

Community-Based Sustainable Development in the Southern Region of Vietnam from the Cultural Aspect

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Abstract: The Southern region is a multicultural area with multiple ethnic groups, religions, actors, and also diverse socio-economic conditions. Contemporary young culture along with religious resources are important cultural assets for Vietnam to implement a sustainable development strategy based on the community. Therefore, it can be said that the cultural resource assets for sustainable development of the Southern region are extremely abundant and rich. Among them, the most outstanding are religious resources, cultural resources, the role of youth, young intellectuals, and the role of the knowledge economy and digital transformation through the workforce of immigrant laborers, the numerous youth, and young intellectuals in the region. By presenting the concepts of cultural resources, community, and community-based sustainable development, using systematic methods, historical methods, and qualitative secondary data analysis-synthesis methods, this article shows the richness and abundance of cultural resources of the communities in the Southern region as favorable conditions for the Southern region to sustainably develop based on the community, the importance of these cultural resources for sustainable development of the Southern region, as well as the strengths and weaknesses that need to be overcome in the current state's approach to these groups to achieve more effective community-based sustainable development.

Keywords: community-based development, cultural resources, endogenous religion, sustainable development, youth

1. INTRODUCTION

Community-based sustainable development is currently a direction and model pursued by many countries, ethnic groups, and communities worldwide. However, in Vietnam, research works seem to have not yet systematically paid adequate attention to the existing foundations for implementing the community-based sustainable development model. Currently, most research works and articles, as presented and summarized at the 2021 National Culture Conference and the 2022 Culture - Institution and Resources Conference, are only approached from the perspective of cultural management. It can be said that young culture, more specifically the role of youth, and religious communities in Southern Vietnam today play a significant role in the effectiveness of the community-based sustainable development strategy. Therefore, the increasingly diverse and complex development trends of religious culture and youth culture in Vietnam are becoming an increasingly serious threat to the effectiveness of the community-based sustainable development strategy. Based on this, this article hopes to partly become a reliable and authoritative reference source on the nature and current state of religious communities and youth communities today, as well as the impact of these cultural resources on the community-based sustainable development strategy in Southern Vietnam.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Pham Hong Tung (2009), a community is a group of many people who must have a high level of internal cohesion, a distinct entity, with identification criteria and operational - behavioral rules based on consensus of will, belief, and community awareness, which in turn bonds the members to each other and to the community.

There are three types of communities: territorial communities, cultural-religious communities, and organizational community networks at various scales.

Among territorial communities, there are three basic types: communities with territorial boundaries recognized by all members, communities bonded by frequent close interactions among members, and communities formed and developed based on planned zoning.

Among cultural-religious communities, there are six types: communities linking groups of people with the same profession or related to a profession, communities linking groups of people who frequently interact through information technology, communities linking groups sharing common cultural characteristics -

customs and community awareness due to shared ethnic origin and language, communities bonding members of a form of belief - religion - faith, communities bonding groups sharing common goals and values, orientations - interests and common political behaviors, and communities bonding members who share a common perception of the ties that connect them, with a shared political culture.

Among organizational community networks at various scales, there are three types: communities organized by kinship ties, communities organized by political and social consciousness, and communities organized by community awareness among groups sharing common economic interests.

Generally, a community is understood as "the reciprocal relationship among individuals, determined by the common interests of members who share similar conditions of existence and activities of those who form the community, including their material production activities and other activities, their closeness in thoughts, beliefs, values and norms, production base, similarity in living conditions as well as their subjective perceptions of goals and means of activity" (Institute of Social Science Information, 1990). However, this view does not specify the characteristics (criteria) to identify a community. Tô Duy Hợp and Lương Hồng Quang, in their work, cited Ferdinand Tönnies' perspective, according to which the concept of community has the following characteristics: "First, social relations that are spiritual, friendly, and naturally cohesive represent community character. Second, is sustainability. Community character is affirmed throughout the course of history. Time plays a role as a factor binding members of the community. Third, the community character, when viewed from the perspective of social status and evaluation of social members, is more about a socially assigned position than one attained through effort. Finally, community character takes kinship relations as the basic concept and includes both characteristics: kinship as blood relations and kinship becoming a cultural model for communal activities" (Tô Duy Hợp, Lương Hồng Quang, 2000). Such a conception of community is quite clear, helping us, as researchers, have a basis to approach and study communities.

According to Tô Duy Hợp & Lương Hồng Quang (2000), community-based development is an approach to implementing local development projects that supports community participation in decision-making and management, aiming to use local knowledge and resources to run projects more effectively. There are many ways this participatory approach contributes to community prosperity. Community-based development can increase resources directed toward programs important to the community and can improve spending efficiency. It can promote leadership skills and community participation at the local level. By encouraging communities to work together toward a common goal, community-based development can strengthen social networks, trust, and future contributions to community public goods. Finally, by helping citizens build leadership skills and engage with political processes, community-based development can enhance the community's ability to effectively demand support from higher levels of government.

