

THE CULT OF GODDESS IN PHÚ QUỐC ISLAND FROM THE WORSHIP OF WATER GODDESS TO THE MOTHER GODDESS

Abstract: *Phú Quốc island as well as Phú Quốc district is a part of Kiên Giang province. The Phú Quốc's natural landscape is so beautiful and it has a diversity of terrain. For living in this island, people have to adapt to the sea and depend on the sea. Their adaptation and dependence leads to the love and the gratitude to the sea, and it becomes the symbol of spiritual life. The islanders' gratitude is manifested by the cult of the Goddess is called Bà (Lady) and the place of worship is also called Dinh Bà (Mansion of Lady). This article initially examines the Dinh Bà system and the cult of the Goddess on Phú Quốc island.*

Keywords: *Cult of Mother Goddess, cult of Water Goddess, cult of Bà-Cậu, Dinh Bà, Dinh Cậu, Phú Quốc Island, Kiên Giang province.*

1. An overview of the Dinh Bà system on Phú Quốc island

There are four *Dinh Bà* temples on Phú Quốc island such as *Dinh Bà Dương Đông, Dinh Bà Ông Lang (or Dinh Bà Lớn Tướng), Dinh Bà Hàm Ninh, Dinh Bà Cửa Cạn*. These monuments are situated in 3 residential areas of the 5 total areas.

Dinh Bà Dương Đông temple (Zone 1, Võ Thị Sáu street, Dương Đông town) faces the sea, at the bottom of the Dinh Cậu mountain. Beside the Thủy Long Thánh Mẫu (Mother Goddess of Water), this monument is also dedicated to Tiên hiền (Forefathers) on the right side and Hậu hiền (Sages) on the left side. The Thủy Long Thánh Mẫu's altar is similar to Tứ Phủ (Four Mother Goddesses). According to the layout of this temple, there is the integration of the cult of the Mother Goddesses into the cult of Tiên hiền and Hậu hiền (the Gods taught the method of

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land reclamation and cultivation to people) and these cults are the basis for establishing the cult of the Patron god of the village from the Center to the South of Vietnam. On the left, there is also a closet to store clothes offered by people.

Basing on some data, Dinh Bà Dương Đông (along with Dinh Bà Cửa Cạn) worship the Kim Giao Lady. According to the legend that a princess of the Khmer Kingdom had merits of the reclamation Phú Quốc island. Whereas Trương Thanh Hùng stated that Dinh Bà Dương Đông is dedicated for the Thủy Long Thánh Mẫu, it is called Dinh Bà Ngoài in order to distinguish Dinh Bà Trong where worshipping Kim Giao¹. Ms. Ngọc Lê (a temple custodian) gave the evidence to prove this argument. There is a well decorated book with the title “Thủy Long Thánh Mẫu” (appendix “the anniversary of the reconstruction on 18th October 1970, the year Canh Tuất) that is preserved in the temple. This historical data helps to confirm that this relic worships Thánh Mẫu, at least since 1970. In addition, there are a pair of parallel sentences (câu đối) on the door of Thánh Mẫu worship space such as “Siêu tứ thủy dĩ vi vương công năng phối địa/ Mãi quần long nhi lập cực đức khả tham thiên” (Crossing the four seas to become the king, the merits are on par with the Earth/ Higher than a dragon herd, the morality is on par with the Sky). This pair of parallel sentences uses two words “Thủy” and “Long” to indicate the name of the Thủy Long Mother Goddess and it praises the merits of the Goddess.

