

Beliefs of Local Residents in the South Central Coast

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Abstract: *The diversity of coastal culture and notably the cults and worship of the locals in the South-Central Coast have been discussed in literature from different perspectives. The paper examines the local cults of worshipping Cá Ông (Whale), Lady Po Nagar, and spirits of the dead in terms of the origin, characteristics and values. Thereby, it proposes solutions for the preservation and promotion of the local religious values in the current context.*

Keywords: Cult, Worship of Whale, Worship of Lady Po Nagar, Worship of Dead Spirits, South Central Coast

Introduction

Vietnam's South Central Coast covers eight provinces and cities, namely Danang, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan. The coastal culture and folk religion in these localities have been well discussed in literature. Worshipping Whale, Lady Po Nagar and dead spirits are among major ritual activities that are closely linked to the daily life of the local people.

The article first provides a review of literature with a particular focus on the derivation, characteristics and values of those beliefs to the indigenous people. It then suggests some directions for the preservation and promotion of such values in the current context.

1. Worship of Whale

Whale has different folk names, such as Ca Ong, Ong Nam Hai, Ong Chuong, Ong

Khoi, Ong Lon, Ong Cau and so forth. It is seen as a sacred sea animal and worshiped by fishermen in the South Central Coast (Le The Vinh, 2015: 46). Ethnographic literature in Vietnam has evidenced the popularity of worshipping Whale among the Viet (Kinh) and Cham people in the coastal areas from Thanh Hoa province to the South of Vietnam. The custom might have existed in the Gulf of Tonkin in the past, but has been covered by layers of Northern cultures and beliefs and become insignificant or no longer present in some places (Nguyen Duy Thieu, 2011: 6).

Explanation about the origin of Whale worshipping varies by study: The whale is the incarnation of the Cham's God Po Riyak, or a piece of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara's robe. According to the local people, the ritual is derived from the story of a young man who was beheaded

by his master and later turned into a whale (Huynh Thieu Phong, 2016). It is said that the current ritual activity for whale demonstrates the acculturation of Viet-Cham culture. The Cham people has been long seeing the Whale as the King of the sea ('Hai Vuong'). It was through the cultural collision with the Cham that the Viet people began to pay attention to this giant mammal (Nguyen Phuoc Bao Dan, 2019: 179).

The worship of Whale plays a crucial role in the spiritual life of fishermen, whose life is attached to the sea and natural forces while being offshore fishing. The Whales in their mind is symbolic of a life saver, in whom their faith is deposited as a valuable source of spiritual support. This belief was initially a mental encouragement for people to endure hardships and dangers in their livelihoods, then were embedded deeply in the people's subconsciousness and became a folk belief (Nguyen Thanh Loi, 2007: 61). However, it is believed that the Whale does not save everyone but only those who are predestined to him and living in goodness and virtue. There are still cases where fishermen in wrecked boats made prayers to the Whale but received no answers. As reasoned with an absolute belief in the goodness of the Whale, the belief of people in such cases might not be strong enough and the Whale has not been sanctified in their mind (Le The Vinh, 2015: 46).

Not just relying on the mental support of the Whale, fishermen also help stranded whales. It is a two-way relationship and a close attachment between human and the nature, reflecting a philosophy of life and

the harmony in Vietnamese traditional culture (Nguyen Duy Doai, 2017: 51).

For high respect to the Whale in the Central Coast, the funeral of the Whale is always solemnly held. Considering the Whale as a sacred creature and a god, the dead bodies of whales are often carried to shore for burial following formal rituals. The first person who ever discovers the Whale body would be the master of the funeral and responsible for informing the leader of his fishing crew to mobilize local fishermen for the work. If the dead body of the Whale is found offshore, a group of boats would be sent to take him to the shore. At the same time, other members of the crew would take care of setting up the place for the funeral. After a temporary burial, people worship the soul of the Whale in the local mausoleum while awaiting the day to bring back his remains for a permanent burial (Le Van Ky, 2015: 230-231). The funeral is to uphold the value and ethnical tradition of showing gratitude for blessings and well-spring as a way to educate people: to appreciate those who have helped and protected them. Moreover, whales are also in the danger of extinction due to illegal hunting. The practice of whale worshiping is another way to encourage people for the protection of rare animals and natural environment as well.

