

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN “VIỆC LỄ” WORSHIP AND SACRIFICIAL SURROGATES CEREMONY FOR PARACELS’ SOLDIERS IN LÝ SƠN ISLAND

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“Việc lễ” worship is a traditionally religious type of coastal residents in Middle part of Vietnam, especially those living in Quảng Ngãi. This religious type was formed and tied with the spiritual and cultural life of all residents in Lý Sơn island. It was born and has been growing up with the sea exploration of Vietnamese. “Việc lễ” worship is a cultural characteristic of Lý Sơn’s sea and islands which was not only a traditional religion but also has the relationship with traditional festivals, especially the sacrificial surrogates ceremony for Paracels’ soldiers. The ceremony has been held for more than hundred years. “Việc lễ” worship and the sacrificial surrogates ceremony for Paracels’ soldiers represents for being grateful and remembering the forefathers who contributed to the family and country. They have become the particularly cultural feature of island residents over years and years.

1. Introduction of “việc lễ” worship in Lý Sơn island

Vietnamese people brought traditionally cultural features of Northern hometowns while moving from North to South in the period of 15th and 16th century. Besides exploring the new land, people organized towns, villages, markets and built temples and worship houses which could be considered as the place of spiritual life. Although they lived in a new place, they kept old customs and even used the names of their old hometowns or villages for the new places as a way of reminding them to Northern homes. Therefore, they and their next generations have organized cultural activities by families. Every year, whole family gather in a certain day and do the worship to remember their forefathers who first explored and contributed to the new place...

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Depending on the rules of each family, they will have different date and type of worship which help to recognize their own children and avoid being lost on their way of exploration new places.

Gradually, this worship is held on a fixed date and now called as “việc lễ” worship. It was formed from cultural activities and maintained by coastal residents in both Middle and South part of Vietnam. It is originally a periodically worship which was established during the exploration and reclamation.

According to historical records, Việt people lived on Lý Sơn island since the end of the 16th century and the early of the 17th century. They were residents of An Hải and Sa Kỳ, belonged to Bình Sơn and Sơn Tịnh (Quảng Ngãi). The genealogy of families wrote as followed: 15 representatives of 15 big families moved to islands and lived in two areas in Mậu Thân (1609) when King Lê Kinh Tông (9th Hoàng Định) reigned. In western side, there were families of Phạm Quang, Phạm Văn, Võ Xuân, Võ Văn, Lê, Nguyễn and Đặng. Seven historical figures explored and established Lý Vĩnh commune which was called as An Vĩnh in the Nguyễn dynasty. In the east side of islands, there were families of Nguyễn, Dương, Trương, Trần, Nguyễn Đình, Nguyễn Văn and Lê^(*). They formed into Lý Hải commune, known as An Hải in the Nguyễn dynasty. In the progress of

(*) Among 15 families who joined in the exploration of Lý Sơn island, there were only two families named Trần and Đặng were taken back the awards because of not following the village's rules.

recalming the islands and forming two villages, families always remember of the home lands and wanted to dedicate to their home towns although they had a stable lives in a new place. Once homeland had signs to call them, they would go back. It is how residents, who first leaving hometown to the island for new careers, feel miss their hometown. Until the population increased and rules of villages were set up, residents asked for separating from land to build their own groups as now. However, they still have the bloody relationship with hometown. In order to next generations remember of their forefathers, families implemented the “việc lễ” worship as a way of dedicating to their previous generations.

Most of families built house of worship for their spiritual activities. There should be a shared house of worship or separated one belong to specific families as Phạm Văn, Phạm Quang, Võ Văn^(*) so on depending on how big family is.

On Lý Sơn island, “việc lễ” is the occasion for grandchildren to gather for worship and strengthen the relationship within family. It was also called as “giữ lễ” and combined with the date of sacrificial surrogates ceremony. The religion of “việc lễ” worship has crossed – contexts and diversified. Firstly, it is dedicated to normal rules, then to land, to those passed away and then safety for

(*)Today, Phạm Văn's communal house is dedicated to Paracel team leader Phạm Hữu Nhật while Võ Văn's communal house is dedicated to Paracel team's another management board Võ Văn Khiết.

families as well as Paracels’ soldiers. The worship also reflects the expectation of Vietnamese to forefathers and excellent people of past generations. They expect forefathers to protect them from all risks and diseases. It is a type of asking for safety and pushing bad luck away so that they can have a better and happier life.

