

SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE KHMER COMMUNITY IN TRA VINH PROVINCE, VIETNAM

Hue T Nguyen¹

¹Tra Vinh University, Vinh Long, VietNam
ORCID: 0009-0006-6282-7419

huetvu@tvu.edu.vn¹

Abstract.

This empirical study explores the socio-cultural dynamics and development perceptions among Khmer community in Tra Vinh, Vietnam, based on survey data collected from respondents across two districts in one year. The research investigates six key domains: perceptions of current living conditions; continuity and change in traditional cultural practices; drivers of community participation; engagement with Khmer-language media; attitudes toward cultural preservation initiatives; and community-defined priorities for government support. Findings indicate a generally optimistic outlook across these dimensions, with high levels of self-initiated civic engagement, consistent media consumption in the Khmer language, and broad approval of cultural preservation efforts. Respondents emphasized employment generation and poverty alleviation as top government priorities, highlighting the intersection of material needs and cultural sustainability. The study underscores the value of integrating cultural identity into development planning and emphasizes the role of community agency in shaping locally meaningful progress.

Keywords: Community engagement, Cultural preservation, Ethnic minorities, Khmer community

1. Introduction

Ethnic minority communities play a pivotal role in shaping Vietnam's cultural and developmental trajectory. Among these, the Khmer population in Tra Vinh Province represents one of the most prominent and enduring ethno-cultural groups, marked by strong community cohesion, Theravāda Buddhist traditions, and a distinct linguistic heritage (Salemink, 2019). As Vietnam accelerates its national development agenda, attention to the intersection between modernization and the lived experiences of ethnic minorities becomes increasingly critical (Do et al., 2020).

This study investigates socio-cultural dynamics and development perceptions among Khmer communities in Tra Cu and Cau Ngang districts. Drawing from structured surveys and interviews conducted with 200 Khmer respondents, it examines six interrelated domains: living conditions, cultural continuity, civic participation, Khmer-language media engagement, cultural reservation, and government service expectations. The aim is to better understand how cultural resilience, local agency, and development priorities intersect within these communities - while evaluating the degree to which current policy frameworks reflect locally grounded needs (Ehlert, 2010), (Michaud & Turner, 2016).

By integrating quantitative data with contextual analysis, this research contributes to ongoing discussions on inclusive development and culturally sensitive policymaking. It foregrounds Khmer voices as central agents of change, building on a body of scholarship that emphasizes participatory governance and the rights of ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia (McElwee, 2004), (Michaud & Turner, 2016), (Liebenberg et al., 2019) uses participatory visual methods to explore how informal community structures and cultural engagement foster resilience among Indigenous youth. It highlights the importance of culturally grounded spaces in building belonging and identity. Kelly-Ann Allen and colleagues (Allen et al., 2021) offers a new framework for understanding belonging, emphasizing its role in mental health, social cohesion, and resilience. It identifies four key components - competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions - that shape how belonging is experienced and cultivated. Participation in meaningful daily activities is strongly associated with a sense of belonging and well-being. It also showed that belonging mediates the relationship between participation and well-being, emphasizing the role of shared experiences in fostering both connection and competence (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). Shared beliefs, supportive environments, and opportunities for interaction are key to developing a sense of belonging. It also links belonging to increased participation, self-esteem, and community engagement (Raman, 2023).

Culture has a critical role in transforming localities into more of a place of nostalgia, causing homesick when someone leaves this place. The familiarity of, sights, sounds, colors, smells and especially cultural activities together have gradually formed into homes and neighborhoods. In many ethnic minority communities, resilience and well-being are deeply rooted in informal social systems. For the Khmer population in the Mekong Delta, social belonging is not only fostered through policy or infrastructure - it's lived daily through community rituals, kinship, and temple-based interactions. This paper examines how such informal mechanisms preserve identity, foster mutual support, and enable adaptive strategies in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape.

Tra Vinh is one of the provinces in the southern region of Vietnam, inhabited by Khmer people. The proportion of Khmer people here accounts for 31% of the total population. They live together with other ethnic groups from urban to rural areas, holding positions in the government. Khmer people here are easily identifiable because of their vibrant and busy lives with cultural activities that take place every year and have been maintained for many years. It can be said that thanks to participating in these cultural activities, specifically going to temples, joining in activities, watching TV, participating in arts... it has made Khmer people more attached to the community.

2. Literature review

Research on Vietnam's ethnic minorities has increasingly emphasized the importance of culturally grounded development strategies. The Khmer ethnic group, concentrated in the Mekong Delta, represents one of the most prominent non-Viet communities, with a rich spiritual and cultural heritage rooted in Theravāda Buddhism and traditional village institutions.

