

# Cultural Industry And Heritage Preservation: The Khmer Mat-Weaving Craft In Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam

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## **Abstract**

*This study investigates the transformation of the Khmer mat-weaving craft in Tra Vinh Province, Vietnam, within the framework of the Cultural Industry (CI). As a National Intangible Cultural Heritage, this traditional craft represents a significant form of cultural capital for the ethnic communities in the Mekong Delta. Utilizing a qualitative approach involving field observations and in-depth interviews, the research analyzes the transition from subsistence-based handicraft production to market-oriented cultural commodities. The findings highlight the critical role of "artisan agency" - exemplified by technical innovations such as the double-sided floral mat - in enhancing economic competitiveness while navigating the paradox between modernization and heritage authenticity. The article concludes by proposing a strategic model for integrating the craft into the creative economy through experiential tourism, designer-artisan collaborations, and digital branding. This integrated approach aims to ensure sustainable livelihoods for the Khmer people while safeguarding their unique cultural identity in an increasingly globalized era.*

**Keywords:** Khmer people, Tra Vinh, Mat Weaving, Cultural Industry (CI), Artisan Agency, Creative Economy, Intangible Cultural Heritage.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The concept of the Cultural Industry (CI) has gained global prominence as a sustainable pathway for economic growth, deeply rooted in the unique heritage and creativity of local communities. In Vietnam, where a rich tapestry of 54 ethnic groups exists, the potential of traditional crafts to transition into viable cultural products is immense. Among these, the traditional mat weaving craft (using sedge or lát) of the Khmer ethnic group in the Mekong Delta stands out. Specifically, the mat weaving of Ca Hom - Ben Ba village in Tra Cu district, Tra Vinh province, is not merely a means of subsistence but a fundamental expression of Khmer aesthetic and traditional knowledge, recently recognized as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage .

This research aims to analyze the current state, challenges, and opportunities for developing the mat weaving craft of the Khmer in Tra Cu within the context of the Cultural Industry. It seeks to balance the need for economic viability and modernization with the imperative of preserving the craft's authentic cultural and historical value.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The development of Cultural Industries (CI) has emerged as a pivotal strategy for sustainable economic growth, particularly in the Global South where heritage assets are abundant (Throsby, 2010). In the Asian context, Kong and O'Connor (2009) argue that creative economies are often deeply intertwined with local traditions and social fabrics, distinguishing them from the more technology-driven models of the West. Traditional handicrafts, such as the Khmer mat weaving in Tra Vinh province, Vietnam, represent what Bourdieu describes as "cultural capital"—a repository of communal identity and ancestral knowledge that can be mobilized for economic development (Throsby, 2001).

However, the transition of these crafts into the market sphere often encounters the "Authorized Heritage Discourse" (AHD), which tends to prioritize static preservation over dynamic adaptation (Smith, 2006). This creates a tension between safeguarding "authentic" traditions and the necessity of commodification for survival in a globalized economy. As Richards (2007) notes, cultural tourism offers a platform for heritage revitalization, yet it requires a delicate balance to ensure that the "staged authenticity" does not dilute the original symbolic meaning of the craft.

In the specific case of the Mekong Delta, the agency of individual artisans is a crucial but often overlooked factor. Drawing on the UNESCO (2014) framework for culture and development, this study posits that the resilience of Khmer mat weaving depends not only on state protection but also on artisan agency - the ability of practitioners to innovate (e.g., the double-sided floral mat) while maintaining their cultural roots. By synthesizing these perspectives, the research explores how the Khmer community in Tra Cu navigates the dual pressures of modernization and heritage preservation within the framework of a market-oriented creative economy.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews with key informants in the Ca Hom - Ben Ba village, including veteran artisans (such as Artisan Ngo Thi Pho and Diep Thi Som), local government officials, and cooperative leaders. Field observation was conducted to document the entire production process, from sedge harvesting and dyeing to the final weaving process (both manual and semi-mechanized). Archival research supplemented the primary data, focusing on local reports and governmental policies regarding craft preservation and CI development.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Artisan Agency and the Capitalization of Cultural Values**