Because it is private for each family so “việc lễ” worship was considered as an anniversary of whole family. On this day, all family members gather in the house of worship to show their love and respect to their forefathers. It is also a chance for them to talk about memories and encourage each other. Each family has its own rules of worship date, worship food and worship ritual depending on their family conditions. Rituals are very complicated and only family members know the worship date even the date is normally fixed. The anniversary could be big or small, simple or complex depending on the financial conditions. Big families in Lý Sơn island as Nguyễn, Trương, Dương, Trần, Võ in An Hải and Phạm Văn, Phạm Quang, Võ Xuân, Võ Văn, Lê, Nguyễn in An Vĩnh basically had their anniversaries in February or March (Lunar Calendar). It is also the time of the traditional Qing ming festival (Pure Brightness Festival).

Worship food are required and there is no explanation of why these food were chosen for this anniversary. Today, besides food as meat, fish, wine, there are some required food, for example: Phạm

family has the fish fresh roll, Dương family has three steaming chickens, Phan family has a whole grilled fish, Võ family adds the grilled fish, steaming crab and chicken in the list.

It could be considered the “việc lễ” worship as a special signal of each family so family members can recognize each other. It is also used for avoiding the marriage between two members in a family.

“Việc lễ” worship is a traditionally cultural festival which has been maintained until today. It is when old residents started exploration and reclamation and rooted from the concept of no ancestor, no descendants. As a result, people do the periodical worship to thank and remember contribution of previous generations (*previous generation created, next generation maintains*). “Lễ yết” is always done before the “việc lễ” worship. It is held in the midnight before the anniversary date to report with forefathers that family members will gather on the next day and ask for whole family’s safety.

“Việc lễ” worship has really stayed in mind of each Lý Sơn people, especially those are home away. They will always think of the home town and forefather wherever they are.

2. The sacrificial surrogates ceremony for Paracels’ soldiers and its relations to “việc lễ” worship

The sacrificial surrogates ceremony for Paracels’ soldiers is a cultural festival which is closely related to “việc lễ”

worship on Lý Sơn island. It is a specially traditional festival which combines many cultures which existed for hundreds of years in the coastal residents' spiritual life. Moreover, this festival was formed base on the "việc lễ" worship and became a required factor for all families who had their sons as Paracels' soldiers in the past.

The origin of the sacrificial surrogates ceremony for Paracels' soldiers was linked with the establishment and operation of Paracels team. According to historical records as "Phủ biên tạp lục" by Lê Quý Đôn, "Hoàng Việt dư địa chí" by Phan Huy Chú..., Paracels young men will receive the call to go to Paracels for exploration and reclamation, water measurement and demarcation of sovereignty every year after the Tet holiday. They will carry food and drinks to use within 6 months. During the serving period, each soldier of Paracels team and Paracels maritime managed the Northern of Paracels. They had to bring a sedge mat, bamboo sticks, rattan cable and a card with their own name on it. In case of falling down, their team members will wrap the body inside the mat by bamboo sticks with the name card and drop the body into the sea. If this soldier is lucky, the sea currents will bring them back to the land and some one will take them back to hometown. The vehicles were very simple back to that time. They used small and simple wherries to go to Paracels and Spartlys while the way was very dangerous with big storms.

Consequently, there were many soldiers sacrificed and stayed in the sea forever. As a proof of their sacrifices to the nation, island residents today still sing the song to praise these braveful soldiers: "Hoàng Sa lăm đảo nhiều cồn/Chiếc chiếu bó tròn mây sợi dây mây/Hoàng Sa đi có về không/Lệnh vua sai phải quyết lòng ra đi/Hoàng Sa trời bể mệnh mông/Người đi thì có mà không thấy về/Hoàng Sa mây nước bốn bề/Tháng hai Khao lễ thể lính Hoàng Sa" (Meaning: *There are many islands on Paracels/ Soldiers once started their journey, they will bring the mat and rattan cable/ It is King's order so they have to go. Paracels surrounded by cloud and ocean/ and the ceremonies for Paracels' soldiers are always held in February*). Their great contribution was also recorded in many historical records since the feudal dynasties as *Đại Nam thực lục tiền biên, Đại Nam nhất thống chí, Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí, Hoàng Việt dư địa chí* and was honourly called as "Paracels braveful soldiers" by King Tự Đức.

There are some opinions of remembering those sacrificed on sea while serving for country and encouraging their next generation to heritage this tradition by holding the sacrificial surrogates ceremony for Paracels' soldiers. There was another story of this as dead soldiers came back and asked for the worship from the court.

