

# Changes in the Culture of Ethnic Khmer People in Southern Vietnam in the Context of Renovation and Integration<sup>1</sup>

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*Received: June 11, 2019*

*Revised: August 20, 2019*

*Accepted: October 31, 2019*

## Abstract

Ethnic Khmer people in Southern Vietnam have created their cultural identities on the foundation of irrigated rice farming and Theravada Buddhism. The objective of this article is to examine and analyze changes in the culture of these people against the backdrop of Vietnam's reform and integration process. The research used qualitative methodology, including in-depth interviews, group discussions, participant observation as well as a questionnaire survey of 254 households in three communes in Soc Trang and An Giang provinces in 2019, and applied the concepts of cultural exchange and acculturation. The study found that there have been significant changes in housing, clothing, language, weddings, funerals, religion, beliefs, and festivals. These changes are based on cultural exchange and acculturation, wherein the Khmer have been impacted by cultural elements from other ethnic groups, particularly the Kinh and the Hoa people who are the larger ethnic groups in Vietnam, while also maintaining some of their traditional features to preserve their ethnic identities.

**Keywords:** cultural changes, Khmer people in Southern Vietnam, integration, renovation, cultural identity

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a part of the state-level scientific research project titled "Cultural Changes of Ethnic Minority Groups: Problems and Possible Solutions" No. CTDT11.17/16-20, supported by the Ethnicity Committee, Graduate Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

## **Introduction**

Khmer people in Vietnam, an ethnic group belonging to the Mon-Khmer language group, have a population of over 1,260,640 people (Ban chi dao Tong dieu tra dan so van ha o Trung uong, 2010). and reside in the western part of Southern Vietnam, along the Vietnam border in the countryside and in cities such as Soc Trang, Tra Vinh, Kien Giang, An Giang, Bac Lieu and Can Tho. With their long history of residence and contact with other ethnic communities in Southern Vietnam, they have created a rich, diverse culture. Khmer culture has been formed on the foundation of irrigated rice farming and Theravada Buddhism, which affects all aspects of life with the autonomous institutions of “*phum*” or a hamlet, “*soc*” or a community consisting of several “*phum*” and *vat* or temples. Subsequent to Vietnam’s adoption of its economic reform policy in 1986, a number of factors have made significant changes in the Khmer people’s social integration and cultural development. Many traditional cultural elements have gradually disappeared and new ones have been created through the Khmer people’s coexistence with other ethnic groups, mostly the Kinh and Hoa people, as well as by the country’s development and by globalization. Thus, preservation of traditional culture against the backdrop of globalization is a major problem facing this group.

The distinct cultural characteristics of the Khmer ethnic group have been highlighted in many research works in various fields, including Nguyen Manh Cuong (2008), Phan An (2005), Tran Van Bon (2002), Truong Luu (1993), Doan Thanh No (2002), Nguyen Hung Khu (2008) and Huynh Thanh Quang (2011). However, these works do not mention changes in Khmer traditional culture in the current context. Moreover, the culture of Khmer people residing in Southern Vietnam has been experiencing dramatic changes because of their coexistence, interactions, and cultural assimilation with the Hoa (Chinese-Vietnamese people) and the Kinh (Vietnam’s majority ethnic group). In addition, there are recent changes due to the impacts of renovation policies, industrialization, modernization, and international integration. These

changes should be assessed and identified so that the cultural identity of the Khmer can be maintained, preserved, and promoted.

This present article examines and analyzes changes in the Khmer people's culture in the context of renovation, integration, and acculturation after the Vietnamese government and Communist Party launched the Doi Moi reform policy in 1986, which will contribute to identifying Khmer traditional cultural values that should be preserved.

### **Research Approach, Conceptual Frame and Methodology**

Culture plays an important role in every nation. Each ethnic group in its formation and development has created its own cultural complex that reflects every aspect of life and uniqueness. The cultural values of each ethnic group contribute greatly to enriching the national culture. Therefore, for ethnically pluralistic countries which are culturally pluralistic nations, the cultural values of each ethnic group should be respected and treated equally (Ngo Van Le, 2017: 4-5). This article focuses on the Khmer people, analyzing the interactions and relationships between traditional and modern cultural factors and changes in their ethnic culture and identity. It uses the systematic approach, the historical approach and the ethnographic/ anthropological perspective, which have been widely used in studying ethnic groups and ethnic cultures in Vietnam since the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Vietnamese government carried out the “*doi moi*” reform policy in 1986. This interdisciplinary approach, including perspectives of ethnology/anthropology, culture, and sociology, was used to survey and assess cultural changes, with in-depth interviews, group discussions and questionnaires.

