

THE ROLE OF KHMER THERAVADA BUDDHISM IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE KHMER COMMUNITY IN SOUTHWESTERN VIETNAM

BY

NGUYEN THI XUAN

Foreign Trade University Ho Chi Minh City Campus



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Corresponding author:

NGUYEN THI XUAN

Abstract

The Khmer community in the Southwest region is an integral part of the Vietnamese ethnic community. A unique, lively, and rich cultural identity has been created during the formation and development of the Khmer community in the Southwest region. In particular, Khmer Theravada Buddhism plays the role of an orthodox religion, contributing to preserving, supplementing, and promoting cultural identity, uniting the Khmer community, it is also a manifestation of the relationship between ethnicity and religion that is closely intertwined. However, religious life has many changes that affect the sustainable development of the Khmer community. Within the scope of the research, the author will clarify the role of Khmer Theravada Buddhism in the spiritual life of the Khmer community in the Southwest region. Sustainable development of the Khmer community in the Southwest region, Vietnam.

Keywords: *Khmer Theravada Buddhism, sustainable development, Southwestern, Vietnam*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Southwest is a diverse land, rich in both ethnicity and religion with the collaboration of Vietnamese, Chinese, Cham, and Khmer. Khmer people in the Mekong Delta are now concentrated in provinces such as Soc Trang, Tra Vinh, Kien Giang, An Giang, and Ca Mau. Most Khmers work in agriculture, with only a few small traders working as laborers. Khmer people live concentrated in communities, taking the temple as the center of cultural and religious activities. Their mainstream religion was Khmer Theravada Buddhism to distinguish it from the Theravada of the Kinh people. In the process of existence and development, the Khmer people have continued to transform and create a rich and diverse culture with unique features and create its own identity in the Southern cultural flow. "Most Khmer people follow Theravada Buddhism. The Southwest region has 443 pagodas, 201 Salatel, and 7,827 monks (including 66 Most. Venerable, 102 venerable, and 1,584 venerable, the rest are novices), 5,701 temple board members and 1,052,895 Khmer follow Theravada Buddhism, accounting for 87.9% of Khmers in the region. Thus, Khmer Theravada Buddhism in the Southwest has many temples, with a large number of monks and followers" (Hop, T. H., (2017), P.99).

Theravada Buddhism has been the mainstream religion of the Khmer people for many centuries, with a closed social structure, the Khmer people do not easily accept cultural elements imported from the outside. However, in recent years, religious life has changed a lot in the context of the country's economic development and the impact of globalization.

2. METHODS AND DATA

Subjects and research objectives: The role of Theravada Buddhism in the spiritual life of the Khmer community in the Southwest. Method: For this article, the author uses the Marxist philosophical method; at the same time, it also uses the method of analyzing documents, observation methods, and methods of combining history - logic.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The influence of Khmer Theravada Buddhism on the spiritual life of the Khmer community in the Southwest

Khmer Theravada Buddhism influenced the ideological conception, morality, and lifestyle of the Khmer people

Khmer Theravada Buddhism takes morality, takes cause, and effect as the main, goes through the scriptures to teach people, takes a simple life, honesty, equality, and charity as a way of life, takes the spirit of the people, fair owner, regardless of caste. as the standard in life, taking the middle way as the basis of action. Influenced by the Buddhist view of Theravada Buddhism, Khmer people live very peacefully, rich in compassion. *"The influence of Theravada Buddhist ethics in Khmer community thought is quite evident. The Khmer people live in the spirit of Buddhism and believe that the Buddha will be present to bring them peace. Therefore, Theravada Buddhism becomes a gluing glaze, gathering all Phum and Soc community members. This is also the rule of the whole community, all members regardless of male and female are obliged and have equal rights before customs and rituals are built and perfected in the spirit of Buddhism"* (Thanh, D. T., (2018), P.75)

Over a long period taking root and developing in the Khmer community in the Southwest, Theravada Buddhism with its human perspectives has become a source of thought, influencing the formation of cultural characteristics of the community. The lessons of cause and effect, selflessness, and love for all creatures have become the motto of Khmer compatriots. Therefore, the majority of Khmer people see Khmer Theravada Buddhism as a spiritual support, a faith, and a promise of compensation.

