PAGODAS IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE VIETNAMESE: RESEARCH ON KHMER PAGODAS IN THE SOUTHWESTERN REGION OF VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT
The Khmer follow Buddhist beliefs, so wherever their presence is, there cannot be temples. The temple is a cultural, spiritual, and material symbol of the inhabitants of the area with very unique architectural features and has many special features. The pagoda is not only a destination for spirituality but also a school for teaching, spreading production experience, a center of belief, culture, and education of the community. The pagoda has made an important contribution in forming personality and preserving the cultural identity of the Khmer. From field surveys in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, studying ancient documents preserved in temples, participating in people's activities in Khmer temples, this study focuses on clearing the architectural features and values of the temples bringing in the spiritual life of the people of the Southwestern Region of Vietnam.

Keywords: Pagodas, Khmer pagodas, spiritual life, southwestern region, Vietnamese people

INTRODUCTION
Right from the establishment of the Southern land, Buddhism was present in the spiritual life of the residents, having committed, co-working closely with the work of reclaiming, building, creating hamlets and contributing to an important part in the organization and development of a land of beautiful, rich, rich material potentials, diversified and rich in spiritual life (Buddhism Academy & Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2021). Buddhism in the Southern region accompanies the historical destiny of the ethnic groups, unite, fight against invading enemies, and protect national independence and freedom (Hoa, 2009). Therefore, Buddhism in the South not only became a factor constituting the cultural and human foundation but also contributed to the creation of the unique cultural value system and identity of the land and people of the South, etc.

According to Venerable Thich Thien Nhơn (2021), Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, the Southern region with a multicultural and multi-faith context is the place where new religious movements arise. If the Buddhist doctrine of means, liberal spirit, and ideological freedom give rise to the schools and sects of Buddhism, then the cultural transformation and tolerance in Buddhism have created the premise for the birth of some endogenous religions in the Southern region. In other words, the Buddhist culture itself has become a fertile spiritual land for the formation, development, and contribution of new religious movements in the South. This fact shows that Buddhism is the lifeblood of the Southern region, it should be maintained as a cultural heritage, and on the other hand, it is necessary to continue to renew its practice to meet the diverse needs of the people of the era. “The multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multicultural nature has made the South of Vietnam a rich and diverse material and spiritual life. Southern Buddhism is not only approached from the perspective of religion, history, and archeology but needs to be exploited through the aspects of culture, ethnology, and anthropology to see clearly the process of formation and development as well as the impacts and influences of Buddhism on the social, cultural and spiritual life of the communities here” (Buddhism Academy & Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2021).

The pagoda has a very solid position in the social life and consciousness of the Khmer Southern people. According to Venerable Kim Ren - Abbot of Doi Pagoda (2020), "The pagoda and the monks are the pillars of spirit, so all the festivities, celebrating the new year takes place at the pagoda, are bold Buddhist Association Men who grow up are cultivated in the spirit of Buddhism, get down their hair to practice, study Buddhist teachings, learn culture before
entering the independent life of an adult burial and ashes are sent to the temple”. Contribution to building pagodas and raising pagodas is considered as a contract to ensure happiness for the present and eternal life in the future. The Khmer do not regret their efforts, precious materials, and the ingenuity of their hands to build the pagoda, so the pagoda becomes the center of "Phum", "Sóc", and the spiritual attachment for a lifetime. The pagoda is a center of religious beliefs and cultural activities and is a place for practicing morality and virtue. On the basis of researching temples in the Southwestern provinces (Mekong River Delta provinces) of Vietnam, this study assesses the position and role of temples in the life of Khmer people, from there proposing solutions to continue promoting the positive aspects of the temples in building Vietnamese society today.

