

Natural Environment and Ethnic Cultural Practices of Khmer People in Southern Vietnam: A Case Study of Du Ke Theater and Phuoc Bien Ritual

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study explores the relationship between natural environment and cultural expression among Khmer communities in Southern Vietnam, focusing on two emblematic practices: Du Ke theater and Phuoc Bien Ritual (sea blessing ritual). Drawing on participant observation, symbolic content analysis, and retrospective interviews with 40 elderly Khmer in Tra Vinh and Soc Trang communes, the research reveals how ecological conditions shape ritual and performative traditions. The findings demonstrate that Khmer cultural forms are deeply embedded in environmental realities and reflect a unique synthesis of Theravāda Buddhist spirituality, subsistence-based adaptation, and communal participation. Khmer communities continue to preserve and adapt their intangible heritage, affirming the resilience of cultural identity in the face of ecological and social transformation.

Keywords: Khmer ethnic group, Du Ke theatre, Phuoc Bien Ritual, Ethnic identity, Cultural adaptation, Natural environment

INTRODUCTION

The Khmer ethnic group in Southern Vietnam has a long-standing historical presence, particularly in the Mekong Delta region. Many Khmer communities have maintained continuous settlement in the region for centuries, predating the modern borders between Vietnam and Cambodia. Over time, the Khmer in Vietnam have become an integral part of the country's multiethnic landscape, coexisting alongside the Kinh (majority ethnic group), Hoa (ethnic Chinese), and Cham communities. Throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods, the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam have experienced significant socio-political changes, including land reforms, cultural assimilation policies, and economic restructuring. Despite these shifts, they have preserved a rich cultural heritage characterized by Theravāda Buddhism, traditional festivals, vernacular architecture, and artisanal crafts.

The Mekong Delta's fertile land and abundant waterways have shaped the Khmer's agricultural lifestyle and spiritual worldview. Their cultural practices such as Du Ke theater, Phuoc Bien ritual, and bull racing are deeply intertwined with seasonal cycles, local ecology, and communal labor. These traditions not only reflect the Khmer people's adaptation to their natural environment but also serve as markers of ethnic identity and resilience in a rapidly changing socio-economic context. Today, the Khmer community continues to navigate the challenges of modernization, environmental change, and cultural preservation. Their lively experiences offer valuable insights into how ethnic minorities maintain cultural distinctiveness while engaging with broader national and regional transformations.

While numerous studies have examined the cultural traditions and ethnic identity of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the interplay between natural environmental conditions and the formation of cultural practices. Existing research tends to focus on historical,

religious, or linguistic aspects of Khmer culture, often overlooking how ecological factors such as geography, climate, and natural resources -have shaped and sustained specific cultural expressions. The absence of interdisciplinary approaches that integrate environmental anthropology and cultural ecology has limited our understanding of how ethnic communities adapt their cultural systems to the physical landscapes they inhabit. This study seeks to address that gap by exploring how the Khmer people have developed unique cultural forms in response to the environmental realities of the Mekong Delta.

This study aims to explore the relationship between the natural environment and the cultural practices of the Khmer ethnic community in Southern Vietnam. The Khmer ethnic community in Vietnam is predominantly concentrated in the southern region, especially in the Mekong Delta. For centuries, the Khmer have coexisted, interacted, and developed alongside other ethnic groups, including the Kinh, Hoa, and Cham peoples. The process of transforming the once-wild landscape into prosperous settlements fostered interethnic cohesion while allowing each group to maintain its distinct cultural identity. Within this context of cultural exchange, the Khmer in Southern Vietnam have created and developed unique cultural expressions such as Du Ke theater, Phuoc Bien sea blessing ritual in Soc Trang, the sedge mat weaving villages in Tra Vinh and Soc Trang, and the agricultural bull racing tradition in An Giang. These practices not only reflect ethnic identity but also demonstrate adaptive responses to the specific natural conditions of the Mekong Delta. Grounded in ecological cultural theory, this study employs field surveys, retrospective interviews, and participant observation in Tra Vinh and Soc Trang provinces to analyze the relationship between the natural environment and Khmer cultural practices. The research focuses on two representative forms like Du Ke theater and Phuoc Bien ritual which are not found in the cultural traditions of Khmer communities in Cambodia, thereby highlighting the distinctive nature of Khmer culture in Southern Vietnam.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) Are these cultural practices unique products of the Khmer people's adaptation to the natural environment of Southern Vietnam?
- (2) In the context of current environmental and climate change, are these traditional cultural activities being affected?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of cultural identity has long been central to anthropology and cultural studies, emphasizing how individuals and communities construct a sense of belonging through shared symbols, practices, and narratives. According to Lindholm (2001), cultural identity is not static but emerges through dynamic interactions between personal experience and collective cultural frameworks, shaped by historical and social contexts. This perspective aligns with psychological anthropology, which explores how identity is embedded in cultural meaning systems and expressed through ritual, language, and everyday behavior.

