

Du Ke Theater Heritage of Khmer People in Tourism Development in Vietnam

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

RECEIVED: 06-Aug-22

REVISED: 25-Sep-22

ACCEPTED: 10-Oct-22

PUBLISHED: 15-Nov-22

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Citation: Trương Thu Trang and Nayan Deep Singh Kanwal (2022). Du Ke Theater Heritage of Khmer People in Tourism Development in Vietnam. Horizon J. Hum. Soc. Sci. Res. 4 (2), 75–82. <https://doi.org/10.37534/bp.jhssr.2022.v4.n2.id1131.p75>



ABSTRACT

Du ke theater art of the Khmer people has been decided by the Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam to be recognized as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage, folk performing arts (according to Decision No.2684/QĐ-BVHTTDL, dated August 25. In 2014, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism announced a list of 19 national intangible cultural heritages, including Du ke theater art. We researched “Duke theatre heritage of Khmer people in tourism development in Vietnam” using ethnographic fieldwork as the main research method.” We asked related subjects about: The role and value of Du Ke theater art and the advantages and disadvantages when applying Du Ke theater art in tourism development in Vietnam? Through the study, the role of Du Ke theater art in tourism development will be clear, thereby proposing some solutions to promote the value of this art form in association with tourism development in Vietnam, especially in the southern region.

Keywords: Du Ke, Vietnam, tourism, folk art, Khmer

Introduction

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country. The diversity in ethnic cultures enriches the country’s traditional cultural capital, which can be the foundation for developing an interest in cultural tourism. The Du Ke theater art of the Khmer people in South Vietnam is a typical case. Therefore, we study “Du Ke theatrical heritage of Khmer people in tourism development in Vietnam” to see the value of this type of heritage in tourism development, thereby highlighting some solutions to promote the value of this art form associated with tourism development in Vietnam, especially in the South.

Du Ke theater art of the Khmer people has been decided by the Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism in Vietnam to be recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage, folk performing arts (according to Decision No. 2684/QĐ-BVHTTDL, dated August 25, 2014, of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism announcing a list of 19 national intangible cultural heritages, including Du Ke theater art). This is one of the special ethnic art forms, an art form that has existed for over a hundred years in the hearts of the Khmer people and can become a unique cultural tourism resource. However, at present, this art form has not been fully recognized in terms of its application values in the economic, cultural and social life of the people. Therefore, it has not been properly preserved and developed and is also at risk of being lost over time.

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Many authors have been interested in understanding the value of the Du Ke cultural heritage art form, especially those in the South of Vietnam.

Author Sang Set (2019), in his work “Du Ke Khmer Theater in the South,” has made important contributions when studying the process of formation and development of Du Ke theater art and, at the same time, introduced several theatrical scripts of Du Ke.. Thereby, readers understand the history of formation, as well as basic features of this art form, including: composition, plot themes, music, choreography and martial arts, decoration—costumes, ways of acting, performing with the audience and some typical scripts.

The work “On the traditional Khmer theater in the South” published by the Department of Culture and Information of Soc Trang province (1998) has collected articles on the types of traditional Khmer Southern theater, in which Du Ke is noticed and studied deeply for topics, stories, acting, music and fine arts. These articles affirm the unique traditional value of this art form, occupying an important position in the cultural and social life of the Khmer. Therefore, it is necessary to develop this art form in the right direction, so it does not disappear.

Other works such as “Southern Khmer Performing Arts” (Hoang, 2011) and “The image of Chan (Yak) in Southern Khmer culture” (Nguyen, 2015) are also valuable works in the study of Du Ke theater art type.