LITERATURE REVIEW
An overview of Theravada Buddhism
When Buddha Shakyamuni was in life, Buddhism was inherently a unified body, without a sectarian division. Only when the Buddha Shakyamuni entered Nirvana, the Buddha disciples gathered together to recite and memorize the Buddha's teachings, when there appeared different views and ideologies about the practice of the Vinaya (Lang, 1974). Started in the 2nd sutra assembly held at BhikkhuCa Ly citadel over 100 years after the Buddha’s death to comment on scriptures, practice precepts, and debate about 10 new rules by a part of the young bhikkhus formed sectarianism in Buddhism. In the 10 new laws, a part of young bhikkhus has introduced and is considered to be legitimate, that is: " Diem Tinh" (with salt in the horns to put in dishes when there is not enough salt); "Luong Chi Sao ThuCtinh" (sunshine past noon 2 fingers are still was eaten); "Tu Lac GianTinh" (before noon to eat, but still allowed to eat in another village); "Tru Su Tinh" (where people live, the "Ba Tat" ceremony right there); "Tuy Y Tinh" (resolutions passed by the Congress, though more or less, are valid for implementation); "CuuTruTinh" (follow the rules and practices); "SinhHoa Hop Tinh" (to drink milk mixed with water afternoon); "Thuy Tinh" (newly fermented wine mixed with drinking water to treat diseases); "Bat Ich Lu Ni Su Dan Tinh" (using borderless tools, larger in size); "Thu Suc Kim Ngan Tien Dinh" (easy donation of gold and silver). The elderly bhikkhus did not accept, advocate to keep what the Buddha taught, and respect the lineage (Lang, 1974; Van, 2020). The young bhikkhus refused because they thought that there were some problems placed in the development of the society that was no longer appropriate, so they found it necessary to modify some points when they were recorded in the scriptures, so they advocated practice according to the spirit of "Khe Ly-Khe Co", which is suitable to the basic and circumstances of each period, region and region of living beings.

The monks with different views, after many days of debate, could not find a common voice, could not agree on their opinion, so in the end formed two sects: Monks who advocated keeping the precepts are the few and the elderly, sitting above to preside over the conference should be called the Venerable. Young monks account for the majority, so they are called the Venerable Buddhist sect. After that, sending them to the North to China etc. called Northern Buddhism or Northern Buddhism. The Venerable sect passed to the south and developed down to Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, so it was called Southern Buddhism or Southern Buddhism (Giau, 1973 & 83; Lang, 1974). Theravada Buddhism strictly adheres to the original precepts and recites the main five initial sutras, so Theravada Buddhism is also called Theravada Buddhism (Giau, 1973; Lang, 1974, Van, 2020; Buddhism Academy & Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2021). Theravada Buddhism was transmitted into Vietnam by missionaries from India traveling by sea to Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand to the Mekong region (Cambodia) and into the Mekong Delta provinces (in the South) of Vietnam, welcomed by a large number of people, especially the Khmer ethnic group, became the religion of the Khmer, thus it is called Theravada Khmer Buddhism (in Vietnam there is also Theravada Buddhism of the Kinh people).
Theravada Buddhism was present in the Mekong Delta very early (around the fourth century). By the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, most Phum (hamlets), Soc (many hamlets) of the Khmer had pagoda worshiping Buddha. As of June 2010, Theravada Khmer Buddhism had 452 pagodas with 8,574 monks (= 19.3% of the total number of monks in the country), mainly concentrated in 9 provinces (cities) by the Mekong River Delta (TraVinh, Vinh Long, Can Tho, An Giang, KienGiang, Bạc Liêu, Soc Trang, Ca Mau) (Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, 2010).

According to the custom of the Khmer, when a son reaches the age of 12 or 13, he has to enter the temple for a period of time with one or more meanings: paying piety to his grandparents, his parents; to exercise feelings and responsibilities towards the nation; to pay homage to the Buddha, etc. These young men need to stay in the temple for at least one month, or even stay in the temple for a long or long time, depending on their conditions, abilities, and wishes. After a month of time, they can ask to leave the temple (to become a monk) to return to normal life at any time, they can get married, do business, participate in social work when they want them to have again. You can apply to the temple for a while and then you can return to your family (Hoa, 2009; Dung, 2016).

