

**COMMUNICATION AND COHESION OF COMMUNITY
THROUGH THE RITUAL OF COMMUNAL TEMPLE
IN TÂN CHÁNH COMMUNE, CẦN ĐƯỚC DISTRICT,
LONG AN PROVINCE**

Abstract: *The communal temple is a cultural and social institution of traditional Vietnamese village. Therefore, beside cultural studies, explore the meaning of rituals and regional cultural characteristics in rituals, the ritual of communal temple can also be examined in the function of communal cohesion. Based on the survey data of worshipping in the communal temple in Tân Chánh, Cần Đước district, Long An province in the period from 2010 to 2012, this research shows that the current worshipping ceremony, beside the spiritual function, meets the need for strengthening social cohesion. The “communication” network of the communal temples has become a prominent phenomenon in the ritual of communal temple at present. The cohesive factor through exchange activities has not only limited the scope of local community, but it also extends beyond. The economic development of the locality has contributed to the “enhancement of ritual” of the communal temple worshipping ceremony in the South.*

Keywords: *Community, cohesion, communication, ritual of communal temple.*

Introduction

The communal temple is a prominent feature of Vietnamese village culture. Despite located throughout the country with specific characteristics of each region, *the communal temple* has the common

* University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Viet Nam National University Ho Chi Minh City.

characteristic of worshipping the tutelary deity of village. The deity is the protector of the villagers. The communal temple in the South (Đình Nam Bộ) has been known as multi-functional characteristics (Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng, Hồ Tường, 1997, p. 42). It is the place of worshipping the deities during the reclamation period, they were kings, queens, courtiers of Lê- Nguyễn dynasties, the deities and the tutelary deities were ordained (appointed by royal command) by the Nguyen dynasty (Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng, Hồ Tường, 1997, p. 53-160).

As a cultural institution from the feudal period, association with the residential space of communities in the history, *the communal temple* has been interested by many researchers in different aspects such as history, architecture, decorative arts, rituals, roles in spiritual life, preserving and promoting its values, etc,.. (Lê Sơn, 1996; Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc, 2011; Quách Thu Nguyệt, 1996; Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng và Trương Ngọc Tường, 1997; Hồ Tường và Nguyễn Hữu Thế, 2005; Sơn Nam, 2006; Lê Thị Ninh, 2011; Huỳnh Quốc Thắng, 2003....).

In term of the communal temple's function, studies mainly focused on analyzing the functions of belief and society. Quách Thu Nguyệt (1996) stated that the function of worshipping the tutelary deity of a village is the most important. The tutelary deity is a representative of the Court to take care of the village, against disasters and bring fortune. In addition, *the communal temple* is also a place of worship of the village community. In term of social functions, Quách Thu Nguyệt stated it is a communal house of a village where the villagers meet, discuss on crop work, and trial of lawsuits. The author also showed its administrative functions are no longer present, but it is also associated with the charitable function and it becomes a meeting place to discuss on the help of each other such as mourning, wedding or organizing charitable classes. In addition, many communal temples are also places of healing and selling the traditional medicines (p.26). According to the author the main function of the communal temples in the South is worship the tutelary deity and other deities (p.157). Research on the communal temple Thông Tây Hội in Go Vap District (Ho Chi Minh City), Lê Sơn (1966) indicated that *the communal*

temple had functions of worship the tutelary deity and other deities of the village; a meeting place to solve the village's internal problems; a place where all villagers can participate in, and a place where the village festival is organized according to seasonal agriculture (p.102). Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc (2011), with the cultural, architectural and organizational approach, showed that the communal temple performed the function of preserving traditional cultural values in sculpture, arts and charitable activities. The author also emphasized that it is a meeting place of community cohesion. For example, on Ky Yen ceremony, it is a lively time for the whole community to participate in the ceremony's activities such as worship, offerings, hát bội (a form of Vietnamese theatre), cooking, and eating. Through this participation, villagers bound together. The festival is a spiritual bridge among people, between the past and the present, the future (pp.118-120).

Based on the research on the communal temple's function, and survey data on the communal temple's ritual of communities in the South, especially the long-term field trip in Can Duoc district (Long An province) from 2010 to 2012, the study shows that the present ritual meets the needs of beliefs as well as strengthening the social cohesion through "exchange" in the religious-belief network. This exchange makes expansion of the communal temple's cohesion function outside the village framework. According to Lương Văn Hy (1994), the economic surplus intensified rituals inside as well as outside the lineages. Rituals and party systems increased social relations (pp.437-438). In my opinion, the improvement in economic life has made rituals of communal temple being more and more scale and opening social relations out of the community.