The research findings from Ca Hom - Ben Ba village provide clear evidence of "artisan agency" in transforming heritage into economic resources. According to Bourdieu's (1986) theory, the technical knowledge of Khmer mat weaving is not merely a manual skill but a form of "cultural capital." The emergence of the double-sided floral mat, pioneered by artisan Ngo Thi Pho around 2000, represents a critical turning point. Rather than passively preserving outdated designs, artisans have actively innovated techniques to meet market demands, thereby transforming intangible heritage into highly competitive "cultural products." The transmission of mat-weaving skills in Tra Cu follows a matrilineal pattern, ensuring the continuity of indigenous knowledge. One respondent noted: "I have been learning the art of mat weaving from my mother since I was a child...". This narrative highlights that the value of the Khmer mat exceeds its utility; it is a cultural vessel containing the "soul" of the community, or what Bourdieu (1986) identifies as embodied cultural capital. This underscores that within the framework of the Cultural Industry, heritage is not a static entity but a dynamic resource that evolves through the continuous creativity of cultural subjects.

### **The Paradox of Commodification and Authenticity**

The transition from subsistence handicraft production to market-oriented commodity production in Tra Cu has revealed significant challenges regarding "authenticity." The introduction of machinery in certain stages (semi-mechanization) has increased productivity from three mats to over ten mats per day; however, it has also raised concerns about the dilution of the craft's symbolic values. Viewed through the lens of Smith's (2006) "Authorized Heritage Discourse" (AHD), technological intervention might be perceived as a loss of core heritage values. Nevertheless, field discussions indicate that for the Khmer community, authenticity resides not only in the production tools but also in the cultural motifs and the communal bonds formed during the dyeing and weaving processes. Consequently, the development of the cultural industry in this region requires a model of "flexible authenticity," where technology is accepted as a means to sustain the vitality of craft villages within the modern economy.

**Comparative Analysis: Mat and Textile Weaving in Southeast Asia**

Research on Cultural Industry (CI) and heritage preservation in the field of traditional crafts in Southeast Asia reveals both similarities and differences in development strategies. Such a comparative perspective helps strengthen the argument for the uniqueness of the Khmer mat-weaving craft in Tra Cu, while also highlighting the universal nature of the challenges it faces.

Comparative Aspects	Khmer Mat Weaving in Tra Cu (Vietnam)	Mat/Textile Weaving in Cambodia	Thai Silk/Textile Weaving (Mudmee/Ikat)
Core Products	Double-sided floral mats made from sedge (locally known as cây lác).	Sedge/grass mats – e.g., Bek Chan mats (red-colored) in Cambodia; cotton textiles (kromah) and silk garments (sampot).	Traditional Ikat silk weaving (locally known as Mudmee in Thailand).
Cultural Industry (CI) Development Opportunities	Recognized as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage; strong potential for craft village-based experiential tourism.	Silk/cotton weaving supported by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focusing on the revival and development of natural dyeing techniques.	National branding strategy: Institutions such as the SUPPORT Foundation and the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles have elevated Thai silk to an internationally recognized brand.
Key Challenges	Unstable supply of raw materials (sedge); lack of young successor artisans; competition from low-cost industrial products.	Competition from plastic/industrial substitutes (e.g., Bek Chan mats); dependence on imported raw materials (cotton weaving)	Globalization and design imitation; balancing handcrafted production with large-scale market demand.
Lessons Learned	The need to integrate tourism and diversify products (e.g., high-end souvenir items) to enhance value.	Cultural preservation approach: maintaining ritualistic/sacred weaving patterns that are not commercialized for mass markets (similar to Iban weaving in Borneo).	Branding strategy: leveraging heritage and royal associations to achieve premiumization, while emphasizing ethical sourcing and cultural values.

