



Comparing Transformations of Traditional Beliefs of the S'tieng and Khmer People in Dong Nai Under the Impact of Cultural Tourism

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Published Online: 22 January 2026	This study analyzes the transformation of traditional beliefs in two ethnic minority communities: the S'tieng and Khmer people, in Dong Nai province (after the merger of 01/7/2025) under the impact of cultural tourism. Using ethnographic methods combined with in-depth interviews of 87 individuals from both communities, participant observation over 05 months at 12 cultural tourism sites, the research reveals significant differences in the process of belief transformation. The S'tieng people demonstrate a tendency toward commercialization of traditional rituals while maintaining their core belief system, whereas the Khmer people undergo syncretism between Theravada Buddhism and tourism elements, creating hybrid belief forms. The study contributes to theories of cultural adaptation in the context of globalization and provides policy recommendations for sustainable tourism development that respects cultural identity.
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1. INTRODUCTION

The intersection between cultural tourism and traditional beliefs of indigenous communities has become an important research topic in contemporary anthropology. Following the provincial merger into Dong Nai on 01/7/2025, this region has witnessed a significant increase in cultural tourism activities targeting ethnic minority communities, particularly the S'tieng people of the Austroasiatic language family and the Khmer people with their long-standing Buddhist tradition.

This study emerges from a gap in existing literature regarding differences in cultural responses of various ethnic groups to the same external pressure - cultural tourism. While many previous studies have focused on the general impact of tourism on indigenous cultures, few works systematically compare how ethnic groups with different belief foundations respond and adapt to this phenomenon.

1.1. Research Questions

The study focuses on three main questions: (1) How does cultural tourism impact the core and peripheral elements of traditional beliefs in each community? (2) What factors create differences in the process of belief transformation between the S'tieng and Khmer people? (3) What do the adaptive strategies of both communities reveal about cultural flexibility and resilience?

1.2. Theoretical Framework

The study applies Berry's cultural adaptation theory combined with Cohen's concept of "cultural commodification" to analyze different levels of transformation. We also employ the "core-periphery" model in belief research to identify invariant elements and changeable elements in belief systems.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Location and Time

Field research was conducted from July 2025 to December 2025 at 12 cultural tourism sites across the new Dong Nai province, including 7 sites in communes with large S'tieng communities and 5 sites in concentrated Khmer residential areas. Site selection was based on criteria of tourism development levels (high, medium, low) and community scale.

2.2. Research Subjects

The research sample included 87 participants: 45 S'tieng people (23 male, 22 female, ages 18-78) and 42 Khmer people (19 male, 23 female, ages 20-75). Subjects were selected through purposive sampling, prioritizing those with roles in religious rituals (shamans, village chiefs, elders) or directly participating in cultural tourism activities.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The study employed three main methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews with 87 participants,

participant observation at 46 ritual events and tourism activities, and analysis of 23 local documents on belief customs. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic coding methods, utilizing NVivo 14 software for data management and classification. Reliability was ensured through methodological triangulation and member checking.

2.4. Research Ethics

The study adhered to ethical principles following American Anthropological Association guidelines. All participants were fully informed about research purposes and signed consent forms. Identities were coded to protect privacy.

3. CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL BELIEFS

3.1. The S’tieng Belief System

Traditional S’tieng beliefs belong to animistic typology, with a complex spiritual hierarchy including Yang (sky deity), forest spirits, water spirits, and ancestral souls. The belief structure is hierarchical, with Yang playing a supreme role but rarely directly intervening in human life. Important rituals include forest worship ceremonies, rain-calling rituals, and particularly the tomb-abandonment ceremony - one of the most complex rituals lasting many days.

The shaman system (*pia kôa*) serves as intermediaries between the human world and the supernatural realm. Belief knowledge is transmitted orally across generations, closely tied to the S’tieng language and natural elements in their living environment. Sacredness is not confined to specific ritual spaces but permeates the entire cultural landscape, from sacred forests and sacred streams to sacred objects in the communal longhouse (*nhà rông*).