In addition, many articles are interested in preserving and promoting the value of Du Ke theater art such as: “Du Ke Khmer theater art in the South—problems and thoughts” (Pham, 2014); “Tra Vinh Khmer Cultural Tourism—A case study of traditional craft villages of the Khmer Tra Vinh people” (Son & Nguyen, 2016); “Du Ke theater art of Soc Trang Khmer people—History and prospects” (Duong, 2020); “Preservation and development of Du Ke Khmer theater art in the South—Cultural heritage of the nation” (Le, 2014); “Preserving and promoting the value of Di Ke theater art of Khmer ethnic group in An Giang province” (Truong, 2014); “Theatrical art of Du Ke Khmer in the South—Origin, characteristics and solutions for conservation and development” (Tien & Duong, 2014) and “For the development of Du Ke stage in global exchanges and integration” (Ha, 2014). These articles are concerned with how to preserve and develop Du Ke theater art. Although Du Ke theater art has special cultural value, to survive in life, some problems need to be solved, especially economic problems and how to make an artist live with Du Ke’s profession.

The above studies have thoroughly researched the history of formation and development, the content and artistic characteristics of Du Ke theater art and some proposals to preserve and develop this type of unique folk theater.. However, there has been limited in-depth research on the following issues: Role and value of Du Ke theater art; how the status quo develops; advantages and disadvantages in preserving and developing Du Ke theater art and contents and methods of applying Du Ke theater art values in tourism development in Vietnam. Therefore, this study discusses the above issues in depth, providing an application solution to “Du Ke theater heritage of Khmer people in tourism development in Vietnam”.

Method

The article is approached in the direction of ethnography and cultural anthropology to understand the traditional cultural movements of the Khmer people, the cultural characteristics of Du Ke theater art and apply those things to tourism development and preservation of Du Ke’s artistic identity for the Khmer people in Vietnam.

The article uses the main research methods:

Firstly, collect and research documents on Khmer ethnic group in the South, paying special attention to documents on Du Ke theater art. Secondly, ethnographic fieldwork: Visited many times by non-participants and observers to absorb the Khmer traditional Du Ke theater art form; thereby, it is possible to properly assess the existence and development of Du Ke theater art, taking that as a basis for proposing solutions in tourism development through this unique period. Third, interview a number of subjects such as indigenous people, tourists from outside the province, ethnic groups living in the same area etc., to get information about their level of understanding, interest and causes of the disappearance of the current Du Ke theater art form and propose solutions.

The time of survey and field interviews was between 2020 and 2021. We conducted surveys mainly at Khmer pagodas and some private houses. Sen Dolta Festival (Phchum Banh—Ancestor Worshipping Ceremony) (September–October), Kathina Ceremony (October–November), Ok Om Bok festival to worship the moon (November), Chol Chnam Thmay traditional festival (New Year’s Eve) (April), Buddha’s Birthday (May) and Sea blessing ceremony (May) are the main festivals of the Khmer people.

Survey and interview questions included the following main ideas:

- Are you knowledgeable about Du Ke theater art form of Khmer ethnic people?
- How do you feel when you watch Du Ke's performance?
- In your opinion, is Du Ke currently being properly maintained and developed, or is it fading over time? Why?
- In your opinion, what values does Du Ke have and can be applied in tourism development? If so, how should it be applied? What is the specific solution?
- After the survey and interview process, we made statistics of the opinions, saw the coincidences, processed the information, and saw the compatibility of the answers with practical activities related to the field of art. We analysed and synthesised opinions combined with secondary data, knowledge and experience to discuss the results.

Result and Discussion

Overview of Du Ke cultural heritage

The name Du Ke

Regarding the origin of the name, there is an explanation in folklore as follows: Some people believe that this word comes from the name of uncle Ke, a monk in Hieu Tu Pagoda, Tieu Can district (Tra Vinh). According to Khmer elders in Tra Vinh, in the 20s of the last century, this young man became very fond of watching and singing. After watching, he often invited his friends to the backyard of the temple to assign roles to perform, and watching that was funny. More and more people came to his concerts, and every time people came, they told each other to see Ke Vu, gradually turning the sound into Du Ke (Sangt, 2019, tr. 9-10).

