

TRANSFORMATIONS OF THERAVADA BUDDHISM IN THE KHMER COMMUNITY IN THE SOUTHWEST PART OF VIETNAM

Abstract: *Theravada Buddhism is closely associated with the Khmer in the South West region of Vietnam and contributes to the cultural identity of this ethnic community. In recent years, Theravada Buddhism has been changing in both positive and negative aspects in the Khmer community in the South West part of Vietnam. These changes have posed many problems for the Buddhism and for the State management in the religious affairs.*

Keywords: *The Khmer; Theravada Buddhism; transformation; Southwest; Vietnam.*

Introduction

Buddhism is a great religion that has a long history in Vietnam. Currently, Vietnam Buddhism has three denominations: Mahayana, Theravada, and Mendicancy. For Theravada Buddhism, apart from a small number of followers who are the Kinh people in the Southern region of Vietnam, the rest is mainly the Khmer people living in the Southwest part of Vietnam.

The Khmer people have a close attachment to Theravada Buddhism. It can be said that the Khmer people are considered as Buddhists when they were born. Over thousands of years, Theravada Buddhism has penetrated into this ethnic community and created specific cultural features of the Khmer people.

Transformations the Khmer Theravada Buddhism

As a fairly conservative denomination, however, in recent decades, in the trend of exchange, integration and opening of the

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country, in the trend of expanding relations among ethnic groups and changes of religions, the Khmer Theravada Buddhism in Vietnam also has changes in faith as well as in religious practices and religious communities. These changes have a certain impact on the lives of the Khmer in the Southwest region and pose many problems for the ethnic and religious affairs of the Party and the State.

Transformations the Khmer Theravada Buddhism in the positive trend

According to the final report of 2017 of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, the Khmer Theravada Buddhism has 454 temples with nearly 8.574 monks¹. After 36 years of living in the common house of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, Theravada Buddhism has integrated in the general Buddhist work.

Ceremonies, festivals, events of Theravada Buddhism have been more solemnly organized. Many activities for consolidation and development have been strengthened. From 2004 to 2016, 80 scriptures were printed in the Khmer script, including the Tripitaka; 96 books were imported from Cambodia to study, research and teaching of Khmer Theravada Buddhism; 100% of the temples have abbots and Board of Management; 100% of temples have seals; 100% of the Board of Management of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam in provinces and cities in the Southwest region joined by monks of the Khmer Theravada Buddhism. The number of Khmer Theravada Buddhism's monks participated in the leadership of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam has increased through the terms².

The training of monks has been increasingly concerned and strengthened. As a result of the peculiar nature to the Theravada Buddhism, the field of education and training of this denomination gets special attention by the State and the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam. The current system of training schools serving Theravada Buddhism and the Khmer people in Vietnam including the Khmer Theravada Buddhist Academy located in Can Tho city; the Pali Intermediate School of the South located in Soc Trang province and

the Vini, Pali Intermediate Classes, the Khmer script classes, complementary classes for monks and youths of the Khmer have been opened in many provinces of the region. Over the past few years, there have been tens of thousands of monks and youths of the Khmer attending the Pali, Vini classes as well as other educational programs; hundreds of Khmer monks and nuns have been facilitated to study and training abroad by the State³.

Restoration, construction and repair the worship palaces of Khmer Theravada Buddhism were also given proper attention. Currently, most of Khmer Buddhist temples have been restored and embellished, 100% of them have protective fences to ensure the specific cultural and architectural landscape of Khmer Theravada Buddhism.