Khmer people in the Mekong River Delta believe that any Khmer son needs to go through spiritual practice for a while to cultivate morality, equip knowledge, and a human way of life. People who have spent time in the temple practice are recognized and appreciated by the Khmer community, are easy to get married, and accepted to do social work. This concept greatly influenced the Khmer as well as the followers of Theravada Buddhism in other countries.

Traditionally, Theravada Khmer Buddhism does not have a female monk in the temple, but Khmer women are educated and greatly influenced by Buddhist ideology and morality, through the lifestyle of the people. Men in the family (who are fathers, fathers, husbands) and through festivals, monks preach traditional Buddhist teachings and rites of the Khmer people: Buddha's birthday; Offering ceremony; the ritual of offering offerings to the monks; CholChnamThmay festival (like Lunar New Year in Vietnam); Don-ta ceremony (ancestor ceremony); Moon worshiping ceremony, etc. Whether it is a Buddhist ceremony or a national ceremony, but all these activities are associated with religious rituals because people come together to the temple, recite prayers, release lanterns, etc. and have the participation of monks.

**Overview of Khmer pagodas**

In the architectural heritage treasure in the Mekong Delta, the Khmer pagoda has a very important position because of its historical, artistic, and social significance in people's lives. The temple is not only a place containing spiritual values, profound beliefs, a place for religious activities but also a center of cultural activities of the community in the area. This place often takes place in cultural festivals during the year. The temple is a cultural, spiritual, and material symbol of the people in the area with very unique architectural features and has many special features.

In the treasure of Khmer ethnic cultural heritages, of the community of 54 Vietnamese ethnic groups, the Khmer pagoda has an important position because of its historical, artistic, and social significance, this is a cultural and spiritual symbol and material of the people in the area with unique, distinctive, and unique architectural features (Quang, 2009). The Khmer have the concept that the Buddha is always with them to protect and bless them, so most of them are in the Phum, squirrels, people voluntarily contribute to building their own temple (Sen, et al., 2011). There are more than 1.3 million people (Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2019) living in the South West region alone, with hundreds of large and small Khmer pagodas, including those dating back several centuries, recognized. National-level architectural monuments such as An Pagoda, Mother Pagoda, Hang Pagoda, Doi Pagoda, etc. Khmer pagodas are often chosen to build on a large land, surrounded by rows of oil trees, palm trees, or lush green Melaleuca forest. In general, a Khmer temple consists of a pagoda gate, fence, the main hall, the tower containing the remains, the amnesty, the synagogue, the amnesty, etc. In which, the most prominent and most important is the main temple built in the middle of
the mind of the temple. In each Khmer pagoda, the main hall was built in an East-West direction with the concept that the Buddha always dwells in the West, looking to the East, giving blessings, and saving sentient beings.

The outside of the main hall often has auxiliary works, embossed relief decorations, showing beautiful goddess images, Krud bird supporting the roof of the pagoda, ferocious Yeak, four-sided Bayon godhead, etc. is taken from the folk beliefs of the Khmer, in addition there are corridors creating a cool space, decorated with images of evil forces submitted by the Buddha.

The space in the main pagoda of the Khmer pagoda is decorated with many delicate motifs with an altar in the shape of a lotus tower divided into many levels and decorated carefully, carefully to worship the Buddha above. The Shakyamuni Buddha statue is carved in harmony with the main hall space and can be posed in many positions of standing, lying, sitting, showing the diversity and richness of the moral significance and beauty of the Buddha.

A very special point in Khmer temples is the frescoes that are painted on the walls of the main hall. The main content of these murals is to recount the life of Shakyamuni Buddha from his birth to his enlightenment (Sen, et al., 2009).

