



## AN INSIGHTFUL STUDY ON RIVER CULTURE IN FOLK-SONGS OF LOWER MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM<sup>i</sup>

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### Abstract:

Doing research on folk literature in relation to folklore has been used effectively by folklore experts around the world. Recently, in Vietnam, this research direction has also been becoming more popular and gaining practical values in finding the material and spiritual cultural values, as well as behavioral cultural values with the natural environment which are hidden in folk literature, including folk-songs. Folk-songs in the Lower Mekong Delta regions are spiritual products of people living in the land with interlacing rivers and canals. It is the characteristic that contributes to creating specific features for folk-songs of new land. By applying some methods such as statistics, analysis, synthesis, and comparison, this article presents some features of river culture in the folk-songs of the Lower Mekong Delta regions to distinguish them from Vietnamese folk-songs in general.

**Keywords:** folk-songs, Mekong Delta, river culture

### 1. Introduction

The Lower Mekong Delta or Mekong Delta is a land with a dense system of rivers and canals. All resident habits, production practices, material and spiritual activities of the inhabitants of this new land are almost always associated with the river. When studying about this land, Nguyen Phuong Thao, a researcher of Southern folk-culture, determined:

*“When coming to the lowland, the villages are still influenced by the river. In addition to the type of coastal village of the fishermen who do fishing, along the banks of the rivers, there is also a type of village near the “water border”, where the tidal water flowing backward intersects the river flowing downstream. The tide pushed water into the*

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<sup>i</sup> NGHIÊN CỨU CHUYÊN SÂU VỀ VĂN HÓA SÔNG NƯỚC TRONG CA DAO VÙNG HẠ LƯU ĐỒNG BẰNG SÔNG CỬU LONG, VIỆT NAM

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*"canals", intersecting the flow of river water to the sea: when intersecting, whether "flood-tide" or "ebb-tide", water does not flow anymore. Alluvium deposited in these places, which residents are used to calling it "donkey back". Boats going back and forth for business often stay here, waiting for water. Villages sprang up here. It can be said that where there is a border of the water, there will be a town, market, and eating house on land. ... "*

Therefore, when studying folklore in general and folk music in particular, we cannot but put them in relation to the material and spiritual cultural characteristics of the Mekong Delta to identify them.

Mekong Delta folk-songs are the spiritual product of the inhabitants of the new land. Right from the time when the first inhabitants reclaimed the land, coming to the wilderness *"Mosquitoes sound like a flute, the leeches are like cake soup"*, folk-songs have become a spiritual dish containing all of their feelings of the new homeland. It can be said that folk-songs are poetic pictures that depict the culture of this land. In addition to the common characteristics of the national folk-songs, Mekong Delta folk-songs also contain their own characteristics associated with natural, historical, and social situations, culture, psychology, and human personalities of the river area. By placing folk-songs in the relationship with culture for research, we hope to give readers a comprehensive and clear overview of the typical features of river culture in Mekong Delta folk-songs.

## 2. Literature reviews

Besides the collected works on Southern folk-songs, there are many research works and articles on the Mekong Delta folk-songs. Some typical studies are listed as follows:

### 2.1. Collection works

The collection works on Southern folk-songs in general and Mekong Delta folk-songs are mainly conducted until 1998. Up to now, there are more than 5000 folk verses collected in the works of researchers, with different characteristics and scales of Southern folk-songs. Typical works include: *Southern folk-songs* (Bui Manh Nhi, chief editor, Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, 1984) (480 verses); *Dong Thap Muoi folk-songs* (Do Van Tan, Dong Thap Department of Culture and Sports, 1984), (900 verses); *Kien Giang through folk-songs* (Giang Minh Doan, Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, 1997), (272 verses), *Mekong Delta Folklore* (Authors of Faculty of Literature, Can Tho University, Education Publishing House, 1997), (1020 verses), *Folk-songs of Six Southern Provinces* (Huynh Ngoc Trang, Dong Nai Publishing House, 1998), (952 verses); *Southern folk-songs* (compiled by Bao Dinh Giang, Nguyen Tan Phat, Tran Tan Vinh, Bui Manh Nhi, 1984, Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House), (2816 verses). All of the collected folk-songs in the above collections are based on the folk-songs collection collected from the 50s and 60s of the twentieth century and the data collected by researchers during fieldwork in the South. This is a valuable resource for current researchers.

