

Researching Traditional Festivals from a Structural – Functional Theoretical Approach (In the Case of Nguyen Trung Truc Festival in Rach Gia City, Kien Giang Province)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the formation, development, and transformation of traditional community festivals through a structural-functional theoretical approach, focusing on the case study of the Nguyen Trung Truc festival in the Kien Giang community. Utilizing a cultural impact assessment framework, it examines various ethnic cultural aspects such as methods of using the natural environment for mutual well-being, practices of worship, creativity, and community togetherness. It also looks into the organization of life based on cohesion through cultural institutions and beliefs, as well as methods of expressing community cultural values. This comprehensive approach aims to understand the traditions and traditional practices of the Nguyen Trung Truc festival and the real life of the Kien Giang community from multiple dimensions. Through the article, the author proposes that local authorities promote the role of the community in organization and management. At the same time, develop a set of cultural codes of conduct for festivals to preserve and promote the value of festival heritage in the direction of sustainable development.

Key words: Festival, residential community, Kien Giang, structural - functional theory

INTRODUCTION

Festivals serve as a means to preserve and transmit culture across generations, contribute to cultural diversity, and are a treasure trove of valuable assets for the community. They hold an important position in the cultural life of ethnic groups and “realize” the concept of spiritual cultural life through a system of symbols and sacred activities, allowing people to “communicate” with gods. With religious practices that are both sacred and profane (worldly), festivals provide a fuller, clearer, and more diverse depiction of the community, as viewed by Turner (1982, 1983), Eic (1983), Falassi (1987), and Maning (1983).

In recent years, some traditional festivals have tended to change (due to the impact of market mechanisms, media development, tourism, etc.), giving rise to many complex phenomena. This article seeks to find the causes of change, thereby proposing solutions to preserve national cultural traditions.

THEORETICAL BASE AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In festival research, this study approaches structural-functional theory based on the narratives of cultural owners, who are both the creative subjects and participants in festival practices. Within the scope of this article, we explore the mechanisms of formation, development, and transformation of the Nguyen Trung Truc festival in the overall economic, cultural, and social life of the community in Rach Gia city, Kien Giang Province.

The application of structural-functional theory in festival research is not a new phenomenon. Since early times, cultural anthropologists have used this theory to study the structure of festival components through space, time, and behavior (costumes, words, gestures). Typical studies include those on the origin and functions of festivals by Van Gennep (1909), Durkheim (1915), and Turner (1974), as well as research on the symbolic meaning of festivals by Geertz (1973). Studies on the structure of festival elements by Van Gennep (1960) and Falassi (1987)

are also notable. Inheriting Durkheim's "social solidarity theory", Radcliffe-Brown emphasizes the function of rituals in maintaining "the integrity of the social system" for the community and society. Meanwhile, through studying the fishing rituals of the Trobriand people of a Pacific island, Malinowski highlighted the psychological and physiological functions of rituals for social individuals, noting that as living environments become more unstable, people increasingly rely on rituals and magic. Research projects on festivals in Vietnam influenced by the structural-functional school include studies on the functions of village festivals and folk festivals of Vietnamese ethnic minorities by Le Trung Vu (1992) and Dang Thi Oanh (2013).

In terms of methodology, this article conducts retrospective research, synthesizing direct experiences from older individuals and conversations with former officers who have led the Provincial Culture sector—individuals with extensive experience and deep understanding of this festival practice. This approach is based on the cumulative sampling mechanism. Ethnographic description is also applied to clarify the traditional elements and changes of the Nguyen Trung Truc festival in the social life of the community in Rach Gia city, Kien Giang province. Notably, the traditional construction of the Nguyen Trung Truc festival has been influenced by the emergence of new social forms for new purposes. As a result, some traditional elements of the festival have become less adaptable and have thus "deformed" (Hosbawm & Ranger, 2012).

