

PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE IN FOLK BELIEFS OF SOUTHERN KHMER PEOPLE IN TRA VINH PROVINCE

FILOSOFIA DE VIDA NAS CRENÇAS POPULARES DO POVO KHMER DO SUL NA PROVÍNCIA DE TRA VINH

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Resumo: A etnia Khmer é um dos 54 grupos étnicos do Vietnã, eles vivem principalmente no Delta do Mekong, mais concentrados nas províncias de Tra Vinh e Sóc Trang. O Khmer do Sul na província de Tra Vinh tem uma vida de crença popular que é vibrante e diversa. A diversidade e a riqueza na vida de crença popular criaram uma filosofia de vida que é muito diferente de outros grupos étnicos na província de Tra Vinh. O objetivo deste estudo é descobrir as características das crenças populares, o conteúdo básico da filosofia de vida nas crenças populares e as influências da filosofia de vida na vida do Khmer do Sul na província de Tra Vinh. Usando métodos de pesquisa qualitativos e quantitativos e entrevistas semiestruturadas com 15 pessoas de 20 a 70 anos, este estudo mostra que a diversidade na filosofia de vida do Khmer do Sul se origina de fatores étnicos, condições naturais, condições socioeconômicas e os impactos das mudanças na sociedade atual. Com os resultados obtidos, este estudo contribui para esclarecer os valores da filosofia de vida nas crenças populares do povo Khmer, tendo assim impactos na promoção de bons valores, fomentando os aspectos positivos da filosofia de vida nas crenças populares do povo Khmer do Sul na província de Tra Vinh.

Palavras-chave: Filosofia de vida. Crenças populares. Povo Khmer do Sul. Província de Tra Vinh.

Abstract: The Khmer ethnic is one of 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam, they live mainly in the Mekong Delta, most concentrated in Tra Vinh and Sóc Trang provinces. The Southern Khmer in Tra Vinh province has a life of folk belief that is vibrant and diverse. The diversity and richness in folk belief life have created a philosophy of life that is very different from other ethnic groups in Tra Vinh province. The purpose of this study is to find out the characteristics of folk beliefs, the basic content of the philosophy of life in folk beliefs and the influences of the philosophy of life on the life of the Southern Khmer in Tra Vinh province. Using qualitative and quantitative research methods, and semi-structured interviews with 15 people from 20 to 70 years old, this study shows that the diversity in the philosophy of life of the Southern Khmer originates from ethnic factors, natural conditions, socio-economic conditions and the impacts of changes in current society. With the obtained results, this study contributes to clarifying the values of the philosophy of life in the folk beliefs of the Khmer people, thereby having impacts to promote good values, fostering the positive aspects of the philosophy of life in the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province.

Keywords: Philosophy of life. Folk beliefs. Southern

1. Introduction

Tra Vinh is a land where many ethnic groups live together, in which the Kinh, Khmer, Chinese and Cham ethnic groups make up the majority. The Khmer people in Tra Vinh account for nearly 31% of the population, are the second most populous ethnic group and live and are distributed in most localities in the province (Tra Vinh Provincial Ethnic Committee, 2020). As an ethnic group with a long history of development, closely associated with wet rice agricultural production, the Khmer people in Tra Vinh have formed a culture, beliefs, and religions with their characteristics, contributing to the diversity and richness of the Vietnamese ethnic community (Tra Vinh Provincial Ethnic Committee, 2021).

In terms of religion, in addition to Theravada Buddhism as the main religion, a part of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province have come to other religions such as Catholicism, Protestantism, etc. (Tra Vinh Provincial Ethnic Committee, 2021). In addition, the Khmer people in Tra Vinh also have a very rich folk religious life (Khanh, 2021). Types of folk beliefs of the Khmer people include: ancestor worship and the Sen Dolta, Arak; Neak-Ta ceremonies; Moon worship and the Ok-Om-Bok ceremony, fertility beliefs, etc. have contributed to the diversity in the philosophy of life of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province and has an impact on their current life.

Beliefs and religions are the spiritual needs of the Khmer people, playing a role and having a profound influence on many areas of life such as politics, economics, culture, society, etc. (Hung, et al., 2021). The diversity of life philosophies in the types of beliefs and religions of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province not only brings positive aspects but also has certain limitations. The influence of life philosophies in folk beliefs on the life of the Khmer people is not constant but has different changes and developments in each certain historical period.