1. The communal temple of Tân Chánh commune, Cần Đước district, Long An province

Tan Chanh is a lowland commune of Can Duoc district, 6 km south of Can Duoc town, with an area of 1,700 ha. In which, agricultural land area is 990 ha, shrimp farming land accounts for 830 ha (Interview with a leader of Tan Chanh commune in March 2017). Tan Chanh commune is currently divided into 7 hamlets such as Đông Trung, Đông Nhất, Hòa

Quới, Bà Nghĩa, Đông Nhì, Đình và Lăng. Tan Chanh is considered as a remote commune of Can Duoc district. The lowland of Can Duoc has been known as the “saline and sour soil” area (đất mặn đồng chua). As flowing of two large rivers as Vam Co and Rach Cat into Soai Rap waterfront, Can Duoc has a interlaced network of rivers, some communes’ land is salty in which the most severe is Tan Chanh commune. These are two important natural characteristics which affect the economic activities of this land. The livelihood history of Tan Chanh commune is defined by the time from 1990 to 2000 when shrimp farming became the main livelihood of the residents there. Before the period of shrimp farming, Tan Chanh was considered as the poorest commune in the district due to low productivity of rice. People, in this period, had to leave home land to earn a living, especially “boat trip” work to exchange goods between the Southeast and the Southwest. On the basis of this work, there was also the development of building barges. In 2010, the whole commune had over 500 cargo barges. Since 2000, people have completely changed from rice cultivation to shrimp farming. Currently, shrimp farming is the main work of Tan Chanh commune’s residents.

In the early 19th century, the land of Tan Chanh was officially recorded in the bibliographies with the first name of Nhon Hoa village, belonging to Phuoc Dien Thuong commune, Phuoc Loc district, Tan Binh, Phien An town. The name Tan Chanh was started in 1871 in the *Table of contents for the names of villages and communes in the Southern region (Nam kỳ địa hạt tổng thôn danh hiệu mục lục)* (Party Committee of Tan Chanh commune, 2003, pp.15-23). Like many other places in the South, “Tân” refers to the new land (Lê Trung Hoa, 2005, p. 124). Since the establishment of the village in the 18th century, in the process of living, residents of Tan Chanh have established a network of religion and belief institution to serve the spiritual needs of the community. There is the presence of Caodaist temple, Buddhist temple, communal temple and shrines. However, the communal temple of Tan Chanh has an important status in the lives of residents. If the religious institutions such as Caodaism and Buddhism only attract its believers while the communal temple is the place that attracts all residents in the commune.

There is no specific document about the time of birth of Tan Chanh communal temple. However, the restoration the modern period is remembered by the people. The communal temple have had a large-scale with more than 50 wooden pillars. It was completely burned by the artillery bombardment in 1961 (Interview with Mr. N.V.O. 84-year-old, a descendant of the communal temple's administrator. Since 1974, with the contribution of the people in the commune, the communal temple has been rebuilt. The works of the main hall, the guest house, the gate were completed in 2006. People often refer to the deity Nguyen Khac Tuan, a martial artist of the Nguyen dynasty as well as a local person.

The communal temple is currently located on the 3,501m square campus (Long An Museum, 2011). It was recognized as a cultural and historical site of province in 2012.

The object of worship of communal temple is Thanh Hoang Bon Canh, the tutelary deity of the village. The deity is worshiped by a wooden “khám thờ”. The temple is also dedicated to Nam Hải Tướng Quân (Cá Ông). In addition, people worship Mr. Nguyen Khac Tuan, a local general who served under the reign of King Gia Long and Minh Mang, who was ordained by King Minh Mang on March 3, 1823 (Party Committee of Tan Chanh commune, Can Duoc district, Long An province 2003, p.28). He was worshiped at the altar located in the center of the communal temple. Because of his merits for the country, people worship him as the tutelary deity of the village.

Currently, the communal temple is the center of the cultural, social and political activities of the community. The communal temple's annual ceremony is held on the 6th of the second lunar month, which is considered the death anniversary of the deity. This ritual is increasingly developed in terms of organization scale. The meaning of participating in worshipping is praying for health and prosperity of the local residents. It is also linked to the market economy factor through the participation and worship of many business people, especially those who work in boats and barges in the locality. The communal temple's worship is no longer a local internal activity, but it also

shows a strong exchange of the regional communal temple network with other religions such as Caodaism and belief of worship goddess.

