

**PRESERVING MARITIME
CULTURAL VALUES AND PROMOTING
COMMUNITY COHESION:
FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF CAU NGU
(WHALE WORSHIP) FESTIVAL
IN THANH HOA PROVINCE**

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INTRODUCTION

The intangible cultural heritage is without borders but it has owner and sovereignty because the heritage is associated with people, their residence, and practice (Le Thi Minh Ly 2020). Hence, Émile Durkheim (1912), a French social anthropologist, in his famous book of the Australian tribal religious life, convincingly argued that the study of festive events was an essential element to understand people's social life. He was probably the first scholar to conceptualize festivals as central social events in the life of "primitive societies". *Cau ngu* festival recreates the traditional cultural space of a coastal fishing village, customs as well as traditional rituals, games and knowledge of the fishermen. In addition, the festival expresses people's aspiration of an age-old philosophy of living in harmony with the sea, maritime spiritual beliefs and cultural nuances to be preserved and promoted in our life.

CAU NGU FESTIVAL IN THANH HOA PROVINCE

Festive event is recognized as a transcultural phenomenon to represent the central cultural experience of a community, showing the identity and social life of the festival. This is especially true where festive events have characteristics of "total social fact", a definition given by Marcel Mauss, one of the most important Durkheim's successors. Subsequently, many scholars with different professional knowledge have explored or acknowledged the importance of festivals in the study of social structures, collective life and political order (Alessandro Testa 2014, 47; 2019, 6). Festival is a cultural activity with a complex system, a total folk cultural phenomenon that embraces almost all different aspects of human social life: religious activities, rituals, customs, communication and social cohesion, folk performance activities (singing, dancing, games, theater...), competitions, entertainment, and culinary activities.

Cau ngu festival is a typical cultural product of the coastal communities in the Central and Southern regions including Ngu Loc Commune. It is one of the most important festivals of fishing communities with many different names depending on localities and regions, a form of community's religious - cultural activity. Fishermen share the same concept that the whale is a sacred creature in the sea, a savior to fishermen and seafarers. The fishermen's life is associated with the sea; therefore, they believe that the safety and good fortune of every voyage is determined by the whale and sea gods. This festival is an opportunity for the community to reconnect their solidarity and express their respect to the whale, pray for protection and good crops. At the same time, it is

a chance to make offerings to the wandering souls who died at the sea.

Through the history, concepts, orders and rituals of the festival, we can understand to some extent the cultural identity, social life and beliefs of the local marine fishing community. The *cau ngu* festival is also a historical data source, the material and spiritual evidence of the sea and islands sovereignty and the experiences living with the sea of different Vietnamese generations in the past, at present and in the future. The festival demonstrates the local community identity and reflects the cultural diversity and human creativity over generations. It can be restored and voluntarily preserved by the community for a long time. For this reason, this festival was recognized by the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism as a national intangible cultural heritage.

The whale temple and the *cau ngu* festival are the clearest manifestations of fishermen's devotion to the sacred whale. The festival in Ngu Loc has been performed since the village establishment in the Later Le Dynasty (1428-1789). It derived from a ritual to pray for safe fishing trips and good crops of the fishermen community who living mainly on fishing. That is the reason why the local people keep annually organizing this festive event in the second month of the lunar calendar.

INSIDE THE FESTIVAL: MARITIME CULTURAL VALUES AND COMMUNITY COHESION

Festival has been defined by Falassi (1987, 2), from the point of view of classical cultural anthropology, as a period of sacred or secular celebration. It honors community values, the identity and continuity. The related traditional knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation through cultural practices, customs, rituals, beliefs, religions, proverbs, and songs... These activities have been enriched in the process of cultural exchange and acculturation and the festival in Ngu Loc has been preserved and maintained by generations until now. It shows the cultural diversity imbued with the creativity of different fishermen generations in this area.

