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THE PRESERVATION OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS VALUES IN THE COASTAL AND ISLAND AREA OF CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

Abstract: *Coastal and island areas are regions that hold a pivotal position in protecting national sovereignty. These areas have many unique characteristics in terms of the economy, culture, society, beliefs, and religion. The residents living there are plentiful and diverse in the origins of both homeland and ethnicity. Therefore, the preservation of religious and ethnic values in Vietnam's coastal and island areas demonstrates a significant meaning in fostering sustainable development of such areas in particular and in building and protecting the country in general. In this paper, we attempt to initially clarify some relevant concepts, then present an overview of the main features of ethnicity, religion, and ethnic and religious values, and finally come to elucidate situations of the preservation of ethnic and religious values in Vietnam's coastal and island communities. The paper used data drawn from statistics and field surveys conducted by the group of authors and previous researchers.*

Keywords: *Ethnic religion, ethnic values, religious values, coastal areas, islands, Vietnam*

Introduction

Some previous research works from the perspectives of historical, ethnological, and cultural studies showed that the seas and islands of Vietnam from the past to the present have been mainly associated with certain ethnic groups: Kinh (Việt), Cham, Khmer, Overseas Chinese

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(Hoa), Ngái [Phan Thị Yến Tuyết, 2014: 56-57; Bùi Xuân Đính, Nguyễn Thị Thanh Bình, 2018: 15]. Each ethnic group, throughout its history of residence, migration, and living, has established its worldview and outlook on human life, which are often clearly exhibited through the beliefs and religious life of its community. On the other hand, the process of exchange and interaction between ethnic groups in a region, a country, or even on an international scale is an inevitable trend of history that leads to the occurrence of acculturation in the realm of beliefs and religions. This is also seen clearly in ethnic and religious relationships in the coastal and island areas of Vietnam. Competition or conflict related to ethnic and religious affairs has been an issue that has concerned the national strategy of sustainable development in general and the preservation of ethnic cultural identity in particular in the context of current modernization and globalization [Lê Hải Đăng, 2019: 97; Vương Xuân Tình, 2021].

In addition to the large part of the population living in coastal and island areas of Vietnam whose people embrace a polytheistic mindset and practice beliefs, some residents are followers of religions (Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Cao Dai religion, The Vietnam Pure Land Lay Buddhist Association, and so on). While complying with doctrine and canon law in general, their religious practices also involve prominent elements of maritime and ethnic cultures [Nguyễn Thị Hải Lê, 2020: 16-21; Phú Văn Hân, 2022]. We employed the perspective of value to approach ethnic values and place such values in the relationship with religious values [Phạm Minh Hạc, 2010: 42; The Institute for Religious Studies, 2022: 20]. It is important to understand that ethnic values here are something that is broader and encompasses ethnic and religious values. Because the ‘religion’ here refers to a kind of religion that is chosen by an ethnic group, for example: Buddhism is chosen by a part of the Kinh people; Brahmanism is chosen by a part of the Cham people; Theravada Buddhism is the choice of the vast majority in the Khmer ethnic group, etc. Therefore, the religious values of each ethnic group will both bear the ethnic cultural characteristics and the characteristics of the religion that is chosen by that ethnic group. Accordingly, the concept of *ethnic and religious values* can be defined as *the good things of an ethnic community, which are formed on a common religious foundation, and become the perceived standards of*

behavior and action of the community. For ethnic communities in coastal and island areas of Vietnam, the establishment of the system of ethnic and religious values stems from fundamental values such as cognitive values, moral values, cultural values, and other values (economics, security, national defense, etc).

This paper relies on secondary documents and original data collected during fieldwork in some coastal provinces/cities such as Quảng Ninh, Hải Phòng, Đà Nẵng, Huế, Cà Mau, Bạc Liêu in 2022 and 2023, along with the deployment of methods of participant observation, interviews, and group discussions.

1. An overview of ethnicity, religion, ethnic and religious values in coastal areas and islands in Vietnam

1.1. Ethnicity and religion in coastal areas and islands in Vietnam

According to Trần Minh Hằng, communities residing in coastal and island areas of Vietnam are “groups of residents, living off various types of occupations, who have been formed and developed through many different stages that linked to the process of adaptation to coastal ecological conditions and the process of ethnic exchange with diverse cultural and religious characteristics” [Trần Minh Hằng, 2022: 115]. Therefore, talking about Vietnam's maritime culture needs to pay attention to its affiliation with specific regions and ethnic groups. Researches show that coastal areas and islands in Vietnam were originally the residential areas of Việt, Cham, Hoa, Khmer... ethnic groups. The characteristics of residential areas, history, and culture of each ethnic group in turn become the premise for the formation of indigenous beliefs, the importation and transformation of foreign religions, or the formation of domestic religions...to meet the religious needs of the resident communities and become the core of ethnic cultural identity.

