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## Communication Culture in Southern Khmer Communities: An Interdisciplinary Approach

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### Abstract

*This study explores the communication culture of the Southern Khmer people, focusing on family and community interactions. Using an interdisciplinary approach combining linguistics, cultural studies, and ethnography, the research analyzes data from field observations, interviews, and folk materials. The findings indicate that communication practices are shaped by respect, social hierarchy, and community cohesion. In family contexts, communication emphasizes politeness, indirectness, and age-based hierarchy. In community settings, it reflects collective values, mutual support, and adherence to traditional norms. Cultural and religious beliefs, especially Theravada Buddhism, significantly influence communicative behavior. The study highlights the close relationship between language and culture and contributes to a better understanding of Southern Khmer communication practices. It also provides implications for intercultural communication, language education, and the preservation of cultural identity in the context of globalization.*

**Keywords:** communication culture, Southern Khmer people, communication culture, family and community interactions, intercultural communication

### 1. Introduction

Humans, as subjects of communication shaped by cultural and social characteristics, have become a central focus of interdisciplinary research. Wherever human societies exist, there are systems of communication and patterns of behavior that govern interactions among individuals and with their surrounding environment. Such communicative behaviors are not innate but are formed and refined as societies develop to higher levels of civilization.

Communication can be understood as the process of interaction and exchange of information through which relationships are established and actions are guided toward specific purposes. Culture serves as the foundation that shapes communication practices and behavioral norms. Communication culture, as a component of overall culture, reflects the ways individuals and communities express attitudes, values, and modes of thinking through interaction. It embodies life philosophies, lifestyles, and

patterns of conduct in relationships among individuals, society, and the natural environment. Therefore, communication culture plays a vital role in both the social and spiritual life of human communities and constitutes an essential aspect of cultural identity.

The Southern Khmer people, long-established agricultural inhabitants of the Mekong Delta, have developed a distinctive system of cultural values through processes of adaptation, exchange, and integration. Influenced by a rich ecological environment, Theravada Buddhism, and diverse traditional festivals, their communication culture—particularly within family and community contexts—offers valuable insights for interdisciplinary research.

## 2. Research method

**In-depth interviews:** The study employed in-depth interviews with representatives of 30 households (aged over 60) to collect data on key characteristics of communication culture, including speech etiquette within families and in *phum* and *soc* communities, as well as changes in communication practices compared to traditional norms. The interviews were conducted across three research sites: Tri Ton district (An Giang province), Tra Cu district (Tra Vinh province), and Vinh Chau town (Soc Trang province), with 10 participants from each location.

**Observation:** The author conducted direct observations and recorded communicative language practices in 30 households at the same research sites, with an equal distribution of 10 households per location. This method enabled the collection of authentic data on everyday communication behaviors.

**Documentation:** Relevant literature on culture, language, Khmer culture, and related sociological studies was reviewed to establish the theoretical framework. The collected materials were then synthesized and analyzed to support the interpretation and generalization of the research findings.

## 3. Literature Review

Anthropology and sociology have produced numerous studies related to communication culture, demonstrating that every society establishes shared norms of behavior that guide social interaction. These norms are collective in nature, reflecting the knowledge, values, and emotions that both subjects and objects of communication orient toward in order to achieve effective interaction. In *The Tree of Culture* (1955), Ralph Linton defined culture as (a) organized and recurrent patterns of behavior among members of a society, and (b) a system of behaviors that are socially approved and transmitted across generations. From this perspective, behaviors recognized and maintained by a community constitute culture.

From a cultural anthropological viewpoint, behavior is also understood as a cultural construct shaped by environmental contexts. Scholars such as James Clifford (*Writing Culture*, 1986) and Tom Boellstorff (*Coming of Age in Second Life*, 2008) emphasize that cultural anthropology focuses not on isolated individual actions but on how natural and social environments shape patterns of human behavior.

From the perspective of cultural sociology, Michel Foucault (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975) examined mechanisms of discipline and social control, while Max Weber (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 2005) highlighted the role of institutions in regulating behavior through systems of authority and governance.

In Vietnam, studies on communication culture are extensive. Pham Vu Dung (1996) identified key components of communication, including gestures, language, and ideas. Huu Dat (2000) analyzed the relationship between language, culture, and communication, with particular attention to family and community contexts. Le Nhu Hoa (2002), from a cultural studies perspective, examined behavioral culture among Vietnamese and ethnic minority groups, emphasizing collective and community-oriented values.

Additionally, various scholars have explored communication and behavioral culture in relation to ethnic minorities, education, and socio-cultural transformation (Nguyen Hung Khu, 2005; Hoang Chi Bao, 2010; Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, 2011; Pham Minh Thao, 2021). Overall, international studies tend to focus on norms, rules, and mechanisms of social regulation, whereas Vietnamese research adopts a more integrative approach, analyzing cultural characteristics, social contexts, and ongoing transformations of behavioral culture.