Representing Spiritual Belief of the Fishing Inhabitants

Festivals are milestones that mark the beginning or end of a production cycle, or reflect several characteristics and events of the social life of each community. Therefore, when those milestones have not been implemented, it is conceived that the production and life of the

community cannot be started favorably. Whale cult is a worshipping form of sacred creature, natural god, and guardian god for seafarers. Whale worship is a combination of a religious belief system that relate to the worship of ancestors, wandering spirits, and animism (Sandra Lantz 2009).

To some extent, all types of cultural performance including rituals and festivals are the explanations of life. In the *cau ngu* festival, in addition to the festival flags, palanquins, and procession costumes, the visual arts and unique characteristics of the fishing community have been shown in the major offering object. It is a big sacred votive dragon-boat used during the festival, simulating function and power of the sea gods. People put their offerings and wishes for a peaceful and prosperous life in this votive boat.

The organization of this festival has a great significance in terms of spiritual aspect, expressing the uniqueness of Ngu Loc fishermen's cultural and religious life. It is not just a fishermen's occupational festival but a sacred time in their heart and mind. On this occasion, all of the fishermen do not go fishing and local people who live in other provinces return home. The festival is also considered a time to create a balance in spiritual life for the fishermen community in particular and for the local residents in general.

Reconstituting Traditional Cultural Space of A Coastal Fishing Village

The population characteristics and culture of a certain region have been always influenced by geographical location or resident terrain. This is especially true in Ngu Loc. Throughout centuries of establishment and existence, despite of many natural risks and disasters from the sea, the fishing community has always relied and connected to the sea to earn their living. From the sea, they have gradually created a living and cultural space reflected through festivals, beliefs, customs, performing arts, and architecture of temples and shrines.

Cau ngu is the largest and the most typical festival in the coastal area of Thanh Hoa Province. It is a source of historical data, a real evidence of the sea sovereignty, and experience towards the sea of different Vietnamese generations. The special feature is the votive dragon-boat - the most important symbol and offering of the festival that shows the difference of a fishing community. In the past, there was a troubled

time in Ngu Loc when the local people were sick, prestigious elderly told villagers to make votive dragon-boats to process the gods around the village to pray for peace and relieve bad luck. People believed and followed the advice, since then their life was stable. That was the reason of the votive dragon-boat appearance, a symbol of the fishery. After completing the votive boat, people choose a good time to point the eyes of the boat before starting the procession rituals. They think that the boat needs eyes to be able to see road on the sea like the human and to increase the sacredness. After this ceremony, the boat is considered to have a soul. In the festival, the most important part is the sacrifice at the main altar and at the boat place. The sacrifices to sea gods are performed in accordance with traditional rituals. The rite related to the votive boat is ordinarily reserved for fishermen. After the ceremony, the big votive boat is burned at the beach.

In addition to rites and ceremonies, the festival includes maritime cultural activities and competitions that attract a large number of participants. They are not only entertainment activities of the community, but also time to preserve traditional and folk arts and performances.

Showing Community Power and Cohesion

Festivals are connected closely to a certain community or area; therefore, festivals of each region often have their regional nuances. This proves that the festival is closely linked to the local community life to meet their spiritual and cultural needs in terms of festival content and style shown in sacrifice oration, offerings, costumes, palanquin and flag styles. This is also one of the privileged points to penetrate other socio-cultural universes (Don Handelman 1990, 9). Hence, through the festival, we can see the characteristics of community cohesion, solidarity spirit, mutual assistance in life and production of people living on the sea.

Cau ngu festival is respected and preserved by the community as it has many positive meanings. It is an opportunity to show the community's strength and the glue holding community cohesion. The fishermen community in Ngu Loc is united due to sharing a same living area and a natural resource and marine economic benefits. They are also influenced by nature and the sea, and identify with each other in the creative activities and cultural sharing... The *cau ngu* festival is an important environment contributing to the creation of the community strength.

