

## Practices of worshipping Nam Hai Bodhisattva of the residents in the Southwest coast

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**Abstract:** *The marine culture of the Southwest region has been studied in many different aspects as an important component of Vietnam's marine culture. In particular, the practice of worshipping Nam Hai Bodhisattva, among others, occupies a high coverage in the Southwest region. The article clarifies the origin and values of the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship of Southwestern coastal residents, thereby recommending solutions to preserve and promote this practice in the current context.*

**Keywords:** Nam Hai Bodhisattva , Coastal Residents, Marine Culture, Southwest Region, Vietnam

### Introduction

For communities living in coastal regions in Vietnam and particularly in the Southwest region, religion is an important part of their lives, especially for fishermen and traders who rely on the ocean for their livelihoods. One of the most significant religious practices of coastal communities in the Southwest region is the worshipping of Nam Hai Bodhisattva (or Guanyin of the Southern sea) - the bodhisattva associated with the pinnacle of compassion and mercy and a deity venerated and worshipped by people living in this region.

The Southwest region, also known as the Mekong Delta region, has 13 provinces and cities, including 7 coastal provinces, which are Tien Giang, Ben Tre, Tra Vinh, Soc Trang, Bac Lieu, Ca Mau and Kien Giang, with a total coastal length of 600km and various big and small islands. Studying

the worship of Nam Hai Bodhisattva in the Southwest coastal region will shed a light on the religious life of communities living here and provide a better understanding of how this practice adopts and integrates elements from Buddhism.

### 1. The origin and name of Nam Hai Bodhisattva

In Mahayana Buddhism, Nam Hai Bodhisattva is originally referred to as *Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát* (in Vietnamese), or Avalokitesvara in Sanskrit. This is the bodhisattva who treats humankind with mercy and compassion. The bodhisattva is a follower of the Amitabha Buddha in the Western Pure Land; she is revered by all humans and is considered a pinnacle of mercy, perseverance, and salvation. Originating from India - the birthplace of primitive Buddhism, *Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát* has the avatar of a male (Pham Lan

Oanh, 2019: 116). When Buddhism was spreaded to China and some Southeast Asian countries, *Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát* is considered the protector and savior for those suffering hardships and pains. According to folk legends, the bodhimanda of *Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát* is the Nanhai Putuo Mountain in Zhejiang province (China). This is also the reason why *Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát* is also known as Nam Hai Bodhisattva (Nam Hải, or Nanhai in pinyin Chinese, means the southern sea) (Pham Lan Oanh, 2019: 11).

According to Ta Chi Dai Truong (2006: 180-181), while travelling to the southern seas, a group of Chinese seafarers encountered a fearful storm. In that instance, they thought of *Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát* and wished to have the bodhisattva's protection and safeguarding, thus calling the bodhisattva with a "marine" name - Nam Hai Bodhisattva, instead of the original name *Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát*. In Vietnam, the avatars of the Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteshvara, Cundi Avalokiteshvara, and the Eleven-Faced Avalokitesvara are unified into a single avatar of a bodhisattva living in the Southern country's sea regions, hence named by the people as Nam Hai Bodhisattva (Doan Thi My Huong, 2015: 47).

In addition, Nam Hai Bodhisattva is also well-recognized among Vietnamese people through Chinese tales kept in Avalokitesvara pagodas in Vietnam, including a tale of a Chinese princess named Miaoshan. Miaoshan is a kind-hearted princess who wished to devote her life to Buddhism, but was forbidden and jailed by her king father. After being saved, she went to the South, stopped to contemplate at Mount Huang Tich (now in Can Loc district of Ha Tinh province, Vietnam), and was tested by Buddha several times. She reached divinity

to become bodhisattva and gained powers to save people suffering from hardships. Despite its Chinese origins, the practice of worshipping Nam Hai Bodhisattva has been Vietnamised, where Nam Hai Bodhisattva became a female bodhisattva worshipped by the majority of fisherfolk communities (Tran Thi Hoan My, 2017: 100).

Although the different origins and names of Nam Hai Bodhisattva are still ambiguous, it is clear that coastal residents' reverence and faith towards Nam Hai Bodhisattva have never wavered. This will be demonstrated in-depth in the following sections.

## 2. The worship of Nam Hai Bodhisattva

The worship of Nam Hai Bodhisattva has a long history<sup>1</sup> and the custom is one of the most representative of marine religions in the Southern Vietnamese region, especially in the Southwest. Nam Hai Bodhisattva, or Nam Hải Quan Thế Âm, has the full name of "*Nam Hải viên thông giáo chủ đại từ bi, tâm thanh cứu khổ linh cảm Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát*", which means "Avalokitesvara, the encompassing lord of the Southern Sea who looks over places with grievances and suffering, the very resonate and holy". Although close to becoming Budha, the Bodhisattva has so much compassion to humankind he has decided to stay on Earth to save those in need. Even the name "Nam Hai Bodhisattva" itself contains influences from the Mother Goddess worship of Vietnam and reflects how this religious practice has a special connection to communities in the southern coastal area (Nguyen Thu Trang, 2016: 129).

