

Protecting peace and the ecological environment: From the story of the Coconut Religion in Ben Tre

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Abstract:

Ben Tre is known as Vietnam's coconut capital. When discussing Ben Tre, one inevitably refers to coconuts and the unique cultural phenomenon of the "Coconut Religion". While this religion no longer exists in its original form following 1975, the folk beliefs surrounding coconuts in Ben Tre continue to reflect the cultural legacy of the "Coconut Religion". One of the enduring values within this heritage is the emphasis on peace and sustainable ecological preservation, a cause championed by the religion's founder, Mr Nguyen Thanh Nam. This legacy extends beyond Vietnam, resonating with followers and researchers in Japan as well. The Coconut Religion's principles have transformed into a folk belief system that integrates religious elements and promotes peace and environmental protection globally. This collaborative research seeks to explore lessons on sustainable ecological protection inspired by the post "Coconut Religion" coconut beliefs, which offer valuable insights for environmental policy. These beliefs, which span natural and cultural ecology, contribute to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and spiritual culture. The findings also hold potential for reviving and enhancing tourism in Ben Tre within the context of globalisation and integration.

Keywords: Ben Tre, coconut beliefs, Coconut Religion, ecological environment.

Classification numbers: 9.3, 10

1. Introduction

Ben Tre, located in the Mekong delta region, covering a natural area of 2,360 km². It consists of three islets: An Hoa, Bao, and Minh, surrounded by the four branches of the Mekong river (the Tien river, Ba Lai river, Ham Luong river, and Co Chien river), along with an expansive network of over 6,000 km of canals, creating an ecosystem highly conducive to coconut cultivation. Encompassing 78,000 hectares of coconut plantations [1], Ben Tre is Vietnam's largest coconut-growing area, where the coconut tree holds a prominent place in the lives of the people.

To understand the role of the Coconut Religion in promoting ecological protection within this unique environment, we conducted a case study on coconut beliefs in Ben Tre. Our focus centred on communities of former followers in Phuoc Thanh, Huu Dinh, Tam

Phuoc, and Phu An Hoa communes within the Chau Thanh district, closely associated with the figure of Mr. Dao Dua. Although the Coconut Religion no longer exists, its legacy endures as a belief system known as the Coconut Beliefs of Ben Tre, embodying the local population's faith and aspirations for a sustainable environment. This belief system holds valuable lessons for cultural managers, social organisations, and other religious communities seeking to promote ecological values.

To gather data, the authors employed document analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, including group participant observation, interviews with dignitaries from Caodaism, Buddhism, former followers of the Coconut Religion, and experienced coconut growers. Collaborators supported data collection, analysis, and evaluation to meet the research objectives.

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2. Literature review

Research on coconut beliefs has not been adequately addressed. Consequently, there are few substantial studies, theses, dissertations, projects, or scientific conferences focusing on the coconut beliefs and the Coconut Religion in Ben Tre, particularly since 1975. This lack of research was a concern for the late professor To Ngoc Thanh, former President of the Vietnam Folklore Association. Throughout his life, he consistently encouraged Ben Tre to prioritise the collection, recording, and documentation of folklore stories related to the Coconut Religion. Based on our research, discussions on the heritage of the Coconut Religion can be categorised into two main groups:

2.1. International

In the United States, Richard Boyle authored *The Flower of The Dragon: The Breakdown of The U.S. Army in Vietnam*, published by Ramparts Press in 1972 [2]. Although the entire book has not been translated into Vietnamese, we have translated a chapter that addresses the Coconut Religion at Phung islet. This chapter offers insight into life on Phung Islet from the perspective of an American soldier, illustrating how the islet served as a refuge for soldiers, both domestic and international.

Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh also wrote *The Coconut Monk*, a children's book published by Parallax Press in 2005 [3]. This well-known picture book introduces the deeds of Mr. Dao Dua during the Vietnam war. It is notable that a globally renowned Zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh, chose to introduce children to the Coconut Religion, emphasising the importance of peace.

In Japan, the magazine 太陽 (*The Sun*) featured an article by Kuwabara Shisei, with photos of Mr Dao Dua on the cover, and an article titled "The monk Dao Dua living in the Mekong river: A form of anti-war activity", spanning pages 107-118 in the 12 March 1974 [4], issue. Similar to Boyle's book [2], this article provides a glimpse into life on Phung islet, depicting the simplicity and hardship there and illustrating how Mr Dao Dua protected his followers from government interference during wartime. The article also presents Mr Dao Dua's ideals for an ideal world, highlighting his regard for President Ho Chi Minh, as symbolised by his display of the North Vietnamese flag on the day of the President's death.

2.2. Domestic

Prior to 1975, significant works included H. Minh's self-published 1964 book *20 Nam Hanh Dao Tren Dai Cao - Doi Kho Hanh - Dao Dua*, in Vietnamese (*20 Years of Religious Practice on The High Platform - Ascetic Life - Coconut Religion*), considered the most comprehensive book on the Coconut Religion to date [5]. The author, H. Minh, conducted fieldwork directly at Con Phung, the sacred site of the Coconut Religion, and, upon completing the manuscript, sent it to Mr. Dao Dua for review and confirmation. This book describes the Coconut Religion as "playing the role of a bird keeper" (p.91) while practising asceticism on That Son mountain, establishing "an ascetic who has spent 20 years pursuing the dream of peace" (p.211). Another early study is Phan Nghi Linh's master's thesis, *Chua Nam Quoc Phat Kien Hoa - Dinh Tuong*, defended at Saigon University's Faculty of Letters in 1971 [6-8]. This thesis, the only master's work on the Coconut Religion to date, meticulously traces the religion's development from its challenging beginnings to Mr Dao Dua's leadership at Con Phung.