Resources owned by the state and international institutions are often repayable or non-repayable aids tied to technology and human resources primarily used for restoring and preserving cultural heritage. No type of resource has potential as rich and diverse in society as cultural resources because they are closely linked to each individual, family, lineage, local community, and social organization, including both tangible and intangible resources. Tangible cultural resources can be owned, preserved, managed, and exploited by the state; can be owned, managed, and used by the community to serve religious, belief, and folk cultural activities; or can be held by private individuals. Intangible cultural resources, such as religion, beliefs, and folk cultural heritage, are all associated with the management, exploitation, and use roles of community organizations, folk artisans, and reputable community members. Until now, the concept of religious resources has often been understood by Vietnamese scholars as the very practical and specific activities of religion, including relief activities, humanitarian charity, care for the vulnerable, medical treatment, and educational-training activities. These religious activities can be quantified with specific numbers to demonstrate that religion is a resource contributing to community-based development. Since the 1980s, in the awareness of countries outside Europe, the connotations of heritage and development, as well as the relationship between heritage and development, have been replaced by new perspectives. According to Nguyễn Thị Phương Châm & Hoàng Cẩm (2022), development is diverse development models in different societies with different traditions, connected and suited to the historical, cultural, and social contexts of each nation and ethnicity. Development is no longer viewed purely from the economic perspective but also includes preserving ethnic cultural identity and ensuring fair and equal social relations. The connotation of cultural heritage has been expanded to include intangible cultural practices, including customs, forms of expression, knowledge, skills, as well as tools, objects, artifacts, and related cultural spaces recognized by the community as part of their cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is a

priceless resource playing an important role in meeting specific development needs in various aspects of particular countries and ethnic groups. Therefore, cultural heritage and development are two parallel, mutually supportive categories that together serve current needs and look toward the future. The role of cultural heritage not only contributes to economic development but also brings a development model rich in identity and ensures social justice.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Overview of cultural coordinates in the Southern region of Vietnam

Southern Vietnam lies in a near-equatorial climate zone, experiencing few typhoons and little erratic climatic variation. It has many large lakes, long rivers, and diverse forest ecosystems, which are very favorable for tourism development. This leads to the second characteristic: it is a waterway region. This is an important geographical constant that creates a significant cultural spirit in the area and leaves a unique mark on the wet rice agricultural culture. The geographical location of rivers and orchards in Southern Vietnam, with countless interwoven canals and channels forming an important economic-cultural-civilizational crossroads in mainland Southeast Asia, has also contributed to shaping the open, tolerant, sociable, dynamic, affectionate, straightforward, simple, and generous personality of the people in Southern Vietnam (Thach Phuong, 1992, p.258). Moreover, this region was once home to several ethnic groups, but due to historical changes, they migrated elsewhere (Tran Van Giau, 1987). These historical fluctuations caused continuous waves of migration (Ngo Van Le, 2007). Three forms of migration have occurred here: natural migration, regulated migration, and local migration (Mac Duong, 1992). The ethnic groups residing in the Mekong Delta arrived at different times. Among these groups, there are differences in economic development levels, social organization, and religion. These differences initially posed obstacles to contact. However, after a long period of cohabitation in the same territory, repeatedly fighting invasions and harsh natural conditions, and living intermingled, cultural exchanges and acculturation processes took place among the ethnic groups. These processes created shared cultural elements among the peoples living here and continue to occur under current positive influences. Regarding the cultural subjects of Southern Vietnam, since the early 19th century, the Vietnamese have coexisted and lived alongside the Chinese, Cham, Khmer, English, French, and Javanese (Huynh Lua, 1987, p.19). Therefore, for a long time, no single ideology could become a dominant belief governing the Vietnamese community in Southern Vietnam; they were always influenced and shaped by many different ideologies and religions (Dinh Van Hanh, 1999, p.37). At the same time, this living context defined the nature of Southern Vietnamese residents as "not overly discriminatory toward the religion or habits of others and exercising self-restraint to adjust their own lifestyle so it does not become hostile to others" (Son Nam, 1992, p.202). An evidence of the openness in the cultural character of Southern Vietnamese residents is their break from rigid, extremist, and dogmatic Confucian doctrines, as demonstrated by the first couplet at Thai Son Temple in Tinh Bien (An Giang): "Neither lord nor subject, neither god nor mortal, lord and subject enjoy together; neither parent nor child, neither father nor son, parent and child share the same joy" (Phan An, 2009).

