Invented Traditions and the Construction of New Religious Collective Memory in Southern Vietnam: An Overview Study from a Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

Invented tradition is a concept in the fields of cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, and history, and in the case of the new religious movement in Vietnam, it is all the more evident in emphasizing the connection to the past in the context of the diminishing dominance of Sino-Vietnamese civilization amid the growing and expanding influence of the West into China and its surrounding countries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This study employs the post-structural perspective of cultural studies and applies Eric Hobsbawm's theory of invented traditions and Maurice Halbwachs's idea of collective memory to demonstrate that the emergence of the new religious movement is an indirect result of a series of cultural negotiations among migrant groups to Southern Vietnam. The ultimate result is the syncretism of religions. The trauma in the historical memory of the old homeland, combined with contemporary political trauma and the trauma in religious practices, led to the rise of the new religion in Vietnam. The new religious movement in Vietnam is a direct product of cultural negotiations among different resident groups to create a shared collective cultural memory, represented by the three ethnic groups: Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer. This study begins by introducing the two concepts of invented traditions and collective memory, as well as their relationship within the historical, cultural, and regional context of Southern Vietnam. It then discusses several previous studies with the common theme of syncretism and multiculturalism in Southern Vietnam. In the last two sections, the long history of cohabitation and the balanced position in memory negotiation among different resident groups will be shown. Theoretically, this study adds a new approach to research on new religions in Vietnam. Practically, it provides an overview of the political and cultural capacity of migrant groups.

Keywords: New religious movement; Southern Vietnam; Cochinchina; Immigrants to Vietnam; Southwards process

Introduction

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the influence of imperialism and colonialism posed a significant challenge to building an organic cultural identity in modern East Asian societies. As the Chinese "cake" was squeezed and even invaded by imperial powers regions influenced by Chinese Confucian traditions, often referred to as "Little China," such as Vietnam, were inevitably caught up in this fateful historical whirlwind. The historical landscape of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was so stormy, harsh, and intense that almost any cultural, political, or religious event was affected by it. Consequently, this geopolitical context became a grand narrative—a rational explanation for what happened in Vietnam. Interpretations and analytical approaches to the new religious movement in Vietnam are a rather typical case in point.

Religious groups that emerged in Southern Vietnam at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century have been studied from various multidisciplinary perspectives. These studies focus on areas such as religious studies (examining the development, organization, and notable features of new religious groups), philosophy (interpreting the values and philosophical principles expressed in the new religions), anthropology and sociology (analyzing the relationships between new religious groups and local communities as well as the broader society, including their roles in social change), cultural studies (notably surveys and fieldwork on the impact of new religions on local culture, including art, traditional culture, and lifestyle), and history (interpreting the historical context and key events that stimulated the development and emergence of new religions in Southern Vietnam during the specified period). These approaches analyze the relationship between new religious groups and migration psychology and land expansion, as well as the significance of these new religious movements in the nationalist movements. Overall, these studies acknowledge the important role of new religions within the cultural, political, and social context of Southern Vietnam at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

Our perspective aligns with that of Nguyễn Xuân Hậu in the 2020 doctoral thesis on Religious Studies, which also highlights common findings among the research conducted by other scholars. It can be said that the conditions leading to the emergence of religions in Southern Vietnam are a notable and distinct contribution of previous works. Factors such as natural conditions, historical context, ethnic composition, and political upheavals indicate that Southern Vietnam at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century was a complex amalgam of many elements. These factors created a "spiritual vacuum" for cultural subjects. Previous works have achieved significant results regarding the history of population formation in Southern Vietnam, the cultural influence of various ethnic groups, and the role of these groups in creating a cohesive yet open approach to new influences, etc. This provided crucial groundwork for the emergence of new religions, based on the inheritance and integration of

traditional culture, beliefs, and religions. Another aspect emphasized by previous research is the political factor in Southern Vietnam at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, including the role of the Nguyễn dynasty, French colonial invasion, and the accompanying Western cultural layer, and so on. All these created challenges for traditional religions. This was a core premise for the activities and transformations of religions that emerged in Southern Vietnam. Most authors argue that the religions that emerged in Southern Vietnam are a mix of religions and beliefs. The distinctiveness of this mix is reflected in the traditional elements that serve as the foundation (Nguyen 2020, 18–19).