Mausoleums and temples for the worship of Whale are constructed in most villages along the South Central Coast and distinguished by the whale gender: *Lang Ong* for males and *Lang Co* for females. Some *Lang Co* could be found in Tu Thien, Ninh Thuan province or

Cam Linh, Khanh Hoa province, and in other localities in Ninh Thuan province such as Ninh Chu, Son Hai, and Ca Na. Meanwhile, *Lang Ong* were often built centuries ago, like Thuy Tu mausoleum (Khanh Hoa province) in 1762, An Thanh mausoleum (Binh Thuan province) in 1781, Ong Binh Thai mausoleum (Binh Dinh province) in 1875 (Ha Dinh Thanh, 2016: 100). In addition to architectural values, many precious heritages of the coastal culture are preserved at those temples and mausoleums, like thousands of whale skeletons of all kinds and different ages and periods. They not only hold spiritual meaning but the biological significance for ocean studies. Moreover, the ordained identities conferred by the Nguyen dynasty for *Nam Hai Dai vua*ng ('the King of the Southern Sea') and the worshipping objects in such temples and mausoleums are priceless artifacts of the coastal culture (Nguyen Duy Thieu, 2011: 66).

Nghinh Ong festival, a procession of bringing back the Whale remains, is an important part of the cult of Whale worship and the spiritual life of local fishermen. The festival is the manifestation of local cult and culture and a community activity (Ha Dinh Thanh, 2016: 19). Like other festivals across Vietnam, there are two parts of the Nghinh Ong festival: the ceremony and the community gathering. The ceremony, which embodies the coastal culture and the high respect for the Whale, includes the procession of Nam Hai General's palanquin to the dragon boat out to the sea for the ritual ceremony. The community gathering is associated with various activities for

entertainment and enjoyment of sea cuisine, bringing joy and positive energy to the locals and visitors from afar. The festival is thus seen as an occasion for people to set aside all hardships and worries in life and rebuild their momentum for the following working days. Other types of folk arts are also performed at the Nghinh Ong festival, such as chant singing ('*hát bài chòi*', '*hát bả trạo*') and traditional sea sports like boat racing, net-weaving competition, tug of war, etc. The festival space is therefore a good environment for the introduction, promotion and preservation of such local cultural traditions.

In brief, the respect of the inhabitants in the South Central Coast for the Whale is clearly shown through the funeral arrangements, the Nghinh Ong festival and the shrines for the Whale across localities in along the coastal areas. The cult of Whale worship contains important values and plays a critical part in the life of the local people, contributing also to the ethical education for people (showing gratitude for blessings), to environmental protection (not hunting whales), and to the improvement of community cohesion and preservation of cultural traditions and folk arts (through the Nghinh Ong festival).

2. Worship of Lady Po Nagar

Lady Po Nagar, the Mother Goddess of Champa, was originated from the Great Goddess Devi - a Hindu icon and symbol for the creative and destructive power of the universe. Influenced by the local beliefs, the Goddess Devi while being introduced in the Cham communities became Lady Po Ina Nagar - a legendary and cultural figure of the Champa. Before

the 16th century, Lady Po Ina Nagar was worshiped at Po Nagar sanctuary in Nha Trang, Khanh Hoa province. For different reasons, around the mid-16th century, the worship of Lady Po Ina Nagar was moved to Temple Po Ina Nagar in Huu Duc hamlet (Ninh Thuan province) while the goddess at the Po Nagar sanctuary became the Holy Mother Po Nagar (Nguyen Thi Thanh Van, 2015).

The figure of a Cham goddess has been Vietnamized but the Cham identity is still strongly embedded, which is attributed to cultural similarities between the Cham and Viet with “the principle of mother worship” (Nguyen Cong Bang, 2005: 188). Worshipping Lady Po Nagar has for long become a traditional cult and held a critical role in the spiritual life of residents in the South Central Coast. The Viet people, during the Cham-Viet acculturation process, have worshiped her as one among the gods that protect and assist them in times of difficulty.

