

# **The Trend from Multiculturalism to Cultural Hybridity in Globalization Context in Bentougong Belief of Hoa People in Cau Ke District, Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam**

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## **Abstract**

In Cau Ke District, Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam, the Hoa people were a long historical immigration ethnic group and established many religious constructions to preserve their cultural values. In the district, there are seven temples with Bentougong being the main worship object and they are said to be sworn brothers. The article tries to interpret the reason for the changed trend from multiculturalism to cultural hybridity in Bentougong belief in Cau Ke District under the effects of globalization. To deal with the research aim, the research subject was approached by the view of globalization, rational choice theory and the specific data collection methods of Anthropology e.g. participant observation and in-depth interview. The data in the paper was the results of fieldworks trips from 2010 to present. Based on the data, we consider that, although Bentougong is the traditional belief of Hoa people, by the centuries of coexistence with the Viet/Kinh and Khmer ethnic group and globalization's effects, the change from multiculturalism to hybridity in Bentougong belief in Cau Ke District is an inevitable trend. Besides, we anticipate that the trend will continue to present more and more strongly due to influences of economy, policy and tourism.

**Keywords: Bentougong, Multiculturalism, Hybridity, Tra Vinh**

## Introduction

Bentougong belief is one of the typical belief of Hoa people in Southern Vietnam, especially in Teochew (潮州) and Hokkien (福建) dialect groups. In Cau Ke District, although Hoa people account for only 0.25% the district population (Teochew is the majority group), they have always conserved their special cultural and religious characteristics, especially Betougong belief. Besides, by the specificity of history and the process of reclaiming the land in Cau Ke District, Hoa people, Viet people and Khmer people have created multicultural status, of which Ong Bon's belief, especially, the Betougong festival as a typical example. By the impact of globalization, especially the impact of economy, tourism and local policies, multicultural status in Ong Bon's beliefs and festivals gradually turned to the trend of being cultural hybridity. These ethnic groups in Cau Ke District together contribute and inherit from Bentougong's belief and festival without ethnic discrimination.

Our purpose in the paper is to explain the causes and developments from multicultural status to cultural hybridity in Bentougong's belief and festival under the impact of globalization. We approach research subject by the view of globalization and applied theory Rational Choice Theory of George Homans, Peter Blau and J.Coleman.

Globalization is not a theoretical system. It is a process involving "increasing global connectivity, assuming that the world is full of movements, mixtures, interconnections, frequently interaction and exchange of culture (...) allowing more and more ethnics and cultures to come into directly and frequently contact with each other." Globalization can take place according to 4 trends as cultural integration, cultural localization, cultural hybridity and cultural conflict. In the article, we find that globalization has made Bentougong's belief and festival in Cau Ke District tend to be a cultural hybridity. The process has not just begun to take place in recent years but has started with the history of the residential community in Cau Ke District.

Rational choice theory has its roots in a number of theories from economics, anthropology, and sociology. Some typical authors of the theory are Fredrik Barth, Karl Polanyi, George Homans, Peter Blau, J. Coleman, etc. The core content of the theory is that when choosing actions, individuals will choose the most effective and minimizing risk way. In the study of religion, the theory is said to be as a new paradigm, contrast to the theory of secularization.

Secularism holds that religion will disappear as society modernizes. The view is criticized because many societies such as Japan, the US, etc. are considered the most modern in the world, but religion still exists and is growing. In the paper, we apply rational choice theory to explain the trend of multiculturalism to cultural hybridity in Bentougong's belief and festival, which is directly related to the needs and interests of community cohesion, sharing cultural values which are specific features associated with the process of forming residential communities in Cau Ke.

To collect data, we use some research methods specific to Anthropology namely bibliographic research, Discourse analysis, In-depth interview method, Participant observation method.

Bibliographic research and Discourse analysis are effective methods to query past problems associated with the symbol of Bentougong in the spiritual life of Hoa people from immigration period to settlement period. The main sources of material are historical works, typical editorials such as Veritable Records of Dai Nam(大南寔錄), Unified gazetteer of Gia Dinh Citadel(嘉定城通志), etc.

