

Symbols and Practices of Filial Piety in the Cultural Life of the Southern Khmer: A Functionalist Approach

PhD. Le Thuy An, PhD. Tang Van Thon, MA. Thach Thi Sa Phia

College of Southern Khmer Language, Culture, Arts and Humanity, Tra Vinh University, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Filial piety is not only a moral value but also an important cultural foundation in the spiritual life of the Southern Khmer community in Vietnam. This study examines how filial practices help maintain social relationships, cultural continuity, and religious identity within Khmer society. Drawing on Functionalist theory, particularly the perspectives of Bronisław Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, the article analyzes the social and symbolic functions of filial traditions in everyday communal life.

The study employs ethnographic fieldwork and symbolic analysis, including observations at Khmer temples, participation in ritual events, and interviews with community members from different age groups. Particular attention is given to culturally distinctive practices such as temporary monastic ordination as an expression of gratitude toward parents, the Sen Dolta ancestral commemoration festival, and merit-making activities dedicated to parents and ancestors.

The findings indicate that Khmer filial piety reflects a close integration between Theravāda Buddhist beliefs and indigenous traditions of ancestor veneration. Filial practices continue to function as an important cultural and moral “anchor” despite increasing pressures from migration, urbanization, and social change. At the same time, younger Khmer generations are gradually reinterpreting filial obligations in more flexible and symbolic ways, especially in urban and migrant contexts. The study argues that filial piety remains a significant source of cultural cohesion and ethnic identity while also adapting to contemporary social realities.

INTRODUCTION

Within East Asian cultural traditions in general, and within Khmer culture in particular, filial piety occupies a central position in structuring both family and social relationships. The Southern Khmer, whose cultural life is marked by a strong sense of identity and a profound influence of Theravāda Buddhism, have developed and sustained distinctive forms of filial observance that reflect the community’s worldview and moral philosophy.

Filial practice among the Khmer is not merely an expression of individual morality; it is closely interwoven with spiritual beliefs, religious rituals, and communal organization. Examining these filial traditions allows for a deeper understanding of Khmer cultural identity, while also providing an intellectual foundation for the preservation and revitalization of traditional cultural values within contemporary society.

THEORETICAL RESEARCH APPROACH

This study applies a Functionalist approach in cultural anthropology to understand how filial piety operates within the Southern Khmer community. Functionalism views cultural practices not simply as traditions or beliefs, but as social mechanisms that help maintain stability, moral order, and communal continuity.

The study draws particularly on the ideas of Bronisław Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. According to Malinowski, cultural practices exist because they fulfill important psychological and social needs. In the Khmer context, filial rituals such as temporary monastic ordination help individuals express gratitude

toward their parents while also providing emotional and spiritual reassurance. Through these practices, people affirm their moral identity and strengthen their connection to the community.

Radcliffe-Brown, meanwhile, emphasized that cultural institutions contribute to maintaining social order and collective stability. From this perspective, filial piety among the Khmer functions as a social mechanism that reinforces intergenerational responsibility, family hierarchy, and communal solidarity within the *phum sóc* community system. In addition to Functionalism, this study also employs symbolic analysis to examine how rituals, offerings, ordination ceremonies, and ancestral commemorations communicate cultural meanings related to gratitude, morality, and collective identity.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology This study employed qualitative ethnographic methods conducted in several Southern Khmer communities in Trà Vinh and Sóc Trăng provinces between 2023 and 2025. Fieldwork focused primarily on Khmer temples, family rituals, and communal ceremonies associated with filial practices.

Data were collected through participant observation, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews. A total of 24 participants were consulted, including Buddhist monks, elderly community members, middle-aged household representatives, and younger Khmer individuals studying or working in urban areas. The inclusion of participants from different generations allowed the study to explore both continuity and changing interpretations of filial values in contemporary Khmer society.