Environmental anthropology offers a complementary lens by examining how human cultures adapt to and shape their natural surroundings. The American Psychological Association (2017) introduced an ecological approach to identity, emphasizing the layered relationship between individuals, communities, and their environments. This framework highlights how cultural practices are often responses to ecological constraints and opportunities, making the environment not just a backdrop but an active participant in cultural formation.

Spatial dimensions of culture have also gained attention in recent years, particularly in the field of cultural geography. Cheng, Zhou, and Zhang (2018) argue that spatial factors - such as architecture, settlement patterns, and public space - play a critical role in shaping cultural identity. Their study of historical courtyards in Beijing demonstrates how changes in spatial organization can lead to shifts in cultural perception and community cohesion. This insight is particularly relevant for ethnic minorities whose cultural practices are deeply tied to specific landscapes and ecological settings.

Together, these theoretical frameworks provide a robust foundation for analyzing how the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam have developed unique cultural expressions such as Du Ke theater and Phuoc Bien ritual in

response to the environmental and spatial realities of the Mekong Delta. By integrating cultural identity theory, environmental anthropology, and spatial analysis, this study seeks to illuminate the ecological roots of ethnic cultural practices and their ongoing transformation in the face of environmental change.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts ethnographic fieldwork as its principal methodological approach to investigate the cultural practices of the Khmer ethnic community in Southern Vietnam. Ethnography enables a deep, contextual understanding of cultural phenomena by immersing the researcher in the lived experiences, rituals, and symbolic systems of the community under study.

Field Site Selection

Two communes Tra Vinh and Soc Trang were purposefully selected due to their high concentration of Khmer populations and the active presence of two distinctive cultural expressions: Du Ke theater and Phuoc Bien sea blessing ritual. These sites provided rich cultural landscapes for observing the intersection of tradition, environment, and identity.

Participant Observation

The researcher conducted direct observation of cultural events, rituals, and everyday activities. This included attending theatrical performances, religious ceremonies, and seasonal festivals to document: (1) Spatial arrangements and ritual choreography; (2) Symbolic elements and material culture; (3) Community participation and intergenerational transmission. Observations were recorded in detailed field journals, supplemented by photographs. This immersive approach allowed the researcher to witness cultural practices in their natural settings and interpret them within their ecological and social contexts.

Retrospective Interviews

To complement observational data, semi-structured retrospective interviews were conducted with 40 elderly Khmer individuals (aged 60 and above), equally divided between Tra Vinh and Soc Trang. Participants were selected through a combination of random sampling and snowball sampling, ensuring both diversity and cultural expertise. Inclusion criteria emphasized long-term residence and recognized knowledge of Du Ke and Phuoc Bien traditions.

The interview guide was designed to elicit narrative-rich responses, with key questions such as “Can you describe how Du Ke performances were organized in the past?”, “What materials were traditionally used for costumes and stage design?”, “How did the community prepare for the Phuoc Bien ritual?”, “Have you observed any changes in these practices due to environmental factors?”. The interviews were conducted in Khmer or Vietnamese, depending on participant preference, with the assistance of local interpreters when necessary. Sessions took place in familiar settings such as homes or community centres. Audio recordings were made with consent, and detailed notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual nuances. All interviews were transcribed in the original language and translated into Vietnamese and English for analysis. Ethical protocols were strictly followed, including verbal informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity. As a gesture of appreciation, small culturally appropriate gifts were offered to participants.