<sup>1</sup> Upon extensive review of research materials, the author has not found any established research that specifically traces when Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship custom was introduced to the Southwestern coastal region. It is only known that the custom has been practiced by the community here for a long time.

Communities of the Southwest coastal region also call Nam Hai Bodhisattva by other names such as *Mother Nam Hải*, the *Goddess Nam Hải*, etc. People show their reverence through seeking paintings, or worshipping Quan Âm's statues in pagodas and temples across the coasts, in islands, on fishing boats and at home. Offering items for Nam Hai Bodhisattva for Southwest coastal communities are mainly water, fruits, and vegetarian food.

Aside from worshipping Nam Hai Bodhisattva as “the principal god” (*chính thần*) in family altars or communal religious institutions, Southwest coastal communities also worship Nam Hai Bodhisattva as “the accompanying god” (*phối thần*). For example, on several fishing boats of fishermen in An Thuy commune (Ba Tri District, Ben Tre Province) and Song Doc town (Tran Van Thoi District, Ca Mau province), the painting of Nam Hai Bodhisattva was worshipped next to the Thủy Long Thánh Mẫu Goddess (The Water Dragon Goddess) - the patroness of sea travelers. The figures of Nam Hai Bodhisattva is also put in the courtyard of Thiên Hậu Cung temple at Song Doc town to accompany the the principal gods Thiên Hậu Thánh Mẫu (Heavenly Empress Saintly Mother), Thiên Địa Phụ Mẫu (the Father and Mother of Heaven and Earth), among other deities (Duong Hoang Loc, 2020: 54-55). The popularity of worshipping Nam Hai Bodhisattva in company with other gods in the coastal Southwest region reflects interculturalism and is a unique aspect of the religious life among the communities here.

The majority of fishing boats believe in the Bodhisattva and Her salvation power. In An Thuy commune, boat owners bring the images of Nam Hai Bodhisattva to pagodas to perform “*khai quang điểm nhãn*” ritual

(“open the light and dot the eyes”, or *Buddhābhiseka* , a ritual to consecrate Buddhist figures), afterwards they will ask the monks to find an auspicious day to obtain an image of Bodhisattva to worship on their boat. Because there are no pagodas in Song Doc, some boat owners find the auspicious day by themselves to buy image of Nam Hai Bodhisattva and worship on their cabins, along with offerings such as flowers, fruits, cakes, sticky rice, dessert soup, etc. Some boat owners in Song Doc go to pagodas in Ca Mau to perform “*khai quang điểm nhãn*” ritual, then choose an auspicious day and carry out the “*an vị*” (settle) ritual for the Nam Hai Bodhisattva image on their boats. The way images and figures of Nam Hai Bodhisattva are venerated by fisherfolks in An Thuy and Song Doc demonstrates how the Bodhisattva is a patron and saviour of seafarers (Duong Hoang Loc, 2020: 53-54). The Nam Hai Bodhisattva festival is a significant part of the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worshipping culture. According to Truong Thu Trang (2017: 52) and other research, the Nam Hai Bodhisattva festival is only present in the coastal region of Bac Lieu province. For residents here, Nam Hai Bodhisattva is not only a Bodhisattva but also a sea god and the mother of the land. Nam Hai Bodhisattva festival is organised annually at Quan Âm Phật Đài pagoda (Nha Mat ward, Bac Lieu City) from the 22<sup>nd</sup> to the 24<sup>th</sup> of the Third Month of the Lunar Year. The festival attracts a large amount of followers who wish to show their veneration to Nam Hai Bodhisattva and pray for good weather, national prosperity and peaceful lives. Aside from the leadership of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha of Bac Lieu province, the government, community organisations, local residents and Buddhist followers from across the country also take part in preparing and organising different

religious, cultural, and arts activities for the festival.

During the festival, local people, Buddhist followers and pilgrims come to the Bac Lieu shore and participate in the holy atmosphere and festivities with a range of religious rituals and activities such as: Buddhist talks, flower offering, welcoming of the Bodhisattva, dragon and lion dance, the “*lục cúng hoa đăng*” dance (six-offering lantern dance), khai chung bằg ritual, thượng phan ritual (floating of mantra banners), “*chiêu u*” ritual (inviting the spirits), etc. (Pham Lan Oanh, 2021: 173-174). In addition, the festival also features traditional markets where young ladies sell lid eugenia tea and green tea; troupes of “*đờn ca tài tử*” (folk music troupes signature of the Mekong Delta) tying head scarves and sitting down on mats to perform classical folk songs; street carts of the Kinh, Hoa and Khmer people, and Vietnamese calligraphy stalls (Truong Thu Trang, 2017: 50).

