

## FOLK BELIEFS IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF SOUTHERN KHMER PEOPLE OF VIETNAM

Hung Quang Nguyen<sup>1\*</sup> & Van HongVu<sup>\*\*2</sup>

\*First author, \*\*Corresponding author

<sup>1</sup>University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

<sup>1</sup>Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

<sup>2</sup>University of Transport and Communications, Hanoi, Vietnam

(nguyenquanghung@tvu.edu.vn, vanvh\_ph@utc.edu.vn)

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### Abstract

Khmer people are one of 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam, and they live mainly in the southern region of Vietnam, with Tra Vinh having the largest concentration. The Khmer people in Tra Vinh province have a diverse folk belief system and unique characteristics. Khmer folk beliefs play an important role in their spiritual life; they partially meet the needs of cultural and religious activities, thereby contributing to psychological relief and balancing their spiritual life. This study aims to generalise and clarify the folk belief system of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province, survey, analyse, and evaluate the role and value of the folk belief system in the spiritual life of the Khmer people. A qualitative study and a semi-structured survey were conducted. The sample selected for the survey was 75 people, semi-structured interviews using a convenient method, and the sample size was 15, including 07 men and 08 women (ages 25 to 70). Combined with previous research and assessments, it shows that in Khmer people's folk beliefs, values must be promoted, and limitations must be overcome.

**Keywords:** *folk beliefs, spiritual life, Southern Khmer people, Tra Vinh province, Vietnam*

### INTRODUCTION

Belief is a common phenomenon and appeared very early in human history. In Vietnam, each community has unique beliefs (Giau, 1973; Ngoc, 2002; Hinh, 2007) and has played an important role in people's spiritual lives throughout history, enriching Vietnamese people's traditional cultural values. Today, those beliefs still exist in life and continue to be consolidated and developed by successive generations of people (Tran, Phan, & Nguyen, 2024).

Tra Vinh is a beachfront coastal province located East of the Mekong Delta, between the Co Chien and Hau rivers, bordering Ben Tre province, Soc Trang province, Vinh Long province, and the East Sea, with a coastline of 65 km. Natural area is 2,391 km<sup>2</sup>; population of over one million people (of which, Kinh ethnic group accounts for 67,76%; Khmer ethnic group accounts for 31,53%, Chinese ethnic group accounts for 0,66% and other ethnic groups account for 0,05%) (People's Committee of Tra Vinh province, 2022). Throughout history, the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province mostly work in agriculture and live mainly in the countryside. They are one of the ethnic groups with a very unique, diverse, and rich culture. The beliefs of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh both have common characteristics of the Khmer ethnic beliefs in Vietnam and have unique characteristics.

The Khmer people community in Tra Vinh province maintains a rich and diverse system of folk beliefs that plays an integral role in their spiritual and cultural life. These beliefs encompass ancestral worship and the observance of ceremonies such as *Sel Dolta*, *Arak*, and *Neak Ta* rites, as well as rituals associated with lunar deities, including the Ok Om Bok festival, and fertility cults related to agricultural and reproductive abundance (Ha & Van, 2019). Such practices are not merely ritualistic expressions but constitute essential components of the spiritual fabric of the Khmer people in this region.

These folk belief systems function as important psychological and emotional outlets, fulfilling the spiritual needs of individuals and the collective community. They are deeply embedded in everyday life and have become indispensable cultural-spiritual practices in contemporary Khmer society in Tra Vinh province. More significantly, these beliefs serve as reservoirs of cultural values, nurturing and perpetuating key social virtues such as communal solidarity, compassion, filial piety, gratitude toward ancestors, and reverence for origins—principles encapsulated in the Khmer proverb “drinking water, remember its source” (Vinh, 2008; Vinh & Trieu, 2015).

While the folk beliefs of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province carry positive cultural and ethical values, it is also important to acknowledge the challenges they present. Due to their spiritual nature, these practices sometimes give rise to superstitious behaviours and irrational beliefs in supernatural forces. Elements such as magic, superstition, ritual healing, sorcery, and the invocation of esoteric symbols may still be found in certain ritual activities (Lu, 2005; Luom, 2018).

The process of integration and cultural exchange is taking place strongly, and the folk beliefs of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province have undergone certain changes. In their belief life, there are trends such as a part of the Khmer

people in Tra Vinh province no longer highly appreciating the role of belief activities in their cultural and spiritual life, leading to the disappearance of some forms of cultural and belief activities. Under the impact of the market economy, the process of industrialisation, modernisation, and globalisation trends have led to a part of the younger generation of Khmer people in Tra Vinh province no longer interested in and participating in the religious activities of our people (Loan, 2018; Khanh, 2021).

In response to ongoing socio-cultural transformations, the preservation and promotion of the constructive elements embedded within the folk beliefs of the Khmer ethnic community in Tra Vinh province are critical. Simultaneously, there is a pressing need to identify, limit, and gradually eliminate archaic or detrimental practices that no longer align with contemporary ethical or developmental standards. Effectively safeguarding and revitalising these cultural traditions not only contributes to sustaining the distinctive cultural identity of the Khmer people in Vietnam but also plays a pivotal role in enriching both the spiritual and material dimensions of their communal life. This process aligns with broader national efforts to protect intangible cultural heritage as emphasised in UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), to which Vietnam is a member state (UNESCO, 2003). Furthermore, such cultural preservation fosters intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge and enhances community resilience in the face of modernisation pressures (Taylor, 2014).

With the above theoretical and practical issues, focusing on clarifying "*Folk beliefs in the spiritual life of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province*" is necessary to continue to find positive values, overcome limitations and negativity, create a healthy spiritual life for Khmer people in particular and people of Tra Vinh province in general. To achieve this goal, this study focuses on answering the following questions, first, how to evaluate the importance, position, and role of folk beliefs in the spiritual life of Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province?, second, what value do folk beliefs have in the spiritual life of Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province?, third, what negative and existing issues exist in the folk belief activities of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province? and fourth, what issues need to be discussed to promote the values and limit the negatives in the folk belief activities of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Concepts of Beliefs**

In Vietnamese context, beliefs is belief in a religion: Freedom of belief (Tan, 1991, p. 1209) and beliefs is a superstitious admiration for a religion or an ideology" (Anh, 1996, p. 238) and also, religion is to believe in a certain religion" (Institute of Linguistics, 1997, p. 960). Thus, with the original meaning, beliefs are the beliefs of each individual's religion.

