

# The Harmonization of Traditional and Modern Values in the Life Philosophy of the Khmer Community in Southern Vietnam

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36348/jaep.2025.v09i11.005>

| Received: 12.09.2025 | Accepted: 07.11.2025 | Published: 10.11.2025

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## Abstract

This study looks at the living philosophy of the Khmer minority in Southern Vietnam, with an emphasis on how traditional ethical frameworks interact with contemporary social transformations. The study uses Theravāda Buddhist principles, communal activities, and philosophical analysis to examine how essential qualities like compassion (*karuṇā*), mindfulness (*sati*), and wisdom (*paññā*) continue to influence moral behavior and social cohesiveness. The study also looks at how modernization, such as education, economic development, and digital media, influences the adaption and reinterpretation of these ideals. Using a hermeneutic and dialectical method, the analysis shows that the Khmer community engages in a dynamic process of value harmonization, combining ancestral wisdom with modern knowledge and practices while maintaining ethical continuity. This research contributes to moral philosophy and intercultural ethics by illustrating a model of ethical resilience and contextualized universality, highlighting how local cultural traditions can adapt creatively to global changes while maintaining philosophical coherence. The findings have practical implications for cultural preservation, education, and community development, emphasizing the role of ritual, intergenerational dialogue, and ethical praxis in sustaining moral identity amidst social change.

**Keywords:** Khmer community, Southern Vietnam, life philosophy, Buddhist ethics, value harmonization, modernization, intercultural ethics.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The philosophical study of value harmonization in the life philosophy of the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam offers a meaningful insight into the ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity within Southeast Asian thought. The Khmer people, one of the oldest ethno-cultural groups in the Mekong Delta, possess a worldview deeply intertwined with Theravāda Buddhist philosophy, communal ethics, and agrarian cosmology. Their moral universe is structured around the principle of balance (*samatā*), which governs both the spiritual and social dimensions of life. However, the rapid transformation brought about by modernization and globalization has placed this equilibrium under pressure, challenging the traditional foundations of Khmer ethical consciousness (Nguyen, 2018, pp. 45–47).

Over the past few decades, modernization has reshaped the socio-cultural landscape of the Mekong Delta. Educational expansion, digital communication, and the influence of market economies have altered modes of living, patterns of work, and ethical values

within the Khmer community. While traditional institutions such as *wat* (monasteries) and *phum* (villages) remain central to communal identity, the younger generation increasingly negotiates between religious norms and modern aspirations. Philosophically, this situation reveals a dynamic process of value transformation, in which inherited Buddhist moral frameworks confront secular ideals of autonomy, rationality, and material progress (Taylor, 2016, pp. 211–214). The coexistence of these tendencies raises a fundamental question: how can the Khmer maintain cultural identity and moral integrity amid the forces of modernization?

Existing studies on the Khmer people have examined the subject from a variety of disciplinary angles, including anthropology, sociology, and religion studies. Ebihara's *Svay: A Khmer Village in Cambodia* (1968) and Taylor's *Goddess on the Rise* (2004) offer detailed ethnographic portrayals of Khmer religion and social transformation. Scholars in Vietnam, like Huynh Ngọc Thu (2019, pp. 98-101) and Lê Lê Huong (2020,

pp. 55-58), have explored how Khmer traditions might be adapted to national development objectives. However, few works have addressed the subject of harmonization as a philosophical problem that is, the dialectical link between the permanence of moral standards and the flux of social circumstances. This gap necessitates a philosophical inquiry based on the ontology of tradition and the epistemology of transformation.

In philosophical terms, “harmonization” refers not merely to coexistence but to an integrative process through which opposing values are reconciled within a higher synthesis. Drawing on Hegel’s dialectical conception of development and Buddhist notions of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), this paper understands harmonization as a creative mediation between constancy and transformation. Tradition, in this sense, is not static; it is a living continuity that evolves through reflective adaptation. The Khmer life philosophy thus embodies what Charles Taylor (1991, p. 68) calls “the moral space of modernity”—a field where individuals reinterpret inherited norms in light of new ethical horizons.