Living in a marine environment with countless uncertainties and dangers, each ethnic group experiencing throughout their history of survival and adaptation has formed their religious consciousness and become constantly aware of and accumulated experience in comporting with the sea. Accordingly, the system of sea gods was formed along with related worship facilities, rituals/festivals, and taboos. Besides, being in an intercultural environment also makes

their beliefs and religions both unique and unified from regional to national cultural characteristics.

The Việt people: The Việt people in coastal and island areas of Vietnam originated from two groups of migrants. The first group was from the “inner field” reaching out to the sea. They brought with them the traditional structure of the social organization (family, kinship, village...) and methods of agricultural cultivation combined with near-shore fishing and aquaculture in small bays, and subsequently they gradually settled down and built a sustainable community there. The second group came from the North and migrated to the South following the “Southern advance” journeys during the times of feudal dynasties, spanning from the Lý – Trần to the Lê – Nguyễn dynasties. During the process of “living with the sea”, the Việt people established a resident community that mimics the way of organizing the institutions of traditional Việt villages in the Northern region, and at the same time, they also created new customs and practices to adapt to natural and living conditions status in the new land. Not just that, they have had interaction and acculturation with the Chăm, Hoa, and Khmer people in the cultural and religious realms. Therefore, besides the emergence of the solemn tutelary gods in the village communal houses, and the sacred deities in the temples, the sacred spaces of this group also witnessed the emergence of many new gods to meet the spiritual needs of the community. Religious practices, therefore, also become richer and more diverse, notably the custom of worshipping Cá Ông, Bà Cậu, Thủy Long Thần Nữ, Tiền hiền, Cô bác... Along with these worships, they are also followers of Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and some other domestic religions...

The Hoa people: The Hoa people have early migrated to the South through many routes, including the sea. Before the border conflict in 1979, in the Northeast of Vietnam, the Hoa people accounted for 75% of the Hoa population in the North of Vietnam; however, the majority of them subsequently returned homeland. Only a small part of those who remain stayed there, but their traditional culture and customs have been fading at present [Nguyễn Văn Chính, 2020: 3-23]. During the 16th - 17th centuries in Cochinchina, the policies of utilizing soft powers and promoting maritime trade under the rule of Lord Nguyen created a favorable environment that attracted many Hoa merchants to

seek refuge and build new lives in some localities in Central Vietnam [Đào Vĩnh Hợp, Võ Thị Ánh Tuyết, 2017: 12]. Though the Hoa in the Southern region have a later settlement history, they have been larger in terms of population and have gained more achievements in terms of economic, cultural, and social lives.

Along with socio-economic institutions, the Hoa built many belief and religious sites (pagodas, temples, shrines...) to meet the religious needs of the community. The Hoa group in Phan Thiết (Bình Thuận) worships Thiên Hậu Thánh Mẫu, Quan Thánh Đế Quân and other gods at establishments such as Bà pagoda (also known as Thiên Hậu palace, 1725), Ông pagoda (Quan Thánh Đế Quân temple, 1770). Meanwhile, the beliefs and religions of the Hoa people in Bạc Liêu clearly show the mixture of the Three Teachings (Confucianism - Buddhism - Taoism) and folk beliefs, with prominent gods such as Quan Công, Thiên Hậu, Guan Yin Buddha, Cá Ông... are worshiped at: Ông Bồn temple (pagoda) (Vĩnh Thạnh commune), Cá Ông temple (Hiệp Thành commune), Bà Thiên Hậu temple (Gành Hào town)... [Trương Thu Trang, 2017 :93].

The Cham people: Historically, they were the owners of the South Central Coastal region. Along with the progress of the “Southern advance” of the Việt people, the migration of the Hoa and Cham people gradually retreated to the South. From being a group of people attaching and reaching out to the sea, exploiting, producing, and trading everywhere, the Cham people have gradually retreated into the hinterland. Prominent traces such as ancient wells (Nam Ô, Cù Lao Chàm, Lý Sơn, Phú Quý, Côn Đảo, Côn Cỏ), towers and temples (PoSah Inu tower in Bình Thuận, Ponagar tower in Nha Trang, Bánh Ít tower in Quy Nhơn...) are relics in many coastal and island localities. The techniques, architecture, and sculpture of these works, along with the decoding of related daily and religious life show the cultural imprint and behavior of the Cham in their journey of attaching to the sea... Although a number of the Cham people have been changed to be similar to the Viet (“Việt hóa”), the ethnic historical imprint of the Cham still stretches across places in the South Central region today (Cù Lao Chàm, Chiên Hóa, Thanh Chiêm...) [Hà Đình Thành, ed., 2016: 28]. The Cham people in the Central Coast are concentrated mainly in the two provinces of Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận and follow Brahmanism, Islam, and Bani groups. In recent years, some of

the Cham have converted to other religions such as Protestantism, Catholicism, and Bahaism, this issue is causing unrest in the community [Vũ Thế Công, ed., 2023:103]

