

The Cultural Beauty of the Nguyen Trung Truc Temple Festival, in Rach Gia City, Kien Giang Province

Nguyen Tan Kiet

Postgraduate Student, Department Of Anthropology University Of Social Sciences And Humanities
(Ho Chi Minh City National University), Viet Nam

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ABSTRACT

From the 26th to the 28th of the lunar August each year, the people of Kien Giang, along with those across the Mekong Delta, eagerly gather for the Nguyen Trung Truc Temple Festival in Rach Gia City, Kien Giang Province. This is one of the most significant traditional festivals in the province, held to honor Nguyen Trung Truc - a renowned historical figure who led insurgent forces against French colonial invaders in the late 19th century. The author uses several methods: Methods of synthesizing and analyzing documents and materials; Survey methods, fieldwork; Methods of synthesis, statistics and comparison. This article delves into the cultural beauty reflected in the Nguyen Trung Truc Temple festival, which has been remembered and celebrated over the years. It aims to provide generations with a profound understanding of this national hero and the rich cultural heritage of a land steeped in tradition. Through the article, the author proposes some recommendations in preserving the cultural values of Nguyen Trung Truc communal house festival.

Key words: festival, Nguyen Trung Truc, culture

INTRODUCTION

Nguyen Trung Truc (1838 - 1868), whose birth name was Nguyen Van Lich, stands as a shining example of patriotism, celebrated for his resistance against French colonial forces in southern Vietnam during the late 19th century. He is remembered as a national hero who left an indelible mark on history with two legendary victories: the burning of the French ship *Espérance* at Nhat Tao Canal in 1861 and the destruction of the French colonial stronghold in Rach Gia Province in 1868. Nguyen Trung Truc is also renowned for his powerful declaration, now regarded as a timeless truth: “Only when the Westerners uproot all the grass in Vietnam will they eradicate the Vietnamese resistance.”

To commemorate Nguyen Trung Truc’s great contributions, people in many places have built temples to worship him, honoring him as a deity. The Nguyen Trung Truc Temple in Rach Gia City was recognized as a National Cultural and Historical Relic in 1987. In 2023, the Nguyen Trung Truc Temple Festival in Rach Gia City, Kien Giang Province, was granted the National Intangible Cultural Heritage Certificate by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. The Nguyen Trung Truc festival is solemnly held every year over three days, from the 26th to the 28th of the lunar August. In addition to the “ceremony” part, the “festival” section features various activities, including cuisine, calligraphy, art photography exhibitions, and floating lantern releases. The number of attendees has steadily increased, with an average of 700,000 people joining the festival annually.

The cultural and religious values of Nguyen Trung Truc festival have always been of interest and research to academics. Research on Nguyen Trung Truc festival will reveal the aspirations and dreams of the Kien Giang community; at the same time, learning about the festival will contribute to orienting and preserving the cultural identity of the community. Previous works of scholars have not yet deeply researched and evaluated the cultural beauty of Nguyen Trung Truc festival. This is a gap for the author to study, research and evaluate. Exploiting the cultural beauty of Nguyen Trung Truc festival not only meets spiritual needs, arouses the spirit of love for homeland and country, but also contributes to sustainable social development. For such an

important and necessary issue, especially in the period of promoting industrialization, modernization, and international integration, the article will contribute to promoting and popularizing the unique features of Nguyen Trung Truc festival in the current context.

THEORETICAL BASIS AND RESEARCH METHODS

Nguyen Trung Truc's life was tragically brief; he was only 30 years old when he was captured and executed. His active resistance against French colonial forces lasted a mere seven years. Yet his accomplishments were so extraordinary that the people-built temples in his honor and passed down legendary tales, venerating him as a deity. In the field of research concerning the life and legacy of Nguyen Trung Truc, several notable works can be mentioned: Nguyen Trung Truc (Life and career), published by Mui Ca Mau Publishing House in 2000, and Nguyen Trung Truc: Cuộc Đời - Sự Nghiệp (Nguyen Trung Truc: Life and career), published by Van Nghe Publishing House in Ho Chi Minh City in 2008. Both works, authored by Vinh Xuyen, offer similar content, providing detailed accounts of his biography, lineage, career, and the folklore surrounding him. These are highly valuable resources.

