

Theravada Buddhism in the Spiritual Life of Khmer People in the Southern of Vietnam: Position, Role and Values

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ABSTRACT

Buddhist philosophy has long permeated the Khmer ethnic community. In this community, the relationship between ethnicity (Khmer people) and religion (Theravada Buddhism) is closely linked together. The Southern Khmer temple is a cultural center of this ethnic group. This place is associated with cultural activities and folk rituals, and at the same time is a traditional school that teaches the knowledge, human ethics, and handicraft. The pagoda is like a museum about Buddhism and the art of “Phum” and “Soc”, a place for Khmer people to rely on their souls when they live and send their ashes when they die. This study refers to the position and role of Theravada Buddhism for Khmer people. From there, state the current situation and make recommendations to the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha and state management agencies, in order to contribute to preserving and promoting the values of Khmer Theravada Buddhism and strengthening the great national unity bloc.

Keywords: Theravada Buddhism, Khmer pagoda, life of Khmer people, Southern of Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Among the ethnic minorities in Vietnam, the Khmer are an ethnic community with a relatively large population. With a population of nearly 1.3 million people, the Khmer live mainly in 9 southwestern provinces (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2019). Residing in an area with a strategic position in terms of security and national defense of Vietnam, therefore, the ethnic-religious policies of the Party and State towards the Khmer people always hold an important position. It not only ensures long-term stability and creates favorable conditions for the development of the Khmer ethnic group, but also is a factor in ensuring the synchronous development of the Mekong Delta region and the whole country.

Theravada Buddhism has played an important role in the religious life of the Khmer in the South. Khmer people live in the “Soc”, each “Soc” usually has at least one temple. Regarding the number of temples of Khmer Theravada Buddhism, there are many different statistics, here we take the data of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha through the reports of the Buddhist governing boards of the provinces and cities with followers. As of the end of 2018, there were 462 Khmer pagodas and 8,574 monks (Government Board of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, 2018).

The Khmer pagoda has a very important role, is considered as a perfect museum of both material and spiritual values, both history, and art is the pride of Khmer people in “Phum”, “Soc”. It can be said that the pagoda is one of the factors contributing to

the unique and distinctive cultural values of the Khmer people in the South. Therefore, when it comes to the Khmer people, it is impossible not to mention the temple and the material and spiritual values it brings. Because, this is a community image, making typical cultural values and always engraved in the mind of every Khmer people in the South.

Theravada Buddhism plays the role of the nation's religion, along with the temple it has contributed to preserving, supplementing, and promoting the traditional cultural identity of the Khmer in the South. Most of the Khmer festivals are associated with the legend of Theravada Buddhism such as Chol chnam Thmay, Dontal, Ok-om Bok, etc.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Southern Khmer people

The Khmer ethnic group in Vietnam has about 1.3 million people, living mainly in the southern provinces of Tra Vinh, Soc Trang, Kien Giang, An Giang, Bac Lieu, Can Tho, Vinh Long, etc. (According to the report summarizing 25 years of implementing Directive 68/CT/TW, as of July 2017, the Khmer population in Vietnam is 1,287,128 people). The life of the Khmer people is associated with wet rice farming and many crafts. The Khmer people have a rich treasure of ancient stories and unique pagoda architecture. The major festivals of the year are an opportunity for the Khmer people in the South to show off their unique cultural activities (Sen, et al., 2009).

The Khmer language belongs to the Mon - Khmer language group. Although living in the same area with the Kinh and Chinese ethnic groups for a long time, the residence form of the Khmer people still retains its

own characteristics, popularly the form of residence according to the human community called "Phum" and "Soc" (like the villages of the Kinh). The Khmer make a living by many occupations including fishing, weaving, mats, knitting, weaving, jiggery making, and pottery. In daily life, Khmer people process many kinds of fish sauce made from shrimp and shrimp, but the most famous one is fish sauce made of snakehead fish, stripes, catfish, shrimp, and shrimp mixed with "thính" (flour made from roasted rice) and salt.

Living in the interlaced environment of canals, boats, and boats of the Khmer people, there are many types. The most special is the Ngo boat (called Tuoc mua) with a length of 30m, made of star wood, with 30-40 oarsmen, the nose and sides of the boat are painted with pictures of ospreys, elephants, lions, and waves. Ngo boat is only used during the Ok-om Bok (Moon worshipping ceremony, October lunar month).

In the past, Khmer men and women wore sarongs made of silk they have woven themselves. Elderly people often wear black pajamas, well-off men sometimes wear white pajamas with a bandana that is always wrapped around their head or over their shoulders (Sen et al., 2003).