## 2.2. The works and advanced research on Mekong Delta folk-songs

Up to the present time, there are quite a lot of articles and research works on the content and artistic characteristics (poetry) of the Southern folk-songs. If systematically gathered, these works will be a set of advanced references with scientific quality on Southern folk-songs. Basically, there are some works and articles as follows:

The article *Nhung yeu to trung lap trong ca dao tru tinh (Duplicate elements of lyrical folk-songs)* (Dang Van Lung, Literary Magazine No. 10 - 1968), later printed in *Van hoc Viet Nam, Van hoc dan gian – Nhung cong trinh nghien cuu (Vietnamese Literature, Folklore - Research works)*. The author refers to the images that are repeated many times in the folk-songs. Each image is exploited in certain aspects: the image of stork, bamboo, moon, punt with landing-stage, aubergine with salt, Cuoi with moon, beverage stall with banyan tree, old landing-stage with old punt, plum with peach, pear and pomegranate, etc.

With the theme *Hinh anh song nuoc Nam Bo qua ca dao dan ca (Image of Southern Rivers through folk-songs)*, author Le Ngoc Trinh (1992) said that the words river - water were like a “constant” repeated in the South folk-songs poetry, forming a specific cultural feature and a distinctive appearance.

In the article *Thiên nhiên trong ca dao – dân ca trữ tình Nam Bộ [Nature in Southern folk music]* (1997), Tran Thi Diem Thuy studied the rich and diverse of natural images related to: rivers, countryside, fields, natural phenomena, cosmic objects, etc. In particular, the article specifically mentioned the art world in lyrical Southern folk songs: nature and comparison, metaphors, symbols and so on. The author identified: “*the changes of nature during the exploration process clearly imprints on folklore.*” This topic has contributed to the understanding of the specific characteristics of the Southern culture of Vietnam.

Bui Thi Tam - author of a master's thesis on *Những đặc điểm ngôn ngữ trong ca dao đồng bằng sông Cửu Long (Linguistic features in the folk songs of the Mekong Delta)* (1998) - studied the abundance and diversity of language classes with local nuances as well as sentence and verse characteristics in the folk songs of the Mekong Delta. In particular, the thesis also mentions several symbolic meanings such as comparisons, metaphors, although an in-depth study of the means and methods of rhetoric in folk songs has not been conducted.

Nguyen Thi Ngoc Diep has classified and described artistic symbols through direct comparisons, and rhetorical metaphors in folk songs as well as presented their structure and role in Vietnamese folk poetry in her doctoral thesis *Biểu tượng nghệ thuật trong ca dao truyền thống người Việt (Art symbols in traditional Vietnamese folk songs)* (2002). Le Thi Thu Thuy compiled the article of *Biểu tượng kênh, rạch, sông trong ca dao dân ca Nam Bộ (The symbol of canals, and rivers in the traditional Southern folk songs)* (2002) referring to the images familiar to people of the waterways here are boats, punts, rivers, bridges and so on.

In his doctoral thesis, *Biểu trưng trong ca dao Nam Bộ (Symbol of the Southern folk songs)* (2004), Tran Van Nam studied the symbol of the folk poem from the perspective of poetics, hence, the author highlighted the role of symbols in illustrating the cultural characteristics of the Southern land and people.

Huynh Thi Kim Lien, with the article of *Truyền thống và biến đổi trong ca dao dân ca Nam Bộ* (Tradition and the Transformations in the Southern Folk Songs) (2006), studied the changes in the folk songs from the perspective of the poetics as well as considered the variability of the Southern folk songs on phonetics, semantics and vocabulary; compared the typical folk songs of Vietnamese people in the North, Central and South regions.

