

# MYTHS AND LEGENDS IN CREATING DISCOURSE ON HERITAGE: A CASE STUDY OF PO INA NAGAR TOWER (NHA TRANG, KHÁNH HÒA)

Trần Thị An\*

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## Abstract

*Thiên Y A Na* is a special female deity in the system of Vietnamese goddesses. On the one hand, historical ups and downs are reflected in the transition of her story; from a story about a *Chăm* goddess (*Po Ina Nagar*) to a story about a Vietnamese goddess (*Thiên Y A Na*). On the other hand, cultural changes, which mask discourses of power, and the cultural symbiosis phenomenon, which represents the vitality of ancient beliefs in spite of the deepening and spreading roots of new beliefs, can be observed from an analysis of performing practices of the *Po Ina Nagar/Thiên Y A Na* cult.

Using theories on folklore genres, including myths and legends, and cultural symbiosis theory as well as the concepts of “discourse” and “invented tradition,” this paper critically analyzes the use of myths and legends in the creation of discourse, identifies the impact of discourses of power on the formation and transformation in the tangible and intangible heritage complex of Tháp Bà Po Ina Nagar (Nha Trang, Khánh Hòa), and confirms that cultural symbiosis has brought about heritage cohesion and encouraged the enduring vitality of the religious life of local communities.

**Keywords:** *Myth; Legend; Po Ina Nagar; Thiên Y A Na; Cultural symbiosis*

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Po Ina Nagar Tower is a relic consisting of many towers on a hill at the estuary of the *Cái* River in Nha Trang city, Khánh Hòa province, Vietnam. Changes in the categories of tangible culture and intangible cultural deposits here over time reveal various stories to our generation. Such stories require their audience to listen actively and analyze carefully to fully understand the long - lasting messages of our ancestors.

**Photo 1. Po Ina Nagar Tower (courtesy by Nguyễn Văn Bốn, 29/12/2016)**



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\*School of Interdisciplinary Sciences, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. Email: tranan1962@vnu.edu.vn

## 1. From the myths of creation

The *Po Ina Nagar* Tower (*Tháp Bà* in Vietnamese) relic complex remains standing to this day, and the worship of *Thiên Y A Na* practiced here is built on many layers of cultural sediments.

Seen from the stories of history, brushing off the thin layer of the dust of time reveals the creation myths of the ancients. Part of ethnic myths, creation myths have particular mythological characteristics. From the point of view of content, myths are considered to be stories about beginnings and stories about the sacred. Meanwhile, as a form of expression, myths are not just simply stories but super stories. The materials used in myths are not just language but metalanguage.

With regard to what “beginnings” as pointed above encompass, in *The Form of Folklore: Prose Narratives*, the author W. Bascom states, “myth is related to events of the distant past, from another world or is earlier than a world to which myth is related.” [1] C.R. Rarre believes that the story told in mythology is the story “when the world was still in the process of forming,” and that “myths provide the basic reason for existing and working in civilization, which make it” [2].

As for “sacred stories,” C.R. Rarre states that “a minimal and seemingly cross - cultural definition of the term myth, when distinguished from other forms of narrative, is sacred narrative, which is almost universally believed to be true” [2]. It is the belief that the divine is real and that the creator of the myth, who associated it with beliefs and rituals, gives a legend of its vitality through time. Regarding this, Th. P. Baaren has argued that, by its fluidity to suit the space - time contexts in which it exerts influence, mythology has power because “it explains why and how something is what appears here and now” [3].

From an etymological perspective, *myth* (“mythology”) is a compound word composed of two Greek elements: *mythos* (story) and *logos*

(narration). From a structural point of view, C. L. Strauss argues that the language of myths exists at both the verbal and linguistic levels, but manifests at a third level, in which myths tell stories that have already happened, having occurred from time immemorial (language level) through the sense of the moment of speaking (verbal level) to express eternal, transcendental problems. C.L. Strauss writes, “*What gives mythological functional value are concrete patterns that are not temporal; myths explain the present, the past, and the future*” [4]. Hence, the meaning of the story that mythology implies is not at the level of events but in “how those isolated elements come together.” The metalinguistics of myths are means to create metatemporal patterns, which are called archetypes, corresponding to the various stages of human evolution. With the feature of metalanguage, the story told in myths is compressed in symbols with the deepest allegorical meaning.

In a definition of myth, J. J. Mark writes, “To the ancients the meaning of the story was most important, not the literal truth of the details of a certain version of a tale” [5].

We can see the above - mentioned mythological features in the following two stories about *Po Ina Nagar*:

The first story, told from ancient *Chăm* documents, tells of *Po Ina Nagar* as an angel who descended on earth. She had 97 husbands and 37 children representing 37 blood colors, turning into 37 types of plants and customs of worshiping gods. The body parts of the goddess create the natural phenomena of the world (e.g., her body being the sky, her legs being the North Star, her breath being the wind and the storm, and her voice being the sound of thunder). The goddess also has eight charms to create the moon, sun, calendar, and people, and then also creates the *Chăm Ahier* (Brahmin) and *Chăm Awal* (Chăm Islam Bani) in *Chăm* ethnic groups. The goddess also defeated the Father in the

cosmic creation battle, and thus gave birth to the Father and nine other gods [Sakaya: 2003/200 - 201]. This story is “the story of beginnings,” “the story of the divine,” and the story of the goddess Po Ina Nagar as “the creator of the world’s firsts”; therefore, *Po Ina Nagar* is considered the Mother of the Country, and to the *Chăm* people, this is archetype of their motherland [6], [7].