In-depth interview method is the main method used to collect the beliefs of different ethnic groups in Bentougong's symbol, multiculturalism in belief and cultural hybridity in Bentougong belief. In the study, we conducted interviews with many subjects including: believers and tourists who are Hoa people, Viet people and Khmer people, management board of temples, cultural management officials and cultural experts in the field.

Participant observation method was used to study multicultural status in offerings, expressing the beliefs of ethnic groups living in Cau Ke District in Betougong belief. We conducted observations mainly at four temples with Betougong as the main object of worship in Cau Ke District namely Minh Duc Cung (明德宮), Nien Phong Cung (年豐宮), Van Nien Phong Cung (萬年豐宮) and Van Ung Phong Cung (萬應豐宮).

We have many years for fieldwork, from 2010 to the present. All data demonstrates the trend from multiculturalism to cultural hybridity in Bentougong's belief and festival in Cau Ke District, Tra Vinh Province.

## **Introduction to Cau Ke District and history of resident community in Cau Ke District**

Cau Ke is a district in the west of Tra Vinh Province, on the left of the Hau River, bordered in the North by Tra On District and Vung Liem District (Vinh Long Province), in the East by Tieu Can District and Cang Long District (Tra Vinh province), in the West and the South by the Hau River. The district has an area of 245km<sup>2</sup> divided into ten communes and one town. As of April 1, 2019, the district population is 102,767 people in which Hoa people are 254 people, Khmer people are 33,133 people and the other are Viet and other ethnic groups.

The history of the inhabitants of Cau Ke district is associated with the history of the three ethnic groups namely Viet, Hoa and Khmer. In the past, the land of Tra Vinh including Cau Ke, belonged to the Oc Eo culture, the kingdom of Funan (夫南). In the period under the Nguyen Lords, Tra Vinh in general and Cau Ke in particular was “a desolate land, all kinds of forests covered the mounds, swamps and interlaced rivers and canals (...). The population was sparse. Phum and Soc of Khmer people and villages of Viet and Hoa people gather into Vang”. Thus, from the beginning of history, Tra Vinh in general and Cau Ke in particular had the presence of three ethnic groups: Viet, Hoa and Khmer.

Regarding the origin of Hoa people who created Bentougong belief, according to author Truong Thi Cam Loan, Hoa people have been present in Cau Ke District for the 17th century by a group of soldiers and subjects in the movement Anti-Qing sentiment (反清復明). In the late of 17th century, the migration of the Hoa people from the Chaozhou and Cantonese groups took place even more strongly. In particular, in 1915, the people of Chaozhou in turn migrated to South Vietnam, including Cau Ke to avoid the oppression of the Manchu Dynasty. According to the researcher Le Van Sao, Vice Director of the Center of Mekong Delta Culture, the Hoa people in Cau Ke District mainly belong to the Chaozhou group and are descended from the Chaozhou people in Vinh Chau (Soc Trang Province), during trade, the Chaozhou people from Vinh Chau moved and resettled in the area Cau Ke (Tra Vinh Province).

No matter where the Hoa people came from, when the Hoa people arrived in Cau Ke District, they became an indispensable part in the process of forming and developing the land. The Hoa people and other ethnic groups united against the dangerous nature, united in resistance, and

preserved every inch of land against foreign invaders. Over hundreds of years of coexistence, there ethnic groups (Viet, Hoa, Khmer) seem to have no ethnic distinction. They respect the characteristics of other ethnic groups, participate in festivals and even believe in the values and beliefs of other ethnic groups. In Bentougong festival, although Viet and Khmer people know that the festival belongs to the Hoa people, the belief and spiritual value of the festival are what they seek.

Therefore, the community of residents of Cau Ke district has a special history of formation, associated with the coexistence of three ethnic groups: Viet, Hoa and Khmer. This is the essential premise to generate multicultural status, the ease of compromise and participation in the exchange of cultural values, beliefs and festivals among ethnic groups. In this context, the boundaries between ethnic groups seem to be ignored and blurred. Solidarity, enjoying the benefits and cultural values for the whole community rather than each individual ethnic group is the aim of residents in Cau Ke District.

