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Review Article

Moral Conceptions and Practices among the Khmer in Tri Ton Commune, An Giang Province under the Influence of Theravada Buddhism: Empirical Findings and Policy Implications

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Abstract

The article presents a comprehensive empirical study using a mixed-method research approach on moral ideas and lived experiences of the ethnic Khmer community in Tri Ton Commune, An Giang Province, Vietnam, a culturally unique borderland where Theravada Buddhism is still deeply embedded in everyday life, family and community governance. This study seeks to specifically address the extent of normative consensus across key ethical dimensions, differences across demographic and social groupings, the degree of consonance between espoused belief and observable conduct, and the complex interaction of forces that both maintain or challenge moral continuity in the face of rapid socio-economic change, using an institutional framework that examines the transmission of values. The data are derived from a representative stratified random survey of 200 Khmer adults aged 18–75 in six hamlets, 12 in-depth interviews with monks, pagoda leaders, elders, parents, and younger residents, and sustained participant observation of religious ceremonies, family gatherings, and communal work activities. The results show very high agreement across all Buddhist-derived moral dimensions: accountability under Kamma, compassion and non-harm, generosity, adherence to the Five Precepts, dedication to self-cultivation, and collective harmony all have mean scores above 4.3/5.0. There is consistent strength of agreement across age cohorts, although younger respondents report significantly less frequent attendance at pagodas and participation in the community. The study finds a persistent but narrowing gap between professed values and everyday practice, primarily driven by labor migration, economic pressure and changing family living arrangements rather than rejection of values themselves. Long-term parental and grandparental teachings, respect for monastic authority and the persistent norm of collective mutual aid are key stabilizing factors. The paper closes with practical, focused suggestions for improving community-based moral education, protecting adaptive cultural institutions, and fostering inclusive development that builds on rather than undermines ethical heritage in the multi-ethnic Southwestern borderlands of Vietnam.

Keywords: Theravada Buddhism; moral conceptions; lived practice; Khmer ethnic group; Tri Ton; An Giang; empirical study; intergenerational transmission; cultural resilience.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Moral life is not merely a matter of abstract ideals, inherited teachings, or written codes. It is finally a matter of what communities together affirm to be right, how individuals judge their own and others' actions, and how those shared judgments are sustained in daily circumstances across generations. One of the most persistent and significant concerns in the sociology of religion, particularly during periods of rapid social transformation when established routines and familiar structures are disrupted, is the gap between what is believed in principle and what is practiced in reality, between doctrine and lived experience (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 45; Giddens, 2006, p. 343). For the Khmer community of the Mekong Delta, Theravada Buddhism provides the comprehensive ethical framework that has long guided family relations, social exchange, conflict resolution, and collective identity; yet precisely how this framework operates in practice, the degree to which it is shared across different age,

education, and residential groups, and the extent to which it is being reshaped rather than replaced by modernization pressures remain questions requiring systematic, place-based empirical examination (Nguyen Hieu, 2016, p. 141; Nguyen Van Kiem, 2018, p. 97).

Tri Ton Commune, located in the renowned Seven Mountains border region of An Giang Province, offers a uniquely illuminating and timely site for such inquiry. With approximately 47% Khmer residents alongside Kinh and Hoa neighbours, and fourteen active Theravada pagodas serving as visible community landmarks, the commune stands as one of the most vibrant and concentrated centres of Khmer religious and cultural life in Vietnam. At the same time, like many rural areas across the country, it faces mounting and interrelated pressures: large-scale youth labour migration to urban centres and industrial zones, the steady penetration of market-oriented values and livelihoods, the rapid expansion of digital media and social connectivity, and a gradual but discernible shift away from traditional collective labour patterns and extended-family living arrangements. These transformations are widely believed in both scholarly and public discourse to weaken traditional value systems, yet empirical evidence regarding their actual impact on moral consciousness, intergenerational transmission, and daily conduct remains limited and often contradictory (Pham Minh Hac, 2018, p. 42). It remains unclear whether shared values are genuinely eroding, adapting their outward forms while retaining core commitments, or persisting beneath visible changes in ritual observance and public participation.