The second story is believed to have been born later, at least from the 10th century (when Islam appeared in Champa), and was widely spread after the 15th century, when Champa left Panduranga. In this story, *Po Ina Nagar* is said to be the son of Po Kuk, who together with Saint Aoloah (Alla), Prophet Muhamad, and nine Islam gods brought light and life to the earth after 12 suns. The moon was shot down. *Po Ina Nagar* descended to earth, continued his father’s mission to rule all species, founded Champa, gave birth to Cham kings, established villages, and then returned to heaven [7]. In this story, *Po Ina Nagar*’s creation is reduced by one level from “creating the world” to “ruling all species” and “creating the kingdom.”

This is the expression of two groups of myths: (1) myths of origin and (2) myths of high beings and celestial gods in the world mythological system [8]. Thus, the deepest layer in the story of the goddess worshiped in *Tháp Bà* is the myth of a goddess who created the universe, created the Champa kingdom, and created the community of the *Chăm* branches. In the two stories just mentioned, we can see the *Chăm*–Islam transition; however, if viewed from the perspective of *Po Ina Nagar* statue in the main tower of the *Tháp Bà* tower group, we can clearly see the *Chăm*–Hindu imprint.

Regarding the statue of the goddess *Po Ina Nagar* in *Tháp Bà* (Nha Trang), documents of the *École Française d’Extrême - Orient* (EFEO) relay that, initially, the statue was carved according to the “image of Goddess Bhagavati” in Hinduism. The statute later became identified with *Yang*

*Pu Nagar* - the goddess of the land of the *Chăm* people [9], [10].

It can be seen that behind the titles are stories about the goddess, and behind the stories is the discourse of emperors concerning the role and spiritual position of this goddess in the Champa kingdom. Surveying the inscriptions of the *Po Ina Nagar* (Nha Trang) at *Tháp Bà* relic, Nguyễn Hữu Thông and Ngô Văn Doanh all recognized the influence of Hinduism in the process of formation and development of this goddess image from the original image of Bhagavati (who was originally a mountain girl and later became the wife of the god Siva) around the seventh to eighth centuries. Then, it was transformed to become the Mother of the Areca clan, Bhagavati Kautharesvari (goddess of the Areca clan of Kauthara, southern Champa), around the ninth century, then localized more deeply by being upgraded to Yang Pu Nagara (God of the Kingdom, or Mother of the Land) around the end of the eleventh century [11] (p. 142) [12], [10]. Meanwhile, Trần Kỳ Phương acknowledges the formation of the center of worship of the goddess Bhavagati and Po Ina Nagar in comparison with Mỹ Sơn holy land from a dualistic structural view. He writes that Mỹ Sơn sanctuary is located in the mountains, worshipping Siva, symbolizing the Father. *Tháp Bà* (Nha Trang) is located on the coast, worshipping goddess Bhagavati, representing the Mother [9].

From another perspective, *Đổng Thành Danh* argues that, in the “Indianization” era, the contact and influence of Hinduism on Champa encompassed two layers: whereas “the ruling class, including the king, lords, and the nobles, absorbed Hinduism through the worship of deities and performance of rituals from this religion,” common *Chăm* people adopted Hinduism yet kept elements of the local beliefs. According to *Đổng Thành Danh*, the impact of Hinduism on the ruling class was only dominated and fully replaced by local beliefs after the

downfall of Vijaya (1471) [13].

Sakya writes that, during the history of Champa, two religions - Brahmanism and Islam - used myths to build up teachings to win followers. In turn, since the 15th century, the Hindu elements that had influenced the mythological world and beliefs of the Chăm people were completely erased, replaced by a world of legends and another set of strong beliefs in indigenous colors in the image of the Holy Mother of the Kingdom: Po Ina Nagar [6].

The existence of many explanations for the process of acclimatization of Hinduism and Islam can be further seen from the perspective of the multi - ethnic nature of the Champa kingdom. In a recent work, Lâm Mỹ Dung states, "There are various pieces of evidence of a multi - ethnic kingdom with the main Austronesian linguistic communities of which the Chăm are, and the Chăm people speak an Austronesian language, closely related to the Ache languages, Malay, and further to the languages of the Indonesians, Filipinos, Polynesians, and the Malagasy" [14] (pages 226–227).

Regardless of the interpretation, it is impossible to see the role of the Mother of the Land, Po Ina Nagar in connecting the historical-socio-religious fragments with the religious life of the Chăm people. Recognizing Po Ina Nagar's ability to connect the two Chăm branches (the Brahmin Chăm and Islam Chăm), Nguyễn Hữu Thông states that this is a special phenomenon because apart from Po Ina Nagar, these two branches do not share anything in common. By creating the image of a "miracle mother, removing religious divides" and "removing heresy guilt," the goddess Po Ina Nagar has "linked people together in the image of children of one mother" [11] (pages 16–18).

