

The Cultural Significance of Khmer Cuisine in Tra Vinh: Classification, Identification, and Transformations in the Context of Globalization

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ABSTRACT

Khmer cuisine in Tra Vinh embodies not only the cultural values, indigenous knowledge, and agrarian beliefs of the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam, but also serves as a symbolic component of regional cultural identity. From the perspective of cultural studies, this paper aims to classify, identify, and interpret the distinctive characteristics of Khmer cuisine in Tra Vinh through the interrelation among human beings, environment, and cultural practice. Furthermore, the study explores the transformations of Khmer culinary traditions amid globalization and contemporary cultural exchange. These transformations reveal both the dynamic adaptability of the community to socio-economic changes and the emerging challenges in safeguarding and promoting intangible cultural heritage in the integration era. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of Khmer culinary culture as a specific cultural code, while suggesting interdisciplinary approaches to the study of Southern Vietnamese food culture today.

Keywords: Khmer cuisine; Southern Vietnamese culture; cultural identity; globalization; cultural transformation; intangible cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

In the cultural landscape of Southern Vietnam, the Khmer community in Tra Vinh has preserved a distinctive set of traditions, beliefs, and practices that vividly express its collective identity. Among these, cuisine occupies a particularly significant position, functioning not merely as a means of sustenance but as a cultural text that encodes values, social relations, and cosmological perceptions. Khmer culinary practices reflect the community's adaptive interaction with its natural environment and its agricultural foundation, while also embodying symbolic meanings related to rituals, festivals, and communal cohesion.

In recent decades, the processes of globalization and cultural exchange have brought about profound transformations in local food systems. The culinary traditions of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh have been subject to hybridization, commodification, and reinterpretation in response to tourism development, migration, and media influences. Such changes, while promoting cultural interaction and economic opportunities, also raise critical concerns about the preservation of authenticity, the transmission of traditional knowledge, and the sustainable development of cultural heritage.

This paper seeks to explore the cultural significance of Khmer cuisine in Tra Vinh by classifying and identifying its key characteristics within the broader context of cultural transformation. Through a qualitative approach that combines cultural analysis, ethnographic observation, and heritage studies, the research aims to elucidate the interplay between traditional culinary practices and the dynamics of globalization. The ultimate goal is to contribute to an interdisciplinary understanding of Khmer culinary culture as both a living heritage and a site of cultural negotiation in contemporary Vietnam.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Research Objectives and Methodology

The primary objective of this study is to elucidate the cultural significance of Khmer cuisine in Tra Vinh through a comprehensive process of classification and identification of its characteristic features. Specifically, the research aims to:

1. Analyze the symbolic meanings and socio-cultural functions embedded in Khmer culinary practices;
2. Identify the typology and structure of Khmer dishes in relation to the ecological environment, religious beliefs, and community life;
3. Examine the transformations of Khmer foodways under the influence of globalization, tourism, and cross-cultural interaction; and
4. Propose recommendations for safeguarding and promoting Khmer culinary heritage as an integral component of Vietnam's intangible cultural heritage system.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach grounded in cultural anthropology, semiotics, and heritage studies. Data were collected through ethnographic fieldwork in selected Khmer communities in Tra Vinh Province, including participant observation, in-depth interviews with local residents, monks, and culinary practitioners, as well as documentation of rituals, festivals, and everyday cooking practices. The study also utilizes textual and visual analysis of culinary representations in media and tourism materials to trace shifts in meaning and representation.

By integrating ethnographic insight with theoretical frameworks on cultural identity and globalization, the research seeks to construct a multidimensional understanding of Khmer cuisine — not merely as a set of tangible food items, but as a cultural discourse that mediates between tradition and modernity, locality and globality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of cuisine and culinary culture is a topic of interest to many scholars from various fields. Dương Mỹ Pha's Master's thesis, "Tra Vinh Culinary Specialties from a Cultural Perspective" (2014), analyzed the values of cuisine and highlighted the unique values of Tra Vinh culinary specialties through hospitality, gifts, and presents during holidays and festivals. Bùi Chí Thanh's research, "Culinary Culture of Some Ethnic Groups in Hòa Bình Province" (2018), provided an overview of the geography, people, dishes, beverages, and cakes used in daily life and during holidays and festivals of the Mường, Thái, Dao, Tày, and Mông ethnic groups in Hòa Bình province. The study proposed measures to preserve, promote, and develop the culinary culture of these ethnic groups. In his doctoral dissertation, "Vietnamese Culinary Culture in the Southwest Region for Vĩnh Long Tourism Development" (2022), Nguyễn Diễm Phúc analyzed the characteristics and cultural significance of Vietnamese culinary culture. He also determined the role and value of culinary culture in the material and spiritual life of the community and in the sustainable development of tourism in the Southwest region in general and Vĩnh Long in particular. Additionally, there have been studies on Khmer cuisine, such as Đào Chuông's "Khmer Folk Cuisine and Festivals in Kiên Giang" (2019), which introduced the cuisine and folk festivals of the Khmer people in Kiên Giang. This work provided a general overview of the Khmer people, their culinary culture, community activities, festivals, traditional dishes, and their character in daily life.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Cuisine Classification