Despite these contributions, research on the communication culture of the Khmer people in Vietnam remains limited and is often only briefly addressed within broader studies of Khmer culture.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Cultural and social characteristics of the Khmer people in the South

Among the six ethnic minority groups in Vietnam with populations exceeding one million, the Khmer people, with approximately 1,319,652 individuals (Central Steering Committee for the 2019 Population and Housing Census, 2019, p. 160), are one of the earliest inhabitants and are predominantly concentrated in the Mekong Delta. Their population is distributed mainly in Soc Trang (31.68%), Tra Vinh (25.45%), Kien Giang (16.43%), An Giang (7.03%), and Bac Lieu (5.5%) (Committee on Ethnic Minorities, 2017, p. 96).

Historically, in response to the ecological conditions of newly alluvial, saline, and sparsely populated lands, the Khmer people established settlements on elevated areas, particularly in Tra Vinh province, following traditional patterns of residence. They typically formed small, closely connected communities around Buddhist pagodas, known as *phum* and *soc*. This settlement pattern reflects a lifestyle characterized by simplicity, strong communal bonds, and close social cohesion.

Festivals represent a convergence of the distinctive cultural features of the Khmer people. Annually, they celebrate a wide range of festivals, including both religious and folk events. Among these, three major traditional festivals are particularly significant: the New Year Festival (*Chol Chnam Thmay*), the Ancestor Worship Festival (*Sen Dolta*), and the Moon Worship Festival (*Ok Om Bok*).

The majority of Khmer people practice Theravada Buddhism. Although Buddhism was introduced to southern Vietnam after Brahmanism and was initially embraced by lower social strata, from the 13th century onward, Theravada Buddhism gradually replaced Brahmanism as the dominant religion due to its compatibility with the historical context and spiritual needs of the Khmer people. As of June 2010, Khmer Theravada Buddhism comprised 452 pagodas and 8,574 monks, accounting for 19.3% of the total number of monks in Vietnam, primarily concentrated in provinces such as Tra Vinh, Vinh Long, Can Tho, An Giang, Kien Giang, Bac Lieu, Soc Trang, and Ca Mau. As noted by Huynh

Thanh Quang (2011, p. 34), studies of the Khmer people, particularly their culture, must be situated within the close relationship between religion, monks, and pagodas. This relationship constitutes a fundamental factor shaping the worldview, behavior, and communicative practices of the Khmer people.

In addition, language plays a crucial role in communication culture. Language not only conveys thoughts and emotions but also reflects cultural values and individual identity. Khmer belongs to the Mon–Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic language family, one of the major language families in Southeast Asia. Today, Khmer is widely used in daily communication within families, religious practices, and community interactions. Although Khmer contains a significant number of loanwords from Sanskrit and Pali, it does not originate from these languages. As noted by Thach Voi (Institute of Culture, 1998, pp. 37–39), Sanskrit and Pali were primarily incorporated to enrich the Khmer lexicon. Therefore, the Khmer vocabulary consists of both indigenous elements and borrowed terms, reflecting long-standing linguistic and cultural interactions.

#### 4.2. Cultural characteristics of Khmer communication

The system of speech etiquette in the communication practices of the Southern Khmer people is grounded in traditional cultural foundations and is profoundly shaped by social structure, kinship relations, and religious beliefs. These norms not only regulate linguistic behavior but also embody core values such as respect for hierarchy, the promotion of community cohesion, and the maintenance of harmony in social relationships.

Within the family context, speech etiquette is organized according to hierarchical principles, in which age and social status play decisive roles. Younger individuals, when communicating with elders, typically employ respectful forms of address and humble language to demonstrate politeness. In contrast, elders tend to use instructive and guiding language while maintaining emotional warmth and normative propriety. Speech acts such as greetings, requests, permissions, and expressions of gratitude are performed consistently and systematically, contributing to the maintenance of family cohesion.

In kinship relations, communicative norms are extended while still adhering to the principle of respecting seniority and yielding to elders. Occasions such as family gatherings, festivals, and commemorative rituals provide contexts in which ritualized forms of speech are prominently expressed. Kinship-based address terms are used in a structured manner, accompanied by polite intonation and respectful attitudes, thereby reinforcing both familial bonds and collective identity.

Within *phum* and *soc* (village communities), speech etiquette reflects strong communal values and social cohesion. Communication among community members is generally friendly and open, yet remains governed by shared cultural norms. In particular, during communal activities such as festivals and religious events, speech becomes more formalized, expressing respect toward the collective, community leaders, and cultural–spiritual values. The influence of Theravada Buddhism further shapes a communicative style characterized by calmness, moderation, and moral orientation.

#### 4.3. Discussion

##### 4.3.1. Communication Culture in Khmer Families

According to Pham Viet Long (2004, p. 14), the family is both a natural and social unit, formed through marriage, emotional bonds,

and kinship ties, serving functions such as reproduction, economic support, emotional fulfillment, and the preservation and transmission of cultural values. As such, family culture encompasses the totality of material and spiritual life activities created and maintained by family members across generations. These cultural imprints are reflected in family structures, functions, relationships, and daily practices, shaping behavioral norms and patterns of communication within the family and between the family and society.

