

## The worship of Vo Thi Sau in Ba Ria–Vung Tau Province: Philosophical values and social functions of a Vietnamese folk belief<sup>1</sup>

*O culto a Vo Thi Sau na província de Ba Ria-Vung Tau: valores filosóficos e funções sociais de uma crença popular vietnamita*

Nguyen Thi VAN  
Phd in Ha Noi National University of Education

Email: Nguyenvansphn76@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0003-3684-2672

### ABSTRACT

The belief in the worship of Vo Thi Sau (commonly known as Co Sau) is a distinctive spiritual and cultural phenomenon in contemporary Vietnamese society, reflecting the integration of the tradition of venerating national heroes with the spiritual needs of the community. In recent years, the number of visitors to Vo Thi Sau's grave in Con Dao has increased significantly, indicating that this belief has extended beyond its local origins to become a cultural symbol with nationwide influence. However, existing studies have primarily focused on its historical development and cultural significance, while paying limited attention to its philosophical foundations and social functions. This article examines the belief in the worship of Vo Thi Sau from the perspectives of philosophy and the philosophy of religion, employing analytical, synthetic, historical, and logical methods to explain the process through which a historical figure is sacralized in contemporary society. The findings indicate that this belief is not merely a spiritual phenomenon but also a social mechanism that preserves historical memory, reinforces community ethics, promotes patriotic values, and strengthens social cohesion. At the same time, the belief is increasingly influenced by commercialization and the expansion of spiritual tourism, creating the need for appropriate management and sustainable development strategies.

**KEYWORDS:** folk beliefs; Vo Thi Sau; philosophy; social functions; Vietnamese culture.

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## RESUMO:

A crença no culto a Vo Thi Sau (comumente conhecido como Co Sau) é um fenômeno espiritual e cultural singular na sociedade vietnamita contemporânea, refletindo a integração da tradição de veneração de heróis nacionais com as necessidades espirituais da comunidade. Nos últimos anos, o número de visitantes ao túmulo de Vo Thi Sau em Con Dao aumentou significativamente, indicando que essa crença se estendeu para além de suas origens locais, tornando-se um símbolo cultural com influência em todo o país. Contudo, os estudos existentes têm se concentrado principalmente em seu desenvolvimento histórico e significado cultural, dedicando pouca atenção aos seus fundamentos filosóficos e funções sociais. Este artigo examina a crença no culto a Vo Thi Sau sob as perspectivas da filosofia e da filosofia da religião, empregando métodos analíticos, sintéticos, históricos e lógicos para explicar o processo pelo qual uma figura histórica é sacralizada na sociedade contemporânea. Os resultados indicam que essa crença não é meramente um fenômeno espiritual, mas também um mecanismo social que preserva a memória histórica, reforça a ética comunitária, promove valores patrióticos e fortalece a coesão social. Ao mesmo tempo, a crença é cada vez mais influenciada pela comercialização e pela expansão do turismo espiritual, criando a necessidade de estratégias adequadas de gestão e desenvolvimento sustentável.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** crenças populares; Vo Thi Sau; filosofia; funções sociais; cultura vietnamita.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the history of the development of the Vietnamese nation, folk beliefs have always held an important position in the spiritual life of the community. In addition to the belief in ancestor worship, Emperor worship, Mother worship or natural gods, the belief in worshipping national heroes is a form of expressing the morality of "drinking water and remembering the source", and at the same time reflects the process of the community transforming historical memories into cultural values and spiritual beliefs (Bui, 2024). Among the characters worshipped, Vo Thi Sau has a special position. From a female revolutionary soldier who died at a very young age, her image has been sacred by the community and has become an object of worship in Con Dao as well as many other localities. Every year, tens of thousands of people come to offer incense at Hang Duong cemetery not only to commemorate a national hero but also to send wishes for life, work and family. This suggests that the transition from historical memory to spiritual belief is a social phenomenon worth studying from a philosophical perspective (Tran, 2022). From the point of view of historical materialism, all forms of social consciousness reflect social existence under certain historical conditions. Therefore, the belief in the worship of Co Sau should be considered