The theoretical framework for this study is intercultural philosophy, which aims to explain universal principles via the lens of specific cultural experiences (Mall, 2000, pp. 34-37). The Khmer worldview, influenced by Theravāda Buddhism, agrarian collectivism, and ritual symbolism, offers an opportunity to explore how traditional principles intersect with global modernity. This study takes a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, examining Khmer moral notions, ritual practices, and societal developments as manifestations of fundamental philosophical processes. The hermeneutic dimension allows for the interpretation of meanings inherent in cultural forms, whereas the phenomenological method discloses how these meanings are perceived and lived by community members (Ricoeur, 1981, pp. 43-46).

Methodologically, the study combines textual analysis of Buddhist canonical sources (such as the *Dhammapada* and *Vinaya Pitaka*) with interpretive readings of ethnographic and historical resources about the Khmer in southern Vietnam. The goal is not to create a descriptive ethnology, but rather to discover the philosophical logic of value harmonization that underpins Khmer moral behavior. The Khmer life philosophy combines ancient Buddhist principles of compassion (*karuṇā*), wisdom (*paññā*), and mindfulness (*sati*) with modern ideals like as autonomy, education, and social participation.

This study also situates the Khmer experience within the broader debate on modernity and moral transformation in non-Western societies. Philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre (1984, pp. 222-225) and Charles Taylor (1991, pp. 59-63) have emphasized the fragmentation of moral traditions in the face of modern

individualism. Yet, in the case of the Khmer, modernization does not necessarily entail moral disintegration; instead, it invites a process of reflective adaptation. The Khmer model of harmonization exemplifies a moral resilience grounded in Buddhist ontology—the view that all phenomena are interdependent, transient, yet capable of achieving balance through mindfulness and ethical cultivation.

Therefore, this paper pursues three main objectives. First, to elucidate the philosophical foundations of Khmer traditional values as articulated in their religious and communal life. Second, to analyze how modernization has transformed ethical consciousness and everyday practices. Third, to propose a theoretical model of harmonization that bridges the ontological continuity of tradition with the epistemological demands of modernity.

Through this inquiry, the paper contributes to contemporary intercultural philosophy by demonstrating how local traditions can generate universal insights into the nature of moral transformation. It argues that the Khmer life philosophy represents not a nostalgic preservation of the past but a reflective, self-renewing engagement with the future—a form of living tradition that embodies both stability and change.

## II. CONTERN

### 1. Theoretical framework

The philosophical basis of this study is based on the dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity, as defined through the concept of value harmonization. This harmonization cannot be interpreted as a simple social adaptation or cultural compromise in the case of Southern Vietnam's Khmer minority. It must be viewed as a philosophical synthesis in which several levels of meaning—religious, ethical, and existential—are dynamically intertwined. Such synthesis exemplifies what Gadamer (1975, pp. 281-284) refers to as the fusion of horizons, a hermeneutic process in which past and present intersect within the flux of knowing.

#### 1.1. Tradition as a Living Ontology

Tradition, in the Khmer philosophical world, is not a static repository of customs but a living ontology—a mode of being that sustains continuity through transformation. The Khmer worldview, shaped by Theravāda Buddhism, conceives existence as interdependent (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) and impermanent (*anicca*). In this metaphysical structure, the continuity of tradition does not rest on immutable doctrines but on the ongoing realization of moral truths through practice. As Ricoeur (1981, pp. 53-55) observes, tradition is “the mediation through which the past becomes meaningfully present.”

This ontological continuity is expressed through the Khmer communal ethos: the moral duty (*kamma-sammā*) toward family, temple, and society.

Every moral act contributes to sustaining the kammic order of harmony within the community. Therefore, when modernization introduces new values—individualism, competitiveness, rational efficiency—it is not perceived as purely external but as a challenge that demands reinterpretation within the ontological matrix of Buddhist ethics (Keown, 1992, pp. 41–43).

## 1.2. Modernity and the Crisis of Moral Fragmentation

Modernity, from a philosophical perspective, is marked by the fragmentation of moral horizons. As MacIntyre (1984, pp. 222–225) argues, the Enlightenment project displaced the teleological unity of moral life, producing isolated moral claims detached from communal traditions. Within the Khmer context, modernization has introduced this fragmentation through secular education, market rationality, and digital media, leading to a tension between the collective moral order and the pursuit of individual autonomy.