To clarify the characteristics, basic contents and influences of the philosophy of life in the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province, this study focuses on clarifying and answering the following basic questions:

(i) What are the characteristics of the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province? Why does it have those characteristics?

(ii) What are the basic contents of the philosophy of life in the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province?

(iii) How is the influence of the philosophy of life on the lives of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province? What are the causes of those influences?

2. Literature Review

According to the Dictionary of Religion, belief is understood as: “Belief is the belief and admiration, aspiration for a supernatural, mystical force, that supernatural force can take the form of a symbol such as “Heaven”, “Buddha”, “God”, “Saint”, “God” or some illusory, mysterious, invisible power that affects people’s spiritual life, is believed by people to be real and worshiped” (Mai Thanh Hai, 2002). According to K. Marx, social life is essentially a practical activity; mysterious things lead to the theory of mysticism. Therefore, K. Marx believes that mystical things can be reasonably explained in a correct understanding of people’s practical life. This shows that, in essence, belief is not a product of the divine, supernatural, or mystical, but it is a product of society.

Belief is a social phenomenon, inseparable from society, carrying the nature of society. At the same time, belief is also a phenomenon of spiritual life, subject to the regulations of material life (K. Marx & F. Engels, 1991, p.437). In the process of survival and development, humans need to transform nature to create material wealth to meet their needs. However, the level and ability of humans to transform nature are still limited, so they have deified nature, giving it supernatural and mysterious powers. This is the reason, the basis for the formation of various types of beliefs.

When society is divided into classes and social conflicts become increasingly fierce. A part of the working people have a life in a deadlock, helpless before the domination of the ruling class. In addition, in life, random, spontaneous factors, disasters, and unexpected misfortunes occur beyond people’s control and ability to solve, making them worried, insecure, and afraid. This is also the reason why people seek protection and reliance on supernatural and mystical forces. K. Marx and F. Engels affirmed: “In the early period of history, it was the natural forces that were first reflected in this way, and in the process of further development, in different nations, these supernatural forces were personified in a very diverse and very mixed way, etc. But soon, besides the natural forces, there were also social forces at work - these forces opposed humans, in a way that was also strange and at first incomprehensible to them, and also dominated them with the same apparent necessity as the natural forces themselves” (K. Marx & P. Engels, 1991, pp. 437-438).

The ethnic groups in Vietnam, each ethnic group has their own forms of belief and express their distinctive features in the structure of their philosophy of life. Primitive beliefs (totem worship, totemism, fertility beliefs, etc.), and folk beliefs are typical forms of belief that are still preserved in many ethnic minorities. For the Khmer people, currently, there are still some beliefs in folklore such as ancestor worship, Arak, Neak-Ta, Moon worship, fertility beliefs, etc. Thus, the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province (ancient traditional beliefs, traditional beliefs) are a way of expressing the belief of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province in supernatural objects that they consider sacred, mysterious and passed down from generation to generation with the desire to be blessed, protected, and sheltered for a peaceful and good life. Therefore, the philosophy of life in the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province also contains mystical content but has practical values for the current life of people.

3. Research method

This study is approached from the perspective of religious philosophy and implemented based on the theoretical viewpoint of dialectical materialism on the dialectical relationship between social existence and social consciousness, in which the decisive role of social existence on social consciousness and the impact of social consciousness on social existence is shown. In addition, the study is also based on the viewpoints and guidelines of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the laws of Vietnam's State on beliefs and religions. The arguments provided by this method and documents will help the researcher better understand the orientations in policies as well as the values and fundamental foundations of the dialectical relationship between social existence and social consciousness.

The study uses a combination of methods: analysis and synthesis, deduction and induction, historical and logical methods, structural systems methods, sociological investigation, etc., comparison, history to research and present. These are methods commonly used in the fields of social sciences and humanities. These methods will help researchers to have an overall overview of the research issues; at the same time, they will help to discover the unique points of the research process by field.