However, while acknowledging the existence of a spiritual vacuum in a specific and highly particular historical context, it is an oversimplification of the intrinsic vitality of migrants—who carry with them cultural memories or even cultural DNA that not every political or historical upheaval can alter. Therefore, it could be theorized that at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century in Southern Vietnam, there were traditional creative activities aimed at constructing collective memory for a cohabiting community of the Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer ethnic groups from various waves of migration to Southern Vietnam. These activities, or processes, involved informal interfaith dialogues and negotiations between different religious communities, with the ultimate goal being to ensure that no belief or faith was overlooked.

This theory is applied by starting with a discussion of the concepts of invented traditions and collective memory, and their interrelationships. Building on this foundation, traces of migrants and what they brought with them to Southern Vietnam can be discovered. Finally, a series of negotiations that occurred within the beliefs of the local community of followers in this new land will be examined.

Invented Traditions and the Construction of Collective Memory of Cultural Subjects in New Religious Communities in Southern Vietnam

Invented tradition can be understood as practices or customs that people often believe to have existed for a long time but were created or constructed relatively recently, as efforts to reinforce identity, build collective memory, or establish a connection with the past (Trinh 2022a; 2022b; 2023). This involves embedding certain values and behavioral norms through repetition, implying continuity with the past (Hobsbawm 1983, 1). Most of these ideas are documented in a collection of essays edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger titled *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). This study plays a crucial role in shaping and developing the theory of invented traditions. Hobsbawm introduces the concept of invented traditions and the ways in which different societies construct and use traditions to serve political, cultural, and social purposes. The essays in this study examine a range of cases, mainly from Britain and some former colonial territories, to illustrate the argument that traditions are often modern inventions presented as ancient practices. Terence Ranger further supports his collaborator's

proposition by demonstrating that many traditions in former colonial countries in Africa were created or shaped by the practices of the colonizers (Ranger 1983, 211). These traditions can be used to create a sense of national unity, control public perception, and maintain power structures. *The Invention of Tradition* is considered influential in the study of tradition, memory, and cultural identity. It shows that traditions are not static relics of the past but dynamic structures developed to meet contemporary needs. The book has stimulated discussions about how traditions shape society and how society shapes their traditions, illuminating the complex relationship between history, culture, and power. However, it should also be pointed out that, to date, the application of invented traditions to religion has not been precedent in Western research due to the characteristics of theological tradition. Nonetheless, in the case of new religions, particularly new religious groups in Vietnam, the arguments for the existence of invented tradition activities in creating collective memory for communities are plausible.

Collective memory is a concept in sociology, psychology, and cultural studies that explores how a group of people, a community, or a society remembers and commemorates past events. Collective memory refers to shared recollections of events, experiences, and historical-cultural phenomena that are preserved and transmitted across generations. The theory of collective memory delves into questions about how societies construct their histories, how memories of events develop over time, and how social, cultural, and political factors shape the ways in which events are remembered and commemorated. It also examines the role of media, technology, and institutions in shaping and transmitting collective memory.

Several key theorists and scholars have contributed to the development of the theory of collective memory, each with their own perspectives and approaches. Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), a French sociologist and philosopher, is considered one of the founding figures in the study of collective memory. In his 1950 study titled *La mémoire collective*, Halbwachs proposed the idea that individual memory cannot be separated from the social context in which it exists. He emphasized that memory is not just an individual recollection but is also influenced by social frameworks and interactions. He coined the term "collective memory" to describe the ways in which groups remember and commemorate events (Halbwachs, 1992). While collective memory exists and is reinforced by the foundation of a unified group, it is the individuals within the group who are the ones who actually remember (Halbwachs, 1992, 48).