Dinh Bà Ông Lang temple (Ông Lang village, Cửa Dương commune) is situated near the coast in the north of the Phú Quốc island. Although it is located on a large site, but the worship space is a small chamber. According to the horizontal lacquered board (đại tự) on the door, this relic was built in 1946 and it was reconstructed in 2007 with a new architecture style. This temple is dedicated to Mrs. Lê Kim Định or Mrs. Grand General (Bà Tướng Lớn). The throne is layout by a statue with colorful clothes and necklaces. There is the portrait of Nguyễn Trung Trực on the left side. There are two sentences “Anh hùng dân tộc” (The national hero) and “Trung trinh liệt nữ” (The fidelity of a female who sacrificed heroically). There is also a closet to store clothes which were offered by people. In addition, on the yard, there are two statues of Quan Âm Nam Hải (Nanhai Guanyin Buddha or Mercy Goddess) face the sea.

According to the legend Mrs. Lê Kim Định was the wife of the national hero Nguyễn Trung Trực. She and her husband participated in the resistance war against French colonists. She was honored as a Mrs. Grand General. Her tomb is at the edge of the sea and far from her temple.

Dinh Bà Hàm Ninh (Dinh Bà Thủy Long Thánh Mẫu) temple is located in Hàm Ninh commune. According to local people, this temple was formerly situated near the coast, but it was moved to this place because of the landslide.

There are two chambers for worshipping Dinh Ông Nam Hải and Dinh Bà Thủy. In addition, on two sides of the yard, there are two shrines for Cô and Cậu as the cult of Tứ Phủ. The Dinh Ông Nam Hải worship chamber has a skeleton of Cá Ông (Whale) and the Dinh Bà Thủy is divided into two parts; the front part has an incense bowl and two flamingos; the behind part has a statue of the Mother Goddess. There are two wooden boats and some sea products at two sides of the altar. On the left, there is also a closet to store clothes offered by people. Some of these clothes will be dressed for the Goddess on the festival (night of the day 22nd or 23rd, Third month, according to the Lunar year).

In the front of Bà Thủy worship chamber has a wooden board carved the word “Tâm” (the heart) and a sentence “A good day, the top of the Third month, the year Quý Mão, the title of the Quang Tự king (1903), believers are Hoàng Ứng Tinh, Hoàng Khánh Vân, Hoàng Đắc Lan and Quách Viễn Phiên from Hải Nam island worshiped”. This data shows that this board offered by people of Hải Nam island. Perhaps, they were blessed by the Mother Goddess, then they came back to thanksgiving. According to this document, the Dinh Bà Hàm Ninh has been a sacred temple at least since the beginning of the 20th century.

The worship objects of the Dinh Bà Hàm Ninh are Nam Hải (Cá Ông) and Bà Thủy (Thủy Long Thánh Mẫu). According to Mr. Võ Vạn, Thủy Long Thánh Mẫu is Thiên Ya Na or Mrs. Marian Jade Lord. Local people organized a procession the Lord from Khánh Hòa province. The procession day of the Lord was also the day of Nam Hải died, so it became the festival day.

Dinh Bà Cửa Cạn temple is located on the right bank of Cửa Cạn river. According to the legend, this temple is dedicated to Kim Giao, a princess of the Khmer Kingdom had merits of the reclamation Phú Quốc island.

To sum up, in general, the cult of the Goddess (Bà) and the construction of Dinh is a long process; it is a need of the spiritual life of the Phú Quốc islanders. They attempted to co-exist with new environment and society. This cult was precious in the spiritual life of people on the new isolated land among the sea. Besides, the cult of Bà of the Phú Quốc islanders showed the integration of belief in many domains. Although the cult of Bà was determined, but it has been an opened system to receive new nuances of islanders' spiritual life until now.

2. The cultural layers in the cult of Bà on Phú Quốc island

The introduction of the Dinh Bà system on the Phú Quốc island shows the cultural layers interwoven in the spiritual life of islanders as:

2.1. The cult of Sea God

Almost of people practice the cult of Bà are fishermen. As a result of our survey on June 2013, most of ship owners have belief in the blessings (support and protection) of the Gods at the worship places that were mentioned. When going fishing, they may do not come to Dinh Bà to pray and worship because there is an altar of the Quan Âm Nam Hải (Nanhai Guanyin Buddha) on all their ships. However, they always pray to the Gods when their ships cross these worship places. Mr. Võ Vạn, a member of the management council of the Dinh Bà Hàm Ninh relic, stated that “The local people are pious. During the memory day of her death, all people return to the island to worship despite they are fishing anywhere. With the support and protection of Nam Hải, fishermen can catch many fish and the Goddess also helps to tow the sunk ships into the land. The Goddess blesses the health or whatever someone pray for fishermen, small traders, the poor or the childless”. (Interview the 5th June, 2013).