Survey method, the investigation by questionnaire: This study surveyed and interviewed 105 people (from 20 to 70 years old), with different education, socio-economic status, and occupations). The survey and investigation by questionnaire focused on the

following contents: (i) Characteristics of folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province; (ii) Basic contents of the philosophy of life in the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province; (iii) Influence of philosophy of life on the life of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province and the causes of those influences. The sample was selected for semi-structured interviews using the convenience method, the sample size was 15 people including 07 men (aged from 25 to 70) and 08 women (aged from 20 to 65) coded from ND1 to ND15. The distribution of age and gender, social status, and different occupations will allow for a more accurate assessment of the views on the content and structure of the philosophy of life in the philosophy of life in the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province. However, due to the limited time and number of people interviewed (15 people), so the comments and evaluation will still have some limitations and will continue to be researched in the next phase.

4. Results

Characteristics of the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province

The folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province are polytheistic:

In Tra Vinh province, there are Kinh, Chinese, and Khmer ethnic groups living together in harmony. In particular, the Khmer people have unique cultural and personality characteristics. In particular, polytheistic beliefs are an important characteristic. They have a deep and strong belief in the spiritual world. They often believe in and respect many gods. The folk beliefs of the Khmer people coexist and are influenced by the long-standing wet rice agricultural culture.

Since ancient times, the Khmer people have known how to create for themselves gods, Buddhas, and sacred objects to pray for good crops, and favorable weather, and help them when they encounter difficulties in life. According to ND1: “Whatever brings good crops, peaceful life, happy family, we all believe in”. According to ND3: “The rice god will help our people have good crops, lots of rice, so we need to worship the rice god”. According to Pham Tiet Khanh (2021): Because of that belief, the Khmer people in the South will worship many gods, especially natural gods.

The following are some characteristics of polytheistic beliefs of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province: they worship many gods such as the Sun god, the Moon god, the lightning god - the rain god, Arak, Neak Ta, ancestors (considered as a god), the field god, the animal

god, the rice god, the “chư thiên” (Tevoda), the Rياهو god, the god of wealth, etc. At the same time, they often perform many important festivals and rituals in their religious activities to show their respect for the gods. These festivals and rituals are often related to life events such as weddings, birthday celebrations, seasonal festivals, ancestor worship ceremonies and life cycle rituals that take place in temples and pagodas. These festivals are held with the participation of a large community to pray for luck, peace, and a “thuận buồm xuôi gió” life (everything in life is favorable). According to ND2: “The Moon worship will make the Moon God bless the people, creating a favorable climate for the harvest”. According to ND11: “The Rice God worship festival is held when the harvest is bountiful, so we have to hold a ceremony to worship the Rice God”.

The polytheistic beliefs of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province reflect the richness and diversity of their spiritual life. With many folk beliefs, each belief is associated with a supernatural force, which has a great influence on people’s lives, governing their lives (both material and spiritual). This is an important part of the cultural identity of the Khmer community in the South of Tra Vinh province.

The Khmer people’s folk beliefs have cultural exchanges and acculturation with the Kinh, Chinese and Cham people:

The Khmer people in the South of Tra Vinh province have lived next to the Kinh people for a long time. Therefore, there has been a deep cultural, religious and religious interaction and integration between the Khmer and Kinh people for many centuries. There are elements of the Kinh people’s folk beliefs that have been incorporated into the Khmer people’s beliefs. Typically, the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province often participate in traditional festivals of the Kinh people such as Luna New Year and seasonal festivals. Religious rituals and folk beliefs, such as ancestor worship and life cycle worship rituals, also have similarities. According to ND5: “My ethnic do not have Luna New Year, but we still participate in this Luna New Year because this is a common holiday for the whole community”. According to ND11: “The Luna New Year of the Kinh people is a very happy festival, so we Khmer people all participate to share the joy with the Kinh people”.

During the intermingling process, due to long-standing cultural exchanges and interactions with the Chinese, the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province have been somewhat influenced by the folk beliefs of the Chinese. Worshiping the God of Wealth is a product of cultural exchange between the Khmer people and the Chinese people during the process of exchange and trade. Currently, some Khmer families in Tra Vinh province who make a living

by business and trade all worship the God of Wealth in their homes. According to ND9: “The God of Wealth will bless us with a successful business, so we must have an altar for the God of Wealth in our house so that we can worship every morning”. The altar for the God of Wealth is found in almost all families that do business. Even families that do not do business still have an altar for the God of Wealth with the concept that “the God of Wealth will bring wealth to the family”, said ND8.