In addition to interviews, the research incorporated observations of ritual activities during *Sen Dolta* ceremonies, merit-making events, and temporary ordination rituals. Field notes and ritual descriptions were analyzed using a functionalist and symbolic interpretive framework in order to identify how filial practices contribute to social cohesion, moral education, religious identity, and cultural continuity.

Because this study emphasizes qualitative interpretation rather than statistical generalization, the findings should be understood as culturally grounded ethnographic observations rather than representative survey data.

RESULTS

4.1. Filial Piety Expressed through Monastic Ordination

The most distinctive and salient form of filial piety within the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam is the ordination of sons into the monastic life as a means of repaying parental benevolence. This conception is deeply rooted in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, wherein religious ideology occupies a central position in the spiritual life of the Khmer people. According to Theravāda doctrine, ordination constitutes the supreme path for the accumulation of merit, as monastics cultivate moral discipline (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*), thereby generating purified merit that can be dedicated to parents, ancestors, and relatives.

Consequently, a son's decision to enter the monastic order is not merely construed as a personal choice but is elevated to a noble expression of filial piety, embodying profound gratitude for the sacrifices associated with birth and upbringing. This practice reflects the intricate interweaving of traditional filial ethics and the Buddhist worldview within Khmer culture. While filial piety in many East Asian societies predominantly emphasizes the material provision for parents, among the Khmer it is further conceptualized as a spiritually significant act of merit-making. It is widely believed that the merit accrued through a son's monastic practice not only brings immediate well-being to parents but also contributes to the amelioration of their karmic conditions, thereby facilitating a more auspicious rebirth in the future (Phan An, 2006).

The Khmer believe that when a son enters the monastic life, his parents partake in the merit accrued both in the present and in future existences. Within the religious worldview of the Khmer in Southern Vietnam, this belief occupies a position of particular significance, being closely intertwined with Theravāda Buddhist doctrine and traditional conceptions of filial piety. According to Theravāda Buddhism, human existence is governed by the law of karma and the cycle of rebirth; all actions, whether wholesome or unwholesome, generate

corresponding consequences. Monastic ordination, entailing the disciplined cultivation of moral virtue (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*), is regarded as the most exalted and purified form of wholesome action, capable of generating substantial and enduring merit. On this basis, the Khmer maintain that the merit accumulated through a son's religious practice may be transferred to his parents, thereby ensuring their well-being in the present and fostering more favorable conditions for rebirth in the future.

Within the Khmer community of Southern Vietnam, a son's ordination ceremony is typically conducted with great solemnity, and its organization vividly reflects both the sacred character of the ritual and the strong sense of communality embedded in Khmer religious-cultural life. From a Theravāda Buddhist perspective, ordination is not merely an individual decision but a pivotal rite of passage marking a fundamental transformation in both social status and spiritual orientation—from lay existence to a life of religious discipline. It is precisely this ontological transition that renders the ordination ceremony profoundly significant and elevates it to a sacred rite within the community.

The sacrality of the ordination ceremony is first manifested in its highly symbolic ritual system, performed within the temple, which serves as the spiritual nucleus of Khmer communal life. Ritual acts such as the shaving of the head, the donning of monastic robes, the taking of vows before the monastic community (*saṅgha*), and the formal commitment to the religious path are conducted in strict accordance with Theravāda monastic discipline. These practices not only embody religious meaning but also signify a symbolic renunciation of worldly life, affirming the monastic vocation as a supreme moral ideal within Khmer cultural consciousness.

Alongside its sacred dimension, the ordination ceremony also distinctly reflects a strong communal ethos through the active presence and participation of the local community, including the *phum* and *sóc*. The organization of the ceremony by a family is not regarded as a private affair but rather as a collective event in which community members gather to witness, share in the joy, and partake in the generation of merit. Communal witnessing of religious rituals—particularly ordination—carries the function of social validation, whereby the ethical value of monastic commitment and filial devotion is collectively affirmed. Consequently, the ordinand is not only recognized in religious terms but is also accorded a new social status imbued with respect and moral expectation.