Post-1975, several studies emerged. These include P.V. Luan's (2019) [6] fieldwork documents on the Coconut Religion, and Ty Kheo Thich Tinh Tri's (2018) [7] essay from Hanh Nguyen pagoda in Ho Chi Minh city, "Hieu the nao cho dung ve nha tu kho hanh Nguyen Thanh Nam, tuc goi ong Dao Dua" "Understanding the ascetic Nguyen Thanh Nam, also known as Mr. Dao Dua", which provides a monastic perspective on the Coconut Religion. Here, the author clarifies the importance of Mr Nguyen Thanh Nam's commitment to peace and interreligious harmony. In 2020, P.V. Luan's article [9], "Di san van hoa Ben Tre trong boi canh phat trien cong nghe hien dai" ("The cultural heritage of Ben Tre in the context of modern technological development"), published in the *Tap chi Van hoa va Nguon luc (Culture and Resources Journal)*, highlights the heritage of the Coconut Religion as a valuable feature of Ben Tre's tourism. Another work from 2020, *Nguoi Ben Tre (People of Ben Tre)* by L.M. Quoc, includes seven pages of text and three pages of photos on the Coconut Religion, with the author noting... "The topic that I have never heard anyone mention... according to my subjective choice, is Mr Dao Dua". Also in 2020, the Ben Tre Union of Science and Technology Associations published *Ben Tre Dat Va Nguoi (Ben Tre Land and People)*, dedicating three pages (274-277) to the Coconut Religion in a section

on Phung islet, one of Ben Tre's prominent tourist islets. Most recently, in 2022, the Social Sciences Publishing House in Hanoi published *Nghi Le Ton Giao Va Thuc Hanh Nghi Le Ton Giao o Viet Nam (Religious Rituals and Practices in Vietnam)*, a collective work featuring P.V. Luan's study "Tim hieu dam gio ong 'Dao Dua' - Nguyen Thanh Nam" ("Exploring the memorial ceremony of 'Dao Dua' - Nguyen Thanh Nam"), spanning pages 430-441, which states, "the story of the memorial ceremony for Mr. Dao Dua contains religious colours and has become a folklore tale in the Southern region" [10].

Additionally, since 2016, the Ben Tre People's Committee has officially recognised Phung islet (Coconut Religion) as a cultural and historical site under Decision No. 59/QĐ-UBND, dated 11 January 2016. This designation includes the Dao Dua relic site (Phung islet) for preservation and ranking, though it excludes the current Dao Dua church.

Most research projects, published works, and theses have primarily focused on the folklore surrounding the Coconut Religion in Ben Tre. However, studies examining the Coconut Religion's insights into peace and ecological protection remain scarce, revealing a research gap. This study aims to re-evaluate the "Coconut Religion" from a contemporary perspective and develop new approaches, leading to meaningful recommendations for preserving and promoting its cultural heritage values. The study synthesises essential lessons on peace and environmental protection that are highly relevant today.

The collected materials, analysed and interpreted through the lens of peace and ecological protection, serve as a foundation for future studies, enhancing the understanding of the Coconut Religion and encouraging broader research applications within Vietnam and internationally.

3. Research methodology

The primary research methods in this study are exploratory, drawing from disciplines such as cultural studies, sociology, and cultural economics to analyse the Coconut Religion. Additionally, the author employs fieldwork techniques, including surveys, observations, and data collection through photography, note-taking, and interviews with residents of Ben Tre province. Consultations with experts, both domestically and internationally, were also conducted. Based on these methods, the study proposes solutions for preserving

and promoting the values of the Coconut Religion, with a focus on fostering peace and ecological protection for sustainable development.

4. Results

4.1. Ben Tre coconut: Foundations of coconut beliefs

4.1.1. Origins of Ben Tre coconuts

The question of when coconuts first appeared in Ben Tre has yet to be adequately explored by researchers. The perception that "Ben Tre is the land of coconuts" has often overshadowed historical inquiries into the origins of coconuts in the region, resulting in limited academic attention. Our research draws on historical evidence such as findings from the Giong Noi archaeological site in Ben Tre city in 2004, an exchange between the scholar Nguyen Dinh Chieu and Truong Dinh, and coconut motifs in the unique architecture of an ancient tomb in Ben Tre. These sources offer preliminary insights into the presence of coconuts in Ben Tre and the development of coconut-related beliefs, especially following the dissolution of the Coconut Religion.

First, we consider evidence from archaeological excavation and historical records. Over 2,000 years ago, nipa palm leaf patterns were engraved on pottery shards unearthed at the Giong Noi site in Ben Tre city [11]. This finding suggests a connection between the nipa palm and the terrestrial coconut - a term locals use for coconuts planted on higher ground. In response to our inquiry on "coconut leaf motifs on artefacts at the Giong Noi site", professor Amarjiva Lochan from Delhi University commented, "The coconut tree is sacred in India, and although we have found ancient paintings of coconuts, we have yet to see depictions of coconuts in early Indian rock art. This new discovery in Vietnam warrants further research". This observation is significant, as India is one of the world's largest coconut producers, and Ben Tre holds a similar status within Vietnam. The historical ties between India and Vietnam, visible in both Hindu temple architecture and coconut cultivation, underscore this connection.

The second story, nearly 200 years old, concerns an interaction in the summer of 1862 between Truong Dinh and the scholar Nguyen Dinh Chieu. Truong Dinh, feeling frustrated, asked, "The imperial order demands that I disband my troops and surrender to the French. How should I act?" Nguyen Dinh Chieu