In work "Folk Theater", the document was collected, translated and introduced by Dam Van Hien-Tran Van Bon-Le Ham. The word Du Ke (Duke) is due to reading the transliteration from Di ke (Dike). Di ke is an old Cambodian theater art form. This art form of the country Chua Thap was introduced into Vietnam through the border region of Tri Ton, A Giang (Dam Van Hien-Tran Van Bon-Le Ham, 2012).

Thus, the word Du Ke has no special meaning. It was formed just by reading a few words with similar sounds, gradually becoming familiar.

In addition, when Vietnam's Du Ke troupe toured the capital Phnom Penh (Cambodia), Cambodians warmly received it and called Vietnam's Du Ke theater art L'kôn Bassac, which means theater of the Hau River region (Trương, 2018).

The process of formation and development

Many authors have been interested in learning about the Du Ke theater art form in the South, where Tra Vinh is one of the cradles of formation and development.

Researchers have confirmed that: "*Duke was born by a group of Southern Khmer writers, artists and intellectuals, knowledgeable in art and fluent in poetry and literature, under the leadership of Mr. Thach Sua, former abbot of Kh'sach Kandal temple, Chau Thanh district, Tra Vinh province*" (Dam Van Hien-Tran Van Bon-Le Ham, 2012, tr.260). Many other documents also confirm: "*Yuke was born by the Khmer people in the Mekong Delta (Southern Vietnam)*" (Pham, 2011, tr.183).

The process of formation and development of Du Ke Khmer Southern theater art goes through three stages:

Regarding the formative stage, Du Ke appeared around the 20s of the twentieth century, a few years after the Vietnamese art of Cai Luong in the South, when Robam theater was out of vogue, less public and lasted until about the 30s. Du Ke gradually developed and reached its peak from the 30s to the 60s of the twentieth century, especially in the 50s. During the fierce war years, especially around the 60s and 70s, Du Ke fell into disrepair. Du Ke was restored and entered a stable development phase from 1975 until now. When the South was completely liberated, the country was unified and the country was reunited, many Du Ke theater art troupes have been established, existed and developed, such as Art troupe Khmer Soc Trang, Anh Binh Minh Khmer Art Troupe—Tra Vinh and Bac Lieu Khmer General Art troupe (Trương, 2018).

Thus, before a century of birth and rooting in the hearts of the Khmer people, nurtured by the folk, Du Ke theater art form experienced many ups and downs. However, today Du Ke still demonstrates a strong and persistent vitality, diligently serving the people and loved by the people.

In Vietnam, the Du Ke theater art form is still maintained in the Khmer community; the plays are being increasingly noticed to be conveyed on the professional stage, aiming to serve tourists to enjoy this unique type of folk theater.

The value of Du Ke theater art form

Du Ke theater art in the spiritual life of Khmer ethnic people

It can be said that Du Ke theater art is an indispensable spiritual part of the life of the Khmer ethnic group in Vietnam, in general, the Mekong Delta, in particular and especially in provinces where many Khmer people live.

Interviews with 20 Khmer households in Bac Lieu, Soc Trang, Tra Vinh and 20 monks at 10 Khmer pagodas confirmed the importance of Du Ke performance in Khmer life. Dancer Thach Si Phol in Bac Lieu, who has been with Du Ke stage for more than 50 years, said: *“Du Ke has become my flesh and blood, even though I don’t have much money from the show, I am still passionate about it, because I know that the Khmer cannot be without this important spiritual food”* (Excerpt from Interview with Dance Artist Thach Si Phol, May 2020).

