

**PALM-LEAF SCRIPTURES: PHILOSOPHY OF ETHICAL
EDUCATION FOR THE KHMER COMMUNITY'S
SPIRITUAL LIFE IN THE SOUTH OF VIETNAM**

***Abstract:** There is an system of extremely unique traditional cultural heritages maintained in the artistic and cultural treasure of the Khmer community in the South, among which Palm-leaf manuscripts are unique art works written on leaves for the purpose of recording Buddhist scriptures or customary laws and teachings for the Khmer. Palm-leaf scriptures are considered a great heritage with a strong influence on religious life, as well as being a profound source of the human spirituality. This form of heritage plays an important role in contributing to the regulation of social appearance and ethnic lifestyle of the Khmer communities during the long-term settlement and living in the Southern region. The study of the Palm-leaf scriptures does not only preserve and promote their influence on the spiritual and cultural life, but also honors the noble and humane values in building the Khmer society into a harmonious combination of tradition and modernity.*

***Keywords:** Palm-leaf manuscripts; Sutra; Khmer; South Vietnam.*

Introduction

The Khmer community has a long history of settlement and living in the Southern region. During this process, they exploited and improve natural conditions for survival, while also performing the task of preserving and transmitting cultural values of the spiritual life in the region. This helped them developing stably and inseparably from their living environment of the South. Up to now, the Khmer community has about 1.3 million people, living mainly in provinces

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and cities in the South such as Sóc Trang, Trà Vinh, Vĩnh Long, Bạc Liêu, Cà Mau, Hậu Giang, Kiên Giang, An Giang, and Cần Thơ. Khmer traditional residential spaces called “phum and sóc”. Having a living-in-group lifestyle, they live around ancient and majestic Buddhist pagodas. The Khmer traditional cultures are very abundant and unique which is associated with both religious characteristics and folk beliefs. The intertwining and blending of cultural streams has contributed to shaping and creating a unique cultural form over the past two centuries. The Khmer is considered an ethnic group with the biggest population amongst the Mon-Khmer group in the Austroasiatic language family who live in Vietnam. They have their own language and writing, as well as an extremely unique belief and religious life associated with Buddhist philosophy and folk concepts. The teaching and admonition of profound virtues from Buddhist scriptures and customary laws are recorded and transmitted on the Satra palm-leaf scriptures.

Sutra is understood as handwritings recorded on palm-leaf then carefully arranged by sets in order of each scripture. This is considered a valuable set of scriptures and one of the rare documents of Khmer Theravada Buddhism. It has clearly demonstrated the formation and development history of the distinctive art and architecture in Buddhist scriptures. In order to understand the philosophy of ethical education in palm-leaf scriptures, this paper analyses the humanistic spirit of the education philosophy in the palm-leaf scriptures to spread fundamental cultural values, while also demonstrating unique belief and religious life of the Khmer. With this objective, methods of qualitative research, field survey and document investigating techniques are applied in this paper.

1. History and origin of the palm-leaf scripture

Each ethnic group has their own language and writing, which is the result of a generalizing and abstracting process of things and phenomena in the real life. It is a means for them to communicate and transmit their experiences from generation to generation. During the process of language and writing development, each community

chooses their own method to record, transcribe, and reflect the reality of social life in accordance with their conditions and living circumstances.

“The ancient Khmer script first appeared in the inscription of the Angkor Borey in 611, gradually developed and completely occupied the dominant position of the Khmer writing system the fifteenth century”¹. In his book *The Vietnamese of Mien Descent*, Lê Hưong pointed out the origin of the Khmer script. He assumed that the Khmer script was created by the Khmers using Sanskrit (Northern Sanskrit) script². Initially, as Khmer kings adopted Brahmanism as their state religion, Indian monks used Sanskrit to record scriptures and what the kings did. Later, archaeologists found those texts carved on stone steles, temple columns and doors. Since the sixth century, the Khmer have used this handwriting to build up the national grammar system and officially created their own script. When Buddhism was widely spreaded and ingrained in the Khmer spiritual life through Pali script (Southern Sanskrit), the Khmer intellectuals at that time borrowed more nouns to add to the Khmer language system to make it diversified and rich up to present time.

