

TRANSFORMATIONS OF FUNERAL RITES OF TÚ ÂN HIẾU NGHĨA'S BELIEVERS IN TRI TÔN DISTRICT, AN GIANG PROVINCE

***Abstract:** Tu An Hieu Nghia religion always guides believers to sincerity, goodness, beauty, and faith in a world without suffering, transmigration (samsara). Therefore, all aspects of the spiritual and material life of the believers are influenced by religious ideals. For the followers of Tu An Hieu Nghia religion in Tri Tôn district, An Giang province, it is clearly showed in daily cultural behavior and the rituals and practices. Despite being the Vietnamese, the funeral rites of Tu An Hieu Nghia religion's believers in Tri Tôn district, An Giang province have many differences affected by their religious characteristics (according to the teachings of their Founder). However, as a result of influences from the outside and changes from the inside, the funeral customs of the Tu An Hieu Nghia religion's believers are no longer the same as traditional ones. This article indicates the funeral rites and rules of followers, changes of the current funeral rituals and the causes led to changes.*

***Keywords:** Tu An Hieu Nghia; An Giang; Tri Ton; funeral rites.*

Introduction

Tu An Hieu Nghia religion is one of the endogenous religions, mainly distributed in the South of Vietnam. According to the latest statistics, the whole country has about 60,000 Tu An Hieu Nghia's followers living in 16 provinces. An Giang province is considered the cradle and the highest density of followers. In particular, Tri

* An Giang University.

Ton district is known as the holy land of this religion with about 25.000 followers¹. As the headquarters of the religion, most religious activities from small to large scale take place in Tri Ton district and it also has the largest number of worship facilities. Therefore, the rituals of Tu An Hieu Nghia are traditional in Tri Ton district.

For funeral rites, the field results at this locality showed that funeral rites have been closest to tradition. Each believer in the same “group” is called “friendship” under the guidance of the Head and is equal in performing religious rites. The rituals that involve joy and grief, four great events of a person’s life (wedding; fun and important events; funeral and death anniversary; holidays of a year) are completely carried out by each believer. When a life cycle finishes, followers of Tu An Hieu Nghia religion receive the respect and protection of the Dharma by its rituals. Tu An Hieu Nghia religion had specific rituals for each stage from the time of serious illness to the last moment. Believers practice these rituals with deep faith, they believe in what the Guru taught in order to help the dead reduce their sufferings in hell and be soon liberated (Moksa). Those rituals show a high sense of community as well as humanity among people.

Currently, Tu An Hieu Nghia religion has been significantly influenced by the impact of the market economy in modern society. As a result, the traditional cultural values of this religion have been gradually lost. However, that impact also created a renewal that helped to decrease outdated things that are holding back the development of religion. Every aspect of believers’ religious life such as religious faith, rituals has been affected and transformed. In particular, the funeral rites are not outside the impact and transformation. In this article, the author mainly mentions the transformation and causes of the change in the funeral rite of the Tu An Hieu Nghia followers.

1. Funeral rites of Tu An Hieu Nghia followers in Tri Ton district, An Giang province

The funeral rites (đám ma) of Tu An Hieu Nghia believers in Tri Ton are basically the same tradition as the Vietnamese, however, they have their own characteristics. The funeral rite (đám ma- a popular way to call a funeral rite of the Vietnamese) is called the rite for a corpse (đám xác) by Tu An Hieu Nghia religion's believers. According to the explanation of a dignitary: "After death, people do not become ghosts (ma), so they do not call đám ma (rite for ghost). They call "the rite for corpse means worship for the corpse"². This religion has a regulation for specific rituals at each stage such as moribund moment, death, and after death.

