

The Role of Music in Southern Khmer Du Ke Opera as a Link between Cultural Heritage and Community Life

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ABSTRACT

Music occupies a central role in the Du Ke (Lakhon Bassak) theater of the Southern Khmer, serving simultaneously as the structural foundation of the performance, the emotional guide, the support for acting, and the affirmation of cultural identity. Through its rich repertoire of melodies, rhythms, and traditional instruments, music has become the very soul of the stage, creating a cultural space that is both solemn and intimate.

Beyond its artistic value, Du Ke music reflects layers of history, belief, and philosophy of life, thereby functioning as a “bridge” that connects heritage with community life. The active participation of the community—from maintaining troupes and transmitting knowledge to innovating and integrating Du Ke into cultural practices—remains the decisive factor ensuring the survival and development of this heritage.

This paper emphasizes that music is the convergence point between heritage and community, securing the enduring vitality of Du Ke theater in the context of contemporary integration.

Keywords: Music; Du Ke; Southern Khmer; Heritage; Community

INTRODUCTION

The Khmer community of the Mekong Delta is one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Vietnam, with a distinctive cultural life. Through a long process of settlement, the Khmer have created, nurtured, and passed down a vast treasure trove of cultural and artistic heritage, including architecture, festivals, folklore, and various forms of performing arts. Among this heritage, the Du Ke stage performance stands out as a representative form of musical theater, reflecting both the spiritual life and aesthetic aspirations of the community. Particularly, with its seamless combination of singing, dancing, music, and drama, Du Ke not only preserves the essence of Khmer folk culture but also absorbs and selectively integrates the artistic influences of the Kinh, Hoa, and even Western cultures, forming a unique and captivating artistic expression.

It is worth noting that in Du Ke, music plays a central role, considered the "soul" of the entire performance. From the local folk melodies that deeply embody Khmer identity to the musical styles influenced by the Kinh's Cai Luong, the Teochew and Cantonese songs of the Hoa people, and even French musical elements, Du Ke has become a vital link between various artistic elements: lyrics, dance, props, and costumes. Through this, music not only drives the narrative but also enhances the portrayal of characters, creating emotional depth, and contributes to the dramatic peaks, making Du Ke a standout feature in the artistic landscape of Southern Vietnam (Tien & Duong, 2014; Pham, Nguyen, & Pham, 2019).

From this practical perspective, the paper chooses the topic "The Role of Music in Southern Khmer Du Ke Opera as a Link between Cultural Heritage and Community Life". The study of this topic is based on the understanding that Du Ke music is not only a means of expressing Khmer identity but also serves as a strong bridge between heritage and the community. In this context, music preserves traditional values while also opening possibilities for cultural exchange and assimilation. Furthermore, it reflects the vibrant life of the Khmer community in the Mekong Delta as they strive to preserve and promote their cultural heritage in the contemporary era of integration.

Content

Overview of the Southern Khmer Community and Du Ke Performing Arts

The Southern Khmer community is one of the largest ethnic minorities in Vietnam, primarily located in Can Tho, Vinh Long, Ca Mau, and An Giang provinces. Over centuries of settlement in the Mekong Delta region, the Khmer people have developed and preserved a rich and diverse cultural heritage. This is reflected through their impressive system of pagodas and towers, distinctive traditional festivals, a wealth of folklore literature, refined dance and singing arts, and especially their various forms of folk theater. Thus, it is evident that theater plays not only an entertainment role but also serves as a medium reflecting the spiritual life, while also affirming the cultural identity of the Southern Khmer community.