The natural and sociocultural milieu of the Southern region is constituted by four fundamental constants: Constant 1: The South represents a convergence of advantageous natural conditions: situated near the equator, yet experiencing summers that are neither excessively hot nor humid, in contrast to the Northern interior, and devoid of extreme aridity or severe storms throughout the year, unlike the Central region.

Constant 2: The South serves as a nexus for international maritime routes: linking Vietnam with Southeast Asia; connecting Vietnam to the Western world.

Constant 3: The South is characterized by the presence of a diverse array of ethnic communities, originating from various parts of the nation and the surrounding region.

Constant 4: Southern culture emerges as a manifestation of the dynamic interplay of spatial and temporal factors. It represents the culmination of the process of positivity within spatial parameters. It also signifies the terminal phase in the chronological evolution of positivity.

The riverine nature engenders the following implications:

Firstly, within the Southern region, particularly in the western areas, aquatic transportation is highly advanced. Canals are perceived as "thoroughfares." A residence adjacent to a canal is regarded as a "house facing the thoroughfare" (Trinh Hoai Duc 1820/1998). The practice of drawing the attention of a boat is an obligatory cultural norm in the South (Nguyen Cong Binh, 1990, p.304; Thach Phuong, 1992, pp.188-190). Both transportation and legal frameworks represent sectors in which Vietnamese agriculture remains significantly underdeveloped. Nevertheless, in the domain of aquatic transportation alone, Gia

Dinh formulated regulations governing river navigation prior to European developments (Trinh Hoai Duc, 1820/1998).

Secondly, aquatic products, along with both aquatic fauna and flora, constitute the dietary staples of the Southern populace. The Mekong Delta boasts over 200 species of fish, of which 30 varieties possess considerable economic significance (Nguyen Cong Binh, 1990, pp.341-342). From fish, inhabitants prepare a multitude of distinct culinary offerings employing various techniques. The method of grilling snakehead fish directly on-site, served atop lotus leaves, accompanied by fresh vegetables, and dipped in a mixture of salt and pepper epitomizes the quintessential Southern culinary experience (Thach Phuong, 1992, p.50). Fish has also given rise to a widely favored culinary item in the South, namely fish sauce. Trinh Hoai Duc once remarked: "The people of Gia Dinh have a strong preference for fish sauce" (section Phong tuc chi). A fish sauce meal hosted by a Southern landowner for guests can be exceedingly lavish. Go Cong shrimp paste was historically regarded as a royal tribute (Thach Phuong, 1992, p.53).

Thirdly, the Southern dialect is replete with terminology pertaining to water-related entities and concepts that are absent in the Vietnamese lexicon. A cursory enumeration of singular terms reveals: rach, xeo, lang, xang, lung, bung, bung, bau, dia; ghe, canoe, tam ban, vo lai, tac rang (designating modes of transport) (Tran Xuan Ngoc Lang, 1995, pp.89-98; Nguyen Cong Binh, 1990, p.31).

Fourthly, rivers and water bodies serve as foundational elements and metaphors for articulating human character. While the Northern Vietnamese express the sentiment, "Do not permit the waves to deter your rowing," the Southern Vietnamese convey: "Persist in crab-catching, regardless of whether others pursue eels or turtles."

The tolerance of the South originates from the synthesis and the negative characteristics of the national cultural tradition, placed in the context of the meeting place of favorable natural conditions. Three out of four cultural constants of the South are already synthetic: Constant 1 (the meeting place of favorable natural conditions), Constant 2 (the meeting place of international sea routes), Constant 3 (the meeting place of residents of many ethnic groups coming from all over the country and region). Southern raw vegetables are the synthesis of many types of vegetables.

Tolerance creates the following consequences:

First, during the pioneering period, ethnic groups lived together but still acknowledged and respected each other's customs and practices.

Second, different religions still respected each other and coexisted at the highest density in the country. Since the time of Phu Nam, there was a reconciliation of Buddhism with Brahmanism; In Brahmanism, the Funan people combined the two gods Visnu and Siva into the god Harihara with a head in two halves, one half is the face of Siva and the other half is the face of Visnu (Nguyen Cong Binh, 1990, p.157). During the time of the Vietnamese, the Three Religions were harmonized with folk beliefs. Luc Van Tien was a Confucian scholar, when in trouble he took refuge in Buddhism, was saved by Mr. Cop and Song Than (folk beliefs), and finally had his eyes healed by the Immortal (Dao). Nowadays, all religions are harmonized: Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Brahmanism, Islam, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai. The South has the most broad range of religions in the country.