Collective memory is thus understood as the memories, events, and experiences shared and remembered by a group of people (such as a community, ethnicity, or society). These memories not only persist over time but are also reinforced and strengthened through the connection and interaction among members of the group. Its foundation is *a coherent body of people*. Collective memory relies on the unity and connection of that group. This unity provides strength and durability to the collective memory, while individuals in the group hold specific memories. The author succinctly summarizes this by stating that we are never alone (Halbwachs 1992, 23).

Collective memory and invented traditions are interconnected aspects of how societies remember and interpret their pasts. They contribute to the construction of social identity, cultural continuity, and the shaping of historical narratives. Both concepts highlight the dynamic nature of memory and the complex ways in which societies and communities negotiate their relationships with history. Collective memory and invented traditions often interact and can influence each other. Collective memory, as shared experiences and events within a social group, can provide a foundation for creating new traditions. Conversely, invented traditions can generate new collective memories by establishing new practices and customs. Both collective memory and invented traditions are related to identity formation and creating connections with the past. Collective memory helps reinforce a sense of unity and defines who "we" are, while invented traditions are often used to create symbols and practices that represent the social group.

Collective memory and invented traditions can both be utilized to address specific political issues. Collective memory can be selectively shaped and emphasized to promote certain narratives or ideologies. Similarly, invented traditions can be intentionally created to influence how a community remembers and interprets its past. Collective memory can provide a stable foundation for the creation of invented traditions. Existing memories, events, or cultural practices can be reinterpreted and adjusted to create a sense of continuity. At the same time, invented traditions can also emerge during periods of change when societies seek new ways to define their identities (Trinh 2022a). Ultimately, both collective memory and invented traditions contribute to social cohesion and group identity. They provide a shared framework of meaning that connects individuals to their community and gives them a sense of belonging.

Overview of the New Religious Movement in Southern Vietnam

In Vietnam, based on the dialectical materialist and historical materialist theories of Marxism-Leninism regarding religion, with the theory "The state and society produce religion" (Marx and Engels, 1995, 569), "The state and society" is understood as the specific social context, region, and period. For Southern Vietnam, this refers to the geographic, historical, economic, cultural, social, and political characteristics of the new land where religions emerged at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Research approaches and interpretations based on Marxist principles in Vietnam have largely dominated scholarly work related to Caodaism specifically and new religious movements in Vietnam in general. This dominance is significant in both quantity and impact within academic discussions. Its influence on foreign research on the same subjects is also substantial. Fortunately, even with the rise of deconstructivist or poststructuralist academic trends, these research findings still hold a place in related discussions.

From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, alongside foreign religions such as Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism, Southern Vietnam witnessed the

emergence of several indigenous religions. Notable examples include Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Phật Giáo Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo, Caodaism, and Tịnh Độ Cư Sĩ Phật Hội Việt Nam among others.

The aforementioned religions emerged within the context of the developing and evolving region of Southern Vietnam. Various historical, political, cultural, and social factors of Southern Vietnam at the time influenced these religions: the harsh environment of the new land; the mysterious Seven Mountains region; the border area of Tay Ninh, an ideal spiritual locale; the influence of the Heavenly Earth Society from the Chinese to the secret societies of the Vietnamese; the synthesis of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism with folk beliefs; the weakening of traditional religions; the decline of the Nguyen Dynasty; and the French colonial rule over Cochinchina, among others. All these factors created a profound void in a society experiencing a crisis of faith, lacking authoritative leadership in both spiritual and temporal realms. The people of Southern Vietnam— the cultural agents of the region— were in need of a new religious movement to fill this void (Nguyen 2020, 1).