However, unlike the Western narrative of moral decline, the Khmer experience reveals a more dialectical pattern. Modernization does not entirely dissolve traditional moral frameworks; rather, it transforms them through selective assimilation. Young Khmer individuals, for instance, may value education and economic progress while remaining deeply committed to Buddhist precepts and rituals (Huynh, 2019, pp. 103–106). This dynamic corresponds to what Charles Taylor (1991, p. 74) calls the “re-embedding of moral sources”—the process through which modern subjects seek authenticity by reinterpreting inherited spiritual ideals.

## 1.3. Harmonization as a Dialectical Process

Harmonization, in philosophical terms, is not equivalent to compromise or balance. It is a dialectical synthesis—a transformative process that transcends contradictions through reflective mediation. Drawing on Hegel’s notion of *Aufhebung* (sublation), harmonization entails the preservation, negation, and elevation of values within a higher unity (Hegel, 1977, pp. 111–113). Applied to the Khmer context, this means that traditional and modern values are not mutually exclusive but co-constitutive moments of moral evolution.

### This dialectical harmonization occurs through several mediating practices:

1. Religious education in monasteries, which recontextualizes Buddhist ethics for modern youth.
2. Community rituals, where shared symbolic meanings reaffirm collective identity.
3. Civic engagement, in which Khmer individuals integrate moral compassion (*karuṇā*) with social responsibility in contemporary life.

Thus, harmonization represents the philosophical praxis of negotiating between moral

stability and ethical innovation. It echoes the Buddhist middle way (*majjhimā paṭipadā*), which avoids both moral rigidity and relativism, maintaining equilibrium through wisdom (*paññā*) and mindfulness (*sati*).

## 1.4. Intercultural Philosophy and Moral Universality

The Khmer situation adds significantly to worldwide discussions about moral plurality in terms of intercultural philosophy. Mall (2000, pp. 49–51) believes that intercultural conversation should not homogenize differences but rather highlight their shared capacity for universality. The Khmer philosophy of harmonization exhibits this dialogical universality by transforming Buddhist ontology into a framework for moral cooperation in a pluralistic society.

Moreover, the Khmer understanding of harmony resonates with Confucian and Aristotelian ethics, both of which emphasize virtue as the mean between extremes. Yet the Khmer approach differs by situating moral harmony not merely in rational moderation but in ontological compassion—the awareness of interbeing that guides moral conduct. This aligns with Thích Nhất Hạnh’s (1998, pp. 122–125) concept of “interbeing,” where harmony arises from the deep realization of mutual dependence among all beings.

## 1.5. Conceptual Model for Value Harmonization

Synthesizing these perspectives, the theoretical model proposed here conceives value harmonization as comprising three interrelated dimensions:

1. Ontological continuity – The persistence of core moral categories (e.g., compassion, mindfulness, gratitude) rooted in Buddhist metaphysics.
2. Epistemological mediation – The reinterpretation of these values through rational reflection and modern experience.
3. Ethical praxis – The lived realization of harmonization through community participation and moral action.

This tripartite structure allows a philosophical articulation of Khmer life philosophy as both historically grounded and open to transformation. It situates the Khmer experience within the broader horizon of global moral philosophy, demonstrating that tradition can serve not as a constraint but as a creative source for moral innovation.

## 2. Traditional value structures in khmer life philosophy

The traditional value structures of the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam are deeply rooted in Theravāda Buddhist ethics, communal norms, and agrarian cosmology. These structures provide the philosophical foundation for moral conduct, social cohesion, and personal flourishing. Understanding these values requires an examination of three interrelated

domains: religious ethics, communal life, and philosophical anthropology.

### 2.1. Buddhist Ethical Foundations

At the core of Khmer life philosophy lies the ethical framework derived from Theravāda Buddhism, which emphasizes moral cultivation (*sīla*), wisdom (*pañña*), and mindfulness (*sati*). The canonical texts, including the Dhammapada and Vinaya Pitaka, serve as normative guides for ethical behavior, outlining duties towards self, family, and society (Keown, 1992, pp. 41–45).

In the Khmer context, Buddhist ethics are not abstract prescriptions but practical guides embedded in daily life. Rituals such as almsgiving (*dāna*), merit-making (*puñña*), and seasonal festivals reinforce moral values, emphasizing compassion (*karuṇā*), generosity (*mettā*), and moderation. For instance, the Pchum Ben festival, which honors deceased ancestors, illustrates a moral cosmology in which individual actions are linked to collective welfare, illustrating the principle of moral interdependence (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) (Ebihara, 1968, pp. 127–130).