There is a view that the concept of beliefs is broad and includes the concept of religion: "Belief is human beliefs and admiration in a phenomenon, a force, something and usually refers to a religious belief. Religion is often understood as one of the forms of beliefs with concepts, consciousness, behaviour, and religious organisations" (Central Theory Council, 2004, p. 449).

According to Dang Nghiem Van (2001, p. 67): Belief is religious belief; belief and religion are intertwined: "When talking about freedom of beliefs, we can understand it as freedom of consciousness or freedom of religious belief, if belief is understood as consciousness, then beliefs covers religion, is the most important part that constitutes religion, without belief there would be no religion. For him, there is no such thing as one religion being superior to another, as all cultures are equal" (Van, 2005, p. 89).

From the perspectives outlined above, *folk belief can be understood as a cultural phenomenon through which individuals and communities express their faith in supernatural agencies, gods, and objects that people perceive as sacred and mysterious; it is a phenomenon in the spiritual life of mankind*. Beliefs have many forms that arise, exist, and develop throughout history. As a constituent element of the human spiritual worldview, belief systems serve to interpret the metaphysical dimensions of existence and mediate the relationship between the material and immaterial realms. These systems are inherently dynamic, manifesting in diverse forms and ritual practices that have emerged, evolved, and persisted across historical and socio-cultural contexts. Belief, in this sense, is not merely a psychological disposition but a socially embedded and symbolically rich mode of engaging with the sacred.

### **Concept of Folk Beliefs**

Currently, folk beliefs are commonly used by researchers in scientific research and mass media (Ngoc, 2002; Van, 2005; Van & Long, 2019; Van, 2022). This term exists in the languages of several countries around the world and has been translated into Vietnamese. It is used with names such as "*traditional beliefs*" and "*folk beliefs*."

According to the Philosophy Dictionary, the term “folk beliefs” is translated into Vietnamese as “*tín ngưỡng dân gian* or *tín ngưỡng truyền thống*” (Matxcova, 1986, p. 576). This terminology reflects non-institutionalised belief systems rooted in cultural tradition and community practice. In French, the expression “*croyance populaire*” refers to widespread, vernacular beliefs that exist outside formal religious doctrine. When rendered into Vietnamese, *croyance populaire* is also commonly translated as *tín ngưỡng dân gian*, a term frequently employed in scholarly discourse to denote pre-modern, syncretic, and locally embedded belief systems that mediate between the sacred and the everyday (Ngoc, 202).

Western authors such as Patrick and B. Mullen believe that folk beliefs have a very rich and relevant connotation: “Folk beliefs are a large genre that includes expressions and behaviours that people call superstition, popular beliefs, magic, supernatural phenomena, prayers, chants, people or things carrying bad luck, good or bad things, ghost stories and bad things taboo” (Thinh & Frank, 2015, p. 273).

For many generations, folk beliefs have been an important and popular form of belief in the cultural and spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. Folk beliefs were once respected and recognised by the feudal states of Vietnam. The feudal dynasties of Tran (1226-1400), Later Le (1428-1789), and Nguyen conferred deity status on “Thanh Hoang Bon Canh” to be worshipped in village communal houses - a unique cultural institution of Vietnamese villages. This is an important and outstanding point of folk beliefs in Vietnam (Loc, 2016). Author Phan Huu Dat commented: “In essence, beliefs are an integral part of folk culture” (Dat, 1999, p. 328).

From the above perspectives, folk beliefs can be understood as cultural-religious expressions through which communities articulate their belief in sacred entities or forces. These beliefs are not institutionalised religions in the formal sense but rather collective cultural phenomena transmitted orally and through practice from generation to generation. They are intimately linked to specific ethnic groups or local communities, often shaped by shared historical experience, ecological conditions, territorial boundaries, and spiritual cosmologies. These belief systems are deeply ingrained in the collective memory and worldview of the people, serving as mechanisms of social cohesion, cultural continuity, and moral education. They embody the aspirations for peace, prosperity, health, fertility, and protection from misfortune. Moreover, folk beliefs reflect a holistic conception of life, in which the sacred and the profane are interwoven, and where the well-being of individuals is intrinsically linked to the favour or will of the sacred forces.

In the Vietnam context, folk beliefs such as the worship of Mother goddesses, worship of Tutelary god, worship of ancestral, worship of wandering souls, etc., exemplify these practices' rich and dynamic nature. They are not only spiritual expressions but also cultural systems that convey identity, historical consciousness, and moral values. Thus, folk beliefs should be recognised not merely as superstitions or remnants of archaic thought, but as living cultural heritages that adapt and evolve alongside modern social transformations, contributing significantly to the spiritual and cultural life of contemporary communities.

### **Folk Beliefs of the South Khmer People**

Based on the analysis of research works by domestic and international scientists on folk beliefs and beliefs, the folk beliefs of the Khmer people are the author's research object in this study. The author believes that Khmer folk beliefs (traditional beliefs) express the Khmer people's beliefs in supernatural objects that they consider sacred and mystical, and passed down from generation to generation with the desire to be blessed, protected, and live a peaceful and good life.

Regarding ethnic minorities in our country, each ethnic group has its own religious beliefs. Primitive beliefs and folk beliefs are typical forms of beliefs that are still preserved in many ethnic minorities. For the Khmer people, the majority of the people are agricultural residents who grow wet rice, so in the concept of the Southern Khmer people, the sky, the earth, the Sun, the Moon, etc., are supernatural forces that can bless or bring disaster to everyone. They believe that for the life and production of individuals, families, and clans to be peaceful, they must be protected and guarded by powerful supernatural forces, which are *Arak* (the guardian god of the clan), *Neak - ta* (the guardian god), *Teevada* (the angels who take care of the world).

Due to the unique natural conditions in the Mekong Delta, the rainy season starts from April to October of the lunar calendar, and this is also the time of the main crop, so most agricultural rituals are concentrated in this season, especially at the intersection of the dry season and the rainy season. This is a natural feature that determines the characteristics of the religious beliefs of the Southern Khmer people. The form of folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people is very rich. The forms of folk beliefs are often admired by the people, so during holidays, Khmer people participate in a large number of entertaining activities such as singing, dancing, boat racing, etc. The forms of rituals are also different, depending on the nature and content of each specific ceremony. The forms of beliefs all bear a strong religious imprint, shown through the presence of monks in the ceremonies or the

names of the guardian gods *Neak-Ta*, *Arak*, etc. One obvious point is that the Southern Khmer people early chose reptiles such as crocodiles and water snakes as their main totem. This totem belief still leaves traces in some stories, rituals, decorative motifs in pagodas, or the labour tools of the people.

