

# ANCESTOR WORSHIP BELIEFS OF THE KHMER PEOPLE IN TRA VINH – TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract:** The ancestor worship beliefs of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province serve as a core social-ethical institution, reflecting a unique syncretism between an indigenous consanguineous outlook and the institutional worldview of Theravada Buddhism. Utilizing interdisciplinary anthropological methodologies—specifically ethnographic fieldwork and comparative documentary analysis—this article systematizes the traditional sacred hierarchy and key ritual practices, including funerals and the Sen Dolta festival, while identifying the profound transformations of these beliefs in contemporary society. Examined through the analytical lenses of structural-functionalism and acculturation theory, the study demonstrates that domestic worship spaces, the frequency of ritual execution, and funerary practices (such as the shift from cremation to inhumation) are undergoing significant simplification and adaptation. These contemporary modifications emerge as inevitable responses to the pressures of urbanization, evolving architectural designs, time-economic constraints, and local state environmental regulations. The article concludes that these contemporary transformations do not destabilize the core values of filial piety; rather, they manifest a flexible mechanism of cultural adaptation. This dynamism allows the Khmer people to negotiate and preserve their ethnic identity within a resilient, multi-ethnic cohabitation landscape.

**Keywords:** *Ancestor worship beliefs; Khmer people in Tra Vinh; Theravada Buddhism; Cultural transformation; Cultural adaptation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Khmer are among the ethnic groups that settled relatively early in the Southern region of Vietnam in general, and in Tra Vinh province in particular. They chose elevated sand dunes (*gông*) for settlement, establishing villages (*phum and sóc*), constructing pagodas as venues for community activities, and generating unique cultural values with distinctive nuances. Tra Vinh is well-known for the cohabitation of multiple ethnic groups, predominantly the Kinh, Cham, Hoa (ethnic Chinese), and Khmer, each possessing its own cultural traits, thereby forging a diverse yet unified cultural landscape. Throughout the process of cohabitation, the law of cultural syncretism has brought these cultures closer together. However, both internal and external demands of this syncretic process have exerted certain impacts on traditional cultural elements. Subject to these laws, the ancestor worship beliefs of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh have undergone specific transformations. Rather than evaluating these changes as positive or negative, the author aims to leverage research findings to discern the core traditional elements for preservation and promotion in contemporary society.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the work *Culture of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta*, edited by Truong Luu, a fairly comprehensive account of Southern Khmer culture is presented (Truong et al., 1993). The issue of ancestor worship is addressed by Dang Vu Thi Thao within the scope of research on the festival system of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta. The ancestor worship ritual (Dolta) is meticulously described by this author across its days of celebration and ritual protocols. Another ritual within the Khmer ancestor worship belief system is the funeral, which is discussed by Thach Voi in Chapter 4 of the project. However, in my view, this merely captures the Dolta ceremony within the broader practice of ancestor worship among the Southern Khmer. In 1998, the project *Understanding the Cultural Heritage of the Southern Khmer Ethnic Group* was published by the Institute of Culture in cooperation with the Hau

Giang Province General Publishing House (Institute of Culture, 1998). The matter of ancestor worship is introduced in the section examining the customs and rituals of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta. This work details the Khmer Dolta ceremony regarding aspects such as time, objects of worship, and modes of ritual practice. The work *Some Folk Rituals and Customs of the Khmer in the Mekong Delta* by Tran Van Bon marks a significant milestone in the study of Southern Khmer folk customs (Tran, 1999). Through this work, readers can conceptualize the ancestor worship customs of the Khmer through various rituals: longevity celebrations, funerals, death anniversaries, prayer ceremonies for the deceased (*cầu siêu*), grand prayer ceremonies (*đại cầu siêu*), and ancestor rituals. The author examines the origins of ancestor worship through a Buddhist legend, thereby explaining the protocols executed during the Dolta festival of the Khmer.

From the aforementioned works, I observe that the ancestor worship belief system of the Khmer has not been fully systematized, with existing literature focusing primarily on specific rituals organized within Khmer daily life.