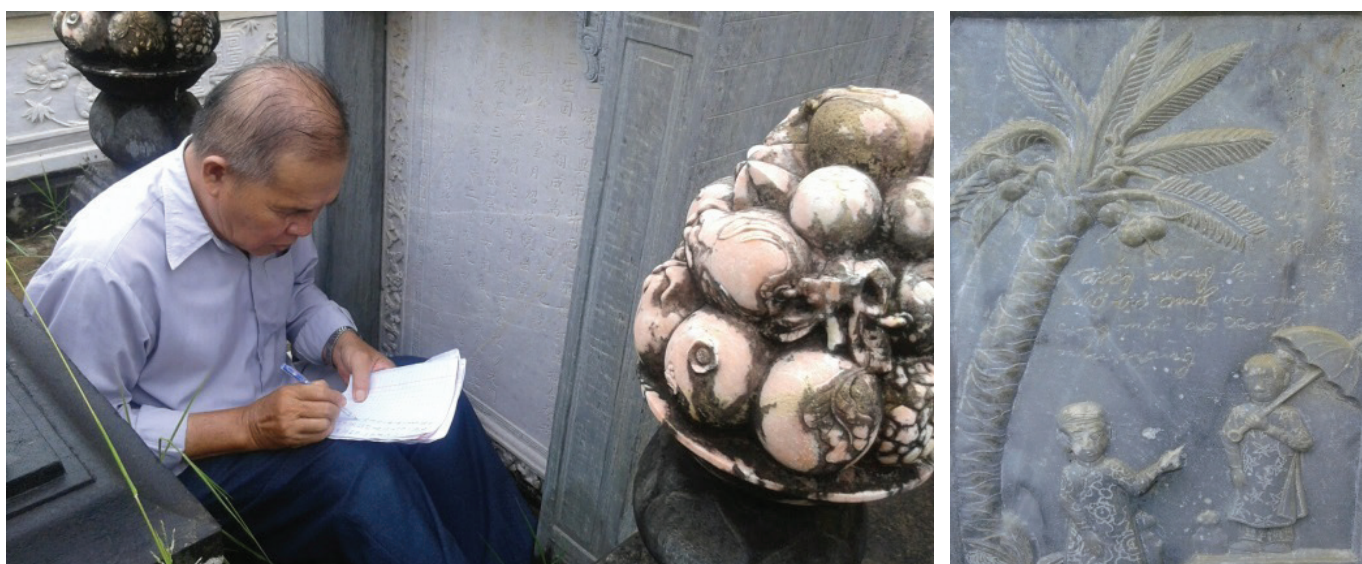
gestured towards a row of coconut trees and asked, “What part of the tree must be strong for it to thrive?” Truong Dinh, after a moment’s thought, replied, “The roots. A tree’s vitality comes from its roots. If the roots are strong, the tree stands firm”. Nguyen Dinh Chieu responded, “Indeed! But recognising where those roots lie is the true challenge”. Truong Dinh then exclaimed, “Here, the roots are here - among the common people in these villages. As long as the people’s will endures, so does the nation!” [12]. Although this exchange is a folk anecdote, it reflects the courage and resilience of the Southern people, symbolised by the coconut trees. This historical theme remains vibrant in Nguyen Dinh Chieu’s writings, illustrating the connection between the people’s strength and the symbolic power of coconut trees.

The third story involves the ancient tomb of District Chief Ho Phung Lam. On 11 January 2016, this tomb, known as the “Ho Family Ancient Tomb”, was officially listed in the inventory of historical and cultural sites in Ben Tre province by Decision No. 59/QĐ-UBND from the People’s Committee of Ben Tre province [13]. However, details about the tomb in the inventory were limited to a few lines.

Significant details about this famous ancient tomb were revealed during our field research on 3 August 2019, in collaboration with Sino-Nom scholar Do Van Tam (artist Tuc Tam). Our findings indicate that the tomb belonged to District Chief Ho Phung Lam, a native of Nghe An who, under Lord Nguyen Tien Hoang’s

orders, moved southward to manage an extensive area encompassing seven communes. Built over 100 years ago from granite and white marble, the tomb features unique architectural and sculptural elements, including a five-fruit tray, dragon motifs, and plant ornamentation. Notably, the tomb has a marble plaque depicting a Ben Tre coconut tree and a red granite coconut placed on the offering tray. The tomb, situated in Phuoc Thanh Hamlet, Tam Phuoc commune, Chau Thanh district, Ben Tre province, was constructed in April 1918. Despite enduring exposure to wind, rain, sunlight, and bombings during the resistance wars against the French and Americans, the coconut tree carvings on the stone relief panels and the coconut on the five-fruit tray remain intact. As Sino-Nom scholar Tuc Tam, of Giong Trom town [6] exclaimed during our fieldwork, the coconut depiction is “clearly visible and exceptionally rare.”

The research findings on the history of coconuts in Ben Tre significantly supplement, deepen, and enrich our understanding of the land, people, and coconut cultivation in the region. Agricultural researcher Do Van Cong from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development of Ben Tre [13, 14] has proposed a hypothesis regarding the origins of coconuts in Ben Tre. He suggests that people from the Central region, particularly Binh Dinh province where coconuts are prevalent might have brought coconuts with them during their migration southward. Alternatively, coconuts may have drifted from the Philippines or Indonesia to Ben Tre’s shores, eventually taking root and flourishing.



Sino-Nom scholar Tuc Tam decoding the coconut tree and five-fruit tray motifs at the Ho Family Ancient Tomb. Photo by authors.

While researchers have yet to confirm or refute these hypotheses, the historical development of Ben Tre as an island region over the past 300 years, populated by migrants from Ngu Quang (the Five Prefectures) who reclaimed and cultivated land, implies that coconuts were planted during this period of land reclamation. The most significant expansion in coconut cultivation occurred during the early 19th century migration wave. Following the conclusion of the war between the Tay Son and Nguyen Anh dynasties, people began to settle, form communities, and establish villages. By the late 19th century, Ben Tre had only 4,000 hectares of coconut plantations. During this time, dwarf coconut varieties-brought from Thailand by Father Gernot along with other fruit tree species - became known locally as Xiem coconuts [15].

By 1930, Ben Tre's coconut plantations had expanded to 6,000 hectares. Starting in 1945, farmers discovered that one hectare of coconuts generated significantly higher income than one hectare of rice, prompting a shift from rice fields to coconut groves. By 1961, Ben Tre had 20,834 hectares of coconuts [4]. Today, despite fluctuating coconut prices, coconuts are still extensively grown across Ben Tre's three islets. The nickname "land of coconuts" was given to Ben Tre because, historically and presently, no other region in Vietnam has surpassed Ben Tre in coconut cultivation.