Moreover, the communal nature of the ordination ceremony is further reinforced by the belief in the shared accrual of merit. The Khmer maintain that the merit generated through ordination does not solely benefit the ordinand or his family but extends to all participants—those who attend, make offerings, and rejoice in the occasion—through a form of “merit resonance.” This belief contributes to the strengthening of social cohesion while simultaneously sustaining the central role of the Buddhist temple in the communal life of the Khmer in Southern Vietnam (Phan An, 2006).

4.2. Ancestor Veneration as an Expression of Filial Reverence

The Khmer maintain practices of ancestor veneration both within the household and in Theravāda Buddhist temples. The Sene Dolta festival—often regarded as functionally analogous to the Vu Lan festival in Vietnamese culture—constitutes a significant occasion for descendants to express filial devotion toward the deceased.

Within the religious and cultural life of the Khmer in Southern Vietnam, ancestor veneration is sustained concurrently in domestic and temple settings, reflecting a harmonious synthesis of indigenous beliefs and Theravāda Buddhist doctrine. In the household context, ancestral worship is typically conducted at family altars, where descendants express remembrance, gratitude, and prayers for the spirits of the deceased. Simultaneously, Khmer temples play a pivotal role in mortuary and commemorative rites, particularly through rituals of merit transfer and dedication, grounded in the belief that merit can be generated by the living and shared with the departed.

Among the various rituals associated with ancestor veneration, the Sene Dolta festival stands out as a traditional observance imbued with profound significance in terms of filial ethics and ancestral devotion. From a cultural perspective, Sene Dolta may be considered broadly comparable to the Vu Lan festival in Vietnamese

society in its social function and moral significance, notwithstanding differences in ritual forms and religious foundations. The continued observance of ancestor veneration and the celebration of Sene Dolta contribute to reinforcing bonds within families, lineages, and the broader phum sóc community. Beyond its ritual dimension, the festival also serves as an important cultural mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of ethical values, particularly the cultivation of filial awareness, gratitude, and a sense of responsibility toward one's ancestors.

This festival occupies a position of particular importance in the religious life and the practice of filial devotion toward ancestors. One of its central components is the offering of ritual items at the temple, where participants engage in chanting, requiem rites, and the dedication of merit to deceased grandparents and ancestors. These offerings are not intended to materially sustain the spirits of the dead; rather, they function as a means through which the living generate merit and subsequently transfer it to their ancestors. This practice underscores the profound transformation of ancestor veneration under the influence of Theravāda Buddhism (Phan An, 2006).

The chanting of scriptures and the performance of requiem rituals during the Sene Dolta festival play a central role in the process of merit transference. The recited texts primarily serve to invoke blessings for ancestral spirits, enabling them to transcend suffering, alleviate karmic burdens, and attain more favorable conditions for rebirth.

In many East Asian societies, including the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam, ancestor veneration constitutes a distinctive socio-cultural institution that reinforces kinship ties and nurtures a shared sense of origin among family and lineage members. Through participation in such rituals, younger generations not only acquire knowledge of their genealogical heritage but are also socialized into a system of traditional values, particularly those of gratitude, moral responsibility, and communal consciousness (Ngo Van Le, 2011).

4.3. Caring for Parents as a Moral Norm in Everyday Life

In the traditional culture of the Khmer in Southern Vietnam, the responsibility of caring for one's parents in old age is regarded as a sacred obligation and a fundamental moral norm governing individual conduct within the family. This conception is profoundly shaped by Theravāda Buddhism, in which filial piety is considered one of the essential virtues of a morally upright person. According to Theravāda teachings, repaying the debt of gratitude owed to one's parents for birth and upbringing is not merely a secular ethical duty but also a meritorious act that contributes to the cultivation of wholesome karma.

From an early age, Khmer children are inculcated with the value of filial devotion through folk narratives, Buddhist stories, and communal life practices. Concrete expressions of filial piety commonly include living in close proximity to provide care, offering financial support, and attending to parents during illness.