As with any festival, the content may vary, but it is essential to affirm that a festival is of the community, created by the community to "satisfy religious needs" and fulfill the desire for "psychological stability" of the community (Le Trung Vu, 1992). This is one of the key factors for the formation and development of any festival. The Nguyen Trung Truc festival of the residents of Rach Gia city, Kien Giang province, is not simply a collection of community cultural activities. It is a cultural element contributing to the formation of community cultural characteristics and is intrinsically linked to the cultural perception and practices of the community members. The formation and development of the festival cannot be separated from the cultural and social space of the community.

Along with the process of economic development and international integration, the transformation of Nguyen Trung Truc festival is an objective necessity. There is currently no research on this issue. Therefore, this article aims to protect and promote intangible cultural values.

STRUCTURE OF NGUYEN TRUNG TRUC FESTIVAL IN RACH GIA CITY, KIEN GIANG PROVINCE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF STRUCTURAL - FUNCTIONAL THEORY

As is well known, the history of Vietnam in general, and Kien Giang province in particular, in the second half of the 19th century, is marked by heroic struggles of patriotic movements against the invading French colonialists. The steadfast sons of the Vietnamese people, "even if they sacrificed everything, they were determined not to be slaves" have been forever recognized by history. Among the thousands who represent that indomitable and steadfast spirit, Nguyen Trung Truc emerged as a bright star in the fight against foreign invaders in the southwestern river region.

Nguyen Trung Truc, a national hero, made his mark in history with two illustrious victories: burning the ship *Espérance* on the Nhut Tao River in 1861 and destroying the French governor's palace in 1868 in Rach Gia (now Rach Gia city, Kien Giang province, where there is a communal house worshipping Nguyen Trung Truc). When mentioning Nguyen Trung Truc, posterity immediately remembers his famous saying, "*When the Western enemy uproots all the grass in the South, there will be no more Southerners fighting the Western enemy*".

Since Nguyen Trung Truc passed away in 1868, the people of Kien Giang province, with infinite respect, have secretly worshiped and viewed him as a "god" in the temple of Nam Hai Great General (Worship of Ca Ong). This temple has now become the Nguyen Trung Truc communal house in Rach Gia city, Kien Giang province. In 1988, it was ranked as a national historical relic by the Ministry of Culture and Information (now the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism). Every year from August 26 to 28 (lunar calendar), the Nguyen Trung Truc festival attracts hundreds of thousands of people from all over the country.

In addition, in some districts of Kien Giang province, communal houses to worship Nguyen Trung Truc were

built.

Table 1. Data on communal houses worshipping Nguyen Trung Truc in Kien Giang province

No	Districts/cities worship national hero Nguyen Trung Truc	Number
1	Rach Gia city	1
2	Hon Dat District	6
3	Tan Hiep District	3
4	Phu Quoc City	2
5	Chau Thanh District	2
6	Kien Luong District	1
Total		15

In addition, people in other provinces in the Mekong Delta have built dozens of communal houses to worship him.

Table 2. Data on communal houses worshipping Nguyen Trung Truc in the Mekong Delta.

No	The provinces worship national hero Nguyen Trung Truc	Number
1	Long An	2
2	An Giang	3
3	Bac Lieu	4
4	Can Tho	1
5	Hau Giang	6
6	Kien Giang	14
7	Tra Vinh	2
8	Soc Trang	6
Total		38

By 2024, commemorating the 155th anniversary of national hero Nguyen Trung Truc's death (1868 - 2023), the Nguyen Trung Truc communal house festival has been included in the list of national intangible cultural heritage by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. It has been recognized with the “National Intangible Cultural Heritage Certificate” for the Nguyen Trung Truc Communal House Festival, Rach Gia city, Kien Giang province.

The purpose of the festival is to pay tribute to and honor the talents and victories of national hero Nguyen Trung Truc. It aims to educate the young generation about patriotic traditions and the steadfast spirit of fighting foreign

invaders and protecting the country. The festival meets the folk belief needs of a part of the resident community and serves as an opportunity to strengthen community cohesion among various ethnic groups, including the Kinh, Chinese, and Khmer.