Traditionally, Khmer Theravada Buddhism has had a close relationship with the community. The monk of Khmer Theravada Buddhism has historically played a role as a teacher of the Khmer script, morality and a spiritual instructor of the community. The Khmer Theravada Buddhist Temples has been a school, a cultural center of hamlet (phum, sóc). In recent decades, along with the general trend of religions over the world and in Vietnam, Theravada Buddhism has also actively engaged into the world by taking part in the fields of secular life. Currently, although the role of monks and temples in the Khmer community has been decreased in comparison to tradition, the Khmer monks has not only had their activities in the traditional activities of the community, they are also interested in the social life; practical issues of life such as socio-economic development, moral education; health care, environment, etc.,

In addition to teaching traditional crafts, in recent years, many monks of Khmer monks have actively studied, improved their qualifications and received the advancement of science and technology and production experience to convey and guide the Khmer people to apply in practice to bring efficiency in socio-

economic development; to train the Khmer to meet the social needs. Besides, over the past years, in response to the Party and State's policies and guidelines, the Khmer monks have been very actively mobilized the Khmer respond to the compatriot movements such as: "All people unite to build cultural life in residential areas"; "Implementing the national target on building a new countryside"; "Encourage learning and talent"; "A learning society". Besides, originated from the movement to live "good life, good religion", the Khmer monks have applied and promoted the practical movements such as the "Building Temple landscape", "Cultural landscape Temple", etc., Through these movements, Theravada Buddhism has had practical contributions to improve the material and spiritual life for the Khmer.

Along with the general movement of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, Khmer Theravada Buddhists also actively participated in social charity activities such as visiting families with merits, building houses, giving gifts to poor people, supporting the poor to build fresh water wells; contribute to building bridges and roads; awarding scholarships to poor and studious students, supporting lonely people, providing free meals at hospitals; clinics, etc.,.

Transformations the Khmer Theravada Buddhism in the negative trend

In addition to the flourish of Buddhist activities and community-oriented activities with positive meaning, in recent years, changes of Khmer Theravada Buddhism have not been conducive to the denomination. There have also been many issues for the State management.

According to the Khmer tradition, young men (from 13 years old) must go to the temple to study. For the Khmer people, cultivating has some great meanings: Filial piety for parents, become a Buddha and the most important thing is to become a human being. Cultivating in the temple helps the Khmer youths to have knowledge and compassion, they will know how live after

leaving the temple. Therefore, those who have cultivated in the temple will be respected by the whole community. Previously, the period of filial piety for parents usually lasted from one to several years. Recently, due to many reasons, the time of cultivating has not been no longer as before. Depending on the family conditions, a person can enter the temple for a period of time: a few years, a few months, a few days. The current reality also shows that many Khmer people perfunctorily implement this regulation, even many adults did not pass the cultivated life in the temple.

The number of people going to cultivate in the temples has reduced, the number of monks sharply decreased. In some localities, a temple sometimes has had a monk. This situation also leads to reality that monks (abbots) have been very young (about 30 years old), the management of pagodas and monks is limited. On the other hand, young monks who have only a limited knowledge of Buddhism, do not have experiences and deep understanding of the traditional customs and habits of their ethnicity, so their prestige is not appreciated in the community. Therefore, their role in solving and managing the affairs of the community as well as in uniting, gathering and guiding the community to implement the Party and State guidelines and policies is also limited.

In addition, as a result of the market economy, some monks pursue the advantages of secular life, are not interested in studying, life of the community. Due to the impact of many factors, there is an increase of monks who have violated law and canon law (mainly young monks).

Moreover, the role of monks and Theravada Buddhism in cultural activities of community has also been reduced. According to tradition, cultural activities of community of Khmer people had a strong attachment to Buddhism, many customs and practices of the Khmer associated with the presence of monks and Buddhist temples. Currently, this tradition has changed. Although Buddhism and Buddhist culture has been a dominant factor of the Khmer's

activities, presence of monks in the cultural activities of the community has declined. Some rituals performed by monks such as marriage, funeral, festivals have gradually been eroded⁴. In the new context, due to the need for living, many Khmer people are working in industrial zones or doing business in the other areas so their time for Buddhist activities of the community is gradually reduced.