In general, Du Ke plays are often full of humanity, with high educational value, like a fairy tale with a happy ending, good people meet the sage and evil people meet retribution. For example, the plays: *“Linh-Thôn”, “Sac- Kinh-ni”, “Thach Sanh slashes the dragon”, “Tam Cam”, “Tru Vuong loves Dac Ky”, “The Tripitaka asks for sutras”, “Phan Le Hue-Tiet Dinh San”*. It is possible to see the cultural exchange between ethnic groups through plays derived from the legends of all three ethnic groups: Khmer–Kinh–Hoa. Also, no matter what ethnicity’s story comes from, the performance is still bold with the Khmer ethnicity, unchanged in character structure, fixed character lines and conventional character costumes high.

Ms. Thach Thi So Ry said: *“We don’t know much about how the fairy tales are organized, the origin of the plays is compiled from Vietnam or abroad, it is only important that we sit and watch familiar characters, familiar plays, happy ending, make us believe in the good life. We also especially love the actors’ colorful costumes”* (Interview with Ms. Thach Thi So Ry—Khmer in Tra Vinh).

Du Ke is often performed at Khmer temples during festivals or in cultural and artistic activities of the Khmer ethnic community. It can be seen that Du Ke’s performances always attract a large number of people to participate. Everyone eagerly looks forward to familiar characters appearing in splendid and brilliant costumes, with bending movements from magical hands, like the roof of a national temple glowing in the sun. Du Ke theater art not only satisfies the needs of entertainment and enjoyment of the arts but also serves as the glue that connects the community in public nights and is one of the cultural symbols of the nation.

Du Ke theater art in tourism development in Vietnam

Cultural tourism is mainly based on cultural values such as traditional festivals, customs, beliefs, etc., to create attraction for domestic and foreign tourists. For visitors interested in researching and discovering indigenous cultures and customs, cultural tourism is an opportunity to satisfy the needs of the world. Most cultural tourism activities are associated with the locality, where many cultural festivals and cultural values occur. Attracting tourists to participate in cultural tourism creates a new influx of tourists, contributing to improving the lives of local people (Hoang, 2014).

Du Ke theater art is a traditional cultural value, completely capable of creating great attraction for visitors who are passionate about research and discovery and with various audiences and tourists, especially foreign tourists. Even the local people around the area who belong to other ethnic groups say that they do not know much about this unique art form, but when they see it for the first time, they always feel excited—looking forward to seeing more books.

Researcher Thach Doni, Bac Lieu said: *“The Khmer have a special cultural capital to develop tourism, of which Du Ke is an important highlight. However, sadly, so far this art form lacks living land and has not been properly exploited”*. (Interview with Researcher Thach Doni, September 2021).

Surveys show that the millet has not been properly exploited to serve tourists in the current situation, and when not exploited, this art form is likely to fade away and rarely inherited. Therefore, promoting the value of Umbrella theater in tourism development brings economic value and preserves culture, and, at the same time, creates livelihoods for local people.

Solutions to promote the value of Du Ke theater art in tourism development in Vietnam

Building tourism products Du Ke

The first and most important step is constructing Du Ke tourism products. Usually, what we get are folktales that exist in folklore. If we want to develop these plays into tourist products, we have to rebuild the repertoire suitable for the audience to enjoy time.

Respondent from Bac Lieu Tourism Joint Stock Company: *"If the play Du Ke wants to serve tourism, it must have a suitable, professional, and unique excerpt, how to do it in a short period of time, which can convey the most important and core spirit of Du Ke theater art"*. (Interview March 2020).

If when performing normally on the local stage, the play Du Ke takes place on all stages, performing the whole play. When serving tourism, we will cut it out according to specific conditions into product packages, such as 10, 15-to-20-minute exchange performances, a short excerpt or a real song and dance short but still showing Du Ke's soul; visitors can be invited to perform along. The performance is about 30–60 minutes, succinctly showing all stages of a Du Ke night, which is a perfect night like a normal stage but with high artistic quality.

In terms of fairy tales, it is necessary to have the practice of playing various fairy tales to be able to serve different audiences. For example, when serving a group of Kinh and Hoa people, they can perform scenes close to their traditional culture so that they can feel the typical cultural nuances of Du Ke and see the national soul they can express in each role.