*In short, this is the profound meaning of the legend of Po Ina Nagar - an original mother of the land of the Chăm people, who both created the universe and established social order for the*

*Chăm people from the very beginning still existing with meaning to this day.*

## **2. To the institutionalization of the invented traditions**

As a rule, all myths turn to sediment when the socio - historical context in which they were formed has changed. However, with the function of "explaining why and how something appears here and now" and "mediating between the known and the unknown" [3], myths have the power to give meaning for the existence of the world. F. Boas also wrote, "*It seems that mythological worlds are built only to be broken, and new worlds are built from fragments*" ("*It would seem that, mythological*" worlds have been built up, only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from fragments") [15] (page 18). Mythical "fragments" exist as "archetypes," and they are signs to identify the structures forming the new world, to explain the phenomena of "why did it appear" and "why here and now." This can be completely clarified when analyzing the case of the goddess/saint worshiped in Tháp Bà (Nha Trang).

### **2.1. Narrative transition from myth to legend**

There is another story about the female character worshiped in Tháp Bà: different in name and different in plot. It is the story about Thiên Y A Na.

This story was composed and carved into a stone stele by Phan Thanh Giản (a famous scholar official of the Nguyễn Dynasty who would commit suicide when France invaded three provinces of Southern Vietnam, of which he was appointed governor - general) in 1856.

The story tells of a fairy who came to earth and transformed into a girl lost in the melon fields of a poor couple. There she was adopted, then entered the "kỳ nam" tree (a special plant, considered to have agarwood, a specialty of Khánh Hòa province), floated to the North Sea,



became the crown prince's wife (the crown prince is believed to belong to a legendary king), gave birth to two children, then returned to the land in which she was born to teach people how to do business, sculpted statues to worship her and then flew away, leaving people with many inspirations. People "built a tower six feet high to worship the fairy god (Tiên Chúa), and on the right [of the Tiên Chúa tower], a small tower two feet high was built to worship the crown prince. Behind [of the Tiên Chúa tower], a small shrine was built

to worship the son and daughter of Tiên Chúa, and on the left, there was a small shrine to worship two old grandparents. In front of the tower, there is a stone stele with words similar to the words on the stones outside the river mouth. Up to now, the fruit garden is lush, everyone up there can eat but cannot bring it home. Whenever meeting the weather, the mountain beasts of the sea tribe never fail to swim and worship in front of the temple. The ancients called her by the name Thiên Y A Na Diễn Phi Chúa Ngọc Thánh Phi" [16] (page 724).



Photo 2. Original and translation version of story Thiên Y Tiên nữ truyện ký 天依僊女傳記 written by Phan Thanh Giản in the stele (1856) (photo by Trần Thị An, 27/4/2018)

The reason why Phan Thanh Giản collected and carved this story into a stele is expressed by Phan Thanh Giản himself in the content of the stele. According to an introduction of this stele, "Hearing the story of the goddess Thiên Y A Na in the past, he [Phan Thanh Giản] hated having no books to study [this story]. On the way to Khánh Hòa province, [while Phan Thanh Giản was] asking about the elders, some people recounted and found books that recorded old story in the countryside, and although there were few [pieces of information on the goddess], there were clues, and these words all say that Thiên Y A Na was a fairy" [16] (page 724).

Sakya reported that a version of "the legend of Po Ina Nagar was collected from the abbots of the Chăm Brahmins at the temple of Po Ina Nagar" [6] with the same content as the one in the Phan Thanh Giản stele simplified above.

It is not difficult to see that the story about Thiên Y A Na has a different layout from the story about Po Ina Nagar in terms of genre. The story about Po Ina Nagar is a myth (a story about the beginning, about the sacred, and expressed in symbolic language common to mankind), whereas the story about Thiên Y A Na is a legend (a story expressing the community's belief in the sacred magic of a god/saint/person who has contributed to the community).

As mentioned above, the story about Po Ina Nagar is a myth of the creator character; the character in the story is the creator and the supernatural character (97 husbands, 36 children); the universe in the story is "in the beginning"; the society in the story is also at the starting point when Chăm branches were created and religions were established for the community. The motif in the story is a mythological motif: It speaks of a "creation god," "supernatural characters," a "pristine world," and "beginnings." Unlike the story of Po Ina Nagar, in the story of Thiên Y A Na [16], the character is a person of earthly life (has parents, husband, and children; has human joys and sorrows, resentment); the world that the story

talks about refers to one's daily life (cultivation, fruit trees, worshiping parents, teaching people to do business, sculpting statues). The motifs used in the story is the legendary motif, such as: an old couple has a child; a person transforms into a tree; a heavy log that only a chosen person in the community can lift; a person teaches the people to reclaim; that person turned into a God, who could bless and bring disaster, people built a place to worship the god, people saw miracles manifest.

If the myth tells about the beginnings of the early stages of the community (e.g., the creation of the earth and the formation of people and the community), then the legend tells about the problems when the community has formed (e.g., forming customs and traditions and shaping history). Therefore, the legend tells about the saints/gods/heroes and heroines/people with meritorious services to the community, who are respected by the community because of the sacredness that has a powerful effect on that community [17]. Judging from the characteristics of this genre, the story about Thiên Y A Na is a legend with all the characteristics and the motifs that make up this type of story.