Linguistic evidence concerning the etymology of the word *dua* ('coconut palm') is provided by H. Shorto (2006) [15]. Its corresponding forms in other Mon-Khmer languages are listed as follows [16]:

Proto Mon-Khmer	*braaw
Old Mon	<i>brāw</i> / <i>braw</i> /
Modern Mon	[nɔm] prɛ̀à
Lawa Bo Luang, Lawa Umphai	phruwa
Mae Sariang	phua
Central Nicobarese	oyau
Thin	blau
~ (*bnraaw>?) Vietnamese [<i>cay</i>] <i>dua</i>	

This means that the word *dua* can be traced back to the stage of Proto Mon-Khmer.

The historical documentation of coconut palm usage appears in *Gia Dinh Thanh Thong chi*, edited by Trinh Hoai Duc (1765-1825) [16]. However, it lacks

specific geographic details on coconut cultivation sites, other than mentioning Gia Dinh [17].

The question of when coconuts first appeared in Ben Tre may continue to intrigue researchers for generations. Nonetheless, evidence from the archaeological findings at the Giong Noi site, the historical conversation between Truong Dinh and Nguyen Dinh Chieu about the strength of the common people, and the white marble bas-relief depicting Ben Tre coconuts on a red granite offering tray at the ancient Ho Family tomb serve as "historical markers." Together, they attest to the historical, cultural, and socio-ecological importance of the Ben Tre coconut tree. Beyond its role as an economic crop, the coconut tree symbolises cultural values, human philosophy, and respect for the ancestors who reclaimed the land. For the people of Ben Tre, the coconut tree signifies both faith and livelihood, embodying the accumulated folk knowledge and beliefs passed down through generations.

4.1.2. *The name Ben Tre and the sediments of coconut worship*

Nearly 60 years ago, while exploring Ben Tre and visiting the holy land of the Coconut Religion, Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh expressed his awe while crossing the Rach Mieu ferry:

"I stood at the bow of the boat, watching it cut through the waves, and was mesmerised by the majestic river's powerful flow. The river is as mighty as the mountains but more lively. The river's water is so red, with so much alluvium... Ben Tre! Ben Tre! I don't see any bamboo. I only see coconuts. Yes, only coconuts... But the impression of the river's vigorous flow during the flood season remains deeply etched in my soul" [18].

It can be said that not only Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, who hailed from Hue, but also nearly all visitors to Ben Tre, experience a similar perception-they come to Ben Tre and see only coconuts. This distinct impression has contributed to the sedimentation of Ben Tre's coconut worship, and the seemingly contradictory name "Ben Tre" reflects an aspect of this coconut worship that deserves further exploration.

In *Géographie Physique, Économique et Historique de la Cochinchine*, published by the Indochina Research Association in 1901, an explanation of the name Ben Tre is offered: "Ben Tre was formerly

called Soc Tre (land of bamboo) by the Cambodians because of the many bamboo groves scattered across the province. Later, the Vietnamese established a market there, which they called Ben Tre, and the canal flowing past this market into the Ham Luong river also took on this name" [19] now known as the Ben Tre river. In alignment with this, the *Nam Ky Luc Tinh Dia Du Chi (Geographical Dictionary of the Six Provinces of Southern Vietnam)* (1872) by Duy Minh Thi states: "Because Soc Tre had many bamboos, boats from near and far docked here to load bamboo, hence the name Ben Tre".

The *Dia Chi Ben Tre (Ben Tre Geography)* (2001) [20] also posits that "the name Ben Tre (formed by combining natural terrain with a plant species) signifies a dock with abundant bamboo growth, akin to Ben Gia, Ben Tranh, and Ben Luc".

However, considering the area dedicated to bamboo cultivation compared to other crops reveals an interesting discrepancy. In 1903, Ben Tre only had 300 hectares of bamboo, while coconut plantations covered 6,115 hectares and 26.7 acres [21]. According to a research published in the *Huong Que Journal* in the 1965s: "The total coconut planting area in the southern provinces was 43,340 hectares, with Kien Hoa province alone accounting for 20,000 hectares, half of the total coconut area in the South" [22]. Despite being the largest coconut-growing area, the name "Ben Tre" persisted, a unique phenomenon in the land of coconuts. The belief in the "land of three lush, coconut-covered islets" is indelibly linked to Ben Tre: the mention of Ben Tre inevitably brings coconuts to mind. Consequently, in folk literature, references to Ben Tre are overwhelmingly inspired by coconuts:

"... Thay dua thi nho Ben Tre (Seeing coconuts reminds me of Ben Tre), Thay bong lua dep thuong ve Hau Giang (Seeing beautiful rice flowers makes me long for Hau Giang)".

Thus, it is not surprising that most visitors to Ben Tre, like Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, are always amazed to see only coconuts!

The layered meaning of the name "Ben Tre" within this "coconut" context inspired researcher Nguyen Van Au to propose a more in-depth exploration of the name's origin, remarking, "To this day, the name Ben Tre still requires study to clarify the matter" [23]. We believe a careful approach is needed to address this unresolved topic, as discussing coconuts is

essential when visiting Ben Tre. For any region, an initial curiosity, exploration, or search often seeks to understand the origins and indigenous knowledge that constitute its unique culture and people. We approach Nguyen Van Au's question from the perspective of coconut worship—a distinct ecological-humanistic viewpoint focused on the coconut tree.

Coconut worship has helped shape Ben Tre's cultural identity, embodying a folk knowledge system that integrates both material and spiritual values created by the people of Ben Tre throughout history. This cultural heritage encompasses a broad range of folk knowledge, including religious practices, customs, literature, arts, and environmental understanding. It is uncertain when coconut trees first became associated with Ben Tre, but they have enriched people's material lives through an array of products from fruit to trunk to leaves. Beyond economic value, coconut trees also provide spiritual sustenance. Their shade enhances Ben Tre's homeland, creating a distinctive landscape. The coconut tree also serves as an enduring source of inspiration for artistic and literary expression, both past and present.

In Ben Tre's folk songs, our ancestors drew on unique elements of the coconut tree:

"Tra on ai co cay dua (Repay whoever has a coconut tree), Cho toi nghi mat doi cho nguoi thuong (Let me rest and wait for my lover)".