The concept of cultural exchange and acculturation, which was initiated in the late nineteenth century by Western anthropologists, holds that direct and long-lasting contact between two or more cultures will lead to changes and transformation in some aspects of culture. American anthropologists consider cultural exchange and acculturation as the processes wherein one culture is assimilated and influenced by another

culture in a way in which the latter's distinct cultural features are accepted and used by the former. Amidst the present trends of integration and globalization, cultural exchange is significant for the evolution of ethnic culture, creating a foundation for continuous development of cultural values (Tran Thi Hong Yen, 2018: 18).

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic nation; therefore, reception of various ethnic cultures is inevitable. Nowadays, the culture of the Kinh has had increasing influence on that of other ethnic groups, including the Khmer. The impacts can be seen in the use of Vietnam's official language in all areas of social life, as well as in cohabitation and heterogeneous marriages.

This article views culture as a systematic entity and aims to serve as a foundation for identifying changes in the culture of Khmer people against the backdrop of renovation and integration. Thus, the cultural values which have been practiced and maintained are given much attention.

Three communes in two provinces were selected for the study, namely the communes of Phu Tan and Phu Tam in Chau Thanh district, Soc Trang province; and Luong Phi commune in Tri Ton town, Tri Ton district, An Giang province. The data were collected in January, 2019 by means of a questionnaire survey of 254 households. In addition, group discussions, observations and in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 key informants who had a deep understanding of their traditional Khmer culture. The survey data were analyzed by means of descriptive statistics using SPSS software. The changes in housing, clothing, languages, weddings, funerals, religions, beliefs, and festivals are discussed in the sections that follow.

## **Changes in Khmer People's Cultural Elements**

### **Housing**

A house is a shelter and a place where family activities and rituals are carried out, and thus it contains imprints of ethnic culture. Ethnic groups belonging to different language groups and residing in different regions have diverse housing structures and cultural activities (Nguyen Thi Song

Ha, 2018: 87). Khmer people's traditional houses were generally built on stilts and had thatched roofs. At the present time, stilt buildings are rarely found in localities along the Vietnam-Cambodia border areas like An Giang province and are seen in only a small number of Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples. Since the reunification of North and South Vietnam, houses in the areas inhabited by Khmer people are now built of brick, sand, and cement like those of Kinh people, but have roofs covered with leaves like their traditional houses. Over the last few years, there have been an increasing number of houses with corrugated metal or concrete flat roofs in these places. The research found that of the households surveyed, 48.4 percent are living in modern houses, 25.6 percent in traditional-style ones, and only 3.9 households in traditional ones.



**Figure 1** A traditional style house



**Figure 2** A modern house with a flat roof



**Figure 3** A traditional house of Khmer people



**Figure 4** Khmer stilt building at Khleung Temple

Source: Author

**Table 1** Types of houses currently in use

Types of houses currently in use	Number	Percentage
Traditional ethnic Khmer house	10	3.9
Semi-traditional and semi-modern house	65	25.6
Modern high houses with flat roof	123	48.4
Both modern and traditional house	40	15.7
Unknown	16	6.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Author

Although concrete houses are the local people's choice because of their easier construction and lower cost of construction, many interviewees said that they still preferred houses in the traditional architectural style, especially those on stilts, because they were made of wood and were better ventilated than those made of concrete. However, stilt houses are seldom constructed these days for two reasons: 1) the cost of constructing concrete houses is much lower than that of stilt houses; and 2) builders and wood materials for the stilt houses can no longer be found. At present, the Khmer people's houses are built of brick and cement and many people find them to be an improvement. Traditional houses were divided into different rooms and had separate kitchens at the back and toilets outside, unlike modern houses which normally have kitchens and toilets inside. The new design, according to Thach Duc (2019), "facilitates the elderly people's daily self-care tasks such as eating and having a bath inside the house without going out of the house to do these things in the night-time."