The Khmer family is primarily based on monogamy, with relatively egalitarian relations between husband and wife. While each household typically lives independently within *phum* and *soc* communities, extended family arrangements involving multiple generations are also common. Traditionally, post-marital residence with the wife's family was widespread; however, contemporary Khmer couples have greater autonomy in choosing their place of residence. This flexibility reflects a kinship system that is not strictly patriarchal and facilitates the expansion of social and familial networks.

Family relationships among the Khmer exhibit a dual structure. Although the husband is often regarded as the head of the household, particularly in external affairs such as agricultural production and social relations, decision-making within the family tends to be shared. Women play a central role in managing household finances, childcare, and domestic responsibilities, while also actively participating in agricultural labor. Major family decisions, including property transactions, marriage arrangements, and religious activities, are typically made through mutual agreement between husband and wife (Nguyen Khac Canh, 1998, p. 86). This relative gender equality is further reflected in property ownership and inheritance practices, where both spouses have rights to personal and shared assets, and children, regardless of gender, have equal inheritance rights.

In contemporary Khmer families, patterns of decision-making vary. In some traditional households, the husband retains a leading role, although decisions are often made with input from other members. In others, especially among younger families, women may assume a more prominent decision-making role, particularly when they contribute significantly to the household economy. In dual-income families, decision-making is typically collaborative, reflecting increasing gender equality and shared responsibility.

Overall, authority within Khmer families is generally associated with adult members who contribute most to the household economy, whether male or female. While children are encouraged to express opinions, they are expected to respect and follow parental decisions. Instances in which children assume primary decision-making roles remain relatively rare.

##### 4.3.2. Communication Culture in Khmer *Phum* and *Soc* Communities

In terms of social organization, the Southern Khmer have developed a distinctive and relatively stable community structure characterized by a dual system of governance that integrates social and religious dimensions. This system, which exhibits features similar to traditional rural communes, reflects both hierarchical organization and a high degree of communal equality. Traditionally, Khmer settlements are organized into two primary forms: *phum* and *soc*. A *soc* typically consists of a larger settlement located on elevated land, encompassing several smaller *phum*,

which are residential clusters formed primarily through kinship and marital ties.

Community management within *soc* is based on the integration of customary practices, cultural norms, and the contemporary legal framework. Although *phum* and *soc* do not correspond exactly to formal administrative units, they continue to function as important socio-cultural structures, maintaining a significant degree of autonomy despite changes in the broader political system. This settlement pattern, combined with environmental and social factors, has contributed to shaping a communal ethos characterized by simplicity, flexibility, and strong interpersonal cohesion.

Communication practices within Khmer communities reflect these organizational features. First, in matters concerning the community, men often play a prominent role in participating in meetings and making decisions, except in gender-specific organizations such as women's unions. Second, individuals with social prestige—such as monks, *achars* (religious assistants), *mevens* (group leaders), respected elders, and retired officials—hold significant influence in mobilizing community members, disseminating information, and guiding decision-making processes.

Community discussions and meetings are typically held at communal spaces such as hamlet offices or *sala ten* (satellite religious venues associated with pagodas), and occasionally at the homes of respected individuals or informal gathering places. These meetings emphasize collective participation, where community members openly discuss and debate issues before reaching a consensus. Final decisions are usually made by individuals responsible for specific areas of management, based on collective input.

In practice, community initiatives—such as environmental sanitation, infrastructure development, or religious activities—are often led by local leaders or religious figures and supported by community members. In cases where mobilization is challenging, respected figures are invited to engage directly with households to encourage participation. Their authority and moral standing within the community significantly enhance the effectiveness of such efforts.

Overall, communication culture in Khmer *phum* and *soc* communities reflects a combination of communal participation, respect for social hierarchy, and the influential role of religious and moral authority in maintaining social cohesion.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examines the communication culture of the Khmer people through two main domains: family and kinship relations, and community relations, including interactions among teachers and students, friends, villagers, and religious figures. Within the family, communication is characterized by strong emotional bonds and a sense of moral responsibility. The behavior and communication styles of elders serve as models for younger generations, shaping their personality and communicative conduct. Even in situations of disagreement, Khmer family members tend to maintain a calm, respectful, and culturally appropriate manner of interaction.

In *phum* and *soc* communities, communication is guided by humanistic values that emphasize respect, solidarity, and the importance of interpersonal relationships. These values are reflected in interactions with peers, teachers, community members,

and religious authorities, reinforcing a strong sense of social cohesion and cultural identity.

However, the processes of urbanization, industrialization, and globalization pose significant challenges to the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural values, including communication practices. Maintaining normative standards of communication culture is therefore not only the responsibility of individuals and families but also a broader social responsibility shared by the entire community.

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