In addition, the Mother Goddess worship of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province worships Lady Earth, Lady Water, Lady Rice, Lady Den, Lady Om, etc. and accepts and integrates the image of Lady Thien Hau (Chinese). During the Mid-Autumn Festival (15th day of the 8th lunar month), the Khmer people of Tra Vinh also participate in decorating and using lanterns like the Chinese. They also pay attention to family rituals and ancestor worship, which is similar to the culture and folk beliefs of the Chinese.

Integration with Cham folk beliefs: Elements of Cham folk beliefs are also incorporated into the Khmer beliefs of Tra Vinh province, expressed through the worship of Ba Chua Xu and Ba Co Hi. These two goddesses are also believed and worshiped by the Khmer. In addition, some festivals and rituals have similarities such as the Kate festival and ancestor worship rituals.

Ong Ta is a prominent evidence of the exchange and integration of beliefs between the Khmer, Kinh and Chinese people. For the Kinh and Chinese, the worship of the land god has existed for a long time in their consciousness. When coming into contact with the Khmer, they accepted the worship of Neak Ta, transforming it into the land god Ong Ta (Dang The Dai, 2017, pp. 94 - 114). The Khmer Neak Ta belief has an integration with the Chinese belief in worshipping gods and Quan Cong. In some Khmer Neak Ta temples in Tra Vinh province, in addition to worshipping the stones, there is also a red cloth with the word God written on it behind or on the wall behind the stones covered with red paint and the word God is written on it. In addition, these temples also combine the worship of Quan Cong. Currently, in Neak Ta temple in Ngai Trung hamlet, Tap Ngai commune, Tieu Can district; Neak Ta temple in Kinh hamlet, Hung Chinese commune, Tieu Can district; in Neak Ta temple in ward 8, Tra Vinh city and Neak Ta temple in An Quang Huu commune, Tra Cu district, this form of worship still has this fusion (Lam Quang Vinh, 2008, p. 66).

The Khmer people's folk beliefs are influenced by Theravada Buddhism:

In places where Buddhism is introduced, it has a profound influence on people's lives thanks to its integration with indigenous folk beliefs. For the Khmer people in Tra Vinh

province, Theravada Buddhism has dominated most of their cultural and spiritual life. This is clearly shown in Khmer festivals and rituals such as: Neak Ta, Dolta, Ok Om Bok, Chol Chnam Thmay, etc.

As analyzed above, the Neak Ta belief is a traditional folk belief of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province. The offerings in this festival are mainly rice, wine, meat, and pig's head. The worship program of this festival is deeply folk. Since Theravada Buddhism was introduced to the Khmer community, the Neak Ta worship ritual has been dominated and influenced by Buddhism on this type of folk belief. Monks play an important role in Neak Ta worship ceremonies. They spend most of their time performing rituals such as chanting, preaching, praying for peace and praying for rain. After performing the above rituals, the monks chant while leading the procession carrying the Neak Ta palanquin - the largest stone worshiped in the temple, around the village, cheering and shouting. According to ND6: "People in the village compete to touch the stone being carried with the wish that Neak Ta will grant them peace, happiness and luck". The Neak Ta worship ceremony has shown the profound influence of Theravada Buddhism on this belief. At the same time, the Neak Ta belief also incorporates Theravada Buddhist rituals to contribute to the development and transmission of unique spiritual and cultural features in the community.

Chol Chnam Thmay is the traditional New Year festival of the Khmer people. It is believed that the nature of this festival is an agricultural festival. Because it takes place during the transition between the dry season and the rainy season, with the Khmer people's wish for the dry season to end quickly so that rain can come down to provide water for the new crop production activities. However, there are also legends explaining the origin of the Chol Chnam Thmay festival associated with Buddhism. The rituals during the 3 days of the festival such as the Dai Lich procession, the rice offering ceremony, the sand mountain building ceremony, and the Buddha bathing ceremony are all in harmony with Buddhism. The important activities in the first days of the new year of this festival take place at the pagodas in the villages and communes. In the rituals, there is the participation and presiding of monks. On the days of the festival, people go to the pagodas to worship, which are crowded, while in the villages and communes, there are few people. Most people attend the pagodas to listen to monks chanting and preaching. In addition, people can also participate in cultural activities and folk games held right in the pagoda yard. Some pagodas in Tra Vinh organize Ngo boat races during the Chol Chnam Thmay festival.

