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Narrating the Whale: Rescue, Compassion, and Sacred Waterscapes in Coastal Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Vietnamese and Cham whale narratives articulate a distinctly coastal multispecies ethics in which whales are not merely symbols of nature or residual spirits, but moral beings embedded in relations of rescue, obligation, and mourning. Drawing on ethnographic and historical accounts of *Cá Ông* [Whale God] and *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] among ethnic communities in Vietnam, this article examines how whale worship embodies ethical frameworks that shape human conduct toward the sea and its more-than-human inhabitants. A comparative analysis shows that Vietnamese and Cham traditions demonstrate distinct yet overlapping ethical regimes in which whales function as protectors and oceanic mediators whose deaths demand ritual recognition. It further suggests that coastal Vietnam offers an alternative ethical imagination grounded not in mastery over nature, but in vulnerability, gratitude, and interspecies responsibility. The article presents an ocean-centered perspective on Southeast Asia within the fields of multispecies studies and environmental humanities, emphasizing its importance in the context of the current ecological crisis - particularly marine environmental degradation, plastic pollution, and industrial fishing - issues that are reshaping and challenging coastal ethical systems.

INTRODUCTION

Along Vietnam's long coastline, whales occupy a complex cultural position. Ethnographic research shows that whale worship is much weaker and far less ritually institutionalized in the North. There, whales are more often treated within classificatory systems of marine life rather than as sacred protectors (Đoài, 2017; Parnwell, 2013). In South Central and Southern Vietnam, whales are not simply respected animals, but morally potent persons embedded in coastal worlds (Taylor, 2004). Whale worship is still practicing among coastal villages in central and southeast Vietnam. They are ritually buried, commemorated, and addressed as ancestors, protectors, and moral authorities of the sea (Đoài, 2017; Parnwell, 2014). This regional difference shows that whale worship in Vietnam is not uniform, but shaped by coastal history, maritime labor, and ecological risk.

Research on whale worship in Vietnam has developed mostly within folklore studies, ethnography, and religious studies. Vietnamese scholars have documented the cult of *Cá Ông* (Whale God), the networks of *Lăng Ông* [whale temples], funerary practices for stranded whales, and cyclical *Nghinh Ông* (whale-

welcoming) festivals. These accounts emphasize ritual organization, regional distribution, and syncretic configurations of this popular belief (Đ.T. Ngô, 2004; Lê, 2011; Endres & Lauser, 2011; S. K. Ngô, 2011). Ethnographic studies from Central and Southern Vietnam provide detailed accounts of how whales are ritually commemorated and addressed as posthumous protectors, who are capable of intervening in human affairs (Đoài, 2017; Taylor, 2004; V.H. Nguyễn et al., 2003). Parnwell's (2014) comparative research further demonstrates that whale worship is neither uniform nor incidental, but historically and ecologically shaped. He points out ritual institutionalization in areas that are characterized by offshore fishing, frequent storms, and high shipwreck risk. Together, these academic works establish whale worship as a major strand of Vietnamese popular ritual in central and southern coastal life.

Figure 1.
Cầu Ngư [Whale-Welcoming] Festival on Nha Trang Bay

Note. Photograph of a display at *Khánh Hòa* Museum, Nha Trang, Vietnam. The displayed photograph is credited to Văn Thành Châu. Museum-display photograph by the author.

There are also studies of Cham religion and history, which position whale worship within the context of the ancient Austronesian maritime cosmology and coastal ritual space. Studies on Champ emphasize the central role of sea gods and marine deities in shaping religious life in the Vietnamese coast areas. Within these ritualized oceanic worlds, *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] does not appear as a single figure, but as part of a maritime imagination about the sea with its spirits, and non-human beings that are intimately connected to human survival (Higham, 2014; Inrasara, 2016a; Po Dharma, 1987). By showing that whale worship is embedded within maritime cultures, these studies contribute to establishing the long history of the sanctified coastal life in Vietnam.

Beyond monographs and academic papers, Vietnamese state and heritage agencies also play a significant role in documenting the presence of whale worship. Cultural heritage reports and museum publications sponsored

by the central and local governments regularly record the *Nghinh Ông* [whale-welcoming] festivals, whale temples, ceremonial artifacts, and ritual procedures in the region. These sources often consider whale worship as part of the intangible cultural heritage and cultural identity of the central coastal Vietnamese areas. Although largely journalistic and descriptive, these accounts are significant in outlining the institutional settings through which whale worship is recognized and preserved in Vietnam over time (Bùi, 2020; M. N. Nguyễn, 2015).

Figure 2.
Cầu Ngư [Whale-Welcoming] Festival

Note. Photograph of a historical display at *Khánh Hòa* Museum, Nha Trang, Vietnam. Original photographer and date not identified. Museum-display photograph by the author.

