

Van Chai in Binh Thuan province: a form of fisheries management need to be concerned

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ABSTRACT

Binh Thuan, a central coasts of Vietnam where fisheries villages are abundance. Fishery villages (Van Chai) has been formed for about 300 years since pioneered fishers settled in Phan Thiet for their livelihoods. This was a original social professional organization found before official administrative system established.

Binh Thuan has more than 30 Van Chai in coastal areas, in which about 20 importantly typical villages. In particular, here Van Thuy Tu shrine exists - a great and oldest fishery temple of Binh Thuan has been preserved and maintained for long time, which is a destination attracting customers and tourists for visit and study. It preserves a greatest skeleton of whale (xuong Ca Ong) in South East Asia and many valuable cultural relics.

In spite of experiencing long time for existence with many social changes, Van Chai in Binh Thuan have been remained, maintained and recovered by a great number of fishers. This has proved outstanding advantages of Van Chai in production, social life and belief of fisher community, which need to be considered, studied and development.

The paper is to introduce a brief history and existence of Van Chai in Binh Thuan province, their roles in life, production and belief of fisher community as well as considerable issues in coming time.

1. Introduction:

Located on the southeast coast of Vietnam, Binh Thuan Province has coastline of 192 km and an EEZ of 52.000 km². Its rich aquatic resource base sustains 7,500 fishing vessels, which land 150,000 t/yr of all species.

During the establishment and development of Binh Thuan fisheries, *van chai* played a crucial role in the organization, management and operation of production activities, as well as in the preservation and promotion of religion and culture of coastal fishing communities. At present more than 30 Van Chai are located in coastal areas of Binh Thuan Province. Of these, 20 are outstanding and merit close attention. In particular among these 20 is the Dinh Van Thuy Tu (Van Thuy Tu Whale temple), now renowned attractive site for tourism. This is the oldest and largest temple in Binh Thuan, yet it requires better conservation.

A thorough understanding of the establishment history and the characteristics of the culture, management, and religion of the *van chai* which were close-knit to the fishing communities will provide both a theoretical and practical basis for designing better fisheries management and development.

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2. Development history of *van chai* in Binh Thuan Province:

The development history of Van Chai in Binh Thuan is linked closely to fisheries development of the province and it may be divided into the following five periods: (1) The Feudal Era, (2) the French colonial period (1887-1954), (3) the American war period (1954-1975), (4) the Collective period (1975 - 1988), and (5) Market-oriented economy period (1988 to date).

1. Feudal Era: Generally, this period saw the foundation and spatial broadening of *van chai*. Some authors [1, 2, 3] confirmed that the history development of Van Chai in Binh Thuan began at the end of 17th century, when fishers from the central regions migrated to the unutilized land of Phan Thiet and settled there. Following the traditional beliefs of their home regions, each community cluster established a *van chai* to worship the Whale God (*Ca Voi*) reflecting both their folk beliefs and professional beliefs, as well as simultaneously intensifying mutual respect and mutual assistance within the fishing community. This was of the first socio-occupational organization, having been established before village and commune-level governments.

The literatures demonstrates that in the initial coastal fishing communities were established in at Binh Thanh, Binh Thien, Quan Thi, Hon Nghe, Mui Ne, Xom Tram, Kim Thanh, Xom Ray, Cay Gang, among others. In those places fishers gathered in small clusters, which then became hamlets (*xom*), *van* and villages (*lang*). Their livelihoods depended mainly on capture activities (longlines, *luoi manh* and gillnet) and fish processing (e.g. principally fish sauce and dried fish).

Under the Nguyen dynasty, especially during the reigns of the kings from Minh Mang to Tu Duc (1820-1883), royal settlement policies encouraged more fishers from the North to settle in Binh Thuan. As a result, the populations in sandy and coastal areas increased, and villages like La Gan, Phan Ri, Mui Ne, Pho Hai, Phan Thiet, and La Gi became increasingly.

Concurrently with the establishment and development of fishing communities in coastal area in Binh Thuan, dozens of temples (*dinh van*) in *van chai* established. Typical are Thuy Tu, Nam Nghia, Khanh Long, Hiep Hung, Nam Hai, Thach Long, Khanh Thien, among many others. In Phan Thiet city, there are many, like Long Hai, Hội Van Lach, Phuoc The, Ha Thuy, Ta Tan, Hiep Duc, Nam Phu, Nam Thuan Thanh, Lang Ong Nam Hai, Lang Ong Bac, in Tuy Phong district; Thien Ai in Bac Binh district; Phuoc Loc, Tan Long, Tan Phu, Xom Ray in La Gi downtown; An Thanh, An Than, among others, in Phu Quy island district. Most were built in the 18th – 19th centuries, and closely connected with the formation of communities and foundation of fishing villages.