Third, the Vietnamese people in the South can tolerate contrasting personalities with a relatively wide range: When working, they labor tirelessly; when playing, they play to the utmost. When they love, they love until the season ends; when they hate, they hate indefinitely. When they are dissatisfied, they will not say anything, even if they force their mouths open, but when they agree, they will reveal their heart and soul. When they have money, they can treat their friends to chicken rice and fish salad; when they don't, they can provide porridge with veggies and fish sauce. They can eat very bland food (boiled crab, boiling fish, boiled shrimp...) and highly salty food (pure fish sauce). This results in a fairly severe Southern character, in contrast to the harmony-loving, two-faced nature (being a man while speaking two-faced) of traditional Vietnamese and Northern people.

Southern culture developed in tandem with the West's openness and dynamism. In terms of space, the South served as Vietnam's entryway to marine traffic from the West. In terms of chronology, the emergence of Southern culture corresponded with the introduction of Western civilization into Vietnam, with the South being the first to be penetrated. The South's energy manifests itself in many different ways. First and foremost, it is demonstrated in the ability to readily change one's way of life. Vietnamese who left their homeland accepted a life full of changes; they abandoned the closed life in the bamboo fences of the Northern and Central villages to live in the open villages of the South, where there were no bamboo fences or gates; houses were not clustered together but spread out along canals and roads for ease of doing business. Second, they were able to readily move their location of abode. Vietnamese farmers, by nature,

want to live in harmony. In the South, people form settlements and consolidate their existence. However, if they are dissatisfied with their current situation, they can easily relocate to another location, as they have already traveled a considerable distance from the Central region, so what is the point of traveling still further? Southern culture celebrates daring individuals who dare to move, in contrast to Northern culture's negative attitudes towards immigrants. "In Cochinchina, a village can dissolve in your hands as swiftly as it comes together... A family goes out with a herd of buffalo in front, carrying their few goods in a cart or canoe. And because there is land to cultivate and trees to build houses wherever they go, they are rarely humiliated by food and housing issues (Tran Van Giau, 1998, p.116).

Dynamism causes the following consequences: The first consequence of dynamism is the ability to readily embrace new experiences. Hot pot, stir-fried noodles, and stir-fried rice noodles are Chinese meals, while goat curry and chicken curry are Cham Muslim dishes. Vietnamese cremate and put ashes on pagoda towers in the same way that Khmers bury dead. In terms of religion and belief, the Southern people accept a variety of bizarre religions, including the Coconut, Banana, and Sitting religions. Almost all new elements acquired from the West enter Vietnam through the South. This is where the country's first movement toward Westernization of dress began, with suits, collared shirts, neckties, and pointed-toe shoes. The Southern God likewise easily adapts to the times, smoking three-digit filter cigarettes and drinking coffee for morning. The second outcome of dynamism is creativity. Flexibility allows for the rapid improvement and adaptation of new ideas. During the Funan period, certain statues of Maitreya and Guanyin were identified by having sarongs covering their thighs or entire legs (Nguyen Cong Binh, 1990, p.160).

The third consequence of dynamism is the expansion of commerce. Since the Funan period, business has flourished due to its unique location at the junction of transportation flows (constant 2). (Nguyen Cong Binh, 1990, pages 141-142).

3.2. Sustainable development in the Southern region of Vietnam viewed from the convergence of cultural resource factors in sustainable development in the Southern region of Vietnam

Society is a community that connects actual individuals (separate and existing people). Social capital begins with the living capital of individuals. An individual's living capital is formed through the process of fulfilling human needs. But humans live not only with the demand to satisfy material needs. Because satisfying material needs is only an instinctual need of animals, whereas the need of humans is to live worthy of their status as human beings. The living capital of an individual is a synthesis of values accumulated from scientific knowledge, ethics, aesthetics, politics, economics, law... it is faith and hope, vision, ways of thinking about life to create the qualities and abilities of that person. However, an individual's living capital is only formed and effectively developed through the totality of social relations. From the living capital of individuals connected to each other, social capital is formed through a network of social relationships. Trust is the fundamental factor creating the cohesion of this network. Because simply, no one can be friends with someone they don't trust. Based on trust, people express understanding in social cohesion with all their abilities, qualities, and emotions. From an ontological perspective, religion is also social capital because religion is the synthesis of ontological attributes of the social spirit, social entity, and social culture. Religion exists in human society, making human society. It would be incomplete to talk about human social life at any historical period without mentioning religion, including pre-literate history. But the social capital of religion has distinctive characteristics.

According to Pargament (2000), religious resources impact society both materially and spiritually. The spiritual resources of religion are systems of values, ideas, ethics embodied through doctrine, canonical law, and dogma aimed at regulating the consciousness and behavior of believers, whom voluntarily and consciously comply. Besides the sacred ideas of religion, these ideas are also normative regulations in life such as filial piety, honesty, compassion, doing good and avoiding evil, guiding people toward truth, goodness, and beauty. In many cases, religious ideas and dogmas are sustainable and strictly observed, effectively educating and regulating human behavior even more than law. The material resources of religion include human resources, worship facilities, and finances. Religious resources manifest in various forms such as tangible heritage like religious architecture, sculptures, paintings, landscapes; intangible heritage such as rituals, festivals...; and worldly activities like relief, medical care, teaching...