Dancer Thach Si Phol said: *"To properly perform Du Ke theater art is not an easy thing, it requires a lot of practice, so actors need training support, money to live with profession"*. (Excerpt from interview with dancer Thach Si Phol, May 2020).

In order to have good plays and artistic performances, the training of actors is extremely important. Because not everyone can perform Du Ke, especially in the current situation when Du Ke has not brought economic benefits, it is quite difficult to find people to follow the profession or children of the Khmer ethnic group who are enthusiastic about the profession is also very limited. Therefore, it is necessary to find potential people, invest in them to study, train and foster deeply in Du Ke's theater art, how to make them both sing and

dance and understand and introduce visitors to this art form. At the same time, they also need to train them on how to communicate with tourists, help tourists dance along and take photos with tourists. In addition, this team also needs to learn basic knowledge about tourism and about the region, as well as the Khmer people and their typical cultural values. It should also be added that foreign language ability, especially English, is more necessary than ever in the current period; they also need to learn basic communication and professional words in English to introduce tourists to foreigners.

Product promotion

Du Ke has not been able to reach the masses and especially has not served much for tourism development because the promotion of products has not been focused.

After building a tourism product from Du Ke's theatrical art suitable for many audiences and flexible in many performance spaces, the next thing is to promote the product. Because no matter how good and beautiful a tourism product is, without promotion, it still cannot reach many tourists near and far, both domestic and foreign.

Respondent from Tourism Department, Department of Culture–Sports–Tourism Bac Lieu: *"Currently, tourists and the people of Kinh and Hoa do not know much about Du Ke theater art, travel companies have not exploited this type, only the Center for Tourism Promotion and Promotion has tested to invite visitors. Guests watching a performance. Therefore, if this type of business wants to develop, it must have an appropriate product promotion strategy"*. (Interview September 2021).

When promoting a product, the level of authenticity in advertising is important. It is to avoid the situation of exaggeration. When tourists come to experience it without the right level of promotion, they will be disappointed and spread word of mouth about the local Du Ke tourism product, thereby the locality losing economic, cultural and social value. At the same time, the possibility of tourists returning is very low, affecting other local tourism products. There are many ways to promote products, such as designing leaflets introducing products, compiling books, making promotional clips for Du Ke Vietnam to put on social networking sites, the performance of Du Ke at night fair spaces in cultural tourism weeks, setting up a space to display Du Ke

cultural heritage associated with the space of famous Khmer pagodas, performing in service of festivals, New Year, Du Ke theater art exchanges between provinces, introducing Du Ke for fam trip groups, etc. At first, the troupes can perform for free with high quality; then, they could charge a fee for the program. However, the fee collection should be moderate for Vietnamese and foreign tourists so that a large number of tourists and even locals have conditions to contact and enjoy this art and culture, which will help spread word of mouth and promote to the public.

Method of connecting and maintaining the product

Connecting stakeholders is indispensable for tourism products from Du Ke theater art to work effectively.

The local government needs to support and help connect the stakeholders to promote and sell products as people and even artists of Du Ke troupe have limited reach to connect and keep the product working. The local government has strategic coverage and understands tourism planning and development policy from the provincial leaders, including holding programs for training and retraining in Du Ke theater art and proposing action programs to develop local tourism, including Du Ke. Therefore, local leaders are extremely important in helping shape, promote, connect, train, foster and introduce products.

Secondly, connecting with tourism promotion agencies at all levels to get information about the tourism situation of the province and the locality, and know about tourism promotion programs that Du Ke can participate in. At the same time, introduce Du Ke to ask for support from these units to help promote the product.