Regarding research on Southern Khmer culture from a comparative and contrastive approach, mention can be made of *Folk Beliefs in Ho Chi Minh City* by Vo Thanh Bang and colleagues (Vo et al., 2008). This work systematized the ancestor worship beliefs of the Khmer in Ho Chi Minh City—such as the veneration of paternal ancestors and parents, ritual offerings, death anniversaries, and the issue of ancestral inheritance—to elucidate the Khmer ancestor worship system, thereby revealing its unique characteristics. In the book *Southern Khmer Culture: A Beauty within Vietnamese Cultural Identity*, edited by Pham Thi Phuong Hanh, ancestor worship is discussed in the festival research section (Pham et al., 2011). The authors focus on exploiting the Dolta festival (ancestor worship ritual) of the Khmer to compare it with the Vu Lan festival of the Kinh people. Although only two festivals related to the ancestor worship beliefs of the two ethnic groups were selected for comparison, this research method successfully highlighted the value and meaning of filial piety within the ancestor worship system of both groups.

Based on the literature review above, the author identifies two key issues to address in this paper: First, to systematize the elements belonging to the ancestor worship beliefs of the Khmer in Tra Vinh; second, to examine how these ancestor worship beliefs manifest in contemporary society within Tra Vinh.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To systematically analyze and comprehensively comprehend the transformations within the ancestor worship beliefs of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh province, this study is anchored upon three core theoretical pillars within cultural anthropology and the sociology of religion: Structural-Functionalism, Acculturation and Cultural Syncretism, and the Concept of Hierarchical Sacred Space within the paradigm of Khmer Theravada Buddhism.

#### *Structural-Functionalism and the Definition of Ancestors*

According to the structural-functionalist school of thought (prominently advanced by Radcliffe-Brown), religious and belief practices play a vital role in maintaining the social structure, reinforcing kinship ties, and preserving group solidarity. In this study, the concept of "ancestor" is strictly confined to the consanguineous axis and kinship relations (lineage and domestic ancestors), establishing a clear demarcation from the notions of occupational or village founders as conceptualized by Ngo Duc Thinh (Ngo, 2012) and Le Duc Hanh (Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts Studies, 2013). Viewed through a functionalist lens, the ancestor worship beliefs of the Khmer are not merely a system of supernatural rituals, but rather a crucial social-ethical mechanism. The responsibility of worship (traditionally designated to the youngest child) and practices such as funerals and death anniversaries reflect the function of maintaining lineage continuity, inculcating filial piety, fostering community cohesion, and enforcing moral obligations between the living and the deceased.

#### *Acculturation and Cultural Syncretism Theory*

The transitional trajectory of this belief system from traditional to contemporary states is scrutinized through the theories of acculturation and cultural syncretism. Tra Vinh functions as a multi-ethnic cohabitation space (comprising the Kinh, Khmer, Hoa, and Cham), where the law of cultural

syncretism operates robustly under both endogenous and exogenous stimuli (Pham et al., 2011; Truong et al., 1993). Acculturation theory elucidates why the traditional ritual structures of the Khmer—such as cremation practices, the frequency of incense burning, and the specific agents responsible for domestic worship—are no longer static. Instead, they exhibit clear signs of adjustment, simplification, or adoption of external elements (such as inhumation, co-worship, or the consolidation of ritual days). These contemporary modifications do not signify a loss of ethnic identity; rather, they demonstrate a flexible mechanism of cultural adaptation in response to modern societal pressures, including urbanization, evolving domestic architectural designs, time-economic constraints, and state environmental regulations.

*The Syncretism of Indigenous Beliefs and Theravada Buddhism*

The final theoretical component involves the religious syncretism model between indigenous animism and institutionalized Theravada Buddhism. The Khmer establish a strict sacred hierarchy on their altars: *The Buddha* → *The Head Monks (Sư cả)* → *Blood Ancestors*. This structure reflects the interaction between the "Great Tradition" (canonical institutional Buddhism) and the "Little Tradition" (localized folk beliefs). The ultimate liberation (*siêu thoát*) of ancestral souls does not exist in isolation; rather, it is fundamentally contingent upon the accumulation of "merit" (*phước*) generated through ritualistic services rendered to the Sangha (making offerings to monks, listening to scriptural recitations), as illustrated by the legend of the Sen Dolta festival (Tran, 1999). This theoretical framework clarifies the dualistic nature of contemporary Khmer cognition: while they maintain the orthodox Buddhist tenets of karma and reincarnation, they concurrently cultivate a folk perception regarding the immanent, protective presence of ancestral spirits within the daily domestic sphere.

#### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The author selected Tra Vinh province as the research site because prior studies have identified this land as the earliest settlement area of the Khmer in the Southern region. This locale still preserves the largest volume of Southern Khmer cultural artifacts and ranks second in the Mekong Delta regarding the size of the Khmer population. The residential areas exhibit cultural differentiation along a spectrum from traditional culture (Tra Cu district) to blended/interlocking culture (Chau Thanh district) and contemporary culture (Tra Vinh city).

The primary research object of this paper is the ancestor worship beliefs of the Khmer. To clearly delineate the object of study, the author clarifies perspectives on ancestors within the concept of "ancestor worship beliefs".

To resolve the concept of ancestors among the Khmer in this paper, the author defines the connotation of the term "ancestor". Synthesizing prior studies on ancestor worship, I note various conceptions of ancestors: viewing them as individuals bound by blood relations, as village founders (*tổ làng*), occupational founders (*tổ nghề*), or national founders (*tổ nước*), among others. For instance, according to Le Duc Hanh: "When ancestors are understood as the deceased, if they are merely relatives within a lineage or family, worship practices differ among ethnic groups. When ancestors are understood as the deceased including those outside the lineage, such as individuals who contributed meritoriously to the village or country, worship practices also vary" (as cited in Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts Studies, 2013, pp. 237-238).

According to Ngo Duc Thinh: "In reality, many village founders (*tiên hiền khai ấp, hậu hiền khai cơ*—those who first cleared the land and established the hamlets and foundations) are revered as Tutelary Deities (*Thành hoàng*) governing the sacred space of the village. Among these Tutelary Deities, some represent specific occupations" (Ngo, 2012, p. 31). Accordingly, the concept of "ancestors" should be confined to the consanguineous axis based on kinship and familial lineages.

Drawing from these perspectives to apply to this paper, I limit the concept of "ancestors" to the criteria of blood relations and kinship. In this study, the entities conceptualized as "ancestors" are examined through the lens of consanguineous and kinship criteria.

To investigate the research object, the author employs the following methods:

- *Ethnographic Fieldwork Method*: With this method, I position myself as an insider to participate in and observe the manifestations of ancestor worship beliefs at the research site.

- *Document and Information Collection Method*: The author uses this method to gather historical records on traditional ancestor worship beliefs, providing a database to contrast with contemporary practices in reality.

- *Interdisciplinary Synthesis Method*: This is used to combine insights from various disciplines to systematically explain folklore, art, and beliefs within the ritual system of Khmer ancestor worship.

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1. The Ancestor Worship Belief System of the Khmer in Tra Vinh

Based on documentary records and information gathered during fieldwork, the author outlines the traditional ancestor worship beliefs of the Khmer in Tra Vinh as follows: When a relative passes away, the Khmer organize a funeral characterized by cremation and the preservation of ashes for domestic worship. After a certain period, the ancestral ashes are deposited at a pagoda (belonging to Theravada Buddhism). The Khmer set up the ancestor altar in the central bay of the house, with the ashes serving as the symbolic representation of the ancestors, and daily rituals consisting of lighting lamps and incense. The ancestor altar must adhere strictly to the following hierarchical principle:

#### **The Buddha → The Head Monks (*Sư cả*) → Blood Ancestors**

On the Khmer ancestor altar, three distinct entities are worshipped and arranged in a clear hierarchical order. When expressing reverence to their ancestors, the Khmer light incense first for the Buddha, followed by the head monks, and finally for their blood relatives. The Buddha is symbolized by a statue, while the head monks are symbolized by prayer beads or objects associated with them during their lifetime. The elevated position of Buddhism in Khmer ancestor worship is rationalized by their belief that upon death, human souls seek the realm where the Buddha resides to pay homage. The ashes of relatives, after being kept at home for a period, are brought to the pagoda so that the ancestors can rely on the Buddhist sanctuary, hearing chants and prayers day and night, and receiving the Buddha's protection. For the Khmer, Buddhism not only governs their present life but also serves as a refuge when transitioning to eternity.