Culture is also a type of resource associated with people and national culture, embodied in both tangible and intangible cultural forms. Cultural resources are a type of socio-humanitarian resource—the more they are exploited, the more their value increases, such as patriotism, aspiration to contribute, commitment ideals, integrity spirit... While other types of resources only create development motivation, cultural resources also regulate development—at its core, development is based on promoting benefits and

oriented by values. Cultural development needs both internal and external resources. External resources may belong to states, international institutions, enterprises, NGOs, individuals, including Vietnamese people living abroad. Resources owned by states and international institutions often come as repayable or non-repayable aid linked with technology and human resources mainly used to restore and preserve cultural heritage. No resource in society is as rich and diverse as cultural resources because they are closely connected with each person, family, lineage, local community, social organizations, including both tangible and intangible resources.

Tangible cultural resources include historical-cultural relics (temples, pagodas, communal houses, shrines, traditional longhouses, ancestral halls...), scenic spots, relics, antiques, national treasures, sacred forests. These resources can be owned, preserved, managed, and exploited by the state in museums; owned, managed, and used by communities for spiritual needs, folk festivals, family clans attached to specific performance spaces; privately held within families. Intangible cultural resources include beliefs, festivals, customs, folk culture, folk art, local knowledge, architectural values, folk music, folk painting... all are linked to the management, exploitation, and use roles of community organizations, social organizations, folk artisans, and reputable community members.

Regarding geo-cultural resources, the Holocene marine transgression period hindered the spread of the **Đồng Nai** culture into the Mekong Delta, so prehistoric archaeological sites are quite scarce in the Southwestern region of Vietnam. It was only around the beginning of the Common Era when the sea retreated that indigenous groups of the **Đồng Nai** culture began expanding their habitation into this area, along with some populations from the islands. Excavations since the time of L. Malleret (1944) have uncovered traces of about 30 “ancient waterways,” which are networks of canals crisscrossing the low-lying Long Xuyên quadrangle. These served both as transportation routes utilising the tidal flow to and from the Oc Eo port market, and as a water management system to drain floodwaters in the Mekong Delta. In the core archaeological zone, valuable artifacts have been found—many relics such as worship statues inside temple and tower ruins, burial objects, and items for material and spiritual life are plentiful in residential sites and religious architectural remains (Lê Xuân Diễm – Đào Linh Côn – Võ Sĩ Khải, 1995). To survive and flourish, Oc Eo inhabitants created suitable living conditions by adapting to and exploiting the annual flood cycles. A distinctive feature of the Oc Eo culture’s lifestyle was continuing to live on stilt houses along natural and man-made rivers and canals, choosing higher ground such as hills, mounds, and elevated patches for dwelling and cultivation (Nguyễn Thị Hậu – Lê Thanh Hải, 2010). Household items of the Southern inhabitants from prehistoric times until recently still retain some characteristic tools of a riverine lifestyle (boats, small stoves known as *cà ràng*, etc.). Among archaeological sites, besides numerous artifacts made from various materials, pottery is the type that best expresses local traditions. The triad of ceramic/earthenware artifacts persisted until as late as the 17th-18th centuries: the *cà ràng* (ceramic stove), various lids and jars, and ceramic lamps. The ancient population maintained and developed this way of life, becoming a “tradition” represented through architectural remains and archaeological relics dated from the early Common Era to the 10th–12th centuries. From this evolved two main economic practices: wet-rice cultivation in the lowlands of the western Hau River area (the “wet rice” civilization) and gardening in the higher lands near the lower reaches of the Tien River (the “garden” civilization). The southern rural landscape accordingly features unique traits: settlements stretch along rivers and canals, with houses facing the waterways to catch the cool breeze during high water. Primary transportation was by boat, following the tidal ebb and flow; docks that served as mooring points eventually developed into market towns. The open and extensive exchange nature is a consistent characteristic throughout the economic and cultural development of the South, at least from the Oc Eo culture to the present. By the late Nguyen dynasty period, market towns had formed in the South. Urban centers in Southern Vietnam were usually located at the heart of regional waterway traffic networks, taking advantage of river, canal, and maritime routes, as well as existing docks and markets to establish important ports like Saigon, Cù Lao Phố, Mỹ Tho, Ba Vát (Bến Tre), Hà Tiên... later followed by Cần Thơ, Long Xuyên, Sa Đéc, etc. It can be said that the character of Southern urban centers was that of “river-based towns”; they were known not only by their fortifications, administrative and religious buildings but also for their docks and markets famous for a diverse and abundant array of goods, rich commercial exchanges, and the dense, diverse population.