These practices reflect a philosophy of relational ethics, wherein the self is understood not in isolation but as part of a moral and cosmological network. Ethical life is thus inseparable from community participation, temple activities, and ritual observance, forming the ontological basis of Khmer morality.

### 2.2. Communal Ethos and Social Hierarchy

Complementing Buddhist ethics is the communal ethos, which structures interpersonal relations and social hierarchies within Khmer villages (*phum*). The village is both a social and moral institution, where norms are enforced not only through codified rules but through shared values, customs, and the authority of elders and monks (Taylor, 2004, pp. 153–157).

This communal philosophy emphasizes collective responsibility, mutual aid, and social harmony. Decision-making processes are typically consultative, reflecting a balance between hierarchy and egalitarianism. For example, the governance of communal irrigation systems, ritual organization, and conflict mediation illustrates how ethical principles are operationalized within the community (Nguyễn, 2018, pp. 52–55).

Philosophically, this ethos resonates with Aristotelian communitarian ethics, where the good life is inseparable from participation in the civic community. However, the Khmer adaptation integrates Buddhist impermanence and dependent origination, highlighting moral obligations as contextual and relational rather than absolute.

### 2.3. Philosophical Anthropology: Human Nature and Moral Development

The Khmer life philosophy also encompasses a distinct philosophical anthropology, which informs ethical expectations and social norms. Human beings are conceived as moral agents whose flourishing depends on cultivating virtue, mindfulness, and harmonious relationships. The self is understood in relational terms, emphasizing interdependence over individualism (Huỳnh, 2019, pp. 112–115).

In this anthropological framework, moral development is a lifelong process of ethical refinement through practice and reflection. Individuals are encouraged to internalize communal and religious values while exercising discernment (*pañña*) in adapting to changing circumstances. The cultivation of *sati* enables moral awareness, ensuring that actions align with both karmic consequences and communal well-being.

The integration of ritual, narrative, and pedagogy fosters an embodied ethical sensibility. Storytelling, proverbs, and temple teachings convey moral lessons, while participation in communal rites reinforces ethical behavior. This multi-layered moral education demonstrates a synthesis of philosophical reflection and lived experience, where abstract principles are inseparable from practical action (Lê, 2020, pp. 62–65).

### 2.4. Interrelation of Tradition and Everyday Life

The strength of Khmer traditional values lies in their inseparability from everyday life. Moral precepts are enacted in agricultural practices, family relations, and temple observances. This embeddedness ensures that ethical behavior is not merely a formal obligation but a lived reality. For instance, respecting elders, participating in ritual offerings, and observing monastic instructions exemplify the harmonious integration of spiritual and social life (Ebihara, 1968, pp. 132–135).

Moreover, these traditional structures provide a philosophical framework for resilience. In times of social change or economic hardship, the community draws upon shared ethical norms to maintain cohesion and moral clarity. This resilience illustrates a dialectical continuity, where tradition is preserved not as static inheritance but as a dynamic, adaptable moral system (Taylor, 2016, pp. 219–223).

### 2.5. Philosophical Significance

From a philosophical standpoint, Khmer traditional value structures exemplify a morally coherent ontology, in which ethics, social practice, and metaphysical understanding converge. This integrative system challenges modern assumptions that moral principles are either universal or entirely individualistic. Instead, the Khmer model demonstrates how local wisdom and philosophical reflection create a sustainable



ethical framework capable of negotiating the tensions between tradition and modernity.

In conclusion, the traditional value structures of the Khmer community provide the ontological and ethical foundation for their life philosophy. They embody a moral vision rooted in Theravāda Buddhism, communal solidarity, and relational anthropology, forming a resilient framework capable of interacting productively with the forces of modernization.

### 3. Modernization and value transformation

The Khmer community in Southern Vietnam has experienced significant socio-cultural transformations over the past several decades, influenced by modernization, education reforms, economic development, and global communication technologies. These changes have exerted profound effects on traditional life philosophy, challenging inherited ethical frameworks while simultaneously creating opportunities for creative adaptation and moral negotiation.