The Khmer people: Historically, the Khmer people are people associated with the river/sea areas in the South. They settled, fished, and imprinted their river/sea culture on this fertile land. Khmer people live in the phum/soc and have polytheistic beliefs. On the one hand, they worship Arak (matriarchal ancestor) and Neak Ta (tutelary god of the land)..., on the other hand, they follow Theravada Buddhism which was introduced into the Southern Khmer community around the 13th and 14th centuries and became the dominant religion of this community. In the cultural life of the Khmer people, the pagoda is a special community architectural work, combining many functions including a religious center, school, the cultural center of Phum/Soc (such as a meeting center, cultural museum...), family worshipping house, economic unit, social charity center [Nguyễn Mạnh Cường, 2008: 62, 134-144].

1.2. Ethnic and religious values in coastal areas and islands in Vietnam

Firstly, the values of religious beliefs associated with ethnic groups

Religion contains many values, including the values of beliefs. These values not only help people be aware of the universe, the infinite natural world, the movement and infinite changes of the universe, and the principles of things and phenomena. These values not only lead to the behavior of individuals, families, and communities in life and society, but also help people have a firm belief in the protection and blessing of the gods for their life, livelihood, and existential security. Due to geographical characteristics, living habits, and livelihoods associated with the sea and islands, residents of ethnic minorities in this area have a worldview, outlook on life, and belief in sacred subjects as protectors in their lives and livelihoods.

This is shown quite clearly with Buddhist followers among coastal and island ethnic groups. In addition to worshipping Buddhist deities, they are especially respectful to Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, also known as Guan Yin Nam Hai - a bodhisattva who can listen and has the power to save or release suffering of living beings, especially can

help fishermen in danger. Therefore, in the subconscious mind of coastal and island residents in Vietnam, the position of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva is promoted. At coastal and island temples, her statues are not only placed in the main hall but also on the temple grounds. Furthermore, these statues are always made in very big size, standing posture and facing the sea. It could be mentioned the statue of Avalokiteśvara at Linh Ứng Pagoda (the tallest statue of Avalokiteśvara in Vietnam, in Sơn Trà, Đà Nẵng); statue of Avalokiteshvara at Vạn Phước Pagoda (Bình Tân); statue of Nam Hải Lady Buddha - Quan Âm Phật Đài (Nhà Mát, Bạc Liêu);...

Similar cases also occur with Catholic communities among Kinh (Việt) people on the coast and islands of Vietnam, such as a large statue of Jesus placed facing the sea in Vũng Tàu; a statue of the Virgin Mary at Dương Đông estuary (now moved to An Thới church, Phú Quốc), or in the case of the statue of Saint Peter (a saint who came from a fisherman group) outside the church courtyard for Our Lady of Fatima (Thanh Hải, Phan Thiết, Bình Thuận), ... In particular, the Southern coastal parishes also have sea festivals with a glimpse influence of the Nghênh Ông festival [Trần Minh Hằng, 2022: 121], Thus, the Buddhas and saints mentioned above belong to different religions, but because of their background or the powers they possess, residents of coastal and island areas all believe that they always closely follow and protect not only the fishermen in the region but also for fishermen in other regions.

In the case of the Cham Brahmins, around the 2nd - 3rd centuries AD, when Brahmanism was a type of exogenous religion that emphasized patriarchy, penetrating Cham society, which was an ethnic group that originally supported female dominance. A number of the Cham people, after accepting this new type of religion, also accepted cognitive values of the worldview, and outlook of life,... but under the influence of ethnic factors, these values had certain changes. Typically, as it is in creationism, Brahmanism believes that the world is created, built, and destroyed by the trinity of Brahma - Vishnu - Shiva (Trimurti), but Cham Brahmins believe that the Land Mother Goddess Yang Po Inu Nugar is the creator of the world and all things. Therefore, she is widely worshiped throughout this coastal community from the Central to South Central regions. Besides, after a long period of living

together, exchanging and adapting culture, the image of the Cham's Land Mother Goddess has gradually become more similar to the Viet's goddess ("Vietnamization") with many titles such as Thiên Y A Na Diên Ngọc Phi, Ngọc Bà Thiên Yana, Thiên Yana Diên Bà chúa Ngọc Thánh Phi (Gem Princess), Tiên Y Thánh Mẫu (Mother Goddess)... She was ordained by the Nguyễn Dynasty as Hồng Nhân Phổ Tế Linh Ứng Thượng đẳng thần, the sacred mother of the Việt people in the Central region. In each different locality, under the influence of regional cultural life and the aspirations of the community, the image of Yang Po Inư Nugar/Thiên Yana will have certain changes. These changes are expressed in two aspects. In the first aspect, there are many different titles such as Thiên Yana, Bà chúa Ngọc, Bà Bô Bô, Bà Thu Bồn, Mother of Earth, Mother of River...[Huỳnh Thiệu Phong, 2022]; Second, she has various powers: for fishermen, she is considered a saint who blesses fishing and aquaculture (like in Cam Lâm, Cam Ranh, Vạn Ninh...); For farmers, she is worshiped as the Holy Mother who teaches people how to grow crops, blesses fertile crops, and civilizes them; For urban residents, especially those doing business, she is worshiped as a god of blessings for good business; For residents who specialize in exploiting forest products, especially agarwood, Thiên Yana becomes the Lady of Agarwood... [Nguyễn Thị Thanh Vân, 2009]. It can be said that under any living conditions and circumstances, religions provide residents of coastal ethnic groups with appropriate "life buoys", help to satisfy their belief in life protection.