An article on *Cảm xúc về sông nước qua ca dao Nam Bộ* (Emotions about the river through the Southern folk song) (2000) by Tran Phong Dieu is available on the website [Vannghesongcuulong.org.vn](http://Vannghesongcuulong.org.vn). The author implied that in folk songs of the Southern region, folk authors often use familiar images to simulate what they want to say.

The essay of Nguyen Thi Na, *Biểu trưng của hình ảnh sông nước trong ca dao Nam Bộ* (The symbol of the image of the river in Southern folk songs) (2008) focused on studying rivers in the material, spiritual and cultural life of the people in the South. In his master thesis of *Từ địa phương trong ca dao - dân ca Nam Bộ* (Dialects in Southern folk songs, 2008), Tran Duc Hung explored the dialect classes used in folk songs. The author also pointed out the artistic role of dialects such as: dialects with symbols and parallel structure; dialects in a comparative, metaphorical structures and pun ...

With the topic of *Cấu trúc so sánh "Thân em..." trong ca dao Nam Bộ về chủ đề thân phận người phụ nữ* (Structure of "My fate is like ..." in the southern folk song about the women's fate (2009), Cao Thi Cam Tu focused on analyzing the value of the comparative structure "My fate is like ..." in Southern folk songs to highlight the theme of the women's condition.

Looking at the aforementioned summation, it can be seen that although there have been a number of studies on the images of rivers, canals and symbols in the southern folk songs a study that identifies overall water cultural imprints in the Mekong Delta folk songs has not been conducted yet. Therefore, this research will help readers gain a complete overview of river culture in the Mekong Delta folk songs.

### 3. Research methodology

To carry out this study, the following research methods were utilized:

#### 3.1. Statistical methods

This method was used in the statistical process of folk songs containing river cultural factors as the survey data of the research.

#### 3.2. General, comparative analysis method

Folk-songs of Mekong Delta are cultural products of spiritual ethnic minority groups like Khmer, Kinh, Chinese Vietnamese, Cham in the new land. Therefore, this method was used as going into the analysis, comparing the materials as well as the cultural characteristics of new residents in the Mekong Delta with the cultural characteristics of the nation to make a general determination of research issues.

### 3.3. Interdisciplinary method

Researching folklore in relation to folk culture is the research way that helps us explain scientific determination most thoroughly. This method helps us apply cultural, historical and geographic knowledge to explain issues in the process of approaching, analyzing and deploying research problems from different perspectives.

## 4. Research results

### 4.1. Research content

Folklore, including folk-songs, is part of folk culture, closely related to the various components of folk culture. It manifests itself in the relationship among folklore, behavioral culture, the natural environment, customs, lifestyle in family and social activities, ceremonies and festivals. The Mekong Delta in the minds of its inhabitants is a land with a system of interlacing rivers and canals. All activities in their material and spiritual life are closely related to the river environment. The Mekong Delta folk-songs are the heartfelt voice and pristine feelings of people coming to a new land. The cultural imprints of this river area are both the conditions and the production environment of the folk-songs as well as the objects of reflection, which have a direct impact on the appearance and content of the folk-songs. Therefore, in order to grasp the intrinsic characteristics of the Mekong Delta folk songs, we need to put them in relation to the cultural environment – river culture in which they were made, existed and developed for research. Therefore, surveys of the manifestations of the river culture in the Mekong Delta folk-songs have been conducted to be able to identify the appearance of this region as clearly as possible.