In addition, many houses, especially in the communes of Phu Tan and Phu Tam, Chau Thanh district, Soc Trang province, closely resemble those built by the Hoa people in spatial arrangement and decoration because of cultural reception caused by cohabitation. These "tube houses," which have a narrow facade and a long living area, have parallel front doors with two lines of words in red, saying that peace, happiness, prosperity and safety would come to this house that year

(Thach Thi Quy, 2019), attached on the two sides. However, there are some important modifications to those in Khmer houses; that is, if the red words are replaced by yellow or if the red words do not look like those attached to neighboring houses, it means that an elderly person in that family has just died. The yellow words are removed after the mourning period is over (Tran Huynh Nga, 2019). Against the backdrop of social changes, improvement in living standards, and coexistence with the Kinh and Hoa, the Khmer people's houses have changed dramatically so that they resemble those of their Hoa and Kinh neighbors.

Nevertheless, Khmer people maintain the cultural practice of consulting a *kru teay* (fortune teller) to help them choose good land, directions, and a suitable time for building their houses to avoid taboos and anything that might anger the local deities where the house is to be built.

### **Clothing**

Traditionally, middle-aged and elderly Khmer men would wear black shirts and checkered cotton scarves wrapped around their heads. At festivals, a man would customarily wear a white (or black) shirt, black trousers, and a white scarf flowing down to his waist. At weddings, the groom would be dressed in a red *sarong* or traditional Khmer outfit and a short red shirt (Pham Thi Phuong Hanh, 2011). Women would wear a *sampot* (non-patterned skirt). Over the last twenty years, the Khmer people's daily wear, especially that of men, has changed greatly and is now similar to that worn by Kinh people. For instance, men wear shirts and pants, similar to rural Kinh people. At festivals, traditional costumes which used to be worn by both Khmer men and women are no longer seen. Changes can be found in fabrics, styles and occasions for wearing them.

The survey found that Khmer people generally wear western clothes similar to those worn by Kinh people (94.1 percent), even when going to places of worship (89.4 percent) (Table 2). This indicates that simple and comfortable clothes are favored by the Khmer people for

their daily activities. Moreover, according to the study, Khmer people think that they will find it easier to integrate in society when they dress like Kinh people (Lam Thi Xiu Ret, 2019).

More noticeably, at festivals, where *sampots* used to be seen, most Khmer women wear western clothes (90.2 percent), which used to be rare on these occasions. Women also sometimes wear the Kinh *ao dai*, Vietnam’s traditional long dress, at festivals. According to Son Thi Thanh Dieu (2019), “only the elderly women wear white lace blouses or traditional long red Khmer blouses and scarves flowing down to their waist at rituals on full-moon days or on the 30th of the lunar calendar.” However, over the past few years the Provincial Department of Culture and Sports and the culture divisions of communes and districts have promoted the use of Khmer traditional costumes at various community activities, such as music performances, boat race festivals, culture and sports festivals, and the Khmer people’s traditional New Year – *Chol Chnam Thmay*.

**Table 2** Use of western clothes similar to those worn by Kinh people by types of occasions

Types of occasions	Use of western clothes			
	Use	Not use	Unknown	Total
Daily	94.1	2.0	3.9	100
Festivals	90.2	4.7	5.1	100
Wedding	91.3	3.1	5.5	100
Funeral	90.6	3.1	6.3	100
Going to places of worship	89.4	4.3	6.3	100
Going to state offices	92.9	1.6	5.5	100

Source: Author

In the past, at Khmer weddings, the bride wore wedding attire consisting of a dark violet or pink *sampot hol* (skirt), a red long dress, a long scarf flowing down to her waist, and a pyramid-shaped hat made of metal or cardboard. The bridegroom was dressed in a traditional

*sarong* and a short red shirt with a stand-up collar and split front flaps tied with buttons (Pham Thi Phuong Hanh, 2011). Over the last ten years, it has become more common for the bride to wear a modern white wedding dress and the groom to wear a white suit.<sup>2</sup> The clothing worn by the parents of the bride and the groom is also different from that worn in the past: mothers are dressed in *ao dai* similar to that worn by Kinh women. Traditional Khmer attire is hard to find in markets because of its decreased use at festivals and weddings and must be ordered in Cambodia and sent back to Vietnam or rented from clothing rental establishments. In short, socio-economic development and cohabitation with the Kinh people have resulted in changes in the way the Khmer dress – western clothes are now favored and have gradually taken the place of traditional costumes.