Overall, existing studies have argued the complex presence of whale worship in Vietnam. However, most of these documents approach whales primarily as sacred symbols, guardian deities, or objects of worship. Such an approach has yielded important insights into belief systems but has done little research into the ethical aspects of the human-whale relations (Đ. T. Ngô, 2004; Taylor, 2004). In this context, this paper approaches whale worship as a coastal ethical practice in which ecological vulnerability, maritime labor, ritual practices, and interspecies obligations converge. Whale worship is not merely an expression of belief in sacred creatures but also helps to create an ethical marine landscape in which humans and whales are interrelated.

This approach allows the paper to connect whale worship in Vietnam to existing debates in multispecies studies and environmental humanities. By emphasizing whales as both ritual presences and ecological beings, the paper offers an ocean-centric perspective on Southeast Asia. It argues that the importance of whale worship is particularly practical in present-day time when the coastal life is shaped by marine environmental degradation, plastic pollution, and industrial fishing.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study is grounded in critical re-evaluations of animism and totemism that challenge the long-standing tendency in anthropology to treat animal veneration as symbolic projection. Classical and structuralist approaches frequently interpreted animal figures as metaphors for social order, clan identity, or cosmological

classification. Such readings positioned animals as representational devices rather than as participants in moral and social worlds. Contemporary anthropology has substantially revised this paradigm. Descola's (2013) critique of the nature–culture divide and Ingold's (2021) relational ecology, reconceptualize human-nonhuman relations as lived, historically situated engagements rather than only belief systems or symbolic codes. de Castro (1998) further destabilizes human exceptionalism by theorizing animals as subjects endowed with viewpoints, agency, and sociality. Together, these approaches make it possible to analyze animal-centered traditions not as projections of human society, but as ethical fields in which nonhuman beings are recognized as moral interlocutors.

Building on these interventions, this study reframes what has often been described as Vietnamese and Cham "whale totemism" as a form of coastal multispecies ethics. Rather than functioning primarily as symbolic classification or residual animism, whale-centered narratives and rituals are approached here as ethical regimes that organize relations of rescue, obligation, mourning, gratitude, and reciprocity between humans and marine beings. In this view, whales appear not as emblems of the sea, but as moral beings capable of intervention, sacrifice, and posthumous presence, demanding humans' commemoration, ritual care and discipline. This ethical orientation draws on multispecies studies and environmental humanities. These fields examine how social life emerges through complex relations of humans, animals, and their environments (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010).

Tsing (2015) emphasizes the vulnerability and ethical entanglement between species, particularly in the formation of ethical worlds under precarious ecological conditions. Haraway's (2016) concept of interspecies kinship suggests the interspecies relationships that include obligations, care, and co-formation. These approaches suggest that whale worship can be understood as an ethical practice towards animals, rather than merely as an animalistic belief.

Environmental humanities have examined multispecies relationships within the context of labor history, colonialism, and ecological transformation (DeLoughrey, 2019; DeLoughrey et al., 2015). Helmreich's (2009) work, *Alien ocean: Anthropological voyages in microbial seas*, highlights ocean life as a site of specific multispecies relationships. Studies in blue humanities and oceanic environmental humanities also conceptualize the sea as a cultural and ethical space shaped by memory, movement, and vulnerability (DeLoughrey, 2019; Hessler, 2018). However, these debates rarely address the coastal worldviews of Southeast Asia as independent indigenous ethical systems.

This study approaches the whale traditions of the Vietnamese and Cham people as a form of indigenous oceanic philosophy. This is a coastal knowledge system that recognizes whales as moral beings and the sea as a moral environment. Here, whale stories are not read merely as mythological symbols but as ethical texts. They express norms of human behavior toward the sea - fishing practices, mourning, acknowledging the sacrifices of non-human species, and responding responsibly to maritime risks. This paper traces how stories of whale rescue, ritual burials, whale shrines, and imperial and folk naming practices for whales reveal a multi-species ethical order in Central and Southern Vietnam. By prioritizing ethics over symbolism and relationships over beliefs, this study contributes to reshaping Southeast Asian coastal folklore as a site of indigenous multispecies philosophy. In doing so, the paper expands debates on environmental humanism and marine humanism beyond the Euro-American and mainland frameworks.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative literary-cultural approach, examining historical works, ethnographic records, and folklore collections related to whales and whale worship as cultural texts through which Vietnamese and

Cham communities express their ethical relationship with marine life. As such, these documents are viewed as narrative forms shaped by the processes of transcription, translation, and performance.

Source materials were selected based on three criteria. The first criterion is thematic relevance including sources that directly address the worship of whales, sea deities such as *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves], and related stories or rituals. The second criterion is geographical representativeness, with attention to materials from various coastal regions of Central and Southern Vietnam. The third criterion is genre diversity. This research includes historical records, ethnographic records, folklore anthologies, ritual records, and journalistic records.

The study relies primarily on modern editions and academic anthologies, many of which originate from earlier Sino-Vietnamese records, oral stories, and ritual traditions. Therefore, this study does not treat them as fixed or original versions of whale worship traditions. Instead, it reads them as cultural texts shaped by oral transmission, translation, editing, and local ritual practice.