## **The symbol of Bentougong in Hoa people and resident community in Cau Ke District**

Bentougong is like a symbolic term, not a particular god or a historical character. “Bentougong means ancestor and Ben means root. Bentougong is just a symbol, not a specific character (...). Each Hoa dialect group has its own beliefs in Bentougong. In the article the worship of Bentougong of Hoa people in the Southern region, author Tran Hong Lien analyzed the concept of Ong Bon in many different countries, in different dialect groups. In China, Bentougong is considered the god who governs the local land. In the Philippines, Bentougong is said to be Bach Phi Hien. The Hokkien people in Binh Duong Province believe that Bentougong is Xuanwu (玄天上帝), a natural god. In contrast, the Hokkien people in Cho Lon (Ho Chi Minh City) concretize Bentougong as Zhou Dagan (周達觀), etc. Particularly in Cau Ke, Bentougong hardly appears associated with a particular natural or human god. People only have the concept that Bentougong is the god who guards, protects and blesses the whole land. Four Bentougong in Cau Ke District are said to be four sworn brothers during the migration to Vietnam.

In terms of names, Bentougong has many different names such as Bon Dau Cong, Dai Ba Cong, Bon Dau Cong Cong, Bon Dau Phuoc Than, etc. Through a field survey, at Cau Ke, the

name Ong Bon used is Bon Dau Cong and accompanied by hierarchical examples the Great Bentougong, the Second Bentougong to the Fourth Bentougong. Calling four Bentougong by serial number is not only affirming the friendship between four Bentougong but contributes to creating a closed system of worship, meaning mutual assistance and help between localities from the past until present.

Up to now, there is no source that records the background or genealogy of the four Bentougong in Cau Ke District. Local people know that they are four sworn brothers. In the end of the 19th century, some Hoa people immigrated and brought wooden statues from China to Cau Ke District. After that, four temples for worship Bentougong were established, known locally as Ong Bon Pagoda.

In term of the image of Bentougong, we are not only interested in the statues but the people's perception of Bentougong. Over time, four statues of Bentougong were damaged. At that time, the Management Board begged Bentougong many times when he “nhap xac” (spirit possession) to allow the replacement of a new status, but he disagreed. Until 1963, when he “nhap xac” he agreed to replace the statue. The statues of Bentougong were newly carved by artisans in Soc Trang Province with Narra Padauk wood, gold laminating and gilding.

Comparing four statues at four temples, we find that the common point of the statues is that male features, an old man with a long beard, the face is majestic but kind-hearted. Depending on each statue, the skin color, beard color, hand position and handle object are different e.g the statue of Bentougong at Minh Duc Cung in the form of a general, brown beard, red skin, right hand holding a sword, left hand stroking his beard; Bentougong statue at Nien Phong Cung has dark skin and white beard. Most local people do not know the specific origin of Bentougong. Bentougong is Tiaochow people and they are four sworn brothers that are the most common answer of people. In particular, according to Mr. A at Van Ung Phong Cung, the first Bentougong is Liu Bei (劉備), the second is Guan Yu (關公), the third is Kong Ming (孔明) and the fourth is Zhang Fei (張飛). Thus, Bentougong is concretized by a specific historical figure.

Currently, in Cau Ke District, the Hoa people have seven temples in order to worship Bentougong, including Van Nien Phong Cung, Van Ung Phong Cung, Minh Duc Cung, Nien Phong Cung, Thien Duc Cung, Van Duc Phong Cung and Vinh Hung Cung. These temples are places to hold Vu Lan great festival during July

(lunar) from 8th July to 28th July. The festival attracts thousands of people from Southern Vietnam. Four bentougongs are said to be four sworn brothers worshiped in four temples, namely:

Minh Duc Cung (明德宮) also known as Tra Khao Pagoda, worships Great Bentougong (大本头公) or the first Bentougong. The pagoda is located in Tra Khao Hamlet, Hoa An Commune, Cau Ke District, Tra Vinh Province. The pagoda was built of bricks, tiles, lime, quality wood, and concrete. Minh Duc Cung was restored three times in 1825, 1909 and 2005. The pagoda has oriental architecture, sculpture patterns with high artistic value.