The changes in religious activities of monks, the decline of roles, status of monks and Buddhist temples in the community have been one of the reasons for the conversion from Theravada Buddhism to Protestantism of Khmer people in the Southwest region in recent years. According to data from the Southwest Steering Committee and fieldwork data of the author Trần Hữu Hợp, more than 2,000 Khmer people in 9 provinces of the region converted to Protestantism up to 2015⁵. Although the number of Khmer who converted was not much (accounting for about 0,2% of the Khmer population in the region), it can be said that Theravada Buddhism seemed to be no longer attractive to a part of Khmer.

Although the evangelization of the Protestantism into the Khmer community and the religious transformation of a part of the Khmer people did not create harsh cultural and religious conflicts like in the Central Highlands and Northern mountainous region, it caused conflicts in the family and in the community. For example, the Khmer Protestants left the ancestral altar, did not come the Buddhist temple, did not believe in the monks that caused social and cultural disturbances as well as issues in the field of State management.

Due to the particularities of the traditional Khmer society, and the basic characteristics of Khmer Theravada Buddhism, Khmer pagodas basically maintain the Temple Management Board (Ban Quản trị chùa). This is an organization that gathers prestigious and knowledgeable people in the community to help the temple to manage activities of village. It can be said that the Temple

Management Board is “an extended arm” between monks and Buddhists, as well as a “bridge” between the government and the Khmer monks, Khmer people. Historically, the Temple Management Boards have played a crucial role for Khmer Theravada Buddhism as well as for the Khmer community. Currently, this role has been decreased because the educational level, knowledge of Dharma, social awareness of a part of the members of the Temple Management Board is not high. Many of them are not fluent in Vietnamese language, do not know Pali, do not memorize scriptures so their prestige in the community is not high and they do not promote their role. In some localities, there is a contradiction, disagreement within the Temple Management Board, between the Temple Management Board and abbot, etc. All of the reasons, as mentioned above, have reduced the role of Theravada Buddhism in the Khmer ethnic communities and caused difficulties for State management.

Referring to the transformation of Khmer Theravada Buddhism in the Southwest region, it can't help mention the Association of patriotic monks. *The Association of patriotic monks* (Hội Đoàn kết sư sãi yêu nước) was born in 1963. It gathered and united monks and the Khmer to join the revolutionary movement, to fight for national independence and against religious discrimination. As a social organization, a religious association, the association of patriotic monks has well promoted its role in history. Currently, this organization is still operating in 8 provinces such as Sóc Trăng, Kiên Giang, Trà Vinh, Cà Mau, Bạc Liêu, Hậu Giang, Vĩnh Long và Cần Thơ. Generally, the Association of patriotic monks in the provinces still promotes its role of gathering monks and Buddhists to participate in socio-economic development movements. Many monks of the patriotic association are also members of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (provincial level), some reputable monks are members of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (central level). It facilitates the management of Theravada Buddhism's activities.

However, the operating model of this organization has also raised issues for the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam and the State. In some localities, the Executive Board of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (provincial level) and the Association of patriotic monks have not clearly defined their functions and tasks leading to a reality that there is no unity, cooperation of these two organizations' activities. In some provinces, there is overlap between the activities of the Executive Board of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (provincial level) and the Association of patriotic monks. Even, the Association of patriotic monks sometimes overwhelmed the activities of the Executive Board of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (provincial level). For example, the Association of patriotic monks made a disciplinary decision, nominating monks to attend courses, appointing the abbot of a temple. The Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (provincial level) did not solve the complex problems of the Khmer Theravada Buddhism, they were passed to the Association of patriotic monks. The overlap between the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (provincial level) and the Association of patriotic monks have reduced the role of the Executive Board, caused conflicts within Buddhism, on the other hand, led to many issues for the State management on the religious affairs.

Besides the internal changes, the international relations of Theravada Buddhism in the Southwest region also show signs of concern. Due to a close relationship with the Khmer and Khmer Theravada Buddhists in Cambodia, the Khmer monks and Buddhists in the Southwest region cross the Vietnam-Cambodia border to do business, study, visit relatives. This phenomenon is quite common in the areas where there are many Khmer people such as An Giang, Sóc Trăng, Trà Vinh, Vĩnh Long, Kiên Giang.