It can be said that Buddhist moral thought plays an important role in regulating the behavior of believers to become subconscious, the philosophy of life has been inherited and continued in the Khmer community. Thereby contributing to creating a healthy social environment, preserving traditional cultural values, and maintaining a rich spiritual life for Khmer compatriots.

Khmer Theravada Buddhism influences Khmer customs and festivals

Customs and practices are unique features of each ethnic group, expressing the specificity of the culture of each ethnic group. For the Khmer people in the Southwest, the customs and practices influenced by Theravada Buddhism are quite clear. When it comes to Khmer customs, it is impossible not to mention monasticism. Monasticism is not only a religious activity but also a long-standing practice and cultural nuance. For young Khmer monks, monasticism is a very important stage of life, as it is one of the criteria for evaluating character, morality, and culture. Going to practice according to the Khmer concept is not to become a Buddha, but to cultivate a person with character, and moral qualities, know how to live according to the spirit of Buddhist teachings, and train according to the Dharma.

For the Khmer community from birth to death, the life of each individual in the community is closely tied to the temple. In daily life as well as cultural festivals of the community, there is always the direct participation or guidance of monks in the temple. *"Khmer temples were built not only to meet the needs of religious activities but also to the needs of the socio-cultural activities of Phum and Soc. The temple is both a religious center and a socio-cultural center of the Khmer people"* (Oanh, D. T., (2011), P.80).

The Khmer community in the Southwest has about 15 festivals in a year attracting the participation of the whole community, including up to 10 festivals originating from Buddhism and organized by monks in the temple premises of Phum and Soc. In the history of the development of the Khmer community, the pagoda is not only a place to train knowledge for children in Phum and Soc but also a place to acquire cultural knowledge through Khmer characters to read sutras, books, chants and to transmit the contents of Buddhist scriptures.

The influence of Khmer Theravada Buddhism on the communal cohesion of the Khmer people

For the Khmer community, the temple is the bridge between Khmer Theravada Buddhism and the Khmer community in the Southwest. *"Based on the commonality derived from the organization of the lives of the members of the Phum, Soc, the temple along with the activities of monks and devotees created synergy and sympathy. All these factors create the strong community cohesion of Phum, Soc Khmer ethnic"* (Hung, T. T., (2019), P.180).

The temple is not only a place for spiritual and cultural activities but also a place where festivals take place, a place to connect the beliefs, feelings, spirituality, and wishes of the Khmer people. Therefore, the pagoda is considered a symbol of the whole Phum Soc community, uniting the members of Phum, Soc in a common destiny. Sympathy is expressed in Buddhist festivals, folk festivals, and the life cycle rituals of each individual with the participation of monks have created a spirit of sharing, attachment, and empathy among members of the community. This synergy and empathy represent the relationship between the individual, the family, and the community that creates strength, and community cohesion against the impacts of external factors such as natural disasters, enemy disasters, and foreign cultures.

3.2. The upheavals in the religious life of Khmer Theravada Buddhism affect the goal of sustainable development of the Khmer community in the Southwest

Theravada Buddhism has worked with Khmer compatriots in the Southwest to create extremely unique cultural values, which have been recognized and honored by the community. However, in the process of globalization, and international integration as at present with the impact and intersection of external cultural flows, Khmer Theravada Buddhism has had movement and transformation.