Second, moral and religious values are associated with ethnicity.

The doctrines and canon laws of each type of religion are used to constrain and guide believers in the process of cultivating and practicing religion, and they also become a moral "mechanism" that invisibly guides ethical behaviors in religious communities and contributes to making society more orderly, peaceful, and better. Buddhism promotes compassion, selflessness, and altruism, encourages people to do good and avoid evil, and encourages believers to practice the Five Precepts, Ten Virtues,...; Catholic teachings such as "Respect God, love others" with the Ten Commandments (Worship one God and love Him above all things; Do not call God's name in vain; In the middle of Sunday; Honor your parents; Do not kill, Do not commit carnality; Do not steal, Do not lie

of witness; Protestantism with the opinion “Respect God and love country”; Brahmanism with precepts for practitioners (Must know Cham writings; Must keep the soul pure; Do not ogle beautiful girls, do not covet other's wives, do not have two wives; Do not covet other's things; Do not kill; Must accumulate virtue for descendants and believers...),... All are conventions for regulating human behaviors and encouraging believers to do good and avoid evil, contributing to the flourishing traditions of the Vietnamese people.

Religions in coastal and island areas of Vietnam not only meet spiritual needs but also build a system of moral and ethical values, guide the followers to cultivate their minds and characters to become useful people for society, know how to love human beings and all things, respect the ecological environment; know how to care for, grow and properly use seafood resources to both bring economic benefits to the family and contribute to the country's economic development.

However, just as mentioned above, ethnic elements always exist in religious communities. In the case of the Bani Cham people who are being influenced by Islam but still preserving the moral values of the ethnic group, this is clearly shown through the custom of worshipping and remembering ancestors (different from Muslims who only worship Allah, and the Islamic Cham group is an example). Before Ramurwan month - the month of fasting according to ethnic custom, people perform grave sweeping ceremonies, worship at home, invite ancestors to return to their descendants and pray for peace, prosperity, happiness, lush crops, and more for all the villagers. Before the main ceremony (according to the Islamic calendar), Bani dignitaries and Hakem groups go to the temple to perform the fasting month ritual. During this time, they live at the temple and are only allowed to eat and drink after sunset (except for pregnant women, children, the sick, and elderly people). Like the Islamic Cham, the Bani Cham people believe that practicing the fasting month means purifying the body and spirit, controlling trivial desires, moving towards truth, goodness and beauty, and solidarity of the ethnic community.

Third, cultural values of ethnicity and religion: Cultural values of ethnicity and religion of coastal and island residents are expressed mainly in two aspects:

Firstly, the worshipping facilities of the religious ethnic communities contributed to the treasure of tangible cultural heritage which is plentiful, diverse, and unique in Vietnam's religious architectural system. From North to South, there are 125 coastal districts in 28 provinces/cities of our country,¹ and almost everywhere there are coastal religious facilities. If the North is dominated by Buddhist temples, and Catholic or Protestant churches; from the Central region to the South, there is also a system of towers of the Cham Brahmins, pagodas of the Bani Cham people, and Islamic mosques; the holy houses of Caodaism; pagodas of the Vietnamese Association of Pure-Land Lay Buddhists; Theravada temples of the Khmer people (along the Southwest coast); in Đà Nẵng, Bình Thuận, Vũng Tàu, Hồ Chí Minh City also has many pagodas of the Hoa people... Besides, on large and small islands of our country,² there are also diverse religious facilities. As of June 2014, on Vietnam's islands, there are 52 Buddhist facilities for worship and other Buddhist-related activities [Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2014]. Recently, this number may have significantly increased. In addition to Buddhist worship facilities, there are many other types of religious buildings for believers' activities. On Phú Quốc island, there is a worship facility of the Vietnamese Association of Pure Land Lay Buddhists; and two worship facilities of the Cao Đài religion. On Phú Quý island, there is a Cao Đài worship facility. Lý Sơn Island has a Cao Đài worship facility. Along with worship facilities, there is a system of worship statues and objects...which also contributes to enriching the treasure of material culture of ethnic and religious communities along the coast and islands in our country.