### 4.2. Survey results

The contents of Mekong Delta folk songs in the collections have been surveyed like *Ca dao dân ca Nam Bộ (Southern folk-songs)* (compiled by Bao Dinh Giang, Nguyen Tan Phat, Tran Tan Vinh, Bui Manh Nhi, 1984, Ho Chi Minh City Publisher); *Văn học dân gian Đồng Bằng Sông Cửu Long (Folklore of Mekong Delta)* (Collective author of the Faculty of Literature of Can Tho University, Education Publisher, 1997); *Ca dao – Dân ca Nam kỳ lục tỉnh (Folk-songs of six southern provinces)* (Huynh Ngoc Trang, Dong Nai Publisher, 1998), manifestations of river culture in the Mekong Delta folk-songs have been specifically collected as follows:

**Table 1:** The contents of Mekong Delta folk songs in the collections

No	Specific manifestations	The number of occurrences
Behavioral culture in daily life	Rivers, canals and means of maritime transport (junks, punts, ships, ferries, spanning, boats, rafts, dredgers, rowing, poles, foot bridges, bamboo bridges, etc.)	200
	Specific types of houses in the river area (thatched houses, stilt houses ...) and building materials (nipa leaves)	80

	Special clothes (ao ba ba, bandanna)	18
	Special dishes and cooking ingredients (snakehead, henricorhynchus, typha augustifolia, sesbania sesban, etc.)	40
Culture with the natural environment in productive labor	Wet-rice cultivation	80
	Horticultural crops	50
	Fishery (marine products)	70
	Trading and holding a riverine and on-river market	15
Spiritual culture with elements of the river	Customs and habits associated with the river	20
	Beliefs, festivals associated with rivers	20
The forms of performing folk compositions with movements, words, sounds and rhythms attached to the river	Chanty (using folk verses to chant and sing along to the rhythms)	300
	Lullabies (using folk verses to lullabies)	500

### 4.3. Apparent forms of river culture in the Mekong Delta folk songs

#### 4.3.1. Behavioral culture with the natural environment in everyday life activities

The Southern region in general, the Mekong Delta in particular is known as a wild land with intermittent river systems. From the 17th century, when new residents came to explore this land, in order to adapt to the living conditions of the new land, initially, like the Khmer people, the Viet people (Vietnamese) opted for floating mounds and gibbous to settle down and live. They built stilt houses along the banks of the river, especially at the waterfronts. On both sides, there were houses facing the canals, channels, the back was vast field land, garden. (*English version from Vietnamese originals*)

- *Avicennia frontwards, Mangrove backward, Cajuput following up  
Behind the coconuts, whose roof is that?*  
(- *Mắm trước, đước sau, tràm theo sát,  
Sau hàng dừa nước, mái nhà ai?*)

- *My house faces the river,  
Behind, the garden planted by mother back then.*  
(- *Nhà em quay mặt ra sông,  
Sau lưng vườn ổi mẹ trồng khi xưa.*)

Being a swampy area, road transportation in this period was very difficult. In order to move from place to place, most of the new inhabitants of this land moved by waterway. Therefore, to adapt to the river environment and make it easier to travel, along with the available rivers and river branches, people dug more canals. Many canals were newly formed, and administrative units in the Mekong Delta were also divided by canals as boundaries and place names (canal (canal 1, canal 2, canal 3, canal A, canal F ...; Order (1st, 2nd, 3rd ..., Thousand (1 thousand, 2 thousand, 3 thousand ...). Waterway vehicles were also very diverse (boat, canoe, ship, ferry, raft, paddle, pole, footbridges, bamboo

bridge ...). It is clear that the river system plays a very important role in the life of the people of the Mekong Delta. This characteristic has a great influence on all aspects of material life as well as the spiritual life of the residents living here. It can be said that right from the time of the reclamation of the land, folk songs have been one of the types of folk art that depicted very clearly the feelings of the ancients about the new land. Therefore, when examining Mekong Delta folk songs, we have statistics of rivers, canals and other means of transport associated with water areas which appear quite a lot in the folk songs of the Mekong Delta (more than 200 times).

Images of rivers and canals appear quite a lot in the Mekong Delta folk songs, such as water rivers, deep rivers, shallow rivers, river wharves, canals, rivulet mouths, etc.

- *Who crosses the northern ferry and looks,  
Cloudy sky, vast river water, an area.*  
(- *Ai qua phà bắc mà trông,  
Trời mây **sông nước** mênh mông một vùng.*)

- *Whoever comes to winding Dong Thap,  
Deep river, water flowing, lonely boat.*  
(- *Ai về Đồng Tháp quanh co,  
**Sông sâu** nước chảy con đò quạnh hiu.*)

The means for moving on the river such as: boats, canoes, ships, ferries, rafts, slopes, rowing, poles, monkey bridges, and bamboo bridges ... also appear dense in the folk songs of the river and water region.