This paper addresses three specific, interrelated research questions designed to clarify these dynamics:

1. What is the level of consensus regarding Theravada-influenced moral norms across six core ethical dimensions among Khmer residents in Tri Ton Commune, and what does this reveal about the community's shared ethical foundation?
2. How do moral conceptions and reported practices vary systematically by age cohort, level of educational attainment, frequency of religious participation, and residential or employment status, especially work away from the commune--and what do these variations reveal about the mechanisms and vulnerabilities of intergenerational transmission?
3. What are the main challenges and enabling conditions, including economic restructuring, migration, digital influence, family cohesion and institutional support, that affect the ongoing practice of traditional moral values in modern community life, and what directions and interventions can help to strengthen continuity in the face of change?

Theoretically, the study is based on the sociological distinction between moral belief and moral behavior. There is an awareness that values may be retained in individual and collective consciousness, while their external expression and the institutional structures supporting them are changing (Keyes, 1983, p. 519). Moreover, it uses the concept of cultural resilience, a process by which fundamental commitments are maintained through adaptive re-expression rather than static preservation, avoiding the simplistic assumption that modernization always diminishes tradition. Methodologically, this study utilizes a convergent parallel mixed-method design conducted between January 2025 and February 2026, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interview and observational findings to capture both measurable patterns and lived meanings. The quantitative component comprises a structured questionnaire administered to 200 Khmer adults selected through stratified random sampling across all six hamlets of the commune, ensuring representation of varying residential proximity to pagodas, main road access, and demographic profiles. The instrument measured agreement with carefully phrased moral statements derived from core Theravada ethical tenets using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree; reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82, indicating strong internal consistency across survey items. Qualitative data were collected through 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews with purposively selected informants including four Buddhist monks, three pagoda leaders (Achar), two community elders, two parents and one younger resident about intergenerational change, perceived challenges, sustaining practices and hopes for the future. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were conducted in either Khmer or Vietnamese, depending on preference. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded thematically. These were supplemented by participant observation through attendance at major religious ceremonies, weekly Dhamma talks, family gatherings and communal work activities. All research procedures were formally approved by the Scientific Council of An Giang University. Informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study.

II. CONTENT

2.1 Levels of Consensus: Core Moral Dimensions

Survey results demonstrate exceptionally high agreement across all measured ethical dimensions, with every item recording a mean score above 4.3/5.0 and over 90% of respondents expressing agreement or strong agreement in nearly every instance. These findings indicate that Theravada-derived moral values remain deeply embedded, widely shared, and collectively affirmed in the consciousness of the Tri Ton Khmer community. The following subsections examine each dimension in detail, elaborating the meaning of the findings alongside supporting qualitative insights.

2.1.1 Personal Responsibility and the Law of *Kamma*

The most frequently accepted and consistently supported aspect examined is the belief that individuals are ultimately responsible for their own actions and the consequences of these actions in accordance with the Theravada concept of Kamma. The statement "Each person must take responsibility for their own actions" was rated at an average of 4.79/5.00 with 78.5% of respondents choosing "Strongly Agree" and none choosing "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree." Closely related, the statement, 'One can transform one's life through self-cultivation and right effort' averaged 4.59/5.00, with 97.5% agreeing or strongly agreeing. These figures confirm that *Kamma* is understood not as fatalistic resignation or passive acceptance of fate, but as an empowering principle of moral agency and personal effort: what one does matters, and one's future is shaped by one's own choices rather than determined by external forces beyond control (Rahula, 1974, p. 33; Gombrich, 1988, p. 68).

This interpretation was repeatedly confirmed in interviews. One monk explained: *"Many people think karma means accepting hardship without trying to change it. That is not what the Buddha taught. He taught that if you plant good seeds, you get good fruit. If your life is difficult now, it is because of past actions—and you can begin planting better seeds today"* (In-depth Interview NV07, 2026). Even among respondents aged 18–30, agreement with both statements remained above 94%, suggesting this foundational worldview persists remarkably intact across generations despite changing livelihoods and exposure to alternative value frameworks. This finding challenges the assumption that younger generations necessarily abandon traditional religious worldviews; rather, they may carry them forward alongside new experiences and opportunities.