In parallel with interviews and observations, the researcher documented cultural artifacts associated with the two focal practices. These included Costumes, masks, and musical instruments used in Du Ke theatre; ritual tools, offerings, and architectural features linked to the Phuoc Bien ceremony. Artifacts were photographed, described, and analysed to understand how natural resources and local geography influence material culture. Attention was given to the origin, symbolism, and usage of each item within its ritual or performative context.

To interpret the deeper meanings embedded in Khmer cultural expressions, the study employed symbolic and cultural content analysis, integrating semiotic theory and cultural anthropology. The analysis focused on ritual gestures and sequential actions; spatial configurations and colour symbolism; iconographic and cosmological motifs. Symbols were examined in relation to environmental conditions (e.g., use of river water, coconut

leaves), historical memory (e.g., colonial legacies, migration), and social roles (e.g., performer, observer, beneficiary). Theoretical frameworks from Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Mary Douglas guided the interpretive process.

Data sources included field notes from live observations; interview transcripts; photographs and sketches; archival materials such as scripts, chants, and folk narratives. Each item was analysed with attention to its social context, ecological setting, and performative function, allowing for a layered and culturally grounded interpretation of Khmer symbolic systems.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Du Ke Theatre as a Cultural and Environmental Expression

Du Ke theatre emerged from the expansive physical landscape of Southern Vietnam, particularly the open courtyards, rice fields, and communal spaces and from the diverse materials of everyday Khmer life. This form of folk performance art has been officially recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage of Vietnam, classified under traditional performing arts.

The terminology surrounding Du Ke reflects its layered origins. While “Di Ke” is rooted in Cambodian tradition, “Du Ke” is considered a localized creation of the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam. Cambodian Khmer refer to it as La Khon Bassac, meaning “Bassac region theatre” (Tiền Văn Triệu & Dương Hoàng Lộc, 2014). Based on the author’s fieldwork and interviews, 100% of elderly Khmer informants in Tra Vinh and Soc Trang affirmed that Du Ke is a distinct artistic form developed by Khmer people in Southern Vietnam. However, further specialized research is needed to substantiate this claim with historical evidence and folkloric traces.

Historically, the sparsely populated and agriculturally rich Southern region provided ample space for communal gatherings after long days of labour. Early Du Ke performances were informal, staged on flat ground with makeshift coverings resembling gourd trellises - hence the early name “Gourd Trellis Theatre” (Sân khấu giàn bầu) (Trần Thị Lan Hương, 2017, p. 84). Over time, the stage evolved, constructed from sturdy tree trunks and decorated with coconut leaves, banana fronds, and areca clusters. According to Mr. Thạch C. from Ward 7, Tra Vinh, the spacious and open living environment facilitated the emergence of Du Ke as both a performative and communal art form.

Theravāda Buddhist temples, with their large courtyards, have long served as cultural hubs for the Khmer community. Most informants agreed that temples are central to religious, artistic, and social life. Du Ke performances continue to be prioritized within temple grounds during major festivals such as Chôl Chnăm Thmây (New Year), Ok-om-bok (Moon Offering), and Si Ma (Monastic Boundary Ritual).

Since the 1960s, scholars, artists, and cultural managers have studied and collected Du Ke materials, concluding that it is a creative product of Khmer farmers and intellectuals in the Southwestern region. It reflects cultural exchange with Chinese opera (Hí kịch) and Vietnamese Cải lương theater (Thạch Chane Vitu, 2014, p. 86). Du Ke narratives often draw from Khmer folktales and mythology, but also incorporate Chinese legends and Vietnamese dramatic plots.