The analysis focuses on narrative structure, recurring motifs, and moral vocabularies in order to examine how human-whale relations are represented in whale worship. These motifs include rescue at sea, whale death and burial, dream instruction, divine naming, ritual offerings, whale bones, and the transformation of whales into protectors. This study compares motifs in narratives from Vietnamese and Cham traditions, identifying both distinct and overlapping forms of coastal ethics.

By doing so, the paper contributes to a literary-cultural analysis of whale narratives as meaning-making forms, rather than merely treating them as records of local belief. It shows how narratives, rituals, and commemorative practices construct whales as moral beings within the coastal worlds of Central and Southern Vietnam.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion is organized into three sections. Together, these sections examine whale worship as an ethical relation among humans, whales, and the sea.

Whale Beings and Moral Seascapes in Coastal Vietnam

The worship of *Cá Ông* [Whale God] in South Central and Southern Vietnam is not merely a coastal belief but also embodies the multi-species ethics formed over history. In early records in the South such as *Thoái Thực Kỳ Văn* [Records from Leisure After Official Service] and other medieval Vietnamese royal chronicles such as *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* [Unified Gazetteer of Đại Nam] and *Gia Định Thành thông chí* [Comprehensive Gazetteer of *Gia Định*], whales appear not only as symbolic animals but also as a sign recording ethical behaviors in the relationship between humans and nature (M. N. Nguyễn, 2015).

Existing ethnographic studies have described in detail the funeral rituals for stranded whales, the construction of whale tombs, and the *Nghinh Ông* [whale-welcoming] festivals (Lantz, 2009; V. H. Nguyễn et al., 2003; Ruddle, 1998). In these rituals, whales are considered non-human entities capable of protecting fishermen and regulating the ethical behavior of individuals in coastal communities. Whenever fishermen encounter danger at sea or difficulties while fishing offshore, they pray to the *Cá Ông* [Whale God], believing that this will surely bring help and rescue, allowing them to return safely. Through these customs, a real sea creature is transformed into a benevolent deity in the daily spiritual lives of the people.

This creature is addressed with a series of respectful titles such as *Ông Lớn* [Great Lord, *Đức Ngư* [Supreme Fish God], *Đồng Nam Hải* [Lord of the East Sea], *Nam Hải Đại Tường Quân* [Great General of the South Sea), *Nam Hải Thủy Thần* [God of the South Sea Water], and many others - among which *Cá Ông* [Whale God] remains the most popular (Bùi, 2020; Đoài, 2017; T. L. Nguyễn, 2015; Taylor, 2004). This spiritual practice reflects the harsh survival conditions in the coastal areas of Central Vietnam. Monsoon circulation, dangerous ocean currents, storm frequency, deep-sea and offshore fishing, and the risk of shipwrecks seem to have shaped how the local people understand and interact with whales.

In his historical monograph *Tỉnh Bến Tre trong lịch sử Việt Nam* (1757 - 1945) (Bến Tre Province in Vietnamese History in the period of 1757-1945), D. O. Nguyễn (1971) argues that whale worship in the southern coastal region of Vietnam is a form of embodiment of encounters and interactions between species in a vulnerable ecological environment. Whales are not merely symbols of belief, but also creatures believed to be capable of intervention, sacrifice, and response - qualities that create ritual obligation and moral recognition. In this sense, D. O. Nguyễn's (1971) historical documentation shows whale worship as a form of relationship between coastal creatures in the context of the ever-present dangers of the sea. In this context, the story of human laborers at sea and the rescue by whales is repeated, creating the impression of the existence of a morally responsive environment, where humans and whales have a moral and responsible relationship that determines each other's survival.

Thus, whales enter ritual life and storytelling not as biological animals but as moral beings capable of helping and responding to the survival pleas of humans. These are creatures remembered for saving fishermen from drowning and guiding boats to shore (Đoài, 2017). Thus, whale worship in the region reflects a distinct multispecies habitat in the coastal area, where the sea is not merely a resource but also a place where responsible relationships exist between non-human and human entities.

While historical accounts emphasize that whale worship emerges from memorized encounters across the species in perilous conditions at sea, cultural studies focus on the spiritual space sustaining these relationships. In his book *Tìm hiểu văn hóa tâm linh Nam Bộ* [Understanding Southern Spiritual Culture], H.H. Nguyễn (2011) places the whale deity in relation to southern folk beliefs. He depicts the whale not only as a rescue agent in history but also as an entity connected to daily ritual life. The whale deity is believed to have saved people in distress at sea. Here, H. H. Nguyễn (2011) considers whale worship an indispensable part of coastal folk beliefs, rather than a separate maritime belief. His discussions emphasize the whale's status as a totem with sacred power and its close connection to protection at sea.

H. H. Nguyễn (2011) especially explores this belief in the fishermen's ritual practice such as burying stranded whales, preserving whale remains, and building Whale Temples. These rituals are believed to have physically anchored the whale spirit within coastal communities. H.H. Nguyễn's (2011) research not only views whale worship as a symbolic veneration but also as an expression of a relationship based on gratitude and moral obligation of humans towards a non-human being, a creature believed to be involved in vital human moments.

