

Changes in Architecture and Festival of Nguyen Trung Truc Communal House in Kien Giang Province

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ABSTRACT

Nguyen Trung Truc communal house in Rach Gia city, Kien Giang province is considered one of the oldest established communal houses in the locality. After the first restoration in 1881, the communal house has existed for two centuries. Impressions of reclamation and establishing of the hamlet period are still preserved through the custom of worshiping "Ca Ong" and the Thanh Hoang God, the landscape or the architecture of the communal house. The article introduces the architectural and festival changes from the time the communal house was born until now. The study of changes will contribute to identifying cultural nuances and, more broadly, the spiritual life of residents in the land located at the southwest end of Vietnam.

Key words: Changes, Architecture, festival, Nguyen Trung Truc communal house, Kien Giang.

INTRODUCTION

Nguyen Trung Truc communal house was formed in 1881 in Rach Gia city, Kien Giang province. This communal house has spiritual significance not only for Kien Giang residents but also has a profound influence on the spiritual life of the people of Mekong Delta area.

Nguyen Trung Truc – a national hero who is immortalized in history books for two glorious victories in the resistance war against the French colonial invaders in the 19th century: burning the ship Espérance on Nhut Tao River in 1861 and destroying the enemy post in Kien Giang in 1868.

With admiration for those who sacrificed for the country, the people of Kien Giang in particular and the Mekong Delta region in general, organized a death anniversary (now a festival) for the person who has been considered as a God. Nguyen Trung Truc Festival has an increasingly widespread influence, innovating both content and form to unite the community, educate the young generation, preserve national cultural identity.

There have been many works researching Nguyen Trung Truc temple (Truong Minh Dat, 2011; Nguyen Phuoc Hoa, 2020; & Tran Van Thanh, 2018), but up to now there has been limited research article to identify and analyze the architectural changes as well as the Nguyen Trung Truc communal house festival in Rach Gia city, Kien Giang Province. This article can be seen as a necessary supplement to an issue that has not been thoroughly researched in the modern context.

THEORETICAL BASIS AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Cultural change is an inevitable phenomenon of culture. Cultural entities will change more or less. In addition to the erosion of time (external factors), cultural entities also change in the direction of reception to suit the new situation but still retain their essence (internal values). On this issue, traditional creative theory,

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symbolic theory, functional theory was applied.

Traditional creative theory: According to European scholars, especially British historian Eric Hobsbawn, traditions here can be considered as national days, traditional rituals, heroes or symbols, etc. According to this understanding, creativity is associated with many historical facts. "Traditional rituals and celebrations of the community are a strategy to build the country's identity, and are also continuously preserved and promoted by the authorities to carry out the work of gathering and unifying ethnic groups in the community and society" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012). Thus, "past material" is the key to creation and the creative process is the repeated performance of rituals.

Symbolic theory: uses Victor Turner's symbolic theory perspective to explore how festival participants connect with each other through the symbols of the festival. According to Victor Turner (2006), the liminal space created during festivals helps people escape the framework of daily life and return to traditional cultural roots. The rites and rituals that take place during the festival such as the statue carving ceremony, palanquin procession, lion dance, etc. create a sacred atmosphere, bringing people back to deep spiritual emotions. The threshold space of the festival is also the place where "communitas" forms, i.e. when everyone immerses themselves in the collective atmosphere and experiences the same emotions. Together they create extremely powerful and meaningful community strength. Therefore, author's hypothesis is that the Nguyen Trung Truc festival not only has the meaning of commemorating ancestors but also contributes to consolidating and tightening community relationships. It erases all boundaries and distances to unite and bond everyone. This is the deepest nature of traditional festivals, which affirm and recreate the unique common cultural identity of the local community.