Sen Dolta festival is one of the traditional festivals of the Khmer people. This festival originated from folk beliefs. This festival has similarities with the Vu Lan festival to express respect and gratitude for the birth and upbringing of grandparents and ancestors of the deceased. During the development process, this folk belief merged with Khmer Theravada Buddhism. Besides being held at home, the Sen Dolta Festival is also held at pagodas. In addition, there is a legend explaining the origin of the festival associated with Buddhism. This fusion makes some people believe that this festival is a product of Khmer Theravada Buddhism.

4.1. Basic contents in the philosophy of life in the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province

Philosophy about human beings in the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province

In the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province, a person is a combination of two elements: body and soul. Both body and soul are fused when a person is alive. The Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province believe that the soul leaves the body when a person dies. According to ND13: “The soul will leave the body when a person dies, the soul will be reincarnated in another life”, this opinion is agreed by ND11 and ND15. The concept of 3 “hồn” (psyche) and 7 “vía” (astral) for men and 9 “vía” (astral) for women, so when a person dies, the soul leaves the body and the custom of calling the soul is the clearest proof of this concept. The Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province believe that right after death, the soul has just left the body and is still lingering somewhere, therefore, a soul-calling ritual must be used to call the soul back, called the “gọi hồn” (soul recovery) ceremony.

The Khmer believe that the present life is just the “sống gửi”, temporary, transient, not eternal. Only the other world, the world of ancestors, of those who have died and returned to heaven and earth, is the real, eternal world. What remains after a person dies is not the body but the soul. The Khmer concept, as well as the Kinh and Chinese concept, believe that: “Although people must die, death is not the end of life, but the beginning of another life. The dead bring their body and blood back to the earth but bring their soul into the new world to continue the journey” (Luu Dong, p. 84). Therefore, it is the responsibility and duty of descendants to let the souls of their ancestors in heaven rest in peace, otherwise, the souls of the dead will bring sin and negatively affect the lives of the living. This partly shows the fear of descendants towards the souls of the dead. “When the soul is worshiped

regularly, it will bless the living. On the contrary, if it does not receive the sincere attention of the living, it will turn into a wandering soul, a ghost with no place to rely on, causing disasters for people.

Therefore, the worship of the dead by the Khmer people in the South of Tra Vinh province has a special significance and is the main worship ritual in the family. In the ancestor worship of the Khmer people in the South of Tra Vinh province, the living person is very specifically defined in terms of duties, obligations and responsibilities. Parents are the ones who give birth and have the duty to raise and educate their children to become good people and build a careers for their children. Children have the responsibility and obligation to support their parents when they are alive and worship them when they are dead and must be filial to their parents. When parents pass away, they must fully perform the funeral and death anniversary rituals. “The most prominent traditional cultural feature, showing filial piety towards one’s family and ancestors, is ancestor worship” (Long, et al., 2020).

The philosophy of people life in the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province:

The folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province clearly show that in life, in addition to the need for material values, people also require spiritual values, that need is the driving force for people to reach for truth, goodness, and beauty. From the beginning, when people’s awareness of the world and all things was limited, people could not explain things and phenomena in nature, and sóciety and think from a scientific perspective, then the spiritual worldview would replace it, helping people to be strong and confident in a foreign land (new land).

When the Khmer people came to the Mekong Delta to reclaim land and establish villages (Khmer people call them phum, sóc), in addition to survival knowledge, they brought with them various forms of folk beliefs to the new land. This land has harsh, wild, mysterious natural conditions, wild animals, etc., so this is the “land” for various forms of folk beliefs to develop. The Mekong Delta has more than 1,230 festivals, of which folk and traditional festivals account for nearly 70%, religious festivals account for more than 21%, historical and revolutionary festivals account for more than 8%, and the rest are other festivals (Hong, 2010, p. 48).