The concept of “living with floods” only appeared around 1996 with negative connotations, material damage, and loss of life. Therefore, we often respond clumsily and dramatize a natural phenomenon that our ancestors calmly exploited for their benefit. Up until the period of clearing the southern lands, a common archaeological artifact reflecting the environment and lifestyle of settlers was the ceramic jar.

This item is still widely used in many places, especially remote areas of the South, with the basic function of storing and filtering water (rainwater, river water) under the southern climate conditions of two seasons, rain and sun, and iron-contaminated water. For the South to develop sustainably, starting from the people's livelihood, a new perspective on the South is needed: it is no longer a region of "nature's generosity, playing with losses...", as population and population density have increased significantly, including replacement and growth from communities with different agricultural mindsets and methods than the traditional Southern approach. Most importantly, investment must be renewed and increased in this region, both in infrastructure and social welfare, to match the potential and contributions of the South to the whole country. The riverine terrain of the South is an inherent and sustainable natural condition. In the context of climate change becoming a reality and the era of "globalization," the existence of a river, even a large one like the Mekong, or the water regime and quality of major rivers today, is no longer just an issue for the South or Vietnam but a regional and even global matter. Therefore, the "river culture" of the South needs to adapt to new circumstances based on historical experience: living in place, making use of, changing lifestyles and production methods to adapt to the natural environment, rather than fearing or dramatizing difficulties, but also not opposing in a dogmatic way.

Southern Vietnam is a multicultural, multi-religious region. This area was an early entry point for Buddhism, Catholicism, and many other religions. At the same time, it is the birthplace of indigenous religions such as Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Buu Son Ky Huong. The religions in Southern Vietnam are influenced by the characteristics of the region, reflecting the cultural values and spirit of the people of Southern Vietnam. Additionally, the Southern region is the southern land of the country, so here there are belief forms from the Central region, as well as beliefs brought in by the Chinese. These belief forms blend together to become a land with very rich and diverse beliefs. This variety of beliefs has met the spiritual needs of the people in the Southern region from the early days of settlement until now. Although there are many different religions, the religious communities here do not conflict but always bond and support each other, together aiming towards strong economic development. Especially in the movement to promote economic development and poverty reduction among religions in the South, followers have united, helped each other with capital and experience, and applied scientific and technological achievements in production. Religions here have contributed to propaganda and raising awareness among believers on how to become wealthy, rise above poverty, and improve material and spiritual life. With economic development, believers have had the conditions to contribute to building rural infrastructure and many other public works. In the coming period, to harmonize beliefs and religions in the Southern region and jointly aim for economic development, religions need to outline some basic common values such as: the value of the sacred homeland; the value of the sanctity of family happiness; the value of collective spirit, moral foundation, and common standards in the social community. These values will be the cornerstone factors that can gather all types of religious beliefs towards a common direction, contributing more to economic development and harmonizing with each other. Besides economic development, religions also contribute to diversifying the mobilization of social resources; sharing the burden with local authorities, the State, and society, spreading the profound spirit of mutual support and compassion within the community. Specifically, when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, religious organizations showed solidarity and high responsibility towards the country and the people by making significant contributions in both manpower and materials, adding strength for the country to overcome the pandemic.

Through the system of scriptures and doctrines, indigenous religions in the Southern region such as Hoà Hảo Buddhism also advise their followers to cultivate virtue, live a kind and decent life, and base their lives on the principles of filial piety, righteousness, and morality in practical life (Hiển Đạo, 1974).

One of the characteristics of the religious cultural resources in the Southern region is their adaptability to meet the practical demands of contemporary society (Trương Văn Chung, 2009, p.24). Therefore, in the cultural consciousness of the Southern residents, these new indigenous religions serve as a foundational premise helping people adapt to the cultural environment of the South under the influences of economic, political, natural, and scientific-technological factors. Ultimately, these new indigenous religions help people flexibly adjust to harsh and changing conditions in economy, politics, science, technology, and nature, thus becoming an important cultural resource for sustainable development in the Southern region.

According to a 2014 report, Cao Đài had 93 facilities for medical examination and treatment, 135 facilities for dispensing medicine, 2 long-term care centers at their premises, and 11 elderly care facilities, with a total expenditure for medical treatment reaching 235 billion VND (Government Religious Affairs

Committee, 2014, p.35). Hoà Hảo Buddhism also operated more than 150 locations offering free medical examination and treatment, over 3 hectares of garden land cultivating many types of precious traditional medicinal plants with an irrigation system valued at over 150 million VND (Phạm Bích Hợp, 2007, p.157). For example, the Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion from 2010-2015 in Bà Chúc town provided more than 5,500 kg of traditional medicine, 10,000 medicine pills, 33,100 doses of medicine, and over 100 million VND worth of medicine; in 2016 alone, it supplied medicine to over 7,500 people, valued at more than 27 million VND (Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa Religion, 2016).