In the context of the Mekong Delta—an area known for its multicultural diversity and rich cultural exchanges—new forms of art have had the opportunity to flourish. One of the most prominent examples is Du Ke (also known as Lakhon Bassak), which emerged in the early 20th century. Du Ke is considered a hybrid form of opera, combining elements of singing, dancing, music, acting, and stage aesthetics. In terms of content, the performances are often based on Khmer myths and folk tales, while also absorbing elements from Chinese operas, Vietnamese Cai Luong (reformed theater), and Western drama. In terms of performance art, Du Ke not only inherits the folk storytelling tradition but is also dramatized, thus making it more vibrant, engaging, and aesthetically rich. Notably, this art form stands out for its "multivocal and multicolored" artistic language. The elements of dialogue, singing, dance, and music do not exist separately but interweave and support each other. Among them, music plays a central role: it not only strengthens the narrative but also portrays character traits, guides emotions, and enhances dramatic tension.

In practice, Du Ke is not only an entertainment function but also serves as the "stage of life" for the Southern Khmer people. Performances are often associated with temple festivals, Tet holidays, or other significant occasions, creating a cultural space for the community to enjoy art and strengthen solidarity.

Furthermore, Du Ke demonstrates the creativity and cultural adaptation of the Khmer people. Building upon traditional theatrical forms such as Ro Bam and Di Ke, Du Ke has selectively absorbed elements from Chaozhou opera (Chinese), Vietnamese Cai Luong Opera influenced by Cantonese and Hunan opera (Ho Quang style), and the Lakhon Khôl art of Cambodia (Tien & Duong, 2014; Ngoc Phuong, 2023). Through this synthesis, Du Ke preserves the ethnic essence while contributing to the cultural landscape.

In the context of globalization and current integration, Du Ke is not only a form of folk art but also a testament to the enduring vitality and adaptability of Southern Khmer culture. The harmonious blend of tradition and modernity has allowed Du Ke to both affirm its ethnic core and reflect the spirit of cultural exchange inherent to the Mekong Delta region. Therefore, Du Ke has become one of the distinctive contributions of the Khmer community to the diverse and vibrant tapestry of contemporary Vietnamese culture.

Music in Du Ke Theater – The Soul of Performance

In the structure of Du Ke theater, the orchestra occupies a central position. It not only shapes the overall atmosphere but also closely accompanies the actors' performance, becoming an inseparable element of the play. The traditional Khmer ensemble includes *Truô U* (two-string fiddle), *Truô Sô* (spike fiddle), *Khlôy* (bamboo flute), *Skô Thum* (large drum), *Skô Tôch* (small drum), *Krap* (wooden clappers), *Kuông* (gong), and *Lôô* (cymbals). This ensemble constitutes the foundational "musical framework," at once reflecting ethnic identity while producing rustic, majestic, and emotionally evocative sounds.

With cultural interaction over time, the Du Ke orchestra has expanded its expressive range. On the one hand, many Chinese instruments such as *Khum Tôch*, *Khum Thum*, *Khmuôs*, and large *Chhap* have been localized to integrate into the Khmer musical environment; on the other hand, Western instruments like trumpet, saxophone, violin, electric guitar, organ, and jazz drums have been incorporated, enriching the tonal palette. Through this combination, Du Ke simultaneously preserves its traditional core while adapting to contemporary social themes. For instance, in the Du Ke version of *Thach Sanh – Ly Thong*, the fusion of Khmer drums with electric guitar

created a modern dramatic effect, making the performance more accessible to younger audiences (Lam Thi Thu Hien & Thach Thi Thanh Loan, 2024).

Particularly, percussion instruments always play a pivotal role in the overall structure. They not only regulate tempo but also “paint” the theatrical scene through sound: the solemn, resonant beats of *Skô Thum* in the opening evoke a sacred atmosphere; the urgent pounding of drums and gongs reenacts the battle scenes in *Chàng Thủy Tinh*; while the mournful tones of cymbals combined with the lingering notes of the spike fiddle render grief and sorrow. Performance principles are also highly strict: drums are only allowed to mark rhythm during pauses in the singing and must never overshadow the vocal line.

Thus, the orchestra goes beyond mere accompaniment, functioning as a “second language” of the stage—constructing the setting, guiding rhythm, and intensifying the emotional depth of characters.