2. The communal temple's ritual in Tân Chánh commune

In addition to worshipping the deity to pray for peace, it is also associated with the rice farming ritual through worshipping Shennong (Agriculture God) and the annual ritual at the altar of Shennong on the occasion of the Hạ điền (start seeding) in May lunar calendar, Thượng điền (finish seeding) in August lunar month and Cầu bông (bearing fruit) in October lunar month. Although shrimp farming has been started for nearly 20 years, people maintain these rituals to pray for prosperity of the community. However, because the communal temple is a place to worship the tutelary deity of villagers, since shrimp farming has started, the image of the shrimps was found in prayer such as "Pray for timely rains and favourable weather, prawns grow, peace for everyone". However, these agricultural rituals are only organized by the local committee with the simple offerings of flowers, chickens, and fruits. Local people rarely participate in these occasions. The communal temple's annual ceremony (Đại lễ Kỳ yên) is the most attracted. In addition to the function of belief, it is also an opportunity for people become attached. In the present context, beside the internal community cohesion with activities such as preparation for rituals, receiving guests, cooking, etc., it is also expanding the belief network through "exchange" among localities residents through the rituals and sympathetic meals.

In order to perform the communal temple's worship, people set up a Board (Ban Hội hương đình). It consists of "elderly, reputable men" in the community. In addition, sons of these men can take that position when their father died. The list of the Board's members of the 2009-2010 term had 30 people from many hamlets in the commune. About 20 people regularly take on the work because some of them working on boats or away from home. Some members are in charge of organizing the communal temple's worship and social affairs. They are called "Thủ bản". However, all decisions related to the communal temple are discussed in the Board. It can be said that "Thủ bản" are

considered to be the most important figures of the Board (who manages everything). Thủ bổn are considered as “the sons of Deity”. The Tan Chanh communal temple consisted of six “Thủ bổn” in 2010. They have a one-year term, and will be re-elected on the occasion of annual ceremony. The majority of “Thủ bổn” for the 2009-2010 term are “businessmen” who are shrimp farming owners and transporters (barges). Since the communal temple’s worship is mainly based on the contribution of the residents. “Thủ bổn” are always in charge of “prepayment” for preparation and invitation the singing group. The wives of “Thủ bổn” take on the job of shopping and cooking. If the husband works away from home (Thu Bon is absent), his wife or family member (usually a brother) can substitute in rituals. Like other communal temples in the South, the worshipping (Ky Yen festival) in Tan Chanh communal temple takes place during two days including the ceremony of Tổng phong, Thỉnh sắc, Xây châu Đại bội, Thỉnh sanh, Túc yết, the reception of guests, Chánh tế, “Tuồng” singing.

Mr. Nguyễn Khắc Tuấn, who have contributed to the land, has been considered as the tutelary deity of the village, so people call the “death anniversary” (giỗ Linh Thần). In 2010, the ceremony took a large scale on the guests because it is a year of “đáo lệ” (“Hát bội” is held every three years). In later years, due to a large amount of money collected in the communal temple’s worship, the singing was held more often (not only for every three years). Participants in large numbers started from 2004. Until 2005, the “rich people” of the commune participated in the “Thủ bổn” group who expanded the network. Previously, people who participated in worshipping were mainly local people and authorities. Since the participation of businessmen in the Board (those who are between 45 and 55 years old), worshipping in Tan Chanh communal temple has become a “diplomatic” activity.

The worshipping ceremony has two main works. The ritual and reception of the delegations are organized by the Board, especially the “Thủ bổn”. The other works are voluntarily done by people. Men take on decorating of the communal temple. The wives of the Thủ bổn are responsible for shopping and cooking. Participating in the preparation

of the kitchen is women of the commune. People automatically remember the day of worshipping and come to participate in cleaning, hanging flags along the way, and preparing to cook according to the principle of “working together, eating together”. The wives of the “Thủ bản” usually arrange works such as choosing food, going to the market, assigning tasks in the kitchen. The “Thủ bản” and members of the Board are usually men who take on cleaning, displaying, decorating the communal temple and the road leading to the communal temple. Because Tan Chanh communal temple is located in the territory of Dinh village, the residents always believe that the task of caring and worshipping as their duty. They are also responsible for preparation works while people of other hamlets mainly come to worship and participate in the party.