not as a mere mystical phenomenon but as a product of the process of social, cultural and psychological development of the community. The study of this phenomenon helps to shed light on the relationship between history, culture, ethics and spiritual life in modern Vietnamese society. The article aims to analyze the philosophical value and social function of the belief in Co Sau worship, thereby contributing to supplementing the theoretical basis for research on Vietnamese folk beliefs as well as the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural values in the context of international integration.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH AND RATIONALE

### 2.1. Research overview

Folk beliefs are one of the areas of interest in the study of philosophy, culture, anthropology and religious studies in Vietnam. Many works have analyzed the origin, nature and social function of beliefs, considering this as an important part of the spiritual life of the community. Studies on ancestor worship beliefs, Mother worship beliefs, Thanh Hoang beliefs or national hero worship beliefs have contributed to clarifying the characteristics of Vietnamese spiritual culture in the historical process (February, 2018). For the belief in worshipping national heroes, most of the works agree that this is a continuation of the tradition of "drinking water and remembering the source", reflecting the community's gratitude to individuals who have made special contributions to the country and the nation. After their deaths, these figures are not only commemorated with historical relics but also sacred by the people through a system of rituals, legends, and religious practices. It is this process that creates a special cultural space where history and spirituality coexist. As for Vo Thi Sau, most of her research focuses on her life, revolutionary activities and heroic sacrifices. Some other studies mention the role of Vo Thi Sau tomb in the development of spiritual tourism in Con Dao or analyze the influence of this belief on the spiritual life of local people. However, existing studies are mostly descriptive or approached from a historical, cultural, and tourism perspective. The academic gap lies in the fact that there have not been many works explaining this phenomenon from a philosophical perspective, especially the issue of why a historical figure becomes the object of folk belief and how the process of sanctification is maintained in modern society. This article focuses on that gap by analyzing the philosophical value and social function of the belief in the worship of Co Sau.

### 2.2. Theoretical basis

From the point of view of Marxist philosophy, social consciousness is a reflection of social existence and is subject to specific historical conditions. Belief is also a form of social consciousness, formed in the process of people perceiving and interpreting the world around them. Although it contains

a sacred element, religion does not exist separately from social life but always reflects the needs, psychology and values of the community. From this perspective, the belief in the worship of Co Sau should not be understood as simply a belief in supernatural elements but as a product of historical and cultural processes. The image of Vo Thi Sau was received by the community as a symbol of patriotism, sacrifice and indomitable spirit. These values are reproduced through rituals, legends, memorial activities and cultural practices, thereby creating sacredness in social awareness. Besides the approach of Marxist philosophy, the theory of collective memory also helps to explain the formation of this belief. Historical memories are not only preserved in books but also preserved through symbols and rituals. When the community continuously recreates the memory of a character with memorial activities, that character gradually becomes a common symbol of the community and carries a meaning beyond the original historical value. From the perspective of cultural philosophy, the process of sacralization is not a denial of history but a form of historical symbolization. A real individual in history is given special spiritual values by the community, becoming a moral and spiritual fulcrum. Therefore, the belief of worshipping Co Sau both reflects Vietnamese cultural traditions and shows the community's ability to create culture in connecting the past with the present.

### **3. THE PHILOSOPHICAL VALUE OF THE BELIEF TO WORSHIP CO SAU**

#### **3.1. The philosophical value of the belief in Co Sau worship in reflecting the relationship between social existence and social consciousness**

From the point of view of historical materialism, social existence determines social consciousness, and at the same time, social consciousness after its formation is capable of re-impacting the real life of people. This is one of the basic principles for explaining the emergence and development of religious phenomena in human history. Beliefs are not accidental products of imagination or merely personal beliefs, but are formed on the basis of the specific economic, political, cultural and historical conditions of a community. In the case of the belief to worship Co Sau in Ba Ria – Vung Tau province, the formation and development of this belief is a vivid demonstration of the dialectical relationship between social existence and social consciousness (Bac, 2016).