Alongside music, vocal performance is the “backbone” of Du Ke. Unlike many other theatrical forms, dance in Du Ke remains primarily illustrative, while singing and the system of melodies bear the responsibility of conveying the script’s content. Initially, the repertoire contained only four basic airs: *Luôm*, *Samphôn*, *Phach Cheay*, and *Nokhoreach*. Later, through cultural exchange, this repertoire expanded to include *Mahôri*, *Hát Quảng* (Cantonese-derived singing), and French-influenced melodies, thereby enriching its expressive potential.

Each melodic form carries a distinct expressive function. *Luôm* is lyrical, often used to convey emotions: in *The Love Story of Lady So Phach*, *Luôm Teng* expresses romantic affection, while *Luôm Phone* depicts female longing for home. *Samphôn* is versatile: at a fast tempo it portrays joy during the prince’s woodland excursions, while in slow tempo it conveys scenes of parting and sorrow. By contrast, *Phach Cheay* is forceful, typically reserved for antagonists such as ogres or witches. *Nokhoreach*, meanwhile, underscores tragic moments for protagonists, such as exile, highlighting their sense of entrapment.

Du Ke also assimilates melodic forms from other traditions. *Quảng* airs, with rapid drumbeats, often accompany the entrance of villains; *Mahôri*, imbued with melancholy, suits tender emotional passages; while *Bassak* has become a hallmark element, frequently recurring to bind the narrative and enhance audience resonance.

According to statistics, the current Du Ke repertoire comprises 163 melodies: 34 of Khmer origin in Southern Vietnam, 22 influenced by Teochew opera, 16 from Europe, and 91 from Southeast Asia. Despite external influences, all have been “Khmerized” to bear distinctive identity, and most songs conclude with collective choral responses, creating a strong sense of community (Du Ke Theater, 2020). These melodies can be grouped into five categories: (1) collective singing for ancestral worship rituals, (2) joyful expression, (3) sorrowful expression, (4) the conveyance of anger, and (5) love and courtship songs.

Another noteworthy feature is the regulation of vocal register: men typically sing in a high register (*Khse Samós*), while women use a lower register (*Khse Phone*). Nevertheless, musicians flexibly adjust to suit different voices and contexts. For example, in *Prince Preah Sothun*, when the female lead possessed a high voice, musicians transposed the mode to allow harmonious duet with the male role.

From this perspective, the orchestra and melodic system constitute the soul of Du Ke. They are not merely illustrative but serve as advanced artistic means—shaping characters, guiding emotions, fostering community bonds, and affirming Khmer identity in Southern Vietnam. The balance between fixed structures and improvisational flexibility, between tradition and modern adaptation, has ensured the vitality and uniqueness of this theatrical art form.

A decisive factor in Du Ke’s success lies in the close coordination between the actors’ singing and the orchestra’s performance. While the playwright provides structural direction through the script, musicians actualize melodies in practice, adjusting flexibly to match vocal delivery and dramatic situations. They do not simply “play music,” but actively co-create, shaping the emotional color and performance nuance.

In practice, musicians must handle the relationship between melody and voice with subtlety. For instance, if an actor’s voice does not align with *Khse Samós* (male high register), musicians may shift to *Khse Phone* (female

low register) to maintain harmony. This demonstrates that the coordination between song and music requires not only technical precision but also a high degree of artistic improvisation.

Musicians in Du Ke are not mere accompanists but co-performers. The sounds of the spike fiddle, flute, or drums directly participate in staging and emotion-building: the trembling fiddle echoes characters' weeping; the flute expands the sense of forested space; pounding drums evoke battle momentum. Despite a limited number of instrumentalists, the orchestra vividly captures the full emotional spectrum—tragic, heroic, and even humorous.

This synergy is evident in the relationship between music and verse. A stanza of seven or eight syllables is typically set to *Bassak*, whereas verses of five, six, nine, or twelve syllables suit *Mahôri*, *Quang melody*, or French melodies. Thus, the creative process extends beyond textual composition to a “second musicalization,” aligning rhythm, meter, and semantics. This necessity explains why collaboration among playwrights, composers, and music directors often involves restructuring the score to match character voices and traits.