There is a worship chamber of Nam Hải in Dinh Bà Hàm Ninh relic. In Dinh Bà Ông Lang's yard has two statues of Quan Âm Nam Hải (Nanhai Guanyin Buddha). In addition, the pair of parallel sentences (has mentioned) of Dinh Bà Đông Dương temple showed the praise from Phú Quốc islanders for the king of the sea. Furthermore, a pair of parallel sentences of the Dinh Cậu temple also indicated the same emotion as “Phong điều vũ thuận dân an lạc/ Hải yên hà thanh thể thái bình” (Harmonious rain and wind, people live in peace and happiness/ Calm river and sea, lives are peaceful). Their desires for harmonious rain and

wind and calm river and sea are permanent of sea inhabitants, so their spirituality rely on the God of the Sea.

In addition, there are two worship places of Thủy Long Thánh Mẫu in Dinh Bà relics in the Phú Quốc Island. It shows that the cult of the God of the Sea in Dinh Bà relics is clarified.

2.2. The cult of land reclamation God

Dinh Bà Dương Đông and Dinh Bà Cửa Cạn temples are dedicated to the Kim Giao Lady. According to the legend that Kim Giao had merits of the reclamation Phú Quốc island and taught people to cultivate. At present, Dinh Bà Cửa Cạn area has had vestiges of field reclaimed by Kim Giao with many pillars to tie buffaloes since once upon a time. And Dinh Bà Dương Đông temple has had traces of the cult of the God of reclamation. There are altars of Tiên hiền (Forefathers) and Hậu hiền (Sages) in this monument. The worship of the person who has had merits for reclaiming has originated from the Center and the South of Vietnam.

2.3. The cult of historical characters

There is a popular phenomenon in the belief of the Vietnamese as “Legends were attached to historical events in order to legitimate the characters” in reverse “Historical characters were deified with mysteries”. These tendencies were intertwined, so we can find many legendary characters in the history and many historical characters have been honored as divine.

The cult of the Lady Lê Kim Định (wife of the national hero Nguyễn Trung Trực) is one of the characteristics of the Vietnamese spirituality. The history book wrote the victory of Nguyễn Trung Trực, but it did not mention his wife. However, because of the adherence Nguyễn Trung Trực with the Phú Quốc island the last two years of his life (1885 - 1886), islanders wrote other historical part of his life with the legend of the Lady Lê Kim Định. This legend has not only been transmitted at the Nguyễn Trung Trực temple and it has also integrated with the cult of Bà Thủy at Dinh Bà Ông Lang temple. The worship of two characters (a historical character, an unofficial historical character) has created the attachment the islanders' lives and the history of resistance to foreign invaders.

3. The cult of Bà on the Phú Quốc island: reunion and expansion of the Mother Goddess cult

3.1. The cult of Bà - Cậu

When mentioning the cult of Bà of the Phú Quốc islanders, we could not help indicating the cult of Bà - Cậu. This cult was written in research of Huỳnh Tịnh Của, Nguyễn Thanh Lợi (2004 and 2012)², Dương Hoàng Lộc (2010)³, and Trương Thanh Hùng (2012)⁴.