Vietnamese scholars have provided a comprehensive analysis of Khmer cultural values and their role in sustainable development. Their work highlights the centrality of pagodas, traditional festivals, and belief systems in maintaining community cohesion and spiritual life in the Mekong Delta. They argue that cultural preservation must be integrated with poverty reduction and livelihood strategies to ensure long-term resilience (Hai, 2021). The spiritual significance of

cultural beliefs is among Khmer communities in An Giang Province. The role of traditional religious practices has been shaping interpersonal behavior and social responsibility, and proposes community-based solutions for preserving these traditions amid globalization (Song & Cam, 2019), (Nguyen Chi Hai et al., 2021). The cultural practices of Khmer communities across Southeast Asia are deeply influenced by their local environments, historical trajectories, and socio-political contexts. Scholars have increasingly emphasized that Khmer identity is not monolithic but locally articulated, shaped by both internal dynamics and external pressures. Cultural expression is deeply embedded in the specific historical, environmental, and social contexts of a community. Localized factors - such as geography, migration patterns, political history, and interethnic relations - play a pivotal role in shaping how traditions are practiced, interpreted, and transformed. As evidenced in studies of Khmer communities in Binh Duong and the Mekong Delta, cultural practices are not monolithic but are instead dynamically molded by the unique conditions of place. This underscores the importance of situating cultural analysis within its immediate context to fully grasp the diversity and adaptability of cultural identities. Khmer cultural expression across Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos is elaborately displayed through a transborder semiotic lens. This comparative analysis shows that Khmer communities in Vietnam act as agents of indigenization, maintaining symbolic forms through rituals, temples, and language despite soft assimilation policies. In contrast, Khmer symbols in Thailand and Laos are often simplified or excluded from public representation (Ca et al., 2025).

The Khmer ethnic minority, numbering over 1.3 million people, primarily inhabits Vietnam's Mekong Delta provinces such as Tra Vinh, Soc Trang, and Bac Lieu, where they maintain distinct cultural traditions rooted in Theravāda Buddhism, wet-rice agriculture, and artisanal crafts. Living in culturally autonomous villages known as phum, soc, Khmer communities coexist with other ethnic groups while preserving their language and spiritual practices. In recent years, development strategies have increasingly acknowledged the value of grassroots agency and local knowledge in fostering inclusive growth. Community-based organizations and local leaders have played a vital role in mobilizing resources and implementing poverty reduction programs, particularly in provinces like Bac Lieu and Tra Vinh, where participatory planning has led to notable improvements in infrastructure, education, and healthcare. Empowerment initiatives, including microcredit and vocational training, have enabled Khmer women and youth to become active contributors to local development. Simultaneously, local knowledge-encompassing traditional farming, herbal medicine, and spiritual customs - has emerged as a key asset in community-based tourism (CBT) and sustainable agriculture. A study in An Giang province demonstrated how local knowledge enhances CBT by offering authentic cultural experiences while preserving heritage, though challenges remain in integrating such knowledge into formal development frameworks due to limited institutional support. The Vietnamese government has responded with targeted policies under the National Target Program on Sustainable Poverty Reduction, channeling resources into Khmer-majority areas and promoting ethnic solidarity, cultural preservation, and infrastructure development. However, persistent gaps in capacity building, especially in remote regions, hinder full participation. Challenges such as limited access to higher education, underrepresentation in governance, and cultural erosion due to modernization continue to affect Khmer communities. Yet, opportunities abound in expanding CBT, strengthening grassroots leadership, and embedding local knowledge into climate resilience strategies (Tung, 2018), (Nguyen Chi Hai et al., 2021), (Nguyen Chi Hai et al., 2023).

In the contemporary study of community resilience and grassroots development, the role of social capital -manifested through networks, trust, and reciprocity - has been identified as a central enabler of collective action. Among the Khmer ethnic minority in southern Vietnam, particularly in provinces such as Tra Vinh, Soc Trang, and An Giang, these social mechanisms underpin communal cooperation and resource-sharing systems. Khmer communities in Vietnam maintain dense interconnections centered on kinship, locality, and religious institutions, especially Theravāda Buddhist pagodas that play a particularly central role, acting as cultural and spiritual anchors and coordinating nodes for collective action (Dell et al., 2017). Economic and social activities are deeply interwoven with relational ties. In Khmer communities of southern Vietnam, social capital in the form of networks, trust, and reciprocity is not an abstract ideal, but a tangible structure of cooperation. These dimensions facilitate sustained collective action and equitable resource-sharing, particularly in a context of socioeconomic disadvantage and institutional underrepresentation. As such, they offer a model for understanding how marginalized communities can organize effectively around shared interests, drawing on deep-rooted cultural frameworks to navigate contemporary challenges (Bao, 2024).

3. Methodological approach

This study employs an integrated framework to examine how Khmer communities in Tra Vinh Province perceive and engage with various aspects of socio-cultural life and development. Culture is viewed as a dynamic and essential component of sustainable development (Soini & Birkeland, 2014). It informs our exploration of how Khmer traditions, institutions, and language are maintained or adapted over time. The work of (Chambers, 1997) emphasizes the role of grassroots agency and local knowledge in shaping development outcomes. People's sense of well-being, safety, and opportunity directly influences their engagement with society and trust in institutions. Networks, trust, and reciprocity enable collective action and resource sharing (Putnam, 1995), (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).

Research questions are:

- How do residents perceive and engage with their community in terms of living conditions, civic participation, and priorities for government action?
- In what ways are cultural identity, media consumption, and preservation efforts shaping the continuity and transformation of Khmer traditions?