People used to held two memorial anniversaries (*Lễ khao lễ thể lính* and *lễ khao lễ tế lính*) on Lý Sơn island and at

Sa Kỳ waterfront. The purpose is to dedicate to the alive and dead people.

All these anniversaries started from the “việc lễ” worship. Two anniversaries were on same day so “việc lễ” worship was actually “sacrificial surrogates ceremony”. Today, there are many explanation of the words “sacrificial surrogates ceremony” by many researchers. In some regions, surrogates ceremony is still an annual anniversary and similar to the “việc lễ” worship. For sacrificial surrogates ceremony, it is said that the ceremony is mainly for witchcrafting/surrogating for soldiers. Some other ideas saw the usage of hình nhân has replaced for lost soldiers and brought their souls back. Therefore, sacrificial surrogates ceremony could be seen as an annual and regulated anniversary.

In this ceremony, dummies was put in boats and floating to the sea. Paracels’ soldiers sacrificed on the sea and their soul were not able to be back home. Residents did the ceremonies to call these souls back and sent the dummies to replace them. It is also a way of keeping their next generation safe when they work on sea. According to old people, “việc lễ” worship has become a rule for families, even for those passed away but did not have tomb. They did the same ceremony as what they had for Paracels’ soldiers. All steps in the ceremonies were exactly same as the sacrificial surrogates ceremony too.

Worship time is also the time used for sacrificial surrogates ceremony for Some

big families hold their ceremonies on one day from 10th to 20th (lunar Calendar). For example, Võ Văn family, living in West part - An Vĩnh commune, had the ceremony on February 16th while Phạm Văn family, living in East part - An Vĩnh commune did the ceremony on February 20th. This is also described through the poem: “Hoàng Sa mây nước bốn bề, Tháng hai khao lễ thể lính Hoàng Sa” (*Meaning: Hoang Sa is surrounded by cloud and ocean and the ceremonies for Paracels’ soldiers are always held in February*).

Paracels’ soldiers team did stop long time ago but the worship day always has the surrogates as a way of remembering passed away people and expect the safety for grandchild’s of family. Today, Lý Sơn residents, who are away from home to earn for their living, will go back home on this date if they cannot come back during the Tet holiday.

In conclusion, the “việc lễ” worship and “sacrificial surrogates ceremony for Paracels’ soldiers” have a close linkage. The ceremony for Paracels’ soldiers was held only when Paracels teams was born and based on the “việc lễ” worship which already existed before. “Việc lễ” worship is the foundation of the sacrificial surrogates ceremony for Paracels’ soldiers when they sacrificed during serving for country. It is the cultural cover of the sacrificial surrogates ceremony as a way of remembering Paracels’ soldiers whose lost their lives. The ceremonies were held through rules of “việc lễ” worship.

“Việc lễ” worship and the sacrificial surrogates ceremony were combined to a thing called tradition and rule which have existed for hundreds years on Lý Sơn island. It is a bloody and essential part of spiritual life and Lý Sơn residents always feel proud of their hometown and previous generation who scarified their lives for protecting the nation. The spirit of remembering scarified generations is described through the poem kept in An Vĩnh temple as followed: “Ân đức dựng xây miền đảo Lý/Nghĩa tình bồi đắp dải Hoàng Sa” (*Meaning: Being grateful for building Lý Sơn island, young generation will use their love to develop and protect Paracels*). Young people always use many words to remind them of Paracels’ soldiers’ souls, for example, “Always remember the origin. It is rule of being a person. Looking back the past 400 years Paracels’ soldiers suffered difficulties and threats to build and protect the island so that young generation can have a peaceful country as today. That sacrifices and achievement will be remembered forever and ever.”[2].

The sacrificial surrogates ceremony has become a particular festival of Quảng Ngãi province, not only Lý Sơn island through many centuries. The festival has also attracted many local and foreign visitors. In 2008, People Committee of Quảng Ngãi province organized this festival to show party’s and state’s attention to the island region. Besides, State restored historical places related to

Paracels’ soldiers, for example, financial support for restructuring An Vĩnh temple, or build and open the exhibition and monument of Paracels’ soldiers who protected the Northern sea.

In general, “việc lễ” worship and the sacrificial surrogates ceremony have the close linkage and it owns historical values. It also shows the thought of remembering forefathers and promoting these values in the industrialization and modernization. The ceremonies are also the thankful words to Paracels’ soldiers and contributed to the confirmation of Paracel islands and Sparty islands belonging to Vietnam. This is also the education of traditional history for young generations □

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