2.1.2 Compassion, Non-Harm, and Generosity

Statements that displayed outward virtues such as concern for others, avoidance of harm, and active generosity received near-unanimous endorsement, reflecting the deeply communal nature of Khmer ethical life. "Living ethically first means not causing harm to others" was rated in perfect agreement (100%), with a mean of 4.75/5.00, and "Forgiveness is necessary when someone who has made a mistake sincerely repents" averaged 4.78/5.00. The practices of generosity, such as giving regularly to the pagoda, helping households in need and doing communal labour without expecting immediate reward, were reported as "often" or "always" by 92.0% of the respondents. These findings are consistent with the importance of Karuna (compassion) and Dana (generosity) in the social ethics of Theravada. These findings align with the centrality of *Karuna* (compassion) and *Dana* (generosity) in Theravada social ethics, where giving is regarded not as optional charity or personal kindness alone, but as a fundamental spiritual practice, a social obligation, and a way of strengthening community bonds (Harvey, 2013, p. 79; Nguyen Hieu, 2016, p. 102).

The qualitative accounts provide more detail on these figures. Generosity was not just giving money but sharing food, helping out when not asked, speaking kindly and not gossiping – everyday acts which build trust and mutual support. As one elder explained "We do not only give to the monks. We give to the neighbor who has no rice; we help carry the load of the aged; we speak well of the absent. That is true generosity" (In-depth Interview NV03, 2026). 3. This wide understanding implies that although financial giving may be limited by economic constraints for some households, the underlying value of care is widely understood and enacted in accessible ways by others.

2.1.3 The Five Precepts and Social Conduct

Endorsement of the Five Precepts as a shared code of personal and social conduct was uniformly high across all indicators: honesty and truthfulness in speech and dealings (mean = 4.78/5.00), self-restraint and controlling anger in interactions (mean = 4.71/5.00), and the belief that adhering to moral precepts cultivates genuine self-mastery and inner peace (mean = 4.70/5.00). Notably, when asked whether moral integrity and good character are "more important than material success and wealth," 89.5% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed a striking result in an era often described as increasingly materialistic. This finding underscores the continued primacy of moral standing over economic gain within community valuation, a distinction that may grow increasingly significant as market influences deepen and competition for livelihood opportunities intensifies (Keown, 2005, p. 41).

In Tri Ton, each precept has a social meaning of definite value. Business and neighborly relations require truthfulness; controlling anger prevents conflicts from escalating; avoiding intoxication protects family stability and public order. Lying, drunkenness, or taking unfair advantage are not merely personal failings, but breaches of shared trust, and so draw quiet but consistent communal disapproval. The precepts are not restrictive rules, but the practical basis of peaceful coexistence.

2.1.4 Collective Harmony and Interpersonal Relations

The primacy of community cohesion and mutual respect over individual interest was strongly affirmed: "Protecting community harmony is more important than winning personal arguments or asserting one's own rights" scored 4.60/5.00, with 98% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. Such widespread consensus supports the continued functioning of hamlet-based conflict resolution through mediation, apology, and reconciliation rather than adversarial complaint or formal legal dispute a practice frequently described as distinctive and precious in Khmer social life (Nguyen Van Kiem, 2018, p. 91).

When conflicts do arise, the preferred approach is to restore relationship rather than assign blame. One *Achar* (pagoda leader) explained: *"If two families quarrel, we do not ask who is right. We ask: how can they live together again? Harmony is the prize"* (In-depth Interview NV05, 2026). This orientation toward reconciliation over victory reflects the deep influence of Buddhist values of non-harm, patience, and interconnectedness, and remains a vital resource for social stability in the commune.

2.2 Variations across Demographic Groups

While broad consensus unites the community across all core ethical dimensions, meaningful and instructive differences emerge when results are disaggregated by age cohort, educational attainment, frequency of religious participation, and current place of residence or employment. These variations are not indications of moral decline in any simple sense; rather, they offer important clues regarding the shifting dynamics, mechanisms, and vulnerabilities of intergenerational value transmission.

2.2.1 Age Cohorts: Belief vs. Participation

The most consistent and significant pattern is the increasing divergence between normative belief and behavioral practice among younger respondents aged 18-30 years. Agreement with core moral statements was consistently high across all dimensions, over 90%, showing that the values themselves are still accepted and internalized. But attendance at pagodas dropped significantly. "Once a month or less" was the response of 62.3% of respondents aged 18–30, compared to only 12.7% of those 51 and over. Similarly, only 41.5% of the younger respondents reported "frequent" or "regular" participation in collective community work such as repairing roads, maintaining pagodas and helping with funerals, compared with 89.2% of the elders.

