

Heritage environment and cultural legacy system in Lý Sơn Island District (Quảng Ngãi Province – Vietnam)

Nguyen Thi Hau^{1*}

¹University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam;
nt.hau@hcmussh.edu.vn (N.T.H.).

Abstract: Ly Son, an island district of Quang Ngai province, is strategically located in the South Central Coast of Vietnam. This study examines the interrelationship between the heritage environment, the cultural heritage system, and the local community of the island, with an emphasis on historical relics and rituals. It explores the dynamic interaction between these elements. Approaching from the archaeology of religion and ritual and community archaeology, the study clarifies the origin and function of religious relics, as well as the close relationship between the community and cultural heritage. The findings indicate that Ly Son's traditional livelihood revolves around sea exploitation. The cultural heritage system centers on the worship of sea gods, with the community organizing rituals and festivals in their honor. Most notably, these are the relics and festivals commemorating the people of Ly Son island who sacrificed their lives at sea. The research results emphasize that currently, maintaining and developing the marine economy is the most important factor in preserving the cultural heritage on Ly Son Island. Concurrently, it provides valuable recommendations for the government and local authorities in building policies to support the sustainable development of Ly Son while protecting the unique cultural heritage system of this island.

Keywords: Community archaeology, Cultural environment, Cultural legacy, Cultural preservation, Lý Sơn Island.

1. Introduction

Lý Sơn Island, located approximately 15 nautical miles off the coast from Sa Kỳ Port, comprises two main islands: Đảo Lớn (also known as Cù Lao Ré or Big Island) and Đảo Bé (Small Island). This article focuses on the tangible and intangible cultural heritage preserved on Lý Sơn's Big Island, emphasizing its reflection of the cultural characteristics, natural environment, and social dynamics of the community throughout different historical periods.

While numerous studies have explored Lý Sơn Island from historical, cultural, and religious perspectives—particularly in relation to local practices affirming Vietnam's maritime boundaries—these studies primarily address historical monuments and festivals without contextualizing them within the framework of "environmental heritage" or examining the relationship between environment and heritage. This gap underscores the need for a more integrated approach to understanding and conserving Lý Sơn's cultural and environmental legacy.

Examining the practices of cultural heritage conservation by local communities over centuries reveals a "bottom-up" approach rooted in socio-natural interactions. Insights from such practices can inform the development of "top-down" conservation policies that align with community-based traditions. These policies could contribute to sustainable and long-term economic, cultural, and social development, benefiting not only the residents of Lý Sơn Island but also coastal communities across Vietnam.

further detail resource exploitation and community involvement, such as the An Vinh villagers' contributions to the flotilla.

Key texts like *Annals of Dai Nam* (in its Prequel and Principal Records) document activities such as surveying, mapping, and planting markers in the Paracels. The *Dai Nam Comprehensive Encyclopaedia* also identifies Cu Lao Re as part of Quang Ngai province within the Hoang Sa Archipelago. These records, supported by *Geographical Gazetteer of Unified Imperial Vietnam* and *An Abbreviated History of Our Dynasty*, affirm Vietnam's sovereignty over the region and highlight the involvement of Ly Son inhabitants in maritime governance.

2.2. Overview of Ly Son Island's Cultural Heritage System and Coastal Social Culture in Recent Studies

Recent research focuses on the socio-cultural dimensions of Vietnam's coastal communities, with a focus on their economic and cultural practices. Works like *The Sea with the Ancient Vietnamese* (1996, by the Institute of Southeast Asia) and *The Vietnamese People with the Sea* (2011, by Nguyen Van Kim) examine the East Sea's strategic role in maritime trade since the Dai Viet era. Recent studies include *Marine Culture from an Overview* (2014, by Nguyen Thanh Loi), *Vietnamese Fishing Communities* (2020, by Nguyen Duy Thieu), and *The Seas and Islands of Vietnam from an Anthropological Perspective* (2022, by Nguyen Duy Thieu). These works investigate livelihoods, resource exploitation, and cultural practices of coastal communities, underscoring the diversity

Ly Son Island figures prominently in works such as *Traditional Culture in Ly Son Island* (2002) *Monography of Quang Ngai* (2*Vietnamese Folk Culture in Quang Ngai* (2001, *Ly Son Island - Perspectives from the Sea* (2018) *Quang Ngai Monuments and Landscapes* (*Preserving and Promoting Cultural Values in Ly Son* (2002, *Ly Son - Sa Huynh: Where Movements Originate* (2019)

The recent surveys (2022–2024) document nearly 30 additional folk belief structures on the island. These structures, deeply tied to the community's rituals and festivals, emphasize the historical and cultural significance of the sea as both a livelihood and spiritual realm. The preservation of Ly Son's cultural heritage involves preserving its environmental heritage, encompassing natural resources, fishing grounds, and the social fabric of traditional village institutions. Such efforts highlight the intricate relationship between cultural conservation and environmental sustainability, ensuring the continuity of Ly Son.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

Since the late 20th century, interdisciplinary research has become a prominent trend in the social sciences and humanities in Vietnam, fostering diverse and multi-faceted approaches to research subjects. Within this context, the study of religious architecture requires an integration of archaeological and community archeology methodologies, as such monuments often exist as dynamic entities within their communities. Situating religious and belief-based architectural monuments in the context of natural conditions and social life aligns with the exploration of the "heritage environment" throughout historical processes.