Another key reference is Nguyen Trung Truc Anh hung khang Phap (Hero of the French Resistance) by Giang Minh Doan, published by Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House in 1991. This book was written during a period of field research and documentation of various temples and relics dedicated to Nguyen Trung Truc in the Rach Gia and Ha Tien regions. It provides insights into his biography and military feats. The proceedings of the Scientific Conference on Nguyen Trung Truc, organized by the Kien Giang Provincial Museum in 1989, are also significant. This conference brought together researchers, historians, scientists, and other individuals interested in the life and legacy of Nguyen Trung Truc. However, differing opinions arose regarding his biography, origins, and activities. These proceedings serve as invaluable materials for further in-depth research on Nguyen Trung Truc and his resistance efforts in the Mekong Delta.

Similarly, the Proceedings of the Scientific Conference on Preserving and Promoting the Cultural Heritage Value of the Nguyen Trung Truc Hero Festival, held in 2009, include various proposals to enhance the festival's role in the lives of Kien Giang residents, with the aim of establishing it as a nationally renowned celebration. The aforementioned works are valuable references for exploring Nguyen Trung Truc's life and legacy. Additionally, some authors have written articles offering an overview of the relics and festivals dedicated to Nguyen Trung Truc. These materials form a foundation for the authors to consult and build upon when analyzing and discussing the cultural beauty of the Nguyen Trung Truc festival.

To clarify the research purpose, the author uses the following theories: Cultural ecology theory of Julian Steward (1902 -1977). According to Julian Steward (1955), the culture of nations is closely related to the environment. It is the environment that creates a cultural style of nations, from which specific cultural forms are born, such as family, clan, political structure, religion, rituals, etc. In other words, the environment is a strong factor influencing the cultural selection of a nation, from the way of eating, living, traveling to religious rituals. Julian Steward believes that each culture is, to some extent, unique, so anthropologists should assimilate themselves into that culture to see it the way the natives see it, he studied the cultural phenomena of each nation in adaptation to the natural environment.

In addition, the author uses the functional theory of Émile Durkheim (1912) and Alfred Radcliffe – Brown (1952). Both focus on the community and social functions of the ritual; considering the festival as a forum with common cultural and educational significance for the entire participating community (or groups within the community). According to this point of view, the festival has the mission of establishing and consolidating social order, enhancing community solidarity. In this study, the research team employs specific methodologies outlined below to effectively address the objectives of the article. Methods of Synthesis and Analysis of Documents and Materials: Based on the collected data, the authors synthesize, analyze, and draw conclusions to assess the current state of the Nguyen Trung Truc temple festival.

Field Survey and On-Site Research Method: This method involves direct visits to the historical and cultural site to conduct interviews, collect statistics, take photographs, observe and describe the site, and assess the state of the relics and historical artifacts. It also includes participation in cultural activities, exploration of local

customs, festivals, and beliefs, and detailed investigation into the festival's organization. These efforts provide a comprehensive overview and enable the authors to obtain objective, accurate results from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives.

Methods of Synthesis, Statistics, and Comparison: By gathering and studying written materials and conducting field research at the Nguyen Trung Truc temple in Rach Gia City, the authors compile, analyze, and compare different research findings related to the impact on the relics. This serves as a basis for reinforcing the authors' scientific conclusions. **Interdisciplinary Research Approach:** The study primarily employs research methods from cultural studies, cultural management, history, ethnology, anthropology, and tourism studies to create a well-rounded interdisciplinary analysis.

Nguyen Trung Truc festival has played an important role in the life of Kien Giang residents for more than a hundred years. However, in the process of formation, existence and development, Nguyen Trung Truc festival has gone through the ups and downs of the times - different historical periods. There was a time when Nguyen Trung Truc festival was banned by French colonialists. Up to now, Nguyen Trung Truc festival has developed strongly, affecting many different levels in community life. Therefore, studying the cultural beauty and role of Nguyen Trung Truc festival in community life is very necessary, in order to preserve and transmit culture in the context of current social life. From there, promoting the role of Nguyen Trung Truc festival now and in the future.

NGUYEN TRUNG TRUC TEMPLE FESTIVAL: A REFLECTION OF LOCAL CULTURAL FLAVORS

Honoring Cultural Heritage

The Nguyen Trung Truc festival stands out as one of the most prominent traditional festivals in southern Vietnam, particularly in Kien Giang Province. This event not only commemorates the national hero Nguyen Trung Truc but also celebrates the cultural heritage of this land. As noted by Ngo Duc Thinh (2010): "Traditional festivals are a unique form of folk cultural activity within the national cultural framework. They encapsulate the essence of traditional cultural values that are distinctive, enduring, and deeply embedded in the nation's cultural identity. These values are preserved, transmitted, and fully embraced within the social fabric through many historical eras."