Tra Vinh province has all of these festivals and is considered a typical place to organize folk festivals of the Khmer people in the South. It can be seen that when settling in the Mekong Delta in general and Tra Vinh province in particular, the Kinh, Chinese and Khmer people, although having different cultures, meet at the “smile of Buddha” (greatly

influenced by Southern Buddhism). Although the Khmer people's temple chanting lacks the bells and wooden fish of Vietnamese temples, it reminds both of them to do good deeds and strive for good things in life. According to ND7: "In any festival, we go to the temple to worship". According to Pham Tiet Khanh (2021), the temple is the most sacred place not only for the Khmer people but also for the community living in Tra Vinh province.

Southern Buddhism has long left a strong mark on the spirituality of the community. The Khmer people in Tra Vinh province have a unique and rich traditional culture. Buddhism is an almost unique religion and has influenced many aspects of the Khmer people's lives. Each Khmer "sóc" (village) has at least one pagoda, the pagoda is the social face, and the religious and cultural center of the Khmer community is the "sóc". The Khmer people take the pagoda as a place for religious activities because the nature of Buddhist culture is a peaceful and pure life without jealousy or competition. According to Tien Van Trieu, Lam Quang Vinh (2015, p. 21): "The Khmer believe that "when young, one must cultivate knowledge, when grown up, one must know how to preserve wealth, when old, one must know how to cultivate oneself when about to leave this world, one must know how to recite Buddha's name". Therefore, for the Khmer, the pagoda is not only a center for religious activities but is also considered a "cultural - social center", a "common home" of the Khmer people where the community is closely connected. The pagoda was built by families in the phum, sóc with contributions of labor and money, etc.

The material and spiritual life of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province is closely linked to the pagoda. The pagoda is also the place where important festivals and beliefs take place in the daily life of the "phum", "sóc" as well as throughout human life, with the concept of "death as well as birth" (life as well as death). Each folk belief festival represents the philosophy of human life; there are different meanings, many unique rituals take place, and the pagoda is always the center of organizing festival rituals, etc. When a person dies, the Khmer people ask to be cremated in the pagoda, and the ashes are sent to the pagoda for worship, with the philosophy that the soul of the deceased listens to Buddhist scriptures day and night, eats vegetarian food, and is close to the halo of light to be liberated soon, to the Western paradise. According to the research of Pham Thi Huong Hanh (2013, p. 99): "The pagoda is a typical symbol of Khmer culture, a place to train human morality and personality, and also a place to educate Khmer youth. Khmer people consider the pagoda a sacred, solemn place, where the quintessence of the nation is concentrated".

Philosophy of compassion and chivalry in the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province:

Compassion, love for people, helping others overcome difficulties, integrating into a new land, taking care of others when they are “in trouble, unlucky in a foreign land”, “protecting”, “mutual love, mutual affection”, etc. of the Khmer people in the South in Tra Vinh province are shown through the lens of those who “reclaimed land, opened up the land”, which is also the Buddha’s teaching to believers. According to ND9: “In times of difficulty and adversity, it is compassion, chivalry, and sharing that helps people overcome difficult circumstances”. Therefore, for those who are far from home, love for people is “loving others as you love yourself”; “when one horse is in pain, all other horse stops eating grass”, etc., which have long become the way of thinking, behavior, and philosophy of life of people here.

Respecting love and morality means putting the common good above the individual and, if necessary, being ready to sacrifice the individual for the common good. It can be seen that this is a land of people from all over the world, from all over the world, people who do not know each other, but also need to help each other, so the basis of their relationship here is not love but gratitude. To survive, people need to rely on and help each other: “Bán anh em xa, mua láng giềng gần”, “Tối lửa, tắt đèn có nhau”. When “sa cơ lỡ vận” (in trouble), people are willing to help each other, because “saving one person is as good as building seven pagodas”. Buddha also taught that “compassionate” Buddhists “save one person more than building seven stupas”.