Its adaptability to the local environment is evident in its thematic content, which often celebrates revolutionary ideals, labor, and daily life. Du Ke scripts are diverse, ranging from the Khmer epic *Riêm Kê* (based on the Indian Ramayana) to folk, historical, religious, and social themes. It also includes Chinese stories such as *Tiết Nhơn Quý* and *Tam Tạng thỉnh kinh*, and Vietnamese Cải lương plays like *Tám Cám*, *Phạm Công - Cúc Hoa*, and *Thạch Sanh - Lý Thông* (Trần Thị Lan Hương, 2017, p. 85). This fusion illustrates the creative flexibility of the Khmer people in shaping a unique spiritual and cultural product that harmonizes elements from Kinh and Hoa traditions.

The author analyzed the thematic content of 20 Du Ke performances by the Ánh Bình Minh Art Troupe in Trà Vinh, which regularly stages plays for local communities during festivals. The results are summarized as follows:

Table 1. The thematic content of 20 Du Ke performances by the Ánh Bình Minh Art Troupe

No.	Title of Play	Thematic Category	Cultural Origin / Influence
1	Riêm Kê	Epic / Mythology	Khmer (based on Ramayana)
2	Tấm Cám	Folk Tale	Vietnamese (Cải lương)
3	Phạm Công – Cúc Hoa	Romance / Family	Vietnamese (Cải lương)
4	Thạch Sanh – Lý Thông	Heroic Legend	Vietnamese (Cải lương)
5	Tam Tạng Thỉnh Kinh	Religious / Pilgrimage	Chinese (Journey to the West)
6	Tiết Nhơn Quý	Historical / Military	Chinese Opera
7	Chuyện tình nàng Moni	Romance / Tragedy	Khmer Folklore
8	Câu chuyện chàng Neang	Moral / Social	Khmer Folklore
9	Lễ hội Ok-om-bok	Ritual / Seasonal Festival	Khmer Cultural Practice
10	Chòl Chnăm Thmây	New Year / Religious	Khmer Buddhist Tradition
11	Sự tích cây lúa	Agricultural / Mythology	Khmer Folk Myth
12	Người con gái bên dòng sông	Romance / Landscape	Khmer Local Legend
13	Trận chiến trên đồng lúa	Resistance / Heroism	Khmer Historical Memory
14	Tình yêu và lòng hiếu thảo	Family / Moral	Khmer Folklore
15	Vũ điệu thần linh	Ritual / Spiritual	Khmer Religious Symbolism
16	Câu chuyện về Đức Phật	Religious / Didactic	Buddhist Narrative
17	Người mẹ và chiến sĩ	Revolution / Patriotism	Modern Khmer Adaptation
18	Huyền thoại sông Bassac	Landscape / Mythology	Khmer Regional Legend
19	Cô gái hái sen	Nature / Romance	Khmer Folk Imagery
20	Lời nguyện của thần rắn	Supernatural / Morality	Khmer Mythology

Cultural Adaptation and Contemporary Transformation of Du Ke Theater

The thematic diversity of Du Ke theater reflects both traditional and modern influences, demonstrating its dynamic relationship with the living environment of the Khmer community. While many scripts are rooted in folklore and myth such as ancestral legends and epic tales, others incorporate contemporary themes, including rural development movements and social change. This duality illustrates how the Khmer people continuously adapt their cultural expressions to reflect evolving realities, while preserving core values such as social relationships and human compassion.

In interviews conducted by the author, elderly Khmer informants in both Soc Trang and Tra Vinh consistently expressed a strong emotional connection to Du Ke theater. They described it as a familiar and beloved form of entertainment, especially during major festivals like Chôl Chnăm Thmây (Khmer New Year). During these occasions, provincial radio and television stations in Tra Vinh and Soc Trang broadcast Du Ke performances continuously. Families gather to enjoy the shows while preparing traditional foods like bánh tét, or attend live performances at local temples.

Most Khmer temples are equipped with performance stages, where Du Ke plays are typically preceded by lively youth music and followed by full theatrical productions. The sound and spirit of Du Ke have become a vital source of cultural nourishment for Khmer communities in Southern Vietnam.