Before and during the festival, a variety of rich and diverse activities take place. The festival typically begins with an incense-offering ceremony to honor and pray for the repose of heroic martyrs, including Nguyen Trung Truc himself. Residents and visitors come together to light incense and offer flowers at the Nguyen Trung Truc temple, expressing their gratitude and reverence. Following the incense ceremony, cultural and artistic activities take center stage, featuring traditional music and dance performances, martial arts displays, and traditional folk games.

One of the most captivating features of the Nguyen Trung Truc festival is the array of sporting competitions, such as traditional boat racing, football, martial arts, chess, etc. These activities not only provide entertainment but also embody the spirit of unity and solidarity within the community. The sports competitions attract a large number of participants from various regions, creating an atmosphere of excitement and vibrant energy.

Additionally, the festival hosts a platform for showcasing OCOP (One Commune One Product) products from the Mekong Delta, along with booths displaying local handicrafts and culinary specialties. Visitors can explore and purchase unique goods from regional communes, while also indulging in traditional dishes such as bánh xèo, fish noodle soup, fresh seafood, and other delicacies. This is a golden opportunity for the people of Rach Gia City, and by extension Kien Giang Province, to present their rich culinary culture to guests from near and far.

The Nguyen Trung Truc festival is not merely a cultural event but also an occasion to educate younger generations about patriotism, unity, and the cultural traditions of the nation. Through its various activities, participants both locals and visitors in deeper insight into history, the sacrifices, and the contributions of earlier

generations in the struggle for independence and freedom. In recent years, the festival has expanded in scale, attracting greater involvement from authorities, cultural organizations, and local communities across the region. The local government has invested in upgrading infrastructure, encouraging businesses and residents to contribute resources and support. These efforts ensure the festival runs smoothly, welcoming pilgrims and tourists from all over to worship and enjoy the festivities. At the same time, promotional efforts for the festival have been enhanced, spreading its meaningful values and drawing even more visitors to participate.

The festival also provides a platform for local artisans and performers to showcase their talents through exhibitions, cultural displays, and artistic performances. These activities not only entertain but also serve as a bridge between generations, helping young people better appreciate and preserve the cultural values handed down by their ancestors. Beyond its cultural significance, the Nguyen Trung Truc festival plays a vital role in promoting local tourism. As the number of visitors increases, tourism-related services, including accommodation and cuisine, flourish. This creates job opportunities for local residents and contributes to economic development, reinforcing the festival's role as a cornerstone of cultural and economic growth.

It can be affirmed that the Nguyen Trung Truc festival is not only a traditional cultural event but also a symbol of patriotism, unity, and community development. Through this festival, both locals and visitors have the opportunity to honor the heroes who sacrificed their lives for the independence and freedom of the nation. At the same time, it serves as a moment to preserve and promote the traditional cultural values of the Vietnamese people. The Nguyen Trung Truc festival will continue to be an indispensable part of the cultural life of the southern people, enriching the diverse cultural landscape of the country.

The Distinctive Spiritual Beliefs of the Nguyen Trung Truc Festival

Alongside economic and social development, the Nguyen Trung Truc festival has experienced moments of both calm and excitement, but its enduring presence over time is a testament to its resilience. It remains deeply rooted in the collective memory of the community, a vibrant tradition that continues to thrive. The people of Kien Giang Province, and the Mekong Delta region in general, have preserved the unique cultural identity of their traditional festivals, characterized by distinct spiritual beliefs: the belief in ancestor worship (during the festival, people come to light incense and offer prayers, a prominent feature of Vietnamese religious practice); the belief in the life cycle (a remembrance of the day of Nguyễn Trung Trục's death); and the belief in reverence for heroes (honoring the national hero Nguyen Trung Truc, who sacrificed his life for the country's independence).

“The festival helps fulfill the spiritual needs of humans, offering a second life, a state of transcendence from the mundane, from existence itself” (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2010). Attending the Nguyen Trung Truc Festival is to embrace faith, devotion, wishes for good fortune and blessings, and a deep reverence for those who have passed, particularly for a hero who sacrificed his life for a greater cause. Here, spirituality embodies the relationship between two cultural forms: community interaction and spiritual culture. The Nguyen Trung Truc Festival holds a sacred significance, drawing people who come with hopes of prosperity, wealth, luck, and health. This brings vitality to everyday life, offering a sense of closeness, unity, love, mutual support, and solidarity—helping to bridge regional divides. It awakens a collective willingness to build shared beliefs and a common culture. The festival is deeply rooted in the community, fostering interaction and integration among visitors from various regions. It provides an opportunity to experience local customs, cultural exchanges, traditions, as well as trade and the sharing of regional products.