Trương Thanh Hùng wrote that “most of the people attached their lives in water believe in “Bà Cậu” cult. They think that this God has extreme authority that dominates the life and the livelihood of people depended their lives on the sea and the river (fishermen and traders). However, many people do not understand Bà Cậu who are two persons or one person. They only know that if Bà Cậu bless they will have success in their business and safety. The symbol of Bà Cậu may be Thiên Hậu (for Chinese), Chúa Liễu, Thủy Long Thánh Mẫu, a prince of Long Vương, a God of Water, or unknown people who bless for the people attached their lives with water, etc.. There is an altar of Bà Cậu with tablet written in the Sino characters as “Thủy Long Thánh Mẫu” or “Thánh Mẫu Nương Nương” on the ship. Thus, Bà Cậu is not yet two Gods as Bà and Cậu; it is the God of Bà Cậu. However, there is a distinguish Bà and Cậu with Miếu Bà (Bà shrine) and Dinh Cậu (Cậu temple) on the land. According to Trương Thanh Hùng, Huỳnh Tịnh Của, the origin of this cult “Bà-Cậu are three Bà and seven Cậu attached the cult of Princess Liễu Hạnh (the Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh)⁵”.

However, there are other ideas of Dương Hoàng Lộc, Nguyễn Thanh Lợi, and Nguyễn Văn Minh - a custodian of the temple Dinh Cậu - stated that “Bà is Bà Thủy, Cậu are Cậu Tài and Cậu Quý. Dương Hoàng Lộc emphasized that “in particular, people, in the South, who have the careers related to water, river, and sea usually worship Bà Cậu with the desire that they pass over typhoons. Thus, the fishermen and traders are called dân Bà Cậu (“dân” means inhabitant). Bà Cậu are Bà Thủy and her sons: Cậu Tài and Cậu Quý”. Nguyễn Thanh Lợi stated that “the Bà Cậu cult of Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu inhabitants; Bà Cậu are Bà Thủy, Cậu Tài and Cậu Quý. Ms. Ngọc Lệ, a custodian of the temple Dinh Bà Đông Dương, stated that “Bà is Thủy Long Thánh Mẫu; Cậu are Cậu Tài and Cậu Quý”.

Nguyễn Thanh Lợi (2004) and Dương Hoàng Lộc (2010) said that “Cậu Tài and Cậu Quý were the sons of Thiên Ya Na Diễn Ngọc Phi, and this context, Thiên Ya Na was homogenized Bà Thủy. Nguyễn Thanh Lợi wrote that “Chúa Tiên (Chúa Ngọc) had two sons as Cậu Tài and Cậu Quý; they were the Gods who protect the water area. The fishermen and traders homogenized Pô Nugar and Thủy Long Thánh Phi, along with her sons (Cậu Tài and Cậu Quý) who were the Gods ruled islands and islets on the seas or rivers”. According to Dương Hoàng Lộc, “people think that Bà Thủy was Thiên Ya Na incarnated. The stele written by Phan Thanh Giản in Tháp Bà Nha Trang wrote that Thiên Ya Na magicked a strong wave to sink the ship of a Chinese Prince and this ship became a rock. Thus, Thiên Ya Na and her sons (Cậu Tài and Cậu Quý) were considered the Gods of sea, river, islets”. However, according to the stele that written by Phan Thanh Giản in 1856 and the legend of the Khánh Hòa area, Thiên Ya Na had two children, a son and a girl. The son named Trí and the girl named Quý. Therefore, there was the appearance of a new character Cậu Tài. The origin of Cậu Tài did not mention in the legend.

We also find out a complex entity that is Dinh Cậu temple on the Phú Quốc island. In the relic Dinh Cậu (Cậu means a boy) there is tablet of Chúa Ngọc Nương Nương (Thiên Ya Na), and two tiny statues were written Nhị hiền vương Thái tử (according to the legend they were Cậu Tài, Cậu Quý - Thiên Ya Na's sons). However, Mr. Nguyễn Văn Minh, a custodian of the temple, explained that “Cậu Tài and Cậu Quý were two natural Gods who have come since 2000 years, a God ruled all seas and the other ruled the navel of the sea. These Gods had not yet come back the Sky because there were many pirates and typhoons. Besides, they had to manage the fish around the Phú Quốc island”. Thus, according to this legend, they were the natural Gods and they had no relation with Bà Thủy, Bà Thiên Ya Na or Bà Thủy Long Thánh Mẫu.