The frescoes bearing profound Buddhist ideas are created with the talented hands of Khmer folk artists, most of whom are taught their craft while studying at the temple. However, in the process of creating these paintings, the artist not only stereotyped and followed the classical patterns. Their works are breathed in inspiration, reflecting the personal life of each layer of thinking and perception of the artist (Hoa, 2009). Each mural is so simple, but contained in it is a story about the Buddha, about the difficulties, hardships, and sacrifices in the spiritual life of the Buddha. It is these frescoes that silently contribute to the education of a clean lifestyle, deeply rooted in Buddhist thought.

SOME ISSUES NEED TO BE DISCUSSED

Buddhism in the spiritual life of the Khmer Southern people

The human spiritual life is influenced by many factors (Anh, 1930; Anh, 1998). If they are people of different religions, they will be influenced by their religious activities (Anh, 2005; Binh, 2005). According to Khmer custom, when the son reaches the age of 12 or 13, he has to enter the temple for a while. This job has many meanings: paying filial piety for grandparents, parents; show affection and responsibility towards the nation; pay homage to the Buddha, etc. (Sen, et al., 2009). These young men stay at the temple for at least a month, can practice for a long time or a lifetime, depending on the conditions, abilities, and wishes of each person. After that, they can ask to leave the temple and return to their normal life at any time. They can get married, do business, and participate in social work. When they want, they can again apply to the temple for a while and then return to their families.

The Khmer in the Mekong Delta believes that any son needs to practice for a while to cultivate morality, equip knowledge, and live a human life. The people who have spent time practicing in the temple are recognized and appreciated by the Khmer community, are easy to get married, and accepted to do social work. This concept greatly influenced the Khmers.

Traditionally, Theravada Khmer Buddhism did not have a female monk in the temple. However, the Khmer women were educated, influenced greatly by Buddhist ideology and morality, through the life of the men in the family, through festivals, and monk lectures teaching the traditional Buddhist teachings and rituals of the Khmer ethnic group: Buddha's birthday, the Cho Nam Thmay ceremony, the Donta ceremony, etc. Whether it is a Buddhist ceremony or a national ceremony, all these activities are associated with the in religious rites, people come together to the temple, recite sutras, release lanterns, with the participation of monks (Dang, 2011).

The Theravada Buddhist monk also receives the precepts through the novices and bhikkhus, but the number of precepts to keep is different. For Theravada Buddhism, sadi novices must keep 105 precepts; the novice ordained was ordained a monk to keep 227 precepts. It is also possible that if a monk does not want to take the monastic ordination, he can remain in the sadi for life. A man who practices Theravada Buddhism on a voluntary spirit, however, is only admitted to the temple and is ordained as a novice when he meets some basic requirements. They must get
the consent of their parents or carers (if they are young). A married man who wants to enter a
temple must get the consent of his wife; must be a good citizen, not in the state of breaking
the law; must have a teacher to guide, have the requisites of a monk. Every Khmer son, regardless of
social class, must go to practice to be a person with a good personality, qualities, and good
morals according to their conception. In principle, a monk from 12 to 20 years old is called to
repay his mother, from 21 years of age or older is to pay piety. They see the religious practice as
both an obligation and an honor of life. Long or short, permanent or secular practice, depending
on the son's discretion.

In daily life, Theravada Buddhism practices according to the original Buddhist precepts, so it is
not a vegetarian diet and lives by daily offerings of food by Buddhists. The monks only ate 2
meals a day, early in the morning, before 12 noon. From 12 noon until the end of the night, the
monk can only drink water, milk, tea, etc. During the year, if the monks are busy with seasonal
work, Buddhists do not have free time, the temple administrators can exchange with families.
Buddhists offer offerings on a given day, avoid days being too much, days too little. If the
devotees are busy, the monks can accept food offered by the families and bring them to the
temple to have them cook (Hoa, 2009; Dao & Van, 2020).