The study involved 200 Khmer participants across two key districts in Tra Vinh province: Tra Cu and Cau Ngang. Data were collected over a 17-month period (Feb 2022 - June 2023) using a mixed-method approach that combined structured questionnaires with in-depth interviews. This ensured both quantitative consistency and qualitative depth, capturing a broad spectrum of community perspectives.

Research Hypotheses and Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by several hypotheses that reflect the socio-cultural dynamics within the Khmer community in Tra Vinh. First, it hypothesizes that Khmer respondents perceive their current living conditions positively, indicating socio-economic improvements. Second, it posits that the continuity and transformation of traditional cultural practices are influenced by levels of community participation and access to Khmer-language media. Third, it assumes that regular engagement with Khmer-language media correlates with stronger support for cultural preservation initiatives. Lastly, it suggests that community-defined government priorities -particularly employment generation and poverty alleviation—demonstrate the intersection between material

needs and cultural sustainability. The research is grounded in three key theoretical perspectives: Culture-based Development Theory, which emphasizes the integration of cultural identity into sustainable development; Collective Action Theory, which explains the role of community agency in driving local initiatives; and Media and Identity Theory, which highlights the importance of ethnic-language media in reinforcing cultural cohesion and identity. Together, these frameworks provide a robust lens for analyzing how cultural values and community agency shape development perceptions and priorities.

The questionnaire

This questionnaire can be described as a community-focused diagnostic tool designed to assess public perceptions, cultural engagement, and development priorities. It blends social, cultural, and civic dimensions to offer a holistic snapshot of how individuals experience their environment and interact with their community.

The questionnaire is composed of six thematic sections, each with closed-ended questions for ease of analysis:

- Perceptions of Living Conditions: Measures subjective assessments of quality of life and environmental change.
- Participation Drivers in Community Activities: Identifies levels and motivations for civic engagement.
- Community Priorities for Government Action: Captures collective preferences for policy and development focus.
- Continuity and Change in Cultural Traditions: Explores perceptions of cultural evolution and identity.
- Media Engagement with Khmer-Language Programming: Assesses frequency of cultural media consumption.
- Perception of Cultural Preservation Efforts: Evaluates public sentiment toward heritage protection initiatives.

Study Sites and Respondents

Between February 2022 and June 2023, data were collected from two communes in Trà Vinh Province, Vietnam: Ham Tan (Vam Ray Hamlet, Tra Cu District) and Nhi Truong (No Lua A and B Hamlets, Cau Ngang District). Each site contributed 100 Khmer respondents, selected to reflect a diverse range of ages, genders, and occupations. Community leaders facilitated introductions and ensured voluntary participation.

Data Collection Procedures

Enumerators trained in ethical research protocols administered surveys and conducted interviews. Consent forms were provided in both Vietnamese and Khmer. Responses were either self-completed or facilitated, depending on literacy levels. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining semi-structured interviews and standardized questionnaires. The survey instrument included 35 items across six domains: living conditions, cultural practices, community participation, media engagement, cultural preservation attitudes, and development priorities. Interviews provided qualitative depth and were conducted in Khmer with informed consent.

Data Processing

Quantitative data were entered into SPSS and cleaned for consistency. Open-ended responses were thematically coded. Interview transcripts were analyzed using NVivo 12, following a grounded theory approach. Coding cycles identified recurring themes and narrative structures.

4. Conducting research and results

The Khmer community in Tra Vinh province is not only numerically significant but also spatially concentrated in distinct rural areas, particularly in the southern districts such as Tra Cu and Cau Ngang. In Tra Cu district, where Khmer people make up over 62% of the population, they represent the cultural and demographic majority. This distribution grants them a central role in shaping local identity, traditions, and social structures. Many villages and communes in this district are known for preserving Khmer language, Theravāda Buddhist temples, and indigenous forms of collective labor such as *sala phum* (village solidarity efforts). In contrast, Cau Ngang district features a more ethnically mixed demographic, with Khmer people constituting nearly 38%. Although not the majority, their presence is substantial and influential. In several communes - particularly those along canal systems and farming zones - Khmer communities have maintained strong social cohesion and participation in local governance structures.

The role of the Khmer population in community development extends beyond cultural preservation. Across both districts, they have actively engaged in grassroots initiatives, agricultural innovation, and educational outreach. Monasteries serve dual functions: as spiritual centers and as hubs for literacy campaigns, youth education, and vocational training. Moreover, Khmer leaders have increasingly participated in local administrative roles, helping to advocate for inclusive policies, equitable land access, and rural infrastructure development. Their geographic clustering has facilitated community-based development models, where cultural identity is leveraged as a foundation for social progress. This spatial and social concentration enables efficient coordination of programs in health, climate adaptation, and cultural tourism, especially when initiatives are designed with sensitivity to Khmer traditions.

The proportion of Khmer people within a given locality appears to be closely associated with their level of participation in socio-cultural activities. In areas where the Khmer population is more concentrated - such as Tra Cu district, where they comprise over 62% of the population - there is typically greater visibility and involvement in local cultural practices, including traditional festivals, Buddhist ceremonies, and community-led events. Their demographic majority not only fosters a strong sense of cultural identity but also enables the maintenance and revitalization of cultural institutions such as pagodas, language schools, and collective labor traditions.