Thus, the two stories about Po Ina Nagar and Thiên Y A Na are two different stories but are deeply connected to each other.

First, with regard to the names, the name Thiên Y A Na is a translation from Po Ina Nagar. Sakaya explains the similarity of the two names as follows: "Po or Pô means king, god; Ina/Inu means female/mother; Nagar/Nugar (Sanskrit: nagara) means land or country. From Po Ina Nagar, Phan Thanh Giản translated and transliterated half Hán and half Chăm as Thiên Y A Na (Po/Pô/Pu means "Thiên" or god; Y A Na/Ina means "the mother/mother"; Phan Thanh Giản did not translate Nagar ["the land" or "country"]) [6] (page 662). Nguyễn Thế Anh argued that the name was a sinicization of the Sanskrit name "Devayana" [18], while Tạ Chí Đại Trường investigated this and found coexistence in the Chăm, Chinese, and Vietnamese languages from Po Yan Ino Nugar to

Thiên Y A Na [19] (p. 240).

In terms of content, the two stories have almost no details in common. However, there is an intermediate story between the one about Po Ina Nagar and the one about Thiên Y A Na as in the stele composed by Phan Thanh Giản, which is the Chăm folktale: “Nàng Mưjuk [10] (pages 159–161). The plot of the story of “Nàng Mưjuk” is similar to that of the story of Thiên Y A Na, and in the story, Mưjuk calls herself Po Ina Nagar. A journey of transformation occurs whereby Po Ina Nagar’s name changes to the name Mưjuk, and the plot of folktale “Nàng Mưjuk” changes to the plot of story of Thiên Y A Na.

This transformation may not have taken a long time. In his research, Ngô Văn Doanh noted timelines of Vietnamese history from 1675, when Lord Nguyễn Phúc Tần annexed Phan Rang (where a Po Ina Nagar temple is located) into Vietnamese territory, until 1856, when minister Phan Thanh Giản ordered the engraving of the story of Thiên Y A Na into the stele [10] (page 155). Thus, at least after a few hundred years, the myth of Po Ina Nagar was replaced by the legend of Thiên Y A Na. Sakaya also states that the great Chăm Brahmin monk abbot at Po Inu Nagar temple in Hữu Đức village (Ninh Thuận province) told a “legend about the goddess Po Ina Nagar” that reproduced the plot of Thiên Y A Na (or the folktale “Nàng Mưjuk”) [6] (page 219). Changes in the narrative structure of a worshiped figure is not uncommon. P. Taylor’s anthropological field study has shown that in the Lady of the Land (Bà Chúa Xứ) temple (Châu Đốc, An Giang province), where people believe that the “lady” is Thiên Y A Na and that Thiên Y A Na is not merely a deity but an actual historical figure with major contributions to the country [20]. The role of tales in discourse creation and the role of discourse in heritage construction are never-ending stories, which can be seen from changes in the Tháp Bà relic complex (Nha Trang).

Looking at the story structure, and insisting on the point of view of binary structure, Trần Kỳ Phương states that the story of Thiên Y A Na -

specifically, her marriage to the Crown Prince of the North Sea - may have reflected the duality and dichotomy in the relationship between the two kingdoms of Champa [9].

The fact that the version of the “Thiên Y A Na fairy tale story” in the Phan Thanh Giản stele or the story of “Nàng Mưjuk” was accepted, handed down, and considered by the Chăm people as “the legend of *Po Ina Nagar*” reflected a transitional process in the concept of the Chăm people - who created the story of the Mother of the Land Po Ina Nagar creating the universe, thereby dividing the ethnic groups in the past. Regarding the ending of the stories, the two characters of the two stories are attached as one at the worshiped relic. From here, Thiên Y A Na is considered as Po Ina Nagar according to the intention/point of view/wish of the narrator. This fact from the aspect of intangible culture has made great changes in the material culture of the Tháp Bà relic site.

## **2.2. Relic decorations**

The above mentioned relic site, as its official name today suggests, is Po Ina Nagar Tower. Thus, in addition to the other small towers, the main tower is the place to worship Po Ina Nagar. In fact, the name Po Ina Nagar is only a shell, wrapped inside it are aspects of intangible culture (story, ritual practices) and tangible culture (statue) worshipping Thiên Y A Na.

As mentioned above, the story of Thiên Y A Na is a late story that has been merged and overlaid with the story of Po Ina Nagar. The main tower for worshipping Po Ina Nagar also had a similar fate: Although this tower was the latest built among the towers and is not located at the center of the relic site, it gives its name to the whole area [10] (pages 108–109). Not only is it the main tower for worshipping Po Ina Nagar-Thiên Y A Na, four other existing towers at the relic site have also changed the main god being worshiped, from Hindu gods to gods in the story of Thiên Y A Na. The statue of the goddess Po Ina Nagar has a linga - shaped cylinder structure,



placed on a yoni - shaped square pedestal with a groove flowing to the side in the Hindu style [21] (page 39).