In terms of environmental humanities, the archives have recorded what scholars specializing in polyspecies describe as the formation of social worlds beyond the human realm. In that world, non-human organisms appear as subjects with morals and emotions, rather than as passive natural contexts (Haraway, 2008; Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010; Kohn, 2013). The historical account of D.O Nguyễn and the spiritual perspective of H. H. Nguyễn reveal that coastal multispecies relationships are not just transient motifs but rather overlapping cultural layers with interrelated narrative treasures, ritual descriptions, and regional cultural maps. These recurring motifs show that is the ecological vulnerability forms ethical relationships between humans and non-human beings.

In this sense, Vietnamese folklore materials concerning whales demonstrate what ethical ecology defines as the profound ethical connection between organisms, including humans, with their environment (Descola, 2013; Ingold, 2021; Plumwood, 2002). They show that whale worship and coastal multispecies ethics are rather multi-layered folklore forms that are transmitted in many cultural dimensions and genres. Through these forms, communities have transformed their coastal living space into a responsible ethical environment where the survival of non-human organisms interacts with other organisms, including humans. This ontological and ethical imagery lays the groundwork for the Cham records about whale worship examined in the next section. As will be demonstrated, within the worldview influenced by Austronesian languages, sacred river landscapes and whale figures like *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] also shape the sea as a ritualistic and ethical environment, home to powerful agents beyond the human realm.

Po Riyak [God of the Waves] and Sacred Waterscapes in Coastal Vietnam

If Vietnamese vernacular and historical texts figure whales as liminal and ethical beings within a moral seascape, Cham materials situate marine life within an even older and more explicitly oceanic cosmology shaped by Austronesian seafaring worlds. The Cham may be understood here as an Austronesian-speaking people historically associated with Champ and with long coastal-maritime traditions in Central and South-Central Vietnam.

In Cham contexts, ritual life and cosmology are embedded within long coastal-maritime histories and art traditions that reflect deep engagements with sacred waterscapes. Historical work by Po Dharma (1987) - a Cham cultural historian educated in France - offers a solid grounding in Champ political and social worlds, while Guillon's (2001) *Cham Art: Treasures from the Da Nang Museum* provides a visual and material context for Cham sacred imagery and cultural heritage. Together, these sources help situate later Cham narratives of marine beings (such as *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves]) within a longer history of seafaring, sacred waters, and coastal ritual practice that extends beyond singular narrative episodes.

M.S Nguyễn's analysis of *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] situates marine-associated sacred beings within a vernacular spiritual ecology embedded in coastal environments rather than institutional religious systems (M. S. Nguyễn, 1994). In his account, *Po Riyak*'s life history includes a sequence of metamorphoses - god, whale, bird, human, and finally *Po Riyak* [God of Sea Waves]. This sequence of events, linking spiritual power with the aquatic space of movement, punishment, and rescue, highlights the vulnerability of boundaries between species.

The sea here is not merely a setting but a dynamic moral field where disobedience, suffering, and moral mission are materially manifested. In Cham folklore and legends, there is often a logic centered on the aquatic landscape, and the spirit of *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] incarnates as a whale after a violent encounter at sea; the whale is then tasked by the heavens with protecting sailors (Sở Văn hóa et al., 2019). In these accounts, ocean currents, coastlines, and marine creatures become sacred forces, and the whale emerges as a mobile moral subject, performing acts of care, punishment, and rescue. In this sense, *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] is not merely a sea god of the Cham people, but also an integral part of the diverse ecosystem and spiritual life of the coast region. Here, spirituality, maritime labor, and human vulnerabilities are intertwined, creating a vibrant ethical map of the sea.

The image of the whale as a moral agent through the rescue motif is systematically and meticulously described in the study by Cham researcher Inrasara (2016a), *"Po Riyak - Thần sóng: Lịch sử, truyền thuyết và tục thờ cúng"* [*Po Riyak* - God of the Waves: History, Legends, and Worship Practices]. Based on historical traces, oral traditions and ritual customs, Inrasara (2016a) recreates *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] as an image of oceanic power and the sacred presence of the Cham cultural world.

He recounts the life story of a virtuous young man who went abroad to learn sacred knowledge to help his suffering homeland. Despite being warned by his master about the dangers of returning, the young man still set sail, heading towards home. During the voyage, the young man died in a violent storm. His body was torn apart and washed ashore near Phan Ri, a southern province of Vietnam, and was revered by both Cham and Vietnamese villagers.

The story continues after death. The young man's body transformed into a whale and later washed ashore at what is now *Vinh Trường* village. Foretold in a dream that *Cá Ông* [Whale God] would appear, the Cham community performed a whale cremation ritual, initiating cycles of such sacrifices that continued for years.