For the Khmer in the South, the monks had a great position and influence. Considered to
represent the Buddha to transmit and educate sentient beings, so the monk is always a respected
and trusted teacher. According to the ancient tradition of the Khmer in the Mekong River Delta,
the vast majority of the people who follow Buddhism belong to the Theravada sect, so when it
comes to the Khmer population in Vietnam it also means that it can be understood as the
number of buddhists (except for monks who are practicing in the temple are considered monks).
It can be said that the daily life of the Khmer people and the Theravada Buddhism cannot be
separated from the pagoda (Sen, et al., 2009; Dao & Van, 2020). The monks who come to the
temple are all children of the Khmer ethnic group, the pagoda is the place of practice of the
monks, the place of worshiping the people, the place to teach literacy and vocational training for
the children of the ethnic minorities. It is the cultural center of the nation, the museum preserves
artifacts from worshiping objects, sculptures, carvings, and boats (for racing in folk festivals),
and is also a place of worship relatives when they die. Activities in the family, the community of
"Phum", "Soc" is mostly associated with the beliefs and philosophies of Buddhism. The work of
the family as well as cultural activities, community festivals are attended by monks. Most of the
pagodas have become converging places, destinations, and places for cultural activities of the
community of Khmer of Vietnam.

The entire residence of the Khmer South has about 600 pagodas, with about 10,620 monks,
while the Khmer ethnic group has only over 1 million people the Khmer people, from birth to
adulthood and old age, all happiness, sadness, happiness, and suffering are tied to the temple
(Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2019). Therefore, the temple becomes the center
of religious activities, the center of cultivation and abbot of the Buddhist monk, the center of
community activities, and the center of cultural and historical values of the Khmer, creating a
void special "sacred" space about the culture of South Vietnam.

Most Khmer people follow Theravada Buddhism (Theravada Buddhism). So going to the temple
or staying at home, the Khmer are all Buddha's children. The Khmer thinks that going to
practice is not to become a Buddha, but to cultivate to be a person with a good personality and
good moral qualities.

The role of the pagoda in the Khmer life

Theravada Khmer Buddhism belongs to the sect of the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha, has been
present in the Mekong Delta very early (around the IV century) (Giau, 2983). By the end of the
nineteenth century, at the beginning of the twentieth century, most of the "Phum" and "Soc"
had pagodas to worship Buddha. The pagoda is the main feature for us to know where the
Khmer people gather. The Khmer pagoda is different from the pagoda of the Kinh and Hoa
people in the Mekong River Delta in that the architecture, colors are very distinctive, the pagoda
is tall, majestic, bright colors, mainly lemon yellow, often surrounded by many old trees like stars, oil.

The Khmer people follow Theravada Buddhism, so they adore and respect the temple and the monks as their own close family; because they consider the worldly life only temporary, the other side is nirvana. The temple is the mediator, the place where they can send their beliefs, receive useful advice for life from Buddhism (Sen, et al., 2009).

There are pagodas built before the sixteenth century, but there are also temples built or restored in the twentieth century. Although there are quite a far between dates there are still common features. It is massive and majestic with a specific characteristic typical of the traditional Khmer architecture. It can be said that wherever the Khmer people reside, there is a temple (Quang, 2011). The pagodas are not only a practice place for monks but also a center of community activities, attracting all classes and all ages together to conduct rituals, cultural activities, and education. Therefore, for the Khmer, the pagoda has been an entity associated with people's lives like a shadow. It is this feature that dominates almost the entire material and spiritual life of the Khmer people. Moreover, the temple is also an architectural work of very high cultural and aesthetic value.

The entire residence of the Khmer South has about 600 pagodas, with about 10,620 monks, while the Khmer ethnic group has only over 1 million people the Khmer people, from birth to adulthood and old age, all happiness, sadness, happiness, and suffering are tied to the temple (Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2019). Therefore, the temple becomes the center of religious activities, the center of cultivation and abbot of the Buddhist monk, the center of community activities, and the center of cultural and historical values of the Khmer, creating a void special "sacred" space about the culture of South Vietnam. Most Khmer people follow Theravada Buddhism. So going to the temple or staying at home, the Khmer are all Buddha's children. The Khmer thinks that going to practice is not to become a Buddha, but to cultivate to be a person with a good personality and good moral qualities.