The statue has the body of the goddess Bhagavati (in the form of a goddess to kill demons: Druga - Sakti - Uma, in the style of the 10th century, according to H. Parmentier) [6] (page 628), and the head is in the style of Việt goddess, painting with gilded lipstick and dressed in godly clothes. Sakaya said: “in general, the statue for Po Ina Nagar worship in Tháp Bà today is not a statue of Chăm worship nor a statue of Vietnamese worship, but it is a mixture of half - Chăm and half - Vietnamese statues (a statue with a Vietnamese head and a Chăm body)” [6] (page 629).



**Photo 3. Po Ina Nagar statue in the main tower of Tháp Bà (photo by Trần Thị An, 28/4/2021)**

Besides the half - Chăm, half - Vietnamese statue, Nguyễn Văn Bốn states that in the main tower, there are artifacts as can be found at a typical Vietnamese temple, such as wooden altars, tablets, incense bowls, vases, flowers, lanterns, parasols, banners, bells, gongs, drums, a couple distich, four horizontal phoenix paintings with content praying peace and wealth.

Likewise, in other towers, there are silk banners with *quốc ngữ* (Romanized Vietnamese) characters containing phrases to express the gratitude of villagers to the parents, husband and children of Thiên Y A Na, such as “Kính dâng Ông” in the South tower worshipping Thiên Y A Na’s husband, “Vạn cổ anh phong” and a banner with the words “dear dedication” in the southeastern tower of Mr. and Mrs. Tieu (Thiên Y A Na’s adoptive parents). A mural with the words “Kính dâng Cô, Cậu” appears in the northwest tower for worshipping her two children [22] (pages 238–239).

The change in the style of the statues and the arrangement of the Vietnamese temples in the ancient temples of the Chăm people reflects the phenomenon of traditional creation or “invented traditions,” as proposed by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in their 1983 work [23]. The point of view of these two historians is as follows: The practice of culture is an endless process, in which, to match the psychology and needs of contemporary people, traditional culture is always recreated consciously by subjects. Reconstruction of tradition has always been a combination of relying on grounds of “authenticity” in the sense that the events took place in the past and changes are required to fit the contemporary context. The story of Thiên Y A Na, with all the details added and updated according to the concept of Vietnamese worship in contemporary contexts, is the act of re - creating the tradition to suit their concept and customs when they owned the land that had belonged to the previous inhabitants.



### **2.3. Discourse in the transition from worshipping Po Ina Nagar to worshipping Thiên Y A Na**

The Chamification of the Hindu got Bhagavati through two steps of Bhagavati Kautharesvari (mother goddess of southern Champa-Kauthara) and Yang Pu Nagara (god of the kingdom) or the name of this female deity is Bhagavati and Yang Pu Nagara respectively, certainly shows both the intervention of the powerful discourses of the Champa kings and the influence of the indigenous folk belief practices of the Champa kings and Chăm people.

Đổng Thành Danh states that while the upper class was influenced by Hinduism, the lower class still maintained the practice of indigenous folk beliefs. This two-way effect must have made the Indo-Chăm, Brahmin-Chăm, then Islam-Chăm complex, that are quite clear in the history of religion and beliefs of Champa [24].

Likewise, the Vietnamization of the worship of Po Ina Nagar into a belief of worshipping Thiên Y A Na, in particular, the power discourse of Đại Việt's dynasties, is very clear. There is a famous tale that Đại Việt Kings brought Champa gods to Thăng Long to worship. *Việt Điện U Linh* (a collection of the stories of deities compiled in 1329) copied a story in *Báo cục truyện* (now lost) in the volume of "gods on earth" to tell a story related to King Lý Thánh Tông.

With the help of a goddess who claimed to be "the quintessence of the great land of the South," he won a war in a battle of Champa, then, brought that goddess to "build a temple in An Lăng village" (now Ứng Thiên communal house, Lăng, Hanoi). Scholars regard this goddess as "none other than Po Ina Nagar" [18].

In addition to integrating the Champa deities into the pantheon of the Đại Việt gods in the period before 1471, in the later period, the integration was also carried out more drastically, promoting the process of acculturation. For instance, the erection of a stele with the legend of Thiên Y A Na placed in Tháp Bà (composed by Phan Thanh Giản in 1856) is a typical move.

It can be seen that the discourse "codification of beliefs to educate the people" is very clear in this stele.

*"In general, in the world, the older the life, the more thrilling things are, and the bigger the land, the stranger the story is. The main thing is that there is a savior who saves the world. It must be recorded in books but not thrown away... Southern regions' education has not been stable, and artillery vehicles have not been provided. At that time, the country was small. The people were few, but the virtues were spread far away. The meals were meager, but the food was prosperous. And the gods often descended on the countryside. It can be proved that Phương Trượng Bồ Đề Lai is not so far away from the human world"* [16].

Although the name of story in the stele is "short story", "truyện ký"; *Thiên Y fairy's short story*, we can clearly see the nature of a manifesto that Phan Thanh Giản showed on behalf of the court: 1) there was the need to record in the bibliography the history of the goddess (Thiên Y A Na); 2) the south - central coast has a brilliant culture but unstable teaching; 3) In the north, there was a god named Liễu Hạnh who, although in the countryside, was known to everyone.

