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KHMER THERAVADA BUDDHISM AND THE PATRIOTIC MONKS' SOLIDARITY ASSOCIATION

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Abstract: *Khmer Theravada Buddhism is called fully the Theravada Buddhism of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam. In examining Khmer Theravada Buddhism, three interrelated elements should be considered: the Southern region within Vietnam's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the Khmer people in their relationship with Cambodia, and Theravada Buddhism within the broader framework of Vietnamese Buddhism. One of the prominent features of Khmer Theravada Buddhism is the formation, development, and contributions of the Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association. Based on the analysis and synthesis of historical sources, this article summarizes the contributions of Khmer Theravada Buddhism and the Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association.*

Key words: *Khmer Theravada Buddhism, Khmer ethnic, the Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association.*

Tóm tắt: *Phật giáo Nam tông Khơ-me (Khmer) gọi đầy đủ Phật giáo Nam tông của dân tộc Khơ-me ở Nam Bộ. Vậy, khi đề cập Phật giáo Nam tông của dân tộc Khơ-me ở Nam Bộ là chú ý ba yếu tố: vùng đất Nam Bộ trong chủ quyền và toàn vẹn lãnh thổ Việt Nam, dân tộc Khơ-me trong mối quan hệ tộc người với người Campuchia và Phật giáo Nam tông trong ngôi nhà Phật giáo Việt Nam. Và, một trong những nét nổi bật của Phật giáo Nam tông của dân tộc Khơ-me là quá trình hình thành, phát triển và những đóng góp của tổ chức Hội Đoàn kết Sư sãi Yêu nước. Trên cơ sở phân tích và tổng hợp các sử liệu, bài viết khái quát lại về quá trình đóng góp của Phật giáo Nam tông Khơ-me và Hội đoàn kết sư sãi yêu nước.*

Từ khoá: *Phật giáo Nam tông, dân tộc Khơ-me, Hội đoàn kết Sư sãi yêu nước.*

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1. Introduction

Southern Vietnam constitutes a territory of the Vietnamese people, established by the Nguyen dynasty from the mid-17th century onward. The process of reclaiming land in Southern Vietnam can be characterised by three main features: firstly, the Vietnamese territorial expansion in Southern Vietnam largely by peaceful means rather than wars;

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secondly, wherever the Vietnamese settled, they instituted administrative systems to govern communities and assert sovereignty over the newly acquired land; and thirdly, the Vietnamese assumed a central role in the economic, cultural, and social development of Southern Vietnam (Nguyen Thanh Xuan - Nguyen Quynh Tram, 2024, pp. 344-345).

Among the three regions of Vietnam - Northern, Central, and Southern - the Southern region has the fewest ethnic minority communities. While the Northwest and Viet Bac (now collectively called Northwest) in the North are home to more than 30 local ethnic minorities belonging to five language groups; the Central Highlands and the Central Coastal Highlands (collectively referred to as Central Highlands) comprise more than 20 local ethnic minorities from two language groups, the Southern region - mainly in the Southwest - is inhabited primarily by the Khmer people, later joined by the Chinese community and some other ethnic groups (Nguyen Thanh Xuan - Nguyen Quynh Tram, 2024, p. 432).

Buddhism originated in India in the middle of the first millennium BCE and subsequently developed into two main branches: Theravada, known as Southern Buddhism, and Mahayana, known as Northern Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism, influenced by Chinese culture, spread northward from India to countries such as China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Theravada Buddhism, shaped primarily by Indian culture, expanded into southern Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Due to various factors, the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam primarily adhere to Theravada Buddhism, becoming a large community with distinct cultural and lifestyle characteristics related to their ethnicity and religion at present. Notably, Khmer people following Theravada Buddhism in Southern Vietnam, often called Khmer Theravada Buddhism, supported and participated in the revolution and made significant contributions, especially during the resistance against the French and the American invasions. The Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association plays a role in disseminating information, mobilizing support, and uniting the forces of Khmer Theravada Buddhist monks and followers, thereby contributing to achievements that merit recognition and appreciation.