For the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province, monks have a very important position and influence. Monks are considered to represent Buddha to teach and educate sentient beings, so monks are always respected and trusted teachers. In the Robam Dance Theater, “the folklore and Localization” of the play has great educational value, using the past to teach the children of today, the main character always has a “happy ending”, resolving the conflict of “good - bad”, “right - evil”, the final victory always belongs to “the good, the right”, the play shows the philosophy of life of the Khmer people in the South in Tra Vinh province.

Perhaps the philosophy of life of Buddhism has been deeply ingrained in the consciousness, becoming a way of life, a very normal action in the religious and spiritual life of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province in particular and the people of the Mekong Delta in general. Thus, the compassion, chivalry, and respect for morality in Tra Vinh culture expressed in the relationships of the ethnic people in Tra Vinh province have shown the

identities of the ethnic people here. It is shaped from the tradition of “the whole leaves cover the torn leaves” of our people for thousands of years, from the simple, rustic philosophy of life “three bowls of rice, three pieces of clothing” regardless of fame and profit of the people who expanded the territory.

4.2. Influence of the philosophy of life in folk belief on the life of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province

Influence on the perception of nature and people:

The types of folk beliefs of the Khmer people have partly explained people’s questions about the origin of natural phenomena and people. Folk beliefs are formed in the process of human labor and production. It reflects the desire for a peaceful, prosperous, and good life. At the same time, folk beliefs also show people’s level of awareness of the natural world and the origin of mankind. In the early period of history, people’s experience and knowledge were limited. Backward agricultural production methods, natural disasters, and epidemics threatened life. Therefore, people seek to explain natural phenomena through cultural forms, including religion and folk beliefs.

The Vietnamese believe that nature is the living space and the factors that influence the labor production process, especially agricultural production. These factors include land, water and natural phenomena such as rain, wind, thunder, lightning, floods, and droughts. They believe that heaven, earth, and water are the living space of deities such as the Mother of Heaven, the Mother of Earth, and the Mother of Water (Dung, et al., 2016, p.106). In addition, the explanation of the origin of rain, wind, sun, and moon is also shown through the story of the mother’s curse that led to her three eldest children in the family turning into rain, wind, and the sun when they died, and the youngest child turning into the moon.

In addition to explaining natural phenomena, the Khmer people have used the stories in the Neak Ta religion (Neak Ta Phnom, Neak Ta Tuk), the worship of the Moon God, to show the origin of thunder, lightning, sun, and moon. In addition, we see the concept of human origin appearing on earth through the stories about the formation of the earth and mankind, which mentioned the gods of wind; gods of the Sun, the Moon; the gods of water, gods of fire blending into the realm of heaven and earth. According to ND6: “The gods will help people have good crops if they worship well; if they do not worship, they will be punished by the gods”.

For the Khmer, their appearance is explained through the story of “Mother Gourd”. Thanks to praying to God, Buddha, and the gods, a childless couple gave birth to a gourd. They hung it on the kitchen shelf. Hearing a voice coming from the gourd, the husband carved the gourd open. The Khmer people who came out first were exposed to smoke, so their skin was dark, the remaining ethnic groups came out later. At the same time, the explanation of the birth and growth of all things and people is also expressed through the fertility belief. The forms of Khmer folk beliefs are very diverse and rich, contributing to meeting spiritual and cultural needs. Among them, there are some beliefs containing philosophical ideas such as explaining the origin of nature and humans.

Impact on socio-economic development activities:

The types of folk beliefs of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province are one of the unique cultural heritages and have important significance for them. It affects the socio-economic development of the Khmer people, especially the wet rice agricultural economy. Wet rice cultivation is the main production activity of the majority of Khmer people. This traditional production activity has summarized many farming experiences associated with folk beliefs and rituals for supernatural forces. Through folk beliefs such as Neak Ta belief, moon god belief, worship of the god of fields, the god of livestock, and the god of rice, the Khmer people feel secure every time a new crop season begins. This helps the Khmer people to be more motivated and active in agricultural production.

The survey results show that folk beliefs affect socio-economic development as follows: 87% of Khmer people believe that through practicing folk beliefs, Khmer people have faith and hope to achieve high efficiency in rice cultivation, animal husbandry and other production activities, thanks to which they are strong and confident in investing effort and materials to increase production. Neak Ta belief is a popular folk belief of the Khmer people, playing a very important role in this community. Neak Ta worship ceremony means going to the fields, imbued with traditional agricultural rituals with the wish for a new crop of good crops, favorable weather and wind to bring a prosperous life to people in the village and village. Through these activities, people can share experiences in life and production.