1.1. Rite for the dying person

This religion attaches great importance to the ceremonial element and promotes the role of dignitaries (ông Gánh), so many funeral rituals take place and are associated with the leader (ông Gánh). When a family member has a serious illness, relatives come to the leader to ask for praying for peace. This praying ritual helps the sick person to be healthy again or "go away" serenely, the body is free from being tortured by disease

When someone is seriously ill, the family representative must come to the leader's house to report and ask him to conduct the ritual of praying for peace. This reporting is done simply by speaking without having items. To perform the ritual, the leader and the laypeople who are dignitaries set up a ceremony table with offerings (lamps, incense, tea, flowers, fruit) and sitting next to the patient to recite the prayers of peace. Family members are simultaneously instructed to recite. The practice of this ritual takes place more or less depending on the intention of the owner.

In general, Tu An Hieu Nghia followers only perform the ritual of praying for peace for their parents, grandparents who are sick for a long time and cannot heal. The rite aims to pray for the sick to end

physical torment and temporary life in the world. They believe that, with the sound of such a chant, these souls will guide toward the Buddha's realm, the mind to be good and free from worldly troubles.

This practice was quite popular in the past. Because the believers' living conditions were still in short supply, they did not have good health care and inadequate medicine, so they only expected miracles from religion. They considered religion as spiritual support and helped them overcome their illness.

1.2. Rituals for death

The ritual for the dying person is quite simple. However, according to the religion regulations, the rituals for a funeral are complex with many rites. First, the representative of the family of the dead buys a tray of betel, wine, flowers, and a pair of lamps to submit to the leader to report the news, invite him to the house to witness and help conduct the funeral ceremony. Then, another tray of betel, wine, flowers, and a pair of lamps is prepared to bring to Tam Bửu gia (a temple) to announce at the guru altar.

As the responsible person for the rituals with understanding prescribed by the religion, the leader (ông Gánh) undertakes many ceremonies. For the ritual for corpses, when receiving reports of relatives of the dead, he will arrange to come to prepare and conduct funeral rites. He and laypeople are assigned to take care of the deceased to perform works, such as: tearing mourning towels, setting up an altar, shrouding. The most important work is shrouding for the dead- the work requires a deep understanding.

Shrouding is also known as *Nhập mặt* ceremony: the rite of having a bath, getting new clothes. Then, the leader put talismans on the corpse. A layperson of the religion said that "Putting spells against the devil disturbing the corpse, it is also a type of passport for the dead's soul comes to another world"³.

Tu An Hieu Nghia believers performed shrouding rite with their own form due to not using a wooden coffin. The dead body is braced

around the body with bamboo sticks. A male has seven bamboo bars, a female has nine bamboo bars. This practice is called *võng nội*. Three large strips of white cloth are tied over the shoulders, back, and legs are called *võng ngoại*. Finally, the body is placed in a *tấm khâm*, a large cloth wrapped the corpse. In addition to *tấm khâm*, three white strips are tied. The dead body directly buried in a grave. Although Tu An Hieu Nghia believers do not use a wooden coffin for the dead, the shrouding rite is not simple and there is no lack of respect for the body of the deceased.

Tu An Hieu Nghia followers believe that “death is burial” which means that the dead must be buried. Thus, in the past, when someone died, it was usually buried on the same day. If a person died in the evening, he/she was buried the next morning. In general, followers do not choose the date to bury the dead. However, in some cases in which the corpse is required to keep at home for more than one day for choosing a date to bury. According to them, selection a good day, a good hour for burial avoid incompatibility with the age of husband or wife and children of the dead.