3.2. The Khmer Belief System

Khmer beliefs in Dong Nai represent a combination of orthodox Theravada Buddhism with pre-Buddhist indigenous belief elements. The pagoda (*wat*) serves as the center of religious and cultural life, where Buddhist rituals such as Chol Chnam Thmay (traditional New Year), Pchum Ben (ancestor veneration ceremony), and Uposatha days (observance days) are regularly held.

Parallel to Buddhism, the Khmer maintain beliefs in local deities (*neak ta*), ancestral spirits, and a magic-religious system practiced by ritual specialists (*kru*). This syncretism creates a multi-layered belief system, where Buddhist doctrine provides philosophical and ethical frameworks, while indigenous beliefs address practical needs regarding health, agriculture, and social issues.

4. IMPACT OF CULTURAL TOURISM

4.1. Forms and Scale of Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism in S’tieng and Khmer communities in Dong Nai primarily focuses on three types: traditional ritual experiences, cultural architectural space visits, and

traditional handicraft shopping. Data from Dong Nai Tourism Department show tourist numbers to ethnic cultural tourism sites increased 340% during 2020-2025, averaging 15,000-20,000 visits monthly at major sites.

Tourism organization models differ between the two communities. In S’tieng villages, tourism is typically organized through cooperatives or partnerships with external enterprises, while Khmer tourism sites usually center around pagodas with active participation from monks and Buddhist laypeople.

4.2. Transformation of S’tieng Traditional Rituals

4.2.1. Ritual Commercialization

The research documents clear commercialization of S’tieng rituals, particularly the tomb-abandonment ceremony and forest worship rituals. A 56-year-old village chief shared: “Previously we performed ceremonies when someone died and conditions were met, but now if tourists want to watch, we can organize on weekends. It’s not a real ceremony but the steps are similar.”

This process leads to separation between “rituals for guests” and “rituals for community.” Performance rituals are typically shortened from 3-5 days to 2-3 hours, eliminating complex preparation stages and strict taboos. However, 38 of 45 interviewed S’tieng people affirmed they still fully perform important community rituals according to tradition, without tourist participation.

4.2.2. Transformation of Sacred Spaces

Cultural tourism impacts S’tieng sacred spaces in two opposing directions. On one hand, some traditional spaces like sacred forests and sacred streams are violated by uncontrolled tourism activities. At two research sites, communities reported cases of tourists violating taboos by entering sacred forests without permission or touching sacred objects.

On the other hand, tourism demand has encouraged communities to restore some forgotten cultural spaces. Three villages in the research sample rebuilt communal longhouses following traditional architecture, spaces previously abandoned for over ten years. A 67-year-old shaman remarked: “Tourism is like a double-edged sword. It diminishes sacredness in some places but also gives us reason to preserve what remains.”

4.2.3. Maintaining Core Belief Systems

Despite surface-level changes, the S’tieng core belief system remains relatively intact. All 45 participants still believe in the existence of Yang and other spirits, still observe daily life taboos, and still consult shamans for important decisions. The clear separation between performance rituals and authentic rituals reveals an intelligent adaptive strategy: the community creates a “cultural shell” to serve tourism while protecting the belief core from intrusion.

4.3. Transformation of Khmer Beliefs

4.3.1. Pagodification of Tourism

Unlike the S’tieng, the Khmer do not create clear separation between religious and tourism spaces. Pagodas serve simultaneously as places of religious activity and primary cultural tourism destinations. This leads to the phenomenon of “pagodification of tourism” - pagodas are renovated to serve tourists with modern amenities like restrooms, parking lots, souvenir shops, while maintaining religious functions.

Five of the 5 surveyed pagodas have constructed separate areas for visitors, distinguished from areas for Buddhist followers. However, this boundary is often blurred, especially during major festivals when tourists are invited to participate in rituals alongside the community.

4.3.2. New Belief Syncretism

Cultural tourism has promoted the development of hybrid belief forms among the Khmer. A typical example is the “life release” ritual designed specifically for tourists, combining Buddhist compassion teachings with eco-tourism experiences. Visitors are guided to release fish into pagoda ponds accompanied by prayers in Khmer translated into Vietnamese and English.