The symbolic significance of the coconut within the folk knowledge system of Ben Tre's coconut worship is profound. The coconut stands as a unique emblem of Ben Tre's cultural and historical identity. Talking about Ben Tre's culture naturally includes references to coconuts, which have become a defining feature of the region since ancient times. Our preliminary research indicates that the folk knowledge of coconut worship among the people of Ben Tre is passed down orally and through performance, requiring thorough exploration, documentation, and study. Many practitioners of folk art and coconut worship traditions are now elderly, making this knowledge increasingly rare.

In this context, our preliminary fieldwork and research suggest that documenting the indigenous knowledge and folk beliefs surrounding coconuts will contribute to the preservation and promotion of cultural values and the protection of the ecological environment. The Ben Tre coconut serves as a central symbol, embodying and perpetuating ancestral

lessons on ecological protection wisdom gained through generations who laboured to reclaim, cultivate, and maintain the land, coconuts, and livelihoods for current and future residents of Ben Tre.

In Ben Tre, growing coconuts is an unending profession, accompanied by significant questions: When did Ben Tre coconuts originate? Why is the land of coconuts called Ben Tre? These questions may remain unanswered, with coconut worship as the means for future generations to convey the deep meaning associated with Ben Tre coconuts.

Coconuts play an immensely important role in the lives of the people of Ben Tre. They provide raw materials for food, beverages, fuel, wood, roofing materials, and more. Recent studies show that coconuts also offer a completely clean biomass energy source and effectively absorb greenhouse gases [24], which is crucial in the context of increasingly severe climate change. Thus, coconuts are naturally regarded as symbols of green, natural vitality in Ben Tre.

Many research projects, dissertations, and theses have explored coconut varieties, cultivation techniques, and coconut candy production from a technical perspective, highlighting the central role of coconuts in the lives of Ben Tre residents. Alongside these studies, numerous articles and scientific reports published in journals and presented at forums have focused on the coconut tree. However, the spiritual aspect of coconut worship as a cultural symbol of Ben Tre and the role of coconuts in the customs and festivals of the people has yet to be thoroughly addressed. Coconuts hold a special place in the folk beliefs of Ben Tre, representing love, aspiration, and happiness across generations.

The coconut tree symbolises love, aspiration, and happiness for many generations of Ben Tre people. This idea coincides with German philosopher Hegel's notion: "A symbol is an external thing, a direct reference that speaks directly to our intuition. However, this thing is not chosen and accepted as it exists in reality for its own sake. On the contrary, it is accepted with a much broader and more general meaning; that requires us to recognise in each symbol two elements: 'meaning' and 'expression'". Meaning is the association with a symbol or an object, regardless of its specific form. Expression is a sensory existence or image (Interview with Ngot on 10 November 2020). Through initial research, we find that the symbolic meanings of the

coconut come from its role and relationship with the lives of the people of Ben Tre. This close, unique, and inseparable bond between the people and the coconut is evident in objects made from coconuts that signify love connections, as well as in daily life practices.

Preliminary findings suggest that the symbolic meanings of the coconut are not fixed but are dynamic, shaped by the relationships among these meanings and the experiences of each person and generation of coconut farmers in Ben Tre. Moreover, the connection between the symbolic expressions and meanings of coconuts is organic, interwoven, and continuously evolving with traditional indigenous knowledge of the coconut land, the nation, and the times.

This article examines the coconut tree as a symbol of miraculous strength and a means of communication for the people of Ben Tre, forming a "belief" within Ben Tre culture. In this context, "Coconut Worship" allows us to approach and understand the deeper aspects of the land and people of the three islets. Decoding Ben Tre coconut worship begins with recognising the coconut as a special symbol in Ben Tre culture, encompassing concepts in religion, beliefs, history, environmental protection, and the entire social life of Ben Tre, built over generations.

The folk knowledge system on environmental protection in "Coconut Worship" is diverse and unique, enriching a land of exceptional people. The coconut in Ben Tre culture embodies traditional values, serving as lessons in culture, history, religion, beliefs, customs, cuisine, and the ecological environment. These values, accumulated over hundreds of years, have become the pride and strength of Ben Tre's cultural identity. More than half a century ago, coconuts were an identifying feature of Ben Tre's ecological environment, with stories and anecdotes related to the "Coconut Religion". This is a special aspect of coconut worship that warrants further study and development to inherit its progressive aspects, contributing to environmental protection from a cultural-spiritual-belief perspective and integrating ecological consciousness with indigenous cultural identity.

4.2. Mr. Dao Dua and the foundation of Coconut beliefs

When speaking of Ben Tre, with its ever-present image of the coconut tree, people invariably mention engineer Nguyen Thanh Nam, also known as Mr. Dao Dua (1910-1990), who hailed from Phuoc Thanh

village in An Hoa canton, Truc Giang district, Kien Hoa province (now Phuoc Thanh commune, Chau Thanh district, Ben Tre province). A young man with a Western education, Mr. Dao Dua studied in France for seven years. Upon his return, he chose not to work for the French colonial government but instead established a soap-making business using coconuts in his hometown. After the business failed, he turned to a monastic life, renouncing material pursuits to live as an ascetic. Initially following Buddhism, he later developed a new faith known to the people as Dao Dua (Coconut Religion).

Although Dao Dua existed as an organised religion for only about 30 years, centred around the sanctuary at Phung islet, it had a profound impact on people through Mr. Dao Dua's unique approach to spreading his teachings. One core element of his message was environmental protection, interwoven with spiritual values and the beauty of coconut beliefs. Mr. Dao Dua's dedication to his homeland's environment was grounded in three main pillars: peace for the country (the foremost cause of his life); economic development and improved living standards (with the architecture of Con Phung as both a place of spiritual practice and a centre for tourism, which continues to flourish); and population control, evidenced in his misunderstood "no child creation" theory, which he hoped would be evaluated objectively later in life.