- *Wishing for the river to run dry on land,  
Let me go back and save the ferry fee.*  
(- *Muốn cho **sông cạn** đất liền,  
Để anh đi lại đỡ tốn tiền **đò ngang**.*)

- *The boat to clean and pull anchor,  
The friends rowing the boat to catch the spandy*  
(- ***Ghe bầu** dọn dẹp kéo neo,  
Mấy chú bạn chèo bắt cái hò khoan*)

Not only transportation, all other aspects of life such as the clothing and cuisine of the Mekong Delta residents are also associated with the cultural characteristics of the river. In order to facilitate the living, traveling, trading and working on the rivers, people in this watery area wear “Áo Bà Ba” shirt and three short laps and a bandana as typical costumes of people of this region. If “Áo bà ba” is convenient for traveling on the river, the bandanna is both a means of rain cover, sunshade and a tool for people to wipe their faces during hard working days. So when it comes to Mekong Delta women, we cannot help but mention this typical “Áo bà ba” and a typical bandanna. In the Mekong Delta

folk songs, the image of “Áo bà ba” and a bandanna appears about 20 times, contributing to embellishing the cultural characteristics of the watery region.

- *Seeing the bandanna shade, I know that you are coming,  
Dong Khoi bandanna color for Ben Tre women.*  
(- *Thấy bóng **khăn rằn** anh biết rằng em tới,  
Màu khăn đồng khởi phụ nữ Bến Tre.*)

- *Ba ba clothes for expectation of parents  
Gentle features, love so much Ba ba clothes.*  
(- ***Áo bà ba** mẹ may chờ con lớn  
Nét dịu dàng thương quá **áo bà ba**.*)

When eggs and meat are major in the traditional daily meals of people in the Northern Delta region, in the daily meals of Mekong Delta people, dishes of vegetable soup and fish are indispensable. The new region of the Mekong Delta is not only felt by the residents as the “*Crocodile under river, tiger in forest*” but also the people here are proud that “*shrimp and fish are ready to catch, the rice is ready to eat*”. “Tập tàng vegetable” is a concept to refer to all kinds of vegetables such as “diệu” vegetable, “sam” vegetable, amaranth, pennywort, “trại” vegetable ... that people of the Mekong Delta can easily pick and cook with fish or little shrimp. Light braised fish or salty braised fish dishes are also indispensable in every daily meal of the families here, then sour fish soup with a variety of vegetables, the island, the sauce or pan pancakes, “khọt” pancakes with a platter full of vegetables... All are available in the abundant land, huge rice fields. Perhaps that is why in the Mekong Delta folk songs, the image of rustic and russet dishes is mentioned a lot by people (about 40 times). This is also their pride in the new land. And it is the richness of this land that has created the generous, hospitable and affectionate character of the people of the river.

- *Typha Augustifolia, Lily made sour  
Salty braised goby fish, buy more pot.*  
(- ***Bồn bồn, bông súng** làm chua  
**Cá kèo kho quẹt** thì mua thêm nôi.*)

- *Which salad better than halfbeak salad  
Serve friend, full of loyalty*  
(- *Gỏi nào bằng **gỏi cá kìm**  
Dọn ra đãi bạn, trọn niềm thủy chung.*)

It can be said that, just by reading the folk songs, we can completely imagine all the culinary culture of the people of the river. People of the new land have taken advantage of the abundance of nature to serve their daily life. The food is very simple as: grilled snakehead fish, catfish cooked with water dropwort, halfbeak salad, mud carp



sour soup with common sesban ... and sour salad made from *Typha Augustifolia*, water lilies, mud carp, *limnocharis*, vegetables and fish are unique in the Western area, creating an unmistakable feature of Mekong Delta culinary culture.