3.2. Archeology of Religion and Ritual

The archeology of religion and ritual involves the analysis of material remains to understand the ritual practices and religious beliefs of past societies. This approach aids scholars in identifying how rituals and religion shaped the lives of ancient populations, how beliefs were expressed, and how these expressions evolved over time [1].

3.3. Community Archaeology

Community archeology provides an avenue for local communities to actively engage in archaeological work and benefit from the preservation of archaeological values. As noted, "Community

archeology is not just a matter of working with, or providing educational opportunities to, the community; it is also about managing and building knowledge and concepts about heritage" [2]. This approach, often referred to as a "bottom-up" perspective on cultural heritage, emphasizes the pivotal role of local communities in interpreting, managing, and sustaining heritage [3].

The application of these methodologies enables a deeper understanding of cultural heritage by incorporating diverse perspectives and fostering a more objective and comprehensive awareness of its value. Moreover, it highlights the respective roles and responsibilities of communities and cultural heritage managers in cones

Cultural heritage embodies both tangible and intangible values, which are intrinsically linked to specific temporal, spatial, and communal contexts. These elements collectively form the "heritage environment." Research into this environment involves examining its unique characteristics and understanding human perceptions and interactions with it.

3.4. Scientific Research Methods

There are two main methods used in this work including Archaeological Methods and Community Archaeology.

Archaeological field survey: 34 historical monuments and landscapes were surveyed sorted into 3 times from 2022 to 2024, alternatively. Most of the surveys have been conducted in the Mid-march of lunar calendar that were also the time of festivals in the island. There are many data acquired by archaeological field survey that will be useful in examination to the system of tangible and intangible values in the island.

Participant observation method: it is reflected in participated in the major festivals. It was contributed by communities who joined archeology projects. Communities are given the power to interpret the past through festivals, monuments and archaeological archives.

The qualitative study with Group interview: it was employed to acquire data from groups related to heritage and preserve those heritages, such as: 1/ Group 1 consists local managers/ authorities working in cultural heritage, agricultural economics, fisheries, and tourism. 2/ Group 2 consists of the resident community in Lý Sơn island, mainly those who directly participate in the management and practice of rituals and festivals, representing long-standing and prestigious local families; 3/ Group 3 consists of the tourists those visited and experienced into the festivals in the island.

Data collection and analytical methods: it was employed to work onto the state papers related to cultural heritage, statistics on the local economic-cultural development strategies, including economic and tourism heritage.

Analyzing data on cultural heritage of the island: Analyzing data on cultural heritage on the island: It was employed working onto the domestic published studies related to history, archeology, anthrthropology, cultural studies, which issued by the government, local authorities of Quảng Ngãi province, and Lý Sơn district.

The above methods were employed to identify the environmental impact into conservation and heritage practices, environmental protection associated with communities.

4. Results

4.1. Natural Environment

Lý Sơn Island, situated approximately 15 nautical miles off the coast from Sa Kỳ port, is located at latitude 15°32'14"–15°38'14" and longitude 109°05'04"–109°14'12". The island's climate is defined by two distinct seasons: wet and dry. Geological studies suggest that the island was formed through volcanic activity during the late Neogene period, approximately 25–30 million years ago. This volcanic origin has endowed the island with a unique landscape, featuring fertile basaltic soil ideal for agricultural practices, particularly in the southern region. The volcanic formations also created

extensive reefs, fostering a diverse marine ecosystem with abundant coral reefs, seagrass, and over 700 species of marine flora and fauna, including a wide variety of seaweed and phytoplankton [4].

4.2. Social and Cultural Dynamics

Administratively, Lý Sơn comprises six villages under its district jurisdiction, without commune-level subdivisions. Two hamlets—East and West—fall under An Vĩnh village on the larger island, while three hamlets—Đông Hộ, East, and West—constitute An Bình village on the smaller island. The island's history spans millennia, with a cultural heritage marked by the Sa Huynh, Champa, and Vietnamese periods, each contributing distinct layers to the island's cultural evolution.