Secondly, in contributing to preserving and promoting Vietnam's intangible cultural heritage, rituals and festivals of ethnic and religious groups of coastal and island residents have enriched the culture of the region in particular and the country in general. Buddhism with Buddha's Birthday ceremony, Vu Lan ceremony, rituals of praying for peace at the beginning of the year, praying for heroes and martyrs' salvation, etc.; Catholicism, Protestantism with Christmas; Cao Đài religion with Yến Diêu Trì Cung Festival; Brahmin Cham people with the Kate Festival (Kate Festival of the Brahmin Cham people in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận was recognized as a national intangible

heritage in 2017 and 2022, respectively), and many festivals of other ethnic groups are the unique ethnic and religious cultural treasures of the coastal communities. These rituals and festivals with ceremonies performances, costumes, cuisine,... not only create a sacred space for connecting between people and the gods but also provide an environment for people's cultural exchange and transmission.

Other values of ethnicity and religion (economy, national security and defense, etc.)

With a rich system of worship facilities, stretching from North to South, along with religious rituals and festivals, it has not only met the spiritual and religious needs of believers but also been a resource for the economic, cultural, and social development of the host community, especially in the field of religious tourism. According to statistics from the General Department of Tourism, in 2019, Vietnam's coastal areas had 323 tourist destinations, accounting for 61.5% of the country's total tourist destinations. Many tourist destinations in coastal areas have become world famous, such as Hạ Long Bay, Cát Bà island, Phong Nha – Kẻ Bàng, Xuân Đài Gulf [Phạm Thị Trâm, Lê Hồng Ngọc, 2023], beaches in Đà Nẵng, Quy Nhơn, Ninh Thuận, Bình Thuận, Vũng Tàu, ... Worship facilities of all types of religions on the coast and islands have become tourist destinations that attract a large number of tourists, including Xuân Lan pagoda (Móng Cái), Yên Tử pagoda, Cái Bàu pagoda (Quảng Ninh), Linh Ứng pagoda (Đà Nẵng), Cham tower system from Đà Nẵng onwards; Catholic and Protestant churches along the coast, Khmer pagodas in the southwestern coastal region, etc.

In addition, religious worship facilities in coastal areas and islands not only meet the religious needs of a part of ethnic believers but also have a particularly important meaning in terms of national security and defense, those are considered spiritual milestones for affirming the sacred sovereignty of the sea and islands of the Fatherland.

2. The issue of preserving ethnic and religious values in coastal areas and islands in Vietnam today

2.1. Achievements in preserving ethnic and religious values in coastal areas and islands today

Firstly, many religious facilities belonging to ethnic groups in coastal and island areas have been restored and reconstructed.

Many religious and ethnic relics were built a long time ago. Due to objective conditions, due to the impact of war and natural disasters, these relics have been degraded, ruined, or even completely disappeared. However, in recent years, many of them have gradually been restored. Funding for restoring usually comes from two sources: First, from the State budget; second, socialized funding sources (contributed by people and local, domestic, and abroad businesses). Many religious facilities of ethnic groups in coastal and island areas have been restored and reconstructed to meet the needs of local residents regarding religious activities. Many religious facilities become the tourist destination, attracting domestic and foreign visitors.

Although there are still many technical and financial difficulties, some Cham towers in the Central region have been restored and become famous local tourist destinations. We can mention the Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary complex (Quảng Nam), Po Inur Nagar Tower (Khánh Hòa), Po Klaong Garai, Po Rome Towers (Ninh Thuận), Po Sah Inur and Po Dam towers (Bình Thuận), or Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples, etc. In reality, the restoration or reconstruction of new religious practicing facilities is not always “smooth sailing”, on the one side, because the legal corridor is not detailed enough and timely, on the other side, because of economic conditions, and in some cases, because the cultural stakeholders do not recognize that is necessary. Regarding this issue, Mr. Nguyen The Hung - former Director of the Department of Cultural Heritage gave the following opinion: “Renovating monuments is the work of generations. Although we have achieved important results in the past few decades, there are still many degraded relics that need to be restored in the coming years. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly raise awareness about the science of preserving relics, to grasp the current status of monuments and the urgent demands that arise from such awareness and reality, therefore conduct strict management and effective implementation in restoring relics to preserve the historical, cultural, scientific and aesthetic values of the relics. These have been the very important tasks for all branches, levels, and every citizen” [Nguyen The Hung, 2023].

Secondly, many new religious facilities belonging to ethnic groups in coastal and island areas have been built.