Nguyen, Dang Duy, in *The Spiritual Culture of Southern* (*Văn hóa tâm linh Nam Bộ*), focuses on analyzing the syncretic aspects of the religions, notably Cao Dai (CĐ): "...The God Creator, arranging everything, comes from Christianity; the celestial spirits descending come from Taoism; human morality is derived from Confucianism; and the desire for material pleasures, the source of all suffering, is from Buddhism" (Nguyen 1997, 71). The French scholar and Cao Dai follower Gabriel Gobron, during 1948–1949, published *The History of Caodaoism* and *The History and Philosophy of Caodaoism*, highlighting the role of linking the living with the deceased and preparing for reincarnation. Later, in *An Initial Study of Caodaoism* (1995), Dang Nghiem Van (editor) provided a comprehensive overview of the religion, examining its historical formation, religious practices, ecclesiastical organization, and social roles. Crucially, this work periodizes the history of Caodaoism through pivotal milestones while meticulously tracing the trajectories of key foundational figures such as Ngo Van Chieu, Pham Cong Tac, and Le Van Trung. A significant finding in Dang's research is the influence of Cao Dai; the author asserts that: "Cao Dai is practical, a religion focusing on attracting the masses by providing them with spiritual nourishment; it blends the mundane with the metaphysical, aiming to offer them a path to alleviate the frustrations of everyday life" (Dang 1995, 165). The work also discusses the nationalistic and worldly aspects, reflecting on Cao Dai's influence on the Vietnamese community in Southern Vietnam. In summary, as discussed from the beginning, there are not many critiques in the discussions about the reasons for the emergence of new religious movements in Southern Vietnam in general.

In the work *The History of the Exploration of Southern Vietnam*, edited by Huynh Lua, the authors, drawing from various sources, present the migration, land reclamation, and settlement processes of the Vietnamese, Chinese, Khmer, and Cham peoples in Southern Vietnam. Although this work does not directly address the indigenous religions

of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it provides extensive documentation on the process of exploring Southern Vietnam from the 17th to the 19th centuries, as well as the social changes during the later reclamation period. The authors particularly emphasize the manifestation of solidarity, the development of material and spiritual life of the brotherly peoples, through the harmony and syncretism of traditional elements and the assimilation of new values: "Southern Vietnam, in general, even at the beginning of its reclamation, had many ethnic groups living together and intermingling. This is a notable point compared to any other region in Vietnam" and "The mixture of populations from various local origins, different religions, and beliefs, and varying levels of social development over many centuries has not at all hindered the unity and cohesion of the peoples living together in Southern Vietnam" (Huynh 1997, 239–240).

Tạ Chí Đại Trường, in *Gods, People, and the Land of Vietnam*, also discusses the characteristics of syncretism and ethnic diversity in Southern Vietnam as a major driving force behind the emergence of new religious movements (Ta 1989). In this study, the author argues that Southern Vietnam is a place where various migration movements converged along with their own pantheon of deities, with a notable influence from the Tian Di Hui (Heaven and Earth Society) of the Minh Hương people. Regarding Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, he views it as the beginning of a prophetic line, extending to Four Gratefulnesses and Filial Piety (Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa / 四恩孝義) all operating within the context of a secret society: "The followers and sects opposing the French were suppressed so harshly that before 1945, the term Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương (道寶山奇香) (and Four Gratefulnesses and Filial Piety), in the two provinces of Long Xuyên and Châu Đốc, the region of origin, was only whispered among the people. Those distant or curious could not find any trace" (Ta 1989, 327).

Sergei Blagov, in his doctoral thesis *The Caodai: A New Religious Movement* (1999), asserts that the emergence of Cao Đài is a fusion of political and religious movements and traditional thought, a reconciliation of Eastern and Western civilizations, and a political-religious organization in Southern Vietnam. The author's perspective is clear on the syncretism of the new religion.

Motivation for Coexistence and Survival in the New Land

The history of the Mekong Delta region is crucial background for understanding the emergence of new religions in southern Vietnam. In the 1st to early 3rd century, this region was part of the Kingdom of Funan. Later, the Champa Kingdom expanded to include Funan territory. In the 6th century, the Khmer Empire (*Chân Lạp*) absorbed and succeeded Funan.

