

The Dua Tpeng Festival of the Khmer in Loc Khanh Commune, Vietnam: Contemporary Practices and Preservation Strategies

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Abstract:

The Dua Tpeng Festival, meaning "going down to the lake" or "breaking the lake," is a community cultural event held in Loc Khanh Commune, Loc Ninh District, Binh Phuoc Province. It is deeply rooted in the cultural identity of the Khmer people and carries profound spiritual significance. The festival symbolizes the community's connection to nature, offering prayers for abundant harvests and prosperous livelihoods, while also fostering solidarity within the community. Key activities include rituals of harvesting aquatic products from the pond, traditional folk dances and songs (Lam Vong, Lam Thon), and the organization of communal meals. These practices not only create a lively and cohesive atmosphere but also underscore the festival's role in preserving and promoting the intangible cultural heritage of the Khmer people. In the contemporary context, the Dua Tpeng Festival is regarded as a priceless cultural asset, significantly enriching Vietnam's national heritage. However, challenges posed by socio-economic changes and urbanization have made it difficult to preserve the festival, necessitating sustainable strategies such as enhancing community involvement, increasing government support, and integrating educational initiatives to raise awareness about the importance of cultural heritage. The Dua Tpeng Festival is not only a source of pride for the Khmer people of Binh Phuoc but also serves as a unique cultural symbol that contributes to the cultural diversity of the nation.

Keywords: Dua Tpeng Festival, solutions, preservation, Khmer people, Loc Khanh Commune

1. INTRODUCTION

The Dua Tpeng Festival, also known as the "Descent into the Pond" or "Pond-Clearing" Festival, is a distinctive Khmer cultural practice in Loc Khanh Commune, Loc Ninh District, Binh Phuoc Province. As an essential element of Vietnam's intangible cultural heritage, it embodies communal solidarity, ancestral reverence, and aspirations for peace and prosperity. Over time, the festival has evolved into a dynamic symbol of cultural resilience, integrating spiritual life, creativity, and social engagement (Lai Thi Ngoc Ho, 2022).

Amid contemporary socio-economic transformation and globalization, preserving and revitalizing the Tpeng Festival has become imperative. Supported by Party and State policies, recent efforts have restored its vibrancy, reinforcing ethnic identity, promoting intercultural exchange, and enhancing the potential for cultural tourism. Its designation as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2019 affirms its significance and highlights the need for strengthened community participation and government support to address the challenges of modernization.

Drawing on fieldwork and secondary sources, this study examines the effectiveness of current preservation strategies for the Khmer Pond-Clearing Ceremony. It argues that sustainable conservation requires not only safeguarding traditional practices but also fostering community pride, broadening public awareness, and encouraging active local engagement to ensure the enduring vitality of this cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world.

2. METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining fieldwork and secondary data collection to examine the preservation of the "Phá Bàu" ritual, a key cultural ceremony of the Khmer people. The fieldwork involved direct observations during the festival and informal interviews with local participants, including community leaders, festival organizers, and residents of Loc Khanh Commune, Binh Phuoc Province. This approach provided first-hand insights into the cultural significance of the ritual and the challenges faced in its preservation.

In addition to fieldwork, secondary data were gathered from a range of sources. These included official reports from local government authorities, documentation of state-led cultural conservation programs, scientific research studies, and policy documents relevant to cultural heritage preservation. The author's field notes, collected during field visits, were also analyzed to provide context-specific details of the "Phá Bàu" ritual and its role in the local community.

The analysis focused on understanding the cultural, religious, and spiritual values embedded in the ritual, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of existing conservation policies and programs. By synthesizing both primary and secondary data, the study aimed to identify challenges and propose practical solutions to enhance the preservation of the "Phá Bàu" ritual within the context of modern socio-economic and environmental changes. The research further emphasized the need for a community-centered approach, focusing on raising awareness, fostering pride among the Khmer people, and encouraging their active participation in cultural heritage preservation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Overview of the Khmer Community in Loc Khanh Commune

Loc Khanh Commune, part of Loc Ninh District in Binh Phuoc Province, borders Cambodia to the north and comprises three hamlets: Soc Lon, Cha Don, and Ba Ven (Tran Hoai Thuong, 2024). Established in 1998, the commune initially had 4,715 residents, over 60% of whom belonged to ethnic minorities, with poverty rates exceeding 50% (Hoang My & Van Hung, 2023). By 2022, Loc Khanh's population approached 8,000, predominantly Kinh, alongside Khmer and Stieng minorities. Notably, the commune achieved the national "new rural standard" in June 2022, reflecting significant improvements in economy, society, environment, and infrastructure (Thuc Vy, 2023).