Tu An Hieu Nghia religion’s believers perform an important ritual that is worshipping the Pure Land (Tịnh độ). This ritual is performed by the leader and laypeople. In the past, the Pure Land worshipping took place when requested by a dead family. There are three times of Pure Land worshipping such as morning, afternoon, and evening. They pray Buddha Amitabha and the Tathagatas bless for the spirit of the dead, guide the spirit along the spiritual path to be liberated, do not suffer from hell. To perform this ritual, the leader and other dignitaries prepared eight paper dolls (*hình nhân*) hanging on small bamboo sticks. According to this religion, these eight paper dolls represent eight Tathagatas. When performing the ritual, the leader takes the first place, reciting the rosary while chanting the sutras, a layman holds a little gong to walk and knock, followed by eight laypeople each holding a paper doll. All of them go around the dead walking while chanting the sutras. At this time,

relatives in white mourning kneel in front of the dead body also chanted sutras, and performed the prostration ritual according to the leader's guidance. This ritual is performed in section. They keep going in circles and performing such rites until the end of the sutras. The meaning of this ritual is to instruct the soul of the dead to recite the sutras and ask the Buddha and the Tathagatas bless them to go to the peaceful realm.

After the Pure Land worshiping rite, the burial rite is performed. This ritual is quite simple. The burial location of the dead has been selected and to be dug. A layman performs the ritual of bringing the dead body to the grave. This layman guides people to follow the process of the funeral such as carrying the photo and incense bowl, carrying the body. They move along the intended path to the burial location. The layman led the funeral delegation while walking and chanting with the purpose of praying for the spirits of plants, insects, and small animals along the road that the funeral delegation accidentally stepped on. When the funeral delegation reaches the burial site, the layman administering the ritual will chant the Prajnaparamita Sutta (kinh Bát dương) and performing the burial. The soil and sand are filled up and a person in charge of the grave takes over the job. Making tombstone of followers was simple in the past. The religion's principle is to not build a big beautiful tomb, less wasting money, and effort.

After the burial, the funeral delegation returned home, the layman stays to recite, perform the ritual of opening the "door of the tomb" and lead the dead's soul to come back home's altar. This ritual is completely different from traditional Vietnamese ritual. According to Vietnamese tradition, the ritual of opening the "door of the tomb" is performed after three days with cumbersome procedures such as roosters calling for dead souls, setting up banana ladders to help dead souls go up, etc.

While the layman is guiding funeral delegation and performing the burial and the ritual of opening the “door of the tomb”, the leader stays at home, performs the ritual to move the altar to the position requested by the householder, and purifies it. This ritual is quite simple. He used a small pot of clean water to add some fresh flowers (flowers is often grown on the porch). Then, he used a branch with green leaves to dip in a water pot and scatter it around the indoor space. This action aims to dispel the air of the Lower world.

1.3. Ritual for a person after death

After the deceased has been buried, the family conducts rituals *Tuần thất* (Every 7 days), *Chung thất* (49 days), *Bá nhật* (100 days), *Tiểu tường* (the last day of a year), *Đại tường* (mourning ends after two years). These rituals are similar to those of Vietnamese tradition.

After two years, the mourning ends ceremony is carried out. The family members begin to organize the death anniversary ceremony for the deceased from the third year. For followers of Tu An Hieu Nghia, the dead are still remembered by family members, and rituals are performed in accordance with the religion’s regulations. Worshipping and commemorating their ancestors is one of the four great virtues (*Tứ trọng ân*) that every believer must remember and perform. They conduct the commemoration solemnly and respectfully.

The death anniversary is known as *Đổi kỵ*. The ceremony will take place on the day of death like the traditional anniversary of the Vietnamese. The purpose of this ceremony is to gather the relatives, to recite the sutras, to send paper bills and five-color papers to the dead. To organize the *Đổi kỵ* rite, family members must prepare many things, including offerings, paper bills, five colors paper, inviting the leader, laypeople, relatives, and friends to attend. The offerings included incense, flowers, lamps, tea, fruit and foods (salty dishes made from fish, or other aquatic species), sweet cake, and sticky rice. Indispensable items are paper bills and five-color

paper. Followers of Tu An Hieu Nghia religion offered paper bills to the dead with different types of different periods. The votive goods offered to the dead are not models of cars, buildings, clothes, they are five-color paper representing fabric for the dead to make clothes for use in their world. The five-color paper is stamped with the seal of the religion, rolled into round tubes, then formed into cubes. They are laid out on the altar along with other items and will be burned at the ends of the ceremony.