It must also be acknowledged that, to date, research on the Southern region of Vietnam, the Khmer people, and Theravada Buddhism has attracted a sustained scholarly attention and has yielded significant results. There are some representative research works directly related to this topic. Specifically, regarding the Southern region, there are works such as: Huynh Lua - Editor (1987), *History of the Exploration of the Southern Region*; Vietnam Historical Science Association (2006), *A Brief History of the Southern Region of Vietnam* (Phan Huy Le - Editor, 2017), *The Southern Region: Formation and Development*; Vu Minh Giang (2017), *The Southern Region from its Origins to the 7th Century*; Nguyen Quang Ngoc - Editor (2019), *Questions and Answers on the History of the Southern Region*, and so on. Regarding religion and Theravada Buddhism, there are works such as *The Development of Vietnamese Thought from the 19th Century to the August Revolution* by Tran Van Giau (1975); *Contributing to the study of Southern Buddhism* by Tran Hong Lien (2004); *Religion and beliefs of the inhabitants of the Mekong Delta* of Nguyen Manh Cuong and Nguyen Minh

Ngoc (2005); *Initial study of Theravada Buddhism in Vietnam* by Nguyen Van Sau (2007); *Khmer Buddhism in Southern Vietnam: issues to look back at* of Nguyen Manh Cuong (2008); *Theravada Buddhism in the culture of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam (the case of Tra Vinh province)* of Trang Thieu Hung (2019), and so on. Along with the aforementioned documents are practical materials from the Government's Religious Affairs Committee on the Khmer ethnic group and Theravada Buddhism.

Drawing on synthesis, analysis, and evaluation, this article attempts to provide a concise overview of the Southern region of Vietnam, the Khmer people practicing Theravada Buddhism, and the Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association - a religious organization with socio-religious characteristics closely associated with the Khmer people and with Vietnam.

2. Results and Discussions

2.1. The Khmer people in Southern Vietnam and Theravada Buddhism

The Southern region of Vietnam is a place that possesses unique characteristics in terms of history, ethnicity, and religion. Historically, it has gone through three historical periods - corresponding to three geopolitical formations: Funan (Fou-nan) from the beginning of the Common Era to the 7th century, belonging to the Oc Eo culture (Ba The district, An Giang province); Chenla (Chen-la, now Cambodia) from the 7th to the 17th centuries; and Vietnam from the 17th century to the present. The Funan Kingdom was formed at the beginning of the Common Era and existed until the end of the 6th or beginning of the 7th century before collapsing. According to many researchers, the ancient Funan Kingdom had a vast territory, encompassing Southern Vietnam, parts of the southern Central provinces, and southeastern Cambodia today. The Funan Kingdom endured for seven centuries and was ruled by eighteen kings (Nguyen Quang Ngoc, 2019, pp. 49, 50).

In the seventh century, when the Funan kingdom weakened, Chenla (Cambodia), formerly a vassal state of Funan, grew stronger and “attacked and seized a part of the Funan empire's territory in the early seventh century” (Vietnam Historical Science Association, 2006, p. 19). Although Chenla succeeded in conquering Funan, due to various reasons, such as cultural differences between riverine and maritime cultures, or the constant turmoil in Chenla, or the need to resist the expansion of Siam (Thailand), and so on, Chenla (Cambodia) did not truly consolidate the administrative control over the region. That situation persisted even during the periods when Chenla emerged as a powerful nation with the flourishing, brilliant Angkor culture. To distinguish the former Funan from Chenla's original territory (Land Chenla), the Han Chinese called the Funan region Water Chenla.

The reclamation of the Southern region of Vietnam began with spontaneous and unrecorded migrations of Vietnamese settlers from the early seventeenth century. Initially, they lived interspersed with the Stieng, Ma, Cho Ro, Khmer, and other local ethnic groups. In subsequent times, those new settlers gradually moved deeper into the delta to cultivate the remaining wild areas. By the mid-18th century, under Lord Nguyen Phuc Khoat, the boundaries

of the Southern region were basically defined as they are today. Because of this peaceful land reclamation, the early establishment of an administrative system, and the development of socio-economic and cultural aspects, when the King of Cambodia demanded the Southern region in the late 1940s, the French government refused and returned it to Vietnam through Law No. 49-733 (dated June 4, 1949), permanently ending the status of “French Overseas Territory” for the Southern region (Vietnam Historical Science Association, 2006, pp. 111, 112).

In researching the Khmer ethnic group in Southern Vietnam, most previous scholars held that the Khmer in Vietnam originated from Cambodia (Land Chenla) through migrations to the Funan region (Water Chenla), where they lived for nearly a millennium, lasting from the seventh to seventeenth centuries. The earliest wave of Khmer migration from Cambodia to what is now the Southwestern region of Vietnam occurred in the seventh century, coinciding with the period when the Chenla conquered Funan. The second wave of Khmer migration took place during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, while the largest migration occurred following the collapse of the Angkor empire.