Functional theory: this theory has two main branches: individual function (B. Malinowski's view) and social function (Emile Durkheim's view and further developed in Radcliffe's works -Brown). Malinowski's theory emphasizes the physiological and psychological functions of rituals and other customs. In a famous example of Trobriand life on a Pacific island, Malinowski analyzed that when fishing in the lagoon without danger, the Trobriands did not need to perform any magical rituals. They relied only on their own knowledge and skills. However, when going to sea, the risks increased and the results were more uncertain. Trobriand fishermen often performed rituals and spelled to reassure themselves psychologically, hoping for safety and a big harvest of fish (Malinowski 1954). Therefore, Malinowski's theory postulates that the more dangerous environment and the more uncertain the outcome, the more people need ritual magic. In the Vietnamese context, following Malinowski's theoretical perspective, it might be cleared about the increasingly large scale of festivals such as Ba Chua Kho Festival or Ba Chua Xu Festival due to psychological insecurity, especially of traders facing with high market and social competition. The phenomenon of more and more traders going to ceremonies and giving thanks, from a functional standpoint, can be explained by the higher risk level of trading activities compared to other professions such as education (see more Le Hong Ly, 2007 and Nguyen Kim Hien, 2008).

Based on the process of organizing Nguyen Trung Truc festival, the following research methods were selected:

- Document collection method: this method helps approach historical issues, find and survey research works on the subject of Nguyen Trung Truc communal house, especially in the field of cultural change; gathering and classifying cultural theoretical documents, specifically approaching concepts of cultural change, rules, and characteristics of cultural change phenomena; learning documents about the causes of cultural change, Vietnamese culture during the integration period, classify secondary documents and primary documents.
- Analysis and synthesis method: based on scale, rituals, community roles, etc., analysis and synthesis method is conducted to clarify the changes of the festival to adapt to the environment.



- Participant research method: directly participating in Nguyen Trung Truc festival to have objective observations and judgments with empirical basis, interviewing some members of the communal house's management board, some researchers about the current issues and historical issues to see the changes of the research object.

CHANGES IN ARCHITECTURE AND FESTIVAL

Architectural changes

Through the document of Nguyen Phuoc Hoa (2020) about Kien Giang in the past and present as well as via participant research, the results presented Nguyen Trung Truc communal house has undergone 8 restorations.

Legend has it that it was from the late 30s and early 40s of the 19th century, outside Gia Khe village (now called Rach Gia), on a heavy rainy night (the 5th day of the 5th lunar month), there was a whale (called as $Ca\ Ong$) that drifted in and "died" (died). The fishermen of the fishing village, according to folk beliefs, sent someone to announce to the village and asked for building a "shrine" to worship $Ca\ Ong$. They would like to show their gratitude to $Ca\ Ong$ for supporting them in sailing, fishing smoothly in the sea. They got the village's approval. The "shrine" is built of leaves near the location where the fish "died". In all four seasons, they make offerings properly. After that, the village elders changed the word "shrine" to "temple"; In front of the gate there is a name made of planks: "Nam Hai God Temple". This area was formerly called "Thu" hamlet, more than 80% of population worked as fishermen. People take the 5th day of the 5th lunar month as a anniversary day (and also a holiday for the fishing industry). Most fishermen don't work on this day; they spend this day to bring offerings to the "temple" for worship.

Table 1. Architectural changes during 08 restorations (Nguyen Phuoc Hoa, 2020)

| ARCHITECTURAL CHANGES | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| 08 restorations | Architecture before restoration | Architecture after restoration | | |
| First construction architecture (around the late 30s, 19th century) | The original architecture was simply made of leaves to worship <i>Ca Ong</i> | The first repair was in 1850. The name was changed from "Shrine" to "Temple". In front of the gate is the word "Nam Hai God Temple". | | |
| The first architectural restoration, in 1881 | It was still a simple architecture made of leaves. | The temple was moved from the beginning of Gia Khe cannal, Vinh Thanh Van village to its current location in Vinh Thanh village (now Vinh Thanh ward). Construction area is about 120 square meters, 20 meters in length, 9 meters width. Wooden pillars were built from hopea ferrea trees; rafters, purlins made of giant crape myrtle; the ground is lined with bricks; the wall is paneled. In front of the communal house gate, there is a sign "La Pagode de la Baleine" (Temple worshiping <i>Ca Ong</i>). | | |