In practice, such adjustments are not without challenges. For instance, *Samôs* is generally reserved for male voices, yet when the script requires a male–female duet, musicians and directors must negotiate either lowering the male part or raising the female part. This flexibility illustrates that the orchestra is not a subsidiary element but a genuine creative agent shaping the style and artistic depth of Du Ke theater.

In sum, the integration of singing and music in Du Ke results from multidimensional interaction between script, voice, and musical improvisation. Thanks to this, the art form preserves traditional melodies while achieving captivating flexibility that meets contemporary audience expectations.

Music in Du Ke is not merely an auditory backdrop but an independent artistic language—structuring rhythm, delineating emotional roles, and organizing the dramaturgical framework of the play. It fulfills both pragmatic functions (signaling, scene transition, maintaining tempo) and aesthetic functions (emotional expression, resonance, identity affirmation).

Music guides the narrative and spatial-temporal structure.

It signals opening, transitions, and closure, while indicating changes of space and time. For example, the solemn *Skô Thum* in the opening (*Chum riép*, *Hum rôông*) evokes sacred atmosphere; conversely, the *Bassak* motif or *Krap* clappers stitch together scene transitions for continuity (Lam Thi Thu Hien, 2024).

Music delineates characters and dramatic conflict.

Each melodic type aligns with a character or mood: *Luôm* for lyricism; *Samphôn* for joy or sorrow; *Phach Cheay* for anger and antagonists; *Nokhoreach* for protagonists in tragedy. Shifts from *Luôm* or *Samphôn* to *Phach Cheay* signal conflict even before characters speak (Lam Thi Thu Hien, 2024).

Music creates climaxes and sustains dramatic tempo.

Percussion is especially vital in building tension: pounding drums and gongs for battle, reverberation for grief, or sharp breaks for scene changes. The rule “drums only beat when singing ceases” underscores the primacy of vocal delivery while allowing reflective silence.

Music embodies aesthetic empathy and emotional resonance.

When a female character weeps in separation, the trembling spike fiddle echoes sobs, while the flute's lingering notes evoke sighs. Music thus transcends illustration to become a channel of emotional communication between stage and audience.

Music conveys ritual and communal values.

Collective singing in ancestor worship, choral responses at the conclusion, or unison greetings before performances embody community solidarity. Aesthetics here reside not only in sonic beauty but also in shared participation—a hallmark of Khmer cultural identity in Southern Vietnam (Lam Thi Thu Hien, 2024).

Music expands expressive range through cultural adaptation.

The assimilation of Chinese instruments (*Khum Tôch*, *Khum Thum*, *Khmuô*s) or Western instruments (trumpet, violin, organ), alongside *Mahôri*, Ho Quang-style Cai Luong Opera, and French melodies, has not diluted identity but enriched adaptability to contemporary themes. This “Khmerization” of foreign elements enhances aesthetic value while preserving tradition (Lam Thi Thu Hien, 2024).

Finally, Du Ke aesthetics are defined by balance between structure and flexibility. Each melodic form corresponds to role types and gender registers; yet in performance, musicians adjust fluidly to situational needs. This “discipline within variation” ensures genre recognition while sustaining creative vitality (Lam Thi Thu Hien, 2024).

In conclusion, music in Du Ke theater fulfills multiple functions: guiding narrative, portraying characters, constructing climaxes, fostering empathy, affirming community values, and broadening expressive scope. By balancing tradition and adaptation, fixed forms and improvisation, music constitutes the very soul of Du Ke theater, ensuring its enduring vitality in both traditional and modern contexts.

Du Ke Music – A Bridge between Heritage and Community Life

Within the diverse cultural mosaic of Vietnam, the Khmer community in the Mekong Delta stands out with its rich repertoire of rituals, beliefs, folk knowledge, and distinctive performing arts. Among these, the art of Du Ke holds a unique position. As a traditional form of sung drama that integrates music, dance, acting, and ritual, Du Ke is regarded as a characteristic “expressive language” of Khmer identity. While many forms of folk art emphasize a single dimension, Du Ke, by contrast, is inherently composite, incorporating multiple elements into a holistic entity that is at once artistic and spiritual.