However, modern life has begun to reshape the conditions under which this cultural form is practiced and consumed. Industrialization and urbanization have led to a reduction in communal living space, and audiences attending live performances usually held in temple courtyards or cultural centres have declined. Many individuals are preoccupied with work, education, or alternative entertainment options. While watching Du Ke on television has become more common, the communal experience of gathering to comment on performances, costumes, and actors has gradually diminished.

In response to these changes, some Khmer artists have proposed innovations to sustain audience engagement. These include shortening the duration of performances, condensing plotlines, and recruiting younger performers. Whereas traditional Du Ke plays once lasted several hours in open air settings, contemporary adaptations aim for 30-minute performances in air-conditioned halls with seating and modern amenities.

It can be concluded that the contraction of physical space and the pressures of modern life have prompted significant adjustments in the practice and presentation of Du Ke theatre. These transformations reflect the resilience and creativity of the Khmer community in preserving their cultural heritage while navigating contemporary challenges.

The thematic range of Du Ke theatre reflects both traditional and contemporary influences, demonstrating its dynamic relationship with the Khmer people's living environment. Through symbolic content analysis of 20 Du Ke scripts performed by the Ánh Bình Minh Art Troupe, the study identified narratives rooted in folklore, mythology, and ancestral legends (e.g., Riem Kê, Thạch Sanh - Lý Thông), alongside modern themes such as rural development, revolutionary ideals, and social transformation. This duality illustrates the community's capacity to adapt cultural expressions to shifting ecological and social realities while preserving core values such as kinship, compassion, and communal solidarity.

Retrospective interviews revealed a strong emotional attachment to Du Ke theatre among elderly Khmer informants. All participants described Du Ke as a cherished form of entertainment, especially during major festivals like Chôl Chnăm Thmây (Khmer New Year). Participant observation confirmed that performances are often integrated into temple festivities, with stages set up in pagoda courtyards and preceded by youth music. Families gather to watch live performances or tune in to televised broadcasts while engaging in traditional activities such as preparing bánh tét. These findings underscore the role of Du Ke as a spiritual and cultural nourishment deeply embedded in Khmer ritual life.

However, the study also documented significant changes in the spatial and social conditions under which Du Ke is practiced. Industrialization and urbanization have led to the contraction of communal spaces, reducing opportunities for large-scale outdoor performances. Participant observation and interview data indicate a decline in live audience attendance, as individuals increasingly prioritize work, education, or alternative entertainment. While television broadcasts have made Du Ke more accessible, they have also diminished the communal experience of gathering, discussing, and emotionally engaging with the performance.

In response to these challenges, Khmer artists and cultural organizers have introduced innovations to sustain audience engagement. These include shortening performance durations to approximately 30 minutes, condensing plotlines, and recruiting younger performers. Contemporary performances are now often staged in

air-conditioned halls with seating and modern amenities, replacing the traditional open-air format. These adaptations reflect the community's resilience and creative agency in preserving Du Ke as a living cultural heritage amid changing socio-environmental conditions.

The findings demonstrate that Du Ke theatre is not merely a static tradition but a flexible cultural form shaped by environmental context, social transformation, and community agency. The Khmer people's ability to retain symbolic depth while embracing innovation affirms the enduring vitality of Du Ke as both a performative art and a reflection of lived experience in Southern Vietnam.

Phuoc Bien ritual

This ceremonial practice emerged as a spiritual response to the uncertainties and dangers associated with nearshore fishing. Rooted in the daily rhythms of subsistence life, the ritual reflects the Khmer people's deep connection to the sea and their reliance on its resources for survival. Over time, it evolved into a communal tradition that blends ecological awareness, religious belief, and cultural identity.

The Khmer ethnic community in Southern Vietnam predominantly practices Theravāda Buddhism, which deeply influences their spatial and spiritual orientation. Most Khmer families choose to reside near temples, believing that proximity to sacred space ensures divine protection. Each temple serves a geographically defined group of lay followers, rather than one based on administrative boundaries. Daily offerings to monks during alms rounds and regular participation in temple rituals especially on full moon days reflect the community's enduring religious devotion. Attendance at temple-organized events is remarkably consistent, particularly during major festivals, and many Khmer individuals maintain lifelong ties to their local temple, even when economic migration takes them far from home (Trần, 2017).

