



THE VALUE OF THE TRADITIONAL ETHICS OF THE SOUTH KHMER COMMUNITY THROUGH THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE

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Abstract:

The Khmer community is one of the ethnic groups with a long process of settling and living in the Southern region. They are agricultural residents with a secluded lifestyle based on the main method of wet rice cultivation. Khmer people have a long tradition of agricultural production, which is a self-sufficient economy and much dependent on the natural environment. In the process of settling and living, the Khmer community in Southern region always considers nature and supernatural forces as the supreme creators who always protect them in their spiritual life. Because of that reason together with the concept of the three-combination "Thien - Dia - Nhan", which means heaven - earth - human is the one, Khmer community has not only promoted physical production activities but also created and built their living space to become unique and mysterious. That existence process which has formed noble qualities in relation to nature has bequeathed lasting and sustainable values so far.

Keywords: nature, traditional moralities, worldview, outlook on life

1. Introduction

From the very beginning, people have had a close relationship with nature. People can survive in a certain time if they are separated from the social environment, but people cannot live without air to breathe, water to drink, food to eat as well as cannot produce food and goods without soil, water and light. Similarly, without those prerequisite conditions, the traditional moral values of Khmer ethnic people in An Giang province, in the relationship between people and nature, could not be formed, exist and develop sustainably until today.

Traditional ethics in the relationship between people and nature of the Khmer community in An Giang have long attracted the attention of many domestic and foreign

scientists with many works in different views. Unlike previous works, in this work, we will present the content and value of traditional ethics in the relationship between people and nature of Khmer ethnic people in An Giang province. Research methods are analysis and synthesis, comparative and filed research. The value of the project is a claim that has a great practical and crucial meaning aims at contributing to the education of traditional values in the spiritual life of the whole community in the impact of the integration process in An Giang province today.

2. Content

Formed in association with practical activities, traditional ethics of the Khmer ethnic community in relation to nature express the behavior and attitude of respect and compliance with nature and the environment. It is a close-knit lifestyle based on the foundation of Buddhist philosophy and traditional folk conception, which has form a Khmer society where people are friendly, modest and respectful for morality. This issue is clearly demonstrated through their relationship, empathy together with their life philosophy of being adhere and cohesive to the natural world and supernatural forces in the spiritual life of the Khmer community.

Due to the great influence of natural and living conditions, the thinking of the Khmer community in Nam Bo is distinctly mythical. In this region, there are mountains, forests, plains with [distinct](#) seasons of rain and sun. During a dry season, the land is arid and devastating the life while flash flood [inundated](#) the fields in the rainy season. Is it the image recorded in the myth of "the origin of the universe and all species"? with the presence of God Teresa, then God Maha Prum. Evidently, in addition to the elements of Indian culture, the natural characteristics themselves make local residents form their concepts toward the world greatly deeply. Besides, originated from ancient myths or legends such as, the tale story of Bà Om Pond (Trà Vinh) and Bôpiel killed crocodile in river in Long Xuyên, the tale story of the Sister ravine and Brother ravine (Tri Tôn district, An Giang province), or the tale story of Mekong Mountain (Ba Den Mountain, Tay Ninh province), ...all of which reflect the relationship and interrelation between nature and human beings, which contain tremendous value of life.

According to records of Mr Son Nam, a historical and cultural researcher, in the project named "Understanding Hau Giang land and An Giang land history", there are the following notes "*new land in right side of Hau river which is flooding in a large area with plantations that have just formed, sparse population, Bay Nui area, (...). To Son Pagoda is located at the west side of the foot of Tô (Bay Nui) mountain where there is a turtle-shaped stone. This is a temple that both Vietnamese and Khmer people respect and pray for luck when there is drought. This temple worships a form of aquatic deity who is called gods of Sa Dec in Khmer language*" (Son Nam, 2015, p.218). Similarly, even in the traditional culture of Khmer people in An Giang province, there are still a number of traditional beliefs that reflect the mental and spiritual lives of agricultural residents, which are worshipping several kinds of spiritual things such as: Arăk, Néak Ta, Mother-Goddess,... Therefore, when

standing in front of the immense and vast nature, Khmer residents always express their anxiety, self-restraint and compliance with nature and supernatural forces. Their main desire is to live peacefully and do business well. At the same time, in order to reciprocate the gratitude of goddess and the natural world, the Khmer community does not forget to pray and worship in thanksgiving "*heavenly father, mother land*" who always have been paying attention to them as well as bless the life of the whole community. During the year, they often organize solemn ceremonies together with several traditional festivals such as: worshipping Arăk, Néak Ta, praying for happiness and peacefulness in the traditional festival of Chol Chnam Thmay, or worshipping the moon and stars in the traditional ceremony of Ok Om Bok... At these ceremonies, in addition to mere rituals, there are also a standard system of human conception, which derived from a lifestyle which is inclined to psyche, religion and based on the concept of triangle "heaven-earth- human", which have been mixed by cultural trend in ancient Khmer society.