The third is to connect with companies and units that provide travel services, especially travel. When these companies and units know about Du Ke tourism products, they can design destinations on tourists' travel journeys. They will also help introduce other companies and units outside the province, even abroad. For companies and travel agencies, finding a new and unique tourism product for tourists will make them extremely excited because through that, they design a tour with content richer in cultural values, meeting the wishes of tourists when participating in tourism.

An indispensable connection is the connection between local and foreign Du Ke delegations. Connecting to

support, help, exchange actors, perform all the shows, even the smallest or grandiose programs that need the participation of a large force of performing artists Du Ke.

Besides, in the South of Vietnam, for Du Ke tourism product to have a living land and maintain its operation, it is necessary to have a fixed performance venue to serve tourists. Du Ke performance site should be located in the space of a famous temple, to perform or reenact festival activities including Du Ke performance. When this place is built, whenever groups of tourists come, there will be a place to perform and introduce products.

Included products and services

One of the extremely important factors in tourism is the accompanying services, tourism-related services. Because tourism products are good and unique, tourists will find it boring if they go there to enjoy and then leave, and the locality will not gain anything from visitors.

Du Ke-related services can be: Renting costumes of performer Du Ke for guests to take photos in a Du Ke-style space and take pictures with the actor; souvenir products related to Du Ke theater art, such as keychains, wall stickers, pictures of Du Ke dancing girls, Champa flowers, musical instruments; temple symbols and Du Ke to display on the desk; wooden sculptures, imitations of wood or glass cages with the above symbols.

In addition, there are services about local cuisine, beautifully displayed stalls and waiters wearing national costumes, selling locally made products, especially rustic dishes. You can eat on the spot, and there are packaged products, beautiful labels, many sizes, weights and typical Khmer confectionery for visitors to buy as gifts.

In addition, a tourism product that accompanies not only Du Ke but also all other products is homestays. Homestay is not just a place for tourists to stay during the sightseeing journey, but more importantly, it must be a tourist product to serve tourists so that visitors can experience Khmer culture right in this house, from decoration and homestay design, to waiters, food services, tour introductions and presentations. The homestay here must be designed with a bold Du Ke space and Khmer culture for visitors to enjoy and feel this unique art form and ethnic Khmer culture.

Conclusion

Born from folklore and preserved by folk, Du Ke received the cultural interference between ethnic groups but never lost its identity. Over the past century, Du Ke has always been an indispensable spiritual dish of Khmer people in Vietnam, especially in provinces with a large number of Khmer people. In the current period, when tourism is identified as a spearhead economic sector, a “goose that lays golden eggs”, along with preserving ethnic and cultural identities, Du Ke really is a tourism product worthy of respect. This is the cultural heritage of the Khmer people, showing Khmer identity, and can completely form unique tourism products of high human value. In order to do that, the solutions mentioned above in this article will be a resource for local leaders, scientists, Du Ke artists and companies and units to carry out the promotion of tourism or as a reference traveller, thereby both doing tourism, preserving the living land for Du Ke theater art.

Competing Interests Statement

The author(s) declare that they have no significant competing financial, professional or personal interests that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

Acknowledgment

The author(s) would like to thank the reviewers and editors of this manuscript for their critical comments in making this manuscript publishable in this scholarly journal.

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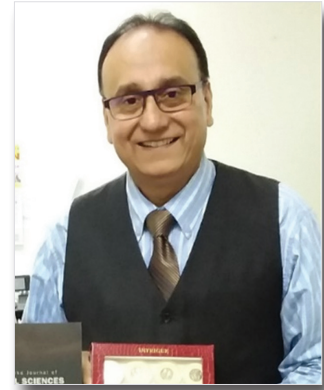
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He joined University Putra Malaysia, Malaysia, in 1996. Since then, he has been with UPM where he served as a Lecturer. In addition, he functioned as the Chief Executive Editor with several prestigious academic journals. Subsequently in 2016, he was offered to work as a visiting Professor at BINUS University, Indonesia. Currently, he is in the U.S. responsible for training and educating several students on freelance basis.

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