In fact, while there was a migration of Khmer people from Chenla (present-day Cambodia) to Funan (Water Chenla), it cannot be conclusively asserted that the Khmer people in present-day Vietnam originated solely from Cambodia. This is because the Funan Kingdom existed for approximately seven centuries, possessing its own defined territory, its own state, its own culture, and its own population. Moreover, when Chenla expanded into Funan, there was no evidence of catastrophic events such as the “Black Death” or the “great flood” that would lead to the mass deaths and the destruction of the Funan people's habitats. According to current understanding, which is primarily based on the exploration of ancient human remains at the Oc Eo sites, it can be said that the local inhabitants of Funan were mainly constituted by ethnic groups from the Malay Peninsula and the Javanese Islands who migrated there, having relations with some ethnic groups in the Central Highlands, collectively known as Indonesians (also called Proto-Malais) - Pre-Malaysian (Nguyen Quang Ngoc, 2019, p. 53). The inhabitants of Funan were associated with a maritime culture, unlike the inhabitants of Chenla, whose Mon-Khmer language group was associated with a riverine culture. Therefore, regarding the ethnic lineage, the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam today do not represent purely Khmer origin; rather, they are more likely to be local Funan people who interbred with the Khmer. Thus, while the Khmer people in Vietnam and those in Cambodia share significant similarities in religion, culture, and lifestyle, there are certain differences between them in terms of bloodline and ethnogenesis (Nguyen Thanh Xuan - Nguyen Quynh Tram, 2024, pp. 348, 349).

In the realms of religion, the ancient Funan kingdom was influenced by India, so Brahmanism was introduced very early and became the religion and culture of the Funan people. Later, like Chenla, Brahmanism declined, giving way to Buddhism. The remaining archaeological artifacts and legends indicate that Buddhism emerged in Funan relatively early, around the sixth century, contemporaneous with its introduction to Chenla (present-day

Cambodia). In this early period, Buddhism was spread to Chenla and Funan from both the Mahayana and Theravada traditions, coexisting with Brahmanism for a time. Some archaeological sites associated with the Oc Eo culture not only yielded Hindu artifacts, but also Buddhist artifacts, especially Mahayana Buddhism. Typical examples include bronze Buddha statues, stone Buddha statues, bronze statues of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva at Go Cay Thi (An Giang), and wooden Buddha statues at Giong Xoai (Kien Giang), and so on (Dang Van Thang, Nguyen Huu Gieng, Ha Thi Sieng, 2022). As in Cambodia, for various reasons, Mahayana Buddhism in Funan eventually declined and gave way to Theravada Buddhism. It is important to note that following the collapse of the Funan kingdom, the dispersion of its people led to the decline of both Buddhism and Brahmanism. It was not until the Khmer people migrated from Cambodia that Theravada Buddhism developed rapidly and extensively. By the seventeenth century, most Khmer settlements followed Theravada Buddhism, and by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Theravada Buddhist temples pervaded Khmer hamlets.

Recently, historians have examined and identified the construction dates of several ancient Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples in Southern Vietnam as follows: Khleung Pagoda in Soc Trang, built in the mid-16th century; Sêrây Têchô Mahatúp Pagoda (Doi Pagoda or Ma Toc Pagoda) in Soc Trang, erected in 1569; Hang Pagoda in Tra Vinh, built in 1637; Nodol Pagoda (Gong Lon Pagoda) in Tra Vinh, built in 1677; Ang Pagoda in Tra Vinh, erected before 1715 and renovated in 1842, and so on (Nguyen Quang Ngoc, 2019, pp. 64, 65).

The following statistics provide an overview of Khmer Theravada Buddhism in Southern Vietnam. First, in the Mekong Delta provinces (Southwestern region), as of 2020, there were 1,155,097 Buddhists, accounting for over 95% of the total Khmer population, along with 7,891 monks and 445 temples. Specifically, Soc Trang recorded 396 followers, 1,749 monks, and 130 religious facilities (92 temples and 38 salatels); Tra Vinh had 304,845 followers, 3,255 monks, and 143 religious facilities; Kien Giang had 210,899 followers, 1,010 monks, and 75 religious facilities; and An Giang had 62,903 followers, 1,100 monks, and 66 religious facilities. Additionally, Bac Lieu reported 68,129 followers, 292 monks, and 28 religious facilities (22 pagodas, 6 salatels); Hau Giang had 26,257 followers, 70 monks, and 15 pagodas; Ca Mau had 40,000 followers, 32 monks, and 7 pagodas; Vinh Long had 22,771 followers, 219 monks, and 13 religious facilities; Can Tho had 22,294 followers, 128 monks, and 12 religious facilities (Government Religious Affairs Committee, 2020).