In this context, the story of *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] expands the moral image of the whale beyond temporary rescues to encompass a historical situation of multispecies formation. The storm, the shattered body, and the repeated return to shore for the whale are always placed within the context of a coastal world fraught with life-threatening risks. These rituals transform this harsh meaning into a moral maritime landscape where humans express grief, protection, and obligation towards the whale's body and soul. Thus, the whale *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] emerges as a distinctive cultural icon of the southern and south-central coastal regions of Vietnam: not merely a marine animal, but a moral presence, a benevolent sea creature. In other words, the whale is not presented primarily as a fixed sacred symbol or an object of worship, but as an active subject, whose status is revealed through its ability to save human lives.

Here, the whale is not given a predetermined divine identity. Rather, its sacred status is shown through repeated acts of response at moments of danger. Works on *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] show that whales always appear at the threshold between life and death, at times when coastal survival is most precarious. Here, the whale is constructed as a moral agent, a creature capable of responding to human vulnerabilities in the working life of the sea. The whale enters an ethical realm structured by gratitude, duty, and remembrance. Thus, what makes the whale sacred is not only some abstract doctrinal classification but a series of encounters between species, in which human survival at sea is recounted as a dependence on non-human intervention. Read in this way, the rescue motif moves beyond symbolic approaches to whale worship with a focus on the relationship based on ecological risk and maritime labor within a multispecies marine environment. In that environment, ecological vulnerability, seafaring work, and narrative memory converge to create an ethical maritime landscape where humans and whales are intimately connected to each other's existence.

This relationship becomes most evident during periods of ecological crisis, when the upheaval of the sea leads to events of interspecies intervention. In Cham tradition, stories of whales appearing during disasters, guiding ships in storms, supporting sinking boats, or embodying sacred figures are very common. Contemporary fishermen tell similar stories: when a sudden storm arises, fishermen, unable to find shelter, pray to "Mr. Whale." Then, whales appear beside their boats and guide them through danger. Passed down among Cham generations is also a story of whales swimming ahead of ships to "block the storm" so the crew can return safely (Parnwell, 2013; Rots & Lu Rots, 2023).

Fishermen on Lý Sơn Island recount praying to the Great Whale when storms unexpectedly arose at sea. They believe that whales appear beside their boats to guide them through danger. Fishermen previously worked with rudimentary means, mainly sailboats and nets woven from hemp. Motorized boats were very rare. Therefore, it can be said that fishermen were primarily in direct contact with the open sea, with very few technological means to protect themselves from unexpected risks of strong winds and waves at sea (Valdemarsen, 2001).

However, even with the advent of modern fishing techniques, the practice of worshipping the *Cá Ông* [Whale God] and *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] has not disappeared, but rather reshaped its form. In the mid-20th

century, diesel engines, nylon nets, radar systems, and later GPS technology allowed fishermen to venture further offshore with better control over weather conditions (Eigaard et al., 2014). In Southeast Asia, after World War II, the fishing industries of Vietnam and the Philippines rapidly modernized: motorboats became common, allowing fishermen to expand their fishing range while saving time and labor (V. Nguyễn, 2025; Silvestre & Pauly, 1997). By the end of the 20th century, nearly all fishing vessels in fishing villages in Vietnam were equipped with engines (including large wooden boats) (Anh Phong, 2024; Đinh Mười, 2023).

Modern technology does not eliminate maritime vulnerability but transforms it into new forms. For example, nylon nets create the "ghost net" that lasts for hundreds of years on the seabed. Industrial fishing and plastic pollution cause whales to die from getting entangled in nets or ingesting debris. The rituals associated with *Cá Ông* [Whale God] and *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] have gradually shifted to promote a consciousness of protecting the very creatures once regarded as the saviors of the sea. This shift demonstrates that whale worship is a flexible coastal ethical system that is continuously restructured in response to various forms of maritime distress.

This whale imagination in Cham traditions must have grown out of processes of cultural contact between Vietnamese and Cham coastal communities. As shown in Table 1, synthesized from recurring motifs and ritual patterns documented across Vietnamese journalistic accounts, ethnographic materials, and folk narratives, both *Cá Ông* [Whale God] and *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] - despite originating from different narrative traditions - are rooted in the maritime culture of Central Vietnam. They are regarded as sacred embodiments of the sea that protect fishermen from natural disasters, and their worship rituals are conducted as communal events. According to Cham legends, the whale is the incarnation of the sea-spirit *Cha Aih Va*; after disobeying his master, he transforms into a whale and is eventually allowed to reclaim his divine status as *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves], the god of rivers and seas.

Many ritual practices are present in both traditions but carry different meanings. These practices include offerings to the sea, red sugarcane symbolizing oars, rituals praying for the safety of fishermen, and the motif of the sea god rescuing people in danger. While the *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] ritual is associated with the Cham system of religious officials, music, and ritual dances, the *Nghinh Ông* [whale-welcoming] ceremony is organized as a community festival of fishing villages. Notably, in Bình Thuận and Ninh Thuận provinces, many *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] worship sites have been adopted by the Vietnamese and integrated into the belief in the *Cá Ông* [Whale God] of the South Sea, who is also worshipped by some members of the indigenous Cham community (Rots & Lu Rots, 2023; Ruddle, 1998).