Van Ung Phong Cung (萬應灋宮) also known as Giua (Middle) Pagoda, worships the second Bentougong (二本头公). The pagoda is located in Giong Lon Hamlet, Hoa An Commune, Cau Ke District, Tra Vinh Province. The pagoda was damaged in 1968 and restored in 2008.

Van Nien Phong Cung (萬年灋宮) also known as Cho (Market) Pagoda, worship the third Bentougong (三本头公). The pagoda is located in Cluster 1, Cau Ke Town, Cau Ke District, Tra Vinh Province. The pagoda was built in Gông (工) shape. The two-storey roof rises high to create a spacious space. The pagoda was restored and embellished in the year of Tan Dau (1861). The gods worshiped in Van Nien Phong Cung reflect the religious nuances of the 3 ethnic groups Viet, Hoa, and Khmer.

Nien Phong Cung (年灋宮) also known as Cay Sanh Pagoda, worships the fourth Bentougong (四本头公). The pagoda is located in Ngoc Ho Hamlet, Tam Ngai Commune, Cau Ke District, Tra Vinh Province. The pagoda has been restored in 1998 and 2001. Nien Phong Cung's architecture is not as outstanding as others.

Looking at the map, four temples form an arc shape embracing Cau Ke canal, in which Van Nien Phong Cung is the top of the arc and is also known as the place taking festival in the longest time and attracting the most people. Other temples are located like satellites around four main temples such as Thien Duc Cung (天德宮) (Ong De Temple), Van Duc Phong Cung (萬德灋宮) (Ong Chau Pagoda), etc. All temples have incense burners worshipping four Bentougongs. On festival, Bentougong also “nhap xac” and giving talismans in these temples. All temples create a Bentougong belief system in resident community in Cau Ke District.

In Cau Ke District, we do not find Bentougong Goddess like in Bac Lieu Province. When four Bentougongs always express authority mighty, majestic face like deity general, accompanied by extraordinary actions such as cutting the tongue, sitting in sword palanquin, bathing in boiling oil, etc. These shamanism form is happened in a sacred space with the admiration and sincerity of a large number of people of both Viet, Hoa, and Khmer ethnic groups.

Not only the Hoa people but Viet and Khmer people also have belief in Bentougong. We conducted in-depth interviews with believers of different ethnicities, from different regions, and received some responses as follows:

“My family does not worship Bentougong, but only worships Buddha, but every year I visit the festival. He (Bentougong) is very spiritual power. Some things like cutting the tongue, bathing in hot oil, how humans can do that. You can ask for whatever you want, but it's mainly health and business”. A Khmer people woman, 35 years old, working as a beverage seller told.

“My wife is Hoa people and I am Viet people. I don't pray in Bentougong, but every year I take my wife to the festival. Seeing “nhap xac”, I also believed in him (Bentougong). Just believing but not worshipping”. A Viet people teacher shared.

“My house is about 50m from there, from childhood I saw him (Bentougong) “nhap xac”. At that time, I was also afraid, but I pray for peace and business”. A Viet people man in Van Nien Phong Cung said.

“I live in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) and visit the festival for many years. In Saigon, there are Bentougong temple, Nhi Phu temple (二府廟). But, in Cau Ke, he giving talismans, so my wife and I came to ask. Pray for do business, health and wealth”. An elderly Hoa people in Saigon answered us.

Besides, we surveyed at the houses around Cau Ke District, many Viet and Khmer families often stuck Bentougong's talismans in front of the door, even put the talismans in the glass frame to worship solemnly together worshipping ancestors and Buddha.

Bentougong belief has an important significance in the spiritual life of local residents in particular and of people in many other provinces, especially Ho Chi Minh City, Soc Trang Province etc. In Cau Ke, Bentougong is considered as the god who protects local land and blesses the community. The belief has integrated many cultural activities in the community,

creating typical and unique cultural nuances through rites and festivals.

Based on data, it allows us to confirm that Bentougong has gone beyond the Hoa community to become a symbol for belief of the Viet, Hoa and Khmer in Cau Ke. If the Hoa connect their feelings and belief to Bentougong because of original point and spiritual needs, the Viet and Khmer believe in Bentougong mainly for their spiritual needs. Although Viet and Khmer people are aware that the belief is the Hoa people's belief, they still believe because Bentougong giving them a sense of security, protection and support for them in life. Thus, Ong Bon has become a symbol for all three ethnic groups in Cau Ke District.