2.2. French colonial period (1887-1954):

This is divisible into two periods; 1887-1845, and from August 1945 until 1954. In general, marine capture fisheries in Binh Thuan was became very much better

established and developed during the period 1887-1945 compared to the previous period, under the Nguyen dynasty. During the French colonial period the *van chai* contributed remarkably to the general development of fisheries, despite fishing gears used being those associated mainly with small-scale fisheries; small boats, rafts and coracles, and manual processing using underdeveloped technology. However, due to the strong cohesion and mutual assistance of *van chai* communities in the villages, fishing and fish processing capacity were promoted. (The abundance of resources also contributed to the development of fisheries activities.) According to official statistics (Binh Thuan Geography Book, 2005), production of fish sauce in 1895 was 3.7 million liters, and that of dried fish was 1,249 tons. By 1930, fish sauce production had increased to 40 million liters. The export revenue of fish sauce increased from more than 7.5 million Francs in 1909 to 83 million in 1927 (Binh Thuan Geography Book, 2005).

Fisheries activities were at a standstill from August, 1945 to 1954, as fishers could not work during the French war. The French conducted many mopping-up attacks in the fishing areas, and prohibited fishing, to prevent the assistance to the revolution.

2.3. American war period (1954-1975):

The Government of Sai Gon (Republic of South Vietnam) promulgated many policies on fisheries recovery, renovation of fisheries, motorization of fishing fleets, and establishment of a fishing infrastructure. The fisheries activities grew remarkably and the *van chai* played an important role. In 1963, the total number of vessels of Binh Thuan was 4,637 ((Binh Thuan Geography Book, 2005),). This number increased to 8269 by 1972, when they employed 31,129 laborers. Fish sauce production in 1974 was 37.35 million liters ((Binh Thuan Geography Book, 2005).

2.4. Collective period (1975 - 1988):

After the national reunification, the public ownership process of the vessels began. Fisheries cooperatives were set up and developed by state, so the role and operations of *van chai* was overshadowed. Many *van* temples were downgraded and damaged.

2.5. Market-oriented economy period (1988 to date):

With the implementation of renovation policies, the development investment in fisheries was renewed. However, having undergone a long period of idleness during the Collective Period of fisheries cooperatives, in many communities *van chai* incapable of being resuscitated.

In recent years, in an attempt to preserve national cultural identity, the Government has promoted many policies and issued guidance to recover the traditional culture in *van chai*. This has included support for rebuilding or repairing Whale temples, and re-organization of fishing community festivals. As a result, many large and key Whale temples have been reconstructed, and, step-by-step, the role of *van chai* has increased again. Such positive changes were welcomed by the fishing communities. However, so far the activities of *van chai* have focused mainly on the cultural and religious traditions, rather than on the important roles of the *van chai* in community cohesion

and in the organization, management and development of production and fisheries resources protection.

3. Arrangement and architecture of van temples in Binh Thuan:

Most of the Whale temples were constructed to cover a large area. They have a solemn appearance, and are situated on the coast and surrounded by walls. The temple is oriented toward the south or southeast. The main entrance includes a wide central path and two side-paths, which are narrower and have ornaments depicting fisheries. Behind the gate is a large terrace on which funeral or veneration activities for Whales (*Ca Ong*) and/or “good catch” ceremony are conducted. There follows the flag tower, screen, *Vo Ca* house, Chinh Dien (central chamber) and Tien Vang (front chamber) for the worship ground.

In the central chamber and *Vo Ca* house, there are phrases carved vertically and horizontally to applaud the strength and holiness of the Whale God, and reflect the gratitude of the fishers to it. The central chamber normally consists of three worship chambers: the central one dedicated to the Whale, that on the left dedicated to the Male Water God and that on the right sides dedicated to the Female Water God. The rear of the central chamber is dedicated to those persons who made great contributions to the establishment of the fishing village, the *van chai* and the Whale temple. In the middle of the *Vo Ca* house is the stage for Ba Trao traditional opera and Boi singing (*Hat Boi*) in annual festivals.

Most Whale temples are constructed from traditional materials, like wood, mortar, brick, and tile. Yin-yang tiles are used for roofing, the ground is made of Bat Trang bricks (from Ha Noi), and the inside construction is made of wood. The Whale temples in Binh Thuan have been restored after time using the same materials.