**Figure 5** Young women in traditional costumes at a temple festival

Source: Author



**Figure 6** The bride and the groom in modern wedding attire

Source: Author

## Languages

While Vietnamese is the national language, several of the country's 54 ethnic groups, including the Khmer, have their own languages. Khmer

<sup>2</sup> Huynh Ny (2019) notes, "At weddings nowadays, the bride and the groom no longer wear the traditional costumes but popular wedding dresses, and brides can be seen in *ao dai*, Kinh people's traditional outfit."

children can now study both Vietnamese and Khmer language at school, according to the policy of Vietnam’s Education and Training Ministry. The research found that 89.9 percent of the people residing in the surveyed villages are fluent in their ethnic language and 89.4 percent are fluent in the national language (Table 3). Therefore, a relatively large number of people are bilingual and can use both Khmer and Vietnamese.<sup>3</sup> Because Vietnamese as the country’s official language is widely used in every field, especially in education and administration, the younger generations of the minority groups are more likely to speak Vietnamese than the older generations. In addition, in Southern Vietnam, where the majority of Khmer people live, Kinh people can be found everywhere and even in the remote mountainous areas, as they tend to work in business and hold high positions as local authorities. It is the cohabitation between the Khmer and the Kinh people that has led to cultural acculturation between the two groups.

**Table 3** Language proficiency in own ethnic Khmer, Vietnamese and other ethnic languages

Languages	Proficiency of languages			
	Fluent	Not fluent	No answer	Total
Own ethnic Khmer language	89.9	7.1	3.0	100
Vietnamese language	89.4	6,7	3.9	100
Other ethnic languages	0	96.1	3.9	100

Source: Author

Because of their competence in Vietnamese, the Khmer people speak Vietnamese in their communication with other ethnic groups and people from different villages, but speak Khmer in their conversations with family members, relatives, and other Khmer in their own village (Table 4). However, the proportion of children aged 15 or less who are

<sup>3</sup> None are fluent in other ethnic languages, which contradicts a local report saying that the people residing in another commune, in the same province of Soc Trang are able to speak the three languages of Khmer, Chinese and Vietnamese because of their long-lasting coexistence with the ethnic groups of Hoa and Kinh (Uy ban nhan dan tinh Soc Trang, 2018).

able to speak and write the Khmer language has gradually declined. They can understand and speak their ethnic language but cannot write it. This is a problem facing the preservation of Khmer culture in the future.

**Table 4** Use of own ethnic Khmer and Vietnamese languages by types of communication

Types of communication	Language used (percentage)	
	Own ethnic language	Vietnamese
Communication with grandparents	89.8	13.0
Communication with parents	89.0	11.4
Communication with children	86.2	19.7
Communication with spouses	88.6	15.7
Communication with people in their village	88.6	30.7
Communication with people from different villages	17.7	78.3

Source: Author

## Weddings

Both homogeneous and heterogeneous marriages have long been common for the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam. The latter have created multi-cultural or cross-cultural families and family lines with flexible language interactions and cultural acculturation reflected in rituals or ceremonies of families and communities.

Weddings are of great significance to individuals, families, and family lines. To the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam, a wedding used to be a ritual closely linked with the customs of their family line and their community and was divided into two phases – engagement and wedding. The traditional Khmer wedding consisted of traditional procedures that took place over several days. Practices included rituals honoring *Neak ta* (ancestral and local spirits), inviting monks to chant and give wishes to the bride and the groom, tying strings around the couples' wrists, cutting hair, staining teeth, wrapping three bundles of

areca flowers, prostrating to the sun at dawn, returning to the bride's house after the wedding, entering the nuptial room, washing the feet of the bride and the groom, and bringing a tray of food to the temple after the wedding. Nowadays, weddings have some procedures that are similar to Kinh people's weddings, as can be seen in offerings, rituals and attendants, but they still retain many traditional features.