Within Khmer society in Southern Vietnam, filial neglect is not only perceived as a violation of familial moral norms but is also subject to stringent social censure, often resulting in a diminution of the individual's social standing. Those deemed unfilial may encounter difficulties in participating in communal activities, experience a diminished voice in collective decision-making, and receive reduced trust within the phum sóc community. Social prestige in Khmer society is closely intertwined with adherence to Buddhist ethical standards, among which filial piety constitutes a key criterion for evaluating an individual's moral character (Trần Hồng Liên, 2014).

4.4. Merit-Making on Behalf of One's Parents

In addition to the ordination of sons as an act of filial devotion, the Khmer in Southern Vietnam maintain that the performance of meritorious deeds—such as almsgiving, life release, charitable acts, temple construction, bell casting, and the printing of Buddhist scriptures—plays a vital role in augmenting merit for one's parents, whether living or deceased.

Particularly, communal undertakings such as building temples, casting bells, renovating sala halls, and printing sacred texts are regarded as acts of great merit, possessing enduring and cumulative value. In Khmer perception, contributing labor or financial resources to the temple serves not only to sustain religious spaces but also to generate merit for one's family and ancestors. Religious structures collectively established by the community are often imbued with the intention of dedicating merit to parents and the deceased, thereby reinforcing the interconnectedness between the individual, the family, and the wider community.

Within the religious-cultural life of the Khmer in Southern Vietnam, merit-making does not exist as a series of isolated ethical acts but is deeply embedded within Theravāda Buddhist ritual practices, clearly reflecting the convergence of traditional filial ethics and Buddhist belief. Rituals such as offerings to the saṅgha, ceremonies for well-being (cầu an), requiem rites (cầu siêu), the Sene Dolta festival, the Kathina ceremony, and occasions for temple renovation all constitute sacred contexts in which merit-making is collectively enacted and oriented toward the transference of merit to parents and ancestors. The Aṅguttara Nikāya likewise emphasizes that acts of merit, when performed with proper intention in accordance with the Dhamma, acquire particular significance when dedicated to one's parents, who are regarded as beneficiaries of profound moral indebtedness. It is precisely this doctrinal foundation that enables the Khmer to integrate filial devotion with communal religious practices.

In practice, merit-making rituals are often conducted with great solemnity at temples, with the participation of families, lineages, and the broader phum sóc community. When descendants present offerings, make donations to the saṅgha, or take part in requiem rites for their ancestors, they are not merely fulfilling religious obligations but also publicly affirming their filial devotion before the community. Within Khmer culture, Buddhist rituals function as a mediating framework through which moral values are transmitted, with filial piety being expressed through acts of merit-making that are both sacred and socially visible. This demonstrates that merit-making simultaneously fulfills spiritual needs and performs a clear social function (Tran Hong Lien, 2014).

Thus, merit-making as embedded in religious ritual constitutes a vivid manifestation of the convergence between filial ethics and Buddhist belief, contributing to the formation of a moral-spiritual foundation for the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam.

DISCUSSION

5.1. Distinctive Characteristics of Filial Piety through the Lens of Theravāda Buddhism

In Theravāda Buddhism, filial piety is not conceptualized as an independent doctrinal category; rather, it is embedded within a broader framework of teachings on karma, gratitude, and the moral responsibilities owed to those who have given birth to and nurtured one's life. The Buddha repeatedly affirms that parents are "worthy of reverence" and "Brahmā-like beings within the household," and that caring for one's parents constitutes one of the most meritorious acts for lay practitioners (Aṅguttara Nikāya). From this perspective, filial piety is not merely a secular ethical obligation but a morally and spiritually significant practice.