## MATERIALS AND RESEARCH METHODS

This research is approached from the perspective of religious philosophy and is based on the theoretical perspective of dialectical materialism on the dialectical relationship between social existence and social consciousness. This perspective demonstrates the decisive role of social existence on social consciousness and the impact of social consciousness on social existence. In addition, the research is also based on the viewpoints and guidelines of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the laws of the State of Vietnam on beliefs and religions.

The State documents on beliefs and religions: Constitution (2013), Law on Beliefs and Religions (Law No. 02/2016/QH14); Decree 162/2017/ND-CP detailing several articles and measures to implement the Law on Beliefs and Religions; Decree 110/2018/ND-CP on management and organisation of festivals; Joint Circular 04/2014/TTLT-BVHTTDL-BNV guiding the implementation of civilised lifestyles at belief establishments and religious establishments issued by the Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism - Ministry of Home Affairs; Circular 04/2016/TT-BNV guiding the content of specialised inspection in the field of religion issued by the Minister of Home Affairs, etc.

Documents of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) discuss the work of belief and religion: *Documents of the IXth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam* (2001), *Documents of the Xth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam* (2006), *Documents of the XIth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam* (2011), *Documents of the XIIth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam* (2016), *Documents of the XIIIth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam* (2021).

The research uses a combination of methods, including analysis and synthesis, deduction and induction, historical and logical methods, structural system methods, sociological investigation, comparison, etc., for research and presentation. These methods allow the exploration of research content and the discovery of both specialised and general research content.

Survey method, questionnaire: This study surveyed 75 people (aged from 25 to 70 with differences in education, socio-economic statuses, and occupations). The issue of survey and investigation by questionnaire focuses on the following contents: (i) Assessing the importance, position, and role of folk beliefs in the spiritual life of Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province; (ii) The value of folk

beliefs in the spiritual life of Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province; (iii) The negatives that exist in the folk religious activities of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province; (iv) Issues that need to be discussed to promote values and limit negative aspects in the folk religious activities of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province. The sample was selected for semi-structured interviews using a convenient method; the sample size is 15 people, including 07 men (ages 25 to 70) and 08 women (ages 25 to 65) coded from ND1 to ND15. With the number of people surveyed and interviewed as well as different ages and levels, the evaluation results will be objective. However, due to the small number of surveys and interviews, this limitation needs to be overcome and implemented in the future to ensure that the evaluations will be more objective and complete.

## **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

### **Overview of Folk Beliefs of the Khmer People**

#### ***Worship of Neak-Ta***

*Neak-Ta* (Louk Ta or Nak Ta) is a form of folk belief for the Khmer and Khmer people living in Tra Vinh province. Up to now, there have still been many different views. *Neak-Ta* are “gods of the fields or forests that people must pray to when they have something to do; *Neak-Ta* is of Brahmanical origin, he placed these gods in the universe of that religion: those *Neak-Ta* existed when the countries were founded and it was Preah In (Indra) who gave them credit work in this country” (Moura, 1883, p. 172). “*Neak-Ta* comes from the phrase “*Neak Tê Vah Ta*”; the word “*Ta*” in this phrase is read in Khmer as “*Da*”. Later, the word “*Tê Vah*” was removed, leaving only two words: *Neak* and read as “*Neak-Ta*”. *Neak-Ta* is the local god of the Khmer people (earth or village god), in charge of each large or small area and has different names” (Set, 2012, p. 13). According to ND1: “This god can bless or punish the people under his control. Therefore, offerings must be made to the gods on prescribed days such as the full moon day and the first day of the lunar month”. This view of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province about *Neak-Ta* shows that it is similar to the Thanh Hoang village of the Kinh people when determining that *Neak-Ta* can affect the spiritual life of the “*phum*” (is a type of residential cluster), “*soc*” (villages of the Khmer ethnic region).

Based on the scope of influence and position of each *Neak-Ta* in the consciousness of the subjects. This belief can be divided into three types: “*Neak-Ta* of individuals and families; *Neak-Ta* of “*phum*” (is a type of residential cluster), “*soc*” (villages of the Khmer ethnic region) and *Neak-Ta* of district, province” (Vinh, 2012, p. 35). Of the three types above, *Neak-Ta* “*phum*” and “*soc*” play an important role in the lives of Khmer people. *Neak-Ta* temples are both a place to



practice beliefs and spirituality, a place to unite the community, and a place to express the unique cultural identity of the Khmer community. Tra Vinh province has 146 temples that worship *Neak-Ta* (People's Committee of Tra Vinh province, 2022). According to ND2: "These temples are very sacred, so people who are sick can go to these shrines to pray and worship to be cured". Thus, as the guardian deity of the people in "phum" and "soc", *Neak-Ta* is worshipped very solemnly by the people in many temples. For the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province, these temples are both places of blessing and places for community activities on major holidays.

### **Ancestor Worship Beliefs**

*Ancestor worship* is a popular folk belief among ethnic communities in Vietnam (Giau, 1973; Ngoc, 2002; Van, 2022, 2023). As a part of the ethnic community in our country, Khmer people also believe in ancestor worship. In addition to the formal manifestations of ancestor worship, beliefs of the Khmer people are similar to those of the Kinh people; their ancestor worship customs have unique features, bearing their cultural nuances. According to ND3: "I see, for Khmer people, every family *worships ancestors*, every house has an ancestral altar". Survey results show that the majority of Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province are followers of Theravada Buddhism. They believe that death is not the end but rather a life in another world. Therefore, Khmer people worship their ancestors very carefully.