**Table 5** Perceived level of change in Khmer people's wedding ceremonies and attendants (percentage)

Types of changes	Perceived level of change			
	Hardly changed	Much changed	Unchanged	Unknown
Change in offerings	25.6	57.9	11.4	5.1
Change in rituals	23.2	57.9	9.8	9.1
Change in attendants	29.1	39.8	19.3	11.8

Source: Author

In the past, matchmakers would arrange several meetings between the families of the bride and the groom, after which the groom's family carried out three different rituals: introduction, engagement, and asking permission to marry, each with separate offerings. However, these ceremonies are presently combined into one ceremony, consisting of engagement and asking permission to marry. Since the establishment of Vietnam's *doi moi* policy, matchmakers are rarely used because young people have numerous opportunities to work with and meet people of other ethnicities and choose their spouse themselves.

When a couple decides to get married and has their marriage supported by both families, the groom's family is expected to make an appointment with the bride's family to arrange for an engagement ceremony at the latter's residence. There, the groom and his family present gifts to the bride's family to officially ask for permission to marry. At the agreement of the bride's family, the groom's family sets the date for the wedding, which has been reduced from three days to one day and two nights with various rituals. These rituals include presenting offerings to the bride's family, opening the welcome gate,

praying and giving wishes to both the bride and the groom, tying strings around the couples' wrists, cutting areca flowers, distributing coconut water and the like. Despite the reduced time, important Theravada Buddhism-influenced rituals, such as inviting monks to pray for blessings or string tying have been preserved (Nguyen Manh Cuong, 2002: 112).

In the past, the ceremonies where the bridegroom's family goes to the bride's house to ask her parents to take her home and where the bride's family, in return, sees her off at the groom's home were not practiced.

While wedding receptions used to take place at the bride's home, presently they are held at both the groom's and the bride's homes, similar to receptions of the Kinh and Hoa people (Lam Thi Xiu Ret, 2019). The Khmer people's weddings, according to local people, are similar to those of the Kinh people in some aspects but consist of more ceremonies because of cultural interaction between the two ethnic groups. For instance, at a Kinh wedding, the bride and groom pay homage to their ancestors by lighting incense, bowing to a photograph or altar dedicated to them, and inviting them to come and view the new family bonds that are being formed and to bestow their blessings upon their living family. This ritual is practiced once by Kinh newlyweds but is practiced repeatedly by Khmer couples in combination with a ritual in which monks bless the couple and guests (usually close family) by sprinkling everyone with scented, blessed water while chanting specific blessings for a long life (Thach Van Sen, 2019).

The reception of some Kinh cultural elements by the Khmer can be seen in certain structural aspects of weddings. Separate celebrations are held for the bride's and groom's families. The wedding party is usually introduced by a master of ceremonies and accompanied by music to entertain the guests. The reception site is decorated elaborately, and a wedding cake is usually served after the banquet, with the first piece ceremonially cut by the couple.

Additionally, ancestor worship ceremonies at Khmer weddings are highly influenced by the culture of the Hoa ethnic group. These

include picking up the bride from her house and taking her to the groom's, the groom holding a candle box containing two red candles which are lit in ancestor-worship and Buddhist rituals to show their respect and gratitude for their ancestors and the couple's love and responsibility for each other (Tran Huynh Nga, 2019). At present, few people are familiar with Khmer ethnic customs and traditions, and young generations are likely to prefer simpler weddings or those from different ethnic groups. These factors have all led to the decline in Khmer people's appreciation of their unique ethnic cultural values (Truong Van Phong, 2019).

In addition to changes in wedding procedures, offerings, and attendants, there are numerous other new ideas among Khmer people with regard to marriage with other ethnic groups and decisions on marriage, as described below.

In terms of marriage with other ethnic groups, 23.6 percent of interviewees answered that their family members married those from different ethnic groups and among these, 3.1 percent were to foreigners. Asked their opinion of their children's cross-ethnic or cross-culture marriages, 4.3 percent said that they would accept their children's decision if their in-laws were willing to follow their ethnic regulations, 12.6 percent prefer ethnically homogenous marriages but do not object to heterogeneous ones, and 82.6 percent are completely in favor of their children's decision. According to in-depth interviews and local authorities' reports, there has been a large number of marriages among the Khmer. However, there has also been a gradual increase over the past several years in the percentage of Khmer people marrying those of different ethnic groups, especially Kinh and Hoa people. Some have married Khmer people from other countries such as Cambodia and Malaysia, illustrating the upward trend in marriages, particularly heterogeneous ones which are one of the factors behind changes in cultural values in Khmer families.