The new indigenous religious communities in the South also act as forces fighting to protect the nation, safeguarding and promoting important national cultural identities, reflected in the patriotic character of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion through numerous movements against French colonial invaders in Châu Đốc, Long Xuyên, and Tây An (Tôn Việt Thảo, 2011, p.115), the anti-American imperialist struggle of the Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion (Hồng Điệp), and the Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism (Phật giáo Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn, 2009, p.14). They also maintain traditional cultural products such as Bình Mỹ roof tiles, Phú Hòa fishing hooks, Tân Châu silk, Phú Mỹ blacksmithing, and Châu Đốc fermented fish.

These new indigenous religions also provide grassroots mobilization forces to strengthen national unity and implement sustainable development policies in the Southern region. For example, Hoà Hảo Buddhism contributed more than 84 billion VND to the Vĩnh Phú rice charity program (Thoại Sơn, An Giang) during 2014-2016 and built over 13,000 charity houses, more than 2,000 solidarity houses, and over 300 gratitude houses from 1999-2014 (Hoà Hảo Buddhism Central Board, 2017). The Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion also cooperated with other ethnic religions to provide over 4,500 gifts worth more than 900 million VND, supported the construction and repair of more than 80 solidarity houses valued at over 1.3 billion VND for poor and solitary households during 2010-2015 (Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa Religion, 2016). In 2012, the Cao Đài religion also donated over 109 billion VND for spontaneous charitable activities in society (Government Religious Affairs Committee, 2013, p.9). More recently, from 2019 onward, during the COVID-19 era, the Liên Tông Tịnh Độ Non Bồng sect, with 189 temples, pagodas, chapels, and practice centers, over 1,400 monks and nuns, and more than 2 million followers, has awarded over 300 scholarships to disadvantaged students and directly affected individuals due to COVID-19, and also provided emergency aid to patients quarantined in hospitals, with a total value of more than 5.8 billion VND (Thích Giác Quang, 2021).

Economically, religious resources are also important resources contributing to education, welfare, public transportation construction, healthcare, and vocational training. Politically, in terms of political culture—which is the system of attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge that people create and accumulate through participating in political activities—the new indigenous religious forces in Southern Vietnam also help improve the trust, attitudes, and understanding of the people towards the government, the Party, and the State. This helps maintain the supremacy of socialist political culture, based on ideology and the four basic needs of the entire nation (a unified homeland, harmonious families, a stable life, and ensured dignity) as its foundation. The ethical standards of living and working according to the law are always the goals of the new indigenous religions in Southern Vietnam: "Dharma and Nation," "Practice the Four Gratuities - Live Filially," "Good life - beautiful faith," "Use faith - save life." As a result, the close and solid connection between village and state, religion, law, and the state is strengthened, reducing unnecessary conflicts of interest caused by hostile and reactionary forces outside trying to create and exploit them to sabotage the revolution. The teachings and scriptures advising followers to pursue truth, goodness, and beauty also help these new indigenous religions in Southern Vietnam become important resources alongside the nation in fulfilling sustainable development tasks and preserving and promoting national cultural identity.

In terms of economics, religious resources are also an important source contributing to education, welfare, the construction of public transportation, healthcare, and vocational training. Politically, with the political-cultural meaning as a system of attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge created and accumulated by people during their participation in political activities, new indigenous religious forces in Southern Vietnam also help improve the trust, attitudes, and understanding of the general public toward the government, the Party, and the State. This, in turn, maintains the dominance of socialist political culture, based on ideology and the four basic needs of the entire nation (national unity, family harmony, stable living, and ensured dignity) as its foundation. The ethical values of living and working according to the law are always the goals pursued by the new indigenous religions in Southern Vietnam: "Dharma - Nation," "Practice the Four Gratuities - Live Righteously," "Good life - beautiful religion," "Apply religion - save life." As a result, the relationship between village and state, religion-law-state becomes closer and

stronger, reducing unnecessary conflicts of interest caused by reactionary hostile forces outside trying to create and exploit them to sabotage the revolution. The teachings and scriptures that encourage followers to pursue truth-goodness-beauty also help make the new indigenous religions in Southern Vietnam an important resource in accompanying the nation to complete sustainable development tasks and to preserve and promote the national cultural identity.