The last paragraph of the content recorded in the epitaph includes important information that we can see in the formula of the legends of communal houses, temples, and shrines: 1) affirmation of the sacredness of the deity; 2) that people worshiped as gods, near and far, come to pray; 3) confirmation of the construction and locations of temples/towers to worship the deity with his/her parents, husband, and children; 4) experiential epiphany; 5) assertion of the deity's name; 6) the conferring of ordination and fine letters of "our dynasty" (the Nguyễn Dynasty); 7) clear statement of the composer and the maker of the stele.

At this point, it can be seen that, although the story of Thiên Y A Na is similar to that of "Nàng Mưjưk" of the Chăm people, this narrative structure reveals the discourse "the king who

rules over the gods” and “the canonicalization of worship to teach culture” of the Nguyễn Dynasty clearly. The policy cleverly expressed in this epitaph seems to be a consistent extension of the tradition of compiling legends from *Việt Điện U Linh* to the treasure trove of myths (usually called “thần tích” or “thần phả”) that are considered to have been collected by Nguyễn Bính and compiled by Nguyễn Hiền in the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Simultaneously with the writing of the epitaph, the Nguyễn court granted this tower temple six ordinations: the third year of the Minh Mệnh reign (1822), the third Thiệu Trị (1843), the third Tự Đức (1850), the 33<sup>th</sup> Tự Đức 33 (1880), third Duy Tân (1909) and ninth Khải Định (1924) [25].

It is also necessary to add here some highlights in terms of content in the story of Thiên Y A Na composed in the epitaph. The potential “legendary” substance can be seen in the narrative circuit of the fairy tale. With the name “storybook,” the last paragraph of the epitaph shows the story’s genre: *“Oh, how strange! Where do fairies come from? At first, on the side of the mountain thanks to the nurturing grace, I thought I had lived there all my life... Whether the gods go or stay, even though the ghosts and spirits can’t control themselves, can they? It’s a period in a period!”* The passage has the character of the legendary genre (which we see in the story texts about the “body, the sacredness, the prestige” of the female deities Liễu Hạnh and Bích Châu in *Truyện Kỳ Tân Phả* by Đoàn Thị Điểm: 1705–1748). This seems to soften the messages but also highlights the comparison of a pattern of deeply rooted folk belief structures in the cultural practices of the people in northern Vietnam.

Story in the stele has a structure that both adheres to the mixed concept of Daoism and Confucianism with the depiction of fairies in the sky descending to earth and observing the woman’s position in the family. Besides, the

story has a feminist meaning when it tells the story of a woman who shows her resistance to the Confucian order so that she can cover commoners (leave her husband - punish her husband and soldiers), entourage dares to tyranny against the people - teach people trades and discipline - make statues - fly to the sky - become gods). The blending of these elements in one story unleashed the spiritual power and supremacy of the goddess Po Ina Nagar in the form of a new god.

Telling a story with a similar structure that both adheres to the Confucian concept (with the woman performing the right role assigned to the woman) and asserts feminine power that has a strong sense of resistance against Confucian order in order to be able to envelop the people with low throat and self - discipline (leave their husbands - punish the husband and his followers who dare to be tyrannical against the people - teach people trades and discipline - make statues by themselves - fly to the sky - become a god) has continued to unleash the spiritual power and prestige of the goddess Po Ina Nagar in the form of a new god.

Nguyễn Thế Anh states that in the Vietnamization of the goddess Po Ina Nagar, the Vietnamese monarchy used religious energy in the divinity of the Chăm people. He also agreed with Taylor’s statement about the phenomenon: “It is the duty of kings to establish a new harmony between the supernatural and temporal powers of the country, and to maintain relations of trust and loyalty with the various local deities, to attract them to the ‘center’ and bring them into the Vietnamese identity that is in the process of being formed” [18]. The co-worshipping and ordination of Thiên Y A Na in the temple to worship Ngũ Hành is so that Thiên Y A Na then replaces Ngũ Hành to become the main goddess of the temple Thanh Tự Đông (Diên An, Diên Khánh, Khánh Hòa province) [26]. The phenomenon that Thiên Y A Na became the

guardian of Hải Cát village [27] and then became a powerful female deity in Huệ Nam Palace (the Southern Palace in Huế city) during the Nguyễn Dynasty is not an exception to this phenomenon.

In summary, the legendization of a myth, the Vietnamization of a story, and the beliefs of the Chăm people represent a long process of cultural transformation in the powerful interactions of power, and traditional creations to be compatible with the historical - political vicissitudes that took place over many hundreds of years in the central strip of Vietnam, especially in the south - central region.

### **3. Diversity of belief practices, diversity of host deities: cultural symbiosis in the belief complex Po Ina Nagar-Thiên Y A Na**

A brief presentation of historical ups and downs through political events that caused cultural changes shows the following fact: the practice of beliefs at Po Ina Nagar Tower (Nha Trang) is a complex containing interference, acculturation, and mixed cultures that are quite overlapping. The volatility of this complex has been going on for a long time and is always incomplete. If we consider the cultural structure to have a depth (stratum) and a surface (epithelial) part [28], in which, the stratum has a relative stability and the epithelium is constantly changing, observing the stratum corneum of Practicing the belief of worshipping Thiên Y A Na in Tháp Bà (Nha Trang) today, we can see that the early formation of this religious complex has undergone great changes, causing the stratum to shake violently; however, after a long period of wobble, it is now reverting to slow oscillation, and so the appearance of this complex is now observable. Observing the appearance of the current Thiên Y A Na worshipping complex in Tháp Bà, I think it would be easier to use the concept/theory of cultural symbiosis.