Second, in the southeastern provinces of Vietnam in 2020, the Theravada Buddhist community consisted of 48,528 followers, 53 monks, and 19 temples. Specifically, Ho Chi Minh City recorded 24,268 followers, 55 monks, 2 temples; Binh Phuoc had 15,557 followers, 107 monks, 5 temples; Binh Duong reported 14,435 followers, 4 monks, 1 temple; Tay Ninh had 7,578 followers, 22 monks, 5 temples; Dong Nai witnessed 7,059 followers, 6 monks, 1 temple; Ba Ria - Vung Tau had 2,787 followers, 6 monks, 1 temple, and so on (Government Religious Affairs Committee, 2020).

Thus, Theravada Buddhism constitutes the primary religion of the Khmer people, representing their unique cultural and religious characteristics and distinguishing them from other ethnic groups in Vietnam. The Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association established among them serves as an exemplary that manifests these unique characteristics of Khmer Theravada Buddhism.

2.2. The Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association of Khmer Theravada Buddhism

The Khmer Theravada Buddhist community in Southern Vietnam is a large community that has had a long-standing association with the Revolution. Following the establishment of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (1960), the Southwestern Regional Party Committee advocated for the creation of a patriotic organisation among Khmer Theravada Buddhist monks, building upon the earlier Monks' Mobilisation organisation formed during the resistance against the French. On March 20, 1963, the *Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association of the Southwestern Region*, initially known as the *Patriotic Monks' Association of the Southwestern Region*, was officially established, with Venerable Thach Som, later the Vice-Chairman of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, serving as the General Headquarters, and Venerable Son Vong as Honorary Chairman. This association operated under the direct leadership of the National Liberation Front Committee of South Vietnam and the Khmer Mobilisation Committee of the Southwestern Region (Government Religious Affairs Committee, 1987).

The Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association of the Southwestern Region, with the structure of three levels such as region, province, and district, served as a unique socio-political organisation within the Khmer Buddhist community and became a member of the National Liberation Front; therefore, it operated as a mass organisation within the political system. Based on the principle: “*To save the religion, one must save the country; without national independence and without defeating the invading American imperialists, true Buddhism cannot exist and develop*” (Government Religious Affairs Committee, 1987). The content and methods of operation of the Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association are to propagate and mobilise Khmer monks and Buddhists to support and engage in the revolutionary movement.

After the establishment of the Patriotic Buddhist Monks' Solidarity Association in the Southwestern region, provinces and cities in the Mekong Delta successively established provincial-level Patriotic Buddhist Monks' Solidarity Associations, including Soc Trang (1963), Tra Vinh (1965), Ca Mau (1966), Kien Giang (1968), and so on (Bach Thanh Sang, 2020, p. 47). From its early days and throughout the resistance war against the US for national salvation, the Patriotic Buddhist Monks' Solidarity Association in the Southwestern region played an effective role, making significant contributions. It mobilised and gathered a large number of Khmer people and monks to unite in the struggle against the US, support the revolution, participate in many demonstrations and hunger strikes to protest the war and demand peace, contributing together with the whole nation to liberate the South and unify the country. Many Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples in the Southwestern region of Vietnam

became revolutionary bases, sheltering and protecting revolutionary cadres, such as O Mich Pagoda, Me Lang Pagoda, Can Nom Pagoda, Prokhub (Tra Vinh), Rach Cui Pagoda (Ca Mau), and so on. Many Khmer monks and Buddhists joined the resistance, becoming revolutionary fighters, actively mobilising monks and Buddhists to participate in political struggles such as Venerable Huu Nhem, Venerable Tang Ne, Venerable Thach Som, Venerable Son Vong, Abbot Thach Phat, Venerable Kim Nhieu Kem, Senior Monk Kim Tuc Chon, Venerable Kim Chao, Venerable Tran Danh, Venerable Lam Co, Venerable Thach Ut, and so on. Many monks heeded the sacred call of the Fatherland, “shed their robes and donned military uniforms,” went to defend the Fatherland, and sacrificed themselves to fight for national independence, such as martyr Duong Soc, martyr Kim Sum, martyr Kim Nang, and so on.