Aside from the Nam Hai Bodhisattva festival, the Quan Âm Phật Đài pagoda and other pagodas and temples in the Southwestern coast also organise Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship ceremonies (“*lễ vía*” Nam Hai Bodhisattva) on the nineteenth days of the second month, six month and ninth month of the Lunar year<sup>1</sup>, coinciding with the dates when the bodhisattva Nam Hai Bodhisattva was born, became a monk, and entered nirvana (Truong Thu

Trang, 2017: 50). These festivals feature Buddhist rituals, praying sessions, and offering of vegetarian food (Duong Hoang Loc, 2020: 56).

The Nam Hai Bodhisattva festival of Bac Lieu and the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship ceremonies are organised at pagodas and temples across the Southwestern coast and is an indispensable part of the Nam Hai Bodhisattva religious custom. These festivals have also become a unique aspect of folklife not only for the coastal community of Bac Lieu, but also for the whole Southwestern coast.

### **3. Value of the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship custom**

The image of Nam Hai Bodhisattva in particular and of other holy figures in the religious system of the Southwestern coastal communities make up an important part of the marine culture in this region. For the people here, the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship custom has existed for a long time and harbors important values in their spiritual lives, as reflected in the following key points.

Firstly, the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship custom is a spiritual anchor for coastal communities.

When humans encounter hardships, failures, or problems that they cannot resolve on their own, spiritual beliefs in supernatural beings can protect, safeguard, and bring peace to their minds. Humans’ spiritual needs are reflected in their belief in gods, in supernatural forces with the power to control human lives (Nguyen Thi Hai Phuong, 2017: 13). Thus, the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship culture in particular, and other religious beliefs in the Southwestern in general, has become a spiritual anchor for coastal dwellers, especially fisherfolk who have to face dangers and storms when setting sail.

<sup>1</sup> Almost every pagoda and temple that worships Nam Hai Bodhisattva in the Southwestern coastal region organize the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship celebration in the same period as above. However, at the Nam Hai Bodhisattva temple in Song Doc town (Tran Van Thoi district, Ca Mau province), the locals organize the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship celebration on the 19<sup>th</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> Lunar month every year (Reference: Duong Hoang Loc, 2020: 56).

Nam Hai Bodhisattva is a benevolent god that they turn to in the first instance with the wish of being saved and protected, as the instinct for survival and the wish to be prosperous, happiness and peace are inherent in every human being.

Furthermore, for fisherfolk who die on the sea, after conducting the “spirit-catching” ritual, the ritual conductor has to pray to Nam Hai Bodhisattva, as the Bodhisattva symbolizes benevolence and the holy light and will help bring the spirit back to the family to help them cope with grief (Duong Hoang Loc, 2020: 56).

Secondly, the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship custom satisfies cultural needs and cultural conservation needs

In the Nam Hai Bodhisattva festival, aside from the ceremonies, there are also the festivities with a wide range of cultural programs, arts performances, and entertainment to serve people participating in the festivals. In particular, there are many types of traditional arts that embody the national culture, such as the “*lục cúng hoa đăng*” dance, “*đờn ca tài tử*”, Vietnamese calligraphy, etc. Nam Hai Bodhisattva festival is not only a spiritual need and a type of community cultural activities, but also an opportunity to conserve traditional arts.

Thirdly, Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship custom enforces community connectedness and ethical education.

According to researchers, festivals are a the “ice cap” of the deep religious mindset, the face of community activities that signify community culture (Ha Dinh Thanh, 2016: 191).

As mentioned above, Nam Hai Bodhisattva festivals and worship ceremonies, which are associated with the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship custom, always receive strong support from the authorities and local people in the preparation and

organising phase. Both of these events also attract widespread participation of tourists from all across the country. This is an opportunity for individuals, organisations, unions and families to interact and exchange culture. These activities will enhance engagement between people in the community, contribute to increasing community adhesiveness.

Furthermore, worshipping, organising festivities, and expressing respect towards Nam Hai Bodhisattva is a way to educate about mercy, benevolence, and kindness towards each other. Although the worship of Nam Hai Bodhisattva is a popular folk belief, it is also integrated with Buddhism philosophy, which has an important focus on shaping people’s ethics.

Fourthly, Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship culture promote economic and tourism development.