Major religious ceremonies, such as Buddha's Birthday, Christmas, and the Hung King's death anniversary, were solemnly observed by Mr. Dao Dua at the pagoda. On these occasions, and as part of his daily practice, he advised followers to fast, pray, and repent to lessen the burden of sins from past lives and present life, stating: "... Everyone must fast and pray and repent to reduce their sins, all the sins of previous lives, this life and the whole life". Later, for descendants, there will be no more unjust bondholders demanding blood debt; The world ends war; Phong Dieu Vo Thuan; National prosperity and peace; Those who survive will enjoy the ancient age or die and be reborn in the pure land" [5].

Though he left no formal teachings, Mr. Dao Dua had a powerful way of mobilising people through clear messages and a hands-on approach. Beyond tangible relics and rituals, his legacy endures as a vision of peace for both the nation and the world, a spirit of religious

harmony, and a dream of a self-sufficient, peaceful society. This vision of self-sufficiency closely mirrors Mahatma Gandhi's ideal for a newly independent India. Mr. Nguyen Thanh Nam encouraged his followers to sustain themselves through coconut handicrafts and farming, with coconuts as a focal point. Some even view him as the "father" of the coconut handicrafts industry [8]. He invested donations from followers to purchase 8 acres of farmland in O Long Vi commune, Chau Phu district, An Giang province, establishing communal land for his followers to use for livelihoods, a practice that continues today (In-depth interview with Ms. B.N. Khai, the person in charge of the church and Mr. Dao Dua's grave on 1 March 2019).

Mr. Dao Dua often invoked the ancient saying, "hands work then jaws can chew (No eating without working)", to encourage self-sufficiency among his followers, urging them to work for their living rather than depend on offerings. He advised visitors interested in his teachings to return home, embrace vegetarianism, do good deeds, and avoid harm to each other and the surrounding environment, an approach he equated to monastic practice. Committed to these principles, he ate only fruit he picked himself, once daily at noon, and refrained from eating in the afternoon. His commitment to peace extended beyond personal lifestyle; during the tumultuous years of war, he advocated for peace in his homeland, driven not by political motives but by a desire for a peaceful life for his people.

Beginning in 1958, Mr. Dao Dua actively campaigned to end the war and restore peace in the South, leading to his arrest and imprisonment seven times by the Saigon government. In the early 1960s, he chose a remote area of Con Phung in Tan Thach commune, Chau Thanh district, Ben Tre province, where he requested permission to establish the "Holy land of Dao Dua", hoping it would inspire peace, unity, and sustainable development for Vietnam. Between 1967 and 1968, his following grew, especially after the Tet offensive of 1968, as people sought refuge from the war and found safety in Con Phung. His vegetarian followers formed residential communities such as Truong Chay hamlet and Nam Quoc Phat pagoda. In September 1969, upon learning of President Ho Chi Minh's death, Mr. Dao Dua organised a public funeral attended by many, marking the only funeral for President Ho conducted under the Saigon government without interference.

Due to his peace campaigns, Mr. Dao Dua attracted large gatherings whenever he left Con Phung, prompting significant security concerns for the Saigon government, which eventually placed him under house arrest on the islet [5].

4.3. How Mr. Dao Dua approached people

In exploring why the community influenced by Mr. Dao Dua remains conscious of practising good environmental stewardship more than half a century later even among the descendants of his original followers we find that Mr. Dao Dua employed unique and effective methods to reach people. His approach not only incorporated popular proverbs but also drew on the oracle stories of the renowned scholar Trang Trinh Nguyen Binh Khiem to support his messages.

In 1970, after President Nguyen Van Thieu introduced the “The ploughman has the field” law, Mr. Dao Dua used an excerpt from Trang Trinh’s oracles at Nam Quoc Phat pagoda to emphasise his teachings: The field is broken then appears the honourable man. No war is achieved naturally.

He prominently displayed the phrase “No war is achieved naturally” on a wall, treating it as a declaration and slogan at the “holy land” of Con Phung. According to Mr. Phan Kim Hue from Long An (depth interview with Mr. Ba Huong, who regularly cleans the shrine area and the grave of Mr. Dao Dua, on 20 April 2020), Dao Dua and his disciples explained “the field is broken” as abolishing the law of the land, that is, promulgating the law that the ploughman has the field, then a honourable man will appear, that is Nguyen Thanh Nam - “Mr. Hai Dao Dua” took Mr. Dao Dua and his followers interpreted “the field is broken” as the abolition of restrictive land laws and the introduction of the new policy granting land to farmers. They saw the phrase “an honourable man will appear” as a reference to Nguyen Thanh Nam himself known as Mr. Hai Dao Dua who advocated for a world without war. This peaceful message resonated deeply, gaining him the trust and attention of his community.

Today, the Con Phung tourist site still features the peace tower (with its nine towers), where Mr. Dao Dua would sit to preach the Dharma, share his vision, or meditate in silence. This tower remains a symbol of his dedication to the peace movement. Believing himself to have a mission for peace, he took the Buddhist name Thich Hoa Binh (meaning “peace” in Vietnam by Nguyen Thanh Nam). Alongside his peace advocacy,

he established a spiritual institution at Con Phung to pray for peace. Visitors were frequently encouraged to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle, abstain from eating meat and fish, and dedicate themselves to repentance and prayers for peace. He held that true peace could only arise from harmonious relationships, beginning with harmony between people and animals, maintaining a clean and respectful environment, and abstaining from harm toward living beings.

This approach to peace and environmental harmony captured the attention of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, who travelled to Ben Tre over half a century ago to meet Mr. Dao Dua. Mr. Dao Dua later served as the inspiration for a children’s educational comic written by Thich Nhat Hanh. In response to the book, Heidi, a reader who used it in Dharma School, noted:

“I used this book in the Dharma School to demonstrate the value of morality. This is a true story about Mr. Dao Dua, a monk who lived with a cat and a mouse during the Vietnam war. He truly embodies a virtuous life. I also used this book to illustrate the Bodhisattva” [3].

Discussing Mr. Dao Dua’s anti-war efforts and his dedication to peace, the Japanese magazine 太陽 (*The Sun*) published his photograph on the cover, accompanied by an article by K. Shisei (1974) titled “Master Dao Dua lives in the Mekong river: A type of anti-war activity”, spanning pages 107-118 on 12 March 1974 [4].