Connecting economic development with the exploitation of the cultural value of religion is attracting the attention of development planners, stakeholders, and local communities. However, this is not merely an issue of economic exploitation but primarily focuses on cultural preservation. The cultural value of religion plays an important role in increasing the attractiveness of tourist destinations, thereby creating economic benefits. Exploiting the cultural value of religious beliefs in the Southeast region, as well as in many other localities across the country, is one of the important approaches to achieving the dual goals of economic development and cultural preservation. Nevertheless, the goals of economic development and cultural preservation do not rely solely on cultural tourism products but require an effective approach to address the relationship between culture and development, as well as between religion and development. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the cultural value of religion based on sustainable development to effectively leverage religious resources. As such, all cultural, social, and religious development goals must be established on the basis of preserving positive value systems, avoiding the impacts of excessive commercialization, and focusing more on nurturing and regenerating the cultural and social values of religion. Ultimately, commitment between religion and development is essential. This is an important task for communities, planners, and stakeholders to promote engagement among parties, moving towards responsible development planning and strategic practices. Especially, this commitment and responsibility are founded on trust, cultural values, and social capital derived from religion. Any activity to harness religious resources must be based on the participation and input of the community as well as religious followers. If the process of leveraging religious resources is unilateral and lacks cooperation among managers, stakeholders, and the community, it often leads to unsustainable outcomes because without community participation, religious resources lack the foundation for expression, maintenance, inheritance, and development.

Youth is a special social group closely connected to all social classes and activities and plays a crucial role in social development (Vu Trong Kim, 1999, p.14). Youth is a social group transitioning cognitively and psychosomatically towards a more complete and stable personality, but their personality is not yet fully formed and stable. Due to their dynamic and sensitive nature, yet lacking a full understanding of the insidious cultural assimilation schemes of industrialized countries using the “peaceful evolution” strategy, youths are also more vulnerable to internal violence and conflict compared to other social groups. In today’s era of globalization, the dynamism, responsiveness, and responsibility of Vietnamese youth continue to be demonstrated through projects such as the digitalization of the Ho Chi Minh City History Museum, historical-fiction films, traditional-influenced modern music arrangements, and innovative film and literature adaptation projects. These methods, positive viewpoints, and youthful creativity and enthusiasm can be harnessed and promoted to evoke and enhance the role of cultural promotion, responsibility, and active contribution to sustainable social development. Therefore, shaping the identity of Vietnamese youth is also building the dominant identity group of the future and establishing the mainstream cultural identity of Vietnamese society later. Thus, it is imperative to boost measures that exploit the dynamic, perceptive, and creative qualities of youth in constructing national identity in order to serve the needs of sustainable social development, strengthen the nation’s comprehensive power, and resist cultural assimilation and the insidious “peaceful evolution” strategies of hostile forces. Under the influence of globalization, the popular culture of vulnerable social groups is becoming increasingly diverse and complex, and the risk of losing the national identity of developing countries and marginalized ethnic communities is becoming more apparent. Therefore, the role of youth—a special group in cognitive, personality, and psychosomatic transition but holding a decisive role in sustainable social development—is more important than ever.

3. CONCLUSION

Firstly, the intricate fluvial topography and the multifaceted ethnic and cultural milieu of the Southern region serve as pivotal determinants of the proclivity of Southern inhabitants to adapt to both the natural and social environments. Furthermore, these factors constitute essential preconditions intricately associated with the sustainable advancement of the Southern territory. These criteria are imperative for the sustainable progression of the South, superseding and taking precedence over the standards of other

local cultural regions, both nationally and globally, when formulating policies aimed at the sustainable development of the Southern region.

Second, among the quartet of cultural resources pertinent to sustainable development in the South, the category encompassing geo-cultural resources—comprising sites, relics, artifacts, and vestiges of historical consciousness—represents a repository of cultural assets possessing enduring significance. It is imperative that these resources receive heightened protection and attention to mitigate cultural disintegration, prevent hybridization, and avert complications within the policies designed for sustainable development in the South, all while capitalizing on the unique, specific, and relatively sustainable geo-cultural assets inherent to the region.

Third, with respect to the cultural resources associated with religious dimensions, it is noteworthy that the majority of emergent endogenous religions in the South are characterized by their profound national roots, indigenous nature, inclusivity, commitment to worldly affairs, and salvific aspirations. Consequently, for the Southern region to achieve sustainable development, it is essential to harness and fully leverage the philosophical tenets of peaceful coexistence, as well as the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty espoused by these new endogenous religions. This approach will effectively enhance the economic, educational, and socio-cultural functions that these religions continue to affirm within the Southern context.

Finally, in relation to the cultural resources linked to cultural actors, particularly human resources, the youth and young adults in the South, as well as in other regions across the nation, must actively cultivate their dynamism, adaptability, and creativity, while simultaneously enhancing their standing within the community. This endeavor will facilitate the emergence of cultural products from the youth in the South that significantly contribute to the region's sustainable development, while concurrently mitigating the influence of distorted cultural products stemming from the absorption of pragmatic Western culture and materialism.

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