“Cultural symbiosis” is a concept borrowed from the term “symbiosis” in the biological sciences used since the late nineteenth century.

The term “symbiosis” is used regularly in the science of algae and fungi. This term is understood as the coexistence of different organisms, which have a beneficial relationship with each other, and symbiosis does not change the individuals in the process of symbiosis. Derived from biology, “symbiosis” is used in many social sciences such as education and psychology. The term “cultural symbiosis” is also considered an effective tool in various fields. For example, Gary Boyd, when implementing a distance education program in Canada, argued that monoculture farming creates resistance that will lead to the extinction of a social activity, so it would be inevitable to recognize cultural symbiosis. In addition, in distance education, the symbiosis of cultures will preserve all the unique points of each culture (except, of course, completely antagonistic features; and, over time, the cultural symbiosis will adjust the characteristics of each culture so that symbiosis is possible) [29].

In a presentation presented in Austria in 2000, M. Sharon Jeannotte recognized the issue of “cultural symbiosis” in the cultural participation of connected communities. Looking at the diversity of cultural practices, Jeannotte sought to make cultural policy recommendations with the view that it was necessary to “facilitate the access to cultural practices and experiences for all citizens without distinction. Regardless of nationality, race, gender, age, or physical or mental disability, this would enrich a sense of cultural identity and belonging to all individuals and communities and sustain them in their search for a future decent and safe.” According to the author, “cultural symbiosis” will strengthen social trust and social capital, create more inclusiveness and democratic equity, and renew society and experiments with new symbolic resources. [30].

The concept of “cultural symbiosis” has also been coined in research in Vietnam, although the number of studies that have explored the concept have been few. In a research work on



architecture, Nguyễn Thế Cường introduced the concept of symbiosis in biology and pointed out its application in the study of culture expressed at two levels: “Cultural symbiosis can be a symbiosis between different cultures (macro symbiosis) or symbiosis between several cultural elements of the same culture or of many different cultures (micro-symbiosis).” Nguyễn Thế Cường states that micro-symbiosis (assembled elements in the whole) and macro-symbiosis (exchange or impose cultures) both have human or institutional factors. The author believes that, in the types of symbiosis, there is a form of “symbiosis in the cultural product between the foreign body (or physical element) and the native soul (social and spiritual element).” This can be observed with the phenomenon of Vietnamizing the worship of Po Ina Nagar into Thiên Y A Na [31]. The concept of “cultural symbiosis” has also been used by Hoàng Ngọc Hiến in his work *Cultural Philosophy and Literary Philosophy* [32]. He states that “cultural symbiosis” is an indispensable trend to preserve national culture in the current context of strong globalization.

Returning to the practice of beliefs in Tháp Bà (Nha Trang) today, it is not difficult to see the clear and vivid cultural symbiosis here. First, looking at the Chamification process of Hindu and Muslim symbols and then Vietnamizing process of the complex of Chăm beliefs (Chăm Brahmin and Chăm Islam), we can see the common factor of creating cohesion with regard to female gods. Nguyễn Hữu Thông states that the common point of these female gods was the god of agriculture, Mother of Rice [11] (page 33), while Ngô Đức Thịnh states that it was Mother of Land [33] (p. 10). Nguyễn Thế Anh quoted Trần Vạn Toàn as saying, “This benevolent nature of the god has made it easy for Vietnamese people to accept her worship” [18], and Ngô Văn Doanh states that there is a flow of the principle of mother worship from Hinduism to later incarnations of female deities [10] (p. 138)

Thus, the common factor connecting female

goddess, mothers, and patron deities at different levels (regions, communities, and countries) makes a name change reasonable. Images of female deities are created to suit the historical-political-social context and the subject of worship. However, as a symbiotic phenomenon, even though the context changes, the subjects of worship change, and even though the discourses of power change, the cultural identity of each individual in the worshiping belief complex at Tháp Bà (Nha Trang) is still preserved to a certain extent. For Vietnamese people, the spread of beliefs about worshipping Thiên Y A Na is very strong. Ngô Văn Doanh states that putting Thiên Y A Na in the communal house is very common and “at present in Khánh Hòa, almost all communal houses have their own temple or shrine to worship Thiên Y A Na” [10] (page 204). The spread of the belief of worshipping the goddess in the area around the tower was also mentioned by Nguyễn Văn Bốn. He states that Thiên Y A Na is worshiped in the tower, in the communal house and also in the am, shrine, and private house; and the rituals of worship in the communal house-pagoda-tower (e.g., the ritual of praying for national peace and prosperity) are intertwined in reality as reflected in the practice of Vietnamese people worshipping Thiên Y A Na [21] (page 215).