First, the tendency to convert religious beliefs

Religious conversion is not a rare phenomenon but a common religious phenomenon in people's religious life. Also in Vietnam, religious conversion takes place in many areas: *"The transition from polytheism to monotheistic belief or switching from traditional religion to Catholicism, Protestantism is quite common, especially in the Northwest, Central Highlands, and Southwest regions. More specifically, in the Northwest region, there is a fairly common phenomenon of Hmong people, the Dao abandoning traditional religion to embrace Protestantism. Other ethnic groups such as Tay, Thai, Nung ... there are also Protestants, but the number is negligible. In the Central Highlands region, many local*

ethnic minorities abandoned traditional religions or traditional beliefs to embrace Protestantism" (Tuan, C. V., (2015), P.31-32)

Khmer Theravada Buddhism is the mainstream religion of the Khmer community, along with the closed social structure, Khmer people are not easily receptive to foreign cultural elements, and the decline of the temple's role has led to the phenomenon of a part of Khmer abandoning traditional religion for another religion. *"Khmer converts to other religions make up a very small percentage: Catholics are 0.27%, and Protestants are 0.18% compared to the Khmer population in the region. However, if we compare Khmer Protestants with the total number of Protestants in each province, we see a significant proportion: Tra Vinh: at 33.43%, Soc Trang at 17.59%, Bac Lieu is 13.31%, Kien Giang at 12.14%. This proves that Protestantism is very interested in evangelizing the Khmer people and that evangelization is fruitful. Some Khmers have been trained as preachers, pastors"* (Hop, T. H., (2017), P.105). The first reason is that religions have increased proselytizing and preaching in Khmer areas with many forms of evangelization, and the life patterns of these religions are simple and appealing.

Second, the tendency to leave the Phum, Soc to migrate to big cities and industrial zones to work.

Due to the influence of backward practices, to this day, the Khmer people are still the most economically disadvantaged in the region. Therefore, Khmer people are forced to leave their homeland to find a livelihood, they leave Phum and Soc to work in industrial zones. *"Among the southeastern provinces, Ho Chi City and then Binh Duong are the main destinations for Khmer people. These are the two industrial and urban centers that provide the most job opportunities for migrants in general and Khmer migrants in particular. Can Tho have a similar role as the largest destination for Khmer people in the Southwest despite its relatively modest size, even compared to some other provinces in the Southeast besides Ho Chi Minh City and Binh Duong"* (Sang, L. T., (2018), P.9). When the living space changes, the absence of the pagoda image is the cause of the fading and fading of customs, customs, and culture of the Khmer community.

Third, the trend of rejuvenating abbot monks and gradually reducing adolescents to study at temples

Khmer Theravada Buddhists have a special respect for monks, whom they see as the embodiment of the Buddha. However, due to his young age, limited level of secular and Buddhist studies, lack of life experience, and lack of deep understanding of customs, and the traditional practices of the nation, the monk's prestige with the community is not high. *"The number of Khmer Theravada Buddhist monks annually fluctuates around 8,000 (up to 10,000 in some years), of which up to 80% are young monks. Due to various reasons such as traditional Khmer Theravada Buddhist monks, monastic to pay homage to parents, the exodus to find a job, and go abroad,...therefore, the number of Khmer monks exporting and importing monks is not fixed, making it difficult to create sources at all levels of training. Especially the choice to train at the Bachelor of Buddhist Studies"* (Ly, L. Q., (2017), P.35). Therefore,

their role in solving and managing the affairs of the community as well as uniting and rallying the community is also limited.

According to Khmer tradition, young men from the age of 13 must enter the temple to study for a while. Going to a monastery of great significance includes paying homage to parents and most importantly, becoming human. Therefore, those who have undergone holy cultivation will be respected by the whole community. Entering the temple to become a monk is a time for young Khmer men to prepare moral conditions, knowledge, and compassion so that after leaving the temple they know how to build a life. Nevertheless, most young people who become monks do not fully carry the meaning as before but mainly fulfill their obligations to the pagoda, their families, and Phum and Soc. *"In the past 10 years, the activities of Khmer Theravada Buddhist monks have changed a lot. The status of Khmer youths entering temples to study according to traditional practices, with a minimum period of 3 years, has now changed. The time to study in temples today is sometimes only three days"*. (Lien, T. H., (2014), P.49).