#### 4.3.2. Culture utilizing the natural environment in production and working

According to cultural researcher Tran Ngoc Them: “*The Southwest (Mekong Delta) has four first: the largest rice-growing region, the largest fruit-growing region, the largest aquaculture region and the region with the largest waterway transportation in the country.*” Because of the dense river system, most of the main occupations that residents work here are associated with the river environment. Surveying the Mekong Delta folk songs, there are many folk verses about river-related occupations (about 200 sentences).

The first occupation mentioned by folk authors in the Mekong Delta folklore is the cultivation of wet rice. The images related to fields and farming tools such as fields, rice, upland, tillage, sowing, transplanting, harvesting, rice cultivation venom, ... or experiences, and advice in the farming process appear quite common in Mekong Delta folk songs.

- *Holding the venom to transplant implicitly*  
*The hand divides the seedling bundle and waiting for women*  
(- *Cầm cây nọc cấy* giấu ngo  
*Tay san bó mạ đợi chờ chị em*)

- *Merawan Giaza for plow,*  
*Ironwood, Lauan meranti for harrow.*  
*Eight teeth of harrow are still sparse,*  
*The eight-inch plow blade has been big enough.*  
*Want to flourish rice,*  
*Plowing deeply, harrowing carefully, giving much fertilizer.*  
(- *Gỗ kê anh để đóng cày,*  
*Gỗ lim, gỗ sến anh mang đóng bừa.*  
*Răng bừa tám cái còn thưa,*  
*Lưỡi cày tám tấc đã vừa luống to.*  
*Muốn cho lúa nảy bông to,*  
*Cày sâu, bừa kỹ, phân tro cho nhiều.)*

In addition to wet rice cultivation, horticulture is also a traditional occupation characterized by the river culture. Referring to the Mekong Delta, people often use the intimate name to name this land: “Miệt vườn – huge garden”. When coming to the new land, people in addition to choosing the lowlands, alluvial all year round to grow rice, they choose highlands, dig ditches for growing up vegetables, fruits, especially fruit trees. In the Mekong Delta from the past until now, there are many orchards and horticulture is considered leisure and higher income than farming. Perhaps because of the superiority of this profession, there are many folk songs of the Mekong Delta folk songs about

horticulture and images related to fruits, gardening landscapes or experience of this profession (about 50 times), such as: mango, grapefruit, lemon, orange, longan ...; raising land, digging ditches, setting up gardens and so on.

- *An Binh, the mother land of ait*  
*Fragrant grapefruit flower, sweet longan.*  
(- **An Bình** đất mẹ cù lao  
Thơm hương hoa bưởi, ngọt ngào nhãn long.)

*Why don't you visit the garden frequently when forming the garden,*  
*That let cattle eat, how many years for success.*  
(- **Lập vườn** sao anh không sớm viếng, tôi thăm,  
Để trâu bò gặm hết, mấy năm cho thành.)

Catching seafood is also a very specific occupation of the land mainly with a system of rivers and canals, and rich aquatic products source. "Sea and lakes with plenty of fish", "available fish and shrimp", Southwestern river region. Surveying the folk songs of the Mekong Delta, we statistically have a lot of words and images related to the fishing industry such as: methods of catching (hook fishing, net fishing, hook spread fishing, fish scoop, fish hunt); tools for carrying out the occupation (coop, heck, fishing bowl, trap, crock); the products (fish, shrimp, snakehead fish, perch, mud carp, iridescent mystus and crocodile), about 80 times. All of these words and images help us to have a good overview of the way Mekong Delta residents take advantage of the natural environment to develop their careers.

- *Fishing boats mooring sand dunes*  
*Shrimp fishing boats mooring near side*  
*See you have an old mother*  
*Can take car, is this allowed.*  
(- Xuồng giăng câu đậu ngang cồn cát  
Xuồng câu tôm đậu sát mé nga  
Thấy em có một mẹ già  
Thấy vô phụng dưỡng biết là đặng không.)

