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CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION DURING RELIGIOUS CONVERSION IN THE KHMER COMMUNITY IN SOUTHWEST, VIETNAM

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Abstract

Religious conversion is a fairly common phenomenon and has been going on for a long time in world religious life. In Southwest, Vietnam, as early as the twentieth century, there was a religious conversion from Khmer Theravada to Protestantism. The consequences of this transformation will lead to profound changes in Khmer cultural identity. In this study, the author will clarify the concept of religious conversion, the role of Theravada Buddhism in Khmer cultural identity, the process of religious conversion in the Khmer community in the Southwest, and cultural transformation in the religious transformation in the Khmer community.

Keywords: *Cultural transformation, religious conversion, Khmer, Southwestern, Vietnam*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Southwest is a land strategically located in terms of economy, politics, society, and national security and defense, at the same time, it is a land with a unique cultural history and a cultural space with characteristics of many ethnic groups, mainly Vietnamese – Chinese – Cham – Khmer. For the Khmer community, Theravada Buddhism has become the dominant religion that influences the entire spiritual life as customs, ethics, and cohesiveness of the whole community create the unique culture of the Khmer community. The core values of Khmer Theravada Buddhism have accompanied the Khmer community, blending in Khmer culture to create a unique Khmer cultural identity. Khmer Theravada Buddhism is the identity, the nucleus, and the pillar of Khmer cultural identity. The temple is the convergence point that creates a cohesive relationship between individuals – families – and Khmer communities.

2. METHODS AND DATA

Subjects and research objectives: Cultural Transformation in Religious Transformation of Khmer Communities 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 combining history - logic.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The concept of religious conversion

World history has witnessed many religious conversions such as conversions from polytheism to Christianity in ancient Rome, conversions from Hinduism to Islam in medieval India and Indonesia, and conversions from Christianity, and Buddhism to Protestantism in European countries, etc Asia is modern, modern and transitioning from traditional, mainstream religions to new forms of religion in most countries of the world today.

There are now many definitions of religious conversion, Lewis. R. Rambo defined it from the perspective of philosophy and religion as follows: "Religious conversion is the process of moving from one religious system to another in a social community, in response to great crises and upheavals in social life" (Lewis, R. R. (2009), P.57).

The Chinese religionist Ma Dai Cat, in his book Religious Studies, said: "A religious conversion is a form of movement of spiritual progression, reflecting the transformations of the totality of social



life, which in a way is a shift of belief, meeting the spiritual needs of contemporary society" (Ma. D. C. (2008), P. 175)

Huynh Ngoc Thu (2014) defines: "Religious conversion is the transformation of belief in spiritual entities, supernatural forces, also the conversion of religious rituals and religious behavior of individuals or ethnic communities". (Thu, H. N. (2014), P.126)

Truong Van Chung (2019) defines: "Religious conversion reflects the changing relationship of believers in religious life, it refers to the conversion from one religion to another by individuals or religious communities" (Chung, T.V. (2019), P.27)

Hoang Thi Lan (2021): "Religious conversion is a common phenomenon that took place in human history. In short, on a global scale, religious conversion is the process of abandoning the old religion for a new one, or not abandoning the old one but still following the new one" (Lan, H. T. (2021), P. 57)

Thus, researchers agree that religious conversion is a process and the cause of religious conversion is the shift or change of the form of the belief system or religion carried out by a social community. Religious conversion aims to meet and satisfy the spiritual needs of each individual in the community.

3.2 The role of Theravada Buddhism in Khmer cultural identity

The relationship between religion and culture is multidimensional and organically interrelated. However, awareness of this relationship in the history of mankind is a process. "For a long time, people emphasized the contrast between them, treating culture as a product of human activity in this mortal world as opposed to religion, which often directs people towards the transcendental values that belong to the supermortal afterlife. Later, with fuller conceptions of religion and culture, people realized the multidimensional relationship between them" (Hung, D. Q. (2017), P.3). Researcher Trac Tan Binh examines and defines religion from a cultural perspective by considering which layer of culture religion lies in. "In general, the fabric of culture can be divided into three levels, i.e. the material plane, the structural plane, and the spiritual plane. The technical and natural sciences of mankind can be attributed to the material plane of culture, it refers to the relationship of man with natural circumstances. The economic, political, and social institutions of human populations and also its theoretical form can be attributed to the structural aspect of culture, which refers to the relationship of people to their social circumstances. Beliefs, religions, moral norms, aesthetic interests, modes of thinking can be attributed to the spiritual and psychological plane of culture, which dictates the nature and character of culture" (Binh, T.T. (2007). P.63). With the above definition, Trac Tan Binh considered religion as an element of culture, if culture is a whole, religion is an element of cultural formation.