| The second architectural restoration, in 1963 | After the Geneva Agreement, the French colonialists withdrew from Vietnam. The "Nam Hai Great General's" temple was renamed "Nguyen Trung Truc's temple". Many sections were damaged, especially the roof and walls. After discussion, the officials agreed to restore it. | Temple was designed in the style of ancientSouthern temples. The architecture is in the style of " <i>Thượng lầu hạ hiên</i> " (i.e. looking from the roof ofthe temple, the front house has two overlappingroofs, the main hall in the back has 3 overlappingroofs.) |
|--|--|---|
| The second architectural restoration, in 2007 | The tiled roofs of the main hall, east and west, were much damaged. | The tiled roofs of the main hall, east and west, were restored. |
| The fourth architectural restoration, in 2008 | The house behind the ruins was degraded. | Replaced all purlins and corrugated sheet metal on the roof; strengthened iron columns; reinforced old brick columns; built2 stairs to go upstairs. |
| The fifth architectural restoration, in 2009 | Build a rest house to create conditions for those who serve and work in the temple to rest. | Solid materials; foundations, columns, floors made of reinforced concrete; roofs made of corrugated iron; doors made of iron with glass frame. |
| The sixth architectural restoration, in 2011 | The temple fence was damaged. | Rebuilt a new fence to protect the entire relic site. |
| The seventh architectural restoration, in 2012 | Built a new house to display Nguyen Trung Truc's background and career in the communal house grounds. | The temple's floor; columns, rafters, and roofs were made of concrete and reinforced steel. The roofs were covered with yin and yang tiles; wooden door. The walls were engraved with patterns. |
| The eightth architectural restoration, in 2012 | | Replace all main doors, side doors, and windows of the main hall with precious wood; carved patterns. |

Festival changes

Through observations, the rituals, scale of organization, purpose of attending ceremonies, etc. have had many changes.

• Changes in worship rituals

In the 1990s of the twentieth century, the Nguyen Trung Truc festival had a parade from Nguyen Trung Truc communal house to Tam Quan gate with many participants. "From the 26th day of the 8th lunar month, all the temple departments gather to prepare for the main holidays. At 5 a.m. on August 27, the ceremony began to take place. First, the police opened the way, followed by a dancing lion group, then a ceremonial music group and floats. On the float there were 06 ceremony students and 01 ceremony master. On both sides of the float, there were 30 people marching, playing the role of special forces, with weapons (ceremony). Finally, there are the people, divided into groups. Everyone walked (except for the colorful floats) about one kilometer. The costumes of those participating in the ceremony depend on each groups. If

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it's a group from a communal house or pagoda, they wear a turbaned ao dai, the Hoa Hao group wears a brown ao dai, the Cao Dai group wears a white shirt, etc. When the procession makes a round trip back to the temple gate, the head of the ceremony says loudly: *nhạc sanh khởi nhạc, nghinh thần nhập điện* (i.e. music starts, welcome the god to the temple). Inside the temple, a music band plays to welcomes the god into the temple" (Tran Van Thanh, 2018).

At the same time, there are performances of lion dance, dragon dance, drums and gongs, soldiers, birth ceremonies, costumes, flags and music. This shows that this parade simulates "Sắc thần invitation" (i.e. the decree is a document issued by the king bestowing a title on a deity) of the communal house worship ceremony.

However, this form has some argument. "Is that reasonable? While the title is given to the original Thanh Hoang god. The spirit is the person of Nguyen Trung Truc, and the form is that of the Thanh Hoang God....Don't use one man's beard to pierce the other woman's chin, making both gods embarrassed. Even though Rach Gia's Tam Quan Gate is a symbol of Rach Gia city, it is not a place to store "Sắc thần", process it from there and then return it to where?" (Truong Thanh Hung, 2011).