Archaeological evidence from sites such as Xóm Ốc (An Vĩnh) and Suối Chình (An Hải) traces human activity back to the Sa Huynh culture, approximately 3,000 years ago. These sites reveal a maritime-focused lifestyle through artifacts like shell tools, jewelry, burial jars, and imported goods, indicating active trade networks [5, 6]. Remnants of Champa culture, including the Buddhist Cave Temple and the Thien Y A Na shrine, further highlight the island's historical significance. These cultural elements were gradually assimilated into Vietnamese traditions following the migration of Kinh ethnic groups in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

The Kinh settlers, originating from Quảng Ngãi province, established distinct communities on the island. Historical records indicate that 15 ancestral families, representing prominent clans, formed the foundation of An Vĩnh and An Hải villages. Their settlement was pivotal in developing the island's economy, particularly in fishing and agriculture. Lý Sơn's strategic location also made it a hub for maritime activities, including participation in the Nguyễn Dynasty's "Hoang Sa flotilla," tasked with exploring and safeguarding the Paracel and Spratly Islands [7].

4.2.1. Contemporary Socioeconomic Landscape

As of 2023, Lý Sơn District spans approximately 10 square kilometers and is home to 24,000 residents, predominantly on the larger island. The local economy relies heavily on marine occupations and agriculture, particularly the cultivation of garlic and shallots, for which the island is renowned. The growth of tourism has further diversified income sources, with services catering to visitors playing an increasing role.

To preserve its rich biodiversity, part of the island and its surrounding waters have been designated as a Marine Protected Area. While this initiative has curtailed near-shore fishing, it has encouraged aquaculture as an alternative livelihood. These adaptive strategies ensure sustainable resource use and support the economic stability of the island's population.



Figure 2.

Ly Son landscape seen from Thoi Loi crater.

Source: Nguyễn [8].

4.3. An Overview of Historical-Cultural Monuments on Lý Sơn Island

- *The process of sea adaptation and exploitation found from the monuments*

+ Archaeological sites: Xóm Ốc, Suối Chình, Giếng Xó La...

+ Worshipping Cá Ông monuments: tombs called with phrases Inner mound and Outer mound, Tân's tomb, Chánh's tomb, Thử's tomb (Vạn Vĩnh Thạnh, An Vĩnh village); Đông Hải's tomb, Vạn An Phú's tomb (Vạn An Phú, An Hải village)...

+ The monuments related to 'Hoàng Sa flotilla' – Bắc Hải: An Vĩnh village communal house, An Hải village communal house, Am Linh Buddhist temple and Hoang Sa soldier's tomb, ancestral worship hall of the Pham Quang Anh family, Vo Van family, Nguyen Quang Tam, Dang Van Siem, Vo Van Khiet temple and tomb, graves of Pham Huu Nhat and Pham Quang Ảnh...

+ The monuments associated with village institutions and communities: in An Vĩnh village where located shrines of Thien Y A Na, Ông Lôi Công, Lân Vĩnh Hòa, Lân An Hòa, Lân Hội Đồng, Miếu Âm Hồn, Dinh Đụn, Shrine of agriculture deities ...; In An Hải village with the shrines of Thien Y A Na, Chúa Yàng, Bà Thủy Long (Lady Water Dragon), shrine of Five basic elements, Lân Lý Nhân, Cave temple, Lân Vĩnh Lộc, Lân Trung Chính, Lân Thuận An, Lân Lý Nhân, Lân Đông Thạnh,...

+ The usually festivals at the mentioned monuments: 'Feast and Commemoration Festival for Hoang Sa Soldiers'; 'Four sacred animals boat racing', 'dồi bông festival', and, ceremony to repay the debt of the gods when prayers are answered, Đạo Mẫu (the cult of mother goddesses); the spirit medium ritual of Vietnam.