Every Khmer son, regardless of social class, must be a monk in order to have a good personality, qualities, and good morals according to their conception. In principle, a monk from 12 to 20 years old is called to repay his mother's grace and from 21 years of age or older is to pay piety. They see the religious practice as both an obligation and an honor of life. Cultivate long or short, cultivate permanently or securely, depending on the son's preference. Therefore, the temple is the center of "cultivating" the young generations in terms of morality and personality (Hoa, 2009). The dignitaries and monks are revered by the people because they are intellectuals who teach people to learn words, learn jobs, and organize people's lives.

From purely Buddhist festivals such as Buddha's Birthday, Entering Ceremony, Launching Ceremony, Teaching Ceremony, Prayer Ceremony, National Festivals to cultural performances, entertainment activities, and even more Community activities for "Phum" and "Sóc" also take place in the temple. The pagoda is not only a place for religious activities but also a center of cultural and social activities. Through these activities, people live close and friendly, united, responsible, and always embrace each other with love (Sen, et al., 2009). The festival usually lasts all night and for many days. During the holidays, especially at night, the temple is crowded with followers and guests. The shop is full of pagodas. Fun activities such as kicking balls, throwing weights for money, playing tickle, jumping net, hiding towels, covering the face to catch goats, hitting nicely, tug of war, etc. and praying ceremonies last until 2, 3 a.m. terminated and then continued until the next day.

Festivals are often associated with traditional cultural forms of the nation. The traditional art of the Khmer people such as traditional theater, whether Keromam, folk dances such as Sarikakeo, Saravan, Romvong are performed by professional artists or amateurs. These cultural performances are full of ethnic cultural identity and affirm the pagoda as a center of community activities.

It can be said that almost the entire life of the Khmer in the South from birth to death, all happiness, sadness, happiness, suffering, success, and failure are closely linked to the pagoda.
The pagoda for Khmer people has a deep love because a pagoda is a place of worshipping Buddha, a place to keep the remains of their ancestors, and the wish of the living person is to be naturalized in the temple to live with their eyes and hands the life of Buddha in the distant Nirvana realm.

CONCLUSION

It can be said that the Khmer Nam Bo pagoda is a combination of specific nuances of the Khmer people. Although not comparable in scale and grandeur to the Indian Buddhist architectures or the temples of the Cambodian Khmer, there are artistic values embedded in the architectural firm, the harmony between architecture, and sculpture with impressive decorative lines. All of them create their own special features, worthy of contributions to the architectural treasure of the Vietnamese peoples.

The construction of the temple also has its own rules and regulations. The first is choosing the location. It is a clearing, a spacious, tall space; usually located in the center of the "Phum" and "Sóc" after choosing a good date and time, people started to work. The first construction work is the sala (the dining room of the Buddhist monk, also the meeting house, welcoming guests from all directions, including the Buddha altar). Next is the tower containing the remains, with special architecture, of different sizes and sizes, built around the main hall? The architecture of the tower is often the same, consisting of three parts: the foot of the tower is wide, square, with a small hole for the remains of the dead; the body of the tower has many floors, getting smaller from bottom to top; The top of the tower is a spike, on the top is attached a four sideds god head statue, which is meant to pray for the dead who have bones in the tower to be reincarnated in another life; or for those who are still alive, please live in accordance with the Buddhist spirit of compassion, compassion, joy, and compassion.

In Buddhism, the temple was an entity, an inseparable part of the Khmer people of the South. Despite going through many changes and ups and downs of history, the temples standing in the old garden are forever a place of protection and refuge for the children of the Buddha.

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