"The worship of Nguyen Trung Truc still has one wrong detail, which is the organization of death anniversary worship on the 28th day of the 8th lunar month. This date corresponds to October 13, 1868. Meanwhile, the date of Mr. Nguyen's sacrifice is clearly recorded in the official documents of the French archives as October 27, 1868, corresponding to September 12 of the lunar calendar. Perhaps the relocation of the sacred object to the place of worship in Tan Dien hamlet, My Lam commune in 1908 and the lack of worship at that place during the period 1945 – 1954, are the reasons why the anniversary of Mr. Nguyen's death was distorted. (Truong Minh Dat, 2011).

In 2015, the Standing Committee of the Kien Giang Provincial Party Committee agreed on the policy that the province will still organize the death anniversary ceremony on the 26th, 27th, and 28th days of the 8th lunar month every year with the name "Traditional Festival of People's Heroes". Nguyen Trung Truc clan". Particularly, the Nguyen Trung Truc communal house relic protection committee will hold a ceremony to commemorate Mr. Nguyen's death inside the communal house on the 12th day of the 9th lunar month. Regarding the ordination of Nguyen Trung Truc communal house, the Standing Committee of the Kien Giang Provincial Party Committee determined that this is a royal ordination conferred on Thanh Hoang Bon Canh of the ancient Van Tap village, not on Nguyen Trung Truc as an individual. Therefore, the traditional festival of national hero Nguyen Trung Truc will no longer have the spirit procession program as has been done for a long time.

• Changes in scale, scope, and participants

As the economy develops and integrates, festivals are seen as an opportunity to promote economic development, promote tourism, introduce local culture, meet the spiritual needs of the people, etc. In 1989, The Ministry of Culture and Information recognized Nguyen Trung Truc communal house as a "Cultural and historical relic". Also from this year, the monument was restored and repaired many times, and Mr. Nguyen's death anniversary ceremony included festivals (folk games, fairs, lion dances, sports festivals, art festivals, etc.). People from the Southwest region attended enthusiastically.

On festival days, the area around historical and cultural relics: Nguyen Trung Truc communal house, Rach Gia city becomes bustling. Guests from all over came to Nguyen Trung Truc communal house and park to burn incense and pay tribute to Mr. Nguyen. Even day and night, about a few thousand people return from the provinces, they volunteer to serve the offerings (cooking rice, preparing food, drinks, etc.) and serve guests. They worked enthusiastically, responsibly, and voluntarily to show their sincerity to Mr. Nguyen.



All of the above activities do not require payment, but only require the opportunity to eat and drink frugal meals with everyone like a family on the anniversary of the death of grandparents (the food is all vegetarian). This is a unique festival model. People go to the temple to eat, live, work, and enjoy the results of their labor together. People come to the ceremony from all over, they bring to the temple what they have to show their devotion: wealth, vegetables, fruits, rice, MSG, sugar, etc. According to custom, after the ceremony, the offerings are used to help poor people, nursing homes, ethnic minorities, charity kitchens, etc.

Coming to Mr. Nguyen's festival, everyone is equal: from servants to pilgrims, from officials to civilians, etc. everyone can eat, drink, and be respected.

On festival days, a large number of people are always present at Nguyen Trung Truc communal house, but the atmosphere here is very orderly. Services (restaurants, hotels, etc.) are all discounted; begging and gambling are almost non-existent.

One characteristic of the Nguyen Trung Truc festival is multi-ethnicity, multi-belief, and multi-religion. Coming to the festival, everyone feels excited, forgets all worries, and integrates into the sacred and bustling atmosphere of the festival. Thereby, they show their gratitude to their ancestors and demonstrate the spirit of community attachment.

Through the survey, it can be seen that the number of tourists coming to Nguyen Trung Truc festival is increasing. Compared to other festivals such as the Ba Chua Xu festival in Chau Doc (An Giang), the Linh Son Thanh Mau festival in Ba Den mountain (Tay Ninh), the Nguyen Trung Truc National Hero Festival attracts a large number of visitors.