The Khmer organize an annual ancestor worship ceremony called Sen Dolta to commemorate ancestral merits and pray for the blessings of deceased family and lineage members. Sen Dolta originates from an account in Buddhist scriptures:

"92 eons (*kiếp*) ago, two Buddhas were born: Buddha Tessa and Buddha Bossa. The father of the Buddha was King Mahinta, who also had three other princes. One day, the three princes requested their father's permission to make offerings to their eldest brother, Buddha Bossa, and 90,000 monks—his disciples—for a period of three months. Upon receiving royal approval, the three princes entrusted the logistics of the offerings to a secretary who served as the storekeeper, while they themselves entered the monkhood. The storekeeper mobilized thousands of cooks to handle the preparation. However, the offerings managed by these cooks became increasingly negligent and deficient because they stole and embezzled food for their own children and relatives, occasionally leaving the monks starving. Upon their deaths, these cooks were reborn as hungry ghosts (*quỷ*) in the underworld. Meanwhile, the storekeeper was reborn as a wealthy man, and the secretary became King Bimbisara (Pinh-pis-sara). One night, deep in the royal palace of King Bimbisara, miserable wailing and desperate cries echoed: 'Give us food, give us drink, we are terribly hungry and thirsty'.

Terrified, the king summoned the court prophets to inquire. The prophets concluded: 'Those are hungry ghosts coming to beg for food. The King must perform a sacrificial ritual'. The king then visited the pagoda to consult Gautama Buddha (*Đức Phật Thích Ca*). The Buddha proclaimed: 'Those are the cooks who became underworld ghosts, enduring hunger and thirst for 92 eons. Knowing that you were their master, they have come to demand food. Therefore, you should make offerings and present rice to the monks, relying on their virtue and chants to transfer blessings to those ghosts'. The king complied with the Buddha's instructions. The ghosts were fully fed and later reincarnated into another realm after serving their punishments for the sins committed in their past lives" (Tran, 1999, pp. 53-54).

According to this legend, the Khmer hold the annual Dolta festival with the objective of requesting monks to chant prayers and accumulate blessings so that deceased relatives may be reborn into a happier life. The festival takes place annually from the 29th day of the 8th month to the 1st day of

the 9th month (according to the Khmer calendar) to chant prayers for the dead and secure blessings for ancestral souls. Specifically:

- *The First Day*: Each family adorns the Buddhist and ancestor altars, places new mats, mosquito nets, blankets, and pillows on the bed, and displays tea, cakes, and fruits on the altar. Next, the family prepares a sumptuous tray of food, scoops four bowls of rice, lights lamps and incense, and invites relatives and neighbors to join the worship. They pray to invite the souls of the deceased back home to eat, drink, and rest. In the afternoon, they continue to worship the ancestors, then prepare small offerings, inviting ancestral souls to accompany them to the pagoda to listen to the monks' chanting, receive blessings, and watch music and dance performances.

- *The Second Day*: After spending a night and a day at the pagoda, representatives of the family go to the ash stupa (*tháp cốt*) in the afternoon to invite ancestral souls back home. They offer another ritual meal, inviting the ancestors to eat and requesting them to stay with their descendants for one more night.

- *The Third Day*: Each family rearranges food and cakes as on the first day, scoops four bowls of rice, and invites neighbors and relatives to assist in the ritual. After praying three times, they scoop rice and place food into small boats or sailing vessels made from banana stems and areca spathes for the ancestors to consume on their journey back to their old realm. Family representatives release these boats into rivers or canals near the house, and invite relatives to share a meal, maintaining a festive atmosphere until the ceremony concludes in the evening or night. Affluent families may also invite head monks (*ông lục*) to chant prayers so that the ancestral souls can attain early liberation (*siêu thoát*).