In contrast, in districts like Cau Ngang, where Khmer people account for approximately 38%, participation in cultural activities remains significant but may be influenced by factors such as interethnic dynamics, access to cultural infrastructure, and the availability of Khmer-led initiatives. In such settings, participation can depend more heavily on support from local authorities and policies that promote ethnic inclusion and cultural preservation.

This relationship suggests that ethnic concentration can facilitate cultural continuity, both through the strength of community networks and the presence of shared values and resources. However, it also emphasizes the importance of inclusive policy measures to ensure that minority groups retain access and agency in shaping cultural life, regardless of their demographic proportion.

4.1. Perceptions of Living Conditions

Survey responses from 200 local Khmer participants revealed that more than half (53%) perceived their current living conditions as better than before. This suggests an overall sense of progress or improvement in quality of life. Meanwhile, 31% reported no perceived change, which may imply stability in socioeconomic or environmental factors. In contrast, 13% indicated that their conditions had worsened, a group that warrants closer attention in future analysis to identify underlying causes. A small minority (3%) were uncertain or unable to assess their circumstances. *“We’ve had more electricity and cleaner roads than before. My children go to school without problems now, and I can sell vegetables at the market more easily.”* a female respondent, Ham Tan commune. *“Before, we had no clear water and the roof leaked. Now we got help from a development project, and things feel more secure. My life is better.”* a male elder, Nhi Truong commune. These responses highlight perceived improvements in infrastructure, education access, and household stability. The optimism is often tied to tangible benefits such as local projects and improved services. However, some reflect communities that have not felt the effects of development policies or support mechanisms. *“We hear that others are doing better, but for our family, it’s still difficult to save money. Nothing has really changed for us.”* a housewife, Cau Ngang district. *“My situation is the same. I still farm like before, prices are not good. We live with what we have - no better, no worse.”* a middle-aged farmer, Tra Cu district. *“I’m not sure. Life feels the same, but maybe that’s just because I don’t expect much anymore.”* A retired farmer, Tra Cu.

These results suggest that while the broader trend points toward optimism or improvement, a significant portion of the population either experiences stagnation or faces declining conditions. This underscores the need for targeted interventions that address inequalities and strengthen community support, especially for those who perceive a worsening of their living standards.

Table 1. Perceived Value of Current Living Conditions

Response Option	Percentage	Count
Better	53%	106
The same	31%	62
Worse	13%	26
Hard to say	3%	6

4.2. Participation Drivers in Community Activities

The survey result of the participating local festivals demonstrates a high level of voluntary participation (66%). Those who do not participate (10%) are due to several reasons such as going to work or traveling far away, busy with school, giving birth, or undergoing medical treatment.

Table 2. Participation Drivers in Community Activities

Participation Method	Percentage	
----------------------	------------	--

		Count
Get involved yourself	66%	132
Someone asked to join	24%	48
Not engaged	10%	20

Among the 200 Khmer respondents surveyed, two-thirds (66%) indicated self-initiative as the main reason for their involvement in community activities. This highlights a strong presence of intrinsic motivation and civic responsibility among participants. *“No one asked me. I helped organize the temple cleanup because it felt right - I want the place to look good when people come for prayers”*, said a young male, Cau Ngang district. Additionally, 24% reported joining due to external encouragement, such as invitations from friends, family members, or local leaders. *“A friend invited me to join the youth volunteer group. I didn’t think of it myself, but once I got involved, I liked it”*, said a student, Tra Cu. A smaller portion (10%) was not involved in community activities at all, suggesting potential barriers to engagement or a lack of perceived relevance. *“I don’t have time. I work from sunrise to sunset in the fields - how can I join meetings or events?”* an elderly farmer, Tra Cu district.

These figures align with earlier findings on participation patterns and reinforce the idea that empowering individuals to act independently is key to fostering robust civic involvement. Social influence plays a meaningful, though secondary, role, while the relatively low rate of non-participation indicates general openness to community engagement.

The finding provides compelling evidence of the critical role that intrinsic motivation plays in fostering active engagement. With two-thirds of participants initiating involvement independently, it appears that individuals are most likely to act when they perceive personal value or alignment with the initiative's goals. This supports self-determination theory, which emphasizes autonomy as a key driver of motivation and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985). By contrast, the smaller proportion of participants who joined due to external prompts suggests that extrinsic motivators, while not insignificant, may have limited reach or durability. This could reflect either the insufficient appeal of the initiative when not internally driven, or a lack of compelling outreach strategies. The low rate of non-engagement (10%) is encouraging, but it still points to the presence of barriers - perhaps informational, logistical, or perceptual - that merit further investigation.

This analysis highlights a clear preference for self-directed involvement among participants, positioning intrinsic motivation as the most influential factor in engagement. The data suggest that while interpersonal invitations and reminders can bolster participation, they are secondary to an individual's own sense of purpose and relevance. Understanding this distinction is essential for designing initiatives that not only attract but also sustain participant interest.