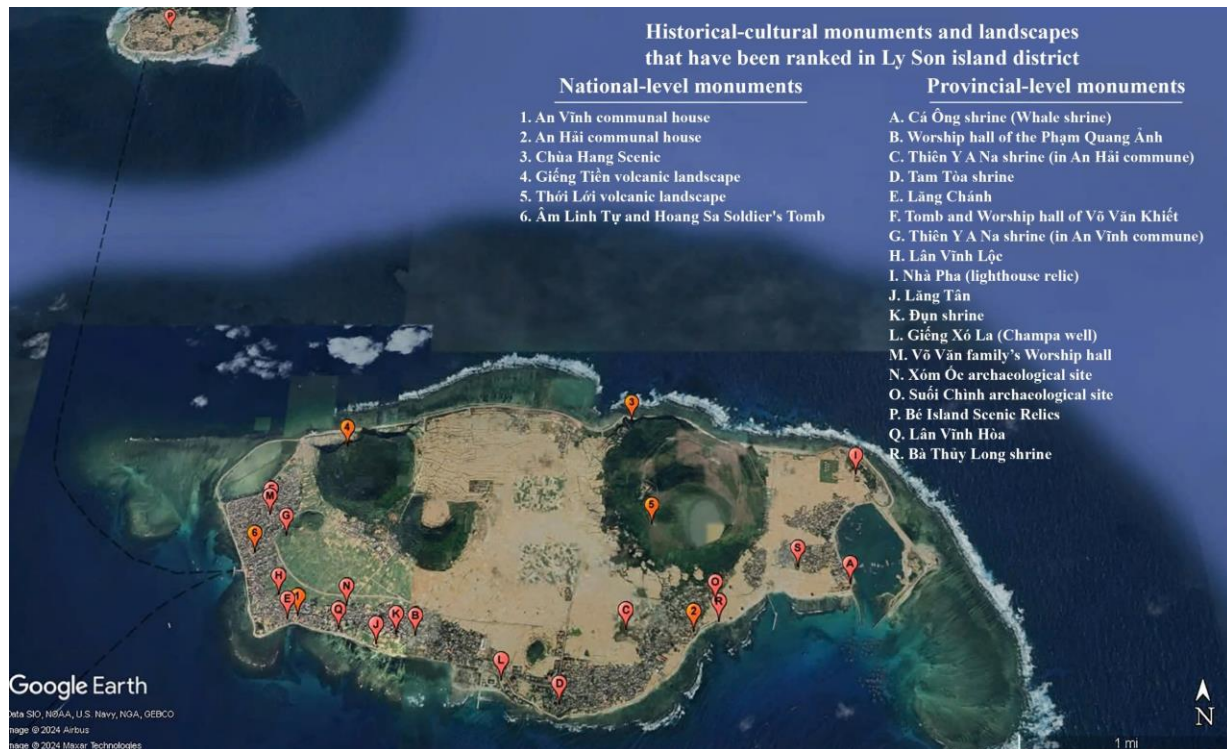


Figure 3.
Historical and cultural relics on Ly Son Island.
Source: Nguyễn [8].

4.3.1. Monuments for Whale Worship

The increase in the number of whale shrines reflects the development of fishing fishermen's beliefs. System of whale shrines on Lý Sơn island has many different names, such as Nam Hải, Đông Hải in An Phú fishing village. Shrines belonging to Vĩnh Thạnh fishing village, where worshipping Đồng Đình Đại Vương in Lăng Tân; Nam Hải Cự Tộc Ngọc Lân Tôn Thần in Lăng Chánh; Hải Dã Xa Đại Tướng Quân in Lân Cồn Ngoài; Nam Hải Cự Tộc Đức Ngư Tôn Thần in Lăng Thứ... The whale is known as the god of waves, who often rescued people in distress at sea. Vĩnh Thạnh fishing village is the only place currently maintaining a regular whale worshipping ceremony, although An Phu has also held the ceremony before.



Figure 4.
Whale skeleton worshiped at Lăng Tân Exhibition House.

Source: Nguyễn [8].

4.3.2. Communal Houses in Vietnam Villages Dedicated to Worship the Village Gods and the Monument Involved in Hoàng Sa Flotilla

Two public house shrines are recognized as state monument-level including An Hải and An Vĩnh, dedicated to worship the village God, the village founder or a local hero in Lý Sơn island. The two shrines organize many cultural activities, festivals, and spiritual beliefs every year, a form of connecting residents of An Vinh and An Hai villages.

- Some main festivals found at An Vĩnh and An Hải villages, such as: Ceremony to worship Hoang Sa - Truong Sa soldiers; Four-sacred animal boat racing festival; *dôi bông* festival... Family worship ceremony; Ceremony to pray for the souls of Hoang Sa soldiers who died at sea in the past, and usually takes place on the third lunar month every year.

Bến Đình boat parking is located in front of An Vĩnh village, where the boats of the Hoang Sa flotilla used to moored, and headed to the islands after the ceremony at the An Vĩnh shrine. Bến Đình boat parking was also the place to welcome the boats of the Hoang Sa flotilla returning from the paracel.

- *Âm Linh tự* Shrine: is a place to worship the spirits and martyrs of the armed force who served and died in the Paracels and Spratlys.
- Places of worship called in Vietnamese as *Dinh* (Communal temple)- *Lân* (Village shrine)- *Miếu* (Temple) where the area and architecture vary depending on the economic conditions of each village, and cannot be larger than the common house of a village. A shrine is small and located within the family compound, called *Miếu* in Vietnamese, headed by a clan leader who takes care of it and maintains it; and will be managed by the village chief if it belongs to the village. *Dinh – Lân*
- *Miếu* are the place where the fishing ceremony takes place on auspicious days, the boats immediately head to the fishing grounds in paracel and the spratlys; festivals to pray for bumper catches of fish and safe journeys at sea.



Figure 5.
An Vinh communal house.
Source: Nguyễn [8].



Figure 6.
Model of the offering boat in the Khao le the linh ceremony at An Vinh communal house.
Source: Nguyễn [8].