In 1973, author Kuwabara visited Con Phung and observed a community of approximately 1,500 young people from across southern Vietnam who had sought refuge there. He estimated that the actual number of people who avoided military service by relocating to Con Phung could have reached about 5,500. K. Shisei (1974) [4] described the lifestyle of these residents, emphasising the peaceful and communal life established by Mr. Dao Dua on the islet:

“People have to endure hardship and poverty. In addition, they must comply with the precepts: 1. Do not kill, 2. Do not have sex, 3. Do not steal, 4. Do not speak nonsense, 5. Do not drink alcohol.

“No killing” is not only a popular viewpoint in Buddhism related to vegetarianism but is also meaningful when implementing anti-war policies and opposing killing during times of war. With that anti-war atmosphere, even the fish in the Mekong river at Phung islet look healthier than elsewhere!

There are a few more precepts: 6. Don't smoke, 7. Don't listen to music, 8. Don't gamble, 9. Greet superiors, 10. Don't chase fashion. They say there are exceptions in the precepts. For young men, when they reach the age of 34, their military service ends. If peace returns, they can get married [4]."

The author conducted a direct interview with Mr. Nguyen Thanh Nam, but Mr. Nam remained silent, not uttering a single word. According to the author, this silence was itself a powerful expression of Mr. Nam's unwavering commitment to peace. Instead of speaking, Mr. Nam wrote down his responses and the author's questions on individual sheets of paper with a ballpoint pen, handing each sheet to the author one by one:

"The ideology of fighting for peace of the Coconut Religion - Nguyen Thanh Nam is not just an empty idea but also through concrete actions. Wanting to go to Hanoi to meet and discuss directly with the North, after 1965, several times the Coconut Religion - Nguyen Thanh Nam group submitted to the Saigon government a request for permission to go to the North. Each application was not accepted, and twice he was sent to prison. The desire for national unity of Coconut Religion - Nguyen Thanh Nam was so strong that he decided to illegally go to the North. In 1967, when Coconut Religion - Nguyen Thanh Nam followed the Ho Chi Minh route to the North, he was arrested at the Cambodian border for illegally leaving the country [4]."

4.4. The lessons of Coconut Religion to protect the ecological environment

The lifecycle of a coconut tree resembles that of a human; the oldest trees bear fruit for around 80-90 years before they are either cut down to make way for new growth or naturally wither and die. Presently, it is rare to find a coconut tree in Ben Tre over a hundred years old. The coconut tree has created a sustained value chain in Ben Tre, providing unique benefits throughout history and offering lessons on environmental protection from a spiritual and religious perspective, once known as the "Coconut Religion" (In Southern dialect of Vietnamese, both "dua" and "vua" are pronounced the same as [jɨə]). The image of the coconut tree in the name "Coconut Religion" symbolises a call for a "green lifestyle" and for coconut itself to be seen as a source of religion.

In discussions with friends and former followers of Mr. Dao Dua, we discovered that he did not refer to himself as "Dao Dua"; the community gave him this name, viewing it more as a folk title rather than a formal religious designation, for three main reasons. First, he was from Ben Tre, the land of coconuts, where these trees are most abundant in Vietnam. As part of the "religious men" movement in southern Vietnam during the latter half of the 20th century, he dedicated himself to the spiritual life. Second, the term Dao Dua also plays on the word (In-depth interview with Mr. Sau Vo Quy, the person in charge of preparing food for Mr. Dao Dua, on 20 April 2020) meaning "moderate" in the standard language, symbolising a path of practice according to the idea of religious harmony, understood in the sense of "neither excess nor deficiency", while also not judging any other religion too harshly. Third, he adhered strictly to a lifestyle centred around coconuts, using Siamese coconut water (various types of coconut for water...) to drink and dried coconut to wash food as opposed to using rain, river, or ditch water like other people (In-depth interview with Mr. Ba Huong, one of Dao Dua's close disciples on 20 April 2020). His ascetic practices, to the point that many saw him as eccentric, marked him as distinct from typical practitioners of the time. "Once a tall man, after years of rigorous practice, he had a small frame of 1.3 metres but retained piercing eyes that conveyed profound inner strength, a result of his dedicated meditation and diet based on coconut", followers recall a story that continues in folklore, with many anecdotes surrounding this real-life figure. This comment is constantly recounted by followers of the Coconut Religion and still spreads today, passed down in folklore with many different anecdotal variations about a real character.

Mr. Nguyen Thanh Nam never referred to himself as a religious leader and refused to take on disciples. He preferred to be called "Uncle Hai" rather than formal titles like teacher, patriarch, or master. This informal title, Uncle, may have also held a deeper meaning, encouraging others to seek spiritual knowledge, emphasising that anyone could achieve insights into higher truths. According to our research, the use of uncle here also has the meaning of "aunt medium, uncle medium" to encourage people to practice. With the implication that "you" can know the secrets of heaven, according to the prophecy, Trinh helped him have a profound influence in the hearts of religious people.



The author interviewing Mr. Sau Vo Quy (left) and Mr. Ba Huong (right). Photos by authors.

Today, generations of people from near and far return to commemorate Mr. Dao Dua annually on his death anniversary. This occasion allows people to visit his shrine and grave, reflecting on his vision and dream of peace for his homeland. His legacy includes his wish for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Vietnam's seas and islands. His grave, an unusual standing burial, is encased in a model of the unified map of Vietnam, including the Paracel Islands (Hoang Sa) and Spratly Islands (Truong Sa) archipelagos, symbolising this enduring commitment. In the wake of Mr. Dao Dua's life and teachings, the community culture he fostered endures a blend of reason and emotion that nurtures a flow of spiritual exchange among former followers of the Coconut Religion and their descendants. This legacy is rooted in a harmonious relationship between people and nature, expressed through a lasting reverence for the coconut tree and the spiritual lessons it represents.