The relationship between the communal temple and Caodaism is also shown in the ritual. It is performed by the students under the control of the “teacher” (Thầy Lễ) (Mr. N.V.T, 75 years old, Dinh village). Before the day of worshipping, the ritual of praying for peace and requiem for the “soldiers” is also organized with the participation of Caodaists. Due to the small number of pupils, Tan Chanh temple of Caodaism in Dinh hamlet can not establish the Music Festival band. In order to organize this ceremony, the Tan Chanh Temple invited the Music Festival band of Tay Ninh to attend to increase the solemnity. “On the Great Festival Kỳ yên, Caodaists were invited to pray for peace of the community, and requiem for the soldiers” (BTL, 80 years old, Dinh hamlet, interviewed in 2010).

In addition to the “death anniversary” (giỗ Linh Thần) ceremony at the communal temple, the villagers also participate in the death anniversary ritual at the tomb of Mr. Nguyen Khac Tuan, the tutelary deity of the village, on the 16th of the second lunar month. In the past, the ritual was just works on a small scale, limited within the hamlet. In the current period, this anniversary day is held on a large scale with invitation representatives of the other communal temples and shrines in the locality. However, the number of guests is less than the occasion of the communal temple’s ritual. Participants are mainly

residents of Lang hamlet and a part of residents of Dinh hamlet and neighboring hamlets.

However, near Dinh hamlet, there is a shrine of Holy Mother of the Realm (Bà Chúa Xứ) in Tan An commune, with the notion of “villagers of each village worship their deity”, people did not participate in Vía Bà festival of the neighboring hamlets, exception for those who have a personal relationship with that locality. For example, due to the border with Dong Trung hamlet, the people of Dao hamlet still participate in shrine worship of Ao Tranh hamlet because they used to carry freshwater in the pond of the shrine.

The works on boats and barges is also expressed through the *Tống phong* (*Tống ôn*) ritual that is held on the morning of the 5th of the second lunar month. Before the ritual, the “Thủ bồn” prepare to build a boat for release (*tống ôn*). They wish the boat will carry away the misfortune of the community along the water, good things stay with the community. If the ritual is going well (the boat is not flipped by the waves and do not come back to the shore or is not or sunk), people believe it is a signal of a good year. If this ritual is unfavorable, they must do it again on another day. The boat is built according to the model of a barge, which is symbol of a profession that brings prosperity to the people there.

After the ritual of *Thỉnh sắc Thần* held at noon on the 5th of the second lunar month, the procession of “sắc Thần” (royal order) to presentation through the tomb of Mr. Nguyen Khac Tuan at Lang hamlet, about 300m from the communal temple, the residents of the hamlet start coming to the communal temple to worship. Most worshipers are middle age and elderly males and females. The offerings include fruits, sticky rice, cakes, money and especially pig heads. The Board appoints a person who record the amount of contributed money. One month before the ceremony, the Board has to sent an invitation to “friends”. The guests invitation has taken place strongly since 5-6 years. It partly due to the economic development of “businessmen” in the organization, especially government approval. Previously, especially in the post-liberation period, the worshipping

took place by the Board members, the offerings were simple, no pig or cow, only a pig's head.

The Board members of the communal temple wear a long brocade dress to show respectfulness. Many people of Tan Chanh commune who work away from home or migrate still remember the day of worshipping and go back to participate in ceremony. In 2010, the number of people gave offering money for the Tan Chanh communal temple is more than 700 people. The amount of money is about 100 million VND, the cost for organizing is about 80 million VND in which for "hát bội" singing is 20 million VND. In 2017, the amount of offering money are 190 million VND, the cost of organizing is about 100 million VND including 20 million VND for "hát bội" singing. Excluding the cost of organizing, the remaining money is used to repay the communal temple's repair in previous years and as a social fund. The day before worshipping, the Board had received 30 million VND from friends (about 30 people). The amount of offering money on the day of worshipping is about 70 million VND (about 680 contributors). Before the shrimp farming (in 2000), people used to offer fruits on the communal temple's worship. Later, people has switched to offering cash because they have had cash from shrimp farming and it was convenient for organizers. A Thủ bản commented that "As a result of the economic development people increasingly participate in the communal temple's worship"

In addition to offering money, many people also offer kitchen utensils such as cups, plates, bowls, chopsticks, pots, rice, and tables and chairs to serve the communal temple's festival. These people are usually boat owners. Some people offer offerings such as cakes, sticky rice, fruits, incense, boiled lamp or pig head.