Due to such strong and widespread Vietnamization, for a time, the religious practice of the Chăm people in Tháp Bà became sparse. This situation is expressed in the lamenting folk song: “*Who goes to the Shadow hamlet to visit the house, ask if the dance of offering to Ba is still there? That’s often the case with bamboo and bamboo shoots, so why don’t you quit posting for it.*” (“*Ai về xóm Bóng thăm nhà, Hỏi xem điệu múa dâng Bà còn chăng? Thế thường tre lụn còn măng, Lẽ đâu tham đó bỏ dâng cho đành.*”) Because the specific religious practices of the Chăm people were forbidden, for a long time, the Chăm people rarely participated in the Tháp Bà festival. The above situation changed when the management

role was transferred to Khánh Hòa Monuments Conservation Center (2012). Since 2012, besides the “hầu đồng” ritual (spirit Mediums ritual of the Kinh people), the “múa bóng” performance (spirit Mediums ritual of the Chăm people) has been restored at Tháp Bà. Ngô Văn Doanh writes, “Thanks to this careful viewing and research, we realize more clearly the Chăm elements and furthermore the Hindu origins of the “múa bóng” performance in Tháp Bà. According to the stories of the elders in Xóm Bóng and through personal research, we find that the form and function of the “múa bóng” ritual in Tháp Bà are very close to and similar to the dances that the Chăm people still often perform on the streets and in the tower on the occasions of their great festivals (e.g., Kate and Chabun)” [10] (p. 167)



**Photo 4. Chăm people in Tháp Bà Festival 2021 (courtesy by Nguyễn Văn Bốn, 17/4/2017)**

In addition to the above, the Chăm communities in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận have also participated in the Po Ina Nagar festival every year with increasing numbers of worshiping methods of their people. In an interview with me on April 27, 2021, Đàng Xuân Kỳ<sup>1</sup>, a dignitary of the Chăm Brahmins, informed that in recent years, Chăm people from Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận often came Po Ina Nagar tower to celebrate Vía Bà (Tháp Bà Po Ina Nagar festival) from March 20 to March 23 of the lunar

calendar every year. In 2021, the ceremony of the Goddess of Mercy coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic; hence, most festival activities such as releasing lanterns, “múa bóng” ritual, “hát vãn”, water procession contests, and display a fruit tray to offer to the Mother Goddess had to be canceled. However, at Tháp Bà yard, there were still quite a few ceremonies held with Chăm delegations from Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận to worship her. When asked, those who attended the ceremony said that due to the COVID-19 epidemic, they came to worship her earlier this year (March 16 and 17 of the lunar calendar), and because of the epidemic, they could not sleep in Tháp Bà relic but had to go to Tháp Bà early in the next morning. After finishing the rituals, they had to return home immediately (*Field Trip Diary*, April 27–28, 2021).

Interview results in 2014 by Nguyễn Văn Bốn also revealed that when gathering to Bà’s ceremony, “the Chăm people want to stay at the foot of Tháp Bà for one or two nights” [21] (page 212). Aside from the participation in festivals of the Chăm and Kinh people, the participation of some other ethnic minorities in the provinces of the Central and Central Highlands regions such as Đà Nẵng, Quảng Nam, Phú Yên, Đắk Lắk, Gia Lai, Lâm Đồng, and Thừa Thiên Huế [34] shows that the cultural symbiotic environment is revitalizing the strong vitality of Chăm culture in Tháp Bà (Nha Trang).

### **Conclusion**

In the religious life of Vietnam, the worship of Thiên Y A Na can be said to be the country’s richest heritage complex.

In this complex, distinct fragments of the heritage are created by discourses, in which narratives (myths, legends) have been used to the fullest extent to create the discourse of power of dynasties. The relationship between narrative and discourse and the relationship between discourse creation and heritage construction is evident in the historical ups and downs and

cultural changes in Tháp Bà (Nha Trang).

In this complex, it is also possible to clearly see the mismatch between the tangible heritage (towers and statues of Chăm worship) and the intangible cultural heritage (the stories told by the Kinh people). But this mismatch, over time, has been cemented by the symbiosis of religious practices of the Chăm and the Kinh people over the centuries, and other ethnic groups in recent times.

Practicing the Mother Goddess worshiping belief with the wish to pray for daily life needs is becoming an intimate need of many communities in Vietnam. UNESCO's registration of the Vietnamese people's belief in Tam Phủ worship (December 2016) with a new discourse on heritage has influenced the practice of worshiping Thiên Y A Na in Tháp Bà (Nha Trang). Sharing the characteristic of worshiping the Mother to protect individuals, communities, and countries, the worship of Thiên Y A Na in Tháp Bà is resonating with the rapid spread of the cult of Mother Goddesses in the entire country. Observing, researching and increasing management efficiency from a scientific point of view respecting the diversity of cultural expressions and the voices of insiders will certainly contribute to the preservation of the cultural values of this millennium national monument complex.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> Đàng Xuân Kỳ was born in 1993 in Phước Đồng 2 village, Phước Hậu commune, Ninh Phước district, Ninh Thuận province. He was born to a family with Kadhar dignity (as a *kanhi* player). His grandfather was the abbot of the Poklaong Girai tower (the major Chăm tower in Ninh Thuận province). His younger brother is both a Kadhar and the youngest practitioner who is known to play all Champa musical instruments, such as the *kanhi*, *saranai*, and *ginang*, fluently. Currently, Đàng Xuân Kỳ is working for the Center of Relic Preservation of Khánh Hòa province.

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