The cultural and spiritual life of the Khmer people in the South is very rich. In the festival system of the Khmer people in the South, there are many special festivals, but there are two major festivals of the year: Chol Chnam Thmay Festival, which is the New Year's Eve, and Ok-om Bok Festival, which is the moon worshipping ceremony. During the ceremony, there is the Ngo boat race between the Phum and Soc. Chol Chnam Thmay Festival in April is a great occasion for the community. People visit, wish each other, organize many cultural and sports activities. The Khmer New Year

celebration is also different from that of other ethnic groups, said Chau On (2019), Khmer Theravada Buddhist Institute of Southern Vietnam, and saying: Welcoming New Year's Eve of Khmer people is different than welcoming New Year's Eve of Vietnamese people or Chinese. The Khmer New Year's Eve is counted according to the sun. That is, according to the predetermined hour, the HoraCha (astronomical person) divination how to calculate the direction of the sun in a straight line, at a certain hour. Time to end this season into a new season. For example, this year, the new year starts at 14h2', then people take it at 14h2', that day is the day people stay at the temple to organize the beating of gongs, fighting against this and that, then invite, give procession Buddha; Buddha statue and Moha Songkran around the main hall at that hour.

Most of the Khmer people in the South follow Buddhist beliefs and the Theravada sect. The most unique heritage of Khmer culture is also the art and architecture of pagodas and towers. Khmer people grow up being nurtured in the spirit of Buddhism, studying Buddhist teachings and studying culture at pagodas before entering independent adult life. Venerable Giang Thanh, abbot of Chroi TonSa pagoda, KimSon commune, TraCu district, Tra Vinh province (2019), said:

In addition to learning letters, the teachers also teach children about morality, how to behave, and greet grandparents, parents, teachers, and old people according to national customs. At the same time, it also provides the children with the most basic knowledge about culture and art such as dances, folk songs, costumes, etc. so that they can understand and preserve their culture”.

During the development process, Khmer culture harmonized and linked with other

cultures in the Mekong Delta. This contributes to forming the culture of the community of 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam with a rich identity.

The position and role of Theravada Buddhism for the Khmer people

Theravada Buddhism plays a very important role for the Khmer people and has become the core of the unique and unique Khmer culture. Almost all activities of the family and community of Phum and Soc are associated with national religious beliefs, Khmer people are based on the philosophy of Buddhism. All activities and festivals of the family or community, whether happy or sad, invite the monks to participate in the ceremony and read the Sutras. The decoration of houses, ceremonies, and pagodas of most families and Khmer ethnic areas has a picture or statue of the Buddha placed in the most solemn place. The members of the community all worship the Buddha and respect the monks. People, regardless of age, go to the temple. Every family more or less reads Buddhist scriptures. Especially, when there is trouble, illness, disaster in the family, in the community, the Khmer people all pray to the Buddha for protection, invite monks to perform ceremonies, recite Buddhist scriptures and pray for the disaster to go away.

Theravada Buddhism also contributes to preserving, supplementing, and promoting the traditional cultural identity of the Khmer people. First expressed in language, the (Pali) script of Theravada Buddhism is also the word of the Khmer people. Almost all national festivals are associated with the legends of Theravada Buddhism such as festivals: Chol Chnam Thmay, Dantal, Ok-om Bok, etc. The legends of Buddhism associated with ethnic festivals aim to educate people to be good, to keep morality in life relationships, between people and

nature, and people to each other in family, community, and social life. The practice of studying according to Theravada Buddhism, the formation of temple schools have contributed to improving people's knowledge, meeting professions to be able to serve life (Quang, 2011).

Theravada Buddhism plays an important role in diversifying and enriching the Khmer ethnic art form. First of all, the beauty in sculpture and national architecture. Through the construction of the temple, the decoration in the temple with the unique patterns of each work. The art forms, stories, and legends, in general, have the colors of Buddhism and are transmitted from one locality to another, from generation to generation.

Historically, Khmer Theravada Buddhism has always stood with the people of the South to fight against foreign invaders for the survival of the country. The vast majority of monks and Khmer Buddhist compatriots have passionate patriotism, which is the highlight of Southern Khmer Theravada Buddhism. That spirit comes from the patriotic tradition of the Vietnamese nation of which the team of monks is a part. In particular, in the resistance wars against the French and the Americans to save the country, there were many monks who participated in the revolution and heroically sacrificed themselves, etc. many pagodas were hiding places to protect officials' safety revolution, and many are Vietnamese heroic mothers.

Today, the Khmer people and other ethnic groups in Vietnam are living in peace and building a new life and a new society. Many qualified and virtuous monks have actively participated in social works, joined the People's Councils and Front Committees at all levels, and contributed to the campaigning and implementation of the

Party's policies and State and local mass movements.