For Khmer people, when a relative dies in the family, they will cremate it, and the ashes will be carefully kept for worship at home. Relatives will bring these ashes to the Theravada Buddhist pagoda sometime later. According to ND4: "The ashes sent to the temple symbolise the Khmer people's beliefs in *ancestor worship*. Every day, relatives will perform the ritual of lighting lamps and incense on the ancestral altar." The ancestral altar was set up by the Khmer in the middle of the house; this is considered the most solemn position for the Khmer. Khmer people often set up ancestral altars: worshipping Buddha, worshipping "elder monks" (dead monks of a temple), and worshipping ancestors with the same blood relationship. When burning incense, Khmer people will burn incense to Buddha, "elder monks" (abbots of a temple who have died), and then to their ancestors (Luom, 2018, p. 60). According to ND5: "We worship the eldest monk because all Khmer people follow Buddhism, the eldest monk is a symbol of Buddha, so we must worship him". South Khmer people in Tra Vinh province believe that the dead cannot directly enjoy the offerings of the living but must be dedicated to monks. Therefore, they do not set up an ancestral altar in their home; they only worship Buddha in the most solemn place in the house. The deceased's ashes are sent to the temple, and the worship is to bring offerings to the temple to present to

Buddha and monks. This is a very different point compared to the ancestral worship ritual of the Khmer people in the South of Tra Vinh province and other ethnic groups.

The Khmer people's ancestral worship ceremony, called *Dolta*, is held once a year. After the *Lunar New Year, Chol Chnam Thmay*, the *Sen Dolta* festival, is the second biggest festival of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh of the year. According to the Khmer language, "*Dolta*" is composed of the word "*Dol*" meaning "grandmother" and the word "*Ta*" meaning "grandfather". Thus, "*Dolta*" in the Khmer language means people related by blood, family, lineage, and ancestors, including those who have passed away. To remember the gratitude of ancestors, grandparents, parents, and deceased relatives, the Khmer people organise the *Sen Dolta* ceremony.

### ***Beliefs in Worshipping the Moon God and Custom Worshipping the Moon***

According to author Pham Tiet Khanh (2021), in the wet rice agricultural production life of the Southern Khmer people, the belief in the *Moon God* plays a very important role. For Khmer people, the Moon is considered a god who governs, protects, and regulates crops to help people have a good harvest and do business well during the year. The Khmer people's moon worshipping ceremony is held to thank the *Moon God* for protecting the crops, giving the people a lush, bountiful harvest, and helping the people have a prosperous life. In this sense, the Khmer Moon worshipping ceremony has similarities with the "*Thuong Dien*" festival of the Kinh people. In addition, this ceremony is also called the *Ok Om Bok* ceremony. In terms of semantics, *Ok Om Bok* means "Putting flat green sticky rice by hand" so this festival is also known as the "Flat green sticky rice Festival". The Moon worshipping ceremony is held every year on the 15th day of the 10th lunar month. This is a big festival for the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province.

Besides, according to Tran Minh Thuong (2020), the *Moon worship* ceremony also has its origin based on Buddhist scriptures. Legend has it that Shakyamuni Buddha's past life was a rabbit, living on the banks of the Ganges River. Rabbits have several close friends, living in harmony, loving and helping each other. One day, when the moon was very full, Rabbit's friends discussed and decided to go look for food together to help the beggars. As for the Rabbit, he sat in meditation in front of the cave. The good deeds of the animals touched the hearts of heaven. God Sakah tried to test the hearts of the animals. The kindness and noble deeds of the animals and the Rabbit's self-sacrifice caused God to draw the Rabbit's image on the Moon for posterity to follow. From now on, Khmer people have held rituals to worship the *Moon god* and commemorate the Buddha's noble deeds in his life as a rabbit. According to ND6: "The moon worshipping ceremony is a place of

spiritual liberation, a place to remember the Buddha who has gone through many tribulations; therefore, people need to purify their bodies with the moon worshipping ceremony, there we meet rabbit, the reincarnation of Buddha". Thus, according to the concept of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province, worshipping the moon is to thank the moon god for protecting the crops during the year, bringing favourable weather and wind, helping every family have a good harvest, and at the same time helping farmers have a good harvest in the coming year. This ritual is also greatly influenced by Theravada Buddhism, as the legends of these beliefs are all associated with Theravada Buddhism.

Moon worshipping ceremony: on the full moon night of the 10th lunar month, Khmer people gather at the pagoda, or many families gather at a relative's house; everyone goes to the front yard to wait for the moon to rise and performs the moon worshipping ceremony. The Moon worshipping ritual (*Ok Om Bok* ceremony) at the temple is conducted similarly to that at Khmer homes. However, when held at a temple, the important part is chanting sutras, receiving precepts and listening to sermons. The ceremony at the temple became more bustling due to the large number of people participating under the guidance of the monks. Monks also make rafts from banana peels like people make banana rafts when worshipping at home, but the banana rafts at the pagoda are larger, shaped like a temple, and decorated with flags. The banana raft is also full of offerings. When the monks finished chanting, accompanied by the lively and bustling sound of sa yam drums, the people lit all the lamps on the banana rafts and let the rafts float down the water. Many rafts floated slowly on the river, one after another, with the sound of cheers and bustling, motivating drums. When the rafts float away, people return to the pagoda and play folk games together in a fun atmosphere (Thuong, 2020).

### ***Breeding Fertility Beliefs***

According to author Ngo Duc Thinh (2001, p. 248): "*Fertility belief*—often referred to in Vietnamese as 'tín ngưỡng phồn thực'—is rooted in the symbolic desire for abundance and regeneration. He argues that for agricultural societies, particularly wet-rice cultivators, prosperity is intimately associated with supernatural forces believed to govern human and natural reproduction. As such, ritual practices emerged to venerate these unseen powers, laying the foundation for enduring fertility culty". Ngo Duc Thinh situates this belief within a *longue durée* framework, describing it as an indigenous cosmology originating in prehistoric society, persisting through feudal periods, and leaving ritual vestiges visible in contemporary practice.

Similarly, Tran Ngoc Them (2001, p. 234) believes that breeding *fertility* is “the belief that prays for the proliferation of nature and humans (prosperity means many, really means to proliferate)”. Since ancient times, people have lived mainly in wet rice agriculture, so the elements of heaven, earth, and water are extremely important in the proliferation of all things. Therefore, people have come to worship the proliferation of humans and nature to survive and develop. The people have their hands and feet dirty in the fields, and their scientific knowledge is still limited, so they have faith that through rituals and ways of worship, the natural energy in humans will be transmitted to all things, from which beliefs will flourish. The beliefs in breeding fertility are the wish for fertility, plants to grow, and good crops (Khanh, 2021). Breeding fertility beliefs are expressed in worshipping the reproductive organs (worshipping the tools of reproduction and growth) and worshipping the act of mating. This unique type of ancient belief is popular in Southeast Asia. According to ND8: “Prosperity means wealth, prosperity in life and abundance. To have wealth and prosperity, our many children and grandchildren must worship the Linga and Yoni because it is a tool for giving birth.”