4. Function's of Van Chai

Self-regulation and mutual assistance:

The main function is the self-regulation. The head of Van Chai is a man, usually an old person with high prestige and who has a profound understanding of the society and fishing profession. He works on behalf of the fishers to direct rituals in ceremonies, worship, festivals, and mutual assistance in fishing activities. Previously, each *van chai* had its own regulations, which can be regarded as norms by consensus on the social relations among fishers. A person wishing to enter the *van* would prepare an application letter and pay a registration fee. An administration council would decide on the admission. At van meetings, the participants were required to dress properly and be well-mannered with each other. Drinking and shouting were banned. Fishing vessels of the members would be marked with specific signs so that they could help each other should an accident occur. Members would be punished if they did not help other members at distress. Some content of *van* regulations could consider as “unwritten law that were formulated from and for the daily life of the fishers and self-enforced effectively by the community. By 1975 such unwritten law disappeared.

Religious and cultural functions:

Whale temples are the traditional institutions of the fishers where they worship the Marine Gods and Ancestors who developed and managed the community's fisheries. Most Whale temples in Binh Thuan are dedicated to the Whale and conduct ceremonies for its Whale veneration. The whale is given names of reverence, like "Ông Nam Hải" (Lord Southern Sea), "Ông Chuong" (Lord Bell), "Ông Long" (Lord Near-shore), "Ông Khoi" (Lord Off-shore), "Ông Sua", etc. According to local fishers, the whale is the god who helps them whenever accidents occur at sea, so they wish to venerate Whale to demonstrate their gratitude for such kindness.

The Thuy Tu temple, established in 1762, is one of the largest and oldest temples in Binh Thuan. It is recognized as a national relic by the Ministry of Culture. A whale skeleton 22 m long and estimated to weigh 65 tons, among some 100 other skeletons, is kept in a showroom. (It might be the largest whale skeleton in southeastern coast of Vietnam.)

The *van chai* held annually offerings and ceremonies according to the lunar calendar, such as for the funeral of a Whale, Whale Skeleton worship, Good Catch worship (or Spring worship), the Main Luck worship, and the Season Ending festival. In each festival, fishers organize the solemn offerings and perform a traditional opera. A boat race is also held. Good catch festival is typical of coastal spiritual and occupational traditions.

Many whale temples of Binh Thuan have preserved the Nguyen dynasty documents by which the king confers on the temple title to the fishery. For example, Van Thuy Tu now keeps 24 sheets by Kings Thieu Tri, Tu Duc, Dong Khanh, Duy Tan, and Khai Dinh. The Ta Tan temple in Phan Ri has 16, and An Thanh temple in Phu Quy has 5 Title sheets.

6. Discussion:

It is difficult to demarcate ownership in fisheries for rational use. The many problems now include pollution, fish depletion, expanding fishing fleets, limited education among fishing communities, and poor awareness of aquatic resource and habitat protection, not good governance. It is therefore necessary to clarify rights and obligations of communities and State in the management of coastal resources. Fishers directly use and benefit from the fisheries resources, so they should be responsible for protection and management of the aquatic resources. If the rights and obligations are clear and fisheries empowered, they would feel that resources are their own assets and be willing to take responsible management measures. By then the Government should be reduce the cost of management and improve efficiency of governance.

In our opinion, in order to enhance the effectiveness of management and development of fisheries in Binh Thuan, the role of *van chai* should be promoted particularly for (1) self-regulation and (2) Solidarity and mutual assistance.

6.1. Self-regulation:

As I have mentioned, *van chai* are socio-occupational organizations established long time ago, with the voluntary participation by fishers. Leading a *van chai* is an elderly headman with high prestige and knowledge. Fishers usually respect their *van* regulations, and this is the core basis for the management of fishing activities. Through the activities of a *van chai*, government could understand the expectations and needs of fishers, and based on that, the government can develop proper plans and effectively implement policies and programs related to fisheries and rehabilitation of coastal aquatic resources.

6.2. Solidarity and mutual assistance:

Through the spiritual festivals, traditional culture, customs, professional beliefs, and the *van* regulations, cohesion among fishers will be enhanced, community values strengthened, and the common beliefs for better livelihoods, good production, and improved living conditions achieved. At the same time, it will contribute to preservation and promotion of typical characteristics of coastal communities in Vietnam.

In the current economic context, in order to enhance the effectiveness and development of production, producers should have close links with each other and successfully co-operate with other economic sectors. We believed that *van chai* will be fully qualified for joint activities in sea fishing, preservation, loading, pre-processing, circulation and linking with other organizations. State policies and regulations on aquatic resources protection and exploitation, information on technology and science, the control and mitigation of natural disasters, safety at sea, price and markets should be disseminated to the fishers through the fishing villages, from which feedback may be sent using the same channels.

7. Conclusion:

Since their formulation, *van chai* have been institutional entities of management, culture, and religion that lie deeply in the heart of coastal communities. For the sake of efficient management of fish exploitation and protection, fishing villages should be paid attention to and facilitated for development. This is, at the same time, in line with state policies on promotion of the people's ownership role, and suited to the expectation, religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and occupations of local fishers.

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