In summary, during the two wars of resistance against French colonialists and the US intervention, the Khmer people in the Southwestern region of Vietnam had 92 heroic Vietnamese mothers, 11 heroes of the armed forces, 2,863 martyrs, 1,029 wounded soldiers, tens of thousands of families who contributed to the nation, and 139 Theravada Buddhist temples that contributed to the revolution. High-ranking monks of Theravada Buddhism in the Khmer region were awarded prestigious titles: Venerable Danh Nhuong was awarded the Third-Class Resistance Medal and the First-Class Independence Medal; Venerable Ngo Van Am was awarded the First-Class Resistance Medal; Venerable Danh Tho was awarded the Resistance Medal, etc. The Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association of the Southwestern region was awarded two Liberation Medals by the Central Committee of the Southern Region for its achievements in the war of resistance against the US intervention for the national salvation (Nguyen Thanh Xuan - Nguyen Quynh Tram, 2024, p. 388).

The establishment and development of the Patriotic Buddhist Monks' Solidarity Association at the regional and provincial levels in the Southwestern region of Vietnam demonstrates that Theravada Buddhism of the Khmer people consistently stood side-by-side with the Vietnamese ethnic communities, contributing manpower and resources to the resistance war against the US intervention until the day of complete victory.

Following the liberation of South Vietnam and the reunification of the country, with the support of the Vietnamese State, the Vietnamese Buddhist community unified its various organisations and sects nationwide into a single entity. In that context, in 1980, the Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association of the Southwest Region, representing Khmer Theravada Buddhism, became one of the Buddhist organisations in the Steering Committee for the establishment of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha in 1981. After the establishment of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, all organisations and sects ceased maintaining their separate organisational structures and unified under the common umbrella of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, while retaining only the characteristics and practices of their respective monastic traditions.

According to the unified structure of Vietnamese Buddhism, which includes the majority being Mahayana Buddhism, some activities with a distinct tradition associated with

distinct monastic rules need to be maintained separately for Khmer Theravada Buddhism. Typical examples of those are the preparation and organization of regular ordination ceremonies, the conferment of precepts, and the ordination of monks. These aspects have not been strictly regulated by the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. Therefore, after the Central Committee issued Directive 68-CT/TW on work in Khmer ethnic minority areas, which was issued in 1991, most localities with Khmer Theravada Buddhism in the Southwest region (except An Giang province) consolidated and established new Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Associations within their provinces. Besides contributing to the cause of national construction and defense, the Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association, a religious and social organization, also supports traditional religious activities of Khmer Theravada Buddhism.

Before July 2025, eight provinces in Southern Vietnam maintained the Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association: Tra Vinh, Soc Trang, Vinh Long, Can Tho, Hau Giang, Bac Lieu, Ca Mau, and Kien Giang. These provincial Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Associations each had charters or operational regulations and established organizational structures at two levels (Government Religious Affairs Committee, 2020). Specifically, the Khmer Theravada Buddhist community in Tra Vinh province, alongside the Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association, maintained a three-level disciplinary council: at the provincial level, the Salakon Monks' Disciplinary Council, headed by the Provincial Mekon (with 11 members); at the district level, the Upachchea Council, headed by the Anuskon (with 7 to 9 members); and at the commune level, led by the head monk of the temple. Despite maintaining this traditional mechanism, the Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association of the Khmer Theravada Buddhist community in Tra Vinh province was not dependent on the Cambodian King as it was during the feudal and French colonial periods. Following the merger of provincial-level administrative units from the end of 2025, and in accordance with the guidelines of the Vietnam Buddhist Association, the Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association of the Khmer Theravada Buddhist community is currently making adjustments to adapt.

3. Conclusion

Southern Vietnam is a region with unique geographical, historical, ethnic, and religious characteristics. It is home to a large Khmer ethnic group - a local community that is a member of the broader national unity. The vast majority of Khmer people practice Theravada Buddhism - a branch of Buddhism that preserves characteristics dating back to the time of Buddha and is influenced by Indian culture and religion. Khmer Theravada Buddhism, a part of the "broader family" of the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha, embodies the spirit of national and religious unity that deserves to be affirmed and cherished.

During the course of Vietnamese revolutionary history, Theravada Buddhism among the Khmer people actively participated in and contributed to both the resistance wars against French colonialists and the US intervention. In particular, in the early 1960s, Theravada Buddhism formed a religious and social organization, which is known as the Patriotic Monks'

Solidarity Association, to gather Khmer monks and Buddhists to participate in the resistance against the US intervention. In subsequent times, despite changes in the social and religious environment, the Patriotic Monks' Solidarity Association continued to play its role appropriately in both social and religious spheres./.

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