Remarkably, despite undergoing significant historical and social transformations, Du Ke has sustained its vitality. On the one hand, it contributes to the preservation of Khmer cultural identity; on the other, it demonstrates flexibility in adapting and assimilating external influences to remain relevant within new contexts. This very capacity for synthesis has enabled Du Ke to become a multidimensional “bridge”: linking past and present, tradition and integration, and the Khmer community with other ethnic groups in Southern Vietnam.

From this perspective, research on Du Ke holds not only scholarly value in the fields of culture and the arts, but also practical significance for strategies of safeguarding and promoting Vietnam’s intangible cultural heritage.

The Identity of Du Ke Music

First and foremost, music is regarded as the soul of Du Ke. In every performance, melodies do not merely illustrate stage actions; rather, they guide emotions, delineate character traits, and convey life philosophies. The traditional ensemble typically includes the *rô-niét* (xylophone), *trô-sau* (bowed string instrument), *skothom* (large drum), *khum* (small drum), and *ching* (cymbals). The harmonious interplay of these instruments creates a sonority that is simultaneously festive and solemn, reflecting the rustic yet profound spirit of the Khmer people.

Particularly distinctive is the use of ornamentation and resonant vibrato—at times urgent and intense—evoking a sacred atmosphere associated with concepts of karma and the struggle between good and evil. These techniques are not mere performance practices but encode “cultural symbols” that express the community’s ethical and spiritual philosophy. Thus, Du Ke music carries both aesthetic value and moral symbolism.

Although it is based on the pentatonic scale common in Southeast Asia, Du Ke establishes its own identity through unique accentuation and vibrato. With just a few opening measures, Khmer audiences can instantly recognize the “soul” of their cultural heritage. For example, in the play *Neang Keo Moni Mekhala*, the vigorous rhythms of *skothom* and *ching* not only generate a sacred atmosphere but also lead the audience into a Buddhist mythological world where the battle between good and evil vividly unfolds.

In this sense, the identity of Du Ke music is expressed in three dimensions: its intimate connection with Khmer cultural space, its dual aesthetic and moral functions, and its distinctive expressive techniques—regionally familiar yet unique enough to serve as a cultural marker of the community.

The Intercultural Adaptability of Du Ke Music

Another outstanding feature of Du Ke music is its openness: rather than being confined within the Khmer community, it is always receptive to intercultural exchange and adaptation. Throughout its formation and development, Du Ke has incorporated elements from *cải lương* (Southern Vietnamese reformed opera), *hát Tiều* (Teochew opera), *hát Quảng* (Cantonese opera), and even Western music. Crucially, such integration has not eroded Khmer essence; instead, it has expanded expressive capacity and enhanced adaptability to diverse audiences.

Clear evidence lies in the inclusion of violin, clarinet, and electronic organ in modern orchestras. When combined with traditional instruments such as *trô-sau* or *skothom*, these additions generate sounds that are simultaneously novel and familiar—appealing to younger audiences while preserving Khmer characteristics. Likewise, performance styles have borrowed from *cải lương*, making Du Ke more accessible to multi-ethnic audiences in Southern Vietnam.

A notable example is the play *Thach Sanh – Ly Thong*, staged by the Khmer Anh Binh Minh troupe during festivals such as *Chôl Chnăm Thmây*, *Sêne Đôn-ta*, and *Ok Om Bok*. Alongside traditional instruments, the troupe employed violin and electronic organ to create dynamic rhythms that drew large audiences. Similarly, plays such as *Tum Tiều* and *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* reveal the influence of *cải lương* through staging, role distribution, and acting style. Thanks to such creative hybridity, Du Ke not only maintains its cultural essence but also broadens its reach within the diverse cultural environment of Southern Vietnam.

