



DOI:10.29013/EJHSS-25-3-43-47



CULTURAL SPACE OF THE KHMER IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM (THROUGH FOLK LEGENDS SURVEY)

Dr. Nguyen Thi Kieu Tien¹

¹ Tra Vinh University

Cite: Nguyen Thi Kieu Tien. (2025). *Cultural Space of The Khmer in Southern Vietnam (Through Folk Legends Survey)*. *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2025, No 3. <https://doi.org/10.29013/EJHSS-25-3-43-47>

Abstract

In this article, the author will briefly describe the Southern Khmer people; about the characteristics of Southern Khmer legends from the perspective of ethnic culture, specifically the cultural space element. Using cultural spatial knowledge to clarify issues of Southern Khmer legends will be a new approach, contributing to outlining the specific appearance of Southern Khmer folk legends, contributing to preserving and promoting the literary and cultural values of the Khmer people in Vietnam.

Keywords: *Cultural space, Khmer people, legends, Southern region, folk literature*

I. Introduction

Ethnic minorities in Vietnam in general and in the Southern in particular all have long-standing cultural traditions and especially rich and diverse folk literature treasures. Regarding the Khmer people in the Southern, they also have a treasure trove of folk literature rich in identity and have been collected, researched, and compiled into valuable documents. In addition, the Southern Khmer folk literature treasures have been partly researched under theoretical approaches to clarify literary, educational, historical values,...

Raising the issue of understanding the Khmer ethnic cultural space is based on the study of legends derived from the original characteristics and the perspective of folk literature as an element of folk culture. In addition, the article also uses ethnic cultural knowledge in general and Southern Khmer

culture in particular to explain the elements of Southern Khmer legends.

II. Methodology

In this article, the author uses the following research methods:

— Statistical method: statistics and classification of Khmer legends according to sub-genres from published Khmer folk literature documents. Specifically: 4 published documents include: Khmer Southern Tales (1983) compiled by Huynh Ngoc Trang (including 10 stories); Khmer fairy tales (1992) compiled by Hong Diep (including 01 story); Soc Trang Folk Literature (2002) (including 14 stories), Bac Lieu Folk Literature (2005) by Chu Xuan Dien (editor) (including 6 stories). From documentary sources, we have compiled 31 stories and versions of legends of the Khmer people. As follows:

Table 1. *Statistical table of Southern Khmer legends*

Nu- merical order	Documents	Year of publication, Author	Story name
1.	Khmer South- ern Tales	1983, Huynh Ngoc Trang	1. The legend of Chol Chon Thom May festival 2. Popitxnoka 3. The Legend of Ba Om Pond (1 story and 4 versions) 4. The story of the broken boat 5. The legend of Bai Xau (1 story and 1 version)
2.	Khmer fairy tales	1992, Hong Diep compila- tion	1. Sister's well Brother's well
3.	Soc Trang Folk Literature	2002, Chu Xuan Dien (editor)	1. The accumulation of fences on the wedding day 2. The legend of Champa pagoda 3. Kinh and Khmer are two brothers 4. The Khmer and the Chinese are brothers 5. The story of Ta Diep village 6. Legend of Ta Lot land 7. The story of Bo Dap hamlet 8. Legend of Vung Thom 9. Legend of Ngo racing 10. Step on the gong 11. The legend of Bassac Pagoda 12. The legend of Sao beach 13. The legend of Chol Chon Tham Thamay 14. The legend of Phchumbân and Sendona
4.	Bac Lieu Folk Literature	2005, Chu Xuan Dien (editor)	Two eggs 2. The custom of offering rice of the Khmer people 3. Why do boys ask girls to marry them? 4. Legend of the name Coh-Don 5. Buddha Land 6. Nieng Chanh

– Analysis – synthesis method: Analyze Khmer legends in terms of themes, types or motifs according to genre characteristics. From there, the article connects the elements of cultural space and ethnic characteristics to generalize into the basic and unique cultural characteristics of the Southern Khmer people.

III. Results and Discussion

3.1. General overview of the Southern Khmer people

The southern Khmers are an ethnic group that has been in southern Vietnam for a long time. Khmer people currently have 1,319,652 million people (General Statistics Office, 2020, p. 160), living concentrated in the Mekong Delta (Soc Trang about 31.68%,

Tra Vinh about 25.45%, Kien Giang about 16.43%; An Giang about 7.03%, Bac Lieu about 5.5% of the total Khmer population in Vietnam) (Mekong Development Research Institute (MDRI), 2015, p. 96). Currently, in addition to the Mekong Delta, which is a large settlement area for Khmer people, Khmer people also live scatteredly in Ho Chi Minh City, the Eastern provinces, and the Central Highlands provinces bordering Cambodia.