The death anniversary (Đổi kỵ) takes place for three days with each process step-by-step being fully implemented. Believers worship the ancestors ((cúng Tiên) for the first day, the second day for the deceased (cúng Chánh), and the third day for **cúng Hậu**.

According to the traditional death anniversary of the Vietnamese in the South, people often bring items to offer the deceased, such as tea, cakes, incense, flowers, fruits, a chicken or a duck, sugar, money. A leader of religion said that “The followers who attend the death anniversary rarely bring such items, they usually offer incense, a tea pack or a little fruit. An indispensable item is a sutra. Followers appreciate this gift”⁴.

In addition to the death anniversary, followers of Tu An Hieu Nghia also made offerings to the dead on the Chánh đán and Đoàn ngũ rituals during the year. Chánh đán takes place during the period from January to March of the lunar calendar, Đoàn ngũ takes place in May and in June of the lunar calendar. These rituals are held at the temple (Tam Bửu gia) of each group (Ghánh) and then takes place at the private house of each believer. At the end of the ceremony, believers bring the tray of offerings to present in front of the ancestral altar at the temple to invite grandparents to the ceremony at their own home.

For families with no well-off income, unable to organize the ritual at their own homes or in cases of living far, inconvenient in inviting laypeople and relatives to chant sutras and recite Dharma, they can organize this worshipping ceremony at the temple or with another

family if it is agreed by the owner. Families donate finance or work depending on conditions, not specified. Joining the ceremony is an interesting activity, showing community cohesion and humanity.

Đổi kỵ, Chánh đán, Đoan ngũ rituals are the occasions to show filial piety towards the deceased. It is partly shown through offerings such as paper money, Dharma. Family members and friends recite sutras to pray for the deceased's spirit to be liberated (Moksa).

2. Transformations of funeral rites of Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa' believers in Tri Tôn District, An Giang province at present

The external impacts and the internal movement have led to many changes in the religious life of the Tu An Hieu Nghia religion's followers. This transformation has occurred in rites that took place in worshipping facilities, and rituals at home. The change of the funeral rite is clearly seen. It has manifested in many aspects such as the ritual of praying for the peace of the sick, worshipping the Pure Land for dead souls, selection date of burial, the form of burial, the worshipping for people after death, etc. In my opinion, this change is a trend of integrating with the development of modern society, reducing cumbersome ceremonies, saving time, and finance. Some changes in funeral rites of Tu An Hieu Nghia's followers in Tri Ton district, An Giang province as follows:

Previously, when a family member had a serious sickness, the first ritual was asking the leader and the laymen to chant sutras for peace. Currently, this rite tends to be reduced. Many families do not perform the rite of praying for the sick. Has the declining religious faith of believers or a non-compulsory rule of religion led to this phenomenon? The concept of Tu An Hieu Nghia religion that everything is based on the "faith" and "mind" of each believer. They believe in this concept, it can help the sick overcome illness, physical torture. Therefore, the rite of praying for the sick is not compulsory, it depends on each family. There is a tendency of non-performing it.

Regarding the issue of believers' "faith" and "mind", another rite of funeral ritual also reflects. It is the Pure Land ritual for the dead. When a family member died, the Tu An Hieu Nghia follower had to buy a tray of offerings to report to the leader and asked him and laypeople to carry out the Pure Land worship ceremony. As mentioned above, this ritual is intended to pray to Amitabha Buddha to allow the dead to escape from hell, come to the peaceful realm. Previously, believers extremely believed in this ritual and seriously performed it. Currently, this ritual has been changing with simplification and even reduction. In an interview with a leader of the religion, he said that "The worship of the Pure Land depends on each family. If any family comes to invite us to worship, we will perform the ritual. It depends on the faith of each person, we cannot force them to do it"⁵.