Table 2. Changes in scale, scope, and participants

| Year | Changes in scale, scope, and participants | Notes |
|------|---|--|
| | Lanterns were hung around the streets near Nguyen Trung Truc communal house and major roads in Rach Gia city, Kien Giang province. | |
| 2003 | – Mass cultural exchange of three ethnic groups Kinh – Chinese – Khmer; organized folk games; played human chess; enjoyed lion and dragon dance competition; released 5,000 flower lanterns on the Kien River; staged the theme "Nguyen Trung Truc – the immortal son" with a staged scenario recreating the battle of Rach Gia post. | Celebrating the 135th anniversary of Nguyen Trung Truc's death |
| | - 400,000 people participated in the festival. | |
| 2007 | -The ceremony to welcome <i>Sắc Thần</i> was held broadcast live on VCTV1 channel. | |

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| | - Guinness Vietnam recorded organization recognizes "Vietnam's largest calligraphy banner" with 04 verses: "Thắng phụ nhưng trường bất túc luân/ Đồi ba để trụ ức ngư dân/ Hoả hồng Nhựt Tảo oanh thiên địa/ Kiếm bạc Kiên Giang khấp quỷ thần" by poet Huynh Man Dat praising Nguyen Trung Truc's courage. - This year's festival attracted about 6,000 people. | |
|------|--|---|
| 2008 | The performance "Anh khí như hồng (i.e. praising Nguyen Trung Truc's heroic spirit as bright as a rainbow of seven colors) was held. As for the festival, activities included: Rach Gia cultural – trade – tourism exhibition fair at Lac Hong children's park; street photo exhibition "country – people of Kien Giang", calligraphy exhibition, walking street and culinary culture at Ton Duc Thang street, Vietnam record "Ta Nien mat weaving" festival program at Nguyen Trung Truc monument park, etc. There were about 700,000 people participating in the festival. | Commemorating the 140th anniversary of Nguyen Trung Truc's sacrifice. Responding to in the Mekong Can Tho National Tourism Year 2008 (hosted by Can Tho city) |
| 2010 | The opening night theater program included two main parts: praising the career of fighting foreign invaders of National Hero Nguyen Trung Truc and the Southern land; looking forward to 1000 years of Thang Long – Hanoi. The ceremony to welcome Sắc Thần was held from Tam Quan gate to the Nguyen Trung Truc monument ceremony yard. There were also activities taking place: cultural performances, amateur music, wine mixing performances, beer drinking contests, performances lion and dragon competition, folk flower competition, synchronized swimming, water puppet show, photo exhibition, motorbike racing, etc. This festival attracted 800,000 participants. | Great celebration of 1000 years of Thang Long – Hanoi |

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| 2018 | · | Celebrating the 150th anniversary of Nguyen Trung Truc's death |
|------|--|---|
| 2019 | — Traditional rituals within the communal house grounds were internally organized. | Due to the complicated developments of the Covid -19 epidemic |
| 2020 | | Due to the complicated developments of the Covid -19 epidemic |
| 2023 | place for the first time in their clang. | Celebrating the 155th anniversary of Nguyen Trung Truc's death Kien Giang province received the National Intangible Cultural Heritage Certificate "Nguyen Trung Truc Communal House Festival – Rach Gia, Kien Giang province" |

• Change in the purpose of participating to the festival

Spiritual purpose

Participating in the Nguyen Trung Truc festival is an important need in people's lives. Being present at the festival is not only a satisfaction of the need to be immersed in the life of the community in many aspects, but also an opportunity to contemplate, awaken, and pray for "peace for people and prosperity". Spiritual belief is an important feature in folk beliefs, with the concept of dividing the world into two poles: the secular pole and the sacred pole, that is, the world that exists and the world that does not exist, the world of the living and the world after death – the world of invisible objects. But in practice, "there is a lack of clear distinction between the sacred and the secular world, between the invisible and the visible, the living and the dead, the earthly and the supernatural, the human and the natural, the natural and the divine, saint, devil.

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Everything seems to be one, but not really one. It is still two" (Dang Nghiem Van, 1999). People who come to Mr. Nguyen's festival can live seemingly at the same time in two worlds, but distinguish between the two worlds. That is the time when they enter the place of worship, light incense, is the time when people step from the mundane space into the sacred space to live in the sacred moment of belief.