In addition, members of ethnically heterogeneous Khmer families and family lines are able to experience cultural reception and interactions in custom and tradition practices at home and in the

community. There has been a considerable rise in cross-cultural families among the Khmer ethnic group since 1986, resulting in dramatic changes in these people's cultural life, especially in their weddings and funerals. Moreover, it is common for the Khmer to invite their Kinh and Hoa friends and neighbors to their weddings because of the cohabitation of these ethnic groups (Phan Van Dop, 2017).

Regarding decisions on marriage, the research found that 11.4 percent of the interviewees said that individuals should be able to make their own marriage decision; 72.8 percent said that they can decide on their own marriage while consulting their parents; 10.2 percent said that they can choose their partners while consulting their parents and representatives; 4.0 percent said that marriages should be decided by their parents; and 5.1 percent had no comment.

These figures indicate that Khmer young adults still maintain their tradition of respecting and consulting their parents and elders for their important decisions; in return, parents support their children's own opinions and respect their marriage decisions.

Against the backdrop of market economic development, the creation of industrial zones and factories as well as tourism and services industries have attracted thousands of young laborers from different localities. Therefore, assimilation between ethnic groups and reception of modern lifestyles, which can be more obviously seen in the Khmer young generation, have experienced a considerable rise. Young adults are now increasingly marrying people whom they meet in those work places, and new-born children from these marriages are usually sent back to the home village and raised by their grandparents. This practice also contributes to cultural changes in their homeland.

Based on the perspectives of the ethnic Khmer in the survey, the changes in Khmer people's weddings are mostly caused by the need to adapt to modern life (67.7 percent), the influence of other ethnic groups (36.2 percent), and being away from home for work and study (8.3 percent) (Table 6).

**Table 6** Causes of changes in weddings from the perspectives of the household heads (percentage)

Causes of changes	Yes	No	Unknown
Influence from other ethnic group (s)	36.2	48.8	15.0
Children working and studying away from home	8.3	76.8	15.0
Necessity to adapt to modern life	67.7	17.3	15.0

Source: Author

### **Funerals**

Traditional Khmer funerals are conducted by an *achar* or respected elderly person who has a broad and deep understanding of Khmer customs and traditions. A funeral consists of various rituals, including the sprinkling of blessed water by monks. The family would choose an auspicious day to perform the procession of taking the coffin to be cremated. In their co-residence with other ethnic groups, the Khmer people have received some of the cultural practices of the Kinh and Hoa people. At the same time, certain Khmer practices, such as cremation at the Khmer temples and keeping the remains of deceased family members at the temples, have been absorbed by Southern Vietnam-based Hoa and Kinh people.

The son of a deceased person who has never been a monk is traditionally expected to practice the ritual of “becoming a monk before the fire,” or being ordained for the duration of the funeral to express his gratitude to his parents for his birth and upbringing. Cremation is the Khmer people’s traditional burial form.

Previously, after the death of their beloved ones, the Khmer people buried the body of the deceased, preferably in their garden, and held blessing rituals every 100 days for the following six to ten years (depending on families’ financial ability) and then conducted a major ritual of taking the remains of the deceased and having them cremated. This ritual was largely attended by all invited family members, relatives in the family line, and even acquaintances from other localities. However, at present the body is brought to the temple for cremation in

the funeral process (Thac Duc, 2019). Khmer people are encouraged to bring the bodies to the crematorium for reasons of environmental cleanliness by the government. These crematoriums are also accessible to Kinh and Hoa people.

The research results found that 62.6 percent of the interviewees said that their families carried out funerals for the dead according to traditional procedures, 5.1 percent said that they followed modern procedures, 24.8 percent responded that they combined of traditional and modern funeral procedures, 2.8 percent in other ways and 4.7 percent in unknown procedures. This data demonstrates that Khmer people's funerals primarily follow traditional procedures with the rituals of bowing to the Three Jewels of Buddhism, observing the Five Precepts, placing the body in the coffin, walking in a procession that pulls the coffin to the cremation site, and saying farewell to the deceased. Nowadays, Khmer people's funerals are simplified and consist of basic traditional procedures which are commonly carried out in the pagodas. However, some Kinh cultural elements, such as funeral wreaths and funeral notebooks containing attendants' words of condolences can currently be found at Khmer funerals.