Phuoc Bien ritual (Chrôy Rum Chêk) emerged from the livelihood realities of coastal fishing. Khmer fishermen typically use simple tools such as drag nets, push nets, and small boats, departing at dawn and returning by late afternoon. The sea is both a source of sustenance and a site of spiritual reverence. To express gratitude and seek protection, coastal communities began performing sea blessing ceremonies. These rituals are not exclusive to Khmer Buddhists; many Vietnamese and Chinese fishermen also worship Guanyin (Phật Bà Quan Âm) and conduct sea offerings for safety and prosperity (Thạch, 2014).

Retrospective interviews with 40 elderly Khmer individuals in Tra Vinh and Soc Trang revealed that the origins of the Chrôy Rum Chêk ritual are not precisely documented. Informants recounted a story about a Khmer monk named Ta Hu, who built a simple stupa on a sandy coastal mound where whale carcasses often washed ashore. This site became a place of incense offering and spiritual reflection. The ritual gained popularity during periods of calm seas and abundant catches, reinforcing the belief in the sea's benevolence.

Today, the ritual is held annually in Cà Lãng A, Vinh Chau. The community has constructed a permanent shrine - Chrôy Rum Chêk Stupa - on the coastal sand dunes. The name derives from the Pandanus plant (*Pandanus odoratissimus*), which once grew densely in the area. Although the plant itself is not used in the ritual, its presence gave the site its name. According to Mr. Kim T., a local resident, the original ritual space was "as thick as a forest" with wild pandanus.

Among the 20 Khmer elders interviewed in Tra Vinh, most expressed interest in Phuoc Bien ritual, though three had never attended due to transportation challenges. All informants agreed that this ritual is unique to Khmer communities in Southern Vietnam, noting that Khmer people in Cambodia primarily fish along the Mekong River and have less dependence on the sea. This distinction is supported by geographic data: the Mekong Delta region has over 700 km of coastline, accounting for roughly one-fifth of Vietnam's total shoreline (3,444 km), and significantly more than Cambodia's 443 km.

The ritual continues to serve as a focal point for community gathering and spiritual renewal. Participant observation during the annual procession from Serey Kro Săng Temple to the Chrôy Rum Chêk Stupa revealed strong communal participation, with offerings, chanting, and symbolic acts of gratitude toward the sea. Although the ritual's origin remains embedded in oral tradition, its continued practice affirms the Khmer community's capacity to preserve cultural memory and adapt spiritual expression to environmental realities.

The relationship between natural environment and cultural expression

Environmental conditions as cultural foundations

Participant observation revealed that the expansive geography of the Mekong Delta characterized by open rice fields, coastal sand dunes, and temple courtyards has directly influenced the spatial and performative nature of Khmer cultural expression. Du Ke theater, for example, originated in communal spaces where villagers gathered after agricultural labor. Early performances were staged on flat ground using locally available materials such as banana leaves, coconut fronds, and areca clusters. This spatial openness fostered a participatory atmosphere and enabled the development of a theatrical tradition deeply rooted in environmental familiarity.

Similarly, Phuoc Bien ritual emerged from the livelihood realities of nearshore fishing. Retrospective interviews indicated that Khmer fishermen, relying on rudimentary tools such as drag nets and small boats, developed the ritual as a spiritual response to the risks and uncertainties of coastal subsistence. The ritual site originally a dense grove of wild pandanus became a sacred space for communal offerings and spiritual reflection. The integration of natural landscape into ritual practice illustrates how ecological features become embedded in cultural meaning.

Symbolic adaptation and material culture

Symbolic content analysis of cultural artifacts and performance elements revealed that Khmer rituals and theatrical expressions are materially and symbolically shaped by the environment. Costumes, musical instruments, and stage decorations in Du Ke theater often incorporate natural materials sourced locally, reinforcing the connection between ecological context and aesthetic form. Similarly, the use of incense, spatial orientation, and ritual offerings in Chrôy Rum Chêk ceremonies reflect environmental adaptation and symbolic continuity.