The enduring imprint of fertility belief (tín ngưỡng phồn thực) among the Khmer people community in Tra Vinh province is most vividly manifested in ritual practices associated with the traditional *Lunar New Year, Chol Chnam Thmay*. One of the most prominent symbolic acts is the construction of sand stupas (phnom-khsach) within temple precincts. These temporary sacred mounds, often built in multiples and shaped according to cosmological symbolism, are believed to concentrate generative energies that ensure agricultural abundance and communal prosperity. Central to these fertility-oriented rites is the veneration of the Linga, a phallic symbol representing male generative force, which is ritually enshrined in select Neak-Ta temples. Notably, a Linga is still worshipped at the Neak-Ta temple located in Ward 8, Tra Vinh City. Moreover, architectural remnants of Linga-Yoni symbolism—emblems of cosmic duality and reproduction—remain visible in the sacred landscape of the region. These include stylised Linga carvings integrated into the triple-arched entrance gates (gopura) of Sam Bua Pagoda in Luong Hoa commune, Chau Thanh district, and Phuong Pagoda in Ward 7, Tra Vinh city, Tra Vinh province. Such ritual and architectural expressions illustrate the deep-rooted presence of fertility cults in Khmer vernacular religion and their syncretic integration within Theravāda Buddhist frameworks across southern Vietnam.

### ***Belief in Worshipping the God of Rice***

The belief in worshipping the *rice god* is common among Southeast Asian residents. Previously, the agricultural economy in Southeast Asia played an important role, mainly in the growth of wet rice. Therefore, rice is the soul of production activities and residents' spiritual life. Wet rice cultivation has given rise to many folk beliefs in Southeast Asia. Among them is the belief in *worshipping the god of rice* (keeping the soul of rice).

Vietnam is an agricultural country, so the wet rice agricultural culture is very strong among the people. Since ancient times, farmers have believed that everything always has a soul and a body. The rice plant also has a rice soul residing in it. The soul will bring vitality, helping the rice plant to flourish, bloom, and produce seeds. Similar to humans, rice plants will die if the soul leaves. From here, the ritual to preserve the soul of the rice plant/the rice god belief appeared very naturally, like many other beliefs of the agricultural residents here. According to ND9: "For many generations, our people have been able to live on thanks to the rice and rice plants brought by the rice god; if we want a good harvest, we must worship the rice god. The rice god will bless us with good harvests". This belief has many similarities with some other ethnic groups in Vietnam. This traditional ritual of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province has a high community character, expressing agricultural residents' spiritual and cultural values .

For the Khmer people, the symbol of the rice god is a woman riding on the back of a fish, holding a branch of rice - the mount and the handle are both associated with wet rice agriculture, with 19 souls (Binh, 2004, p. 27). The belief in *worshipping the god of rice* has many legends explaining its birth. The legend of the rice god of the Khmer people says that in the past, when rice was ripe, it would fly back to people's homes, and people did not need to harvest it. One day, a couple quarrelled, making the rice god unhappy, so they left. The Khmer people tried every way to convince the god of rice to stay, but she refused. Therefore, famine happened to the people. Seeing this, a shaman invited the rice god to return. Since then, rice has not flown home on it (Chu, 1998, p.127).

In the past, Khmer people had rituals and taboos in each stage of the growth and development of rice. However, nowadays, they only worship rice spirits before harvesting. The offering is a tray of rice and soup (Vinh, 2015, p. 48). After harvesting rice, they bring it home, and the Khmer people also make offerings to the rice fields. This is one of the traditional customs of the Khmer people of Tra Vinh province. To thank the gods for summarising the achievements of the crop and learning lessons for the next crop, the Khmer people organised worship of the rice field.

### **Evaluate the Importance, Position, and Role of Folk Beliefs in the Spiritual Life of Southern Khmer People in Tra Vinh Province**

To evaluate the importance, position, and role of folk beliefs in the spiritual life of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province, after reviewing the comments and assessments of previous studies, we have found that *folk beliefs* hold a very important position in the spiritual life of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province and govern almost all of their activities (both material and spiritual). To further consolidate these observations and assessments, the authors surveyed 75 people (aged from 25 to 70, with different educational backgrounds, socio-economic status, and other occupations).

The survey results show that the rating focuses on the “Important” level, reaching 49.33% (with 37/75 respondents); next is the level “Very important”, reaching 38.67% (with 29/75 respondents), “Quite important” reaching 8.00% (with 6/75 respondents). However, there are still 4.00% (with 3/75 respondents) answering “Less important” and no one answering “Not important”.

Responding to the importance of folk beliefs in the spiritual life of the Khmer people in the Southern region of Tra Vinh province, according to ND10: “Belief activities are like the breathing of our people, if there are no secular belief activities, their lives will become poor and sick. Therefore, beliefs and activities play a very important role in the spiritual life and govern people's material life”. Both participants, ND11 and ND13, expressed concordant views, indicating agreement with the stated position. According to Mai Ngoc Chu's assessment (1998), Khmer people create beliefs, but beliefs become the spiritual fulcrum of the people, even dominating the economic life of many Southern Khmer people. From these comments and assessments, it can be seen that folk religious activities have held an important position not only in the spiritual life but also greatly influenced the material life of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province.

### **The Role of Folk Beliefs in the Spiritual Life of Southern Khmer People in Tra Vinh Province Today**

Forms of belief, in general, and *folk beliefs*, in particular, all play a certain role in the life of a community or ethnic group. The folk beliefs of the Khmer people in Vietnam, in general and in Tra Vinh province, also play an important role in their spiritual life. Researching folk beliefs in the spiritual life of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province today, we see the following roles:

Firstly, the folk beliefs of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province have partly met the needs of cultural and religious activities, thereby contributing to psychological relief and balancing the people's spiritual life. The folk beliefs of the

Khmer people in Tra Vinh province are currently attracting the participation of many Khmer people. Not only that, but it tends to attract the attention and participation of other ethnic groups in Tra Vinh province every time the festival comes. This proves it has met the community's cultural, mental and spiritual needs. Khmer folk believe festivals are mainly related to praying for favourable weather and winds for agricultural production, praying for peace for family members and the community, and praying for grandparents to live healthily. In addition, belief activities are also a place for people in "phum" and "soc" to exchange and share joys, sorrows, difficulties and hardships in daily life. According to researcher Mai Ngoc Chu (1998), "The fact that people gather and interact in belief activities shows the need to share joys and sorrows in life". This shows that belief activities are very necessary for the spiritual life of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province.