Furthermore, families with financial means may select an auspicious day during the year to organize a prayer ceremony (*cầu siêu*) or a grand prayer ceremony (*đại cầu siêu*) to generate merit for the early liberation of ancestral souls.

## **5.2. Contemporary Transformations of Ancestor Worship Beliefs among the Khmer in Tra Vinh**

In terms of form, the most conspicuous transformation can be observed in funeral practices that escort the soul of the deceased to join the ancestors. While traditionally the Khmer exclusively practiced cremation and preserved the ashes for worship, inhumation (burial) has increasingly appeared today. This change is driven by various practical factors. First, local government bodies have campaigned to raise awareness regarding the environmental impacts of traditional cremation methods (since all Khmer cremation sites are built traditionally and lack mechanisms to handle smoke and odor during the process). Some respondents also noted: "We lack the budget to transport the coffin to modern cremation centers, so we bury them on family land". Second, there is a shift in the Khmer conceptualization of ancestral souls. Traditionally, worship aimed at helping ancestral souls achieve rapid liberation; however, at present, many wish to keep ancestral souls close to their descendants, thereby opting for inhumation near the family home. In my view, this transformation does not completely eradicate traditional ancestor worship rites, as it only occurs in certain localities. Concurrently, this shift demonstrates consensus between the Khmer community and local authorities regarding environmental protection awareness.

In addition, funeral formats have been simplified, discarding complex rituals that drain family time and finances. Examples include eliminating rituals and offerings meant for inviting Achar (ritual masters), ritual music troupes, and monks. Protocols during the funeral procession (*di quan*) have also been curtailed, such as removing the rituals of rolling on the ground (*lăn đường*), scattering cotton seeds (*rãi bông gòn*), and discontinuing the use of palanquins for monks and Achar to sit on during the procession (instead, they walk or use other vehicles alongside the funeral procession). According to my observations, this transformation occurs across all researched areas, particularly in Tra Vinh city. Other regions experience fewer changes due to the higher concentration of the Khmer population, whose predominantly agricultural livelihoods grant them more time to organize traditional funerals.

Another element that has transformed in the ancestor worship beliefs of the Khmer in Tra Vinh is the domestic organization of worship. The spatial layout and placement of the ancestor altar have shifted in accordance with modern house architecture. Traditionally, Khmer houses featured a two-

roofed, three-bay architectural style. The front bay was the most solemn space designated for the ancestor altar, serving also as a place to welcome guests and host pivotal family events. However, at present, many families allocate a dedicated ancestor worship space on the first or second floor of the house. Homeowners justify this arrangement as creating a quiet and solemn space for their ancestors. This phenomenon is prevalent in families residing in multi-story houses or those wishing to separate ancestral worship from daily family activities. The Khmer maintain that despite changes in the physical space of worship, younger generations always preserve a steadfast respect for ancestral souls. My observations indicate that although the location and space have altered, the hierarchical principles governing the arrangement of deities and ancestors on the altar remain strictly observed. This underscores the deep alignment between Theravada Buddhism and the life of the Khmer in Tra Vinh. The individual responsible for ancestor worship has also undergone changes in contemporary life. While traditionally the youngest child (regardless of gender) assumed this responsibility, there is now a phenomenon of transferring this role exclusively to the youngest son, or convening all siblings to select a designated caretaker. Alternatively, cases of "co-worship" (*đồng thờ* - where a single soul is worshipped across multiple households) or divided worship (*chia nhau thờ* - where different members worship different deceased individuals) have emerged.

Furthermore, the timing of ancestor worship is another issue of concern. While traditionally the ancestor worship festival was held exclusively during the final three days of the eighth lunar month, many families now select any convenient day within the eighth month to organize the ritual. This phenomenon appears frequently in Tra Cu and Chau Thanh districts. According to current perceptions, ancestor worship is an occasion for siblings to gather and share life's joys and sorrows; however, if held during the final three days of the month, family members might not attend fully due to institutional work or personal affairs. Consequently, families often agree on a single, most convenient day to conduct the ancestral rites. It is precisely due to this flexibility that the phrase "Dolta Month" (*tháng Đól Ta*) has emerged in Tra Vinh. Not only that, the practice of conducting ancestor worship based on the specific death anniversary (*ngày mất*) has appeared in many households. They believe that observing the actual death anniversary reminds descendants of the day their ancestors departed, while offering comfort to the ancestral souls. Remarkably, those who perform worship on death anniversaries or choose a random day in August still participate in the official Sen Dolta festival, operating under the belief that organizing rituals multiple times generates more merit to accelerate the soul's liberation.