#### 3.1. Educational Influence

Education has played a pivotal role in shaping the cognitive and ethical horizons of younger Khmer generations. With the expansion of public schooling, formal curricula emphasize secular knowledge, scientific rationality, and civic responsibility, sometimes contrasting with traditional Buddhist teachings and communal norms (Huỳnh, 2019, pp. 118–121). While traditional moral instruction was embedded within monastery-based pedagogy (*sīla* and *paññā*), modern education introduces new epistemologies that value individual reasoning and critical thinking.

Philosophically, this shift illustrates an epistemological tension between inherited wisdom and newly acquired knowledge. Yet, rather than entirely displacing traditional ethics, education often serves as a mediating space, allowing youth to reinterpret Buddhist precepts in ways compatible with contemporary societal expectations (Lê, 2020, pp. 68–71). For example, the cultivation of mindfulness (*sati*) can be integrated with practices promoting self-discipline and academic diligence, demonstrating the adaptability of traditional moral structures.

#### 3.2. Technological and Media Impacts

The proliferation of digital media, including social networks and online information, has introduced alternative value frameworks that compete with local traditions. Exposure to globalized lifestyles, consumer culture, and Western ethical paradigms has prompted Khmer individuals to reconsider norms related to authority, social conduct, and material aspirations (Taylor, 2016, pp. 225–228).

This phenomenon aligns with Charles Taylor's (1991, pp. 74–77) notion of the "moral space of modernity," wherein individuals confront multiple, often

conflicting, value systems. Within the Khmer community, media exposure has created a form of ethical pluralism, compelling individuals to negotiate between traditional collectivist morality and modern individualistic tendencies. Importantly, these engagements are not passive absorption but active reinterpretation; young Khmer often integrate new knowledge while maintaining loyalty to communal and religious obligations.

#### 3.3. Economic and Social Transformation

Economic development in the Mekong Delta, including shifts from subsistence agriculture to market-oriented labor, has restructured social hierarchies and altered daily practices. Market participation encourages individual initiative, strategic planning, and mobility, which contrast with the historically cooperative and hierarchically organized village economy (Nguyễn, 2018, pp. 59–63).

From a philosophical perspective, such changes challenge traditional conceptions of virtue. The ethical emphasis on moderation (*sama*) and communal obligation is confronted by a competitive ethos emphasizing achievement and self-interest. Yet, rather than eroding morality, this tension often prompts reflective ethical adaptation. Khmer individuals reconcile these pressures through selective incorporation of modern practices while maintaining adherence to Buddhist virtues, illustrating the dialectical interplay between continuity and change.

#### 3.4. Intergenerational Negotiation

Modernization has accentuated intergenerational differences in value perception. Elders often emphasize adherence to ritual, respect for hierarchy, and moral continuity, whereas youth prioritize education, mobility, and technological competence (Ebihara, 1968, pp. 134–136). This tension generates a moral negotiation, wherein traditions are neither rigidly preserved nor entirely abandoned. Philosophically, it exemplifies the hermeneutic principle: understanding arises through dialogue and interpretation, allowing traditions to retain relevance in evolving social contexts (Ricoeur, 1981, pp. 61–64).

Ritual participation, temple affiliation, and communal festivals serve as mediating mechanisms, reinforcing ethical norms while accommodating modern aspirations. For instance, young adults may engage in professional activities while actively participating in merit-making ceremonies, demonstrating the dynamic synthesis of ethical continuity and adaptive innovation.

#### 3.5. Philosophical Implications

The transformation of Khmer values under modernization illustrates a critical philosophical insight: moral systems are neither static nor solely externally imposed. Instead, they are co-constructed through interaction between inherited wisdom, contemporary

experiences, and reflective interpretation. This aligns with Gadamer's (1975, pp. 289–292) concept of fusion of horizons, where the past and present co-constitute understanding.

Moreover, modernization reveals the Khmer capacity for resilient moral creativity. The principles of compassion (*karuṇā*), wisdom (*paññā*), and mindfulness (*sati*) persist, yet they are recontextualized to address contemporary ethical dilemmas—such as navigating market pressures, digital influence, and shifting social norms. This process embodies a philosophical model in which ethical continuity and social transformation are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory.