Although society has changed a lot today, folk beliefs still hold a place and an important role in the spiritual and material life of the Khmer people in the South in Tra Vinh province. The results of research and direct interviews with people show that, in religious activities, after performing the ceremony to worship the gods, families will participate in on-site exchanges. Usually, the men in the family and the men from neighbouring fields, along with the village elders, exchange and eat the offerings they have made to the gods. The meal can last long or short, depending on the homeowner, but usually it must be until the evening, when "the wine pot is dry" (must be until everyone is full and drunk).

Secondly, the Khmer people's folk beliefs play an important role in forming and developing customs and festivals. Khmer people's folk belief festivals are often associated with pagodas and praying for deceased relatives to show gratitude to the deceased and filial piety to ancestors. All Khmer folk belief festivals aim to create attachment and unite family members, clans and communities, bringing spiritual stability to the people. Currently, festivals related to the folk religious activities of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province are fully organised yearly. Folk religious activities originate from religious beliefs and have become the customs and cultural activities of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province.

Every year, around April and May (solar calendar), the *Neak-Ta* worship ceremony is held to pray for good rain, peaceful winds, and lush fields and gardens. This is the time to start the rainy season in preparation for farming and sowing work. Sen Dolta Festival's main activities are worshipping grandparents and ancestors, chanting sutras to pray for the souls of deceased relatives to be freed, and praying for grandparents and ancestors to bless their families and children with good health; business has many advantages. For the South Khmer

people in Tra Vinh province, the moon is considered a god who governs, protects, and regulates crops to help people have a good harvest and do business well during the year. The South Khmer people in Tra Vinh province's *Moon worshipping ritual* (*Ok Om Bok ceremony*) is held to thank the Moon god for protecting the crops, giving people a lush, bountiful harvest, and helping people have a good life, warm and full. Forms of fertility belief, worship of Arak, the god of fields, god of rice, and ancestors, all express the community's gratitude to the gods who have helped, protected and protected them.

Festivals are occasions for spiritual activities, entertainment, and the maintenance of community cohesion. According to Khmer folk beliefs, Achars can also cure diseases, and shamans (Krou Tay) can write and cast spells. Because Khmer folk beliefs still play an important role in spiritual life today, they still have lasting vitality in the lives of Khmer people. Besides the positive values and folk beliefs of the Khmer people, negative elements still exist. During the process of international integration, the folk beliefs of the Khmer people have undergone certain changes. The issue that needs to be raised today is the need for appropriate solutions to help promote positive aspects and limit the negative aspects of Khmer people's folk beliefs.

Thirdly, the role of Khmer folk beliefs in moral education for the young generation. The South Khmer people in Tra Vinh province worship their ancestors to show gratitude to those who gave birth to them and, at the same time, pray for their ancestors to always be close to their descendants to encourage and support them in life. daily life. Because of the concept that "death is not the end", every family practices "sống tết chết giỗ" (When the person we are indebted to is still alive, we must remember to celebrate the New Year carefully, and when that person has died we must remember to pay their death anniversary seriously according to custom); consider its morality and the discipline of the family and clan. Through ancestor worship rituals, the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province want to express gratitude and respect towards their ancestors. In every family, ancestor worship has become the morality of "uống nước nhớ nguồn" (gratitude), "filial piety" and a humane lifestyle that values gratitude. When each person succeeds, they respectfully report to their ancestors, thank them for their support, and rejoice with them. Ancestor worship beliefs encourage people to strive for goodness, work, and study well to succeed and make their ancestors, clan, village, and homeland shine. According to ND14: "Every time we hold an ancestor worship ceremony, we always vow to cultivate ourselves, accumulate virtue, and do good deeds so that our ancestors can feel at ease".

Through the performance of domestic and communal ritual practices, the intangible cultural heritage of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province is actively



preserved and transmitted. These rites embody symbolic expressions of sacred cosmology and function as vital mechanisms for sustaining core values within the community's spiritual culture. Notably, the continuation of customs such as reciprocal labour exchange (mutual aid networks), the observance of ancestral and agrarian rituals, and the intergenerational sharing of experiential knowledge in agricultural production all serve to reinforce collective identity. Such practices foster social cohesion, mutual support, and cooperative resilience, thereby contributing to the formation of a prosperous, stable, and culturally cohesive society.

Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province not only worship those who have contributed to giving birth and raising the deceased but also worship those who have contributed to "phum", "soc" and to the residential community and the land where they live, where I live, there are temples and "eldest monks". According to ND15: "When we burn incense for our ancestors, the first thing we do is burn incense for the Buddha, then light incense for the "eldest monk". On important days, we also go to the temple to burn incense for those who have contributed to "phum" and "soc". That contributes to the connection between the family, "phum", "soc", and the land where they live; contributes to consolidating, maintaining and promoting the traditional moral values of the homeland (such as filial piety, compassion, community, sympathy, diligence, creativity, studious spirit, will to progress, patriotism, etc. whenever facing ancestors, gods, and monks (i.e., sacred beings), people do not dare to deceive, do not dare to show disrespect or rudeness for fear of being reprimanded or punished. They must always be cautious, respectful, and use the best gestures and behaviour. Belief in an invisible divine being can help misguided people awaken their conscience and return to living honestly. At the same time, helping people to be more compassionate and tolerant, ready to sympathise and forgive, "hit those who run away, but who can bear to hit those who run back". Beliefs about gods (gods who punish those who do not know how to submit, obey village rules, have a joking attitude, blaspheme the gods, etc.) make many people restrain themselves and control their behaviour accordingly.