4.3. Community Priorities for Government Action

Spiritual life is quite stable due to the attraction of diversity and regularity of cultural activities. Besides, Khmer people in Tra Vinh want the government to support them and provide them with convenience through forms of entertainment. *“We enjoy watching performances during the festivals. If the government helped bring more cultural shows or Khmer music events, people would be very happy.”* A youth coordinator, Vam Ray Hamlet. The data show a clear consensus around economic security, with 77% of respondents identifying job creation as the top governmental priority. *“Without work, people cannot think about anything else—not about festivals, health, or even religion. A stable job is the foundation.”* A male respondent, Cau Ngang. *“If the government can help set up more training or jobs for young people, then everything else will follow. It’s the first step.”* a teacher, Tra Cu. Following closely, 57% emphasized the urgency of addressing hunger and poverty, underscoring widespread concerns about basic livelihood and food security.

Infrastructure and economic development (41%) and access to culture and education (40%) also feature prominently, indicating an interest in both long-term structural progress and social investment. Meanwhile, 35% of respondents highlighted health and medical services, and 21% expressed concern for environmental sustainability, particularly clean water and sanitation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while immediate economic needs dominate public concern, respondents also value social and environmental dimensions of development. This multidimensional perspective offers important guidance for policymakers aiming to build inclusive and resilient strategies.

Table 3. Priority Areas for Government Support

Area of Support	Percentage	Count
Job creation	77%	154
Hunger and poverty alleviation	57%	114
Economic development and infrastructure	41%	82
Culture and education	40%	80
Medicine and public health	35%	70
Clean environment and water access	21%	42
Other	1%	2

Inevitably, at the top job creation (77%) and poverty alleviation (57%) form the foundational needs - echoing immediate priorities focused on economic stability and livelihoods. The middle include calls for investment in infrastructure, education, and healthcare. However, we see emerging concerns for environmental sustainability and miscellaneous needs, which, while important, are perceived as less urgent than the socioeconomic fundamentals

4.4. Continuity and Change in Cultural Traditions

Khmer people have a rich culture, the highlight of which is in festivals. During the year, Khmer people have more than 30 large and small ceremonies such as Chol Chnam Thmay (New Year's Ceremony), Ok Om Bok (Fresh Rice Ceremony), Sen Dolta (Grandparents Worshipping

Ceremony), Meka Bauchia (Buddha Ceremony), Visak Bauchia (Buddha's Birthday Ceremony), Chol Vosa (Summer Entry Ceremony), Chan Vosa (Summer Departure Ceremony), Kathina (Red Offering Ceremony), Bon Phka (Flower Offering Ceremony), Bon Putthea Phi Sek (Buddha Statue Offering Ceremony), Bon Seyma (Feast)...

Table 4. Perceptions of Changes in Khmer Traditional Ceremonies

Response Option	Percentage	Count
1- Just like before	38%	76
2- There are many positive direction	56%	112
3- There are more negative changes	2%	4
4- Have no ideas	4%	8

Insights from 200 Khmer respondents indicate that a majority (56%) perceive traditional ceremonies to be evolving in a positive direction, suggesting that cultural practices are adapting well to modern contexts or gaining renewed relevance. Additionally, 38% believe ceremonies remain unchanged, which points to a strong preservation of tradition and cultural identity over time. Only 2% noted a negative shift, implying minimal concern over cultural erosion or deterioration, while 4% were uncertain. The overwhelmingly positive or stable assessments reflect a sense of cultural resilience and adaptability. This trend may indicate that modernization and tradition are not necessarily in conflict - instead, cultural practices appear to be navigating contemporary changes in ways that are largely seen as beneficial or authentic. Further research could explore what aspects of these ceremonies are evolving and how they are being received by different generations. *“Young people now go to the temple more often during festivals. They post pictures and help organize events. It feels new but still respectful of our beliefs.”* A youth organizer, Tra Cu district.

For Khmer people, festivals and customs are often intertwined. In each ceremony, there are many rituals interwoven between religious elements and folk beliefs. Each festival of the Khmer people is associated with daily activities, morality, lifestyle and people's wishes. Therefore, the festival has become an indispensable spiritual part of the Khmer people. Although the nature and content of each festival and each locality are different, the most common point is that they all carry heavy elements of religious beliefs. *“Nothing has changed much. We still chant, prepare food, and visit the temple like our parents did.”* an elder, Nhi Truong commune

Strongly and deeply influenced by the human philosophy of Theravada Buddhism, the cultural and spiritual life of the Vietnamese Khmer community is always associated with temples, in which monks play a leading role. Buddhists live a good and beautiful life. Throughout the Southern region, there are about 600 large and small Khmer pagodas with more than 10,000 monks, some pagodas built several centuries ago, recognized as cultural relics, architectural and artistic relics. National level arts such as: Ang pagoda (Tra Vinh), Hang pagoda (Tra Vinh), Bat pagoda (Soc Trang).

Although the integration process, exchange and acculturation of foreign cultures have had an impact on the spiritual life of the Khmer people, temples are still the heart of the community, a place of religious worship and cultural activity institution for local residents. *“Our community keeps the same rituals every year. Everyone knows what to do - it’s passed down naturally.”* a female farmer, Vam Ray hamlet. The religious practice of Khmer Buddhists at the temple goes hand in hand with the process of preserving and promoting unique cultural features such as sports and festivals. Thus, for the Khmer people, these elements in their cultural and spiritual life are closely related to each other.