Environmental change and cultural transformation

Field observations and interviews documented the impact of industrialization and urbanization on the spatial dynamics of cultural practice. Shrinking communal spaces and changing livelihood patterns have led to innovations in performance format such as shortened Du Ke plays and indoor staging to accommodate modern constraints. Despite these changes, the core symbolic themes remain rooted in environmental experience, demonstrating the community's resilience and capacity for cultural adaptation.

Cultural identity and ecological memory

The findings suggest that Khmer cultural expressions serve not only as artistic and religious practices but also as repositories of ecological memory. Through storytelling, ritual, and performance, the community encodes its relationship with land, water, and seasonal cycles. These expressions reinforce collective identity and transmit environmental knowledge across generations. The continued practice of Du Ke theater and Phuoc Bien ritual affirms the Khmer people's ability to preserve cultural heritage while responding to ecological and social transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study presents a layered and encouraging portrait of Khmer community dynamics, revealing how perceptions of material well-being, cultural identity, and civic engagement are deeply interwoven. The data suggest that individuals who feel an improvement in their living standards are also likely to view changes in cultural practices with optimism and to demonstrate a proactive approach to community involvement. This interplay points to a larger narrative of social cohesion, where growth in one domain reinforces confidence and participation in others. Importantly, the strong presence of self-initiative in both civic and cultural spheres indicates a community that is not merely adapting to change, but actively shaping it. This signals a promising shift from passive participation to empowered citizenship, grounded in both tradition and forward-looking aspirations. As such, the findings underscore the need for policies and programs that continue to invest in economic inclusion, cultural revitalization, and citizen agency. By supporting these interconnected pillars,

stakeholders can help ensure that development efforts are both sustainable and rooted in the lived experiences and values of the communities they aim to serve.

The Khmer community of southern Vietnam stands at the intersection of tradition and transformation. Their experiences reveal a nuanced portrait of marginalization, agency, and resilience. Through strong social capital networks, cultural adaptability, and community-led organizing, Khmer people continue to forge inclusive paths of development that honor their heritage while adapting to modern realities. Policymakers and development practitioners must take heed: truly sustainable, inclusive growth is only possible when grounded in cultural understanding and collaborative governance. As such, Khmer voices must not only be heard - but amplified in shaping the future they envision. This research reaffirms that informal networks and rituals are not peripheral - they are core to how ethnic communities like the Khmer create belonging, maintain resilience, and navigate socio-economic transformation. Future community development initiatives must prioritize and nurture these cultural assets. Khmer community in Tra Vinh province has various and periodical cultural activities. They include visiting temples, attending festivals, participating in entertainment and watching TV at home. The picture of these activities through Khmer people's responses about participation and choice confirms that these activities are both communal and express personal interests. The role of the government to organize, strengthen and maintain them is very practical. Worth mentioning here is the people's enthusiasm and voluntary participation in activities, which causes the existence of government policies. This indispensable pair of actions points towards a better future for sustainable living environment. Together, these findings suggest that perceptions of personal well-being and cultural evolution are interlinked, reinforcing the idea that socioeconomic advancement and cultural heritage can coexist in harmony, rather than in opposition. Continued attention to both spheres may help strengthen community identity and resilience.

Conflict Of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in the conduct of this research. This study was carried out independently, without any financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could be perceived to influence the ethnographic investigation of Khmer cultural practices in Southern Vietnam. No funding bodies, cultural organizations, community authorities, or research institutions exerted any influence over the study's design, data collection, interpretation, or presentation of findings related to Du Ke theater, Phuoc Bien ritual, or broader Khmer environmental - cultural interactions. All engagements with Khmer communities in Tra Vinh and Soc Trang were conducted solely for academic purposes, with respect for cultural sensitivity and autonomy, and without obligations to any stakeholders that might compromise the objectivity or integrity of the research.

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