### **The Value of Folk Beliefs in the Spiritual Life of Southern Khmer People in Tra Vinh Province**

Folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province contain positive values and are a place to store cultural values imbued with the national identity of the Khmer people. Author Ngo Duc Thinh (2022), when researching beliefs and religious culture in Vietnam, said that religious beliefs are the environment that arises, integrates and preserves cultural activities and folk arts. Belief is the place

where cultural values are produced and integrated. Beliefs include pure beliefs and rituals, expressing and transmitting those religious symbols and ideas. Beliefs are expressed through myths, legends, miracles, forms of doctrine, etc., to describe the origin and life of the gods. To convey that content, beliefs not only use ordinary language but also use artistic language. Therefore, beliefs have produced and integrated art forms such as singing, dancing, etc. Religious rituals all have forms of music and folk songs.

According to Ngo Duc Thinh (2022), beliefs are also an environment that preserves cultural and artistic values. This is reflected in the fact that cultural and artistic activities in festivals are no longer conventional but are customary and ritualistic. Many ancient customs have been preserved in festivals. Folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province also contain the above positive values and need to be promoted in the current period. Based on the review of previous studies, research, and interviews with Khmer people in Tra Vinh province, folk beliefs about the spiritual life of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province have the following values:

Firstly, folk beliefs contribute to preserving and building love for the homeland and country. According to author Hong Vu Van (2022), beliefs and religions play an important role in educating patriotism, love of culture and love of humanity. Beliefs and culture of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province not only meet the cultural and spiritual needs of the people but also contribute to consolidating and building great national unity as well as building and protecting the country. Southern Khmer folk belief festival, Tra Vinh province not only helps people express gratitude to the generations of ancestors who reclaimed land and established hamlets, but also reminds people of their responsibility to preserve the land, building the love for homeland and country. Therefore, patriotism becomes “the focus of focuses, the value of values” and “the greatest emotional driving force of national life, and at the same time the highest step in the system of moral values of our people” (Vinh, 2015, p. 173).

When the French colonialists invaded, witnessing the cowardice of the Nguyen court, the people of the Mekong Delta (including Tra Vinh province) steadfastly joined the uprising movement, fighting against the French invaders to protect their homeland who was led by patriot, as: Truong Dinh, Nguyen Huu Huan, Nguyen Trung Truc, Do Thua Luong, Do Thua Tu, etc. After 1945, French colonialism returned to invade the South, and the comprehensive resistance war against the French colonialists attracted a large number of people to participate. Many examples of anti-French colonialism and United States of America imperialism have appeared through the Union of Patriotic Monks in the Mekong Delta. Today, organisations such as the “Patriotic Monks Solidarity Association”

propagate policies and guidelines so Buddhists believe in the Party's leadership and the State's management.

Nowadays, the good values and cultural values rich in humanity of folk beliefs have created an important motivation for the Khmer people to always strive for the good fight for beauty, progress, and human happiness. In recent times, many hostile forces have sought every way to destroy the spirit of solidarity of the Vietnamese ethnic groups. In that context, in the religious activities of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province, the spirit of solidarity and stability is increasingly demonstrated. In religious activities, the image of the fatherland and homeland is placed solemnly and at the forefront. Many sabotage activities of hostile forces have been discovered and reported to the authorities by the people of "phum" and "soc". This has created peace in "phum" and "soc", contributing to the local authorities' promotion of socio-economic development.

Second, folk beliefs are the accommodation to preserve the good customs and traditions of the nation. Folk belief activities of the South Khmer people in the South of Tra Vinh province are where traditional identities and good customs and values of the Khmer people in Vietnam, in general and the Khmer people of the South, are accumulated and preserved. Tra Vinh province in particular, has a simple life with high community cohesion. Khmer people have a very rustic emotional life. For Khmer people, family, clan and community are always highly valued. According to ND6: "I work far away and only come home occasionally, but when people in the "phum" and "soc" know that I'm back, they often come over to ask and chat very closely."

In Khmer people's folk beliefs, the tradition of family education and family affection is expressed. Khmer folk beliefs reflect respect for the elderly and love for children. The tradition of loving, nurturing and educating young children is reflected in the Khmer life cycle ceremony related to conception, pregnancy, birth, and adulthood. These ceremonies express the family's wishes and expectations for a good future for the child. Respect for the elderly is shown during the *Chol Chnam Thmay* ceremony as children and grandchildren gather to bathe their grandparents, wish them a long life, pray for their blessings, wish them and their parents good health, long life, etc.; this is a psychological therapy through which the elderly are motivated, encouraged, improve their health, and live happily with their children and grandchildren in the family. According to ND13, "The festival is not only a place to have fun but also a place to pray for blessings, peace, and good luck for family members. Therefore, for us, during those festivals, the most enjoyable thing is to gather with our grandparents and relatives". The Vietnamese have a saying, "joy like a festival", which shows that through the implementation of festivals, the cultural values of the residents are preserved and promoted.

During the *Sen Dolta* and *Chol Chnam Thmay* festivals, Khmer people bring items to the pagoda to worship deceased relatives and pray for a requiem, which is also carried out at home. These beliefs and religious activities of the Khmer people have both spiritual meaning and show the care and concern of children and grandchildren in the family for the elderly, demonstrating the tradition of valuing filial piety. According to ND11: "I believe in Buddha very much, so on the *Sen Dolta* festival and *Chol Chnam Thmay* festival, I often bring offerings to the temple to worship my grandparents, hoping they will be saved." "In addition, the *Sen Dolta* festival and *Chol Chnam Thmay* festival are places where children and grandchildren show their filial piety, so we prepare offerings very carefully, ND2 said. Thus, the typical values of the spiritual culture of the community are expressed through maintaining community activities, maintaining traditional rituals, etc. From there, we create solidarity and help each other in the production process and daily life towards a prosperous, stable community and a civilised society.

Thirdly, folk beliefs are a place to consolidate community sentiment and strengthen the great unity of the entire nation. Folk religious activities of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province strengthen the feelings within the family and clan and provide an opportunity to unite the community, "phum" and "soc". Through folk belief activities, people directly participate in organising, performing, and enjoying cultural activities, and they become creators of cultural values and improve their spirits, solidarity and community attachment. Folk religious activities of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province, such as *Neak-Ta*, *Chol Chnam Thmay*, *Ok Om Bok*, *Sen Dolta*, etc., are an opportunity for people in the community to meet, perform traditional arts, and participate in cultural activities. They participate in folk games such as boat racing, sack jumping, water splashing, tug of war, etc. Residents of the "phum" and "soc" will gather at the pagodas to listen to the monks read prayers for peace and rebirth, then go to the pagoda yard to participate in cultural, artistic, and entertaining activities.