Regarding the development of language and writing, while mentioning the history and origin of the palm-leaf scripture, it should also refers to the process of language and writing self-development the in Khmer society, and the human real life, the relation between belief, religion, the history of ethnic formation and development as well. According to recorded documents on culture and history, the Southern Khmer language belongs to the Austroasiatic or Mon-Khmer language family, which is a large one in Southeast Asia and scattered in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, etc. After Buddhism was brought into the Khmer religious life, the Southern Khmer quickly absorbed language and Buddhist teachings in Pali scriptures. As a result, there was a continuation and combination leading to a unity of language and writing in their cultural life. Since the language and writing was specified, the Southern Khmer recorded and reflected their thoughts and conceptions of the human life through material and spiritual life,

or natural and social aspects. It was clearly shown in unique literary and artistic works handed down in oral literature or objects such as stone steles, folded paper, palm leaves, and later paper documents in the Khmer culture.

The archaeological evidences show that the Buddhist scriptures written on palm leaves appeared in the 2nd century in India. In Vietnam, sutras written in ancient Khmer or Pali following Thomadut and Mahainikai schools³ have been preserved in the State Records and Archives Management Department of Vietnam. This extremely rare type of ancient document is meticulously and elaborately carved on the palm leaves called Satra Slác-rút (or Satras in short) by the Khmer people. These scriptures recorded all the Buddha's teachings, folk knowledge, life experience, or virtue admonitions of ancient ancestors to instruct people living well and usefully, and staying away from gossip and lies.

In the Khmer folklore conception, palm-leaf trees are similar in shape with Thnot tree⁴. Previously, they were grown widespreadly throughout regions of the Tiền and Hậu rivers. Due to their usefulness and not being affected by weather, this is an abundant source of raw materials for writing. Moreover, as this is a tough, durable, clean, and bright-color kind of leaf, the writing will not be faded or damaged during the preservation process.

To create an aesthetic and dignified set of palm-leaf scriptures, it is required an extremely careful and elaborate making process. Before cutting leaves to make paper, the Khmer perform ritual to worship and pray for permission and bless from gods and Buddha. Then they began to choose materials for making paper. First, they selected chits with good and beautiful leaves, then grafted them to the tree frames (for three to five months) so that the leaves grow in desired shapes. This aimed to limit sunlight and ensure the leaves to grow normally. After nearly-one-year process of selecting leaves, they chopped trees and brought the leaves home to dry; then they cut the leaves into rectangle pieces, pressed them straight, and arranged in sets. They also used wooden braces to tightly hold and keep the leaves straight. However,

before cutting down the leaves, Khmer people also perform rituals to pray for God and Buddha's witness and blessing.

In order to well write or carve on the leaves, Khmer artisans use short and rounded pens made from woody or horn trunks, which is rounded and cut short to fit the hand. Nibs were pinheads of sharpened needles. When carrying out inscription, Khmer artisans must be very careful because if there was only one wrong stroke, the leaf must be removed. Moreover, to successfully carve a set of sutras, it was required quiet and dignified carving spaces, so that the artisans could be calm and focused in each handwriting.

As a result, writing sutras on leaves was mainly done by Khmer monks. They were very knowledgeable about Buddhist scriptures and Buddhist teachings, as well as having good wisdom and meditation. Hence, completing the sutras was performed smoothly and solemnly by the monks. After engraving, Khmer artisans mixed soot⁵ with pine oil and rubbed it evenly on the writings, and wiped the leaf surface at the same time, so that the writing could be seen more clearly. They meticulously and carefully worked on each palm leaf and then binded them into sets with wooden covers. According to some senior monks, to increase sutras' durability, and make them bright and beautiful, Khmer people also use a gold powder solution to brush on the spine of palm-leaf book, then the palm-leaf sutras changed into a gilded and dignified color.