4.3.3. Shrines Dedicated to Goddesses

There are 15 shrines dedicated to goddesses including Thiên Y A Na, Five elements of nature, Yàng Lady, Nguu Man Nuong Lady..., worshiping goddesses is close engaged with fishermen living in Lý Sơn island; the two major shrines of which are Lan Vinh Loc shrine built in the East village in An Vinh,

and Thien Y A Na shrine is located in the East village in An Hai. Monuments statistics dedicated to goddesses in villages An Hải and An Vĩnh are 8 and 7, respectively.

Lý Sơn island residents have selected and harmonized many different beliefs, especially the belief of "worshipping goddesses/mothers", during the process of exploring, building and living on the island, having to deal with many challenge.

The people of Lý Sơn are proud of 24 shrines surrounding island dating back to late of 18th to early 19th century, such as An Vĩnh shrine, Vĩnh ân Buddhist temple, Âm hồn Buddhist temple, Tân Lập tomb all that dated to 1798; An Hải monument complex consists a shrine house, an ancestor shrine house, a shrine worshipping Bui Ta Han, shrine dedicated to the founder of village, shrine of whale, Thiên Quỷ shrine... All those structure were constructed over a previous monument foundation dated to 1820; in addition, there are many shrines dedicated to goddesses, whale, so on [10].



Figure 7.
Dinh Thien Y A Na (Thien Y A Na temple) in A Hai village.
Source: Nguyễn [8].

4.3.4. Some Typical Festivals and Rituals

- Feast and Commemoration Festival for Hoang Sa Soldiers at the common houses in An Vĩnh and An Hải villages: this is one of the major ritual ceremonies in the island. It not only recalls the seakeeping tradition of the residents of Lý Sơn, but also recreates the history of soldiers residing in Lý Sơn participating in the Hoang Sa Flotilla who performed the duty of exploiting and protecting the island over centuries. In particular, families on the island who have relatives serving as soldiers in Hoang Sa armed forces worshipping ceremonies to show their gratitude to their ancestors; It might inspire and maintain maritime traditions, protect fishing grounds, and also protect national sovereignty over the sea and islands.

Many families have members participating in the armed force on the fishing grounds of Paracel and Spratlys, those families are living in the island. thus many monuments were associated with the historical process of the Paracel flotilla forces, such as Am Linh Buddhist temple and Hoang Sa soldier grave site, ancestral worship hall of the Võ Van family, Pham Van family, Pham Quang family, Nguyen family, and areas with empty tombs

- Ceremony to repay the debt of the gods when prayers are answered: Ceremony to repay the debt of the gods when prayers are answered: which usually being carried out by Cát Lái, such festival attracts millions of fishers to there. Cát Lái will prepare offerings, sending them to the shrines of *Dinh - Lân - Miếu* in the villages to thank the gods for protecting them during their voyages. Fishermen often repair boats and fishing gear, as well as organize offerings to the gods in September and October of the lunar calendar on the island. Tourists coming to Lý Sơn will be invited to stay to enjoy 'gift living from gods' at *Dinh - Lân - Miếu*.

Village regulations are often documents that provide information about ceremonies and festivals at most of the monuments crossing the island, the role of the community is also clearly regulated. For example, the 'Feast and Commemoration Festival for Hoang Sa Soldiers' is regulated by the village to only be held at communal houses and families that have people served in paracel and spratlys.

The ceremony to worship the God of water will take place on the boat or at sea. Presiding over the ceremony is the boat owner or representative of the homeowner standing on the boat to pray for the sea gods and sea spirits to bless and protect them, so that the trip out to sea will have good luck, and to maintain marine fishing grounds.

The four sacred boat racing festival in early spring is an important festival of the year. Cat-lai and fishermen gather to exchange experiences in catching seafood, and organize festivals to serve the gods during the New Year at *Dinh - Lân - Miếu*. Fishermen participate in boat racing to represent the spirit of solidarity in the community, and begin the first sea trip of the new year after the boat racing festival ends, on the 8th day of the lunar new year. New Year is an opportunity to reunite with family according to the concept of fishermen in fishing villages, and is also an opportunity to give thanks to the gods.

The ceremony to worship the god Nam Hai and the goddess Thien Y A Na are also ceremonies marking beliefs and beliefs. Fishermen and Cát-lái often attend the ceremony to worship Nam Hai God and Thien Y A Na goddess, and pray for a good fishing trip. Boat owners will offer money, or invite performing arts troupes to make offerings to *Dinh-Lân-Miếu* if their fishing team has a good harvest and the fishermen are safe and healthy.

The aforementioned festivals reflect Ly Son Island's rich cultural heritage, characterized by numerous traditional celebrations similar to those found in the coastal regions of South Central Vietnam. A distinguishing feature of Ly Son's cultural identity, however, is the presence of two unique festivals dedicated to honoring the memory of soldiers who sacrificed their lives on the Hoang Sa Islands. These commemorative events underscore the profound historical connection between the island's inhabitants and their pivotal role in defending national sovereignty and territorial boundaries. The local community's continued observance of these festivals serves as a testament to their deep respect and enduring reverence for the bravery and sacrifices of their ancestors.