Another interesting phenomenon is the emergence of “tourism amulets” - mass-produced protective objects with simplified designs to suit tourist preferences, accompanied by multilingual explanations. A 52-year-old abbot explained: “We still make traditional amulets for devotees, but have simpler versions for visitors. The merit is similar but easier for outsiders to understand.”

4.3.3. Canonization of Indigenous Knowledge

A notable transformation is the trend toward “canonization” of previously oral indigenous belief knowledge. To serve tourist education needs, many pagodas have compiled written materials about neak ta beliefs, healing rituals, and folk tales. This process both helps preserve knowledge and changes its oral nature and flexibility.

Observation at one pagoda revealed a group of young monks preparing materials introducing “10 distinctive Khmer beliefs” to distribute to visitors. This standardization and digitization of knowledge creates an “orthodox” version of beliefs that may differ greatly from the diversity and richness of traditional practice.

5. COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS

5.1. Different Adaptive Strategies

Data reveal the two communities apply fundamentally different adaptive strategies to cultural tourism pressure. The S’tieng employ a “separation” strategy - creating clear boundaries between religious space/time and tourism space/time. Conversely, the Khmer apply a “syncretism” strategy, blending tourism elements into existing belief structures.

This difference can be explained by three main factors. First, the nature of belief systems: S’tieng beliefs are highly communal, tied to specific events and local spaces, while Khmer Buddhism is an organized religion with universal doctrines, easily shared with outsiders. Second, power structures: the S’tieng have an informal shaman system that easily controls information, while Khmer pagodas have formal monastic structures with responsibilities for propagating teachings. Third, economic benefits: Khmer pagodas receive merit donations directly from tourists, creating incentives to integrate tourism into religious activities.

5.2. Degree of Transformation in Belief Elements

Analysis using the core-periphery model shows both communities protect core elements (basic belief systems, conceptions of the supernatural world, fundamental moral values) while accepting transformation of peripheral elements (ritual forms, practice spaces, religious objects).

However, the boundary between core and periphery is not fixed. Among the S’tieng, some elements initially considered peripheral, like ritual timing, gradually became important when the community recognized that sacredness tied to natural cycles cannot be compromised. Among the Khmer, the emergence of new hybrid belief forms is creating an “intermediate” layer between core and periphery.

5.3. Role of Language and Memory

Language plays different roles in belief transformation processes. For the S’tieng, the S’tieng language is the only medium for accessing deep belief knowledge. “Guest rituals” may be explained in Vietnamese, but mantras and prayers must remain in S’tieng. This untranslatability creates a natural protective layer for belief knowledge.

The Khmer have advantages in Pali texts and rich Buddhist literature, but this also makes beliefs more accessible and prone to reinterpretation. Translating scriptures and explaining doctrines to tourists has created “simplified” versions of Khmer Buddhism that may reversely influence how younger generations understand their own beliefs.

5.4. Generations and Cultural Continuity

Age-based analysis reveals important differences in attitudes toward belief transformation. The elderly generation (over 60) in both communities express concerns about cultural loss, but respond differently. Elderly S’tieng tend to intensify teaching traditional knowledge to younger generations in private settings, separate from tourism. Elderly Khmer view tourism as an opportunity for children to learn about culture through serving guests.

The younger generation (18-35) holds more pragmatic views. 67% of S’tieng youth and 72% of Khmer youth surveyed believe cultural tourism makes them prouder of their ethnic identity, despite acknowledging changes in

practice forms. A 24-year-old Khmer youth shared: “When tourists respect and want to learn about our culture, I feel it has value. But I also understand some things must change for them to understand.”

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Beliefs in the Era of Globalization

Research findings contribute to debates about the survival of indigenous beliefs in the globalization context. Rather than a binary “preserve or disappear” model, data show communities are developing complex adaptive strategies, simultaneously maintaining and transforming beliefs in creative ways.