Within this diverse setting, the Khmer community plays a vital role in preserving and promoting traditional cultural values. Cultural heritage, including 28 ancient stilt houses, matrilineal marriage customs, and Theravāda Buddhist practices centered around Soc Lon Pagoda, remains vibrant. Annual rituals such as Chol Chnam Thmay, Kathina, Sen Dolta, and Vesak foster strong cultural continuity. Among these traditions, the Pond-Clearing Festival (Dua Tpeng) stands out, intimately linked to the community's natural environment. Managed by village elders, communal ponds—rich in aquatic resources year-round—support both subsistence and cultural life.

The Dua Tpeng Festival, recognized as National Intangible Cultural Heritage since 2019, symbolizes the Khmer people's gratitude toward nature and their aspirations for abundance. Beyond its cultural and spiritual significance, the sustainable management of natural ponds contributes to local livelihoods, biodiversity preservation, and climate regulation. Loc Khanh thus exemplifies the harmonious interrelation between cultural heritage, economic resilience, and environmental stewardship, serving as a model for cultural conservation and socio-economic development in Vietnam's border regions.

The Dua Tpeng Festival, a key cultural event for the Khmer community in Loc Khanh Commune, reflects the distinct cultural identity of the Khmer people in Binh Phuoc Province. Influenced by a blend of folk beliefs, Brahminism, and Buddhism, the festival has evolved due to various factors, including natural conditions, historical contexts, and socio-economic policies (Tran & Trần, 2024; Tran, n.d.). Deeply rooted in the community's traditions, the festival embodies the Khmer people's spiritual and cultural life, shaped by

historical and social circumstances that have led to unique cultural traits (Tran, n.d.). The festival balances traditional creativity with the changes brought about by globalization and cultural exchanges, while preserving its core cultural elements. Effective state management, sustainable practices, and community engagement are critical for the festival's preservation. This includes issuing policies, promoting eco-friendly practices such as waste management and energy conservation, and involving local communities in planning and execution to enhance cultural preservation (Dung & Hoàng, 2023; Suharto & Jamali, 2023). However, the festival faces challenges from modernization and external influences, making it essential to balance traditional practices with inclusive strategies that promote sustainability. This approach not only protects cultural heritage but also fosters community well-being and environmental sustainability, ensuring the festival's continued relevance for future generations.

2.3. Cultural Values of the Festival

The research findings reveal that the Dua Tpeng Festival constitutes a distinctive form of communal cultural expression among the Khmer community in Loc Khanh Commune. It not only embodies the community's rich spiritual life but also serves as a vital means of preserving and promoting traditional folk performances linked to Khmer heritage. Through the festival, the Khmer people demonstrate a harmonious relationship with their natural environment, expressing sustainable practices in resource utilization. The event also facilitates the annual practice and preservation of traditional fishing techniques, showcasing generations of creativity and ecological stewardship. Moreover, the festival is deeply imbued with educational values, reinforcing communal norms and respect for elders and those who have contributed to the well-being of the community.

Beyond its cultural and ecological significance, the Dua Tpeng Festival plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion. It provides opportunities for interaction not only within individual hamlets but also between neighboring communities. Through gatherings, musical performances, and communal meals, the festival helps bridge divisions, resolve conflicts, and strengthen bonds across generations. It also serves as a traditional courtship space where young men and women can build lasting relationships. Additionally, the festival highlights the preservation of traditional Khmer cuisine, with iconic dishes such as grilled fish, rice cooked in bamboo tubes, and stewed dishes enriching the local gastronomic heritage.