Unlike the worship of Whale which is mainly presented in the coastal areas, Lady Po Nagar is worshiped in both coastal and rural areas as a guardian for the fisheries and fishermen and as a deity who taught people how to cultivate with blessings for good crops. In the areas of forestry-related occupations, Lady Po Nagar is venerated as the master of agarwood and forests. Relics of temples and shrines worshipping Lady Po Nagar have been found in many localities in the South Central Coast, particularly from Hue city to Ninh Thuan province. Lady Po Nagar is often worshiped in communal houses, pagodas, temples of five elements,

and even in mausoleums of Whale in the region’s coastal areas. The veneration of Lady Po Nagar has become widespread and even more popular in local families (Nguyen Van Bon, 2016: 21). Noticeably, the Nguyen dynasty in the 19th century gave a special cult to Lady Po Nagar: King Gia Long right after his enthronement had ordained the goddess an official name of the Holy Lady of the Emerald Lord Po Nagar (Nguyen The Anh, 2005: 33).

The rituals of worshipping Lady Po Nagar in the South Central Coast are very solemn, especially in places where she is the principal deity. In times of the Nguyen, the head mandarin of the province had to act as the master of the ritual ceremony for Lady Po Nagar at the Shrine of Goddess and the Lady Po Nagar Tower (today’s Nha Trang city, Khanh Hoa province). In Hue, the Nguyen’s court recognized the Goddess of Ngoc Tran Mount (Lady Po Nagar) as the superior goddess. The temple at Ngoc Tran Mount had been rebuilt and expanded under the reign of King Dong Khanh to become a magnificent and splendid palace of Hue Nam. The King also ordered the ritual ceremony to be held bi-annually in the spring and fall and led by a representative from the court as a way to pay tribute to the goddess (Nguyen Dinh Hoe, 1997: 345).

The celebration of Lady Po Nagar’s birthday is an important festival in the South Central Coast and varies by locality. There are generally three main procedures: worship of spirits (*tế âm linh*), announcement ceremony (*lễ cáo*), and principal ceremony (*lễ chánh*). The celebration is extremely hefty once

every three years with pork and beef as offerings and performance of Vietnamese classical drama art (*tuồng*). Meanwhile, the annual ceremony is quite modest (*lễ sái*, *trầm trà*), often with fruits, sticky rice, chicken, tea, and rice wine. A required normative ceremony for every celebration, however, is the ceremony for serving offerings (*lễ dâng mâm*) (Le Van Ky, 2015: 271).

The Lady Po Nagar festival, similar to the Nghinh Ong festival, is also a cultural space for performing folk arts like chanting singing, martial art, and other folk games. The most typical form folk art at this festival of both the Viet and the Cham people in the South Central Coast is shadow dance, which has been often performed with *hầu đồng* (lit. serving the holy reflections, a ritual ceremony with votive dance) and *hát văn* (a Vietnamese traditional singing form) (Nguyen Van Bon, 2016: 22). In addition, the festival also contribute to reinforcing the connections among the communities of the Viet and the Cham people and other indigenous groups.

Beside cultural features reflected through the ritual ceremonies, the worship of Lady Po Nagar holds spiritual values for people in the South Central Coast: the goddess is a blessing deity and the source of spiritual support to them. The Lady Po Nagar festival also helps strengthen the community cohesion as well as the preservation of traditions and different forms of folk arts. The relics representing the worship of Lady Po Nagar along the South Central Coast are precious tangible cultural heritages that need to be protected and preserved.

3. Worship of dead spirits

Dead spirits are the souls of the dead in the underworld that are believed to linger around their living relatives. In the coastal areas, dead spirits could also be the souls of the unknown dead people, whose bodies drifted from other places are found and buried by local villagers. There is a 'community' of dead spirits, including kings and ordinary people, the rich and poor, humans and animals and even insects (Huynh Ngoc Trang and Truong Ngoc Tuong, 199: 138).

Counter to the belief of people in the South Central Coast, the dead spirits are unhappy and homeless souls that are wandering in the underworld (Le Van Ky, 2015: 279). They could be villagers or strangers of unknown identities who died at sea or in battle. The coastal residents worship all such people of unlucky fate as a way to show their compassion and sympathy with them. In the locals' spiritual minds, the dead spirits are often very scared and if their souls are taken care of, they would bless for peaceful and successful trips of fishing.