The cultural and spiritual life of the Khmer people is extremely unique and diverse. The spiritual and cultural development of the Khmer people has a close relationship with the Party's guidelines and policies; awareness and sense of preserving the culture of the people; local economic and social life. Survey results have shown that, currently, the majority of Tra Vinh Khmer people evaluate very positively the activities related to local cultural life (56%), as well as the changes of these activities in recent years.

Vietnam government has issued various policies to promote and preserve the cultural values of ethnic minorities in general and Khmer people in particular. These policies have created favorable conditions to promote the quality of cultural activities to meet the increasing spiritual needs of the people. Identifying the role of temples in improving the cultural life of Khmer people, the authorities always pay top attention to the issue of restoring and embellishing temples. In addition to dedicating a budget for this activity, governments at all levels also perform well the work of socializing and mobilizing benefactors, while at the same time linking the preservation and development of religious institutions with develop spiritual cultural tourism. As of March 2017, the whole country has 19 Khmer temples that have been ranked as relics at different levels, 123 Khmer temples have been restored and repaired. The whole Tra Vinh province has 15 Khmer temples recognized as provincial-level and 30 national-level cultural and architectural historical relics.

Besides, many Khmer festivals have been recognized as cultural heritage and organized on a large scale such as: Southern Khmer Ethnic Culture and Sports Festival (held from 2003 to present, every 2 years); An Giang's Seven Mountains Cow Racing Festival was upgraded to a provincial festival; Ok Om Bok Festival was recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage; Hanoi has built a Cultural and Tourism Village for Vietnamese Ethnic Minorities, and annually organizes a Khmer cultural day in the South within the framework of the Vietnamese Ethnic Cultural Festival program (Hoang Thi Lan, 2013). Folk games and traditional sports of the Khmer people such as: boat racing, bull racing, carrying bamboo baskets to fetch water, stick pushing, dua co, cross-country running, stilt walking, blindfolded pot smashing, playing Kol, petanque was gradually restored, cultural and sports competitions were held increasingly larger and rich in form. Not only Khmer people participate in the activities, but the whole community participates. Tra Vinh Khmer people can choose to participate in cultural activities in their home province, or visit friends and relatives in other provinces in the Mekong Delta region and experience activities there. Spiritual life is enhanced with the convenience of today's transportation, roads and audio-visual technology.

The consistency of positive outlooks across both domains points to a broader climate of optimism and cultural vitality within the community. The parallel between improved living conditions and a favorable view of ceremonial evolution may signal that socioeconomic stability fosters cultural resilience. In other words, when basic needs are met or improving, communities may be more willing - or able - to invest emotionally and materially in sustaining or modernizing traditions.

However, it's important to note that "no change" was the second most common response in both datasets. This points to a segment of the population experiencing either material or cultural continuity, which can be viewed positively or neutrally depending on personal expectations. Additionally, the small yet notable share of respondents who felt their living conditions worsened (13%) stands in contrast to the very low percentage (2%) concerned about negative cultural change. This may suggest that even amid economic difficulties, cultural traditions are seen as a source of consistency or hope.

4.5. Media Engagement with Khmer-Language Programming

In addition to participating in community activities, respondents also demonstrated high levels of media engagement at home, with 49% reporting daily viewership of television programs. The primary motivations for watching TV included staying informed through news and current events (82%), enjoying traditional music performances (43%), and viewing entertainment content such as films (22%). Among 200 Khmer respondents, nearly half (49%) reported watching Khmer-language TV programs on a daily basis, reflecting strong engagement with media in their native language. A further 34% tune in multiple times per week, suggesting that over 80% of respondents maintain regular contact with Khmer-language content. Only 9% said they rarely watch such programs, and 8% reported not watching at all. These findings imply a robust cultural media presence, with television continuing to serve as a primary channel for linguistic and cultural preservation.

Table 5. Frequency of Watching Khmer-Language TV Programs

Viewing Frequency	Percentage	Count
Frequently (everyday)	49%	98
Sometimes (2–3 times per week)	34%	68
Rarely (once per week)	9%	18
Not at all	8%	16

The frequency with which Khmer respondents engage with Khmer-language television programming offers critical insights into broader patterns of cultural participation. With nearly 83% watching Khmer-language TV at least several times a week, the data point to a strong and sustained connection to cultural media. This form of engagement acts not only as entertainment but also as a mechanism for language preservation, cultural continuity, and the reinforcement of shared identity. Older generations often engage more consistently with traditional-language content, particularly when literacy in Khmer script is high and alternative digital platforms (e.g., social media) are less accessible. Younger individuals may still tune in but might diversify their media sources or prefer online formats over traditional broadcast TV. Also, those with lower formal education levels may rely more heavily on television as an accessible medium for cultural