Vo Thi Sau is a real historical figure, associated with the national liberation struggle movement during the resistance war against French colonialism. Her sacrifice in Con Dao not only left a mark in the history of the Vietnamese revolution but also created a special symbol of patriotism, indomitable spirit and sacrifice. It is these historical conditions that have created an objective basis for the community to remember, honor and gradually sanctify the image of Vo Thi Sau. Separated from the historical context

of the struggle for national independence, it is difficult to explain why a young woman has such a profound influence on the spiritual life of many generations of Vietnamese people (Novak, 2024).

However, the existence of historical events is only an initial condition. In order to form a folk belief, there needs to be a process of transformation from historical memory to cultural memory and eventually to social belief. This process takes place through many different channels such as word of mouth in the community, memorial activities, memorial ceremonies, the construction of monuments, memorial areas and especially the spread of stories about Co Sau in folk life. It is the long-term accumulation of these elements that has made the image of Vo Thi Sau beyond the scope of a historical figure to become a sacred symbol in public awareness.

From a philosophical perspective, this phenomenon shows that social consciousness is always historical and inherited. Moral values such as patriotism, the spirit of sacrifice for the community or the will to overcome death are selected, preserved and recreated by the community through the symbol of Ms. Sau. This proves that religion does not exist separately from social life, but is a mode of reflecting reality in the form of symbols and beliefs. The sacralization here does not deny the historical element but on the contrary makes the historical memory long-lasting through cultural practices (Tung, 2019).

Another noteworthy point is that after being formed, beliefs have the opposite impact on social life. Every year, a large number of people come to offer incense at the place of worship of Co Sau not only to pray but also to commemorate a revolutionary example. These activities contribute to educating patriotic traditions, strengthening the morality of gratitude to those who have contributed to the country and creating cohesion among community members. Thus, social consciousness in the form of beliefs has become a spiritual driving force that positively impacts human behavior and cognition.

In addition, in the modern context with the development of media and spiritual tourism, the belief in Co Sau worship continues to expand its scope of influence. This reflects the mobility of social consciousness when always adapting to new conditions of existence. However, this development also poses the risk of commercialization or absolutization of spiritual elements if there is a lack of appropriate cultural orientation. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the belief in the worship of Co Sau as a historical social phenomenon, in which the core value lies in preserving national memory and nurturing positive moral standards, not in mystical elements.

From the above analysis, it can be affirmed that the belief in the worship of Co Sau is the product of specific socio-historical conditions, vividly reflecting the principle of the relationship between social existence and social consciousness. At the same time, the existence and development of this belief also shows that social consciousness after its formation has the ability to impact real life, contributing to

strengthening cultural identity, traditional education and strengthening community cohesion in contemporary Vietnamese society.

### **3.2. Philosophical value of the process of sanctifying historical figures in the belief of worshipping Co Sau**

One of the outstanding philosophical values of the belief in worshipping Co Sau is that it reflects the process of sacredifying a historical figure into a cultural and spiritual symbol of the community. This is not a phenomenon unique to Vietnam but appears in many different civilizations, where individuals with special merits to the nation are revered by the people and gradually become the object of commemoration and worship activities. However, in the context of Vietnamese culture, the process of sacralization has its own characteristics associated with the tradition of upholding morality, gratitude and the blending of history with spiritual life (Le, 2014).

Philosophically, sanctification does not mean denying the historicity of the character, but rather the process by which the community assigns the character symbolic values that transcend their personal lives. Vo Thi Sau is first of all a specific person, born in a specific historical situation and participating in the revolutionary struggle movement in the condition that the country was invaded. Her brave actions and sacrifices create objective historical value. However, when these values are preserved, recounted and reproduced through rituals for generations, historical memories gradually transform into cultural memories. It is this transformation that forms the foundation for the process of sacredization in social awareness.