The belief in worshipping the Moon God has a profound influence on the agricultural production of the Khmer people. For the Khmer people, the moon is considered a god who governs, protects, and regulates crops, helping people to have a good harvest and do business smoothly during the year. The Khmer moon worship ceremony is held to thank the Moon God for protecting the crops, giving people a good harvest, and helping people have a

prosperous life. On the occasion of the Moon worship ceremony, the Khmer people organize a Ngo boat racing festival. This is also a traditional ritual of the people to thank the Water God after the harvest, and at the same time send the Water God back to the sea when the rainy season ends and the dry season begins in a cycle of the year. In addition, organizing this festival aims to contribute to training the health and adaptability of the people to the river environment during the labor and production process. Regarding the worship of the god of fields and the god of livestock, the Khmer worships these two gods to pray for good crops, for rats and pests not to destroy the fields, for livestock to grow quickly, be healthy and not be affected by diseases. In years when the crops are at risk of failure, people will worship these two gods.

In addition, 95% believe that through festivals in folk beliefs, attracting tourists to Tra Vinh contributes to creating jobs and improving the lives of the people. Festivals have attracted tourists to Tra Vinh, contributing to the development of festival tourism. Chol Chnam Thmay Festival, Sen Don Ta Festival, Ok Om Bok Festival, Dom Long Neak Ta Festival are traditional festivals, typical cultural forms that have important significance in tourism development. In addition, with the pressures and stresses of life, some people have an increasing need to find a quiet, peaceful place to relax. Khmer pagodas have become the chosen destination of several visitors, as shown through pilgrimage tours. Every year in the fourth, seventh, and tenth lunar months or during festivals, Khmer pagodas in Tra Vinh province welcome spiritual tourists and pilgrims from all over to worship Buddha, visit, enjoy the scenery, and explore the unique architecture and art of pagodas such as Ang Pagoda, Hang Pagoda, and Vam Ray Pagoda.

The rational exploitation of cultural and historical relics, communal houses, pagodas, and shrines in Tra Vinh province in the field of spiritual tourism to contribute to the development of the culture and economy of the province is of great significance. The results also show that 83% of people participating in the survey believe that through folk belief activities, festivals contribute to promoting small-scale business and trade. On this occasion, local people trade more conveniently due to the need to shop for religious activities and festivals in the community and tourists. Tourists come here not only to visit but also to enjoy local specialties. In addition, they can buy handicraft gifts such as crowns, masks, items woven from sedges, and local foods as souvenirs and gifts for relatives. This has created conditions for tourism development associated with festivals and spiritual tourism,

contributing to creating a breakthrough for tourism development in Tra Vinh province in the next period.

5. Conclusion

The folk beliefs of the Khmer people in the South of Tra Vinh province have existed for a long time, forming a diverse philosophical structure of life and having a great influence on their perception, sócio-economic life and spiritual life. Through the process of existence and development, the Khmer people have distilled positive and suitable elements in the types of folk beliefs. These types of beliefs have always been inherited by the Khmer people in the South of Tra Vinh province from their ancestors and developed. Thanks to that, it has become more and more valuable and meaningful in life. This is an important reason that has a positive influence on the spiritual life of the Khmer people in the South of Tra Vinh province today.

In fact, the practice of Khmer folk beliefs brings them back to their national roots, with gratitude and immersed in good wishes, peace, health, good crops, and a prosperous life. At the same time, it contributes to regulating community relationships in “phum” and “sóc” in many areas. In life, they are also closely linked together in many aspects due to their common belief in sacred objects. This shows solidarity and mutual support in production life as well as in the process of building and protecting the homeland and country. Worship with gratitude and respect for people, supernatural forces, and gods who have protected and helped them. This is a noble expression of the tradition of “uống nước nhớ nguồn” (remember and be grateful for the origin). It is thanks to the appropriate selection of values that types of folk beliefs exist, develop and are closely linked to the cultural life of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province up to the present.

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