“One of the most striking features of the Nguyen Trung Truc festival is its diversity—ethnic, religious, and spiritual. When people attend the Nguyen Trung Truc festival, they feel uplifted and excited, forgetting their daily worries and hardships, fully immersing themselves in the sacred atmosphere of the ceremony and the lively celebrations. Through this, they express their gratitude to their ancestors, those who have contributed to their village, homeland, and country, and demonstrate their community spirit, striving for noble dreams. Attendees feel the warmth, blending into the sacred space of the festival, viewing Nguyen Trung Truc as a spiritual father, and honoring him with the same sincerity as one would when paying respects to their own ancestors. Everyone helps restore and clean the temple... Participants willingly take part in various tasks to support the ceremony, such as cooking, preparing food, and cleaning...” (Tran Thi Mai Lan, 2009). Moreover,

people from all over willingly contribute goods, money, and volunteer services with deep sincerity to serve Nguyen Trung Truc. Hundreds of people gather at the Nguyen Trung Truc temple, setting up welcome gates, hanging flags, umbrellas, and decorative lanterns, and building temporary shelters and hammocks. Pilgrims attending the Nguyen Trung Truc festival are treated to vegetarian meals and free refreshments. “Volunteers helping with the festival range from 2,000 to 3,000 people, serving an average of about 1 million free meals. All of this is done voluntarily, showcasing the generosity and camaraderie that is deeply embedded in the culture of the Mekong Delta... The festival strengthens solidarity and cohesion within the community, boosting the role and participation of the people in preserving and promoting cultural heritage values. It has also become a spiritual symbol celebrating patriotism and national pride in the southwestern region of the homeland” (Le Huy Hai, 2023).

The empathy inherent in the Nguyen Trung Truc Festival is also evident in its unique way of engaging participants. Every year, visitors feel both a sense of familiarity and novelty. The festival is an opportunity for people to exchange emotions and aspirations, thereby fostering trust, strength, tranquility, and reverence for nature, ancestors, and the departed. The Nguyen Trung Truc Festival clearly reflects the resilience and indomitable spirit of the Vietnamese people, along with their cultural lifestyle. The festival’s contribution lies in its preservation and promotion of the local and national cultural beliefs and practices.

The Role of the Nguyen Trung Truc Festival in Community Life

In the spiritual and cultural life of the Vietnamese people, festivals are an inseparable part of the community's existence. Beyond fulfilling the cultural and spiritual needs of the people, festivals also play a crucial role in preserving, safeguarding, and promoting the distinctive cultural values of a particular ethnic group, region, or locality. The Nguyen Trung Truc festival is a form of intangible cultural heritage that is highly comprehensive and community-oriented. The festival encompasses many types of intangible cultural heritage, including performing arts, rituals, traditional clothing, music, cuisine, craftsmanship, knowledge, and folk games. Because of these characteristics, the festival always holds significant appeal and plays a major role in the community. “Traditional festivals exist as a whole, with their elements interrelated and interdependent” (Nguyen Chi Ben, 2013). In reality, it is impossible to revert life today to that of the past. Therefore, when we say the festival is “alive”, it means it continues to “live” in the present. The ongoing presence of the Nguyen Trung Truc Festival today demonstrates its vital role in the community, having endured various historical phases, the ups and downs of time, and social changes, while remaining honored and preserved by the people. Thus, “Whether near or far, wherever we are/Remember the day for Nguyen, and we shall all gather”, as it has become tradition. Every year, on the 26th to 18th of the eighth lunar month, descendants from all corners of the country gather at the Nguyen Trung Truc Shrine to offer incense and pay tribute to the national hero Nguyen Trung Truc and the ancestors who fought for the independence and peace of the nation.