Everyday Cuisine

Similar to other cohabiting ethnic groups in the region, rice plays a dominant role in the daily meals of the Khmer people. There are two types of rice: glutinous rice and regular rice. Glutinous rice is often used to make cakes and sticky rice, while regular rice is used for cooked rice, porridge, or vermicelli. Cooked rice is the

main component of a Khmer daily meal, followed by various vegetables and fish, which are prepared simply into soups, braised dishes, boiled dishes, or stir-fries. A unique feature of their daily diet is the frequent use of raw vegetables dipped in various types of fermented fish paste (mắm), such as mắm cá linh (fermented small fish), mắm cá sặc (fermented gourami), mắm cá chột (fermented catfish), or mắm tép (fermented shrimp paste). The basic structure of a daily meal is rice, vegetables, fish, and “mắm” – “Pro-hoc” or “Pra – hoc” in Khmer language. From tradition to the present, Pro-hoc is a consistent item in Khmer meals, and it can be said that eating Pro-hoc is a cultural feature of Khmer cuisine. The preparation of Pro-hoc is quite diverse. If eaten as is, the Khmer people simply add a little seasoning like sugar and MSG to balance the salty and sweet flavors, and grind some garlic and chili to eat with white rice. For more elaborate dishes, they might prepare a soup cooked with Pro-hoc (sim-lo mchu), steamed Pro-hoc with meat, or just steamed with a little pepper and onion, braised Pro-hoc served with various herbs, or fried Pro-hoc. In general, the Khmer people create a wide variety of dishes from fermented fish. Although it's all Pro-hoc, the preparation methods and flavors differ greatly among the Khmer people of An Giang, Tra Vinh, and Soc Trang. For example, the Khmer in An Giang prefer a sweeter Pro-hoc due to the use of jaggery, while the Khmer in Tra Vinh favor a saltier Pro-hoc made with a lot of salt. The distinctive salty Pro-hoc" (also known as bò-hóc) from Tra Vinh is famously used to make the region's well-known noodle soup. Meanwhile, the Pro-hoc of the Khmer in Soc Trang seems to be a balance between the sweet Pro-hoc of An Giang and the salty Pro-hoc of Tra Vinh. In addition to fermented fish, fermented shrimp paste (bo – ot Pro-hoc) is also a popular choice for daily meals. Small, wild shrimp are carefully selected, washed, and fermented with salt for about three months before being ready to eat. When the Pro-hoc is ready, it is eaten directly with seasonings, ginger, garlic, and chili. Sometimes it is mixed with unripe papaya, ginger, garlic, and chili, and served with fried fish and raw vegetables, making for a very flavorful daily meal. One of the most distinctive dishes of Khmer culture for daily meals is the mixture of roasted shrimp pounded with young tamarind and young ginger. This dish has a harmonious blend of salty and sweet from the roasted shrimp, sour from the young tamarind, and warm spiciness from the ginger. This dish often appears during the change of seasons when the weather turns a little cold and young tamarind fruit is in season. A simple bowl of hot rice and this shrimp and tamarind paste is a delicious and culturally rich meal for the Khmer of Tra Vinh during transitional seasons. Overall, the daily cuisine of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh is quite simple. They choose readily available food, cooking rice, vegetable soup, sour soup, braised fish, or fried fish. When they are too busy with daily work, they simplify their meals even further, only needing Pro-hoc, dried fish, or using whatever seasonal ingredients are available to prepare a simple meal. This approach to food selection and consumption partly reflects a simple lifestyle and a harmonious cultural relationship with nature.

Cuisine in Festivals and Customs

Cuisine for New Year and Festivals

The Khmer people of Tra Vinh celebrate three major annual festivals: Chol-Chnam-Thmay (the New Year festival around mid-April), Sene Donta (around August), and Ok-Om-Bok (around October). During Chol-Chnam-Thmay and Sene Donta, there are rituals of offering food to the pagoda, so the selection and preparation of dishes are special. While daily meals are simple, festival and holiday dishes focus more on symbolic meaning. For offerings at the pagoda, the Khmer often prepare dishes like bitter melon stuffed with meat, braised pork with eggs, or stir-fried meat with various vegetables, all prepared to be delicate, delicious, and visually appealing. The dishes offered to the monks in the pagoda are meticulously prepared, though not overly elaborate. Khmer Theravada monks do not practice vegetarianism, but it is forbidden to use meat from animals in the proscribed list, such as snakes, turtles, dogs, and cats. These are prohibitions that every Khmer person understands and adheres to strictly. This shows that eating is not just about human interaction with nature or with each other, but it also has a social dimension and becomes even more sacred when it occurs in a religious context. Common festival dishes, in addition to braised and soup dishes, also include stir-fries, curries, and hotpots, which clearly show cultural exchange among ethnic groups. Today, the variety of dishes offered to monks during festivals includes sweet hotpots (cù lao, a Vietnamese dish), curry, and Thai hotpot. The meticulous and sophisticated preparation of these dishes reflects the care, thoughtfulness, and spiritual reverence of the Khmer people.