In contrast to approaches that emphasize obedience or purely normative duty, Theravāda Buddhism conceptualizes filial piety as an ethically grounded causal relationship. A filial individual is one who recognizes and repays parental indebtedness through concrete actions, such as providing care in old age, attending to parents during illness, performing wholesome deeds, and dedicating merit to both living and deceased parents. Within Theravāda-oriented societies, filial conduct is regarded as a foundational ethical principle of lay life and a prerequisite for the accumulation of wholesome karma, thereby contributing to well-being in both present and future existences. At the same time, Theravāda teachings underscore the moral consequences of unfilial behavior: neglecting, abandoning, or harming one's parents is considered an unwholesome act that results in both social censure and a diminution of one's accumulated merit.

In the Khmer community, these norms of filial piety are profoundly shaped by Buddhist doctrine, forming an effective mechanism of social regulation that sustains familial order and communal cohesion. Filial piety, as construed within Theravāda Buddhism, extends beyond the parent-child relationship to underpin the broader

moral fabric of society. When filial conduct functions as a key criterion for moral evaluation, it becomes a normative guide for individual behavior, reinforces intergenerational bonds, and helps ensure the sustainability of the community. Viewed through the lens of Theravāda Buddhism, filial piety is therefore not merely a traditional value but a central ethical and spiritual principle in both personal and social life, particularly within the Buddhist cultural context of the Khmer in Southern Vietnam.

The findings of this study reveal a clear paradigmatic divergence between Khmer and Vietnamese (Kinh) constructions of filial piety. While Vietnamese filial ethics are strongly influenced by Confucian principles-such as the doctrine of filial obedience and an emphasis on secular obligations-Khmer filial piety operates within the soteriological framework of Theravāda Buddhism. The ordination of sons as an act of repaying parental indebtedness represents a distinctive spiritual function. In this context, filial piety transcends material care (a pragmatic function) and is transformed into a mode of spiritual redemption (a metaphysical function). This constitutes a key contribution of the present study, reconceptualizing filial piety as an enduring spiritual value embedded within the cultural structure of the Khmer community.

5.2. Filial Piety as an “Anchoring Force” in the Context of Migration and Urbanization

In the context of rapid migration and urbanization in Vietnam in general, and in the Southern region in particular, traditional family structures and intergenerational relationships are undergoing profound transformations. The movement of labor from rural areas to urban centers, and from traditional phum sóc communities to industrial zones and metropolitan areas, has increased spatial separation between generations, thereby posing significant challenges to the preservation of traditional moral values, including filial piety. Within this context, filial piety may be understood as an “anchoring force” that enables individuals to maintain moral and emotional ties to their families and communities of origin, despite changes in residence and living conditions.

From a sociological perspective, migration and urbanization often give rise to the individualization of social relations, weakening traditional bonds grounded in kinship and village-based communities. Nevertheless, a substantial body of research indicates that filial values continue to be upheld as a core ethical principle, shaping the behavior of migrants. In communities strongly influenced by traditional culture and religion, such as the Khmer in Southern Vietnam, filial piety remains a foundational framework through which individuals define their responsibilities toward parents and family, even when living and working far from home. This suggests that filial piety does not dissipate in the process of migration but is instead reconfigured to adapt to new socio-spatial contexts. In practice, it is expressed through flexible forms, including remittances to support parents, regular communication, participation in familial and religious rituals when possible, and the provision of emotional care from a distance. These practices indicate that filial piety is no longer contingent upon constant physical presence but has been transformed into symbolic and ethical modes of connection. In the context of urbanization, filial piety thus continues to function as a moral norm that sustains ties between migrants and their families and communities of origin, while mitigating the erosion of traditional cultural values.

Moreover, filial piety may be interpreted as a mechanism for anchoring identity amid social transformation. As individuals confront the pressures of urban life-such as economic competition, shifting lifestyles, and changing value systems-filial ethics serve as a source of moral orientation, enabling them to situate themselves within networks of familial and communal relationships. In modern society, traditional values do not simply disappear; rather, they are often reinterpreted to meet the demands of maintaining a stable sense of identity. In this regard, filial piety can be seen as a value that is continuously rearticulated as a durable ethical principle within the flux of social change. Thus, in the context of migration and urbanization, filial piety is not merely a moral legacy of the past but also a crucial “anchoring force” that sustains intergenerational cohesion, preserves cultural identity, and stabilizes the spiritual life of individuals.