Paul Tillich went from analyzing the relationship between Christianity and Western culture, Islam with Arab culture, and Hinduism with Indian culture to generalizing the relationship between culture and religion as follows: "In our creations, a culture of interaction manifests something inevitable for us, A

transcendent value, not as something alien, but as a spiritual foundation peculiar to it. Religion is the essence (Substanz) of culture and culture is the nuance (form) of religion. That's the proper way of saying it from an interactive point of view" (Paul, T. (1967), P.84). Thus, according to Paul Tillich, religion is not only a constituent element of culture, but religion also plays an important role in building and preserving cultural values. The connection between culture and religion and only with religion can culture ensure unity.

According to Christopher Dawson, religion is the foundation of a culture and influences every aspect of life including art, philosophy, ethics, and customs, thereby creating the identity of each culture. Religion also contributes to preserving and protecting the core values of community culture in the face of changes in social life. "Where is the relationship between culture and religion? The similarity of life forms will determine the similarity of life conceptions as well as the similarity of behavioral norms and value norms. The result is a culture of the spiritual community whose coherent unity is due to a common (religious) faith and certain physical forms of thought" (Christopher, D. (1951), P.67). The relationship between culture and religion can be referred to as Christianity with Western culture, Islam with Arab culture, Hinduism with Indian culture, and Judaism with Jewish culture. Thus, any religion is formed based on a certain socio-historical condition, but the development process of that religion molds its cultural value systems that are deeply religious in that social life.

The views, although standing on different aspects, are unified in the approach to culture – religion when considering religion as the nucleus, the essence, the pillar, the soul of culture and only associated with religion and culture can ensure unity, and become a unified whole. In the context of international integration and globalization today, culture has become an important factor contributing to the preservation and promotion of the cultural identity of ethnic groups in particular and national culture in general.

For the Khmer community, each individual from birth to death is attached to Theravada Buddhism, in the temple. Theravada Buddhism became a red thread throughout influencing the spiritual and cultural life of the Khmer community. "Because Theravada Buddhism has characteristics consistent with the ethics, psychology, lifestyle, and thinking of the Khmer people, the Khmer community considers the philosophy of the Buddha as its philosophy of life" (Trinh, N. N., & Hòa, P. N. (2021), P.220). Therefore, the Khmer community in the Southwest always believes in the law of cause and effect, doing good deeds to accumulate virtue for the next life. Stemming from that spirit, Khmer people live compassionately and tolerantly and consider giving alms, offerings, doing blessings, and helping those in need care as good deeds for cultivators to accumulate virtue. Khmer people believe that bringing the goods offered to the temple and giving a part to the monk will do tenfold, so when they have money, they often deduct most of it to make offerings to the temple and consider it a duty, duty, and joy of Buddhists and completely voluntary. Khmer people are not afraid of poverty but only fear that after death they

will not be cremated to bring their ashes to the temple next to the Buddha, so they do not worry about themselves in the present but only contribute money to build massive pagodas and perform blessings and ceremonies to ensure the next life to Nirvana.

The temple is the bridge between Khmer Theravada Buddhism and the Khmer community in the Southwest. *"Based on the commonality gained from organizing the lives of its members, the temple and the activities of monks and devotees have created a sense of community and sympathy. All these factors create the strong community cohesion of the Khmer ethnic group."* The temple is a place to convey the belief of each individual *"live to send body, die to send bones"* (Hung, T.T, (2019), P.180). The temple is also a literacy school for Khmer children. Along with the general education system, the temple is also the second education system to teach literacy and people. The temple is also the site of traditional religious ceremonies and folk festivals such as Buddha's Birthday (April Full Moon); Y-offering ceremony (coffee offering to monks), Chol Chnam Thmay (Khmer Lunar New Year), Dolta (Grandparents worship ceremony). Most of these ceremonies are abboted by monks and take place in the sacred space of the temple.