Thus, the whale worship as a product of cultural translation and ecological attunement: Vietnamese settlers encountering the long-established Cham cult of *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] adopted and reworked this figure within their own ritual worlds, and the whale-worship tradition now reflects the fusion and evolution of Cham and Vietnamese spiritual practices.

Table 1 shows that *Cá Ông* [Whale God] worship and the Cham *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] cult share a common concern with maritime danger, rescue, and ritual obligation, but they organize these concerns through different cultural systems. *Cá Ông* [Whale God] worship is centered more clearly on fishing-village ritual, whale temples, and communal festivals, while *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] worship is embedded in Cham sacred waterscapes, ritual specialists, and narratives of transformation. The comparison therefore supports the argument that whale worship in coastal Vietnam is not a single homogeneous belief. It is a layered coastal ethical system shaped by cultural contact, regional difference, and shared vulnerability to the sea.

Table 1.
Comparison between Vietnamese Whale Worship and the Cham Po Riyăk Cult

Aspects of Comparison	Lord of the South Sea / Vietnamese *Cá Ông Nam Hải*	*Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] of Cham people
Origin narrative	A Vietnamese folk legend tells of *Quan Âm*, the Vietnamese form of *Avalokiteśvara*, the Bodhisattva of compassion, tearing her monk's robe and scattering it across the sea, where its pieces transformed into whales to save fishermen. The whale was later appointed the Great General of the South Sea and revered by the people as *Cá Ông* [Whale God].	According to Cham legend, *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] was a historical figure from the reign of Po Rome (1627 - 1651) who was born in *Binh Thuan* and traveled to Mecca to study the teachings of salvation. He died in a storm on his return, and his remains were later revered by (Inrasara, 2016a).
Protective function	*Cá Ông* [Whale God] is the deity of the sea, believed to rescue fishermen in distress, calm rough seas and strong winds, ensure safe voyages, and bring good catches. The appearance of *Cá Ông* [Whale God] at sea is often interpreted as a sign of protection and good fortune.	*Po Riyak* is known as the God of the Sea Waves. Cham people pray to him, hoping he will grant peace at sea, calm the waves and winds, and help fishermen work with peace of mind. Like *Cá Ông* [Whale God], *Po Riyak* is associated with rescue and protection during storms.
Ritual form	The *Nghinh Ông* (whale-welcoming) festival typically lasts two days (usually in spring and autumn and is organized by the fishing communities. It includes offerings, prayers, songs such as *bả trạo* [fishermen's folk songs], boat-related performances, and rituals asking for safety and a good fishing season.	The *Po Riyak* ritual takes place one day after the *Rịja Nưgar* Festival (major traditional New Year ritual festival of the Cham people). The ritual is connected to Cham ritual life and involves Cham ritual specialists, ceremonial music, offerings, red sugarcane symbolizing oars, and symbolic boat-rowing movements (Inrasara, 2016a).
Material and ritual symbols	The most common representation of Whale God as a whale skeleton displayed in a shrine (whale, dolphin, and other giant fish skeletons are all collectively referred to as *Cá Ông* [Whale God]). The architecture of *Cá Ông* [Whale God] shrines typically features statues of dragons and qilin (*Ngọc Lân*), as well as decorations depicting "two dragons paying homage to the sun" (two dragons facing the sun). Fishermen also worship dolphins with a similar belief (An, 2016).	There are no distinct statues of *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] in the historical records. Ritual symbols include red sugarcane stalks symbolizing boat oars, *Ka-ing* attire (a red headscarf), and ceremonial instruments (*baranưng* - a Cham frame drum*; saranai* - a Cham double-reed wind instrument). Ancient *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] shrines were typically built along the coast or on sand dunes (today, only a few blocks of tuff remain) (Inrasara, 2016a).
Spatial distribution	The *Nghinh Ông* [whale-welcoming] festival remains very popular in the central and southern coastal provinces such as *Vũng Tàu*, *Phan Thiết*, *Nha Trang*, and *Cần Thơ*. In many fishing communities, the festival is held annually or every three years as a communal ritual for honoring the *Cá Ông* [Whale God] and praying for safety at sea. It has also become part of local maritime heritage, with some whale shrines, such as *Đình Lăng Ông*, receiving official recognition and protection (An, 2016)	*Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] worship is concentrated mainly in Cham areas of *Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận*. In *Ninh Thuận*, the ritual is still held at the beginning of the Cham calendar year, while in parts of *Bình Thuận*, *Po Riyak [God of the Waves]* worship has been absorbed into Vietnamese Whale God. Local Cham communities and research organizations continue to maintain related customs, including the Cham protective deity *Rịja Nưgar* [Kingdom Festival] ceremony combined with the *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] ritual (Inrasara, 2016b).