Since ancient times, along with the rich ecological environment, the meeting and influence of many cultural streams, Khmer residents here have established a system of ethnic cultural values. In particular, the festival is a convergence of typical cultural features of the Southern Khmer people. The Khmer have

many festivals every year, including Buddhist festivals and folk festivals. In addition, the role of Buddhism and Khmer pagodas always strongly influences the worldview, outlook on life, customs, rituals and lifestyle of the Khmer people. Buddhist ideology directly influences Khmer thoughts, attitudes and actions. Along with the role of Buddhism, the position of monks is highly valued by the Khmer community. In traditional social management as well as in the important work of each Khmer family today, they still keep the habit of coming to ask the Elder's opinion.

Besides Buddhism, the Southern Khmer people have many types of folk beliefs. In their spiritual life, they always believe in the presence of gods and demons. In phum, soc of the Khmer people, there are religious practitioners such as mediums and shamans (Krou) who take care of worshiping and communicating with gods and demons. Notably, the custom of worshiping Arāk and Neak Ta are unique folk beliefs of the Southern Khmer people.

The elements of customs, practices, and religious activities – Theravada Buddhism are the environment for survival and development of folk literature of the Southern Khmer people in general, and legends in particular.

3.2. Overview of the Southern Khmer legends

The term chest p-ereng is used to refer to the genre of Khmer folk legends. Regarding classification, according to Nguyen Thi Nhu Uyen (2006), Southern Khmer legends are divided into two types: geographical legends and historical legends (Nguyen Thi Nhu Uyen, 2006, p. 41). According to Pham Tiet Khanh (2007), Khmer legends are divided into four types: Legend of places; Legends explain customs; Legends about cultural creation and craft ancestors; and The legend of solidarity among ethnic groups in the South (Pham Tiet Khanh, 2007, P. 97–121). Among them, legends explaining customs account for a large number, represents Southern Khmer legends.

In this study, based on the statistical sources of stories, the author chose the classification method of author Pham Tiet Khanh. This classification is both consistent with the world and regional folklore system and shows the characteristics of this genre in Khmer folk culture.

Legendary place names reflect the history of ethnic formation, bearing the mark of the wilderness of the Southern region. Southern Khmer people range from strange and confused to friendly and then attached to the land, plants, and nature of this place. The name of Southern Khmer legends is often the name of the person who publicly opened the land, or uses the name of a popular production tool, etc. to name their phum, soc. The legends explaining customs and festivals are also very representative of the treasure of ancient stories of the Southern Khmer people, such as the legend of the Legend of Chol-chnam-thmay associated with the Chol-chnam-thmay festival, the legend of The legend of Phchum Ban Sen Don-ta is associated with the Sen don – ta festival (worshiping grandparents), the legend of the Ngo boat race is associated with the Ok-om-bok festival.

As for the legend of the cultural creator, it shows the Khmer people's pride in their monumental feat in land reclamation; about creative achievements in making agricultural tools (knives, sickles, plowshares), building houses, pagodas and making musical instruments. According to Pham Tiet Khanh (2007), the story of Popitxnoka is the only legend about a cultural creator of the Khmer people (Pham Tiet Khanh, 2007, P. 125–128).

The character system in Southern Khmer legends has both historical significance and symbolizes the religious values of the Khmer people, such as Popitxnoka, Ba Om,...

About poetics:

- Sacred land motif is a motif associated with Khmer place legends;

- The art of storytelling is very brief and simple;

- Most of the legends listed above do not have a plot, mainly existing in the form of sporadic details assembled disjointedly (Pham Tiet Khanh, 2007, p. 132).

- Southern Khmer legends have no theme about the history of building and defending the country.

3.3. Southern Khmer cultural space through legends

According to Ngo Duc Thinh: "Ethnic culture is the totality of cultural elements that are characteristic and specific to an ethnic group, it performs the function of uniting an ethnic group and distinguishing one ethnic

group from another” (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2006, p. 229). In the totality of factors, cultural space is considered the cultural environment associated with a specific space, a specific territory, a specific community of people, within a certain distance. certain specific time,... Along with the characteristics of population, level, economic conditions, customs, religion,... cultural space will contribute to forming ethnic cultural characteristics.

3.3.1. Sacred space in Southern Khmer legends

Sacred spaces are living spaces, places dedicated to remembering and worshiping ancestors, gods, saints, mothers and the souls of all things in general; is a place where people believe supernatural forces are present and exercise the power to “bless” or “bless” a human community. In Southern Khmer legends, sacred spaces are expressed diversely through festival spaces, customs, and beliefs.