The temple is also a place to organize meetings of Khmer compatriots including religious and life affairs. Khmer compatriots are both followers of Khmer Theravada Buddhism and members of Phum Soc. In addition to the management of the self-management apparatus, they are also under the management of the temple management board which not only performs purely religious-related tasks but also undertakes other cultural, educational, and social issues. *"It can be said that the traditional social organization of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam is intertwined between traditional self-governing social institutions and religion. The relationship between these two factors has maintained stability and given Khmer Soc a distinct appearance from Vietnamese villages. In that combined mechanism, Khmer people feel comfortable, and peaceful and are the owners of phum, soc"* (Cánh, N. K, (2014), P.59). Thus, the traditional social institutions of Phum Soc together with Khmer Theravada Buddhism have built cohesion in the Khmer community in the Southwest. Community cohesion has become the glue, creating the community strength of Khmer people against natural disasters, and enemies and preserving traditional cultural values.

Thus, the philosophy of Khmer Theravada Buddhism is the nuclear basis of all cultural and spiritual activities in particular and governs and regulates the cultural institutions of the Khmer community in the Southwest in general. The process of practicing Khmer beliefs and festivals along with Buddhist teachings and teachings has been accompanied by the community psychology and come to life flexibly and harmoniously, thereby creating unique cultural and religious values and creating orderly, lifestyle and traditions of the Khmer community. Therefore, with the cultural values of Theravada Buddhism and its influence, the preservation and promotion of Khmer cultural heritage will bring great significance to the sustainable development of the Khmer community in the Southwest.

3.3 The religious conversion of a section of Khmer

compatriots in Southwest, Vietnam

The religious conversion of Khmer compatriots from Theravada Buddhism to Protestantism is a process that has been going on for a long time since the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1911, Protestantism was initially formed in Vietnam by the Evangelical Union of America (CMA), the forerunner of today's Vietnamese Evangelical Church. In the early twentieth century, Protestantism was present in the Southwest region, evangelization was promoted in Can Tho, Rach Gia – Kien Giang, Chau Doc – An Giang and spread to provinces in the Mekong Delta such as Soc Trang, Bac Lieu, Long Xuyen and Ca Mau.

In 1974, Soc Trang Evangelical Church opened a branch church in Ward 2 of Soc Trang Town for Khmers, chaired by Pastor Seang Ang. In 1978, the church closed, and Pastor Seang Ang returned to Cambodia. From 1970 to 1975, Soc Trang Church opened 2 branches, Chau Khanh Chapter and Dai Ngai Chapter in Long Phu district, Soc Trang. From 1988 until now, with reforms in religious policies to ensure freedom of belief and religion, Khmer Protestants have been increasing. *"By 2010, more than 2,000 Khmers in 6 out of 13 provinces and cities had renounced Theravada Buddhism to embrace Protestantism, and a part of Khmers abandoned Theravada Buddhism to embrace Tonkin Buddhism and Cao Dai"* (Lan, H. T. (2021), P. 57). Thus, although the number of Khmer people in the Southwest who converted from Khmer Theravada to Protestantism is not a high proportion of the total population of the whole Khmer community, it proves that Theravada Buddhism is no longer the only option for Khmer compatriots in the Southwest region.

3.4 Consequences of cultural transformation in religious conversion in Southwest, Vietnam

For a portion of Khmer compatriots, converting from Theravada Buddhism to Protestantism means a complete dissolution or decline in the beliefs and ritual practices of traditional beliefs and religions. *"The abandonment of traditional cultural activities and beliefs, including cultural values that contribute to the cultural identity of people in a part of the Catholic and Protestant ethnic minorities, causes cultural disruption, fades identity, and leads to the risk of losing ethnic cultural identity"* (Lan, H. T. (2021), P. 249). From here, it disrupts cultural activities, customs, and practices. Because religion is the cultural nucleus associated with the spiritual life of the whole Khmer community, at that time, the elements that create ethnic cultural identity in traditional beliefs and religions were lost such as the concept of the world, people, worship rituals, ways of practicing rituals, traditional musical instruments for religious activities, etc religion.