One young resident in nearby Chau Doc explained the practical constraint behind this gap. "*I still believe in the teachings respect parents, do not harm others, be honest, help when you can but I work six days a week, sometimes seven. I can't go to the village for every full moon day or for every work session. I send money home, I call, I come for the big festivals but I am not there every evening like my father was"* (In-depth Interview NV11, 2026). This pattern indicates a shift, not a rejection: values remain intact intellectually and emotionally, but the ritual and communal structures that have traditionally reinforced and deepened them – daily presence, shared labor, regular instruction – are becoming less accessible to younger generations, with altered livelihood patterns.

2.2.2 Education and Residence

Formal educational attainment showed no negative correlation with moral agreement; respondents with higher levels of schooling expressed comparable or slightly stronger endorsement of Buddhist ethical principles than those with less education. This counters the common assumption that modern education inevitably erodes religiously grounded values or replaces traditional frameworks with secular individualism (Weber, 1978, p. 1210). Instead, educated residents often articulated values in more reflective, explicitly reasoned terms—drawing connections between traditional teachings and broader social responsibilities such as environmental protection, inter-ethnic solidarity, and inclusive development.

However, those working temporarily or permanently outside the commune reported significantly lower frequency of home-based moral instruction and reduced confidence in their ability to pass traditional values to their own children—a concern cited by 71.4% of migrant respondents. Physical separation from parents, grandparents, and the local community removes children from the daily examples, conversations, and shared activities through which values are most naturally and effectively transmitted. As one mother working in a provincial industrial zone observed: *"I tell my child to be respectful, to be kind, to study hard—but I am not there to show her every day. My words are weaker than my presence would be"* (In-depth Interview NV10, 2026). This diminished opportunity for intergenerational modelling represents the most substantial vulnerability identified in the study.

2.3 The Belief–Practice Gap: Challenges and Facilitators

The most significant finding to emerge from the combined survey and interview data is the existence of a modest but real and widely recognized gap between what community members affirm as right and what they report seeing or doing in daily life. Critically, this gap is not driven by rejection of the values themselves; it arises from structural and situational pressures that constrain how values can be expressed and practiced. Understanding these pressures—and the resources that continue to sustain practice despite them—is essential for designing effective support and preservation strategies.

2.3.1 Principal Challenges Identified

Respondents consistently ranked three interrelated factors as most influential in weakening traditional moral practice and transmission:

Rank	Challenge	Percentage identifying as "major influence"
1	Economic pressure prioritizing income and livelihood over communal obligations and traditional practices.	76.5%

Rank	Challenge	Percentage identifying as "major influence"
2	Youth labour migration and reduced family time together, especially across generations.	71.0%
3	Digital media and social networks introducing alternative values, lifestyles, and standards of conduct.	63.5%

Qualitative accounts elaborate the human dimension behind these statistics. One elder summarized the first two challenges together: *"The young do not become bad; they go away to earn a living because there is not enough land here. They send money, this is good, this is how they care but they cannot sit with their children in the evening and teach them as we did. They cannot attend every ceremony or help their neighbour repair the roof. Necessity pulls them away"* (In-depth Interview NV03, 2026). Economic necessity is not moral abandonment; it is a practical constraint that reshapes the circumstances within which values must be expressed.

Digital influence operates differently and was described with greater ambivalence. Several respondents noted that exposure to diverse lifestyles and values online can erode the taken-for-granted status of traditional standards, making them one option among many rather than the shared, unquestioned foundation of social life. However, others also recognized opportunity: *"The phone brings bad examples, yes—but it also brings the Dhamma. We can listen to sermons from anywhere; our children can see how Khmer live in other places. It is not all bad; it depends how we use it"* (In-depth Interview NV06, 2026). Technology is not inherently destructive; it is a new space where values must be actively taught, demonstrated, and lived.