From the content of the traditional morality of Khmer community in relation to nature, it can be seen that the value summarized from the lifestyle of the Khmer community is expressed in two main aspects:

A. First, the value of perceiving the world (outlook on life) in relation to nature

If the cognitive value is the value of discovering the truth, finding out the fact, the value of the emotional, sensational and rational activities of human; the value of the world awareness is expressed in the process in which people, through their interaction with nature which can guide human behavior so that they can perform accordance with the laws of nature and with human themselves, aim at formulating the standards of ethics, morality as well as establishing standards of goodness, beauty, set of dos and don'ts, set of reasonable and unreasonable things in relation to the world.

From the early beginning, people have had a close relationship with nature. People can survive in a certain time if they are separated from the social environment, but people cannot live without air to breathe, water to drink, food to eat as well as cannot produce food and goods without soil, water and light. In order to maintain the existence and development, humans must produce food and goods first. And in order to have effective material production, people first need to be conscious of world around them as well as be aware of themselves. The result of that cognitive process has shaped the certain notions and views about the world and humans, especially the role and meaning of human life in the world. For the rice farmers who live and work closely depend on the natural world as the Khmer community, they become more thoroughly aware of the relationship between people and the natural world.

From the way of cultivating by irrigation methods, casting the causeway to the custom of worshipping "rice soul" (Preah Me), some mysterious stories explain the natural phenomena such as rain, wind, sun, the moon, mountain gods, river gods, ... together with remnants of the matriarchy and the residence custom in wife's hometown still exist in the Khmer society which has been entirely influenced by Buddhism. Also,

from the unique spiritual life such as worshipping stone in the Neak Ta temple, the Ark belief or the agricultural rituals in dry season, all of those are profound marks of the living concepts which must be in harmony with nature and supernatural forces. Some customs such as marriage, giving birth, funeral, death anniversary, house construction ...etc have been greatly influenced by living conditions even. At the same time, due to the fact of process of labor and production based on the semi-geological land (both plains and hills) and from the world outlook about Theravada Buddhism, numerous of legends and ancient stories such as Treasure Bâuran, historical documents such as Sutra (Sastra) which were formed in Khmer folk world aim at praising the spirit of labor, nature-love and respecting the Supreme in nature.

According to the author's understanding, derived from the values of ancient culture such as myths, legends or Khmer folk tales, which have been transmitted down from generation to generation, it has been shown that the natural world has a significant impact on traditional psychology, lifestyle and customs of the Khmer community, and thereby it can be easily seen that the concepts of cosmology dualism or contrast dualistic theory through conceptions about land and water, high mountains and plains, continents and seas, winged species and aquatic species,... which initially show the peculiar lifestyle of wet rice civilization, are also the basis for moral concepts associated with nature together with supernatural forces in the spiritual life of the Khmer community. In addition, through the forms of spiritual and religious beliefs, or traditional agricultural rituals, it can be shown that the evident dominance of the natural world to the type of cultural and religious activities of people, which is the polytheistic belief still existing until today in Khmer society. It is an important and reliable support in the spiritual life for their mode of living.

The awareness about the natural world in the Khmer community's mind has always been enhanced by the strong mental domination in people's lives. Some perspectives on cosmology dualism or contrast dualistic theory consistently have a great impact on people's awareness and thinking. Khmer people believe that all of the existing things and daily natural phenomena are associated with aspirations and agricultural activities. For example, they believe that water is a form of material, which is present in the universe very prematurely (*Khmer ancient story - Origin of the universe and all species*). Water which is combined with three other forms of material including soil, fire and wind creates everything in the world, including human beings

In other words, four elements of soil, water, fire and wind constitute all things. Water is also a symbol of purity, chastity, softness, gentleness, freedom,... Hence, the women in Khmer viewpoints are always seen as a symbol of water, like mother's breastmilk. So, Khmer people call water as "Pră-Kong-Kia" with the meaning of "Water God" and name the biggest river flowing through this region as "Mekong" - Mother of the Water. Khmer people also said that the reason for the fresh and cool water source is thanks to the protector god who is called "Arăk Tuk" in the Khmer language.