On January 23, 2017, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism recorded and announced the knowledge and techniques of writing on palm-leaf of the Khmer belonging to the folk knowledge type in the list of eleven National Intangible Cultural Heritages. Currently, the palm-leaf sutras have been carefully preserved in Southern Khmer pagodas including Trà Vinh, Sóc Trăng, and Kiên Giang... However, most of them are preserved in Khmer pagodas in two mountainous districts (Tịnh Biên and Tri Tôn) of An Giang Province. According to statistics, over 100 sets of palm-leaf scriptures are kept in 30 out of 65 Khmer pagodas in Tri Ton and Tinh Bien districts, An Giang province, especially, the large quantities of palm-leaf satra concentrated in Xvay-Ton, Mỹ Á, Xoài So, Sà Lôn pagodas, etc.

associated with famous artisans such as Chau Ty, Chau Kāk, Chau Son Hy, Chau Poly, Chau Soc Khon.

From a religious perspective, the palm-leaf scriptures is considered a kind of document with great values which preserves a complete system of Theravada Buddhism's Buddhist scriptures and commentaries in Pali language and Khmer script system. From social perspective, the palm-leaf satra has clearly shown its important role in creating strong community cohesion.

Generally, the palm-leaf manuscript is considered a major and main textbook used in teaching at Buddhist schools in the Khmer Theravada Buddhist system, as well as in major sermons of Buddhist ceremonies and rituals. It is an encyclopedia containing abundant contents of different aspects in the cultural spiritual life of the Southern Khmer community such as space and humanity science, religious teachings, philosophy, theology, architecture, astronomy, geography, culture, art, agriculture, trade, and environmental science... It contributes to creating a harmonious Khmer community and a society taking the Buddhist spirit as the basic foundation for social building and development.

2. Content of the palm-leaf scriptures

It could be said that language and writing was not created from simple emotions or abstract thoughts, but formed of requirements of human social life. Some ethnic groups concretized their voice and language by recording and reflecting the real life on soil, animal skins, bones, stone stele, or bamboo slips... However, there are also ethnic groups choosing to record their historical information on leaves as the Khmer people. The Khmer writing on leaf has existed for a long time (considered 19th century), associated with a long-term settlement process in the South. During that process, the Southern Khmer have summarized and refined to create satra scripts, which fully bear the characteristics of ethnic culture.

In terms of the content, palm-leaf satra can be divided into four main groups: *Satra Ruong* (story satra), *Satra Lô-beng* (entertainment satra), *Satra Chơ-bấp* (teaching regulation satra) and *Satra Tes* (scripture and verse satra). Each satra has its own meaning and role.

Satra rương is a series of written stories, which can also be called a series of folk literature (Óc-so-sắc-pơ-ro-lom-luóc) that records old stories with the purpose of borrowing old stories to teach nowadays people. Satra rương are divided into different groups such as Rương-bo-ran (ancient stories), Rương-ni-tiên (telling stories) or Rương-bờ-đóm (ancient tales). In order to distinguish different types of tales, Khmer people rely on terms and call them as myths, legends or fables. For instance, Rương-a-sti-tiếp are mythological stories in differentiating from Rương-pơ-ri-đích (ghost stories) or Rương-tê-vok-tha (fairy tales), Rương-pa-pắc-câm (religious legends), Rương-sắc-sana (biography tales of bodhisattvas) and Rương-pơ-rông (magical folk tales), etc. Additionally, for jokes or fables, the Khmer also classify them into many different types including Rương-sát-bạc-sây (animal stories), Rương-kom-phleng (satirical stories) or Rương-rao-xà-bay (humorous stories).

With the diversity of genres, it can be seen that Satra rương is not simply used to tell stories but also transformed into unique literary and artistic works of high applicability. Along with the oral transmission function, the Southern Khmer also use Satra rương to build stage scripts in typical singing and dancing arts such as Rô băm, Dì kê or Dù kê. Moreover, they also use Satra rương to improvise and create many different works to recite poetic stories such as Châm-riêng-chà-pây, À day (folk call-and-response singing) and À day (story).