Du Ke Music as Collective Memory

Beyond its artistic value, Du Ke also functions as a repository of collective memory for the Khmer community in the Mekong Delta. Its melodies, rhythms, and scripts are closely tied to Theravāda Buddhism, myths, and folktales, thereby transmitting moral and spiritual values across generations.

In major festivals such as *Chol Chnam Thmay* and *Ok Om Bok*, Du Ke performances serve both as entertainment and as opportunities for community cohesion. Elder masters and younger performers share the stage, weaving a “thread of memory” that extends from past to present. Thematically, scripts often revolve around conflicts between good and evil, cause and effect, thereby reinforcing ethical norms valued by the community.

In this sense, each Du Ke play may be regarded as a “record of collective memory”—re-enacting the past while shaping cultural identity in the present. This function elevates Du Ke beyond artistic performance to a medium of cultural continuity.

Affirming Identity in a Multicultural Environment

The Mekong Delta is a multi-ethnic region where Kinh, Khmer, Hoa (Chinese), and Cham people coexist and interact. In this context, Du Ke serves as the “cultural passport” of the Khmer community. Its distinctive sounds enable Khmer people to recognize their identity while also fostering dialogue and exchange with other ethnic groups.

This is evident in artistic festivals. For instance, the First Southern Khmer Du Ke Theater Festival held in 2013 in Sóc Trăng transcended the community level to become a cultural symbol, enriching the multi-ethnic cultural landscape of Southern Vietnam (*Nhan Dan*, 2013). Through such events, Du Ke both reinforces Khmer ethnic pride and contributes to harmonious inter-ethnic relations in the region.

Social and Educational Value and Transmission

In contemporary life, Du Ke is not confined to traditional festivals but has also entered community-based education. Many large temples, such as Mahatup (Sóc Trang) and Âng (Tra Vinh), have become “community schools” where master artists directly train younger generations.

Scripts such as *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* are often chosen for youth training because of their themes of filial piety, compassion, and moral causality. Thus, Du Ke not only fosters aesthetic appreciation but also nurtures ethical values and social responsibility among Khmer youth. It is this dual function—artistic and educational—that underpins the enduring vitality of Du Ke in contemporary life.

Contribution to Cultural and Tourism Development

In the context of globalization, Du Ke is not only a vehicle for heritage preservation but has also become a “cultural specialty” linked to tourism development. Many scholars regard Du Ke as a “mirror reflecting the spiritual life and cultural identity of the Southern Khmer,” while also serving as a potential resource for developing distinctive tourism products in the Mekong Delta.

With its unique combination of music, dance, language, and theater, Du Ke offers audiences an aesthetic experience unlike any other, making it a highlight of large-scale cultural–tourism events. For example, during the *Ok Om Bok – Ngo Boat Racing – Khmer Cultural Festival* in Soc Trang, Du Ke performances consistently attract tens of thousands of visitors. Likewise, the Second Southern Khmer Du Ke Theater Festival (Tra Vinh, 2023), featuring 11 troupes and over 500 artists, not only garnered extensive media attention but also enhanced local tourism appeal (*Tra Vinh Newspaper*, 2023).

Through such activities, Du Ke has made significant contributions to cultural and tourism development in Southern Vietnam. Moreover, its integration with religious practices and festivals increases its appeal to visitors interested in cultural and spiritual tourism. International tours to Thailand, Cambodia, and various global festivals further position Du Ke as an ambassador of Southern Vietnamese culture, raising the international profile of Vietnam’s cultural heritage.

Challenges and Prospects in the Context of Integration

Despite its many values, Du Ke today faces considerable challenges. Foremost among these is the competition from modern entertainment, which has gradually reduced its appeal to younger audiences. With the fast pace of contemporary life, youth are often drawn to popular music, online films, and video games—forms of entertainment that are shorter and constantly refreshed. As a result, in many Khmer villages (*phum, sóc*), Du Ke mainly attracts older generations, while the youth show limited interest.

Furthermore, the integration of traditional arts with tourism, while offering opportunities, also carries the risk of commercialization. When performances are shortened for quick entertainment, layers of ritual, philosophical, and spiritual meaning may be stripped away, leaving Du Ke superficial.