Cuisine in Marriage Customs

Marriage is one of the important life-cycle rituals for the Khmer people. This ceremony marks an individual's establishment of self, maturity, and the beginning of their own family. In the marriage rituals, the banquet for guests is considered very important alongside the ceremonies themselves. It expresses the hosts' respect and gratitude to their guests. Depending on their financial conditions, the hosts will organize a large or small party. Regardless of the size, the dishes served to guests must be carefully prepared and beautifully presented to honor relatives and neighbors. Previously, few scholars studying Khmer marriage customs paid attention to the dishes prepared for the banquet. A Khmer wedding in Tra Vinh typically lasts for two to three days. On the preparation day, the hosts cook rice, soup, braised dishes, or stir-fries to feed the relatives and neighbors who come to help. Dishes like pork stew with turnips, braised pork with pickled radish, or braised chicken/duck with ginger are commonly prepared. On the main banquet day, a Khmer wedding usually has four to five dishes. The meal starts with an appetizer like cold cuts, steamed dumplings, and fried spring rolls. There are typically two to three main courses made from pork, chicken, or beef, which can be fried, cooked in a stew, or made into a hotpot. A hotpot dish is usually served last, and the meal concludes with a dessert of fruit, sweet soup, or ice cream. In Tra Vinh today, due to convenience, most parties are catered by cooking teams, so the dishes served at weddings are similar among different ethnic groups. However, one notable difference is that dishes served at parties are very different from daily meals. Specifically, while *mắm* dishes like sour soup with Pro-hoc or pro – hoc -based noodle soup may appear in daily meals or festivals, they are almost never seen at wedding banquets.

Cuisine in Funeral Customs

In the life-cycle rituals of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh, funerals are considered a very important custom. With the belief of "living is temporary, death is eternal," the Khmer organize a funeral that is simple yet solemn. The funeral ceremony expresses the love and sorrow of descendants for the deceased. During the funeral, the Khmer invite monks to chant scriptures, preach sermons, and explain the ethics and filial piety of children towards their parents and grandparents. Guests who attend the funeral are welcomed and invited to a meal by the hosts as a gesture of thanks for their condolences. The meal served during a Khmer funeral in Tra Vinh is also quite simple. It mostly consists of rice and a main dish of pork braised with salted mustard greens. To enhance the flavor (and prevent boredom), there may also be pickled mustard greens or cucumbers. The meal often ends with a hotpot (*cù lao*) cooked with pork, cabbage, carrots, dried shrimp, and dried squid. Depending on their means, the hosts might also serve stir-fried beef with bitter melon or cowpeas. People in Tra Vinh often call this "*bò né*," and it is served with fermented anchovy sauce (*mắm nêm*). In summary, the food in Khmer funeral customs in Tra Vinh is simple but emphasizes meticulousness. The hosts often offer guests a glass of rice wine as a way of expressing gratitude. All of this speaks to the sharing of emotions and the strengthening of bonds.

Cultural values from the perspective of Khmer cuisine in Tra Vinh

The Utilization of Nature in Cuisine

Tra Vinh is a land with diverse cuisine. Its cuisine shares common features with that of the Southern region of Vietnam but also has unique characteristics that bear the deep imprint of local culture. This is the result of adapting to the natural and social environment, which has created unique values in Tra Vinh cuisine. The cuisine of the Khmer people in Tra Vinh reflects their local knowledge in interacting with the natural and social environment to create dishes. Based on this, Tra Vinh cuisine can be classified into everyday cuisine, festival and holiday cuisine, and cuisine for customs such as weddings and funerals. The eating culture of the Khmer people has both common and unique features compared to other ethnic groups in the South. This is a result of their choices and adaptations in their interaction with the natural environment, which dictates everything from their selection of ingredients to their eating habits, which are primarily in harmony with nature. In traditional Khmer culture, they select food by season, eating what is available at that time of year. This seasonal food selection allows them to choose the most delicious and nutritious ingredients while also demonstrating the ethnic group's cultural adaptation to the natural environment. During the rainy season, when both terrestrial and aquatic plants thrive, they often eat foods that are products of the rivers, such as

various wild vegetables and aquatic plants like “điên điển” flowers and water lilies. Additionally, they favor river fish like “cá linh”, “cá sặc”, “cá rô”, and “cá lóc” during the rainy season. Around September and October each year, when water from the upstream rivers floods the area, the Khmer people and other ethnic groups in the South receive a bounty from nature in the form of abundant aquatic products. When there is an excess, the Khmer often make fermented fish or dried fish to store and eat during the dry season. This practice of selecting ingredients and utilizing what is available in nature has shaped the simple eating culture of the Khmer people in their daily meals.