Theravada Buddhism not only influenced cultural activities but also made a clear mark on the traditional self-government apparatus, creating a very unique social character of the Khmer countryside in Southwest, Vietnam. This traditional social institution is built according to a fairly sustainable phum and Soc organization. The management of Khmer society follows a special operating mechanism, including community power and the role of Theravada Buddhism. In addition to the management of the self-governing apparatus, they are also under the management of the



temple self-management system that takes care of religious affairs. In each temple along with the monks who specialize in religious affairs, there is also the organization of believers, the temple management board. The temple management board is religious, culturally qualified, able to communicate, knows how to organize rituals, and understands Khmer customs and practices to help manage Phum and soc. Meanwhile, the Phum and Soc management Board elected by Khmer relatives, usually elders and reputable people, performs the task of caring for and helping families in Phum, soc when facing difficulties, maintaining order, managing public assets, and coordinating with the temple management board to organize religious activities.

It can be said that the traditional social organization of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam has a mixture of self-governing social institutions with religion. Traditional Khmer society is based on the ethnic practices and institutions of Theravada Buddhism. In this traditional society, Theravada Buddhism is of particular importance that governs all aspects of social life. It is the combination of religion and traditional social organization that has created cohesion and stability in the Khmer community. When a part of Khmer converts to another religion, this strong relationship gradually becomes loose and gradually breaks down, affecting community cohesion. *"Religious activities of ethnic groups are also the whole cultural and social activity, a catalyst to create community cohesion, so when faith is disintegrated, it also divides communities that have been strongly linked through thousands of years of history"* (Mai, N. N. (2021), P.262)

In the process of performing traditional religious rituals, Khmer people will strengthen interpersonal relationships, family ties, clan relations, and community relations in Phum and Soc, contributing to community cohesion. This is the basis for building unity in the ethnic community, which today is considered an important resource in the cause of national construction and defense. However, when a part of the Khmer people abandon traditional religions and beliefs, it leads to division, difference, and opposition between groups with different religions. *"Family relationships, clans, and ethnicities change dramatically. Regulations on organizing religious ceremonies, traditional customs, and practices are no longer of much value to followers"* (Lan, H. T. (2021), P. 225). The process of religious conversion in the Khmer community in the Southwest not only created a division between a new religious community and a large number of traditional religious communities but also broke community relations, causing conflicts in the family, clans and communities. The aforementioned intertwined contradictions should not only cause cultural conflicts but also create social instability. On the general level, culture, beliefs, religions, and social institutions are the factors that build and strengthen the cohesion of a community. When one of these elements is lost or changed, it leads to broken community cohesion.

4. CONCLUSION

Conversion of religion and belief is an objective phenomenon when the economic, social scientific, and technological context develops, and people's spiritual lives move and change. Religious

conversion from Theravada to Protestantism is the intentional choice of each community member. They are not interested in the profound philosophies of liberation and salvation of this religion for them after death, they are only interested in the benefits achieved in the present, which is a better material life. The choice to convert religion in the Khmer community can be seen as a rational choice that goes from the choice of the individual to the family and then affects the whole community with clear, intentional considerations to become followers of Protestantism.

Religious conversion has affected the lives of Khmer compatriots in the Southwest positively and negatively. On the general level, the life of the people has remained stable, there has not been a major change in the aspect of religious activities because only a small part of Khmer people have converted to religion. In the long run, however, the religious conversion will profoundly transform many aspects of the Khmer community. When we consider religion as the nucleus of culture, religious conversion will cause significant impacts on cultural traditions from lifestyle, morality, customs, customs, and cohesion of the whole community. Religious conversion will create a division in the Khmer community between the vast majority of Khmer people bearing the imprint of traditional culture on the one hand and a part of Khmer compatriots influenced and dominated by the newly converted religious culture.

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