In addition to the majority of monks and residents who comply with the State regulations, apply for permission and announce to the authorities when crossing the border, there are some residents and monks who do not comply with the law. According to statistics

of the Southwest region's provinces, the annual average of about 2,000 turns of Khmer people visited Cambodia and over 2,500 turns of Khmer people from Cambodia and other countries arrived Vietnam; during 10 years from 2001 to 2010, there were 630 Khmer monks studied abroad such as Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, India and China, in which, most of them (371 monks)⁶ in Cambodia. Among the Khmer monks studying abroad, some of them did not announce or ask for permission. In particular, some monks have been abused by overseas Khmer Krom groups (in Cambodia, United State of America, Australia) through scholarships and sponsoring social activities⁷.

Currently, a number of organizations of the Khmer people in foreign countries such as "Association of Khmer Cambodian Krom Monks" (Hội Sư sãi Khmer Campuchia Krôm), "Union of Nationalist Committee" (Liên hiệp Ủy ban Chủ nghĩa dân tộc- KKK), "Cambodian Krom National Liberation Front" (Mặt trận Giải phóng dân tộc Campuchia Krôm- KKNLF), "Committee of reconciling the Khmer Cambodian Krom" (Ủy ban dung hòa Khmer Campuchia Krôm- KKKCC), "Committee of Coordination the Khmer Cambodian Krom" (Ủy ban Điều phối Khmer Campuchia Krôm- KKKCC) are seeking to entice the Khmer monks who are freely studying abroad in order to oppose the Party and the State.

Activities of these organizations have a great impact on monks and the Khmer in the Southwest region, especially the young monks. After studying abroad, some Khmer monks returned to the country, have revealed extreme thoughts (Lý Chanh Đa group in Buddhist temples such as Prây Chóp, Tà Sết, Túc Sáp in Vĩnh Châu district, Sóc Trăng province. In particular, in recent years, there was emergence of organizations of the Khmer monks that have had intention of opposing caused insecurity in some localities of the South West region such as "The Association of monks of Cầu Kè District" (Hội tăng sinh huyện Cầu Kè), "The Association for the Protection of Buddhist Studies and Khmer Culture in Trà Cú District" (Hội bảo trợ Phật học và văn hóa

Khmer huyện Trà Cú), caused insecurity in some localities of the South West region such as “The Association of Khmer monks jasmine flower” (Hội tăng sinh Khmer vòng hoa lài).

Conclusion

In the new context, under multidimensional influence, Khmer Theravada Buddhism has changed in both positive and negative directions. The problem is how to take advantage of the positive side and limit its negative aspects in the process of building and developing the Khmer's life and ensuring political security in the Southwest region. /.

NOTES:

- 1 Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (2017), Documents of the 8th National Congress of Buddhist Representatives, the term 2017-2022, Hà Nội, p. 20.
- 2 Report of the 7th Khmer Theravada Buddhist Symposium (2016).
- 3 According to data from the Southwest Steering Committee, by 2013, 687 monks went abroad to study.
- 4 Rituals such as Inviting monks to chant sutras at home on the night before the wedding ceremony; a monk cuts the red thread tied the wrists of the couple, etc., are almost no longer existed.
- 5 Trần Hữu Hợp (2017), “The conversion of a part of Khmer people in the Southwest region”, *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, No. 3&4 (161), p. 98-107.
- 6 Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics (2015), *Policy towards organizations, dignitaries, monks, worship places of Khmer Theravada Buddhism in the Southwest region to 2020, vision to 2030*, Hà Nội.
- 7 Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics (2015), *Policy towards organizations, associations, dignitaries, monks, worship places of Khmer Theravada Buddhism in the Southwest region to 2020, vision to 2030*, Hà Nội.

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4. Huỳnh Thanh Quang (2011), *Cultural values of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta region* Publisher Chính trị Quốc gia Sự thật, Hà Nội, 2011.
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6. Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics (2005), *Policies of the State of Vietnam towards Khmer Theravada Buddhism in the Southwest region*, Hà Nội.