Religion is not obligatory and coercive as the law, however, believers strictly obey it because they have a religious belief. The case when families do not perform the Pure Land ceremony for their loved ones at death because they do not believe that this ritual can help the dead to avoid exile in hell or they do not believe in the world of the dead.

In addition, there are cases of performing the Pure Land worship but it is reduced. Specifically, people reduced the number of rituals performed during the day. In the past, this ritual is performed three times a day (in the morning, in the afternoon, at night). Currently, it is only performed in the morning and afternoon. Explaining such reduction, a believer said that "Due to the increasing number of believers, dignitaries have to take care of many rituals. Time and health are not allowed so it must be reduced"⁶. In fact, the Pure Land worship at night is performed at midnight, it is a time of rest, so it affects the health of the worshiper. In particular, they have agreed on this reduction to ensure work progress.

There are changes in the form of the funeral rite. According to the viewpoint of a simple life, they also have a view of a simple funeral and burial. Therefore, in the past, believers did not use wooden coffins for the dead. The dead were covered with inner, external hammocks (*võng nội, võng ngoài*) and bamboo bars around the body. This form has changed, wooden coffins for the dead in particular. The dead are still covered with amulets, then placed in the inner, external hammocks, wooden coffins instead of the bamboo bars. Currently, Tu An Hieu Nghia followers in Tri Ton, An Giang have used a wooden coffin when burying the dead. Depending on economic conditions, they use coffins with different qualities such as good wood, bad wood, beautiful or simple designs.

The influence of current society on the simple lifestyle instructed by the Guru has led to changes. In addition, there is another reason that was explained by a believer as follows: “In the past, because of many difficulties in the material life of believers, the Guru advocated a simple funeral to avoid wastefulness (wooden coffins were not used). Today, people use wooden coffins because material life has been improved. Besides, family members do not want their loved ones’ bodies to be buried in the sand. It will be pitiful”⁷.

Based on the concept of “death is burial”, Tu An Hieu Nghia religion performed the burial quickly, did not prolong for days. Generally, the dead were buried in a day and it didn’t matter the date. Today, the funeral rite of the Tu An Hieu Nghia followers has become almost similar to the traditional funeral rite of the Vietnamese. They do not bury the dead on the same day, they keep the dead at home for one to three days or even more for reasons such as they may want to let the dead’s children, grandchildren, and relatives come back to meet them for the last time, or they have not chosen a suitable date for the burial. The Tu An Hieu Nghia followers in Tri Ton district, An Giang currently do not bury the

dead in a day for the same reasons. They have to choose a good day and hour, the date is not incompatible with the husband/wife, children, grandchildren for fear of causing bad affect the career of their relatives. This work is done carefully and seriously. They also pay attention to choosing the land to bury the dead.

The funeral organization in the current period also has many signs that go against the viewpoint of the Founder teachings as it must be done simply, to avoid waste. For families with a good economic condition, the funeral is solemnly held with musical drums, trumpets, and Vietnamese trumpets. The dance teams and the dragon wagons are hired to perform in the funerals. It shows the reputation and wealth of the owner.

The ceremonial changes in worshiping for the deceased also manifested through the rituals, such as *Đổi kỵ*, *Chánh đán*, and *Đoan ngũ*. Under the influence of many external factors, as well as the initiative to change to suit the actual conditions, the worshiping rituals are different from the past. It manifests at the time of performing, the ceremony process, the attitude of the person in charge of the organization, and the offerings. I just mention the death anniversary (*Đổi Kỵ*) ceremony. Today, this ceremony lasts for two days instead of three, the first day to worship the ancestors (*cúng Tiên*) and the deceased (*cúng Chánh*), and the second day to worship *cúng Hậu*. On the first day of worship, some families do not worship the ancestors (*cúng Tiên*) and they only worship the deceased (*cúng Chánh*) after 12:00. The families keep worshiping the ancestors, the rite can be done simply by burning incense and offer offerings to altars. These offerings are used again for the worshiping of the deceased (*cúng Chánh*). In the past, each day performed a ritual of worshiping with its own offerings. Explaining the reduction in the number of days of worshiping, a Tu An Hieu Nghia follower said that “Because the followers have increased over the years. On the occasion of worshiping, many families invite the leader and the lay people to come to worship. If the rituals are

still held for three days, they cannot attend the other ceremony. Therefore, it must be reduced”⁸. The reduction of the number of worshipping days is to match the current reality, but it does not follow the traditional regulations of this religion. In addition, it has led to a change in the time frame of performing the worshipping.