Another pressing issue is the shortage of successors. Most master artists are elderly, while training requires long-term commitment and dedication. Economic pressures and modern lifestyles discourage young Khmer from fully committing to the art, threatening a break in the continuity of heritage.

To address these challenges, strategic solutions are required. Strengthening the connection between Du Ke and education is essential, for example, by expanding school-based clubs that enable young people to access cultural heritage while cultivating pride in ethnic identity. The application of digital technologies is also critical, particularly in digitizing scripts, melodies, instruments, and performances, thereby enhancing outreach in cyberspace and attracting younger audiences. In addition, long-term policies at both state and local levels are needed, including incentives for master artists, training programs, investment in theater infrastructure, and the integration of Du Ke into sustainable tourism strategies.

In the long run, preserving and promoting Du Ke is not only about safeguarding a form of folk theater but also about sustaining collective memory, strengthening community cohesion, and enriching Vietnam’s cultural diversity. With systematic investment, Du Ke has the potential to become a candidate for UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, thereby elevating the cultural value of Southern Khmer traditions and promoting Vietnam’s image on the global stage.

From the above analysis, it is evident that Du Ke music is not merely an artistic component of Khmer theater but a multi-layered “cultural bridge”: between past and present, heritage and daily life, and between the Khmer community and other ethnic groups in the multicultural environment of Southern Vietnam. With its distinctive identity, flexible adaptability, and dual functions of education and community cohesion, Du Ke has demonstrated both resilience and multidimensional value.

However, in the context of globalization, this art form also faces significant challenges—from competition with modern entertainment and risks of commercialization to the shortage of successors. For this reason, the preservation and promotion of Du Ke must be embedded in long-term strategies that integrate community education, digital innovation, and policy support.

More broadly, Du Ke music can be seen as a cultural bridge that both safeguards tradition and adapts to contemporary contexts. In this process, the community remains the creative and sustaining agent—ensuring that Du Ke not only survives but thrives. Preserving and promoting Du Ke, therefore, is synonymous with maintaining Khmer cultural identity while contributing to the diversity of Vietnamese culture as a whole. With proper investment and promotion, Du Ke has the potential to become not only a source of Khmer pride but also a national treasure and, ultimately, a representative element of humanity’s intangible cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

In summary, music in Southern Khmer Du Ke theater is not merely an artistic component but the very “soul” of the entire performance tradition. It guides the narrative, shapes characters, builds dramatic climaxes, and evokes emotional depth, thereby fostering a strong bond between audience, characters, and community. This synthesis is precisely what endows Du Ke with its unique appeal and distinct identity within the broader artistic landscape of Southern Vietnam.

Beyond its aesthetic dimension, Du Ke music functions as a multi-layered “cultural bridge”: connecting past and present, heritage and community life, and the Khmer people with other ethnic groups in the multicultural environment of the Mekong Delta. Rooted in tradition, Du Ke has demonstrated remarkable adaptability—preserving the Khmer essence while integrating external influences to meet contemporary aesthetic demands. This dynamic balance not only sustains Du Ke’s vitality but also elevates Khmer cultural identity within the broader context of integration.

Nevertheless, in an era of globalization, Du Ke faces significant challenges: competition from modern forms of entertainment, the risk of commercialization, and the shortage of successors. Safeguarding and promoting its values thus require a long-term strategy that integrates community-based education, the application of digital technology, and concrete policy support. At the same time, linking Du Ke with cultural and tourism development opens new opportunities for its wider dissemination, transforming it into a distinctive “cultural specialty” of both regional and international significance.

Overall, Du Ke music not only contributes to sustaining the cultural identity of the Southern Khmer but also constitutes an essential element in the cultural diversity of Vietnam. With appropriate investment, promotion, and strategic development, Du Ke has the potential to attain recognition as a Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity—becoming a source of pride not only for the Khmer community but for the entire Vietnamese nation.

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