In addition, Satra rương is also used by Khmer artisans to create special works in painting, sculpture and decoration in pagodas with many diverse and rich themes originated from folk tales. Obviously, Satra rương is a key factor contributing to the Khmer's mysterious and artistic literary and arts by honoring the beauty. Furthermore, the greatest meaning of Satra rương is to change the Khmer perception of good and evil, good and bad, righteousness and fraud.

Satra Lô-beng (entertainment satra) is mainly recording entertainment activities, folk games, traditional sports, and physical activities of the Khmer. Most of its content is shown in two aspects. On one hand, Satra Lô-beng reflects simple agricultural lifestyle of the

Khmer through folk games such as wrestling, cockfighting, and kite flying etc. On the other hand, it also exudes a spirit of freedom, open-mindedness, and satisfaction in social activities, which is apparent in festivals. Additionally, the great interferential part of Satra Lô-beng is the combination between entertaining folk tales and the views of *karma* and *samsara* in Buddhism philosophy. Consequently, it can be seen in Satra Lô-beng, the contradiction between “promoting kindness and discouraging evil is explained dogmatically, focusing more on illustrating doctrine than reflecting social relationships”. Hence, it is thought that there is an identity between Satra Lô-beng and Satra rưong.

Satra chơ-bắ́p (satra of teaching regulation) is considered the most prominent and classic one of the palm-leaf manuscripts. Khmer people solemnly call it a teaching satra because of its important nature and role in the community life. To comprehend Satra chơ-bắ́p, they divide it into two different subjects. One type about Buddhism practice and precepts, as well as learning Buddha’s teachings is used for monks. The second type mainly refers to the virtue teaching of ancient ordinary people teaching to their children.

According to the most complete statistics, eleven teaching songs are recorded in Satra chơ-bắ́p including:

1. Chơ-bắ́p Pờ-rô: Regulations for sons
2. Chơ-bắ́p Sơ-rây: Regulations for daughters
3. Chơ-bắ́p Hê-ma-hachan: Regulations for common people
4. Chơ-bắ́p Bon-đam-bi-đĩa: Regulations of fathers
5. Chơ-bắ́p Koon-chau-lo-bóc: Regulations for descendants
6. Chơ-bắ́p Tôul-miên-khơ-luông: Regulations for self-cultivation
7. Chơ-bắ́p Vi-thua-banh-dit: Regulations for intellectuals
8. Chơ-bắ́p Piêk-chas: Regulations of old people
9. Chơ-bắ́p Rích-nê-tiéc or Chơ-bắ́p Pờ-rặc-Hích-sầm-phia: Kings’ regulations for people.
10. Chơ-bắ́p Kê-kal: Teaching Regulations from previous generations, also called Chơ-bắ́p Sề-thây: Teaching regulations of the rich parents to their children

11. Chơ-bấp Pơ-kôn-cháu: Regulations for teaching descendants [Trường Lưu, Ed. 1993: 216].

Regarding to doctrine's contents, it can be seen that the main foundation in Satra chơ-bấp mainly refers to the philosophy of living with good direction, along with the admonition of virtue of the ancients in the method human moral education. Furthermore, along with the philosophy of human moral education, Satra chơ-bấp also points out shortcomings and limitations, as well as mentions factors that affect the process of building and developing society of the Khmer. It is about criticizing and condemning bad habits and social evils that have a certain impact on fine customs and traditions in national culture, such as: theft, cheating, lazy work, gambling,... with the purpose of advising people to stay away from bad and strange cultural inclination.

