

DOCTORAL THESIS IN BRIEF**NGUYEN VAN LUOM. *Belief in worshipping ancestors of Khmer ethnic people in Tra Vinh province***

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Vietnam's ancestor worship beliefs are diverse and varied across ethnic groups and regions. Tra Vinh province, with one of the largest Khmer populations, is an area where the Khmer has settled for a long time. The folk culture of the Khmer people in this region is remarkably rich. Living among other ethnic communities, the cultural values of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province have exhibited a certain degree of integration and adaptation with the culture of other ethnic groups, particularly the Chinese and the Kinh, in various aspects, including in ancestral worship practices.

The main content of the dissertation is presented in four chapters: 1- Overview of the literature, theoretical foundation, and research area. 2- Characteristics of ancestral worship practices among the Khmer people in Tra Vinh. 3- Changes in ancestor worship beliefs among the Khmer people in Tra Vinh today. 4- Ancestor worship beliefs among the Khmer people in Tra Vinh: Links with Southern Buddhism, the community, and ethnic groups living together. Below are some prominent research findings of the dissertation.

Tra Vinh is a coastal plain province situated between the downstreams of the Tien River and the Hau River. The Khmer constitute about one-third of the province's

total population and is a part of the Khmer community in the Mekong Delta. They belong to the Mon-Khmer language group and share a common origin with the Khmer in Cambodia. Ancestor worship is one of the most popular beliefs practiced by the Khmer, alongside agricultural spiritualism, deity worship, and crafts ancestor worship. The author asserts that Southern Buddhism plays an indispensable role in ancestor worship of Khmer people.

Regarding the object of worship in ancestral worship beliefs, the Khmer define ancestors as deceased individuals with blood relations to those living in the family, without distinction of the souls' original status or position in the clan lineage. Thus, Khmer people worship several members, including grandparents, parents, spouses, aunts, uncles, and even grandchildren. In their ancestor worship practices, it is also common for the Khmer to worship Buddha alongside their ancestors. For the Khmer people, Buddha can protect the souls of ancestors and the living. While ancestral altars may not always be present in every home, there are always Buddhist altars adorned with Buddha images or statues. Monks, as representatives of Buddhist teachings and avatars of Buddha, are highly regarded in their spiritual life. Therefore, monks are also objects of veneration in the ancestral worship beliefs of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province.

Regarding ancestral altars and worship items: The positioning of the ancestral altar is of great importance, as it must reflect

the Khmer's reverence for ancestors and the objects of worship, especially Buddha. Accordingly, the Khmer people often select the most dignified location within their homes to place the ancestral altar, similar to practices observed among the Kinh and Chinese households. The incense bowl for ancestral worship is an indispensable item, typically placed at the center of the altar. While multiple objects may be worshipped on a single altar, the Khmer people typically only place one incense bowl. Worship items on the altar may consist of photographs of the deceased individuals, or substitutes of those photographs. Additionally, the altar may also be adorned with decorative items such as a pair of candlesticks (made of bronze or wood), flower vases, or a set of utensils for holding the incense bowl. Ritual practices of ancestral worship among the Khmer people include: Daily ancestral worship rituals; Chôl Chnẵm Thmây ceremony (New Year's celebration); Đôlta ceremony (also known as Sel Đôlta, Ancestor worship ceremony); and requiem ceremonies.

In the daily ancestral worship rituals, families usually incense for their ancestors twice a day, in the early morning and in the evening. They light the incense in a sequence, starting from Buddha, followed by monks, and finally the ancestors. The responsibility for conducting ancestral worship in the family usually falls on the youngest child. If the youngest child enters a monastery and does not return, the responsibility of ancestor worship will be transferred to the next older sibling. In cases where there are only daughters in the family and the youngest

child cannot perform ancestral worship, this responsibility falls upon the eldest daughter in the household.

The Chôl Chnẵm Thmây ceremony is held for three days at the end of April according to the Buddhist calendar. During these days, the ancestral altar is adorned elaborately and decorated with various food offerings. If the family does not invite monks to recite scriptures, a family representative will offer prayers at the altar. Affluent families often organize grand ceremonies and may invite the Achar or monks from the temple to perform the worship rituals.

The Đôlta ceremony is an important special occasion for the Khmer people. Đôlta is celebrated for three days at the end of the eighth month or beginning of the ninth month in the lunar calendar (depending on the Maha Sangkran calendar of the Khmer people). Khmer families usually hold this ceremony with great solemnity: on the first day, they decorate the ancestral altar and invite the Achar and monks to conduct ancestor worship; on the second day, they make merits for the ancestors by offering food to the monks, inviting them to recite scriptures as a requiem for the souls of the ancestors at the temple; on the third day, they set up a meal to bid farewell to the souls of the ancestors returning to the Buddha.

The requiem ceremony, or "cầu siêu", is celebrated by the Khmer people on the third day of the New Year, which is the third day after the Chôl Chnẵm Thmây ceremony, to pray for the souls of deceased family members to be blessed by the Buddha.

Funeral rituals are considered pivotal moments for the transition of the deceased souls back to the Buddha and ancestors. Each funeral includes: rituals and ceremonies for the terminally ill; rituals and ceremonies for paying respects to the deceased body; funeral procession and cremation; set-up of the ancestral altar and post-funeral rituals. Achars and monks play significant roles in conducting these rituals.

The ancestral worship beliefs of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province in modern-day society have undergone certain transformations under the influence of various external and internal factors,

such as changes in economic conditions and living standards, changes in the educational environment, etc. Living with other ethnic groups, the Khmer people have also integrated other cultural values, particularly those of the Kinh and Chinese people, to enrich their traditional cultural heritage, while gradually phasing out values that are no longer relevant.

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