### **Religion, Beliefs and Some Festivals**

The spiritual life of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam has long been closely connected to their religion and temples. According to statistics in some provinces where Khmer people live, Southern Vietnam currently has 436 small and large temples, which are located in the following provinces: 89 in Soc Trang, 68 in An Giang, 70 in Kien Giang, and 124 in Tra Vinh (Tran Van Bon, 2002: 37). Southern Vietnam-based Khmer people have long followed Theravada Buddhism which has dominated every aspect of their life. According to the Khmer traditional culture, young men, preferably teenagers aged 13 to 15 become short-term novice monks at temples to express their gratitude for their parents' giving them life and raising them. In Khmer belief, those who are strongly attracted to Buddhism or those who are destined to devote their life to the Buddhist temple are likely to become

permanent monks. They regard their becoming monks as an obligation and an honor. Traditionally, males who are old enough would become monks to express their gratitude to their parents for their birth giving and upbringing and learn the code of conduct from the older monks. The young men, at present, are expected to spend about two to three years serving as novice monks at the temples compared to 10 to 15 years in the past before they return to normal life with their families (Duong Saray, 2019). However, over the past 10 years, there has been a sharp fall in the number of teenagers being ordained as novice monks. While poor families normally send their children to the temples to study, others send their sons aged 13-15 to the temples for short summer monk-training courses.

Another significant change in the Khmer people's culture and religion is the adoption of certain Hoa religious practices. While previously, the only altars that Khmer people set up in their homes were Buddhist, today many Khmer families were found to have set up altars to worship their ancestors, as well as the Chinese god of heaven, the local deity of the earth or locality, and even Quan Cong, a talented Chinese general. On Buddhist holidays, Chua Xu Pagoda and Ba Den Pagoda, which are the best-known Mother Goddess temples of the Hoa people in Southern Vietnam, are visited by a large number of Kinh, Hoa, and Khmer people to pray and present offerings. Kinh festivals, such as the Lunar New Year, the Mid-Year Festival and Ancestors Day are also celebrated by the Khmer people. The study found that the Khmer people's celebration of Ancestors Day which can also be found in Kinh people's religious rituals, in fact, has been influenced by Hoa people. On this day, Kinh and Hoa people visit their ancestors' tombs to clean the gravesites, and perform rituals, while the Khmer people go pay respect to small stupas or reliquaries containing their ancestors' ashes at Khmer temples. Both Kinh and Khmer people have adopted the Hoa practice of attaching white or colored papers to their ancestors' tombs or ash reliquaries. This phenomenon demonstrates strong cultural assimilation and acculturation in the multi-ethnic community of Kinh, Khmer, and Hoa people.

As far as festivals are concerned, a Khmer festival is not an occasion merely for fun, but also for the opportunity to receive significant blessings through making merit by chanting and presenting offerings. The festival system of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam is diverse and can be divided into several types: traditional ethnic festivals, including full-moon festivals, ancestor worship rituals and New Year welcoming ceremonies; folk belief festivals, including the rituals of cutting hair to pay tribute to midwives, celebrating the first birthday of newborns, weddings, funerals, house-warming parties, worshipping the rice goddess (a practice found among the Tai and Lao groups), worshipping ancestors, praying for good health and peace, praying for blessings, observing the anniversary of a death, praying for long life of the elderly people, flower offerings, and Buddhist festivals.<sup>4</sup>

In the current context, there have been many changes in Khmer people's festivals. According to the research results, 61.4 percent of the interviewees said that present festivals are carried out following traditional procedures, 24.4 percent have some changes in rituals, 7.5 percent have many changes due to organizers and the local authorities, and 6.7 percent did not comment. Some of the main some changes in festivals are described below.

First, some animistic rituals are rarely practiced, such as *Arak*<sup>5</sup> and worship of *Neak Ta* (spirits of ancestors or of people who lived in a particular place), are no longer practiced. These festivals are superstitious activities and hardly held in the localities (Ban dan toc, UBND tinh Soc Trang, 2018).