Synthetic Nature

The synthetic nature of Khmer Tra Vinh cuisine is evident in the way they select ingredients. In a meal, whether it is an everyday meal or a special occasion, the ingredients are a combination of many different components. For example, in a daily sour soup, the Khmer combine ingredients from plants, aquatic products (such as crab, fish, and shrimp), and various other spices. The synthetic nature of ingredients is even more pronounced in meals for festivals and holidays. Dishes such as cù lao, hotpot, mắm-based noodle soup, and curry all combine many ingredients into one dish. In addition to the selection of ingredients, the way the Khmer eat also clearly demonstrates the synthetic nature of their cuisine. The traditional main meal structure of the Khmer is rice, vegetables, fish, and mắm. A meal will combine many dishes, with rice as the base, followed by braised dishes, stir-fries, and soups. At a minimum, there must be at least two dishes in a single meal.

Globalization and Heritage Dynamics

Khmer cuisine in Tra Vinh encapsulates a complex system of symbolic meanings deeply embedded in agricultural cosmology and communal life. Dishes prepared for festivals, such as num ansom (sticky rice cake) or num kom (pyramid-shaped rice cake), are not merely culinary creations but ritual offerings that express gratitude to deities and ancestors. The act of sharing food during celebrations like Ok Om Bok (Moon Offering Festival) symbolizes social harmony, reciprocity, and the collective spirit of the Khmer community. In this sense, food serves as a cultural language through which moral values, spiritual beliefs, and social relationships are communicated and reinforced.

Despite social change and economic modernization, Khmer cuisine in Tra Vinh demonstrates remarkable adaptability. Traditional cooking methods - such as the use of natural herbs, fermented ingredients, and open-fire techniques - continue to coexist with modern utensils and food processing. Local cooks, particularly women and monks in pagodas, play a crucial role in transmitting culinary knowledge across generations. Adaptation does not necessarily imply cultural loss; rather, it reflects the resilience of Khmer cultural identity through creative reinterpretation and contextual innovation within everyday life.

Under the influence of globalization, Khmer cuisine has undergone visible transformations in both form and meaning. Culinary tourism, digital media, and market integration have recontextualized traditional dishes, sometimes turning them into commercial or performative symbols for cultural consumption. While this process increases public visibility and economic value, it also risks commodifying heritage and diluting authenticity. The challenge, therefore, lies in balancing cultural preservation with adaptation to global demands. Sustainable heritage safeguarding requires community participation, policy support, and educational initiatives that emphasize the living nature of Khmer culinary traditions as an evolving cultural resource.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Khmer cuisine in Tra Vinh represents more than a repertoire of traditional dishes; it embodies the living memory and collective identity of a community that has continuously negotiated its cultural position within the diverse socio-cultural landscape of Southern Vietnam. Through the processes of ritual practice, daily cooking, and communal sharing, food becomes a medium through which values of harmony, gratitude, and resilience are enacted and transmitted. The study demonstrates that Khmer culinary traditions are not static relics of the past, but dynamic expressions of cultural creativity capable of adapting to new historical conditions.

In the context of globalization, Khmer foodways are simultaneously challenged and revitalized. Global tourism, media exposure, and intercultural exchange open new opportunities for recognition and economic development, yet they also impose pressures of standardization and commercialization. The sustainability of Khmer culinary heritage thus depends on the community's ability to assert cultural agency—actively defining how their traditions are represented, practiced, and transformed.

To safeguard and promote Khmer culinary heritage effectively, several recommendations are proposed:

1. Community-based preservation: Encourage local participation in culinary documentation, teaching, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.
2. Policy integration: Recognize Khmer cuisine as part of Vietnam's national intangible cultural heritage, ensuring legal protection and institutional support.
3. Cultural education: Incorporate Khmer food heritage into educational and tourism programs to enhance public awareness and cultural appreciation.
4. Sustainable innovation: Promote creative reinterpretation that respects traditional values while engaging with contemporary needs and markets.

Ultimately, preserving Khmer cuisine means preserving a way of life—a system of meanings that connects people to their environment, faith, and history. As a cultural discourse, Khmer culinary heritage provides valuable insight into how local identities persist and evolve in an increasingly interconnected world.

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