The subsequent centuries in the Mekong Delta were marked by disruption until new settlers began arriving to reclaim the land. From the 17th century onwards, Vietnamese people started to cultivate the region, both overland and by sea. Ngo Duc Thinh, in his book *Culture and Cultural Regions of Vietnam* (*Văn hoá và phân vùng văn hoá Việt*

Nam) suggests that the Khmer arrived in the Mekong Delta as early as the 13th century, following the collapse of the Angkor Empire. This implies that the Khmer were present in the region 2-3 centuries earlier than the Vietnamese (Ngo 1993, 285).

Tran Quoc Vuong, in *The Foundations of Vietnamese Culture* , adds that by the 16th century, the Vietnamese had settled in the Mekong Delta with diverse social backgrounds. Some were prisoners brought to clear land, others were wanderers and the poor seeking refuge, while the majority were soldiers and officials dispatched to protect the new territory and chose to stay (Tran 2005, 269).

In *The People of the Mekong Delta and Indigenous Religions*, Pham Bich Hop (2007) argues that Chinese immigrants also played a critical role in the reclamation and development of the Mekong Delta region. In 1678, Mac Cuu[1] (鄚玖 / 1655–1735) led 400 people to the Hà Tiên area for reclamation. In 1679, Dương Ngan Dich[2] (楊彥迪 / ? - 1688) and Tran Thuong Xuyen[3] (陳上川) were granted permission by the Nguyen lords to settle in My Tho[4] and Bien Hoa. This group was known as Minh Hương settlers. Even into the 20th century, there were still waves of Chinese migration to the Mekong Delta. Regardless of their background or occupation, the Chinese formed organized groups called *bangs*, each led by a leader known as a bang trưởng (Pham 2007, 56–57).

The Vietnamese community migrating from the northern and central regions of Vietnam is also considered a highly significant demographic factor. One notable example is the group known as the "Dan Hai Huyen," who originated from the central region of Vietnam—a region known for its harsh weather and living conditions. In *Religion in the Historical Context of the Vietnamese Nation* (1983), Cao The Dung writes about this group:

> The Dan Hai Huyen have retained their Vietnamese identity, particularly symbolizing the Vietnamese cultural line extending from Gia Dinh through Dinh Tuong to Vinh Long, An Giang, Chau Doc, and Cao Lanh. The Dan Hai Huyen expanded rapidly in the An Giang region... As the Dan Hai Huyen increased in number, they organized into villages according to the administrative structure of the court and carried with them the customs and traditions from their northern homeland through the stopover at Gia Dinh. (pp. 12–19)

A summary of the Dan Hai Huyen illustrates how settlers from Central Vietnam, after a long journey, brought their cultural heritage to the new land in Southern Vietnam, seeking a better life. Son Nam, in *History of the Southern Land Reclamation*, notes that "Miet Hai Huyen"[5] refers to the people from the five Quang provinces (Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Quang Duc, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai) who settled in the South. The area known as Miet Hai Huyen is associated with the Ong Chuong River (Long Xuyen). The term "Hai Huyen" refers to the two administrative units—Tan Binh and Phuoc Long—that were the first to be established by the Nguyen lords in the South, now part of Gia Dinh and Bien Hoa. The people of Long Xuyen, known as Dan Hai Huyện, were likely settlers from Bien Hoa and Gia Dinh or soldiers from the five Quang provinces who settled in

Long Xuyen.