3.2 Sustaining Factors: What Remains Strong

Despite these acknowledged challenges, three stabilizing forces were consistently identified across interviews and open-ended survey responses as preserving moral continuity:

- Parental and grandparental instruction: Rated the strongest influence on personal moral formation (mean = 4.82/5.00), surpassing pagoda teaching, peer example, and school education combined. Even when separated by distance, parents and grandparents continue to teach through phone calls, messages, holiday gatherings, and the simple reminder to "remember who you are and how we live."
- Monastic and pagoda influence: 87.0% of respondents reported listening to Dhamma sermons at least occasionally; many younger people specifically cited seasonal visits, merit-making opportunities, and participation in temporary ordination (*Buos*) as moments of moral reconnection and personal renewal. The pagoda remains a touchstone even for those who cannot attend frequently.
- Community expectation and mutual aid: Mutual aid during festivals, funerals, illness and hardship remains a visible, lived demonstration of collective responsibility that no foreign influence has totally replaced. When a family is struggling, neighbors still come together – values of care, solidarity and interdependence put into action.

These results indicate resilience, not decline. Migration and distance put strain on the transmission system, but its core institutions – family, pagoda, community – still function, are valued and adaptive.

2.4 Implications and Directions for Response

The findings point to several practical measures for sustaining moral values within the Khmer community. Although many traditional values remain widely accepted, the ways in which people participate in religious and community activities have changed. Therefore, efforts should focus on making participation more accessible, adapting existing practices to current social conditions, and maintaining the role of families, pagodas and local communities in passing these values on to younger generations. Rather than seeking to bring back earlier ways of life, it is more important to build on the resources that the community already has.

First, pagoda-based moral education must adapt to evolving schedules and lifestyles by offering flexible session times, recorded and digital content for those away for work, weekend and holiday programs, and youth-oriented activities that accommodate modern work patterns without compromising core teachings. Second, family-based transmission needs to be recognized and practically supported: cultural events that foreground intergenerational storytelling, the practice and meaning of temporary ordination, and respectful communication between age groups should be expanded and promoted as community assets. Third, hamlet-level mutual aid networks should be strengthened and renewed: linking traditional cooperative practices—shared labor, resource pooling, assistance to vulnerable households—with contemporary rural development projects can align economic progress with moral solidarity, demonstrating that development and heritage can reinforce rather than oppose one another. Finally, policy should support cultural preservation alongside economic opportunity: infrastructure that facilitates affordable, frequent travel between workplaces and home communities; digital connectivity that extends educational and cultural outreach; and inclusive development planning that consults pagodas and

community leaders directly—all these sustain family-based value transmission without requiring residents to choose between livelihood and identity.

As one monk summarized the community's guiding vision: *"Development changes how we live; it builds our houses, it improves our roads. It does not need to change who we are. We can walk the new road carrying our values with us"* (In-depth Interview NV07, 2026).

VI. CONCLUSION

This systematic, mixed-method study has provided comprehensive empirical evidence regarding moral conceptions and lived practices among the Khmer community in Tri Ton Commune, An Giang Province. The findings demonstrate clearly and consistently that Theravada Buddhist values—centred on personal responsibility through *Kamma*, compassion and non-harm, generosity, honesty and self-restraint, collective harmony, and lifelong self-cultivation—remain widely, deeply, and enduringly endorsed across all demographic groups surveyed, with agreement levels above 90% on nearly every measured indicator. These values are not relics fading from memory; they remain the living ethical foundation of community life. At the same time, a growing divergence between stated belief and observable participation is evident, particularly among younger residents, driven primarily by labour migration, economic pressure, and reduced time available for traditional communal and family-centred activities. Importantly, this gap reflects changed circumstances and practical constraints rather than rejection of the values themselves; the ethical core remains intact, but the structures through which values are daily expressed and transmitted are under strain.

Three institutions stand out as decisive in maintaining moral continuity: the family, where moral instruction begins earliest, carries greatest authority, and continues across distance; the pagoda and monastic order, which preserve the teachings, model disciplined life, and provide periodic reconnection; and the hamlet community, where shared values are most tangibly lived through mutual aid and reconciliation. Strengthening these interconnected institutions—adapting their methods to contemporary circumstances while preserving their essential purpose—represents the most effective, culturally respectful, and sustainable path forward. Preserving traditional morality is not an obstacle to development; it is a vital resource for inclusive, harmonious, and sustainable development in Vietnam's multi-ethnic Southwestern border regions (Pham Minh Hac, 2018, p. 58).

Future research should extend this inquiry across additional Khmer communities in the Mekong Delta, comparing rural and urban settings, migrant and resident populations, and tracking these dynamics over time. Understanding how values adapt as circumstances change—and which adaptations strengthen rather than dilute cultural vitality—will remain essential to community well-being, social cohesion, and inclusive development.

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