In recent decades, many new pagodas and churches have been built in coastal localities within the planning of tourist areas or on religious and spiritual tourist routes such as Cái Bàu Pagoda (also known as Trúc Lâm Giác Tâm) started construction in 2007 on the foundation of Phúc Linh temple - a place to worship Trần Dynasty generals during the resistance war against the Mongols. In 2009, the works were completed and inaugurated on an area of about 20 hectares, becoming a center for practicing Buddhism for monks, nuns, followers, and local people. At the same time, with its location next to the Bãi Dài - Vân Đồn tourist area, the pagoda becomes a stop on the tourist route in Quảng Ninh.

Regarding island areas, according to statistics from the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, as of June 2014, Vietnam's islands have a total of 52 temples, including restored temples after deterioration, and damage, and also including new temples. Accounting only Trường Sa archipelago, three pagodas on the islands of Trường Sa Lớn, Sinh Tồn, and Song Tử Tây were restored in 2008, inaugurated in 2010, and three other pagodas were restored at the beginning of the year 2013, inaugurated in 2014. By 2020, three new pagodas continued to be built in Trường Sa Đông, Sinh Tồn Đông, and Đá Tây Á, bringing the total number of restored and new pagodas in Trường Sa islands to nine. These pagodas are places for religious activities and meeting the spiritual needs of island residents. These pagodas and other sites of belief worships have become solid spiritual milestones, standing in the middle of the sea, contributing to stabilizing “spiritual security” for compatriots and soldiers on the islands, with important significance in affirming and protecting the country's sacred sea and island sovereignty [Trần Thanh, 2022].

Thirdly, many rituals/festivals at religious facilities for ethnic groups in coastal and island areas have been restored.

Along with the restoration, reconstruction, and building of new worship facilities, special attention is also paid to the consolidation and restoration of ethnic groups' religious rituals and festivals. Throughout history, festivals are not static but always moving and changing. Each layer of “sediment” in the festivals carries within it characteristics of different aspects of social life and is an extremely rich and lively source of materials which is a cornerstone for our

learning the past and predicting the future. Therefore, restoring rituals and festivals is necessary in the context that the Party and State are enhancing the promotion of religious values in ethnic communities along the borders, coastal areas, and islands.

Kate festival is one of the important rituals of the Brahmin Cham community in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận that has gradually been restored in recent decades. In 2017, the Kate festival of the Cham people in Ninh Thuan was recorded by the State in the list of National Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the Kate festival of the Cham people in Bình Thuận has been included in the list of National Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2022. Recognition of Intangible Heritage for these festivals is the basis for preserving the religious values of the community. The Kate festival meets the religious needs of the Cham community, contributes to promoting the unique culture of this ethnic group, and creates a religious tourist destination that attracts tourists to the locality. The Kate festival held at Po Sah Inu tower is a highlight in the spiritual and religious life of the Brahmin Cham community and is also a highlight in the restoring religious festivals of ethnic communities in Vietnam. At the same time, the Kate festival has revived the sacred coastal space - where the ancestors of the Cham people settled and resided.

For Khmer people, rituals and related activities in the temple at phum/soc are the center of religious and spiritual life. Particularly, a number of the Khmer people living and working on the Southern coast, in addition to being Buddhists, also practice beliefs related to the sea. Typically there is the Phước Biển worshiping festival, also known as Chroi Rum Chek of Khmer residents in Vĩnh Châu region (Vĩnh Châu town, Sóc Trăng province) and the sea worshiping festival of Khmer people in Bạc Liêu. In these rituals, in addition to community activities, there is also the active participation of monks and Buddhists to give thanks to heaven, earth, gods, and predecessors who have discovered and created a foundation of this coastal land for the Khmer community; especially, the ritual activities include praying for fishermen 'boats are full of fishes, houses are full of rice'... It is worth noting that this ritual is increasingly being restored and expanded in scale, with the strong influence of Buddhism. Many Theravada Buddhist rituals with the participation of monks (chanting prayers for

peace, performing the Three Jewels ceremony, receiving the five precepts, and listening to sermons...) have increased the ethnic-religious imprint of the locality, strengthened ethnic identity in relationships with neighboring ethnic groups. This is a unique point that attracts many people during their journeys of spiritual and religious tourism [Trương Thu Trang, 2015: 33].

Reality shows that festivals and religious ceremonies in general and religions of coastal ethnic groups in particular not only gather ethnic religious followers but also attract the participation of many tourists, people who love ethnic cultures. This is an opportunity for all members of the community to interact, meet, exchange, and confide. It can be said that the restoration and reconstruction of religious rituals and festivals of ethnic groups is not only important for preserving ethnic and cultural values but also for strengthening community solidarity and exchanges. During the above holidays, we can easily meet followers of other religions who attend the festival and ceremony because of invitation or proactively come because of love. In addition, these rituals and festivals are the ‘soul’ of the monuments and relics, an important reason to attract the attention of tourists from all over. Thus, the restoration of old religious facilities, the construction of new religious facilities, the restoration of rituals/festivals, and the influence-scale expansion of religious rituals/festivals have contributed to preserving the core elements of ethnic and religious relations in the direction of maritime sovereignty, firmly building ‘spiritual security’ for ethnic communities in particular and the Vietnamese community in general.