- *In the afternoon, Mr. Lu fishes with fishing rod*  
*Crocodile dragged Mr. Lu into the river.*  
(- Chiều chiều ông Lữ thả câu  
Sấu lôi ông Lữ cắm đầu xuống sông.)

Because of the characteristics of the Mekong Delta as mentioned above, there is a dense system of rivers and canals. The upper village, the lower hamlet, this commune, and the other commune communicate with each other thanks to the waterway transport. This is the prerequisite condition to generate trade in the river. Traders use boats to carry

vegetables, meat and all other consumer goods along the rivers and canals where people live to sell. In the initial period of reclaiming land, new residents, especially Chinese, were very good at trading, together they created the business of river bank and river trade. In the Mekong Delta at present, there are still many bustling markets along the big river junctions, at the rivulet mouth. In particular, there is a market model that every visitor to the Mekong Delta wants to explore, which is the floating market model. Floating markets are wholesale markets, often opening at river junctions, convenient places for waterway transport activities. This is a market model bearing the hallmark of the Western River region. We have collected a lot of statistics (about 15 times) of words and pictures describing the river trade such as wholesale trade, trade, rice market, and sale at rivulet mouth.

- *What do you sell but a small canoe,  
The waves were swept, the burying wind, and hurt in my heart.*  
(- *Em bán giống chi mà chiếc xuồng nhỏ nhỏ,  
Sóng dập, gió vùi, lao khổ lòng anh.*)

- *Tien River Hau River same source  
Busy sale, trade boats.*  
(- *Sông Tiền sông Hậu cùng nguồn  
Thuyền bè tấp nập bán buôn dập dùi.*)

#### 4.3.4. Spiritual culture posing elements of the river

##### 4.3.4.1. Customs and practices associated with the river

In addition to physical and cultural factors, the spiritual and cultural factors of the people who reside and live in the Mekong Delta are also strongly influenced by the river. Growing up with rivers and canals, almost all residents of this area, from young to old, stick to and understand the river environment. Therefore, all the habits and spiritual conduct of the residents of this new land are attached to the river. Surveying the Mekong Delta folk songs, we have found many songs about folk knowledge and customs of people in dealing with the water environment.

The rivers and canals in the Mekong Delta have a very special feature that every day there are high and low water levels. People in the river region often know this rule very well to take advantage of the high, and low rules of the river for their daily life. When the water is high, they sail, when it the low, they come back, when the standing water, they stop ... gradually it became a familiar habit in life. When building houses, doing business, going to important jobs or especially at a wedding, the people here always choose the high water level to move because they have learned that the high water level will be lucky and happy. In the Mekong Delta, the wedding often goes by boat to pick up the bride. Sometimes it takes about half a day floating in the river to welcome the bride to her husband's house. All these customs and practices are quite clearly reflected in the Mekong Delta folk songs.

When talking about the experience of dealing with the river environment, the ancients summarized the experience: If the water is stopped, the water is high, then waiting for the water to flow in the direction of the water, which will save us much effort.

- *Plug in and wait for the water to rise*  
*When will you get married?*  
(- *Cắm sào em đợi nước lên*  
*Bao giờ mới chịu lấy chồng hỏi em?)*

- *In the afternoon, the water rises*  
*My boat dock, plugged in to visit you*  
(- *Chiều chiều con nước lên cao*  
*Thuyền anh cập bến, cắm sào thăm em)*

Boys and girls who confess, swear or want to stay in the same house are attached to the boat of the river region.

- *No husband stays that way for peace,*  
*Let me clean the wedding boat for welcoming you.*  
(- *Chưa chồng ở vậy cho yên,*  
*Để anh dọn chiếc thuyền duyên cưới về.)*

- *If you bring bride, you will bring them by boat.*  
*Do not put the raft wet bride clothes.)*  
(- *Đưa dâu thì đưa bằng ghe,*  
*Đừng đưa bằng bè ướt áo cô dâu.)*