content, particularly if reading ability or access to print materials is limited. Conversely, more educated respondents might engage through multiple platforms - TV, radio, digital media - but still value Khmer-language programming as a cultural anchor. In rural areas where Khmer speakers are concentrated and where communal viewing in pagodas or homes is common, TV can play a central role in cultural life. In urban or peri-urban areas, media consumption may diversify, potentially reducing reliance on traditional language programming unless it is broadcast through modern, mobile-friendly channels. These correlations imply that Khmer-language television remains a unifying cultural thread, especially in areas where Khmer identity is strongly rooted. However, to maintain relevance across generations and contexts, content creators and policymakers may need to expand Khmer-language offerings to digital and interactive platforms, ensuring cultural media remains accessible and appealing to diverse audience segments. *“Khmer music programs remind me of my parents’ generation. We listen together and talk about the songs - it brings the family together”*, said a young adult, Cau Ngang district. Or *“Sometimes I just want to relax, so I watch Khmer movies or comedy shows. It makes me laugh and helps me forget worries.”* said a retired temple caretaker in Cau Ngang, *“I don’t always have time to watch every day, but I try to watch Khmer programs at least two or three times each week.”* a Construction worker, Nhi Truong commune.

4.6. Perception of Cultural Preservation Efforts

Temples are traditional cultural institutions and have a particularly important meaning in the lives of Khmer people. They are the center of religious activities; a place to preserve cultural values; moral and character education, literacy and vocational training; cultural activities, sports and folk games; charitable activities (feeding the elderly, orphans, providing hardship assistance to the poor). Khmer folk culture has many unique features, including the belief in worshipping Neak Ta. This belief is considered a spiritual and cultural value of the Southern Khmer community. Neak Ta are shiny pebbles, people believe that they are the incarnation of Neak Ta, big is called Thmâr thom, small is called Thmâr tach, representing purity, natural simplicity, cleanliness, and hardness to protect people in the care home. If a temple is a place to worship Buddha, then these small houses are to worship God Neak Ta, called Neak ta settlements. They can be located within the temple grounds; under the tree, at the crossroads in every commune, hamlet. Most of the Khmer temples were built a long time ago and now their number has met the religious needs of the people. This explains why the current construction of new Khmer temples is very limited, but the need for restoration, embellishment and repair is very high. If we do not pay attention to the preservation of temple or Neak ta settlement, it will cause many difficulties for the religious activities of the people, greatly affect religious policy and the risk of eroding national cultural values.

The interview reflections show visible results of collaborative initiatives and a sense of pride in restored heritage spaces. *“We were worried that the Neak ta site would be forgotten, but officials helped us clean it up and even put up signs explaining its meaning. It feels respected again.”* a community youth leader, No Lua A hamlet. *“Our temple was renovated last year with help from the government and local volunteers. It looks beautiful, and more people come during festivals now.”* A female elder, Vam Ray hamlet. Also there is suggestion that while recognition of efforts exists, sustainability and equity in funding or follow-through are still areas for improvement. *“I think the support is okay, but sometimes it takes too long to repair things. We need more regular attention to smaller temples, not just the famous ones.”* A middle-aged monk, Tra Cu district.

Table 6. Assessment of Preservation and Restoration of Traditional Cultural Institutions

Evaluation Level	Percentage	Count
too poor	0%	0
poor	1%	2
acceptable	23%	46
good	46%	92
extremely good	30%	60

Khmer people consider the temples to be both sacred and intimate, carrying both religious and existential meaning of life, a place where people go to consult. anything in daily life. Almost all the community's energy is put into the temple, otherwise people rarely put it into their own home". Even since ancient times, when life was still in lots of troubles, they had been very interested in building and restoring temples and Neak ta. Today, living standards have improved somewhat, and with the support of the government's policies, this activity is carried out better in both quantity and quality.

Survey responses indicate a strongly favorable assessment of the current efforts by both the community and government to preserve and restore Khmer traditional cultural institutions such as temples and Neak ta settlements. A combined 76% of respondents rated these efforts as "good" or "extremely good", highlighting widespread satisfaction and perceived effectiveness of preservation initiatives. An additional 23% found the efforts "acceptable," suggesting moderate approval with potential areas for enhancement. Importantly, only 1% expressed dissatisfaction, and no respondents rated the efforts as "too poor", indicating nearly universal recognition of at least some level of success.

These findings reflect a positive climate for cultural heritage stewardship and may signal strong community - government collaboration. They also reinforce earlier data showing confidence in cultural continuity and modernization, suggesting that preservation efforts are both visible and valued by the population. these data points suggest that cultural vitality, civic engagement, and material improvement are not occurring in isolation, but are interlinked. Preservation of tradition is not seen as a backward-looking endeavor, but as a living, dynamic process aligned with progress and self-determination. This synthesis affirms the value of policies that recognize culture not as a passive artifact, but as a critical pillar of sustainable development - one that must be nourished through inclusive governance, responsive investment, and the ongoing empowerment of Khmer communities themselves.

5. 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.

Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the support of time and facilities from Tra Vinh University (TVU) for this study.