The environment of traditional festival is basically villages. Festival is a favorable environment in which traditional cultural elements are preserved and developed. Those traditional cultural elements are the quintessence drawn and perfected in the community's development. Through the implementing process, in the depths of the socio-cultural life, people can draw lessons that cannot be observed and explained in our daily life (Victor Turner 1982, 13). Therefore, traditional festivals are often full of strong vitality and maintained up to present. Many festivals after a period of interruption have been recovered and renewed by the local community through ancient documents, or from the memories of the village elders. This is not only a way of honoring the traditional cultural values of the community and typical cultural features of each village, but also representing the community solidarity and the love of their homeland and village.

Handing Over Traditional Maritime Experience and Knowledge

A festival just appears, exists and develops when it becomes a voluntary demand of a community. It is also a need to create and enjoy material and spiritual cultural values of the local inhabitants, and a form of education and transfer traditional ethical values to the next generations in a particular way of combining spiritual elements with competitive and entertaining games.

Previously, the dragon-boat was small and simple. Then it has made bigger with a more splendid appearance. People use bamboo to create the boat frame with an outside bamboo mat layer, then cover this layer with cardboard. Talented and virtuous artisans selected in the village are divided into many groups. The group leader is experienced in managing and arranging other people to work. There is a group specializing in making the main frame and bow of the boat; other groups are involved in making spongy statues, making dragon head and rowers. Spongy statues placed on the dragon-boat represent characteristics of the fishing community: a general (responsible for informing and controlling the boat direction in the sea), a captain, three men in charge of asking for sunlight, rain and shadow, and ten rowers in each side.

The cultural preservation and transmission through generations have been also promoted through the organization of *cau ngu* festival. The festival is a space to preserve and transfer traditional knowledge related to making the dragon-boat offering, taboos when making it, traditional songs and

music, rituals, and games from generation to generation. Every year, twelve skillful young and old men have been selected to work in 20 days to make the votive boat. During that process, old men instruct and train the young people; and it is a way of preserving the community culture.

Attracting Crowds of Tourists

Facing many upheavals, the *cau ngu* festival has been uninterrupted and implemented annually by the community. In the past, only old men went to worship at the main altar and the ritual was small in scale. Now it is bigger and more crowded with visitors from different provinces and areas.

Cau ngu festival consists of two parts: ceremony and festivity, in which the ceremony plays the most important and meaningful role. The ceremony comprises of prayer for safety at sea and offering sacrifice. The festivity including folk games such as cock fighting and cultural activities characterizing a fishing life such as squid fishing, drag nets... The festive part includes plain verses, drum and dance performance. Previously, there was also a boat race in the festival. There is a viewpoint that in the past, the boat race was not solely a competition but also a ritual towards the Water God. Recently, the boat race was separated into a periodic festival, which is also a typical festival of the fishing residents in Ngu Loc.

After the ceremony performance, local people and tourists in turn come to worship at the main altar. At the end of the ceremony, the votive dragon-boat is carried by thousands of people to the beach and burn with the meaning of sending wishes to the sea. Previously, this festival was only for fishermen; however, at present, it becomes a festival of lots of people of different occupations and localities.

CONCLUSION

Vietnamese villages have been considered cradles of the formation and preservation of the nationally traditional culture; and festival is also one of the important elements of that cultural cradle. This is even more meaningful in the context of current industrialized, modernized and globalized society when the mission of preserving and promoting nation's traditional culture becomes more important than ever. The recognition of *cau ngu* festival in Ngu Loc as the national intangible cultural heritage will effectively contribute to the conservation and promotion of traditional cultural values in the contemporary life.

Cau ngu festival is not merely a festival but a window to look into the society and its structure. The festival is filled with various traditional conceptions and knowledge. Major features of the festival are the sacredness (associated with the worship of whale and sea gods), the complexity (including many different aspects of life such as religious activities, rituals, customs, community cohesion, folk performance, competition, traditional games, and cuisine), and community spirit (community of villagers and community of fishermen and seafood processing workers).