Satra tes (scripture satra) records all Buddhist sayings or scriptures in the most basic way. In Khmer language, Satra tes is considered a type of literature with Buddhist spirit in the Khmer literary and artistic treasure. The first is Chiếc-dok including most of the stories about previous life of Buddha Shakyamuni. The second, Tô-chiếc, mainly records Buddha's virtues such as almsgiving, observation of precepts, and right efforts. The third, Mô-ha, refers to the Buddha's great life, and is also considered a big set of books about the life of the Buddha (including 14 volumes). The fourth, Trai-pê-dot (Tripitaka) or Thâm-ma-pa-da (Dhammapada) is translated from Pali scriptures into Khmer language. These popular scriptures have been used by Khmer monks in major ceremonies with the aim of teaching and transmitting Buddhism light and spirit to the Khmer community.

In general, the palm-leaf scriptures is a synthesis of many separate sets or volumns of satras. It is not only an intellectual product which contains traditional knowledge but also a great heritage which contains a profound educational philosophy. Based on these satras, the Southern Khmer has filtered and concluded the perspective and knowledge from their ancestors then form the community's cultures and ethics with harmonious combination between religion and life, between the Buddhism spirit and folk concepts.

3. Philosophy of moral education in palm-leaf scriptures

It can be seen that the palm-leaf scriptures are the most valuable treasure of the Khmer culture and arts. It is considered a type of art valuable in both tangible and intangible culture as it brings Khmer community a spiritual stability with a moral philosophy foundation of the Khmer culture.

In an overview, it is recognized that most of the texts recorded on the palm-leaves are folk literature, Buddhism knowledge and philosophy. They are transformed by Khmer people into profound stories closely related to the community life. It honestly reflects life experiences, folk concepts in order to be transmitted and practiced parallelly with virtue teachings. Hence, education is considered a key and fundamental element in organizing and building Khmer social life. This is reflected visibly in the content of the palm-leaf manuscripts as the followings:

Firstly, it advises people live the good life and do the good works. It can be said that in the Khmer Theravada Buddhism, besides basic precepts mandatory for practitioners such as “not killing, stealing, fornicating, lying, drinking alcohol or taking intoxicants” (five precepts), many others that the Buddhist priests and followers of Khmer Theravada Buddhism must comply to behave appropriately. This has been clearly demonstrated in the concept of goodness and evil, rightness and wrongness, as well as what should and should not be done. For instance, in Khmer customary law, it is taught that:

“Kùm đôy pút pel kùm som kùm sếp

Kùm sóp kùm sral, k ùm o kùm al T'rêk đôy ngey”

(Do not act on bad things

Do not be gullible to do bad things) [Hoàng Tuấn, 2013: 30].

Or in the other paragraph of teachings:

“Th-êk muôi chia kho-êc-đóp;

(One crow becomes ten)

Chacht chia tê-vô-tót, mocht chia te-vo-da”

(A honey tongue, a heart of gall) [Trương Lưu, Ed. 1993: 178].

In great festivals or ceremonies, the followers of Khmer Theravada Buddhism are taught to do a kindness. In these days, along with chanting sutras to celebrate a requiem for the dead, Khmer monks also teach precepts by telling stories of karma and samsara. For instance, the story about the son fulfilling his filial duty to his mother Socpenh Kokma⁶, the legend of the custom of building sand mountains⁷, or the folk story of hunting wild animals⁸ to teach people and demonstrate the concept of “One good turn deserves another”.

Secondly, it reminds and advises people to strive to cultivate their minds and character. When referring to human nature, in the Buddhism view, it is believed that everything originates and comes from people’s mind. From this point of view, it can be understood that the origin of joy and sorrow is from the mind. It is the core and root of all desires and passions. Consequently, Buddhism always advocates eliminating human ignorance and unawareness by maintaining the precepts and practicing release with correct consciousness.

Understanding the cause of suffering is from mind, most of Khmer Theravada Buddhists always focus on careful thoughts and actions to harmonize life and religion. They also seriously contemplate what has happened in the past in order to cultivate their mind to live peacefully, happily, and kindly. In Chơ-bấp Piêk-Chas (advices of the ancients), it is taught that “Uóc tus kum ôl la an” with the meaning “When pulling the boat, one must do gently and not let the river water muddy” [Hoàng Tuấn, 2013: 29]. This is intended to remind people to be persistent and patient, and at once to know how to control their emotions to avoid conflicts and discord, as well as bad things caused by an impure mind.