Nguyễn Thanh Lợi (2012) also mentioned the other legend that “at the Côn Đảo island, Bà was homogenized Bà Yến Phi (Lê Thị Răm), a concubine of Nguyễn Ánh; she was the mother of the Prince Cải; Cậu was homogenized the prince Cải who was thrown to the sea (when he was four years old) by the first king of Nguyễn dynasty⁶.

In my opinion, the legends of Bà and Cậu showed the flexibility and they were the result of an opened cult and this cult has continuously received new layers in order to create a larger and unified entity.

3.2. From the cult of Sea Goddess to the cult of Mother Goddess

The Dinh Bà temples on the Phú Quốc island are located near the coast as I have mentioned. These temples' location is not a random placement. It meets the spiritual need of fishermen who ask for the Gods' blessing. According to my data of interview, fishermen believe in Goddesses (Các Bà) and they usually come these temples to pray before going to the sea, give thanks for the Goddesses when they have success in business, participate in the festival day (Vía Bà). In this aspect, the Goddesses are considered as Bà Thủy, Bà Kim Giao, Bà Lớn Tướng Lê Kim Định who protect and bless people on the sea.

In addition, according to my data of survey, believers who come to pray at Dinh Bà and Dinh Cậu belong to many classes. Ms. Tư (Ngọc Lệ), a custodian of the Dinh Bà Dương Đông temple, and Ms. Trần Thị Ngân, a member of the Society of the Dinh Bà Dương Đông, stated that "a half of believers who come to pray at Dinh Bà are tourists or people from the mainland who arrive to pray for security (cầu an) and avoiding unlucky or dangerous things (giải hạn). In particular, this kind of tourists or people only practice the rite at Dinh Bà; people who have careers related to the sea practice the worship of Bà-Cậu. Besides, people come Dinh Bà and Dinh Cậu in order to invoke to have children, disease treatment, success in studying or trading.

According to local people, Mr. Nam Hải blesses the fishermen to catch many fish, leads the sunk ship to the land. Bà Thủy protects the poor fisherman, the childless, traders, etc.. It is similar to the case Dinh Cậu (dedicated to the Sea God)⁷ and Dinh Bà Dương Đông. While fishermen pray the blessing from the Gods at Dinh Bà and Dinh Cậu, people pray for security (cầu an) and avoiding unlucky or dangerous things (giải hạn) at Dinh Bà. This phenomenon does not show the level of sacredness, but it is an opened cult. While the cult of Long Vương or Nam Hải meet the need of protecting people who work on the sea, the cult of Bà Thủy continuously opens along the time in order to meet spiritual requirement of people.

To sum up, the cult of the Sea Goddess has opened to become a new complex cult as the cult of the Mother Goddess (Thánh Mẫu) because this is a unique cult can meet demand of daily life. It also shows the opened characteristic of the Mother Goddess' cult (Tứ Phủ). For instance, the first Medium rite was organized at Dinh Bà Thủy Long Thánh Mẫu on August 2013 which was welcomed by the inhabitants⁸.

4. Conclusion

The cult of the Mother Goddess expressed the intensity of spiritual demand of the Phú Quốc islanders. Basing on the author's data survey, the establishment and expansion of this cult, the practice of the rite and the expansion of the festival at Dinh Bà temples clearly showed the spiritual requirement of inhabitants. Their desire was manifested through institutional relic, festival organization, practice of the rite, belief in magic.

The cult of the Goddess in Phú Quốc island originated from the cult of the Water Goddess (Bà Thủy) with the desire for safety on the sea of islanders. However, along with the time, the practice of the rite, the object and the content of worshiping have been more diverse and this cult was asymptotic the cult of the Mother Goddess which has had the flexibility and the synthesis, so it has attracted many classes of islanders and tourists.