Table 1.
Some typical festivals and monuments on Ly Son island district.

No.	Festivals' name	Community organizes of festival	Festival venue	Time
1	Hoang Sa Soldiers Commemoration Ceremony <i>National Intangible Cultural Heritage</i>	An Vinh Village	An Vinh Communal House, Tay Hamlet. National Historic and Cultural Site	16 th March (lunar month)
2	Hoang Sa Soldiers Commemoration Ceremony	Vo (Van) Clan	Vo (Van) Clan Ancestral House, Tay Hamlet, An Vinh Village. Provincial Historic and Cultural Site of Quang Ngai	16 th February (lunar month)
3	Four Sacred Creatures Boat Racing Festival <i>National Intangible Cultural Heritage</i>	An Vinh Village	Racecourse at An Vinh Communal House. (<i>National Historic and Cultural Site</i>)	4 th January (lunar month)
4	Four Sacred Creatures Boat Racing Festival	An Hai Village	An Hai Communal House, Dong Hamlet. (<i>National Historic and Cultural Site</i>)	4 th of January (Lunar month)
5	Thiên Y A Na Goddess Festival	Tay Hamlet, An Vinh Village	Temple of Thiên Y A Na, Tay Hamlet, An Vinh Village. (<i>Provincial Historic and Cultural Site of Quang Ngai</i>)	25 th December (lunar month)
6	Groundbreaking Ceremony	An Hai Village	An Hai Communal House, Dong village (<i>National Historic and Cultural Site</i>)	3rd January (<i>Lunar New Year</i>)
7	Dồi Bồng Ceremony	An Hai Village	An Hai Communal House, Dong Village. <i>National Historic and Cultural Site</i>	8 th January (<i>Lunar New Year</i>) <i>Rarely held in recent years</i>
8	Chúa Yàng Goddess Festival	Dong Hamlet, An Hai Village	Temple of Chúa Yàng, Dong Hamlet, An Hai Village. (<i>Provincial Historic and Cultural Site of Quang Ngai</i>)	25 th November (lunar month)
9	Lễ vía Nữ thần U Linh Xạ Nữ Vương The Festival of the Goddess U Linh Xạ Nữ Vương An Vinh Village: Date: 25th day of the 2nd lunar month	An Vinh Village	Dinh Đụn, thôn Đông Làng An Vĩnh. <i>Di tích lịch sử văn hoá tỉnh Quảng Ngãi</i> Dinh Đụn, Dong Hamlet, An Vinh Village, A cultural and historical site in Quang Ngai Province	25 th February (lunar month)
10	Epidemic Expulsion Ceremony	An Vĩnh Village	An Vinh Communal House, Tay Hamlet. National Historic and Cultural Site	Held when there is an outbreak in the village
11	Thiên Y A Na Goddess Festival	An Hai Village	Thiên Y A Na Temple, Tay Hamlet, An Hai Village. <i>Provincial Historic and Cultural Site of Quang Ngai</i>	25 th February (Lunar month)
12	Thần Nông (Agriculture God) Ceremony	An Hai Village	Thần Nông Shrine, Dong Hamlet, An Hai Village. (<i>Provincial Historic and Cultural Site of Quang Ngai</i>)	25 th March (Lunar month)
13	Whale Worship Ceremony	An Phu Fishing Village	Đông Hải Mausoleum, Dong Hamlet, An Hai Village. <i>Provincial Historic and Cultural Site of Quang Ngai</i>	20 th July (Lunar month)

14	Whale Worship Ceremony	Vinh Thanh Fishing Village	Tan Mausoleum, Dong Hamlet, An Vinh Village. <i>Provincial Historic and Cultural Site of Quang Ngai</i>	20 th December (Lunar month)
----	------------------------	----------------------------	---	---

Source: Nguyễn [8].

5. Discussion

Vietnam possesses significant potential for establishing extensive fishing grounds, supported by over 3,260 km of coastline and a maritime territory, including exclusive economic zones, spanning approximately 1 million square kilometers from north to south. The climatic conditions of Central Vietnam facilitate year-round fishing activities, with relatively stable weather and abundant marine resources. Among Vietnam's coastal regions, Lý Sơn Island stands out for its rich historical and cultural heritage, much of which is intricately linked to the Hoang Sa Flotilla, established during the Nguyễn Dynasty to exploit and protect fishing grounds. The island's proximity to the Paracel (Hoang Sa) and Spratly (Truong Sa) archipelagos—traditional fishing grounds for Lý Sơn fishermen—underscores its strategic and economic importance.