Obviously, the Khmer are very subtle in virtue teaching. They use real things and phenomena to make comparisons and evidence for advising and teaching people in a cordial and easy-to-understand manner. In this respect, it has been shown that the palm-leaf manuscript is a solid spiritual fulcrum for the Khmer spiritual life. It is the light reflecting and illuminating human mind to help them avoid causing bad things in communication and relationships among people.

Thirdly, it contributes to consolidate and build social moral relations. It can be seen that besides the social rule of law institutions, morality is an important tool to regulate and orient social relationships, first of all family relationships, parentage, villages and residential communities. This is clearly shown in the central role of the leaf sutra as it advises and guides the establishment of stable relationships in Khmer society. This has been proven as the followings.

In family relations, it advises people to cultivate and preserve virtues such as “filial duty to parents”, “faithfulness”, and a spirit of “tolerance” in behavior, among which the filial duty plays a core and central role in children’s behavior and gratitude to their grandparents and parents. The faithfulness is a major task in establishing and maintaining family happiness. And the tolerance spirit is the premise for maintaining family disciplines with the view of “peace at home and abroad”. Accordingly, in *Chơ-bấp Kôn-chau*, it is taught that “Disrespecting one’s mother is disobedient to Buddha’s teachings; people will not abandon their parents even who they are; human words are longer than his paths; rice left for long time will be spoilt” [Nguyễn Thị Kiều Tiên, 2014: 97].

Obviously, the palm-leaf manuscripts often advise and remind people to keep their mind on practicing and cultivating virtue as each good individual creates good families and communities to build a civilized society.

In social community relationships, when it comes to talking about the Khmer community or society, it is mentioned a community of solidarity and fellow feeling. This was obviously reflected in the long settlement process in the Southern region. In that process, the Khmer community took not only the spirit of equality and democracy as leading principles to set social order, but also the solidarity and fellow feeling in social building and development. It is considered a prominent value, a good tradition, and a main element regulating the existence and development of the Khmer community that have a typically cultural-closed lifestyle. A Khmer proverb says that “Sound

expresses language, temperament tells the family, voice stands for nation, and character represents the race” [Nguyễn Thị Kiều Tiên, 2014: 97] to express their self-respect and national pride of the residing process in the new land. Based on the spirit of solidarity and fellow feeling in working, social building and stabilization becomes more favorably. Khmer proverbs often say that “Do not eat to your satisfaction alone and ignore others, help hungry and miserable people to eat them fill” [Nguyễn Thị Kiều Tiên, 2014: 97] or it is always reminded in Sophia-sat:

“Nhiêch cho - ngay min sơ - mơ bon pho - ôl chích

(Better a neighbor near than a brother far off)

Kim bếch chất đon eng min bay

(One cannot live without counting on others)”. [Trương Luru, Ed. 1993: 174]

Its implication is teaching and reminding people of the spirit of solidarity and living for each other as that truth and life experience has been summarized by the elders. That value has shaped a sustainably developed Khmer society to date.

Fourthly, it advises people to live sincerely, gently, and humbly. The reality has shown that a essential condition to ensure a connection, happiness, and healthfulness in life is the humble and heartfelt value. In the same way, the ancient Khmer particularly focused on a sincere, gentle and humble lifestyle to teach people how to live a moderate and gentle life. This help them forming a good moral character. The clearest proof is the simple lifestyle of the Khmer people. They do not care much about winning or losing, avoid collision, extravagance or lavishment in social life. Consequently, all fortunes created by the Khmer’s true labor and hard work is contributed to make merit and build pagodas. Furthermore, Khmer people are very careful to what they say to avoid negative things that can affect themselves, their families, especially the image of *phum soc* as they understand that deception breaks the ethical rules and affects the community image. Their saying “*Tho-êk muôi chia kho-êc-đóp*”

(One crow becomes ten crows - criticizes the fabrication and boasting) or *Châcht chia tê-vô-tôt, mocht chia te-vo-da* (Tevotot's belly and Tevoda's mouth, or Good mouth but a foul heart) to criticize lying and deception)"[Trương Lưu, Ed. 1993: 178].