In addition, in the Pres Thong legend (Indian Prince) - Neang Neak (Princess Soma), it is about the origin of the ethnic group, in which water is an indispensable

element toward the development of the nation. Neang-Neak (Neang-Teavatey) is the daughter of King Thuy Qi (Sa-dach Pha-chong-Neak) and a model of Khmer people, whose origin was from the world of aquatic species (Thal-pha-chong-neak) of Batatal land - the land of the ocean; Neang Neak is a woman who has got a half-human body and a half is a seven-headed snake, got married to Pres-Thong in Koklo-lok island, and founded the first Khmer dynasty. They themselves brought essential knowledge to Khmer people and many elements that make up the brilliant Khmer culture. Today, the image of this marriage is still embedded in Khmer weddings (the ritual when a groom is holding the bride's gown in their bridal chamber, or ritual of blackening bride's teeth etc.)

According to Khmer folklore viewpoints, land is not only a place for people to settle down and reside, but also it serves production activities to feed all species. Therefore, Khmer people respectfully call it "Pran-Tho - Ra-Ny" which means "God of Earth". As stated in Khmer people's concepts, the reason why the land retains its fertility is thanks to the nymph "Nieng-Hing-Pra-Ra-Ny". Hence, if Khmer people would like to exploit and use the land, they must conduct a ceremony to worship this nymph. This ceremony has a great significance in protecting the environment and maintaining the fertile of the land. Besides, rice and rice seeds which are called "Pră-Me" by Khmer people means "Mother God". They would like to show their respect and honor toward the rice, rice seeds and grains of rice in the lifestyle of Khmer people, which are associated with the purely agricultural life with long-standing fertility rites and cults. They are the basis of impact on quality and effectiveness of production, especially for rice grain value. In consonance with Khmer people, trees and forests are very valuable to the living environment. According to them, trees and forests are shields, which play a key role in sheltering and protecting all species, and the god "Ark Pray" is guarding them. Thus, if Khmer people desire to exploit trees or forests, they must conduct a ritual to implore this god, which partakes in protecting the environment and natural resources in their living place.

For the Khmer community, although the concepts about the surrounding world, stars and heaven are not strange, Khmer people always perceive that water is an important component that brings many necessary benefits for their own lives. It not only serves their physical life but also spiritual one. Water is a significant source of irrigation in agricultural production, especially in farming, aquaculture and rice cultivation. It itself is the supernatural force that decides the living mode of the whole community. Therefore, when mentioning the weather and seasons, Khmer people often point out the role of stars in the solar system like the Moon god. Because Khmer people think that Moon God is the guard god of crops, who has a decisive role in advantages and disadvantages of production during a year. They conduct a traditional ritual - Ok Om Bok- to worship this god to pray for timely rains and favorable weather as well as bumper harvests. Or if they wish for peace and happiness, Khmer people often worship god Arăk, god Néak Ta. The concepts about rain, wind and land - the leading condition for agricultural production- are also clearly reflected in the story of Chol Chnam

Thmay. Chol Chnam Thmay is a traditional new year when there was a battle of wits between Pra Ma (a representative of the Brahmanism) and the boy Thom Ma Bal (a representative of Buddhism) in order to mark the turning point of the end of Brahmanism and then the divine power was shifted to Buddhism, but it still reminded people to enjoy the wind, rain and land to create products that feed them. Moreover, all kinds of festivals, Tet and unique traditional cultural activities of Khmer people and Khmer Theravada Buddhism such as: Lunar New Year, Ceremony of praying for peace, ritual of worshipping God Ark, God Néak Ta, ceremony of Retreat season (*An abominable retreat is the practice of monks in the three months of summer (starting from the Birth of Buddha Shakyamuni on April 15th in Lunar calendar to the day of the Ghost festival on July 15th in Lunar calendar)*), Sen Dolta ... are organized in the order of weather changes and crops in a year.

Thus, in the thinking of Khmer community, the world always has souls. From the images of land, water, forest ... to nature's movement, all of them have natural feature. Therefore, Khmer people are always reserved and timid, but often show their respect and less give impact on the natural world and the environment. That is the cognitive value in the lifestyle of those people toward the supernatural world, which is also the basis and premise to form the traditional moral values in the spiritual life of the community in a lasting and long-term relationship with the environment.