Under the impact of labor migration from phum sóc communities to major urban centers, the traditional family structure of the Khmer has undergone significant transformation. Nevertheless, practices of filial piety-such as merit-making and returning to one’s hometown during the Sene Dolta festival-continue to perform what Talcott Parsons conceptualizes as the latency function (L) within the AGIL framework, namely the maintenance and reproduction of cultural patterns. In this sense, filial piety is no longer a rigid set of prescriptive norms but

has evolved into an adaptive mechanism. The act of sending remittances to enable parents to engage in religious merit-making is not merely a form of economic support but also a means through which migrant youth sustain their connection to their cultural and communal roots. This dynamic helps to mitigate processes of cultural alienation and ensures the continuity of ethnic identity within the urban milieu.

5.3. From Moral Obligation to Symbolic Capital

In traditional societies deeply shaped by religion and communal culture, fundamental moral norms are typically understood as obligatory duties incumbent upon the individual. However, in the context of modern society and profound transformations in social structure, many moral values no longer function solely as mechanisms for regulating behavior but are increasingly converted into a form of “symbolic capital,” contributing to the construction of social prestige, status, and recognition. This transformation reflects a shift in the operation of moral norms—from purely ethical obligations to valuable social resources. From this perspective, symbolic capital may be understood as an intangible form of capital constituted by honor, prestige, and social recognition, which can be converted into other forms of capital, such as social or cultural capital. In everyday life, morally appropriate behaviors—such as filial devotion to parents or active participation in religious activities—not only fulfill ethical expectations but also facilitate the accumulation of symbolic capital for individuals and their families. Thus, morality should be viewed not merely as a system of normative values but also as a mechanism for the production and distribution of social prestige.

Traditional moral obligations are typically monitored and evaluated by the community through public opinion. When individuals successfully fulfill these obligations, they not only avoid social criticism but also gain respect, trust, and recognition from others. Adherence to established moral norms becomes a crucial condition for being acknowledged as a morally upright individual, thereby enhancing one’s social standing. This suggests that moral obligations extend beyond the private sphere to become constitutive elements of social prestige. In the context of modernization and urbanization, where traditional forms of social control tend to weaken, symbolic capital associated with moral conduct becomes increasingly significant as a mechanism of self-regulation. Individuals who consistently uphold traditional moral values are often perceived as trustworthy and responsible, which in turn facilitates the formation and expansion of social networks. The preservation of traditional moral values thus not only contributes to cultural continuity but also enables individuals to accumulate prestige and consolidate their position within a rapidly changing society. Viewing moral norms through the lens of symbolic capital therefore elucidates the dynamic role of ethics in contemporary social life, while also providing a valuable analytical framework for interdisciplinary studies in culture, society, and development.

With specific reference to filial piety and its role in shaping social status, this study argues that the practice of filial piety constitutes a process of accumulating symbolic capital. Families whose members demonstrate filial devotion—by adhering to religious practices, engaging in monastic or merit-making activities, and properly observing ancestral rites—generate a form of “soft power” within the phum sóc community. This helps explain why, despite economic constraints, Khmer families often prioritize resources for religious practices associated with filial piety. The function of these practices extends beyond the fulfillment of individual spiritual needs; it also serves to affirm the family’s value and standing within the local social hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

The Khmer practice of repaying filial indebtedness constitutes a vivid manifestation of moral philosophy, religious belief, and communal culture. Shaped by the influence of Theravāda Buddhism and indigenous traditions, this practice has played—and continues to play—a crucial role in sustaining family-social relationships and preserving the cultural heritage of the Khmer people. In the contemporary context, a nuanced understanding and meaningful revitalization of this tradition not only contribute to the safeguarding of cultural continuity but also foster the development of a more compassionate and sustainable society.

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