Cultural philosophy believes that symbols are a way for people to preserve and transmit important spiritual values of the community. A symbol has lasting vitality when it contains meanings that go beyond the limits of an individual. In Ms. Six's case, the community not only commemorates a female revolutionary soldier but also sees there the image of patriotism, unconditional sacrifice and indomitable spirit in the face of evil. Therefore, Ms. Sau has become a moral symbol that many generations aim for, as well as a spiritual fulcrum in times when people need trust and encouragement.

This process of sacredization also reflects the characteristics of Vietnamese cultural thinking, in which the boundary between history and belief is not completely separated but intersected. Many historical figures after their deaths are honored by the community through communal houses, temples, shrines or traditional festivals. This comes from the notion that people who have contributed to the nation continue to be present in the spiritual life of the community through memory and gratitude. Thus, faith is not a substitute for history but a form of socialization of historical memory, helping history to be preserved in ways that are close to people's lives (Nguyen, 2011).

From the perspective of humanistic philosophy, sacredification also reflects the need to build ideal models to orient values for society. Every community needs common symbols that strengthen trust, inspire civic responsibility, and nurture moral standards. When the image of Vo Thi Sau is revered by the community, what is honored is not the supernatural element but the human values associated with her life. Through this symbol, qualities such as courage, dedication and a sense of responsibility to the country continue to be transmitted to the next generations.

In addition to positive values, the process of sacredification also poses problems that need to be viewed scientifically. In the context of the market economy and the strong development of spiritual tourism, sacred symbols can be commercialized or interpreted in a superstitious way without the guidance of cultural authorities and researchers. When worship is no longer associated with the desire for fortune, fortune or self-serving expectations, the historical significance and educational value of the symbol are in danger of being diminished. Therefore, it is necessary to clearly distinguish between honoring the historical-moral value of the character and extreme interpretations or mysticism that lack basis.

It can be affirmed that the process of the sacralization of Vo Thi Sau is a socio-cultural phenomenon with a clear historical basis and profound philosophical significance. It reflects the community's ability to transform historical memories into spiritual symbols, and shows the connection between historical, moral and cultural values in the development of Vietnamese folk beliefs. It is thanks to this process that the image of Co Sau continues to have vitality in contemporary life, not only as a historical figure but also as a cultural symbol that contributes to strengthening the identity and value system of the nation.

### **3.3. The philosophical value of the belief in worshipping Co Sau in affirming the morality of "drinking water, remembering the source" and building a social value system**

One of the most important philosophical values of the belief in worshipping Co Sau is the reflection and strengthening of the traditional morality of "drinking water, remembering the source" of the Vietnamese people. From the perspective of moral philosophy, every society that wants to develop sustainably must build a common value system to regulate the behavior of individuals and maintain the stability of the community. For Vietnamese culture, gratitude to ancestors and people who have contributed to the country and the community is one of the fundamental values that form the national identity. Therefore, the belief in worshipping Co Sau is not only a spiritual activity but also a method of preserving and recreating traditional moral standards in the context of modern society.

From the point of view of Marxist philosophy, human beings are the sum of social relationships and the development of the individual is always associated with the community. No single individual exists completely independent of history and society. Therefore, paying tribute to those who have sacrificed for national independence is not only an expression of personal affection but also a moral responsibility of the community to history. When people come to offer incense at the place of worship of Co Sau, that action not only means prayer but also shows the recognition of the historical values that have contributed to the creation of the current life. It is at this point that religion becomes a form of moral education through cultural practice.