B. Secondly, the value of human life (outlook on life) in the relationship between people and the nature

It can be understood that human value in the broad sense is the concept about human life or reasons for living. The purpose, meaning and value of human life will be reflected through the thinking, consciousness and actions of human in their own circumstances in each different historical period. In a narrow sense, the human value of human beings is a system of human views about themselves, which is summarized through practical activities by human's behaviors and attitudes in the relationship between people and people and among nature and society. In these relationships, the basic components to maintain human existence are the spiritual and material values. In that existence, people need physical factors such as optimal living conditions which are guaranteed by essential natural products such as natural resources, the environment ...etc. At the same time, the human survival also needs to be nourished by human thoughts, feelings and moral qualities. Therefore, the combination of physical and spiritual factors is the foundation for human life to survive and grow as well as form conceptions about the living mode of human themselves.

With the characteristics of agricultural production method, when conducting production labor activities which impact on nature, the Khmer community have learned about the nature by themselves, and then summed up into their experience for their lives and production activities. In this process, the Khmer community knows how to rely on the natural world, mingle with nature and be content to nature, all of which have dominated and deeply impressed in the Khmer people's subconscious and

emotion then become customs, habits and lifestyles of Khmer people since the first foot-set in An Giang province. Therefore, for Khmer people, the natural relationship is an organic, attaching and inseparable one.

Due to the living in the land where there are both the maximum advantages in living conditions with incentives, support from nature as well as the transformation, changes in psychology, cognition and action, all of which have certain influences on shaping the lifestyles of the Khmer community. Looking back on the process of formation and development of this ethnic group in the Southern region, it is found that the spiritual value itself is the foundation that decides the lifestyle of the Khmer community. Khmer proverbs say that "*Sam-ma-ki chia kôm-lang*" means "*solidarity is power*". The working process which was severe and arduous created a Khmer community with traditions of hard work, solidarity, creativity and patience. From the demand to associate mutually in order to cope with difficulties and challenges, the connections between people and people, people and nature have been created. On the other hand, on the basis of Buddhist dogma together with the relationship with nature, the Khmer community always has very gentle and moderate attitudes towards nature. They know how to regulate their thoughts and actions so that the living environment is always a green shield for their existence.

The Khmer community considers nature as the green lung of life, so they have not only learned how to exploit and use nature in moderation, but also known how to conserve the natural environment to be fresh and clean, which can serve their spiritual and physical life. The Khmer people say "*Nâu pơ - tah mơ - đai ti ti, Nâu pơ - ri mơ - đai chi muôi*" with the idea that "*At home, everyone has their own mother; in the forest, everyone has a communal mother*" (Truong Luu, 1993, p .175). This saying aims at expressing the obligations and responsibilities of each person in conserving, protecting and exploiting the natural resources in moderation. Besides, with the concept of spiritual beliefs, Khmer people always think that nature has soul because there are gods who are reigning there. They often have gentle attitudes in any activity which may impact on nature. They consider the natural world to be closely related, but also they are very respectful and content to the vast natural world, all of which make contribution to the formation of an educational perspective in relation to the natural environment with the criteria of "*Gratitude is the sign of noble souls*" or "*When drinking water, think of its source*" as Vietnamese concepts.

Derived from the agricultural production process which largely depends on weather and climate conditions, Khmer people observe and notice nature, then they learn from those experiences about natural movements and know the rules of movement of heaven and earth as well as how rain and sun affect production activities. The Khmer proverb said that "*Săm - nap đôn dâ*" (which means "rice seeds which can grow depend on the soil") or "*Chanh sơ - rây tonh kơ - đau dâ*" (which means "do farming when the land is still new"), and then come to the conclusion with experience as "*No giur sơ - cót, ôn - đấc kơ - rop*" (which means rice standing straight is sickly, rice stooping is plump). However, whenever there are abnormal changes in nature, Khmer people

always wish for timely rains and favorable weather as well as pray for peace in life. In addition, in relation to nature, together with being respectful and content to the natural law, the Khmer community also expresses their harmony with nature through the concept in which they consider nature as the standard of aesthetics, beauty and the tolerance. Nature is the force which has always been guarding people's lives.

3. Conclusion

It can be said that through the relationship with nature, the concept of living closely to the natural environment of the Khmer community can be clearly seen through their lifestyle which is rustic but filled with love, respect, reverence and harmony with nature. Also, through that relationship, it has contributed to build the moral values of solidarity, mutual affection as well as deep educational perspectives in order to create a Khmer community that they not only know how to live for themselves but also for the environment.

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