In addition, during these festival holidays, Khmer people gather at *Neak-Ta* temples, sacred loci dedicated to local tutelary spirits to pray for everyone's peace and good crops. These gatherings are often accompanied by participatory festive activities, including traditional games, which reinforce social cohesion and cultural continuity within the community. On *Neak-Ta* worship occasions, each Khmer people's family will bring to *Neak-Ta* temple items such as roasted or boiled pig head, boiled chicken, boiled duck, roast duck, fruit cakes, incense, lamps, etc., to worship. After finishing the offering, everyone will take a portion to send home; the rest will be served, and everyone will eat together. This activity attracts the

participation of Khmer people and other ethnic groups living together in “phum” and “soc”.

Currently, charity work such as giving gifts to people experiencing poverty is also emphasised with the meaning of solidarity, good leaves cover torn leaves, and many gifts such as rice, soy sauce, cooking oil, and money are also given to disadvantaged people. These activities have contributed to strengthening community solidarity. Khmer folk belief activities in ceremonies and religious rituals also have a profound educational meaning: guiding people to good things, teaching the next generation production experiences, and the traditional lifestyle of our people. The folk beliefs and activities of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province demonstrate positive values, which is the place to store and preserve the cultural values, traditional arts and fine customs of the Khmer people.

### **Issues that Arise and Need to be Discussed**

Monks have a great position and influence in the minds of the Khmer people. Monks are considered to represent Buddha to teach and educate living beings, practice rituals, etc.; therefore, monks are always respected and trusted teachers in the community. According to Mai Ngoc Chu (1998), Pham Tiet Khanh (2021): Monks hold a very important position in folk rituals and are highly trusted by people. According to Nguyen Van Luom’s assessment (2018), monks play a leading role in the spiritual life of Khmer people, and important rituals all have the role of monks. In the past, young Khmer people needed to go to temples to practice. This ritual obligation is regarded as an expression of filial piety and profound gratitude toward one’s parents, an essential moral duty that every young Khmer man is expected to fulfil. Within the cultural framework of Khmer society in Tra Vinh province, it functions as a spiritual rite and a rite of passage that affirms the individual’s moral maturity and social responsibility. Significantly, the performance of this obligation enhances a young man’s social standing and is considered a key determinant of personal reputation and familial honour before marriage.

However, today, the Khmer people’s beliefs in Tra Vinh province have changed; they no longer consider the need for young people to undergo a period of spiritual practice to be eligible for marriage. According to Lam Quang Vinh (2015): Maybe due to the rapid development of society, the living conditions of Khmer people have also changed, so some religious activities have also changed. According to Bui Thi Loan (2018): nowadays, pagodas no longer educate standards of personality and morality. Due to the influence of the market economy, work pressure as well as the speed of industrialisation, the leisure time of Buddhists is not much; the time to go to temples, chant sutras, make offerings,

do meritorious deeds, and volunteer is also limited, not as much as before. Therefore, the activities of monks must also change. The forms of begging for alms, chanting sutras, and performing rituals have been reduced and lost their solemnity, and the image and role of pagodas and monks are no longer considered as important as before. These changes require further research to more clearly analyse the causes, fundamental changes, and impact on the spiritual life of the Khmer people.

Furthermore, according to Lam Quang Vinh (2012), with the development of science and technology, the integration and introduction of beliefs, religions, festivals, etc., of many cultures. Festivals and beliefs that have long been embedded in the spiritual life of the Khmer people are somewhat overlooked. For a long time, the religious festival of the Khmer people in the South, Tra Vinh province has the characteristics of the life of the people in the rice growing area, associated with the cultural and spiritual life of the Khmer people who went to reclaim and open the world (Hung & Van, 2021). However, in recent years, due to many different reasons, the traditional folk festival of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province has had certain limitations. In general, the level of preservation of Khmer festivals is not high; young people, mostly young people, are no longer as enthusiastic about festivals and folk beliefs as before; instead, they like to participate in them. Contemporary festivals often originate through processes of cultural diffusion, either as transnational imports or as interethnic adoptions from other cultural communities. These externally derived celebratory forms are frequently localised and recontextualised to align with existing symbolic frameworks, ritual practices, and communal values.

Thus, clarifying the values of folk beliefs in the spiritual and material life of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province has contributed to affirming the position and role of religious activities. These important spiritual values contribute to creating unique characteristics in the system of 54 ethnic groups of Vietnam, creating diversity but unity in Vietnamese culture. However, due to objective and subjective conditions, this study has not yet clarified the limitations of the religious activities of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province. This is also a suggestion for the authors to continue researching in the future.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The above research has shown that the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province have a very unique cultural and religious life with many typical forms of community-based folk beliefs. Representative forms of Khmer folk belief encompass a diverse range of ritual systems and sacred cosmologies, including the veneration of Neak Ta as local tutelary spirits; ancestral worship as a means of

maintaining lineage continuity; lunar deity worship and associated rites directed toward the Moon God; ritual cults linked to human and agricultural reproduction; Arak spirit beliefs rooted in animistic healing and possession traditions; and the propitiation of agrarian deities such as the *God of the Fields*, the *God of Livestock*, and the *Rice God*. All of these reflect an intricate cosmology deeply embedded in the Khmer community's relationship with nature, kinship, and the community and play a very important role in the spiritual life of Khmer people. It contains positive values and is a place to store cultural values imbued with the national identity of the Khmer people. Folk beliefs and activities attract the participation of many Khmer communities and other ethnic groups, and are the basis for strengthening emotions within the family, clan, and community cohesion of "phum", "soc". Folk belief activities have great meaning and value as a cultural element in the community's life from the past to the present.

The research results have shown that the folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province are one of the typical cultural products of the community in terms of living, existing, and adapting to this land. Khmer people's beliefs and cultural practices aim to meet spiritual needs and unite the community. Besides, practising beliefs is also a place to preserve and promote the community's cultural traditions. However, due to the limitation of research time, the number of survey samples is not large (75 people); therefore, some comments on the value of religious activities need time to be verified and clarified. At the same time, it is necessary to clarify the limitations and causes of limitations in the beliefs and activities of Southern Khmer people in Tra Vinh province. This delineates a future direction for in-depth ethnographic and interdisciplinary investigation in the forthcoming stage of the research topic.

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