The morality of "drinking water and remembering the source" in Vietnamese culture is different from remembering history in the purely sense of historical science. If history preserves mainly documentary events and figures, then beliefs preserve history through symbolism and community emotions. A historical figure is remembered not only for specific feats but also for the spiritual values that that character represents. The image of Co Sau has thus transcended the scope of an individual to become a symbol of patriotism, sacrifice and the will to fight for national independence. When subsequent generations are exposed to this symbol, they not only receive information about the past but also receive a socially recognized moral value system (Bui, 2017).

From the perspective of value philosophy, every symbol only has long-term vitality when it meets the spiritual needs of the community. In modern society, the process of industrialization, urbanization and globalization is creating many changes in lifestyle and value systems. Individualism and the tendency to emphasize material gains can undermine the sense of social responsibility and historical tradition. In that context, the belief of worshipping Co Sau contributes to reminding people of the connection between the individual and the nation, between the present and the past and between rights and obligations. This is a philosophical value that is oriented, helping to balance economic development with the preservation of humanistic values.

In addition, the belief in worshipping Co Sau also reflects the Vietnamese people's concept of continuity between generations. In the traditional perception, although people with meritorious services to the country have passed away, their merits and spirit continue to accompany the community. This creates a continuity of history in social and spiritual life. Through memorial activities, incense offerings and memorial ceremonies, the memory of the predecessors is transferred to the younger generation by specific cultural experiences, thereby forming a sense of responsibility to the country and the community. Therefore, religion not only preserves the past but also contributes to the orientation of the future.

However, in order for this moral value to be properly promoted, it is necessary to recognize the belief of worshipping Co Sau on the basis of historical and cultural knowledge, avoiding the tendency to

mystify or commercialize worship activities. If the memorial is only for the purpose of seeking fortune or personal gain, the educational and humanistic significance of the belief will be diminished. On the contrary, when the community understands that honoring Co Sau is first and foremost to honor the spirit of patriotism, courage and sacrifice for the common good, the faith will continue to play its role as a cultural institution contributing to building a social value system.

Thus, from a philosophical perspective, the belief in worshipping Co Sau is the concretization of the morality of "drinking water and remembering the source" in contemporary life. It contributes to translating historical values into moral standards, creating a bridge between the past and the present, and strengthening the spiritual foundation of the community in the process of development and integration.

#### **4. Social functions of the belief to worship Co Sau**

##### **4.1. Function of educating values and strengthening community cohesion of Co Sau worship belief**

From the perspective of social philosophy, any form of belief that wants to survive for a long time must perform the function of maintaining and reproducing the value system of the community. For the belief in worshipping Co Sau, the outstanding value does not lie in the mystical element but in the ability to transform a historical figure into a moral symbol, thereby educating patriotism, sacrifice and a sense of responsibility to society. This is the process of turning historical memories into spiritual resources, helping the values formed in the past continue to be meaningful in modern life.

The commemoration and worship of Co Sau creates a special educational environment in which people receive history not only with knowledge but also with emotions. The stories of Vo Thi Sau's life, sacrifice, and steadfastness help shape moral norms such as courage, dedication, and a sense of putting the interests of the community above personal interests. Compared to receiving history through books, the experience at the memorial space creates a stronger psychological impact, making moral values internalized and becoming the behavioral orientation of individuals.

In addition to the educational function, the belief of worshipping Co Sau also contributes to community cohesion. In incense offerings, memorials or memorial ceremonies, people of different occupations, ages and economic conditions share a common value system of gratitude to those who have sacrificed for the nation. This unity of values creates a sense of community and reinforces a common cultural identity. At the same time, through the process of passing on historical stories to the younger generation, beliefs contribute to connecting generations, helping the national memory to be preserved and recreated continuously. Therefore, in essence, the belief in worshipping Co Sau is not only a spiritual activity but also a cultural institution with the function of education and social cohesion (Bui, 2017).