In terms of content, the ritual actions in ancestor worship have also evolved. Records indicate that traditionally, the Khmer lit incense for their ancestors in the morning, at noon, and in the evening. Today, families primarily light incense only in the evening. This shift is explained by various perspectives. According to an elder, Mr. D.K.S (75 years old) in Tra Cu district: "In the past, whatever our grandparents taught, we followed without understanding the underlying meaning". The head monk of Samrong Pagoda stated: "Theravada Buddhism does not prescribe the specific timing or frequency of lighting incense for ancestors. However, lighting incense can serve the purpose of paying homage to the Buddha at different intervals of the day". According to Mr. S.N.L: "I heard from my grandparents that in the old days, incense was lit 2 or 3 times a day, but now we must leave for work early in the morning and do not return at noon; only in the evening does the whole family gather, so lighting incense then makes the household feel warm and cohesive". While these sources make it difficult to determine the exact traditional meaning of incense lighting frequency, it is evident that work commitments have reshaped the frequency of incense lighting in their ancestral beliefs. The Khmer do not stipulate which family member must light incense daily; each individual performs it out of personal awareness. At present, they also do not restrict incense lighting to rigid, traditional timeframes; descendants can light incense whenever they wish to commune with their ancestors.

On the other hand, traditional Khmer beliefs held that the soul of the deceased would return to the Buddha and remain there, awaiting the merit-making actions of their descendants to achieve liberation or otherwise face condemnation to hell. Worship served to generate "merit" (*phước*) for the soul, and Buddhist scriptures chanted during the ritual would allow the soul to hear the Buddha's teachings, repent for past sins, and attain liberation. The recitation of scriptures during ancestor worship

was paramount. Therefore, when the author conducted interviews with monks of various ages and ranks across the three research sites, they all provided a singular consensus: "The act of chanting scriptures and performing rituals by descendants is the critical factor that generates merit for the ancestral soul". The ultimate goal of ancestor worship was to deliver the "merit" created by descendants to the ancestral soul resting in the land of the Buddha. However, contemporary Khmer increasingly believe that the souls of the deceased exist around the daily lives of their descendants, residing on the ancestor altar, and even possessing the capacity to bless descendants in business or help them overcome difficulties, luck, and risks in life. In tandem with this, many households no longer invite an Achar to guide the ceremony or a monk to chant prayers for the dead. Instead, they simply arrange a food tray on the altar, and either self-recite the prayers or merely pray verbally to invite the souls to dine with their descendants during the ancestor worship occasion.

Thus, it is evident that in contemporary society, the ancestor worship beliefs of the Khmer in Tra Vinh have undergone transformations in both form and content. This change reflects the impact of societal factors on the agents responsible for ancestor worship, leading to the omission of certain elements to accommodate modern life, alongside the integration of new elements to foster positive faith in the spiritual lives of current generations.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Tra Vinh is a territory where the Khmer settled early in the Southern region of Vietnam. Here, they established *phum* and *sóc* and forged the distinctive cultural values of their ethnic group. Prominent among these traits is their ancestor worship belief system. When a relative passes away, they organize funerals and rituals to express filial piety and gratitude for the merits of birth and upbringing. Ancestor worship stands as a vital responsibility of descendants toward their lineage, and the execution of these rituals carries the profound meaning of aiding ancestral souls in attaining early liberation. However, through the process of cohabitation with the Kinh (majority Vietnamese) and the Hoa (ethnic Chinese), the ancestor worship beliefs of the Khmer in Tra Vinh within contemporary society have experienced certain transformations in form and content. These changes are partly the outcome of the laws of cultural exchange and acculturation, as well as the direct consequence of scientific-technological advancements and practical life demands.

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