2.2. Building and gradually improving the “religious borders,” consolidating ethnic communities, and maintaining sovereignty over the sea and islands

Religions with systems of doctrine and canon law always orient people towards the values of truth - goodness - and aesthetics, constantly improving themselves, contributing to stabilizing order, building a spirit of tolerance, and aiming to develop sustainable social development. Regarding ethnic issues, “religion is a factor that contributes to preserving the cultural identity of ethnic groups in the process of exchange, integration, development and globalization” [Nguyễn Văn Thanh, 2015: 121].

Preserving and promoting ethnic and religious values through conserving, restoring, and reconstructing religious facilities; Respecting doctrine, canon law, and rituals/festivals is an important action in ensuring religious freedom; ensuring political and social stability and promoting economic development, especially religious tourism in ethnic and religious areas. In Vietnam's maritime strategy, the issue of “civilianization” on the sea and islands is considered an urgent task, which emphasizes organizing residents (settlement), production, and cultivating marine resources. To help people feel secure on the sea, in addition to policies related to completing essential infrastructure (roads - schools - stations), policies to encourage people to settle on islands and archipelagos, the construction and stabilizing spiritual life are also raised. In particular, belief and religious facilities and rituals/festivals are considered “spiritual milestones” to ensure “spiritual security” for people/residential communities so they can feel secure in their journey of ‘living with the sea’. This, on the one hand, expresses the strategic will of the Party and State in the sustainable development of seas and islands, protecting the country's territorial sovereignty; on the other hand, meeting the people's right to freedom of belief and religion, respect equal rights among ethnic groups to implement the policy of “great national unity”.

Móng Cái City (Quảng Ninh) is a coastal city, in the extreme North of the country, with land markers marking the border between Vietnam and China. In the city's tourism development strategy, the elements of spiritual tourism are always highlighted. Each of the 59 historical and cultural relics and scenic spots that have been inventoried and ranked is considered by the city as “spiritual milestones”, and “cultural milestones”... which affirm Vietnam's sovereignty in terms of culture and religion. Xã Tắc Temple, village communal houses (Trà Cổ, Bình Ngọc, Tràng Lộ) are places for folk religious activities, pagodas (Xuân Lan, Nam Thọ) are places of Buddhist worship; Trà Cổ Church (also known as Tràng Vĩ Church) is the place for Catholics' religious activities are carefully preserved and restored. In particular, religious works are always associated with building the solidarity of all people to protect border security and the sacred sovereignty of the Fatherland, among which, it is especially

emphasized in foreign affairs activities, and people diplomacy between Việt people on both sides of the Vietnam - China border.

On the other hand, belief and religion are considered an important factor in identifying ethnic identity. Each religion with related elements such as worship facilities, rituals, festivals... along with aspects of music, costumes, and cuisine... has formed ethnic identity, and contributed to ethnic community cohesion in a common consciousness about sacred objects, teachings, as well as canon laws, etc. However, reality shows that the diversity of religions and beliefs in Vietnam does not only come from the consciousness of each ethnic community but also the result of the government policies of religious tolerance and the consolidation of ethnic groups within the common unity of the nation. In an uncertain maritime environment, exchanges, and friendships between domestic and international ethnic groups become much more important. Vietnam's coastal ethnic groups, with their history of cohabitation, have had cultural, economic, and social exchanges that have taken place on a wide and deep scale, including the interference of beliefs and religions which are expressed through the places of worship, rituals, and worship communities.

The influence of the Viet on the Cham people is shown by the transformation of the image of the Mother of the Land, Yang Po Inu Nugar, into Thiên Y Ana, Linh Sơn Thánh Mẫu, Bà Chúa Ngọc, Bà Chúa Xứ... of the Việt people. The influence of Khmer beliefs on other communities is most noticeable in Neak Ta worship with the appearance of the Ông Tà temples in the resident space and religious facilities of the Việt and Hoa people. In the area where the Hoa lives together with the Khmer in Sóc Trăng, many temples worshipping the Khmer Earth God also place the tablet “Phúc Đức Chính Thần” (ie. Ông Bồn) inside. The religious interference between the Việt and Hoa communities is also reflected in the creation of common religious facilities. There can be cases such as Ông Pagoda (No. 411 Trần Hưng Đạo Street, Quy Nhơn City) and Bà Pagoda (No. 152 Trần Hưng Đạo Street, Quy Nhơn city) which were jointly built by Hoa and Việt people (with worshipping places for Thiên Hậu Thánh Mẫu); Hải Nam pagoda and Minh Nam Primary School (now Lê Quý Đôn Primary School, No. 04 Chu Mạnh Trinh Street, Tuy Hòa city, Phú Yên) were jointly donated money to build by Hoa people in Phu Yen and neighboring local people [Đào Vĩnh Hợp, Võ Thị Ánh Tuyết, 2018: 17].