There has had a change related to the followers’ attitude when organizing rituals for the dead. The filial piety of the descendants towards the ancestors which expressed during the death anniversary (Đôi Ky) ceremony. Currently, this ritual shows the duty of family members to the dead and it is the obligation of a believer.

In the rituals at home, the change also manifested in the offerings. To the followers of Tu An Hieu Nghia, the most important offerings in the death anniversary ceremony have been the sutras and votive paper. Currently, paper houses with many designs and sizes has appeared in offerings for the dead. It may be influenced by the current trends. On these occasions, in addition to the sutras, votive paper bill, and five-color paper, homeowners prepare paper houses to burn for the dead. According to the tradition, people offered vegetarian or salty food depending on each family. Nowadays, salty offerings have replaced in order to be suitable for setting guests.

Conclusion

By the time, religions in general and Tu An Hieu Nghia religion in Tri Ton district, An Giang in particular have gradually changed under the influence of contemporary society. Tu An Hieu Nghia religion is facing external and internal transformations. These transformations have manifested in many aspects. However, this study mentions the changes of the rituals of the deceased.

In fact, the practice of rituals for the deceased has not complied with the rules and principles of the religion. A decline in faith has led to this situation. That is the result of the reception from other religions and non-believers who have lived for a long time in the same residential area.

The research results show that the impact has brought significant changes. These changes are not completely in a negative direction, on the contrary, it can be a positive direction. However, the line between these two dimensions is very fragile. Therefore, if the subjects (believers) of this religion do not fully understand their funeral rites, it can lead to deviation and undermining of traditional values./.

Notes:

- 1 Hội đoàn Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa (2015), *Văn kiện Đại hội đại biểu đạo Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, lần thứ II, nhiệm kỳ 2015 – 2020/ Documents of the General Meeting of Tu An Hieu Nghia religion, the second, term 2015 - 2020*, An Giang.
- 2 Extracted from the interview with Trần V. N. Year of birth: 1955. Sex: Male. Homeland: Ba Chúc Town, Tri Tôn District, An Giang Province, a believer of Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion.
- 3 Extracted from the interview with Bùi V. Đ. Year of birth: 1974. Sex: Male. Homeland: xã Lương Phi, Tri Tôn District, An Giang Province, a layman of Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion.
- 4 Extracted from the interview with Ngô V. N. Year of birth: 1934. Sex: Male. Homeland: Ba Chúc Town, Tri Tôn District, An Giang Province, a leader (Ông Gánh) of Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion.
- 5 Extracted from the interview with Ngô V. N. Year of birth: 1934. Sex: Male. Homeland: Ba Chúc Town, Tri Tôn District, An Giang Province, a leader (Ông Gánh) of Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion.
- 6 Extracted from the interview with Nguyễn V. N. Year of birth: 1960. Sex: Male. Homeland: xã Lê Trì, Tri Tôn District, An Giang Province, a layman of Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion.
- 7 Extracted from the interview with Ngô V. N. Year of birth: 1934. Sex: Male. Homeland: Ba Chúc Town, Tri Tôn District, An Giang Province, a leader (Ông Gánh) of Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion.
- 8 Extracted from the interview with Phạm V. A. Year of birth: 1976. Sex: Male. Homeland: Ba Chúc Town, Tri Tôn District, An Giang Province, a layman of Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion.

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