Additionally, to remind and advise people to live sincerely and gently, in Satra Chơ-bấp Kôn-chau, it is taught that:

“Nis kir chơ-bấp krom

Pro sơ uddom tuôn mean neak phoong

Preur oun lum tuorm

Kom bey mean chho-koan

Prach nha bom phon”

Meaning:

This is a rule

With elevated content to admonish people

To be humble

Do not be violent

Intelligence is better. [Hoàng Tuấn, 2013: 29]

These are considered valuable descendant teachings with the imbue ment of being gentle, courteous, and not to deceive anyone to maintain good harmony. Therefore, in the law of teaching offsprings (Satra Cho-bap Kon-chau), the ancients were very attentive and careful in communication, and always advised people to treasure relationships with those who live around them. This is a typical moral value representing the personality and behavioral culture of the Khmer community. This has contributed to figure out a community of honest and peaceful people over the past centuries.

Fifthly, it reminds people of striving to protect the ecological environment. As traditional residents of wet rice agriculture, the ecological environment is a solid spiritual support and a great influence on the community's typical production method. From their early days in the South, the Khmer community has always have a

close and harmonious lifestyle in compatibility and interdependence with the natural environment. It is considered an outstanding feature in the cultural life of the Khmer community.

To have a positive living attitude to quickly adapt to the natural environment, it is obviously seen that the Khmer thinking and lifestyle is greatly influenced by the foundation of Buddha's teachings of ecological morality. Accordingly, from rituals and Buddhist stories of the universe and humans, to educate people, the Southern Khmer have concretized this by using worship forms associated with elements of natural environment that directly related to human life and agricultural production activities. Among them, all natural elements such as trees, land, and water sources et cetera are controlled by gods.

Khmer folk legends and stories that refer to the natural world such as *The origin of the universe and all species*, *Rain and wind tale*, *The sun - the moon*, *The story of Nieng*, *Me khata*, *Ria-hu story*; major traditional festivals such as Chol Chnam Thmay, Ok Om Bok; or stories associated with rivers, ponds, swamps, mountains and forests⁹ have clearly demonstrated the sacredness of natural world in Khmer lifestyle and thought. They believe that: "Natural creatures have soul ruled by gods". Hence, Theravada Buddhism strictly prohibits the abuse of living creatures, as well as killing animals and damaging natural resources. It is considered a basic convention of Buddha's teachings in ecological ethics education with the purpose of advising and reminding believers to protect the natural environment, as well as profound natural resources. This has strongly influenced on the thinking and lifestyle of the Khmer community in conquering and improving the Southern region nature. In that process, the Khmer people always have a cautious, respectful and moderate attitude in exploiting natural products in order to create a connection and harmony with the ecological environment.

Being imbued by the perspective that ecological ethics is meaningful for human life hitherto, in major festivals including Chol Chnam Thmay, Ok Om Bok or agricultural festivals (such as praying for a new good field or harvesting agricultural products), the Khmer

always performs rituals to express their respect to heaven and earth and gods for blessing and bestowing good things. A Khmer folk song says:

God Prac In, please bless us
God Maha Brum, please come down and help
May the rain pour down and flood the fields.
Blowing up! Blowing up!
Richness and longevity please come to us
Buddhism has imbued everyone
Fields are of heaven and earth,
Efforts are of human.
Blowing up! Blowing up!
A rain falls: Happiness will take us to Nirvana.