It is the "folk belief core" of Dao Dua that, despite not being an official religion, has created a cultural flow surrounding coconuts that carries broad and lasting social significance, uniting the community of "coconut people" in An Giang and other Western provinces for over half a century. This connection has also become a lifeline for "migrants" from Ben Tre who, in recent years, have sought land and livelihoods in An Giang due to drought and saltwater intrusion, which have led to crop failures. In 2020, the community associated with Dao Dua played a crucial role in bringing freshwater from upstream An Giang to quench the "thirst of saltwater drought" in Ben Tre.

Today, while Dao Dua as a movement no longer exists, Mr. Dao Dua's close followers affirm that his mission was to bring peace and national unification to Vietnam. When this wish was fulfilled, he foresaw his own departure, leaving a will and instructions for his followers to honour. In our view, Dao Dua has ceased not because it does not have its own doctrine. Due to many misunderstandings and insufficient studies, an evaluation of Dao Dua's death has not been published objectively. It is considered by the authorities' perspective, that we have reached the end of the phenomenon of Dao Dua. The issue we are concerned about is that although it is not a religion, in the past 60 years, followers continued to revere him as a figure of "Coconut Belief", rooted in the cultural and spiritual landscape of Ben Tre since Dao Dua was not an official religion with a doctrine but rather a symbolic folk belief.

The enduring value of Dao Dua lies in the teachings on peaceful coexistence and ecological stewardship, principles that generations of his followers continue to practise. Bhikkhu T.T. Tri (2018) [7], who studied Coconut Buddhism at Con Phung for seven years, noted: "His concept of practice is highly ethical, aligning with Buddhist teachings and the trends of the time". Since Mr. Nguyen Thanh Nam's passing on April 18, 1990 (lunar calendar), his followers across Ben Tre, Tien Giang, Dong Thap, An Giang, and beyond, have continued to honour him, recognising him as the embodiment of a coconut-based folk belief that

sustained and nurtured generations. In keeping with his legacy, they contribute to environmental protection and community welfare in practical ways, such as building homes, roads, and bridges, supporting the poor and elderly, and participating in charitable activities.

A particularly notable contribution from the Dao Dua community has been the campaign to plant trees and clean up rural areas, in support of the monthly “New Rural Sunday”, which protects local water resources. Even into their eighties, some followers travel regularly from My Tho to the shrine to care for the grounds, clean, plant, and maintain ornamental flowers. These activities align with local policies and are visible during the peak commemorations at Mr. Dao Dua’s shrine, such as his death anniversary, which draws thousands of participants. One example is the freshwater supply system installed at his shrine in Phuoc Thanh commune, Chau Thanh district, which provided much-needed drinking water during the severe drought and COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This mobile freshwater pond, holding over 300 cubic metres, was set up along the Ba Lai river with a canvas-lined wooden frame, a filter tank, and a faucet system to enable quick, efficient access while observing social distancing guidelines.

Ben Tre, blessed with unique climate, terrain, and soil, is divided into three ecological zones: freshwater, brackish water, and saltwater. The brackish zone is particularly suited for coconut cultivation, and coconut is identified as one of Ben Tre’s eight provincial value chains. With a goal to increase productivity, coconut output, and farmer income, Ben Tre has leaned on coconuts to counter the challenges of climate change, which has led to increasingly severe natural disasters and saltwater intrusion. Unlike other crops, coconuts thrive under these adverse conditions, underscoring their resilience in the face of global ecological threats.

As the earth’s temperature becomes increasingly warmer and energy resources dwindle, the appeal of “Coconut Houses” constructed from coconut trunks, leaves, and shells grows. These homes align with an ecological lifestyle, showcasing a sustainable, “green” approach to living. The coconut tree’s unique characteristic of providing a complete value chain from construction materials to culinary uses represents a significant ecological benefit, as coconut-based products are both energy-efficient and environmentally friendly. Coconut products not only appeal to visitors but also increase awareness of their contribution to global environmental protection.

Today’s rising interest in ecological conservation and the use of organic, biodegradable products reflects the value of using coconut-based products for daily living, fostering both novelty and environmental consciousness. As food safety and health concerns grow, the demand for fresh coconut water and other coconut products has surged, further linking the coconut tree with safe, sustainable agricultural tourism and culinary practices.

While recent developments have mainly emphasised the agricultural and economic value of coconuts, there has been less attention to the cultural, spiritual, and symbolic meanings that complete the coconut tree’s value chain. Understanding the folk knowledge and environmental lessons rooted in the Coconut Religion today, as an enduring aspect of Ben Tre’s culture, offers insight into how peace and ecological stewardship are embedded in the lives of the people through customs, beliefs, and traditions.

5. Conclusions

Coconut trees play a vital role not only in the economy but also in the spiritual and religious life of Ben Tre’s people. Today, the teachings of Dao Dua on peace and ecological preservation form an integral part of Ben Tre’s cultural legacy. This folk belief in coconuts, which once guided generations in Con Phung, has become a medium for intergenerational communication, helping to illuminate the enduring values of peace and environmental protection.

The Coconut Religion, while no longer active as an organised movement, represents a system of indigenous knowledge that integrated both tangible and intangible practices, encompassing complex, multifaceted expressions that resonate with meaning across time and place. The materials gathered and analysed in this study serve as a foundation for future research, providing insights into the depth and uniqueness of this knowledge system. As such, “Coconut Religion” embodies Ben Tre’s cultural identity of protecting the ecological environment, with multiple meanings in its complex and vivid expressions, evoking many levels of meaning and value that transcend time and space. The materials collected, researched, and explained in this article serve as a guide for further research that contributes to understanding the profound, broad, and unique levels of meaning that knowledge holds. The folklore’s role in protecting the ecological environment has manifested itself in the “Coconut Religion” of Ben Tre

people. It is our hope that this study will contribute to the reminder that every mention of a coconut tree is a time to raise the level, spread unique meanings, and spread lessons of protecting peace and the environment. The ecological lessons from Dao Dua hold timeless value in the context of protecting peace and the environment, inspiring global conservation efforts.

CRediT author statement

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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