Participating in the Nguyen Trung Truc festival, people seem to forget all their worries and daily hardships and immerse themselves in the sacred atmosphere of the festival. Thereby, they express their gratitude to their ancestors and show the spirit of community attachment, aiming for good dreams. Everyone repairs and cleans the temple, participates in ceremony services such as cooking, preparing food, cleaning, etc. Everyone eats, lives together, works, and enjoys their labor results. Festival attendees bring back to the temple what they have to show their devotion to Nguyen Trung Truc, such as: vegetables, rice, fruit, sugar, MSG,... At the festival in 2023, *“There were about 3,000 volunteers participating in serving the Nguyen Trung Truc festival, divided into many groups, such as: cooking vegetarian rice, pouring vegetarian pancakes to serve people for free, setting up hammock camps, providing drinking water,... serving 24/24 hours during the festival”* (Duy Nhan, 2023).

As a rule, after the ceremony, the community's offerings are used to help the poor, donate to nursing homes, support people affected by natural disasters, and supply charity kitchens in hospitals. During the Nguyen Trung Truc festival, attendees receive free meals and drinks. *“Every year, we cook about 20-25 tons of rice. In 2023, we did even more. All meals are free. Our kitchen has about 150 people cooking free vegetarian rice for people who come here to visit and worship national hero Nguyen Trung Truc”* (Chi Cong, 2023). All types of services, such as restaurants and hotels, offer discounts. Funding for organizing the festival comes entirely from social contributions. During the festival, attendees in need can receive free medical examinations and medicine at the “Southern Medicine Room” of the communal house. The medicines used are plants and grasses available in the area and brought by people from various places inside and outside the province. All doctors and attendants here provide their services for free.

The Nguyen Trung Truc Festival is not only a harmony between humans and “gods” and between humans and the landscape but also a product of the interaction between humans in the relationship of: community (residing together in the same territory), common benefit (exercising common rights and obligations), and communion (sharing and enjoying identical experiences, skills, and behaviors in the community, sharing cultural values, and the same belief in the protection of “god” and practicing that common belief). *“A very unique beauty of the Nguyen Trung Truc festival is the spirit of the festival attendees. People from all over the Mekong Delta provinces come to attend the festival as if returning to their families, commemorating the death anniversary of their grandparents. Therefore, communion, destiny, and symbiosis are clearly expressed in this festival. People come to attend the festival following the call of the national cultural tradition ‘when drinking water, remember the source’, commemorating a national hero who sacrificed for the people and the country. On the land where that hero fell, people voluntarily join hands to organize the festival without calculating the loss. Whoever has the resources contributes, whoever has the strength contributes, and each has their own work, without calculating, comparing, or envying each other”* (Vo Thanh Xuan, 2023).

The Nguyen Trung Truc Festival has endogenous strength, formed on the basis of solidarity and close relationships between community members. This festival provides an opportunity for generations within the community to perform their duties and enjoy common benefits. It is not only a time for the community to offer incense in memory of Nguyen Trung Truc but also to meet, interact, and share life experiences and work. *“Many convoys of vehicles (motorbikes, bicycles, cars) carrying whole families from all provinces flock to Rach Gia city during Mr. Nguyen's festivals, making the atmosphere bustling and full of meaning. People in the Mekong Delta who attend the festival also bring specialties and typical products of each locality to sell at cheap prices, such as Soc Trang green rice, spring rolls, water chestnut tubers, Dong Thap lotus seeds, Go Den fish sauce, Go Den sole wine, Chau Doc Thai fish sauce, and Soc Trang Pia cake. It can be seen that there are rarely festivals where people voluntarily share spiritual and material values like the festival of national hero Nguyen Trung Truc in Kien Giang province”* (Vo Thanh Xuan, 2023).

The festival absorbs tradition and becomes part of the community tradition. Its structure represents the significant events of the community. In researching the structure of the Nguyen Trung Truc Festival of the Kien Giang community, we analyze the cultural framework by breaking down the festival into its various components and levels to examine their characteristics and functions.