People also build *nghĩa trường* (lit. common cemetery of merit) and *nghĩa tự* (lit. worship place of merit) and temples for the worship of dead spirits. *Nghĩa trường* is a common grave for all unknown people who died for the common good. All the remains of anonymous soldiers are also gathered in here, as well the bodies of the unknown people. Villages often take care of *nghĩa trường* and hold the rituals for dead spirits following a spontaneous routine. There are cases where local authorities manage *nghĩa trường* and responsible for collecting remains and ritual services.

Meanwhile, *nghĩa tử* is the place of worshipping dead spirits and often located near *nghĩa trũng*. It is seen as a religious institution of communities for the worship of homeless and anonymous spirits, including unidentified soldiers (Pham Tan Thien, 2015: 36). Among the worship places in the South Central Coast, *âm linh tử* (lit. worship place for dead spirits) in An Vinh village (Tay hamlet, An Vinh commune, Ly Son district) is a special place for worshipping anonymous spirits and soldiers who died for the Paracel Islands (Do Minh Thuy et al., 2015: 127). It is worth mentioning also a *mộ gió* (the empty grave for housing the souls of the dead) for the Paracel soldiers that is still taken care of by the residents on Ly Son island. These are the very monuments of great values for educating people of the patriotism and appreciation of the people who died for the country, also a way to raise awareness of the national sovereignty protection.

Annually, on the full moon day of the first lunar month ('*Tết Nguyên tiêu*'), the spring days after the vernal equinox ('*tiết thanh minh*'), or the full moon day of the seventh lunar month, the locals in the South Central Coast often hold a ritual ceremony for dead spirits. While the organization might vary by locality, the common procedures include *lễ giã y mả* (cleaning the grave) and the sacrifice ceremony with offerings (Nguyen Dang Vu, 2007: 50). The ritual ceremony for dead spirits involves all villagers (either locals or migrants) in all steps of practicing rituals. This is a great bond to people of communities and reflects the humanistic spirit, compassion and love for national

fellows. The activity is also where people express their gratitude towards those who sacrificed their life for the Fatherland, those who had helped cleared land for villages as a way to educate people of their ancestors and people of previous generations.

Unlike the Nghinh Ong and Lady Po Nagar festivals, the ritual ceremony for dead spirits only consists of the ceremony part and after the ritual procedures people would the offerings would be shared among people. The cult of worshipping dead spirits demonstrates the beauty of the locals' spiritual life with strong humanity and community solidarity.

4. Discussion and conclusion

In order to enhance the sea space as the space for livelihoods and inhabitation, the coastal residents have turned the sea space into a cultural space where the internal cohesion and connections with spirits are strengthened towards adaptation and confrontation with the natural power of the sea (Tran Thi An, 2015: 8).

The local cults in the South Central Coast embodies the local cultural life in a strong association with the sea. The afore discussed traditional cults not just serve the spiritual needs of people but exhibit the cultural values and humanity that contribute to enriching the life of people and community spirit.

For the preservation and promotion of these local cults in the South Central Coast, first and foremost, the local governments and cultural officers should understand thoroughly the traditional beliefs in order to better their management as well as their support and instructions to local people in maintaining the traditions. There

are different folk arts in the community gathering parts of the Nghinh Ong and Lady Po Nagar festivals that need to be preserved and promoted.

Along the South Central Coast, the relics and heritages of the cults for worshipping Whale, Lady Po Nagar and dead spirits have been protected. These are valuable heritages for historical and scientific studies. Thus, in addition to preservation, it is necessary to push for further research for better knowledge of such cultural heritages. Preserving these types of local cults not only means restoring the old traditions or providing an intact preservation but also promotion of poetry and music composition regarding the topics of worshipping Whale, Lady Po Nagar and worship orations for dead spirits. In addition, it would be helpful to have a coastal culture museum to be built in the South Central Coast for better preservation and promotion of local cultural heritages and folk beliefs □

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