#### 4.3.4.2. Beliefs, festivals associated with the river

Coming to the land of “mosquitoes sound like a flute, leeches like a soup cake”, “crocodile in the river, tigers in the forest”, the trust in the supernatural forces to console themselves and find peace in the soul is one of the very typical cultural behaviors of the ancients. Living in the vast river environment, sacred forests, and poisonous water is the basis for forming the custom of worshiping the gods. The Mekong Delta has many temples worshiping the emperors, and the gods with meritorious achievements in history or merits of teaching, guiding and helping people in the process of exploiting new lands. These communal houses are often built at the confluence of rivers. In particular, people have typical worshiping practices such as: Ba Thuy (the female deity who governs the river, when angry, she will arrest people), Ha Ba, Ngu Ngac (These are the two generals of Long Vuong. These two generals often poses danger to fishermen in the river). It can be said that these customs are for fear of worshiping, worship to avoid disaster. Temples are usually placed at the confluence of rivers to make it convenient for people, especially fishermen and boat traders to burn incense, to worship offerings. This cultural and spiritual character is mentioned quite a lot in Western folk songs (more than 15 times).

- *I swear in front of Ong temple,  
Living in one mat, dead in the same box.*  
(- Tôi về thờ trước **miếu Ông**,  
Sống nằm một chiếu chết chung một hòm.)

- *Sacred temples do not dare to stand near  
Standing far away but praying for the witness*  
(- **Miếu linh** chẳng dám đứng gần  
Đứng xa mà vái thánh thần chứng chi.)

Besides the above-mentioned worships, we have also surveyed some folk songs about the Nghinh Ong festival. This is a very typical festival of the river. In the Mekong Delta, almost every province has a whale temple. Worship of a whale that, according to legend, is a fish that always appears and helps people when they are in danger on the river. Every year, the residents here, especially the coastal provinces will organize this very solemn festival in three days to express gratitude and pray for a happy new year with good winds and peaceful waves for people to feel secure to do business and make a living on the river.

- *Be as happy as the ceremony of Ong welcome  
Flowering, firecrackers, the river of sunlight  
The fun, many guests come to play  
The rich and poor, were comfortable to play for three days*

(- Vui nào bằng lễ nghinh Ông  
Đèn hoa, pháo nổ, mịt sông ánh trời  
Cuộc vui nhiều khách đến chơi  
Nghèo giàu hỉ hả ăn chơi ba ngày)

Thus, it can be seen that, despite the different dullness, the cultural and spiritual characteristics of the river area have a great influence on the content reflected in the folk songs and in contrast, these typical cultural features have been reflected quite clearly by the folk songs, giving us an overview of the culture of the inhabitants of this new land.

## 5. Conclusion

The Mekong Delta (the Lower Mekong Delta region) with the density of rivers and canals inherent with the system of artificial canals, all aspects of material life such as travel, livelihood and spiritual activities of the people here are attached associated with the river. The Mekong Delta folklore is also born, existed and developed in this environment so the river is both a reflection and a context for them to arise. By learning about the Mekong Delta folk songs, we will identify the whole cultural picture of this land. With this research, we can initially affirm: Every aspect from the reflection content, and expression

material to the performance of folk songs of the Mekong Delta region has a strong impression of the characteristics of river culture.

### **Acknowledgements**

To get this paper done, the author would like to express her sincere thanks for the enthusiastic support from the teaching staff, Department of Vietnamese Linguistics and Literature, School of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSSH), Can Tho University (CTU), Vietnam to her paper to be first to be published in an international journal about “ *An insightful study on river culture in folk-songs of Lower Mekong Delta, Vietnam.*” Secondly, her great thanks would come to Dr. Thai Cong Dan and Miss Thai Phan Bao Han, currently English lecturers, School of Foreign Languages (SFL), CTU, Vietnam for their useful assistance with the entire paper proofreading, English modification and format. And finally, her respectful thanks would go to the European Journal of Literary Studies Board for this study to be spread out to the public worldwide, especially those interested in Vietnamese literary works, folksongs and cultural aspects taught and learnt at higher education institutions, particularly those in the Lower Mekong Delta Region, South of Vietnam on the way to the global integration.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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