Examined more closely, the group of Vietnamese migrants to the South can be divided into three categories. 1) According to Nguyen, Duc Toan (2015a), since the 17th century, the southwestern region of southern Vietnam began to see the emergence of a new class of settlers - Vietnamese migrants. Most of them were poor farmers and craftsmen from northern provinces who were forced to leave their homeland due to the calamities caused by the war between the Trinh and Nguyen factions. The oppressive taxes, forced labor, conscription, and the brutal exploitation by the feudal class compelled them to migrate in search of a better life: "leaving was a gamble, with no certainty of morning sunshine or afternoon rain" (*ra đi là sự đánh liều, nắng mai không biết, mưa chiều không hay*).[6]

2) Additionally, there was a small segment of exiled convicts. Although historical records do not specify this issue, researcher Huynh Lua suggests that this group also made up a significant number, as the practice of exiling convicts to the south had been in place since the Le dynasty (especially during the reign of Le Thanh Tong from the mid-15th century onwards) and was continued by the Nguyen lords.[7]

3) Besides farmers and craftsmen, there was also a group of individuals who opposed the court to varying degrees: those dissatisfied with the examination system, those whose talents went unrecognized, those who exposed corrupt officials, or those who led or participated in various uprisings under the Lê-Trịnh regime. These were considered "intellectuals" with broad knowledge, literacy, and writing skills. These individuals could be the "thầy đồ" who played the role of teachers for the children of settlers in the new land.

The early migrants to the Mekong Delta region also included wandering adventurers (Vietnamese Text: giang hồ tứ chiếng) [8] or border soldiers. In general, all those discontented or dissatisfied with the current feudal regime aimed for this distant southern land in the hope of finding a better life (Nguyen 2015a, 20–21)

Li Tana in "An Alternative Vietnam? The Nguyen Kingdom in the 17th and 18th Century" (1998) argues that the experience of expanding borders southward seems to present an image of Vietnam quite different from the northern territories at that time, opening the door to a world where diversity was embraced and utilized for the development of Vietnam itself. This period was marked by significant development in Southern Vietnam under the rule of the Nguyen feudal dynasty, creating a new dynamic with the expansion and settlement efforts of Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer peoples.

From the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, the Nguyen dynasty lost its control over the country. At this time, the French in Vietnam clearly displayed their economic and political ambitions. In response, anti-French activities were continuously carried out across Southern Vietnam. Unfortunately, these uprisings generally ended in failure, often resulting in significant losses for the local people. The anti-French movement in Southern Vietnam continued in a different form, heavily influenced by mystical religious elements. This was the period when Buu Sơn Ky Hương, Tu An Hieu

Nghia, and various groups of Ong Dao (religious sects) emerged, closely associated with land reclamation, village establishment, resistance against the French, and opposition to the oppressive actions of the feudal officials (Nguyen 2020, 31).

A community of residents composed of various ethnic groups and traditional beliefs found themselves in a new land due to traumatic experiences and a longing for their homeland. Despite the hope of finding a promising new territory, this new land did not immediately offer great prospects for establishing their cultural memories. As a result, an implicit agreement and negotiation between these ethnically and religiously diverse groups began to take shape in their interactions and coexistence.

Negotiating Memories Among Cultural Agents

Historical trauma from the old homeland, combined with contemporary political traumas and the ultimate trauma in religious practices, led to the emergence of new religions in Vietnam. These new religions are a direct product of the cultural negotiations among various groups of residents, aimed at creating a shared cultural collective memory among the four groups of inhabitants from three different ethnic backgrounds.

Khmer immigrants carry with them the memory of Theravada Buddhism.

Nguyen Van Trung (2015b), in his work *Dossier on Lục Châu Studies: Understanding People in the New Land, Based on Literature and Historical Documents in the National Language in the South from 1865 – 1930* (*Hồ sơ về Lục Châu học, Tìm hiểu con người ở vùng đất mới, Dựa vào tài liệu văn, sử bằng Quốc ngữ ở miền Nam từ 1865 – 1930*), notes that "the local Buddhism of the Cham and Khmer people is Theravada Buddhism, which focuses solely on individual salvation through personal practice and is somewhat incompatible with the high sense of collective solidarity among frontier settlers. Furthermore, the Mahayana Buddhism from the North and Central regions, while concerned with the salvation of all beings, also found it difficult to develop in the South during the French colonial period" (Nguyen 2015b, 302). On the other hand, Buddhist teachings can be recognized as profound and sophisticated, in the context of the near-decline from the 15th century, with the increasing prominence and institutionalization of Confucianism in the 19th century, and the lack of genuine spiritual guides, along with the harsh conditions of the new land, the Buddhism that immigrants brought with them was, to some extent, not well-suited for those who sought to make a significant impact (Nguyen 2020, 41–42).