Aspects of Comparison	Lord of the South Sea / Vietnamese *Cá Ông Nam Hải*	*Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] of Cham people
Transmission and community base	The Whale God system is deeply rooted in the fishing village community and has been passed down primarily through oral tradition. Although the imperial court once elevated *Cá Ông* [Whale God] to the status of a national deity through titles such as *Nam Hải Cự Tộc Ngọc Lân Đẳng Thần* [The Divine Whale Spirit of the Great Lineage of the South Sea, Honored with Noble Rank], the tradition is not tied to a specific clan or sect. It is preserved through fishing associations, boat owners' groups, and the solidarity of coastal communities (Ban Nghiên cứu văn hóa, 2024).	*Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] is a Cham belief system, passed down through the Cham ritual hierarchy (*Mưdwơn, Ka-ing, Kadhar, Pajuw*), as well as through oral tradition and traditional Cham texts (*damnay*, *danak*). Later, Vietnamese culture adopted *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] through the belief in *Ông Nam Hải* [Lord Whale]. Efforts have been made to restore temples and maintain rituals such as the *Rija Nưgar* [Kingdom Festival] New Year ceremony in some Cham regions today (Ban Nghiên cứu văn hóa, 2024; Inrasara, 2016a).
Source	Official histories, *Sino-Nom* [pre-modern Vietnamese) texts, village archives	Cham inscriptions, ritual texts, and colonial-era ethnography

Cá Ông [Whale God] as the Compassionate Body of the Sea: Buddhistizing Coastal Multispecies Ethics

If the figure of *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] in Cham traditions articulates the whale as a marine savior embedded in indigenous cosmology, and if sacred waterscapes in Vietnamese communities organize Whale Lord through coastal shrines, rituals, and seascape memory, narratives that identify *Cá Ông* [Whale God] as the embodiment of *Phật Bà Quan Âm* [*Avalokiteśvara*, the Bodhisattva of compassion] disclose the ethical grammar that makes both formations intelligible. These accounts not only add a Buddhist layer to earlier beliefs but also translate the lived experience of maritime vulnerability - already evident in *Po Riyak*'s rescue functions and in ritualized sacred waterscapes - into a cosmology of compassion. This cosmology redefines the whale as a multispecies subject of moral intervention.

Across central and southern Vietnam, in both Cham and Vietnamese traditions, folk narratives recount *Quan Âm* [Guanyin] or the Buddha touring *Biển Đông* [Eastern Sea] and witnessing fishermen driven by hunger to risk storms, shipwreck, and death. In the Cham spiritual culture, a widely transmitted legend recounts that, during one of his journeys across the South China Sea, the Buddha felt deep compassion for the plight of these vulnerable beings. In their struggle for food and shelter, they were constantly forced to battle boundless waves and winds.

With boundless compassion, the Buddha immediately removed his saffron robe and cast it into the sea; every thread of that sacred garment transformed into a pod of whales that roamed the ocean day and night, ready to rescue ships and fishermen who found themselves in distress amidst the stormy seas. Thus, the whale was born from the Buddha's robe, rescuing fishermen in distress at sea (Trần & Đặng, 2012).

This motif recurs consistently across regional folklore collections in southern Vietnam. In *Bạc Liêu* province in southern Vietnam, there is a story about a fragment of *Quan Âm*'s [Guanyin] robe becoming the Whale God who, accompanied by two swordfish assistants, rescues fishermen (Chu, 2011). Similar accounts appear in the Mekong Delta and *Vĩnh Long*: *Avalokiteśvara* [the Bodhisattva of compassion] transforms pieces of her robe into whales entrusted with saving sinking boats (La, 2021); or, the Bodhisattva sees coastal people compelled by hunger to venture into stormy seas and sends countless whales to save them (T. L. Nguyễn, 2015).

Later coastal legends further depict the whale's body as a catastrophe itself. *Quan Âm* (*Avalokiteśvara)* fashioned the whale's skeleton with elephant bones and granted it the power of always reaching people in

distress in time (La, 2021; D. T. Nguyễn, 2011). *Cá Ông* [Whale God] and *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] are believed to intervene whenever people face storm intensification, boat overturning, or sailors losing their way. They lift vessels, guide fishermen back to shore, or position their bodies beneath wreckage to prevent drowning. In this sense, whales act as "rescue forces." They are diverse creatures whose form, speed, and endurance are ethically conceived and suited to the dangers of the sea. Thus, whales embody the transformation of Buddhist compassion into a concrete, practical ethics of care at sea.

The image of the whale deity *Quan Âm* [Goddess of Mercy] also reinforces the ritual practices of the sacred riverine region. D. V. Nguyễn 's (2016) ethnographic records on the worship of the *Cá Ông* [Whale God] by the coastal people of Central Vietnam show that the Buddhistization of whale worship occurred not only at the ritual level, but also at the linguistic and symbolic levels. Accordingly, fishermen chant *Thập nhị đại nguyện* [Twelve Great Vows] taught by *Quan Âm* [Goddess of Mercy] to summon the *Cá Ông* [Whale God] or Po Riyak [God of the Waves].

It is noteworthy that the expression *Thập nhị đại nguyện* [The Twelve Great Vows] sounds similar to Mahayana Buddhist prayers, particularly the ones associated with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Many records describe that in the southern province of *Bình Thuận*, coastal fishermen still preserve twelve ritual prayers known as the Twelve Great Vows bestowed by *Avalokiteśvara*, the Bodhisattva of compassion so that they can invoke the King of the South Sea in times of danger.