The most important factor in any belief or religion is human faith. It is thanks to fisherfolk’s faith in the protection of Nam Hai Bodhisattva that they feel safe in setting sail, which in turn helps to develop the ocean economy.

In addition, Nam Hai Bodhisattva festivals and worship ceremonies organised at Quan Âm Phật Đài pagoda (Bac Lieu province) are considered valuable cultural tourism heritage that bring economic benefits to the people and the region. In the days before and following the events, Quan Âm Phật Đài pagoda has attracted a large number of locals and tourists who come to visit and admire the holy figures. Tourism, restaurants, hospitality and entertainment services have also developed to accommodate the needs of visitors from within and outside of Bac Lieu province during the festival period. This has created more jobs and helped to improve the quality of life for the people and bring great revenue to the province.

Fifthly, cultural relics associated with the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship culture are national cultural treasures

The Quan Âm Phật Đài pagoda is one of the most well-known tangible cultural heritage in Bac Lieu province. The pagoda is known for the standing Nam Hai Bodhisattva statue which is 11 meters tall, facing the ocean. The statue was built in 1973 under the leadership of the management board of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha in Bac Lieu Province, with basic constructions completed in 1975. In 2004, the Bac Lieu provincial authorities approved the project and allowed the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha in Bac Lieu Province to develop more architectural projects in the 2.5-hectare area around the Quan Âm Phật Đài pagoda. These side projects include: Tam quan Gate, worshipping halls for the Thousand Arms and Thousand Eyes Bodhisattva (Thiên Thủ Thiên Nhãn Bodhisattva) and Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva (Địa Tạng Bodhisattva), 32 Holy statues of Bodhisattva avatars and other projects (Pham Lan Oanh, 2019: 116). The Quan Âm Phật Đài pagoda and other historically-dated paintings, statues, worshipping items, and documents about Nam Hai Bodhisattva in pagodas and temples across the Southwest coastal region are also tangible cultural heritages embodying significant cultural-religious values that need to be conserved and protected for future generations.

In addition, cultural and arts performances that occur during the Nam Hai Bodhisattva festival, such as *đờn ca tài tử*, the *lục cúng hoa đăng* dance, Vietnamese calligraphy and so on, are also valuable national intangible cultural heritage.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

The presence of Nam Hai Bodhisattva in almost every Vietnamese pagoda hall and

the development process of the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship custom throughout history have shown that in the spiritual world of Vietnamese people, Nam Hai Bodhisattva symbolizes sympathy, sharing, salvation and is venerated by fisherfolk and sea merchants. Observations on geo-culture, Vietnamese spiritual life, the real meaning of Buddhism, the development of Buddhism and the origins of the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship culture demonstrate that Buddhism and the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship custom in Vietnam are an integration between local culture and Buddhist culture (Doan Thi My Huong, 2015: 48).

Although science has made strong advancement in recent time, human is still not able to comprehend or explain every mystery of the universe and incidences of the spiritual world. With its positive values (such as: satisfying spiritual needs; satisfying the needs to enjoy and conserve nature; strengthen community cohesion; educate about ethics; develop the economy or tourism, etc.), the Nam Hai Bodhisattva religious custom has become an indispensable part of daily life for coastal communities in the Southwest. As a result, it is necessary to push for research activities and implement solutions that maintain and promote values of the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship custom.

Accordingly, the authorities, union organisations and cultural management officers at provinces that worship Nam Hai Bodhisattva need to raise awareness of the people on the value of the custom through advocacy and coordination with specialised research agencies to organise conferences about this religious custom. Tangible cultural heritage related to the Nam Hai Bodhisattva custom, including paintings, statues, worshipping items, and documents

about Nam Hai Bodhisattva in pagodas and temples across the Southwestern coast region, the Quan Âm Phật Đài pagoda in Bac Lieu province, or intangible cultural heritage - traditional arts forms organised in the Nam Hai Bodhisattva festival such as *đờn ca tài tử*, the *lục cúng hoa đăng* dance, Vietnamese calligraphy and so on, contain cultural and historical values of the nation that need government investment and mobilised investment from non-state sectors so that conservation efforts can be carried out with the consultancy of scientists and experts.

Researching and preserving values of the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worship custom do not only mean “restoring the old” or “preserving the original” but also mean innovating and renewing activities related to this custom. This could be done through advancing religious tourism in diverse forms, combining with communications and promotion of the Nam Hai Bodhisattva worshipping culture using innovative technology brought by Industrial Revolution 4.0. There could also be new musical compositions and new dances about Nam Hai Bodhisattva, using modern sound and lighting systems during the Nam Hai Bodhisattva festival to increase engagement and attract local participation while still preserving the values, meaning and traditional beauty of this worshipping custom □

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