From the festival structure, we see that the Nguyen Trung Truc festival of the Kien Giang community is a collection of relationships between the entities that make up the festival, which are the “ceremony” and “festival” parts. In particular, the “ceremony” part means giving thanks and asking for divine protection. This is the “religious part” that reflects the religious and spiritual life of the three ethnic communities (Kinh, Chinese, Khmer) living in Kien Giang province. The “festival” part includes activities associated with performance and entertainment such as: lion and dragon performances; exhibition of art photos and calligraphy; ornamental animal contest,...this is the “life part” that reflects the daily cultural life of the resident community. There is a relationship between these two parts, in which the “festival” part depends and is regulated by the “ceremony” part.

With belief in the divine world, with the desire and desire to receive protection and help from the “god” Nguyen TrungTruc, the Kien Giang community always sincerely looks towards the sacred world. During the Nguyen TrungTruc festival, sacredness is strictly enforced with regulations through the ceremonial space, as well as through sacrificial rituals. The space is sacred by the atmosphere of reverence and solemnity by strings of words such as offerings, vows, and promises of the sacred person (the master of ceremonies), by offerings, and by the majestic echo of trumpets and drums. . Besides the sacredness, Nguyen Trung Truc festival also has a daily life as shown through the series of events taking place in the festival, which are attractive dance activities, music, cuisine, folk games, etc. Many community members participate in these activities

Unlike some other festivals in Kien Giang province (Hung King's Anniversary in Tan Hiep district; Nghinh Ong festival in Kien Hai district; Dinh Cau festival, Dinh Ba Ong Lang festival,... in Phu Quoc city; the death anniversary of King Khai in Mac Cuu town in Ha Tien city), Nguyen Trung Truc festival in Rach Gia city is the only festival associated with the national hero in the resistance war against the French colonialists. Therefore, the organizational process is carried out thoughtfully with a series of events that are rituals, with the participation of individuals as members of the community. Specifically, the ritual takes place as follows:

Table 3: Ritual activities of Nguyen Trung Truc festival

Time	Activities
The first day (August 26 lunar calendar)	- Participate in the following tasks: decorating communal house grounds, welcome gates, banrols, hanging lanterns along main roads in Rach Gia city. - Take place association activities, welcoming leaders and compatriots from the provinces to attend
The second day (August 27 lunar calendar)	- 5:30 a.m.: flag raising ceremony - 6 a.m.: welcoming <i>Sắc Thần</i> - 6:45 a.m.: settle down and chant incense - 7 a.m.: opening of the festival - 9 a.m.: ceremony to request peace of the God - 6:00 p.m.: Ceremony for deputy official Lam Quang Ky
The third day (August 28 lunar calendar)	- 0 a.m.: altar ceremony (according to traditional rituals, lasting 2 hours) - from 7 a.m. - 11 a.m.: groups continue to visit - 2 p.m.: Ceremony to sacrifice to Nguyen TrungTruc - 4:30 p.m.: saying goodbye to <i>Sắc Thần</i>

Two months before the festival, communities from all over the Mekong Delta region come to worship Nguyen Trung Truc. They feel obliged to make a pilgrimage to the original communal house to worship Nguyen Trung

Truc. Seeing Nguyen Trung Truc in Kien Giang province makes their hearts happy and their soul's sublime. They open their hearts to the festival of the national hero. They want to contribute their efforts to repay those who "deterred to die for the Fatherland". Coming to the original communal house worshipping Nguyen Trung Truc, pilgrims direct their souls to the sacred soul of the mountains and rivers. From here, love for homeland and country grows in their hearts; creates adaptive opportunities for people to nurture faith and worship the national hero.

Coming to the solemn festival, no one will disturb or disrupt the order. People who are "young and naïve" will feel inferior. People who lack morality, do wrong things, etc. will not exist in the community of people who sincerely worship national hero Nguyen Trung Truc.