Importantly, the festival is closely tied to the management and sustainable exploitation of communal water resources. Natural ponds serve as vital assets for irrigation, livestock, and food security. The Khmer community regards aquatic resources as sacred gifts, thus enforcing strict communal regulations on harvesting. Under the supervision of village elders, fishing is permitted only during the officially organized festival, following communal consensus. In this way, the Dua Tpeng Festival not only preserves intangible cultural heritage but also reinforces community governance over natural resources, promoting cultural vitality, social solidarity, and environmental sustainability amidst the broader context of modernization and integration.

3. Emerging Issues and Solutions for the Preservation and Promotion of the Dua Tpeng Festival

3.1. Emerging Issues

The Dua Tpeng Festival represents an essential intangible cultural heritage of profound significance to the spiritual life of the Khmer people, playing a pivotal role in local socio-economic development and environmental conservation. However, the preservation and promotion of this festival in Loc Khanh Commune face significant challenges in the context of rapid environmental changes, globalization, urbanization, and modernization (Tran & Trần, 2024).

Firstly, preserving the cultural space of the festival presents a major challenge. As land increasingly becomes a valuable commodity, areas surrounding natural ponds are at risk of being converted into agricultural plots, storage facilities, or commercial establishments. Without rigorous protection measures implemented by both local authorities and the community, such developments pose a threat to both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems (Dung & Hoàng, 2023).

Secondly, strengthening the festival's potential to generate employment and sustainable income for the local population remains an urgent concern. The festival's ability to contribute to local economic growth, both during and after its occurrence, needs to be explored further, with a focus on creating sustainable opportunities for local residents (Suharto & Jamali, 2023).

Thirdly, increasing public awareness—particularly among the younger generation—regarding the importance of preserving and promoting the festival's values is crucial. These values are key to not only socio-economic development but also environmental protection and the maintenance of Khmer cultural identity (Hoàng & Mỹ, 2023).

Finally, mobilizing and expanding resources to sustain the festival is essential, particularly in managing and protecting the ponds and preserving the festival's physical space amidst urbanization and the pressures of a market-driven economy. This requires urgent attention and the development of sustainable management practices that can protect the festival's heritage while balancing modern developmental forces (Cục Di sản văn hóa, 2022).

In conclusion, while the Dua Tpeng Festival remains a cornerstone of Khmer cultural life and a unique symbol of cultural identity in Binh Phuoc, it faces significant challenges that demand concerted efforts in preservation and promotion. These efforts will require collaboration among the government, local communities, and cultural organizations to ensure the sustainability of the festival and its broader impact on socio-economic and environmental wellbeing.

3.2. Solutions for the Preservation and Promotion of the Dua Tpeng Festival

The Dua Tpeng Festival, a distinctive intangible cultural heritage of the Khmer people, continues to be maintained in Loc Khanh Commune, Loc Ninh District, Binh Phuoc Province. To ensure the preservation and promotion of this heritage, local authorities and communities must implement a comprehensive set of strategies, with emphasis on the following aspects:

- **First**, it is crucial to protect the festival's space, particularly the ponds and surrounding landscapes, to accommodate the increasing number of participants and visitors. Loc Ninh District should take further steps to preserve and even expand the festival's space, maintaining the integrity of traditional ponds to safeguard the ecological environment and cultural features. Local authorities, cultural officials, and enforcement agencies must intensify public education programs, mobilize community participation in pond conservation, and promptly prevent any encroachments, illegal fishing, or land-use changes around the ponds. Strengthening the professional capacity of cultural officials through specialized training in heritage preservation is equally important for the effective management and promotion of the festival.
- **Second**, it is necessary to integrate festival preservation with environmental protection and community-based tourism development. The current project to develop community tourism in Loc Khanh, funded by the Asian Bank with a budget of approximately VND 14 billion, presents an opportunity to enhance the value of the Dua Tpeng Festival. Incorporating the festival into the project's framework must focus on preserving its cultural authenticity and developing it as an attractive tourist destination. Strategic plans should link the festival with eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and community-based experiential activities to attract domestic and international visitors. Locals would benefit from selling cultural products, traditional foods, and offering services such as homestays and guided tours, thereby generating stable incomes. Additionally, robust multimedia promotion campaigns, cultural events, and the effective use of social media platforms should be employed to popularize the festival and Khmer culture more broadly. Creating engaging content—such as videos, images, and stories centered on the festival—can vividly convey its cultural uniqueness. Frequent cultural exchanges and participatory events should be organized to allow visitors to experience traditional practices, rituals, folk games, music, and cuisine firsthand.
- **Third**, strengthening community engagement, especially among the youth, is vital for sustaining the Dua Tpeng Festival. Encouraging direct participation of the local community and youth is key to ensuring the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. Educational and training programs focused on traditional Khmer practices—such as folk singing, traditional dances like *Lam Vong* and *Lam Thon*, and ritual