The fund of Tan Chanh Communal temple's Board was 30 million VND in 2010, residents mainly borrow it for god fortune. "The highest amount is 500.000 VND and the lowest is 50.000 VND. The interest rate is decided by the generosity of people. Everyone can borrow it" (N.V.H, 48 years old, the treasurer of Tan Chanh Communal temple). People will return this money along with the

interest on the festival occasion of next year to have a fund to hold the ceremony. After settling the offering money on the 8th of the second lunar month, people can come to visit the “Thủ bản” to borrow it. On the occasion of the worshipping ceremony on the 6th of the second lunar month, people go back to pay capital and interest. In 2010, there were about 60 borrowers. In 2017, nearly 100 people borrowed this money. In addition, in 2010, the Board also established a Fund to interact with the other Communal temples in order to favour the “Thủ bản” who do not have good economic conditions to be able to do their work of operation and exchanges with other places. This fund is taken from the offering money, but it is mainly donated by the Board’s members, especially by the “Thủ bản”.

Along with the economic development, the communal temple’s worship has also become an “exchange” occasion. For example, in 2010, guests were invited from Ho Chi Minh city, Tien Giang province, friends of the Board members came from all over the South West provinces. The ritual of Tan Chanh communal temple is different in the form of worshipping of the local people, individuals and delegations. While the local people go straight to the communal temple, stand in line to offer offerings and pray and then go to take a meal, the delegations is solemnly organized with the procedures of registering, waiting to be called to enter worshipping and then being invited to the table to take a meal. Their offerings are usually a tray of fruit, incense and cash [from 500,000 VND to 1 million VND (2010); from 1 to 2 million VND (in 2017)].

In 2010, twenty group of delegations came to worship at Tan Chanh communal temple. In 2017, there were 35 group of delegations with a donation of 1 or 2 million VND, along with the offerings of fruits and incense sticks for one group. They were the Board of the other communal temples and shrines throughout the provinces. A “Thủ bản” as well as a shrimp farming owner told about his participation in the worshipping activity in order to the expansion of relationship of Tan Chanh communal temple: In the past, the “Thủ bản” were old men so the ritual was simply organized. At that time, I was a donor to mobilize

contributions. Later, I found myself getting older, and doing business needed to have a faith to make a strong business, so I would like to work as a “Thủ bản”. Everyone need a faith when being a businessman. I burn a incense stick make me feel more confident because of the god (Ông Thần) bless. I do because I believe. When I became a “Thủ bản”, I invited my friends who do business, people mainly worked on barges. I mobilized my friends contribute. Each person donated about 500,000 VND or 1 million. I told about the sacredness of the god, they believed then they contributed. I invited them come to worship at my village’s communal temple. I will come to pray at their village’s communal temples when there are ritual”. (L.V.L, male, 50 years old, Đình village, interviewed in 2010).

The relationship between economy and spirituality is evident through the involvement of local business owners in the working of “Thủ bản” and the Board. “Some years ago it was hard to find a person who play the role of a “Thủ bản”. Because they feared do not have enough money to organize the communal temple’s worship. At present, if the offering money is residual, it is put to the fund. If the offering money is not enough, the debt will be repay in the following year. Rich people register to be as “Thủ bản” because they believe that doing merit will support their business” (B.T.L, 80 years old, a member of Tan Chanh communal temple’s Board).

Thus, in the current context of society, the communal temple is a cultural institution that maintains its important functions. The belief function of the communal temple’s worship still preserves its nature to support for agricultural livelihood activities of residents. In the past, if livelihoods were rice cultivation, livelihoods are now shrimp farming. The shrimp has found in praying in order to send their desire to the village’s tutelary deity. In addition, when studying the communal temple’s worship in Tan Chanh as a typical in the South, we found that the social function of the communal temple has been expanded. The worship do not only have a cohesive function within the community, but it also expand the socio-economic links to other localities. This expansion that makes the ritual has become more and

more scale. The transformation from the economy of growing rice with low productivity to shrimp farming help people to have conditions to contribute to communal temple's worship. In addition, the existence of many economic activities of the community is also help to promote the social relations. In contrary, the ritual solemnly organized has made the development of social relations to bring economic benefits to the participants. /.

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