A Buddhist commentary on Avalokiteshvara describes these twelve vows, including the vow to listen to the cries of suffering beings, to rescue those in danger of drowning, and to guide beings to the Pure Land. The use of the term *đại nguyện* [great vows] repositions the *Cá Ông* [Whale God] within a Buddhist ethical universe rather than a purely local deity worship.

The repetition of phrases such as *làm những việc thiện* [performing good deeds], *cứu người lâm nạn* [rescuing people in distress], and *che chở* [protecting] are characteristic Buddhist terms calling for compassion, salvation, and the protection of all beings. These vows represent a familiar image of compassion in Buddhism: compassion that listens, descends, intervenes, and saves (Giới Hương, 2019; Thạch et al., 2014; Trần & Đặng, 2012).

The symbolic association between the whale and the "robe bestowed by the Bodhisattva" transforms the whale from a local sea creature or deity into a morally redeeming deity, linked to the compassionate power of Avalokiteshvara. In this sense, the whale is not only sanctified but also redefined through Buddhist concepts of mercy and salvation. This is a testament to the process of religious syncretism in Vietnam, often achieved through ethical language and symbolic translation.

Thus, it can be seen that in the communities living along the Vietnamese coast, this compassionate language in Buddhism is closely associated with the imagery of whales. In a life dependent on rivers and the sea, where danger is an integral part of their work, fishermen have revered whales as benevolent deities, gods of good fortune protecting human lives at sea and bringing fish, shrimp, and wealth.

The custom of worshipping whales is maintained in temples, in the preservation and offering of sacred bones, in prayer rituals, and in annual festivals such as the *Nghinh Ông* [whale-welcoming] and *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] ceremonies. It is interesting to note that Buddhism did not replace the whale worship rituals of the local river dwellers that permeated them, providing them with moral vocabulary through which whales not only became objects of worship but also creatures through which kindness, help, and reassurance were tangibly expressed (Đoài, 2017; H. L. Dương, 2015; T. A. Dương, 2015).

Thus, the stories of *Quan Âm* [Goddess of Mercy] show that the process of Buddhification is not abstract or dogmatic but gradually built through perilous situations arising in risky water life and memorable rescues. This building is also present through the sacred bodies or ritual skeletons of whales. In stories associated with *Avalokiteshvara*, whales are envisioned as creatures created for compassion: beings sent to help, to do good, and to bring mercy to the turbulent movements of the ocean. Thus, the Buddhistization of whale worship arose from the ongoing need of coastal communities to understand the meaning of vulnerability. In this understanding, the whale cannot be reduced to a symbol, a local deity, or a folkloric entity, but rather as a multi-species moral subject whose origins, physical strength, afterlife, rituals, and historical memory are all intertwined with the precariousness of coastal life. Whales are part of the ocean, but also embody compassion. Around this image, coastal communities have built an ethics of rescue, gratitude, mutual assistance, and interspecies duty.

CONCLUSION

The ethical meaning of whale worship can be viewed in the context of today's increasingly harsh ocean environment. Extreme weather, plastic pollution, overfishing, and coastal erosion have altered the world in which *Cá Ông* [Whale God] and *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] are remembered and revered. Numerous records show whale species, including sperm whales, beaked whales, pilot whales, and pygmy sperm whales, ingesting marine debris. The waste found in whale bodies ranges from plastic bags and packaging to ropes, fishing gear, and other discarded materials (Simmonds, 2012). Large pieces of plastic can injure internal organs, cause malnutrition, and lead to death in whales (Fossi et al., 2020; Germanov et al., 2018; Lebreton et al., 2017; Simmonds, 2012). Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific are typical examples of this crisis: whales continue to be ritually venerated, even as their habitats are increasingly destroyed by plastic waste and industrial exploitation (McCauley et al., 2015). The creatures once invoked as saviors of fishermen are increasingly exposed as victims of human development (Q.H. Nguyễn, et al., 2018).

In that context, the stories of *Cá Ông* [Whale God] and *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves] should be seen as powerful and vivid moral reminders. They preserve and transmit memories of rescue, thereby reminding people of their responsibility toward creatures whose lives are intimately intertwined with human lives. Whales are not merely symbols, resources, populations, or captivating marine animals but the creatures with whom coastal communities have long shared dangers, dependencies, grief, and hope. Understood in this way, whale worship gives marine conservation a different meaning, requiring not only scientific knowledge, environmental policies, or legal regulations, but also a remembrance of gratitude towards whales and the interrelationships between species in coastal waters.

In the current ecological crisis, whales also need help. The relation of rescue is therefore reversed: the whales once remembered as rescuers now become beings in need of human protection. In this context, the stories of *Cá Ông* [Whale God] and *Po Riyak* [God of the Waves], along with the accompanying worship rituals, retain their value. They remind coastal communities of how they survived at sea through diverse interspecies interactions in the past and raise the question of how to live in harmony with the ocean.

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