This is an intermediary place for people to communicate with the sacred through rituals. As a place to practice rituals during the festival, Nguyen Trung Truc communal house is the place where the Kien Giang people as well as the Mekong Delta show their respect for the God in the people's hearts. Through space and rituals, individuals in the community have the opportunity to share spiritual beliefs as well as memories of history and origins. Nguyen Trung Truc Communal House is not a natural space as it is, but a sacred space. Nguyen Trung Truc Communal House is considered a place of separation between the sacred and the secular. Obviously, the sacred, can never exist naturally without interaction with humans.

Today, in an increasingly developing economic context. Individuals and businesses are successful in the marketplace, partly thanks to their constant self-efforts, and people also think about divine help. With such a mentality, when they come to the Nguyen Trung Truc festival – where the god Nguyen Trung Truc is present – they become more secure and entrust their faith to the gods to pray for good weather.

This phenomenon is mentioned by B. Malinowski (1992) in functionalism. Malinowski emphasized that the magical rituals of the Pacific Trobriand islanders were considered the height of ignorance and absurdity, but were understandable and effective. For example, "when the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands go fishing in the lagoons, it is an understandable problem. But when they get off the rocks, out into the open sea with its vagaries and dangers, fierce waves, sudden storms, unpredictable catches and other difficulties, they often rely on into a magical ritual to assuage his terror and continue his work. When going to sea to fish, the risks increase and the results are also more uncertain. Trobriand fishermen often perform rituals and spells to reassure themselves psychologically, hoping for safety and a big catch of fish" (Bronislaw Malinowski, 1992).

Entertainment and tourism purposes

Kien Giang is a province with a rich festival system, expressing unique features of the community's culture, such as: Nghinh Ong festival (Kien Hai district), boat racing festival, Dinh Cau festival (Phu Quoc city), Chieu Anh Cac Tao Dan festival (Ha Tien city), Hung King's death anniversary at Hung Temple (Tan Hiep district), celebration of the death anniversary of Armed Forces Hero Phan Thi Rang (Hon Dat district), Culture – sports and tourism festival for Khmer people (Go Quao district),...

Previously, the main purpose of people coming to festivals was to entertain through folk games. Nowadays, festivals have their own cultural characteristics and also have the participation of tourists.

In terms of space, Nguyen Trung Truc communal house is located in Rach Gia city – which is identified as the tourist triangle axis of Rach Gia – Ha Tien – Phu Quoc. Therefore, visitors come to the festival as a destination to visit, shop for local products, and experience traditional cultural values amid modern life. This purpose appears when human life is increasingly improved. Thus, Nguyen Trung Truc festival is also a place to connect and transmit traditional cultural values. This contributes to local economic growth.

CONCLUSION

Community culture is always influenced by the cultural subject and the cultural space that creates it. Nguyen Trung Truc Festival is no exception to that influence. Nguyen Trung Truc Festival was born on the basis of meeting the needs of the people; therefore, to form the Nguyen Trung Truc festival, people have to work,

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create, search, and select.

Approaching the structure-function theory, it can be seen that Nguyen Trung Truc festival is formed on the basis of customs of the community.

According to H. Spencer, a British psychology researcher (1820 – 1903), "humans and animals can only survive in their living environment when they know how to adapt." On that basis, people will adapt to the environment during their existence and development. Thus, according to the historical process, Nguyen Trung Truc festival has undergone changes (receiving and developing by intertwining new things or eliminating old elements that are no longer suitable). This contributes to gathering the strength of great national unity; enrich cultural identity; brings economic benefits to Kien Giang province (through revenue from services and tourism), and contributes to promoting the belief of worshiping Nguyen Trung Truc (a unique belief formed from admiration of the National Hero); creates conditions for the community to look forward to the nation's heroic historical traditions, participate in cultural activities, express gratitude and appreciation to those who have contributed to the Fatherland, and be aware of personal responsibility for building and protecting the country.

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