### **The trend from multiculturalism to hybridity in Bentougong belief in Cau Ke District**

Bentougong was formed in the Hoa community when they immigrated to Vietnam. They carried the image of Bentougong as an ancestor, a symbol to remind the homeland and bless the safe for the new land. By the community characteristics as analyzed above, Bentougong belief easily has the opportunity to approach Viet and Khmer people. Viet and Khmer people also accept Bentougong naturally as a god of the land. For them, Bentougong is not a god for the Hoa people or they are forced to receive the god. They consider Bentougong's presence as an indispensable fact, associated with their lives.

The Khmer people usually live high land, cultivate rice and believe Theravada Buddhism and diverse folk beliefs and festivals such as Neak Ta, Sen Dolta festival, Ok Om Bok festival, etc. The Hoa people usually reside around market area, densely populated residential area for trade, producing handicrafts with some folk beliefs such as Tianhou (Mazu), Guandi, etc. The Viet people live around fields and gardens for farming with the belief of Than Hoang Bon Canh (神隍本境) and annually Ky Yen festival. It is the diversity in culture of ethnic groups who come from different origins and beliefs that have not had any hindering factors, on the contrary, that support the union of local communities.

From the premise, working and trading together, the ethnic groups in Cau Ke have an open characteristic, respect others culture and easily accept new cultural elements. The relation between ethnic groups in Cau Ke originates from the specific history of the land. They are the owners of reclaiming and developing Cau Ke District, so they are like brothers in a family.

Because of the special history, multicultural elements easily come into contact and interact with each other creating a cultural hybridity.

The roof of Minh Duc Cung was covered by Hoa people's traditional tiles but interwoven with yin and yang tiles. That is the main tile form of communal houses, pagodas and houses of Viet people. Van Nien Phong Cung and Minh Duc Cung contain "Vo Ca House" (the hall for performance) that is the traditional architecture of the communal house in Southern Vietnam.

In the campus of Bentougong's temples, people usually built Thach Than Mieu (石神廟), the temple of stone, to worship stone as the Khmer worshipping Neak Ta. Especially at Minh Duc Cung, although still worshipping stone, the construction is called Thu Than Mieu (樹神廟), the temple of tree. Below the main altar, there is a place for worshipping stones like the Neak Ta of the Khmer people. In the main hall, the left and right altars on both sides are places to worship Tien Hien (前賢) and Hau Hien (后賢) or Ta Ban (左班) and Huu Ban (右班) that is form of Vietnamese communal houses.

The offerings offered to Bentougong seem to not be a standard. It depends on the heart of the donor. Therefore, offerings is so diversity. Some typical offerings of Viet people to offer ancestors e.g betel and areca are also present in the altar. Particularly, the appearance of "kiem" (kind of sweet soup), it is a typical dish of the Viet people in the South. The Tam sanh (三牲) an offering of Hoa people also changed to pork, egg, shrimp or squid instead of pork, cow, and goat. In rites, in addition to "nhap xac" rite, there are also chanting of Mahayana Buddhism of the Viet people and Theravada Buddhism of the Khmer people. The management board also invites some other religious organizations to attend Ong Bon festival e.g Cao Dai.

According to the survey results, people who come to Bentougong festival do not consider what the culture of Hoa, Viet or Khmer is. They only focus on the Bentougong symbol. The elements of multiculturalism gradually turn to cultural hybridity. The cultural features of each ethnic group contributed and blended to create a unique and sacred space of Bentougong belief. In the space, there is no distinction between Hoa, Viet or Khmer. According to a member of Minh Duc Cung's Management Board, "When he (Bentougong) entered, he speaks Teochew, because he is Teochew people, but when you pray him (Bentougong) you speak your mother language, he can understand any language, whatever you pray and ask, he can teach and

support you". Thus, all ethnic groups in Cau Ke are equal in Bentougong's belief. Due to the mentality, hybridity is more likely to happen.