In conclusion, modernization has catalyzed significant value transformation within the Khmer community, reshaping education, economic behavior, media engagement, and intergenerational relationships. Yet, rather than eroding traditional life philosophy, these changes stimulate philosophical reflection and adaptive harmonization, highlighting the dynamic nature of Khmer moral culture. This sets the stage for the subsequent analysis of value harmonization, demonstrating how tradition and modernity are reconciled through deliberate ethical praxis.

#### 4. Philosophical synthesis: harmonization of values

The previous sections have examined the traditional value structures and the transformative influences of modernization on the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam. This section articulates a philosophical synthesis, conceptualizing the harmonization of values as a dynamic, dialectical process that integrates the ethical, social, and spiritual dimensions of Khmer life philosophy.

##### 4.1. Conceptualizing Harmonization

Harmonization in the Khmer context is not merely coexistence between old and new values but an active synthesis that preserves essential ethical principles while allowing for adaptation to contemporary circumstances. Drawing upon Hegelian dialectics, harmonization can be understood as a process of *Aufhebung* (sublation), wherein traditional and modern values are simultaneously preserved, negated, and elevated into a higher ethical unity (Hegel, 1977, pp. 111–113).

In Khmer philosophical terms, this synthesis is achieved by combining Buddhist moral precepts with modern social activities. According to Keown (1992, pp. 41–45), core virtues like compassion (*karuṇā*), mindfulness (*sati*), and wisdom (*paññā*) serve as ontological anchors, ensuring continuity during societal upheaval. Individual autonomy, educational success, and technical skill are selectively assimilated, resulting in a flexible and cohesive moral framework.

##### 4.2. Mechanisms of Harmonization

The harmonization process operates through several mediating mechanisms that facilitate ethical negotiation between tradition and modernity:

1. Religious and Moral Education: Monastery-based instruction adapts to contemporary educational demands, teaching both traditional Buddhist ethics and practical skills relevant to modern society. This enables youth to internalize core virtues while navigating new social and professional environments (Huỳnh, 2019, pp. 123–126).
2. Ritual and Communal Practices: Participation in festivals, merit-making ceremonies, and village rituals reinforces moral norms, creating spaces where traditional values are enacted and reinterpreted. For example, Pchum Ben remains a critical forum for ethical reflection, even as younger generations integrate modern understandings of time, organization, and social participation (Ebihara, 1968, pp. 134–136).
3. Intergenerational Dialogue: Ethical knowledge is transmitted through conversation, guidance, and negotiation between elders and youth, enabling a reflexive adaptation of moral norms. This dialogue represents a hermeneutic mediation, allowing traditions to remain relevant while accommodating contemporary ethical concerns (Ricoeur, 1981, pp. 61–64).
4. Ethical Praxis in Daily Life: Harmonization is realized through practical actions—family care, community involvement, professional conduct—that embody both traditional moral principles and modern competencies. Ethical praxis thus becomes the locus where philosophical reflection translates into lived experience.

##### 4.3. Philosophical Dimensions

Three philosophical dimensions characterize Khmer value harmonization:

1. Ontological Continuity: The ethical universe remains grounded in Buddhist ontology, emphasizing interdependence, impermanence, and relational selfhood. Moral principles are thus deeply embedded in the metaphysical understanding of life (Taylor, 2016, pp. 228–231).
2. Epistemological Mediation: Individuals actively reinterpret inherited values in light of modern knowledge, balancing communal expectations with personal judgment. This reflective process allows moral norms to evolve without losing their core meaning (Taylor, 1991, pp. 74–77).
3. Ethical Praxis: Moral understanding is actualized through action. Compassion, mindfulness, and social responsibility are expressed in both traditional contexts and

contemporary practices, demonstrating a dynamic integration of values.

#### 4.4. Dialectical Resolution of Conflicts

The process of harmonization also involves the resolution of ethical conflicts. Tensions between collectivist obligations and individual autonomy, ritual adherence and secular achievement, or spiritual devotion and economic participation are addressed through reflective adaptation. Drawing on Buddhist middle-way principles (*majjhimā paṭipadā*), the Khmer achieve balance without rigid adherence or relativistic compromise (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1998, pp. 122–125).

In practical terms, a young Khmer may pursue higher education or professional advancement while actively engaging in communal rituals and temple activities. This demonstrates that tradition and modernity are not oppositional but complementary, mutually informing ethical decisions and moral identity.