The festival always brings together the sacred power of heaven and earth, mountains and rivers, ancestors and descendants. Therefore, during festivals, through religious belief rituals, children and grandchildren express their wishes to connect the bond of communion between God – People – Community and express their aspirations in sacred space and time. sacred. Southern Khmer people have many festivals during the year. Festivals are often associated with daily activities, folk beliefs, and rituals of Balamonism and Theravada Buddhism. Through rituals, Southern Khmer people conveyed their thoughts and wishes for a favorable production life; Educate children and grandchildren about how to treat people. On major holidays such as Chol-chnam-thmay, Sen don-ta, Ok-om-bok, stories such as the Legend of Chol Chhnam Thmay, the Legend of Phchum Ban and Sen Donta,... are always recreated by Khmer people. back on stage, practicing through rituals.

These characteristics are present in the stories about the Chol Chon Thom May festival. The story is associated with the Khmer New Year festival space. The legend of Ba Om Pond and the Legend of Sister’s Well and Brother’s Well, in addition to reflecting some relatively faint traces of matriarchy, also explain wedding customs. Both of the above legends are reminiscent of the way the Southern Khmer people resolved disputes over whether

the male or female side would have to marry each other. The folk author let the female side win in a very folk style, originating from folk beliefs and through a familiar talent competition motif in Southeast Asian culture. Recreating these legends in Khmer wedding rituals has a sacred meaning that not only reminds the newlywed couple to love and respect each other, but also educates and preserves the traditional values of the nation.

Besides, with the natural conditions of the South, a large, fertile plain but often flooded, the Khmer people face many dangers from the wildness and harshness of the new land. Since then supernatural powers have become a constant necessity in the material and spiritual life of the southern Khmers.

3.3.2. Natural space in Southern Khmer legends

Southern Khmer legends are a vivid, colorful picture of the Southern region from the beginning. In particular, with artistic characteristics and the crystallization of folk cultural values, the stories recreate the natural scenery of the typical tropical region, bearing the mark of wet rice civilization.

The interaction between people and the Southern geographical space in legends is very diverse. On the one hand, there is the impact of humans on trees, water sources,... things that belong to the natural world around them; On the other hand, there is the opposite impact of nature on humans. From that interaction, people have formed ways to use tools, food, housing and other practices consistent with the ecological environment.

In addition, in the process of finding a place to settle in the Southern region, the Khmer people chose to raise high ground, cultivate crops, grow wet rice and raise livestock. Legendary Southern Khmer place names have highlighted the uniqueness of this residential area. Thereby, it reflects the deep emotional attachment to the Southern Delta of the Khmer people, such as the legends: The Legend of Ta Diep Village, The Legend of Ta Lot Land, The Legend of Bo Dap Hamlet, The Land of Buddha.

In addition, because of the challenging environment, such as dense forests, wild animals, harsh weather, etc., the Southern Khmer people created legends such as the Legend of Ao Ba Om, Popitxnoka, etc.

to reflect the life of the Khmers. persistent struggle and constant creativity, as well as demonstrating attitudes towards the Southern natural environment through making agricultural tools (knives, sickles, plowshares) building houses, pagodas, etc.

These historical “traces” have accompanied the spiritual life of the Khmer people throughout their cultural progress in the South. From the sacred space of festivals and rituals, to the natural space and activities of Southern people, Khmer folk legends truly reflect the very personal and unique material and spiritual life of the Southern Khmer people.

Conclusion

As an ethnic group with a unique culture, of course, the folk literature treasure of the Southern Khmer people will also contain unique ethnic cultural values. When studying

Southern Khmer folk legends, the author used cultural elements, specifically cultural space, to shed light on the content and art of the stories. Thereby, the culture imbued with traditional values of the Khmer people is vividly expressed and partly affirms the role of Khmer culture in Vietnamese culture. Southern Khmer legends were born to meet the community’s need for awareness about the area where they live and about the spiritual values that create strength for the people here. The names of places (land names, village names, pagoda names, etc.) carry the meaning of cultural nature, imprinting the silhouette of people’s lives and the land. Sacred space and natural space in Khmer legends reflect the psychological and emotional nuances, customs and rituals, dealings with the natural environment and community,... of the Khmer people during their time living in the Southern region of Vietnam.

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submitted 11.05.2025;
accepted for publication 25.05.2025;
published 30.06.2025
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Contact: ntktien@tvu.edu.vn