At the festival, "people worshiped non-stop day and night. When it comes to worship, there must be worship and rituals. They were all solemn in traditional costumes. They are always very enthusiastic, not lazy at all. According to custom, when performing solemn worship, it is necessary to have music played. In the communal house, every time a group of guests come to visit, ancient music is played. Music warms the festival space. On Mr. Nguyen's death anniversary, always be neat and respectful, because this is a ceremony to worship the gods. The host or guests both show sincerity" (Truong Minh Dat, 2009). It can be seen that the way the rituals are conducted gives the ceremony a spiritual vitality that is transmitted to everyone who is respectfully commemorating.

CHANGE IN SPACE-TIME DIMENSION AND TRADITIONAL TECTONIC DYNAMICS OF NGUYEN TRUNG TRUC FESTIVAL IN KIEN GIANG RESIDENTS COMMUNITY

Any festival, no matter how conservative or traditional, is always constructed and transformed over space and time. Especially in contemporary social life, when festivals are built and managed to meet many goals (Getz, 2010), while the structure - function and meaning of the festival are dynamic, spatial-temporal and often unstable, so it has the potential for change.

Hobsbawn (2000) argues that there is no time or place where there is no traditional construction. However, "that tectonics often takes place when the rapid transformation of a society weakens or destroys traditionally established social forms and creates new social forms that make traditional values are no longer applied, or creation occurs when old traditions and the mechanisms that convey and promote them are no longer flexible and adaptable enough, so they are eliminated" (Turner, V, 1974). If understood in this sense, the transformation of the Nguyen Trung Truc festival of the community of residents of Rach Gia city, Kien Giang province is determined in relation to "traditional standards". In other words, does it keep whether it is "traditional" and ensures the "authenticity" of the cultural characteristics of the ethnic group that creates and practices it or not.

Looking from the perspective of the internal structure of the Nguyen Trung Truc festival, as well as the environmental factors in which it operates, we see that the Nguyen Trung Truc festival is having changes in contemporary social life. The most obvious expression is in the following aspects: the purpose of attending the ceremony; scale, scope, and audience attending the ceremony (Nguyen Tan Kiet, 2024).

Considering the causes of the change in the Nguyen Trung Truc festival of the Kien Giang community, we attribute it to two factors: endogenous (internal factors of the community stemming from changes in environmental conditions, social context affects the subjective perceptions and intentions of cultural subjects); exogenous (factors influenced from the outside due to the process of discovering, disseminating, and diffusing "new" or "foreign things"). These two factors break down the fulcrum: the natural conditions where the community resides (the basic inputs for the community's livelihoods to be realized); related to mental and spiritual life, also known as behavioral thresholds. Once these fulcrums are affected or broken, traditional factors will change.

As mentioned, the community is the creator of the festival, and they are also the ones who decide the existence and development of the festival. Once social life changes, the function of the festival will also change. This is an objective, inevitable reality.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Community culture is always influenced by cultural subjects 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 community. Therefore, to form a festival, the community must work, create, search and select.

Approaching the theory of structure - function, surveying the Nguyen Trung Truc festival of the community of residents of Rach Gia city, Kien Giang province, we find that this festival is formed and developed on the basis of customs and the needs of the community here. Associated with community cultural activities, Nguyen Trung Truc festival not only reflects the values, ideas, symbols, ideologies, identities, and cultural characteristics of the community, but it also reflects the level of productive knowledge, and worldview of community members that are formed in the process of people here interacting with the natural environment where they reside.

Although it is a spiritual cultural activity that unites the community, the changes in contemporary social life have transformed some traditional elements of the Nguyen Trung Truc festival. In general, the content, rituals, functions, and roles that connect cultural, spiritual, and entertainment activities of the festival have been changed.

Therefore, local authorities need to promote the role of the community in organization and management. At the same time, build a set of cultural codes of conduct for festivals to preserve and promote the value of festival heritage in the direction of sustainable development to protect the uniqueness and diversity of cultural elements of Nguyen Trung Truc festival (rituals, language arts: worshipping texts, words of prayers, etc.), decorative arts, culinary arts, etc. to form the whole of the festival. The authorities respect the purpose of organizing festivals of the local community to educate the tradition of patriotism, national pride, honor the merits of ancestors (national hero Nguyen Trung Truc); form noble behaviors, attitudes, and awareness for each person.

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