Second, among festivals associated with Buddhism, some ceremonies, are not conducted annually. For example, rituals of

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<sup>4</sup> These festivals include the ceremony of issuing the teachings held on the 15th of the first lunar month, the Buddhist festival taking place on the 8th or 15th day of the fourth lunar month, the ceremony of entering summer on the 15th of the sixth lunar month, the ending of summer ceremony on the 14th of the ninth lunar month; the ceremony of the Buddha's return to earth from Tavatimsa Heaven, where he went to preach to his mother on the 15th of the ninth lunar month; the ceremony of offering monks' robes between the 16th of the ninth lunar month and the 15th of the tenth lunar month; Buddha image-placing ceremony, mountain worshipping rituals and ordination rituals (Tien Van Trieu and Lam Quang Vinh 2015: 118).

<sup>5</sup> *Arak* rituals consisted of music for religious and healing purposes to drive out dangerous spirits.

bringing Buddha images to temples to be consecrated are held only when the Buddha images are donated to the temples. However, because there are a large number of existing Buddha images in the pagodas, and this ceremony is not necessarily conducted regularly.

Moreover, the duration and number of rituals of festivals have been reduced. The *Kathin* festival of offering monks' robes at the end of Buddhist Lent used to move from one temple to another, day by day, so that all of the temples could benefit. It is presently carried out for three days in Tra Vinh province between the 13th and the 15th days of the tenth lunar month and on only one day in Soc Trang province on the 5th day of the tenth lunar month. The reduction of festival duration is also accompanied by the elimination of many details of the rituals. For example, the pouring of scented water over monks and Buddha images during the traditional Khmer New Year in mid-April, which was one of the most important rituals, is no longer practiced; and the custom of sending boys to the temples to become novice monks at this time of year has declined. Many temples no longer hold candlelight processions circumambulating the stupa three times on the full-moon night before certain important Buddhist days, but only rituals of chanting and giving offerings to monks in the early morning.

Third, the scope of festivals has expanded. The change can be seen in the full moon festival, adopted from the Hoa people, and the Khmer boat racing festival. The full moon festival is annually held on the 15th day of the tenth lunar month when the harvest time ends. The festival pays tribute to and expresses people's gratitude to deities that helped the villagers have a bountiful rice crop and to look forward to another successful year. Moreover, the ceremony is to show their thanks to the Buddha. At the festival, the local people present their agricultural products as offerings to the moon. This festival is also accompanied by troupes performing various kinds of music and by a Khmer boat race in which each team represents a temple. The two festivals have been experiencing changes, particularly in their scope. Currently, they are organized by the local authorities. There is also a big change in festival attendees, who used to be only local Khmer villagers but now include

Kinh and Hoa people as well (Ban dan toc, UBND tinh Soc Trang, 2018). Similarly, the festivals are now aimed at not only worshipping various deities, but also at promoting local tourism. The Khmer boat race has become an increasingly commercialized festival and is attended by hundreds of thousands of internal and external tourists and is considered to be a wide-spread cultural product in the community.

Khmer boat racing and bull racing festivals are now held at both the regional and the provincial level and attract not only Khmer people but also Kinh and Hoa, as well as internal and external tourists. At present, the local authority has expanded the boat racing festival of the Khmer people to the rest of Southern Vietnam to promote Khmer cultural values.

## **Conclusion**

Socio-economic development, together with renovation and integration in Vietnam, have had a strong impact on the culture of ethnic minority groups since the country carried out its reform policy in 1986. As a result, there have been significant cultural exchanges among these groups, including the Southern Vietnam-based Khmer people. Against the backdrop of market economy development and technologies, the Khmer people have been increasingly engaged in the economic, social, and cultural integration process, leading to their cultural assimilation and acculturation with other ethnic groups, particularly the Kinh and Hoa people.

While many traditional cultural elements are no longer in use, a number of new cultural components have come into existence because of the necessity to adapt to development trends. It is evident that the Khmer people's material culture has witnessed a greater change than their non-material culture. Therefore, it is important to identify changes in traditional culture and problems of the state management of culture and to carry out cultural policies that preserve the Khmer people's unique cultural values. These values are considered to be a cultural heritage contributing to the development of the nation, community, and the ethnic group in accordance with integration and globalization practices.

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