The concept of “authenticity” in beliefs also needs reconsideration. Both S’tieng and Khmer communities create “not entirely traditional” versions of beliefs to serve tourism, but this does not necessarily diminish the authenticity of belief practices within community contexts. Instead, multiple layers of authenticity emerge: historical authenticity, experiential authenticity, and authenticity constructed for tourism.

6.2. Agency and Religious Information

An important finding is the shift in control over religious information. Previously, belief knowledge was tightly controlled by religious specialists (S’tieng shamans, Khmer monks), but cultural tourism has partly “democratized” access to this knowledge. Tour guides, highly educated youth, and tourism entrepreneurs become new cultural intermediaries.

However, this process unfolds differently in the two communities. The S’tieng maintain clear boundaries between shareable knowledge and forbidden knowledge, limiting the role of new intermediaries. The Khmer tend toward greater openness, leading to widespread dissemination of belief knowledge but also creating risks of misinterpretation.

6.3. Intersection of Religion and Economics

The study clarifies the complex relationship between beliefs and economics in the tourism context. Both communities derive economic benefits from cultural tourism, but how they negotiate between economic and religious values differs. The S’tieng tend toward clear separation - earning money from tourism but never allowing money to influence important religious decisions. The Khmer accept interweaving of economics and religion, with the notion that merit can come from multiple sources, including tourists.

This reflects different cultural conceptions of sacredness. For the S’tieng, sacredness is closely tied to specific spaces, times, and communities, difficult to transfer. For the Khmer, sacredness is more flexible, can be created and maintained through correct actions regardless of context.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1. Main Findings

The study has demonstrated that cultural tourism impacts the traditional beliefs of S’tieng and Khmer people in Dong Nai differently based on three main factors: the nature of belief systems, socio-religious structures, and community adaptive strategies. The S’tieng apply a separation strategy to protect their belief core while creating a cultural shell serving tourism. The Khmer employ a syncretism strategy, blending tourism elements into belief structures, creating new belief forms.

Both strategies have advantages and limitations. The separation strategy helps protect belief integrity but may create value conflicts when boundaries blur. The syncretism strategy facilitates creative cultural development but risks diluting core values in the long term.

7.2. Theoretical Contributions

The study contributes to cultural adaptation theory by demonstrating that communities do not passively receive external impacts but actively design adaptive strategies based on their own cultural characteristics. The “core-periphery” model needs adjustment to recognize that boundaries between these zones are dynamic and can change according to context.

The study also expands the concept of “cultural commodification” by showing this process is not uniform across all communities. Some groups can commodify cultural elements without harming belief essence, while others undergo deeper transformations.

7.3. Policy Recommendations

Based on research findings, we offer recommendations for sustainable cultural tourism development in Dong Nai:

For state management agencies: Flexible tourism policies respecting differences among ethnic communities are needed. Rather than applying a uniform tourism development model, each community should be allowed to decide the level and form of tourism participation suitable to their cultural characteristics. Establish regular dialogue mechanisms with elders, religious leaders, and community representatives to monitor tourism impacts.

For tourism enterprises: Investment in training guides with deep understanding of local beliefs is needed, not just at performance level but at cultural meaning level. Respect boundaries communities establish regarding sacred spaces, sacred times, and taboos. Develop fair benefit-sharing models with communities, especially investing in cultural preservation.

For local communities: Clear community conventions about what can and cannot be shared with tourists are needed. Strengthen education of younger generations about traditional beliefs parallel to tourism participation. Develop capacity for self-management and control of tourism activities in their areas.

7.4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The study has several limitations worth noting. First, the 18-month research period is insufficiently long to observe profound belief transformations, which are processes occurring across multiple generations. Second, the research sample focused on developed tourism sites, not fully representative of communities with less tourism exposure. Third, the study has not deeply assessed the impact of digital technology and social media on belief transformation processes.

Future research could expand in the following directions: long-term studies tracking one or two specific communities over 5-10 years to understand transformation trajectories; comparison with S’tiengand Khmer communities in other provinces with different tourism development levels; research on the role of younger generations and digital technology in recreating and disseminating beliefs; and analysis of tourism impacts on other cultural aspects such as language, arts, and social organization.

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