References

- Allen, K.-A., Kern, M. L., Rozek, C. S., McInerney, D. M., & Slavich, G. M. (2021). Belonging: a Review of Conceptual issues, an Integrative framework, and Directions for Future Research. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 73(1), 87 - 102.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409>
- Bao, L. H. (2024). Historical state and its legacy: another perspective on Dai Viet–Khmer economic division in Vietnam. *Empirical Economics*, 67(6), 2933 - 2970.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00181-024-02630-y>

- Ca, N. M., Diem, N. T., & Pham, H. T. (2025). Transnational Khmer cultural landscapes: A comparative analysis of symbols, belief systems, and communal structures in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos. *Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology*, 9(6), 760 - 775.
<https://doi.org/10.55214/25768484.v9i6.7874>
- Chambers, R. (1997). *Whose reality counts? putting the last first*. Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Dell, M., Lane, N., Querubin, P., & Borrero, P. Q. (2017). *The Historical State, Local Collective Action, and Economic Development in Vietnam*. Harvard and NBER, IIES, and NYU.
- Do, H. T. H., Nguyen, N. D., Mai, A. N., Phung, D. M., Vu, N. D., Nguyen, H. D., Tran, D. M., & Phung, T. M. T. (2020). Ensuring basic education for ethnic minority groups in Vietnam. *Management Science Letters*, 10(12), 2805 - 2812.
<https://doi.org/10.5267/j.msl.2020.4.029>
- Ehlert, J. (2010). *Living with flood local knowledge in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Ethnic Minorities and Sustainable Development Goals: Who will be left behind? United Nations Development Programme*. UNDP.
<https://www.undp.org/vietnam/publications/ethnic-minorities-and-sustainable-development-goals-who-will-be-left-behind>
- Hai, N. C. (2021). Preserve and Promote the Values Cultural Belief of the Khmer People in An Giang Province, Vietnam. *Indonesian Journal of Innovation and Applied Sciences (IJIAS)*, 1(2), 82 - 88.
<https://doi.org/10.47540/ijias.v1i2.192>
- Haim-Litevsky, D., Komemi, R., & Lipskaya-Velikovsky, L. (2023). Sense of Belonging, Meaningful Daily Life Participation, and Well-Being: Integrated Investigation. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(5), 4121.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20054121>
- Hoang Thi Lan. (2013). Preserving and promoting the intangible cultural values of the Khmer people in the Southwest region. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(82), 76 - 83.
- Lan, N. T. P. (2013). Social and ecological challenges of market-oriented shrimp farming in Vietnam. *SpringerPlus*, 2(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1186/2193-1801-2-675>
- Liebenberg, L., Wall, D., Wood, M., & Hutt-MacLeod, D. (2019). Spaces & Places: Understanding Sense of Belonging and Cultural Engagement Among Indigenous Youth. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18(18), 160940691984054.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919840547>

- McElwee, P. (2004). Becoming socialist or becoming kinh? Government policies for ethnic minorities in the socialist republic of Viet Nam. *Cornell University Press EBooks*.
- Michaud, J., & Turner, S. (2016). Tonkin's uplands at the turn of the 20th century: Colonial military enclosure and local livelihood effects. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 57(2), 154 - 167.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12121>
- Nguyen Chi Hai, Nguyen Ho Thanh, & To Minh Chau. (2021). *Preservation of Cultural Values and Socio-Economic Development in the Sustainable Development of the Khmer People in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam*. BP International.
<https://doi.org/10.9734/bpi/mono/978-93-91595-78-4>
- Nguyen Chi Hai, Phan Van Tuan, Phuong, T., & Tran Hau Tan. (2023). Factors Affecting the Policy of Training and Fostering Civil Servants of Khmer Ethnic Minorities in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. *Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 46(1), 163–173.
<https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.46118-1012>
- Putnam, R. D. (1995). Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), 65 - 78.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1995.0002>
- Raman, S. (2023). Sense of Belonging. *Springer EBooks*, 6308 - 6310.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17299-1_2646
- Salemink, O. (2019). *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*. London: Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351226981>
- Soini, K., & Birkeland, I. (2014). Exploring the scientific discourse on cultural sustainability. *Geoforum*, 51(51), 213 - 223.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2013.12.001>
- Song, T., & Cam, T. (2019). Changes in the Culture of Ethnic Khmer People in Southern Vietnam in the Context of Renovation and Integration. *Journal of Mekong Societies*, 15(3), 52 - 75.
<https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/mekongjournal/article/view/194070>
- Sonn, C. C., & Fisher, A. T. (1998). Sense of community: Community resilient responses to oppression and change. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 26(5), 457 - 472.
[https://doi.org/10.1002/\(sici\)1520-6629\(199809\)26:5%3C457::aid-jcop5%3E3.0.co;2-o](https://doi.org/10.1002/(sici)1520-6629(199809)26:5%3C457::aid-jcop5%3E3.0.co;2-o)
- Tung, D. T. (2018). Poverty and Ethnic Minorities: The Case of Khmer Households in the Rural Mekong Delta, Vietnam. *Economics & Sociology*, 11(1), 233 - 244.
<https://doi.org/10.14254/2071-789x.2018/11-1/15>
- Woolcock, M., & Narayan, D. (2000). Social Capital: Implications for Development Theory, Research, and Policy. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 15(2), 225 - 249.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/15.2.225>

Xu, J., Ma, E. T., Tashi, D., Fu, Y., Lu, Z., & Melick, D. (2005). Integrating Sacred Knowledge for Conservation: Cultures and Landscapes in Southwest China. *Ecology and Society*, 10(2).
<https://doi.org/10.5751/es-01413-100207>