(Song pray for rain) [Trùng Lư, 1993: 182]

In general, it can be said that all of the palm-leaf scriptures contents reflects a profound living philosophy. It focuses mainly on human ethical education in order to helping people build good moral relations. A special thing can be seen in the whole sastra contents is profound and close virtue advices. They are honestly connected to people's life and deeply ingrained in their consciousness as a set of exemplary behavioral principles in the Khmer society. Furthermore, from the viewpoints and principles of moral education method, the palm-leaf scriptures have contributed to form a positive and progressive concept of life in building and developing society. This contributes to the establishment of a unique culture-closed lifestyle of the Southern Khmer in their long living process.

Conclusion

It can be seen that the palm-leaf manuscript is the soul of Khmer culture. In terms of religion, it brings mental stability as indirectly and strongly influencing human mind by adjusting and changing human thoughts and behaviors. It helps people realize the truth of life and

practices Buddha teachings of goodness and evil in order to harmonize religion and life. In regard to consciousness, the palm-leaf scriptures provide people necessary information to guide them correctly evaluate and reflect life reality. This helps the human process of understanding the world and having right behavior towards their surrounding living environment and circumstances. In respect of morality and aesthetics, the palm-leaf scriptures contribute to orienting and creating human moral behavior to direct their activities to basic ethical standards and rules. It is visibly demonstrated through standard values including filial respect, faithfully, solidarity, and mutual love. In addition, in company with the contribution to build human moral behavior, the palm-leaf scriptures also direct their activities to good aesthetic values such as knowing to practice good deeds, have correctly behave, live for the community, and live in harmony with natural environment. Obviously, these have affirmed great value of the palm-leaf manuscripts in the Khmer history development. It shows not only strong vitality of the palm-leaf manuscripts but also the influence on Khmer cultural and spiritual life. This helps the community's life develop harmonically to living conditions in the Southern region over the past two centuries./.

Translated by Phạm Thị Thủy Chung

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ANNOTATION

- 1 Cited by Trang Thiều Hùng (2014), “Ảnh hưởng của Phật giáo Nam tông đối với ngôn ngữ, văn học và nghệ thuật của người Khmer Nam Bộ” (The influence of Theravada Buddhism on the language, literature and art of the Khmer people in the South), *Journal of Vietnamese Social Sciences*, N^o6 (79), p. 95.
- 2 Cited by Lê Hương (1969), *Người Việt gốc Miên* (The Vietnamese of Miên Descent), Văn đàn Publishing House, Sài Gòn, p. 10.
- 3 Two ancient schools in Indian cultures.
- 4 The palm tree is in the same family as the coconut tree, with the straight trunk, can reach up to 30m high with an average lifespan of over 100 years. This plant can withstand dry and flooded weather, and the bigger it is, the faster it grows.

- 5 The name of mixed coal (carbon black), which can be used to create transparent materials such as glass, windows, touch screens,... with the effect of cleaning and repelling liquid objects such as water and oil. This can be considered an ideal material in manufacturing technology with very high waterproofing ability.
- 6 The name of a character (a son) who is mentioned in the legend about the filial piety custom of Khmer traditions.
- 7 A popular worshipping custom in the traditional Chol Chnam Thmay festival of the Southern Khmer community. This is a ritual associated with belief and religious life in Khmer culture. The ceremony of building sand mountains also refers to the "theory of reincarnation" in Khmer tradition. Khmer people believe that each grain of sand covered will free a sinner in the world. Therefore, the custom of building sand mountains has been deeply ingrained in the community's consciousness as a good moral act to sow good fortune in the world for the Khmer people.
- 8 The story refers to hunting and killing wild animals. The purpose of this type of story is about the "law of cause and effect" and valuable lessons about good - evil, good - bad. If one sows evil causes (killing wild animals) in this life, one will inevitably meet bad results in the next life (will be harassed by the souls of animals).
- 9 These stories refer to legends of Bà Om Pond (Trà Vinh province), Chi-riêng Anh Well (Hậu Giang province), Mê Deng Mountain (Mountain of Black Lady in Tây Ninh province).

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