Fishing in these waters holds immense significance for the livelihoods of the Lý Sơn community. Historical records reveal that the Nguyễn Dynasty formalized regulations governing the selection of young men, the number of vessels, and the schedules for departure and return of the Hoang Sa Flotilla. This fleet played a dual role: ensuring the sustainable exploitation of marine resources and affirming Vietnam's sovereignty over the islands through tasks such as erecting sovereignty markers and conducting cartographic surveys of the archipelagos in the East Sea. These efforts, particularly in the Paracel and Spratly areas, solidified their status as critical fishing grounds, as documented in historical sources.

The history of Lý Sơn's engagement with the sea intertwines economic necessity with national sovereignty. From the 17th century to the present, the island's inhabitants have balanced the dual objectives of resource utilization and territorial protection. Families with ancestral ties to the Hoang Sa Flotilla, such as the Võ Văn, Phạm Văn, Trần, Nguyễn, Dương, and Trương lineages, continue to reside on the island, contributing to the preservation of its cultural heritage.

The protection and promotion of Lý Sơn's cultural values are evident in the maintenance and restoration of monuments, communal houses, and symbolic structures like the empty tombs honoring those who perished while serving in the Hoang Sa Flotilla. These cultural practices emphasize the historical legacy of maritime defense and communal solidarity. Consequently, the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos can be viewed as integral to the natural and cultural heritage of the Lý Sơn community, reflecting their enduring relationship with the sea and its resources.

Festivals and rituals on Lý Sơn Island are deeply intertwined with the community's cultural and spiritual beliefs, reflecting a profound connection to the sea as both a familiar natural environment and a vital resource. These practices honor those who have sacrificed to protect the maritime territories and sustain the island's way of life. Monuments and festivals serve as sacred spaces and times, offering spiritual support to fishermen as they venture into the sea, safeguard fishing grounds, and ensure the community's livelihood. This connection is exemplified by the annual Fishing Festival, held at the beginning of the year, which highlights the islanders' enduring affection and reverence for the sea and islands.

Although the sea represents an expansive and multi-dimensional living space, the island community has historically adapted to its challenges by learning about its natural environment, accommodating its dynamics, and sustainably exploiting its resources. What sets Lý Sơn apart from other regions is the high density of historical and cultural relics, along with a vibrant tradition of folk festivals that have been preserved for centuries. This cultural distinctiveness originates from the island's history of migration, where settlers from the mainland brought with them the customs and traditions of their ancestral homelands as a means of spiritual support and community cohesion.

Life on Lý Sơn requires both physical and mental resilience, as the harsh marine environment demands adaptability and endurance. The island's complex of sacred monuments—such as *Dinh*, *Lân*, and *Miếu*—provides "spiritual strength" to the fishermen. Central to their cultural adaptation is the worship of sea gods, revered for their perceived ability to neutralize natural disasters and ensure safety during voyages. This belief fosters communal solidarity, enabling fishermen to endure the arduous conditions of their labor. Successful fishing trips, supported by these beliefs, contribute to the community's economic stability and the sustainable development of their fishing practices.

The enduring presence of Lý Sơn fishermen in traditional fishing grounds serves as tangible evidence of their role in maintaining and protecting these maritime spaces. These activities have, in turn, shaped a unique cultural heritage system rooted in the natural environment. Festivals and rituals associated with the island's monuments have been transmitted across generations, preserving a rich heritage environment grounded in historical traditions and maritime culture. This intricate relationship between the community, their spiritual practices, and the sea highlights the resilience and cultural richness of the Lý Sơn islanders.



Figure 8.
Interview with representative of Ly Son district Fishing Corporation.
Source: Nguyễn [8].

Tangible cultural heritage on Lý Sơn Island encompasses historical and cultural structures, while intangible cultural heritage includes rituals and festivals. These two cultural forms are intricately interconnected, reflecting the island's unique heritage system. Religious structures, such as whale shrines, goddess shrines, and memorials for those who died at sea, are central to community life. These sites are often constructed and renovated by the community, with contributions increasing during times of economic prosperity. The condition of these relics directly correlates with the success of fishing activities, as evidenced by the scale and vibrancy of the rituals and festivals hosted at these sites. This tradition, preserved for centuries, signifies a continuous and sustainable relationship between the community and their fishing grounds, underscoring their historical assertion of sovereignty over maritime territories.

A significant component of Lý Sơn's intangible cultural heritage is the *Feast and Commemoration Festival for Hoang Sa Soldiers*. This ancient ceremony, organized by An Vĩnh villagers and clans, aims to honor and pray for the safety of soldiers serving in the Hoang Sa armed forces. Initially held in the ancestral halls of the Võ Văn and Phạm Văn families, the festival later expanded to include other sites such as the Âm Linh Buddhist Temple and the An Vĩnh communal house. Held annually on the 16th day of the third lunar month, the festival embodies local beliefs aimed at reducing risks faced by soldiers. Rituals include the creation of paper effigies representing Hoang Sa soldiers and banana tree trunks fashioned into symbolic boats, which are ceremonially released into the sea to symbolically absorb potential dangers. These rituals instill confidence in the soldiers as they fulfill royal mandates, while also serving as a way for families to honor deceased members through clan-specific ceremonies. Over time, the festival has evolved into a deeply humanistic and uniquely spiritual tradition, integral to the cultural identity of Lý Sơn residents.