The Vietnamese migrants from the northern regions carried with them the memory of Confucianism.

The Vietnamese carried Confucianism from the northern regions into the South. Some Vietnamese adopted Confucianism from the Chinese settlers who came to the South during the same period seeking a livelihood. However, the influence of Confucianism on the people in the South was not as strong as in the North. This is due to the rebellious nature of the migrants who wanted to break free from the constraints of their homeland. Author Thach, Phương (1992), in the book *Folk Culture of the Vietnamese in the South* (Vietnamese Text: Văn hoá dân gian người Việt ở Nam bộ) states that as one moves further south, the feudal characteristics diminish, replaced by a spirit of democracy and equality, evident in both communal village life and in the daily lives of individual families (Thach 1992, 68). Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Confucianism was favored by the Nguyễn dynasty for the construction of a centralized feudal state, serving as the ideological foundation for "regulating the family, governing the country, and pacifying the world." At this time, Confucianism was not only a political doctrine for the court but also a key component of education at all levels. Confucianism permeated strongly from the royal court to the common people, providing ethical guidelines and discipline among the masses.

The third group of migrants, namely the Chinese, brought with them various religious organizations to the Southern region.

The Heaven and Earth Society, also known as the Red Lotus or Three Points Society, is a secret society from China with religious elements aimed at "restoring the Ming dynasty and overthrowing the Qing dynasty." When Western powers began ruling Hong Kong, they viewed all Chinese secret societies as threats and illegal, making it extremely difficult for such organizations to operate. The Heaven and Earth Society spread to the Southern region of Vietnam along with Chinese immigrants.

Son Nam (1926 – 2008), a renowned writer, journalist, and cultural researcher from Southern Vietnam, often called the "Old Man of the South," is one of the authors who has done extensive work on religious organizations, including the Heaven and Earth Society, which is considered to have originated from and led by the Chinese community.

The fourth group of residents consists of the descendants of wealthy families who went abroad for higher education in Western countries.

Illustrating this economic and cultural transition, La Laurette observed that the economy of Cochinchina was "stable and developing well," which enabled many newly wealthy families to send their children to Europe for higher education. Upon their return,

these western-educated youth significantly "contributed to the Europeanization of the region" (Nguyen 2015b, 333).

Based on this, the influence of Western culture on the religions that emerged in the Mekong Delta was quite apparent in the early 20th century. However, the Vietnamese in the Mekong Delta were very proactive, adapting the culture in their own way and seeking to make it independent of its origin. La Laurette remarked: "The Vietnamese learned from France the language, fashion, customs, advancements, and methods of social and economic organization, not to make Cochinchina French but to advance Cochinchina to a point where it no longer depended on France." (Cited in Nguyen Van Trung 2015b, 334).

Each community group, along with their faith, plays a clear role in politics and social status. For example, a Khmer leader named Asoa, who was of royal descent, established a base in the Seven Mountains area, Châu Đốc, and once collaborated with Nguyễn Hữu Huân in the resistance against the French (Tran and Tran 1998, 151). Asoa's activities were supported by the Vietnamese in the region and formed a movement. The uprising led by Pôkumpao in Saigon and Tay Ninh, also a prominent Khmer figure, had a significant impact on the Khmer community in Southeast Vietnam. Pôkumpao allied with other patriotic figures such as Truong Quyen,[9] the son of Truong Dịnh.[10] This force later became a powerful element in the resistance against the French, stretching from Tay Ninh to the Southwest, and achieved several notable successful uprisings (Nguyen 2020, 31–32). The political and cultural prowess of each ethnic group is an important factor in the cultural negotiation process. An additional example of the "Dân Hai huyện" can be found when they migrated to the South—where the Chinese community had already settled. The "Dan Hai huyen" people maintained and preserved their Vietnamese identity, from personal and family life to traditional customs and ethnic culture (Cao 1983, 13–18).