**Sustainability and Gender Roles in Cultural Industry Development**

A significant finding of this study is the primary role of Khmer women in maintaining the value chain of the mat-weaving craft. Developing the cultural industry through handicrafts not only generates income but also contributes to women’s empowerment at the local level. However, the disruption of raw sedge supplies and the trend of young laborers migrating to industrial zones threaten the sustainability of this model. To address this, the study proposes integrating heritage into the "creative economy" through experiential tourism. When tourists purchase not just a physical mat but a "cultural story" and a "weaving experience," the added value of the product increases, creating an incentive for the younger generation to remain engaged with their traditional craft.

### **Strategic Recommendations**

#### **1. Integration of Experiential Tourism and Heritage Education**

- Developing a "Creative Cultural Tourism Village" Model: Rather than focusing solely on product sales, Ca Hom - Ben Ba village should develop experiential tourism packages. These tours would allow visitors to engage directly in various stages of production, from harvesting sedge and dyeing materials to the intricate process of pattern weaving.
- Establishing Display and Performance Spaces: The construction of a local heritage information center is essential to honor eminent artisans (such as Mrs. Ngo Thi Pho). This facility would serve as a venue for tourists to explore the historical evolution and aesthetic significance of Khmer mats.

#### **2. Product Diversification and Enhancing Creative Value**

- Developing High-end Souvenir Lines: By leveraging traditional weaving techniques and distinctive color palettes, the community can create derivative products such as handbags, interior décor items, and sustainable fashion accessories (Eco-fashion).
- Designer-Artisan Collaboration: Facilitating partnerships between local artisans and professional designers is crucial for modernizing designs. This synergy allows traditional motifs to be integrated with contemporary aesthetic sensibilities, making products more appealing to international market segments.

#### **3. Digital Branding and Marketing**

- Building Geographical Indications (GI) and Collective Brands: Intellectual property registration for the "Tra Cu Khmer Mat" brand must be prioritized to enhance market competitiveness and affirm the prestige of the craft.
- E-commerce and Digital Storytelling: Utilizing digital platforms and social media to narrate the "cultural stories" behind each handcrafted mat will create an emotional connection with consumers. This strategy enables artisans to bypass intermediaries and connect directly with the global handicraft market.

#### **4. Sustainability and Resource Management**

- Zoning Concentrated Raw Material Areas: Local authorities should provide policy support for residents to maintain and expand sedge cultivation areas, ensuring a stable and high-quality supply of raw materials for production.
- Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer Policies: Support funds for vocational apprenticeships should be established for village youth. Furthermore, integrating weaving heritage into the local educational curriculum will ensure the sustainable preservation of craft knowledge across generations.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study confirms that the Khmer mat-weaving craft in Ham Giang Tra Cu District, Tra Vinh Province (Ca Hom - Ben Ba) is not merely a form of tangible cultural heritage but also a dynamic component within Vietnam's Cultural Industry (CI) ecosystem. The transition from utilitarian products for daily use to high-end commercial goods—exemplified by the double-sided floral mats—demonstrates the community's keen adaptation to the pressures of a market economy. However, this development faces an inherent paradox: the necessity of modernization to enhance productivity versus the imperative to preserve authenticity to safeguard its value as a national intangible cultural heritage.

Furthermore, the research indicates that the success of heritage conservation is inextricably linked to the economic interests of the local community. Promoting the mat-weaving craft within the Cultural Industry framework does not only protect unique "cultural assets" but also fosters sustainable livelihoods, particularly regarding women's empowerment and the retention of the younger generation within the craft village. In conclusion, the Khmer mat-weaving craft in Tra Cu possesses all the requisite conditions to become a crucial link in the creative economy, provided there is a harmonious synthesis of indigenous knowledge, artisan innovation, and strategic policy support.

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