The legends, Dinh Bà and Dinh Cậu temples and the cultural relics in Phú Quốc island have shown the cultural interleaving of Viet, Chinese, Khmer, and Cham people. This interleaving has blended perfectly and it has been become the common property of islanders at present.

It is clear that the cult of Bà-Cậu of the Phú Quốc islanders was an interleaving between the spirituality of fishermen from the South Central Coast (Nam Trung Bộ) such as Quảng Ngãi, Bình Định provinces with the faith of inhabitants of the Southwest Vietnam (Tây Nam Bộ) and the cult of Tứ Phủ from the North Vietnam (Bắc Bộ). It has gradually become a system of complex entity. This system has been opened to fulfil spiritual need of the inhabitants and the rapid change of inhabitants' spiritual requirement under the social, economic impacts and the influence of international integration in the contemporary Vietnam./.

NOTES:

- 1 Trương Thanh Hùng & Phan Đình Độ (2012), *The Folklore of Phú Quốc and Lý Sơn Islands* [Văn hóa dân gian huyện đảo Phú Quốc và Lý Sơn], The National Culture Publishing House, Hanoi: 90.
- 2 Nguyễn Thanh Lợi (2004), “The Cult of Goddess in Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu”, in *Research on the Characteristics of Cultural Relics, Folklore of Southern Vietnam* [Tín ngưỡng thờ nữ thần ở Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu, trong *Tìm hiểu đặc trưng di sản văn hóa văn nghệ dân gian Nam Bộ*], The Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi: 146.
- 3 Dương Hoàng Lộc (2010), “The Cult of the Water Goddess of Fishermen in An Thủy, Ba Tri district, Bến Tre province” [Tín ngưỡng thờ Bà Thủy của cộng đồng ngư dân An Thủy (huyện Ba Tri, tỉnh Bến Tre)], *Nguồn sáng Dân gian*, số 2.
- 4 Trương Thanh Hùng & Phan Đình Độ (2012), *The Folklore of Phú Quốc and Lý Sơn Islands*, ibid.
- 5 Trương Thanh Hùng & Phan Đình Độ (2012), *The Folklore of Phú Quốc and Lý Sơn Islands*, ibid.
- 6 Nguyễn Thanh Lợi (2012), “The Story of the Lady Phi Yến in Côn Đảo”, The conference: Côn Đảo - 150 years of Struggle, Construction and Development, August. [“Câu chuyện bà Phi Yến ở Côn Đảo”, Hội thảo Côn Đảo - 150 năm đấu tranh, xây dựng và phát triển].
- 7 Nguyễn Thị Diệp Mai (2013), “The Cult of Bà in Phú Quốc”, The conference: *The Cult of the Water Goddess - Dragon and Shadow Theater or Sing Writer on the 10th August*. [Tục thờ Bà ở Phú Quốc], Tọa đàm Văn hóa tín ngưỡng Mẫu Thoải - Thủy Long và nghi lễ chầu văn tại Phú Quốc.
- 8 *The Performance of Shadow Theater or Sing Writer in Ngọc Island*, <http://www.Kiengiang> Department of Culture - Sport and Tourism [Trình diễn nghệ thuật hát chầu văn trên đảo Ngọc], website Sở Văn hóa - Thể thao và Du Lịch tỉnh Kiên Giang].

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2. Nguyễn Thanh Lợi (2004), “The Cult of Goddess in Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu”, in *Research on the Characteristics of Cultural Relics, Folklore of Southern Vietnam* [Tín ngưỡng thờ nữ thần ở Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu, trong *Tìm hiểu đặc trưng di sản văn hóa văn nghệ dân gian Nam Bộ*], The Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.
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5. Nguyễn Hữu Thông (2001), *The Cult of the Mother Goddess in the Centre of Vietnam* [Tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu ở Miền Trung Việt Nam], Thuận Hóa Publishing House, Huế.