The position and role of the pagoda in Khmer people life

The pagoda is the center of religious activities:

For a long time, the pagoda has played a very important role for the Khmer people in the South, as one of the places for them to put their faith in everything in life, especially religion. Although there are many beliefs and religions imported and accepted by the Khmer, for them, Theravada Buddhism still holds a unique position. Khmer pagodas only worship Buddha Shakyamuni. Buddhism has become the traditional living ideal of the Khmer people in the South. Every year, there are many periodic festivals taking place in the temple premises, such as the ceremony of offering the Kashāya (Kathan Na Tean), which is held from September 16 to October 15 (lunar calendar); the ceremony to order the squeezed rice (Phua Chum Bon) takes place within half a month at the end of August, or the Buddha's Birthday (Bon Visaka Bochesa, held on the full moon of the fifth month of the lunar calendar). This is a big ceremony in Buddhism, has become a custom. In addition to the periodic religious festivals, there are also non-periodic religious festivals held at the temple, such as the main hall closing ceremony, the Buddha statue worshipping ceremony. Besides, there are also folk festivals that are both associated with agricultural rituals and Buddhism, revered by the Khmer, also taking place at the temple grounds, which is Chol Chnam Thmay - New Year's Celebration, Dolta festive, etc. All the above-mentioned religious festival activities take place in the sacred space of the temple, which further shows that Khmer pagodas play an extremely important role as a religious center, one of the factors that make

up the cultural characteristics of the Khmer community in the Southern.

The pagoda is the center of cultural activities of the Khmer people in the South:

The Theravada Buddhist temple carries a very deep affection for the Khmer people in the South, not only where religious ceremonies take place but also where the expression of human emotional attachment takes place. The Southern Khmer temple is a cultural center of this ethnic group. This place is associated with cultural activities and folk rituals, and at the same time is a traditional school that teaches knowledge, humanism, and crafts. The pagoda is like a museum about Buddhism and the art of Phum, Soc which a place for Khmer people to rely on their souls when they live and send ashes when they die.

Every year, in addition to religious festivals that are respected by the people, folk festivals are also actively held in the temple, typically: the moon worshipping ceremony (Ok-om Bok), the worshipping ceremony for grandparents - Delta and the Ngo boat racing ceremony.

Because, during the holidays, especially at night, the temple is crowded with not only Buddhist followers but also the participation of most of the people here. The festival atmosphere was bustling and exciting, the Khmer's traditional arts were brought into play: traditional Yuke, Robhash, folk dances, such as Sarikakeo, Sara-van, Ram Vong, etc. During the sessions. In this cultural performance, all Khmer people gather at the temple to dance, sing, and conduct traditional ceremonies. Not only that, a pagoda is also a meeting place for people in Phum and squirrels to discuss issues related to the collective, such as: digging a canal, repairing the temple, organizing a festival, even solving the problem. Disagreements and conflicts

between individuals and groups in Phum and Soc show a deep sense of community (Cuong 2008).

The pagoda is a school of moral education:

Due to social conditions and religious spirituality, they realized that the temple is the place where the noble values of life and Buddhism are concentrated, associated with serious teaching, and pure educational space. For that reason, the temple soon became the first important "school" in charge of the educational function. The pagoda was the center of mobilization to organize the training and transmission of knowledge and understanding of the culture - the art of the ethnic group as well as the preservation and preservation of Khmer script.

Also thanks to the role of the temple, Khmer writing is still common in daily life and in artistic creation. The temple for the Khmer is a school, a very positive educational environment. The pagoda is the school and the monks are the teachers. The monks who follow Theravada Buddhism are aware of their special position with the education of people, upholding the responsibility of taking care of the education of students at the temple. Therefore, the teaching monk is called by the Khmer people with an affectionate name, Kru or Achar Kru, which means the knowledgeable person (Cuong, 2008). The pagoda is the school of the Khmer right from their childhood, especially when they were young is for men, through their own custom, that is the custom of going to the monk.

As is customary, any Khmer son must enter the monastery for a certain period of time. From an educational perspective, the monastic custom has fully promoted its role in educating Khmer youth in morality, personality, and lifestyle. From there, helping them to grow up early and easily

integrate into social life. The young Khmer have summarized, built, and contributed to maintaining the beautiful culture of their nation because they are the pillars of their family later and also. They themselves will educate their children about moral values (Dang, 2011). Not stopping there, the pagoda is also a place for vocational training, handicrafts, organizing classes of “main housewives”, a place to train for a number of sports activities (Quang, 2011).