The interaction between tangible and intangible heritage on Lý Sơn aligns with the concept of "interoperability," which describes a dynamic relationship progressing from cognitive understanding to applied practices and performance capabilities. This framework, when applied to heritage environmental research, highlights the community's critical role in heritage conservation, emphasizing a bottom-up approach [3]. The residents of Lý Sơn exemplify this interaction by seamlessly integrating their natural environment, historical traditions, monuments, and festivals.

The "heritage environment" of Lý Sơn includes both physical and immaterial dimensions. The physical environment comprises the island's geographical features, its maritime spaces, and the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos within Vietnam's waters. The immaterial environment reflects the deep attachment between the people and the sea, their integration of fisheries and agriculture with spiritual practices, and the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. Together, these elements form a cohesive heritage environment, illustrating the profound relationship between Lý Sơn's cultural heritage system and its surrounding natural and historical context.

6. Conclusion

Thieu [9] introduces the concept of "marine adaptability" to analyze the degree of participation, mastery, and exploitation capacity of marine communities. Historically, institutions and marine communities have engaged with the sea across three dimensions: at sea (resource exploitation of islands, archipelagos, marine spaces, and energy sources like wind power), on the sea surface (transportation, trade, cultural exchanges, and energy from waves and tides), and beneath the sea (fishing, marine product harvesting, and extraction of natural resources such as minerals, gas, and oil). This multifaceted adaptability underscores the profound awareness and interactive capabilities of the Lý Sơn community with their surrounding marine and island environment. The relationship between humans and the sea is reciprocal, characterized by both reverence for and mastery over nature, evolving into the traditional occupation of maritime exploitation.

The establishment of religious institutions, rituals, and festivals reflects this deep connection between the community and the sea. These practices signify a shift from cognitive understanding of the marine environment to applied and practical engagement, emphasizing the community's cultural and spiritual alignment with the ocean. The case of Lý Sơn Island demonstrates that protecting fishing grounds is inherently tied to safeguarding the "heritage environment."

Preservation of historical relics and the continuation of traditional festivals are not solely acts of cultural preservation but also vital activities for tourism and heritage-based economic development. Furthermore, these practices manifest the community's enduring aspiration to assert ownership over fishing grounds, ensuring their freedom to traverse and sustainably exploit marine resources. In this way, Lý Sơn's cultural heritage and marine adaptability serve as vital components of its socio-economic and ecological resilience.

Funding:

This research is funded by Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM) under grant number C2023-18b-05.

Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

Copyright:

© 2025 by the authors. This open-access article is distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

References

- [1] T. M. D. Lâm, "Some issues of ritual and religious archeology," in *Proceedings of the Scientific Conference on Ritual and Religious Archeology, University of Social Sciences and Humanities - Hanoi National University*, 2023.
- [2] L.-J. Richardson and J. Almansa-Sánchez, "Do you even know what public archaeology is? Trends, theory, practice, ethics," *World Archaeology*, vol. 47, no. 2, pp. 194–211, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2015.101759>
- [3] M. H. Ngo, *Preserving the heritage environment*. Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City National University Publishing House, 2014.
- [4] P. K. P. Nguyen, P. U. Nguyen, D. L. Bui, and L. A. Nguyen, "The current situation of aquatic exploitation in Ly Son district, Quang Ngai province," in *Proceeding of International Scientific Conference Bien Dong 2022, Khanh Hoa*, 2022, pp. 896–905.
- [5] V. T. Ha, *Vietnamese archeology*. Ha Noi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1999.
- [6] N. K. Doan, "Xom Oc site (Cu Lao Re - Quang Ngai) and Bai Ong site (Cu Lao Cham - Quang Nam): Documentation and awareness," *Archaeolog*, vol. 2, pp. 75–100, 2002.
- [7] T. T. Nguyen, "Research, preservation and orienting development of tangible and intangible culture in Ly Son insular Island," Report of Quang Ngai Provincial Scientific project, 2002.
- [8] T. H. Nguyễn, "Historical and cultural relics on Ly Son Island," Master's Thesis, City, Vietnam, 2023.
- [9] N. D. Thieu, *Vietnam's seas and islands: From an anthropological perspective*. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 2022.
- [10] D. V. Nguyen, *Quang Ngai – some cultural historical issues [Quang Ngai and a few cultural historical issues]*. Ha Noi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 2008.