In particular, the person chosen by Bentougong for "nhap xac" is not only Hoa people but Khmer or Viet people. People also said that Bentougong borrowed anyone's body regardless of ethnicity and profession. The "nhap xac" person lives normally but must serve Bentougong during the festival season or whenever Bentougong needs to teach the Management Board temple and people. Therefore, even the most sacred element, Bentougong, does not distinguish between the ethnic groups. That contributes to the evidence of cultural hybridity in Bentougong's beliefs. In addition, the members of the Management Board temple are not only Hoa people but also Viet and Khmer people. Although the Hoa people play a main role in the Management Board temple, the role of the Viet and Khmer people is significant in managing and operating.

Based on rational choice theory, we explain that the trend of cultural hybridity is a choice of ethnic communities in Cau Ke. Originating from the history of the community, ethnic groups with different experiences together renovated nature and built a social network at Cau Ke District. In the context of wilderness and nostalgia for homeland (especially in Hoa people), the trend of alliance and cooperation among ethnic groups is inevitable. They cooperated in trade, water treatment, labor and production. As a result, cultural elements are also naturally shared. Over many generations, cultural elements of other ethnic groups have been present as inherent elements in their culture.

Under the influence of the economy, ethnic groups decide to choose the trend of joining together, creating cultural hybridity rather than finding ways to exclude cultural elements of other ethnic groups. Ethnic groups here are not afraid of hybridization because they still retain their own cultural features and only have more Bentougong's belief. For the Hoa people, they also are not afraid of Bentougong's belief becoming hybrid due to many cultural factors because they consider Bentougong to be a god who does not distinguish believers, so why do they distinguish? Cohesion and friendship between ethnic groups, creating strength and helping each other in life are the needs of people in Cau Ke District, which Bentougong is a typical symbol for the relationship.

From the view of globalization, Bentougong's belief has a continuous interaction with other ethnic groups from the past to the

present. Economy, tourism, and policy also strongly affect Bentougong's beliefs. The budget for Bentougong temples's existence is mainly from people's charity. Therefore, if only the Hoa people visit temples, this revenue will decrease significantly. With the concept that Bentougong is a symbol of all people, regardless of ethnicity, Bentougong temples are always open to welcome all ethnic groups.

Currently, the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Tra Vinh Province is preparing a dossier to submit to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism to recognize Bentougong festival with the name Vu Lan Great Festival as a national intangible cultural heritage. With this name, Bentougong festival of the Hoa people will be the main and important festival not only of the Hoa community, but also of the whole country. The policy can be seen as a factor increasing cultural hybridity. Besides, Tra Vinh Province has also chosen Vu Lan Great Festival as a highlight for tourism in Cau Ke District and the Province.

In summary, originating from the beliefs of the Hoa people, under the influence of history, Bentougong's belief gradually absorbed many cultural elements of the ethnic groups and created multiculturalism. Over time, ethnic communities tend to cooperate and choose Bentougong as a typical symbol instead of trying to eliminate cultural elements different from their culture. The trend from multiculturalism to cultural hybridity in Bentougong's belief is a rational choice, based on the premise of history, economy, and beliefs.

## Conclusion

Originating in the premise of coexistence of the three ethnic groups (Viet, Hoa, and Khmer) in Cau Ke District, the Bentougong belief of the Hoa people easily had the chance to receive cultural elements of other ethnic groups as well as be accepted by other ethnic groups and created multiculturalism. Over the centuries, the multiculture of Bentougong belief gradually turned into cultural hybridity. The cultural hybridity made the gods, despite having different origins and ethnic groups, to become a unique belief in Cau Ke District. The image of Bentougong becomes a symbol of unifying Hoa, Viet and Khmer people.

They come to Bentougong belief to immerse in the sacred space and express their respects with offerings that contain their culture. Based on beliefs, practical needs, the trend from multiculturalism to cultural hybridity in Bentougong belief is the rational choice of community and takes place from the past to the

present. Under the impact of globalization, policy changes, and economic fluctuations, we predict that the trend will become stronger and more complicated. The issues of cultural hybridity in Bentougong belief that need to be studied in the future are the impact of tourism, the influence of the economy, and the satisfaction of community's spiritual needs.

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