However, religions and folk beliefs are closely linked to one another and both meet the needs of people and believers. In particular, sacred objects of religions are commonly transformed into gods of folk beliefs. The consciousness of Guan Yin Buddha (Quan Âm Nam Hải) rescuing suffering, rescuing fishermen in the storm (associated with the legend of Cá Ông) is practiced throughout the Central and Southern coastal areas. Statues of Quan Âm appear everywhere in almost every religious space (pagodas) and beliefs (fanes, temples), even in private homes. In particular, Quan Âm Phật Đài (Nhà Mát, Bạc Liêu) is a pilgrimage center, a gathering place for Buddhists and tourists [Trương Thu Trang, 2017: 92].

It can be said that preserving and developing religious facilities and creating conditions for religions to operate within the framework of the law not only meets the religious and spiritual needs of the people, but contributes to the consolidation of the religious and ethnic communities in coastal and island areas, but also create a basis for ethnic and religious values to be promoted and contribute to national development. Each religious facility of an ethnic group, whether it has an ancient foundation, a restored facility, or even a newly built facility, is a source of significant historical evidence and proof – “spiritual milestones” of affirming the nation's sovereignty.

Conclusion

Ethnic and religious issues in Vietnam are strategic issues that have always been a concern and given direction by the Party and the State of Vietnam to build great national unity and uphold the right of freedom of religion and belief, based on the principles of equality and respect for all citizens. Depending on the historical and cultural context of each region, the distribution of ethnic and religious groups is different from one to another. In the coastal areas and islands of the northern region of Vietnam, ethnic demography is relatively homogeneous. The majority of “living with the sea” residents are Kinh (Việt) people with a long history of residence, a small number of Việt (from Hoa origin) live here but have faded their cultural and religious traditions. Meanwhile, in the Central and Southern regions of Vietnam, in addition to the Kinh community as a majority, there are also Cham, Hoa, and Khmer communities whose lives are associated with the sea. These ethnic communities, in addition to practicing traditional beliefs, also follow

world religions such as Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism, as well as domestic religions (Caodaism, The Pure Land Buddhist Lay Association of Vietnam, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, and more).

Although the ethnic demography in coastal areas and islands is not as diverse and complex as in other mountainous and midland areas in Vietnam, the diversity of residents' origins and residential history, especially along with the harsh living conditions near the sea, result in the unique characteristics in both the religious mindset and practices of ethnic groups in coastal and island areas. The establishment of ethnic and religious relationships in these areas serves an important role in consolidating the communities for sustainable socio-economic development and ensuring security and national sovereignty over seas and islands. Reality shows that the ethnic groups on Vietnam's coasts and islands live intertwined with each other so that they have exchanges and relative stability in political life. In religious practice, instead of discrimination, these ethnic communities have shown the spirit of tolerance, and harmony, and promoted their own cultural, ethical, and religious values, at the same time, there was an intersection and integration of cultural and religious values of other ethnic groups. They have implemented the spirit of solidarity, working together to fulfill cultural movements initiated by the Vietnam government's ministries, departments, and institutions, aiming to build a healthy cultural life, eliminate social evils and construct the homeland and country, as well as create unity among the cultural and ethnic diversity in Vietnam.

In particular, in coastal and island areas of Vietnam, religious elements are unified, while also exhibiting ethnic characteristics associated with residential history and survival characteristics. The preservation of religious and ethnic values, in addition to paying attention to ethnic and cultural identity; and unity of each religion, also requires paying attention to situations that emanate from ethnic and religious relationships such as issues of religious conversion, land or symbol disputes, etc./.

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NOTES:

- 1 There are 28 provinces and centrally-run cities bordering on the sea nationwide, including Quảng Ninh, Hải Phòng, Thái Bình, Nam Định, Ninh Bình, Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, Hà Tĩnh, Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, Thừa Thiên Huế, Đà Nẵng, Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Bình Định, Phú Yên, Khánh Hòa, Ninh Thuận, Bình Thuận, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu, Hồ Chí Minh City, Tiền Giang, Bến Tre, Trà Vinh, Sóc Trăng, Bạc Liêu, Cà Mau, Kiên Giang [according to Nguyễn Chí Bền, ed., 2019: 11].
- 2 There are 12 island districts in the country, including Cô Tô, Vân Đồn (Quảng Ninh); Bạch Long Vĩ, Cát Bà (Hải Phòng); Côn Cỏ (Quảng Trị); Hoàng Sa (Đà Nẵng); Lý Sơn (Quảng Ngãi); Trường Sa (Khánh Hòa); Phú Quý (Bình Thuận); Côn Đảo (Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu); Kiên Hải, Phú Quốc (Kiên Giang) [according to Nguyễn Chí Bền, ed., 2019: 11].

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