procedures—should be expanded. Furthermore, training in traditional crafts, food preparation, and musical instrument making can help preserve associated tangible cultural elements. Practical cultural activities should be regularly organized, fostering intergenerational collaboration and instilling a sense of responsibility for cultural preservation. With the guidance of elders, young people can also take on roles in cultural communication and tourism promotion, ensuring that the festival not only survives but thrives in contemporary life.

- **Fourth**, creating sustainable financial and human resources for festival preservation is essential. Economic development initiatives linked to cultural preservation—such as the promotion of traditional handicrafts, local specialties, and tourism services—can provide steady income sources for the community and support festival maintenance. Additionally, integrating festival conservation efforts into broader local socio-economic development strategies, while mobilizing support from businesses, philanthropic organizations, and the wider community, will help secure long-term financial and human resources for sustainable heritage preservation.

4. CONCLUSION

The Dua Tpeng Festival, held in Loc Khanh Commune, Loc Ninh District, Binh Phuoc Province, is a comprehensive form of folk cultural activity within the Khmer community. It holds deep spiritual significance, symbolizing a connection to nature, a wish for bountiful harvests, and a prosperous life. Additionally, the festival strengthens the solidarity within the local Khmer community. The festival includes various activities such as ritual offerings to deities, fishing in the ponds, folk singing and dancing, and organizing communal meals, which collectively create a lively atmosphere and strengthen community bonds. In the modern context, this festival is considered an invaluable cultural heritage, contributing to the preservation and promotion of Khmer cultural values and enriching the cultural heritage of Vietnam.

To ensure the preservation and promotion of the Dua Tpeng Festival, it is essential to implement timely policies, particularly in raising awareness among the youth of the Khmer ethnic group. Awakenning a sense of responsibility in maintaining and promoting traditional cultural values is an important task for ensuring that this heritage is passed down and developed sustainably within the community. Additionally, festival preservation efforts should be closely linked with practical and sustainable solutions, particularly by increasing the festival's visibility and organizing cultural exchange activities to spread the beauty of the festival.

Furthermore, it is crucial to enhance the quality of local cultural officials by providing specialized training programs on cultural preservation tailored to the region's specific needs. These programs will equip officials with the necessary skills and expertise to effectively manage, organize, and promote the festival's heritage. The comprehensive strategies outlined above will not only help preserve and develop the Dua Tpeng Festival in alignment with the modern challenges of globalization and integration but will also contribute to safeguarding the cultural identity of the Khmer people, fostering a culturally rich community in the present era.

Footnote: The ritual offering table for the ceremony is traditionally arranged with a pig's head, covered with lard to conceal the eyes, along with the tail, four pig's feet, liver, heart, and intestines, all wrapped in betel leaves, accompanied by fruits, sticky rice with chicken, and white wine. These items are arranged beautifully and comprehensively for the offering to the deities (Lai Thi Ngoc Ho, 2025). This was recorded during the fieldwork trip.

Within the hut's space, traditional dishes are presented enticingly, including *canh thut* (a type of soup), *com lam* (rice cooked in bamboo tubes), grilled bamboo shoots, grilled fish, roasted meats, and white wine, among others. Surrounding the hut, there are several fires already lit, and when the festival takes place, the fish caught will be grilled and shared as a communal meal for all participants (Lai Thi Ngoc Ho, 2025).

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