As economic and social life develops, the need to stabilize life and economic development is also increased. Today's youth must work to feed themselves and their families, on the other hand, they realize that entering monastic temples is not the only way for children to pay tribute to their parents. Trích dẫn

3.3. Solutions to stabilize religious life towards sustainable development of the Khmer community in the Southwest

First, promote economic development and improve the material life of the Khmer community

First of all, it is necessary to promote the role of dignitaries and prestigious people in the community to raise awareness for Khmer compatriots in economic development and building real life. Mobilize and guide believers to spend economically and reasonably, especially during festive occasions to both ensure the spiritual needs of entertainment and not affect economic life. Renovate the way of organizing festivals during the year in the direction of saving but still ensuring compliance with the customs and customs of the Khmer people. In addition, it is necessary to create conditions for Khmer compatriots to diversify their economic activities, transfer science and technology in agricultural production, especially post-harvest technology, and facilitate access to capital sources with preferential interest rates. On the other hand, it is necessary to focus resources on developing socio-economic infrastructure in Khmer areas, including rural roads.

Second, strengthen the role of dignitaries and reputable people in the Khmer community to promote positive influences of Khmer Theravada Buddhism

Regularly organize training courses, and update knowledge and guidelines of the Party and State legislation for Khmer Theravada Buddhist dignitaries and prominent people in the community. Propagate, educate and strengthen the belief of Theravada Buddhist dignitaries in the Party's views, policies, and laws of the State. In addition, it is necessary to gradually standardize the level of Buddhism and competence for the abbot monks of Khmer

Theravada Buddhism, to improve the quality of religious activities, and organize and administer religious festivals and national festivals efficiently and economically.

Third, preserve, preserve, and promote the traditional values of Khmer Theravada Buddhism, contributing to the preservation of the cultural identity of the Khmer community.

First of all, it is necessary to be fully aware of the place of the temple in the spiritual life of Khmer compatriots and implement financial support policies to repair and embellish temples. Increase investment in the maintenance and preservation of national traditional festivals, Buddhist festivals take place on the temple premises, contributing to meeting the needs of entertainment and entertainment imbued with national identity. Along with that is to restore, consolidate and develop the traditional cultural, artistic, and sports movements. In addition, it is necessary to continue to improve the quality of Khmer radio and television, Khmer newspapers, and Khmer photo newspapers

4. CONCLUSION

Khmer Theravada Buddhism is a mainstream religion that has been closely linked, durable, and influential in many aspects of the spiritual life of the Khmer community in the Southwest. The harmony between the ethics of Khmer Theravada Buddhism with the lifestyle, ideology, and ethics of the Khmer community has become a philosophy of life, rules in communication, and behavior between people in the community. In addition, Khmer Theravada Buddhism contributes to maintaining the customs and practices of the Khmer people, taking care of the development of education and social security, building community cohesion, and establishing social consensus. Since its introduction into the Khmer community until now, Khmer Theravada Buddhism has deepened, taken root, and become a daily religious necessity and influenced the spiritual life of the whole community. Thus, Khmer Theravada Buddhism is the mainstream religion that contributes to building Khmer cultural identity. Therefore, preserving the identity of Khmer culture requires care, protection, and development of the pillar and the main identity of that culture is Khmer Theravada Buddhism. Khmer Theravada Buddhism always accompanies the nation at every stage of development and directly contributes to the stability and sustainable development of the Khmer community. In the face of changes in the religious life of Khmer people in the Southwest in particular and in other parts of the country in general. The State should continue to improve policies and laws, pay attention to and create conditions for religious organizations to operate under the charter and the charter has been recognized by the State and ensured by the provisions of the law. In addition, the State also needs to improve the capacity and qualifications of commune-level and ward-level cadres because this is the management part and direct contact with believers and religious leaders. Doing these tasks well will contribute to social stability, and economic development and preserve and promote the fine traditional cultural values of the Khmer community.

Thank you

The study of good and evil is a difficult job, requiring a lot of thought and concern, so it encounters many certain difficulties.

Therefore, I look forward to receiving the sharing, sympathy, and comments of readers. The author looks forward to listening with the spirit of learning more. Thanks very much.

Best regards

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