The groups discussed above reveal an equality in political roles and social positions. No group held a dominant or weaker role compared to the others. Therefore, the balance of status in the process of negotiating and reconciling memories is equal. This is the foundation for the syncretic nature of new religious movements in Southern Vietnam.

Conclusion

This study initially proposes a new approach to explaining the syncretism of new religious movements in Southern Vietnam. From the perspective of invented traditions and collective memory, the long history of coexistence, emphasizing the balance in the ability to negotiate memories among different migrant groups, can be highlighted. On this basis, the syncretic nature, integrating various religions into a new religion, is formed. Furthermore, the capacity for balance to negotiate among groups also shapes the spirit of harmonious coexistence among different new religious movements in the same region of Vietnam, a region with a history, and political volatility.

Admittedly this study lacked sufficient physical space to elaborate on the political and social roles of the resident groups—a factor that directly affects the process of negotiating memories and cultures among these groups. Additionally, more space to delve deeper into the manifestations of the invented religious traditions in Southern Vietnam would have been desirable. It is hoped that future research will continue to elaborate upon this research idea

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

[1] Mac Cuu (鄚玖), also known as Mac Kinh Cuu (鄚敬玖) was a Chinese merchant who contributed to the reclamation and establishment of the Ha Tien region (Kien Giang) in the early 17th century in Vietnam.

[2] He was a leader in the anti-Qing, pro-Ming movement and a general of the Ming Dynasty under Trinh in Longmen, Qinzhou, Guangxi, China. In 1679, he, along with his entourage, sailed to pledge allegiance to Lord Nguyen and became instrumental in the development of the My Tho region in Vietnam.

[3] He is considered the first person to have made significant contributions to the large-scale reclamation of the Bien Hoa region. He was honored by Lord Nguyen with the noble titles "Nguyen as king, Tran as general, a great meritorious official without end." He was also conferred the title of "Supreme Deity" by Emperor Minh Mang and Emperor Thieu Tri.

[4] In 1679, a group of approximately 3,000 Ming Chinese immigrants were settled in this new land by Lord Nguyễn. Led by Duong, Ngan Dich they established My Tho Big City (美荻大浦). By the 17th century, MyTho had become one of the two largest commercial centers in Southern Vietnam.

[5] Miệt is a regional term used in the Mekong Delta of Southern Vietnam, meaning "area."

[6] This is a local folk verse from the western region of Southern Vietnam.

[7] The Nguyen Lords (Chúa Nguyễn / 阮王) (1558-1777, 1780-1802) were the rulers of Đàng Trong, the southern region of Vietnam, from Thuận Hóa (south of the modern-day Ngang Pass) to the southern part of the country. This period was marked by the Trịnh-Nguyễn civil war, where the Nguyễn Lords opposed the Trịnh Lords of Đàng Ngoài in northern Vietnam.

[8] "Giang hồ tứ chiếng" is a popular and familiar phrase in Vietnam, meaning people who are everywhere and go everywhere, often carrying a negative connotation.

[9] Trương Quyền (1844–1871), also known as Trương Huệ or Trương Tuệ, was a leader in the anti-French resistance movement in the latter half of the 19th century in Cochinchina, Vietnam. He was honored by the people with the title Bình Tây Nhị Lang Nguyên Soái (Marshal of the Second Army Against the West).

[10] Trương Định (張定; 1820–1864), also known as Trương Công Định or Trương Trường Định, was a military commander of the Nguyễn dynasty and a leader in the resistance against the French from 1859 to 1864 in Vietnamese history.

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