#### 4.5. Implications for Moral Philosophy

The Khmer model of value harmonization offers broader insights for moral philosophy and intercultural ethics. First, it challenges the notion that modernization inevitably undermines traditional moral systems. Instead, it illustrates that ethical resilience and creativity can emerge from the dialogical engagement between heritage and contemporary experience (Mall, 2000, pp. 49–51).

Second, it exemplifies a form of contextualized universalism, wherein particular cultural practices—rooted in Buddhist ontology and Khmer communal life—provide insights relevant to global debates on moral pluralism, ethical adaptation, and the reconciliation of tradition with modernity.

Finally, this synthesis emphasizes dynamic ethical continuity, suggesting that moral systems are best understood as living processes rather than static codes. Such an understanding aligns with contemporary philosophical perspectives on virtue ethics, hermeneutics, and intercultural dialogue, highlighting the relevance of Southeast Asian thought for global philosophical inquiry.

#### 4.6. Summary

In summary, the philosophical harmonization of values within the Khmer community reflects a deliberate integration of traditional and modern ethical frameworks. It is characterized by ontological continuity, epistemological mediation, and ethical praxis. The process is facilitated by education, ritual, intergenerational dialogue, and daily practice, allowing Khmer individuals to navigate the challenges of modernization while preserving moral coherence. This dynamic synthesis underscores the philosophical sophistication of Khmer life philosophy and provides a

model for understanding how communities can sustain ethical vitality in rapidly changing social contexts.

### III. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the life philosophy of the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam, highlighting the dynamic harmonization of traditional and modern values. Through an analysis of Buddhist ethical principles, communal practices, and philosophical anthropology, the research demonstrates how the Khmer navigate the tensions of modernization without losing moral coherence or cultural identity.

The Khmer life philosophy is grounded in Theravāda Buddhist ethics, emphasizing compassion (*karuṇā*), mindfulness (*sati*), and wisdom (*paññā*). These values form the ontological foundation of moral life, guiding individual behavior and social relations. At the same time, the community exhibits remarkable adaptive capacity, integrating modern influences such as formal education, technological exposure, and economic mobility. Rather than displacing traditional values, these forces act as catalysts for ethical reflection and creative adaptation, demonstrating the resilience and flexibility of Khmer moral culture (Huỳnh, 2019, pp. 123–126; Taylor, 2016, pp. 228–231).

A key finding of this study is the identification of harmonization as a philosophical process. Harmonization entails more than coexistence; it involves dialectical synthesis where tradition is preserved, reinterpreted, and elevated to meet contemporary ethical demands. Mediating mechanisms such as religious education, communal rituals, intergenerational dialogue, and everyday praxis facilitate this integration, enabling Khmer individuals to maintain moral integrity while engaging meaningfully with modern life (Ricoeur, 1981, pp. 61–64; Hegel, 1977, pp. 111–113).

From a theoretical perspective, the Khmer experience offers significant insights for moral philosophy and intercultural ethics. It challenges the assumption that modernization inevitably leads to moral erosion, demonstrating instead that communities can sustain ethical continuity through reflexive adaptation. Moreover, the Khmer model exemplifies contextualized universalism, showing that local moral wisdom can contribute to broader philosophical discussions on moral pluralism, virtue ethics, and intercultural dialogue (Mall, 2000, pp. 49–51).

Practically, this study underscores the importance of preserving cultural heritage while fostering ethical adaptability. Policy-makers, educators, and community leaders can draw upon these insights to design educational programs, cultural initiatives, and community projects that reinforce ethical values and cultural identity, even amidst social change. The findings also highlight the role of intergenerational engagement

and ritual practice as vital mechanisms for transmitting ethical knowledge and sustaining communal cohesion.

In conclusion, the Khmer life philosophy represents a living tradition—an integrative moral framework capable of negotiating the complex interactions between past and present, tradition and modernity. It embodies a model of moral resilience that is both locally grounded and philosophically sophisticated, offering valuable lessons for understanding the dynamics of ethical transformation in multicultural and rapidly modernizing societies. Future research may explore comparative studies with other Southeast Asian communities, examining how distinct cultural and religious traditions articulate similar processes of value harmonization in response to global modernity.

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