Thus, the Southern Khmer pagoda not only trains the society for cultured people but also labor knowledge - a team of technical workers, fine arts, architecture, and sculpture. The Khmer people's moral education schools, the “pagoda schools” of the Khmer people have actively contributed to the training of children in Phum and Soc so that more than 68% of Khmer people can read and write Mandarin. The movement of all people to unite to build a cultural life in residential areas has developed quite strongly, bringing positive effects in strengthening the community, helping and supporting each other for progress.

The model of cultural pagodas has been focused on building in many places in Phum and Soc provinces, contributing to the improvement of people's knowledge, the movement of teaching and learning Khmer letters, preserving ethnic culture, and encouraging the thought of justice, charity, and recognition quite enthusiastic response from all classes of people in the Mekong Delta (Sen, et al., 2003). Localities in the Mekong Delta where Khmer people live have implemented illiteracy eradication and primary education universalization for Khmer children and adults aged 15-35, reaching the prescribed rate governments.

The pagoda is a miniature museum of the Khmer people in the Southern:

The pagoda itself has put on a unique architectural artistic value of the Khmer community in the Southern (Quang, 2011). From the temple gate to the main hall architecture, from the “Sala” architecture to the monk house architecture, along with the decoration and the system of worshipping statues, each artifact, each work is a perfect aesthetic whole profound philosophy with enthusiastic heart and skillful hands, especially the creative ability of Khmer artisans. Therefore, the fact that residents in Phum and Soc protect the temple is also their way of protecting and preserving the unique and characteristic cultural values of their tribe.

In addition, the Khmer pagoda also keeps valuable artifacts, which are long-standing leaf books, carved/written by artisans in Sanskrit (Pali), ancient Khmer script, including ancient Khmer characters in Buddhist scriptures, idioms, proverbs, laws and teachings, customs, horoscopes, divination, etc. The cultural values hidden in these books are carefully preserved by the temple, over the course of hundreds of years but still preserved, becoming precious and ancient books of their own people.

In the pagoda, such books are preserved for a long time (hundreds of years) and are only given to monks to read during major holidays held in temples. Along with precious books written on leaves, Khmer Southern pagoda also has artifacts and antiques of both material and spiritual value. Among them, there are Buddha statues and ancient Ngo boats. These are artifacts of unique cultural value (Hoa, 2009). Ngo boat is also associated with intangible culture, which is not the product of an individual or any collective. Each Ngo boat is created by a temple, representing one or more Phum, Soc Khmer people created, both community and spiritual expression.

Ngo boat is often a symbol for animals with strength, or the ability to run fast, etc. The symbol of the Ngo boat in Four Faces Pagoda (Soc Trang) is a bird symbol, Champa Pagoda (Soc Trang) is a tiger symbol, Mr. Mek pagoda (Tra Vinh) is a fish symbol, etc.

The Khmer people believe that, during the competition, the Ngo boat will be able to rush away at a fast and powerful speed like the animal chosen as the symbol. The two sides of the boat's body, nose, and tail are decorated with patterns and colors that match the symbol of the boat as if to create strength. If the symbol of the Ngo boat is the Naga snake, the motifs on both sides of the boat also exude the image of a snake. When the boat is surfing, the viewer feels like seeing the image of a magic snake gliding on the waves. The Ngo boat at the pagodas is considered an artifact bearing traditional cultural elements of the Khmer in the South that is still preserved to this day. Besides, some pagodas, such as Bat Pagoda (Soc Trang province), also have five-tone orchestras. This is a set of five instruments, each emitting a single sound, which blends together to create unique, resonant melodies. This orchestra is used in festivals, on weekdays, children studying in pagodas can still use the five-tone orchestra very proficiently, which is a way to preserve the cultural and spiritual values of their tribe.

It can be said that, in addition to a number of state-built museums, each Khmer temple is also a cultural museum of the Khmer ethnic group, reflecting the history of the inhabitants of Phum, Soc, the history of each pagoda, of each land (Quang, 2011)

CONCLUSION

Experiencing changes in history, Theravada Buddhism has become a traditional cultural feature of the Southwest region, with Buddhist ethics always directing people to

noble values: "truthfulness - goodness - beauties". Lessons on "impermanence", "non-self, altruism", "compassionate joy", "peace", "nirvana", etc. Theravada Buddhism is closer and has a strong relationship closely connected with the community life of the Khmer people in the Southwest region, where the Khmer pagoda is considered the convergence point.

In the current cause of national construction and development, the monks and dignitaries of the pagoda are trusted and trusted by the Khmer ethnic people, actively participating with the local government in mobilizing and propagating the Buddhists strictly abide by the guidelines, policies, and laws of the State; actively participate in conciliation of disputes and conflicts among the people. Monks and dignitaries in each Phum and Soc are really a bridge between the government and the people, bringing the Party's guidelines, policies, and laws to the people.

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