As Ngo Duc Thinh (2010) stated, “Festivals fulfill the spiritual needs of humanity, serving as a second life—a transcendent state beyond mundane existence.” The Nguyen Trung Truc festival embodies values that consolidate community strength, connect people to their roots, provide spiritual balance, inspire creativity and cultural enjoyment, and preserve and pass on cultural heritage. This festival not only reflects the unique cultural values of the Vietnamese people but also serves as a living space to safeguard, enrich, and promote these priceless cultural legacies. In practice, the rituals and ceremonies of the Nguyen Trung Truc Festival are essential for preserving associated intangible cultural assets, such as don ca tai tu (traditional Southern Vietnamese music), ca vong co (nostalgic singing), and traditional folk games. Without the festival, these traditions - rooted in the culture and sustained over centuries - might struggle to maintain their relevance and vibrancy. The Nguyen Trung Truc Festival, therefore, is not merely a cultural event but a vital platform ensuring the continuation and flourishing of these cultural treasures. It transforms collective memory into a living tradition, allowing contemporary and future generations to engage with and cherish their heritage. Guided by the principle of “uong nuoc nho nguon” (drinking water, remembering its source), the annual Nguyen Trung Truc memorial ceremony is held with great reverence. This event plays a key role in fostering patriotism, national pride, and solidarity among all members of the community, encouraging them to contribute to building a prosperous and civilized homeland. In recent years, under the direction of cultural authorities and local leadership, the Nguyen Trung Truc festival has evolved into a major regional celebration.

Beyond honoring Nguyen Trung Truc through rituals, it has become a vibrant cultural exchange between the local community and neighboring regions. Participants often dress in their finest attire and gather at the temple area a day in advance. After offering incense and prayers to commemorate the hero and seek blessings, they immerse themselves in traditional folk performances, cultural exhibitions, and sporting competitions. The combination of solemn rituals and lively festivities makes this event a cornerstone for preserving heritage, uniting people, and celebrating the region's cultural richness.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nguyen Trung Truc festival stands as a cherished tradition, embodying the deep gratitude of the people as they reflect on history and honor the contributions of their ancestors who fought to build and defend the nation through various historical periods. More than a commemorative event, the festival encapsulates the unique cultural characteristics of the community. It serves as an occasion to educate participants about values such as patriotism, moral integrity, and national pride, fostering unity and solidarity within the community. This meaningful celebration not only preserves historical memory but also strengthens the bonds of cultural heritage, inspiring future generations to uphold the spirit of resilience and gratitude.

The Nguyen Trung Truc festival, held annually, serves as a tribute to the national hero Nguyen Trung Truc and reminds future generations of the glorious contributions of their ancestors. It celebrates cultural values such as unity, love, and mutual support. The festival also offers a platform to cultivate and showcase the artistic talents of the local people. Though they may lead humble lives as farmers or workers, during the festival, they transform into artisans, displaying their creativity and craftsmanship. The Nguyen Trung Truc festival blends royal and folk elements, reflecting the local cultural lifestyle and creating a unique cultural space. Through the festival, people from the region have the opportunity to exchange ideas, share experiences, learn about customs, and promote local economic development. It also acts as a powerful connector of the community, creating an atmosphere that is both respectful and lively, reflecting the deep reverence for history and the sacrifices made by their ancestors. In addition to being a space for celebration, the festival provides emotional relief and entertainment, offering a respite after long days of work and labor. It contributes to enriching the national cultural identity while also incorporating modern elements that highlight historical, cultural, and humanitarian values. The Nguyen Trung Truc festival plays a crucial role in preserving local and national culture, promoting sustainable tourism, and contributing to the ongoing development and prosperity of Vietnam.

To contribute to preserving the beauty of Nguyen Trung Truc festival, the author proposes the following recommendations:

Firstly, continue to promote propaganda work on mass media and diversify types of propaganda so that all people are fully aware of the content and value of Nguyen Trung Truc festival; about the meaning and benefits of the festival for the socio-economic development of the province. Second, perfect the policy on the restoration and embellishment of Nguyen Trung Truc communal house relic. Implement detailed planning for the preservation of relic space, harmonizing cultural space, architectural identity, environmental landscape, creating the overall value and characteristics of the relic site. Third, improve the quality and effectiveness of the work of preserving, restoring and promoting the value of intangible cultural heritage (don ca tai tu, cai luong, etc.), bringing these cultural heritages back to the community, creating favorable conditions for people and communities to promote their role as both creative subjects, participants in heritage protection, and beneficiaries of the values of cultural heritage.

Fourth, focus on investing in upgrading transport infrastructure, technical infrastructure for trade, tourism, services, and environmental landscapes in a synchronous, focused, and key direction. Over time, preserving and promoting the cultural beauty of Nguyen Trung Truc festival is a source of strength for the socio-economic development of Kien Giang province in particular as well as the community, nation, and people in general.

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