#### **4.2. Functions of stabilizing spiritual life, preserving cultural identity and promoting social development**

Another important social function of the belief in the worship of Co Sau is to create a spiritual fulcrum for people in the context of modern society. The process of industrialization, urbanization and economic competition makes many people face pressure and uncertainty in life. In such conditions, religious spaces become places where people seek psychological peace, strengthen beliefs and orient positive life values. The value of faith is not in replacing science or labor, but in its ability to motivate people, help people have more faith to overcome difficulties and aim for good moral standards.

At the same time, the belief in worshipping Co Sau also contributes to preserving the national cultural identity. The honoring of a revolutionary hero shows the continuation of the tradition of "drinking water, remembering the source" and reflects the characteristics of Vietnamese culture of attaching importance to the morality of gratitude to those who have contributed to the country. Through memorial ceremonies, monument spaces, and cultural activities, historical memories are transformed into community memories, helping traditional values to continue to exist in contemporary society. This is an important factor to maintain national identity in the context of globalization and international cultural exchange.

On the other hand, this belief also creates resources for the development of cultural and spiritual tourism. Con Dao is increasingly becoming a destination that attracts a large number of tourists who want to learn about history and participate in commemorative activities. That contributes to promoting local economic development, creating jobs and promoting the image of Vietnamese culture. However, in order to promote sustainable value, it is necessary to avoid the tendency to commercialize or mystify beliefs. The preservation and promotion of the belief in Co Sau worship should be based on respecting historical values, traditional education and cultural management in the direction of civilization. At that time, beliefs not only meet the spiritual needs of the people but also become a cultural resource contributing to social development and strengthening national identity in the integration period.

#### **5. Discussion**

The results of the study show that the belief in the worship of Co Sau needs to be seen as a socio-cultural phenomenon with a historical and philosophical basis, rather than just being approached from the perspective of purely spiritual beliefs. This complements previous studies that have focused primarily on describing the formation process, the characteristics of practices, or the role of faith in the development of spiritual tourism. By approaching from philosophy and social function, the article shows

that the process of the sacralization of Vo Thi Sau is actually the process of the community transforming historical memory into a system of cultural symbols to maintain moral values and national identity.

From the perspective of historical materialism, the belief in the worship of Co Sau reflects the dialectical relationship between social existence and social consciousness. Vo Thi Sau's sacrifice is an objective historical event, but the community's continued commemoration and honor through religious practices is a product of spiritual needs and social conditions in each historical period. This shows that social consciousness not only reflects reality but also has the ability to impact social life by directing moral norms, strengthening collective memory, and creating community cohesion.

In addition to the positive values, the study also shows that the belief in Co Sau worship is being affected by the commercialization process and the strong development of spiritual tourism. If the practice of religion is dominated by the mentality of seeking fortune, profit or uncontrolled business activities, the historical and educational significance of the Co Sau symbol may be diminished. Therefore, it is necessary to have a combination of heritage conservation, historical education and cultural management to promote the human value of beliefs, and at the same time limit the manifestations of superstition or the abuse of beliefs for profit.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the belief in Co Sau worship is not only a specific cultural phenomenon of Ba Ria – Vung Tau province but also reflects the mechanism of building and maintaining the value system of contemporary Vietnamese society. This is also the basis for further research on the relationship between historical memory, cultural identity and spiritual life in the context of globalization, thereby contributing to the improvement of philosophical studies on folk beliefs in Vietnam.

## 6. Conclusion

The belief in worshipping Co Sau is a socio-cultural phenomenon with profound philosophical values and social functions. The process of sacralization of Vo Thi Sau reflects the transformation of historical memories into spiritual symbols, contributing to moral education, fostering patriotism, strengthening community cohesion and preserving national cultural identity. In the current context, the promotion of the value of beliefs should be associated with heritage preservation, historical education and orientation of civilized religious practice, avoiding the trend of commercialization or extreme superstition. This research contributes to complementing the philosophical approach to folk beliefs and provides a theoretical basis for the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural values in Vietnam's sustainable development process.

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