

# The Role and Authority of Abbot Monks in Southern Theravada Buddhist Temples in Reviving the Sen Dolta Festival of the Khmer People in Southeast Vietnam

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## Abstract

*Sen Dolta is one of the quintessential traditional festivals of the Khmer people in Southeast Vietnam as well as the Mekong Delta – Southwest Vietnam. The festival reflects many distinctive features: from customs, beliefs, to various forms of art, and even the communal relationships of the Khmer people. After a period of interruption due to wars and unrest, the festival has been restored in recent years. However, due to the unique natural conditions, historical and social circumstances, alongside similarities, the Sen Dolta festival of the Khmer in Southeast Vietnam has transformed and developed distinct cultural characteristics compared to the Khmer in other regions. Based on Max Weber's theoretical perspective on power and combined with ethnographic fieldwork methods, this article presents the unique cultural features of the Sen Dolta festival of the Khmer in Southeast Vietnam. It also analyzes and explains the factors influencing the transformation of the festival, particularly focusing on the role and authority of the abbot monks in Theravada Buddhist temples in reviving the traditional festival of the Khmer in contemporary Southeast Vietnam.*

**Keywords:** *Sen Dolta Festival, Cultural Transformation, Power, Khmer People, Southeast Vietnam.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Khmer people in Southeast Vietnam belong to the Mon-Khmer language group and share a common historical origin with the Khmer in Cambodia as well as with the Khmer in the Mekong Delta – Southwest Vietnam. According to the 2019 Population and Housing Census, the Khmer population in Southeast Vietnam is 172,477, primarily residing in the two provinces of Tay Ninh and Binh Phuoc, which are border regions adjacent to the Kingdom of Cambodia. In Binh Phuoc, the Khmer population is 19,315, concentrated mainly in the districts of Loc Ninh, Binh Long, and Chon Thanh; in Tay Ninh, the Khmer population is 9,932, primarily concentrated in the districts of Tan Chau, Tan Bien, Chau Thanh, and Hoa Thanh. Among the two border provinces in Southeast Vietnam, Tay Ninh has a border length of 240 km adjoining the Kingdom of Cambodia to the west and north with two international border gates: Moc Bai and Xa Mat; it has 20 border communes belonging to 5 districts adjacent to 22 communes of 7 districts of 3 Cambodian provinces: Svay Rieng, Prey Veng, and Tbong Khmum (<https://www.tayninh.gov.vn/>). Binh Phuoc is also a border province with 3 districts (Bu Gia Map, Bu Dop, Loc Ninh) bordering 3 provinces of the Kingdom of Cambodia (Mondulhiri, Kratie, Tboung Khmum), with a total border length of 258.939 km, having 4 border gates: Hoa Lu, Hoang Dieu, Loc Thinh, and Tan Tien (<https://www.binhphuoc.gov.vn/>).

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Southeast Vietnam Map. Source: Internet

Like the Khmer in other regions, the traditional festivals of the Khmer people in Southeast Vietnam have developed from three cultural layers: folk beliefs, Brahmanism, and Buddhism (Chanchai Khongphianthum: 2015, p. 140; Nguyễn Thị Vân: 2015, p. 54). Particularly, Theravada Buddhism holds a significant position and deeply influences the social life of the community. For the Khmer, monks, especially the abbots in the temples, represent the Buddha and wield considerable power in the community's spiritual and religious activities. They believe that family and community rituals led by monks ensure that their wishes and desires are more likely to be fulfilled, and their ancestors will receive greater blessings.

Currently, there are only 17 Theravada Khmer temples in the entire Southeast region, most of which are under renovation, repair, or construction. This is a consequence of the wars before the 1980s; for instance, in Tay Ninh province, which includes Khmer residents: "Throughout the years of war, Tay Ninh was heavily devastated, with 60 out of 73 communes completely destroyed..." (<http://www.lyluanchinhtri.vn/>).

Due to this, during this period, temples were ruined, and abbots relocated, leaving the community unable to organize festivals, which gradually fell into oblivion. Since the Doi Moi (Renovation) policy in 1986, Vietnam has implemented numerous policies to develop its economy, society, and culture, significantly improving people's lives. However, it was only around the 2000s that the lives of people in Southeast Vietnam began to stabilize and develop, roughly over the past ten years. Consequently, traditional Khmer festivals have gradually been restored. A significant contribution to the revival of these festivals can be attributed to the monks, especially the abbots of the Theravada Khmer temples. During this period, monks from the Southwest began to study in Southeast Vietnam increasingly, and temples started to have abbots to manage and oversee them after years of absence.

Among the traditional festivals of the Khmer in Southeast Vietnam, Sen Dolta stands out with many distinctive cultural features of the Khmer people in this region. The festival showcases various cultural aspects, including customs, beliefs, arts, community relationships, and especially the way the Khmer honor their ancestors' spirits. However, influenced by unique natural, historical, and social factors, the Sen Dolta festival in this region has developed unique cultural characteristics alongside its similarities.

Research shows that studies on the culture and festivals of the Khmer people in Vietnam mainly focus on the Mekong Delta – Southwest Vietnam, such as works by Lê Hương (1969), Trường Lưu (1993), Trần Văn Bốn (1999), Lê Công Lý (2010), Ngô Văn Lê (2013), Phan Thuận (2014), Philip Taylor (2014), Lê Thúy An (2017), Nguyễn Thị Song Hà and Phạm Thị Cẩm Vân (2019). In contrast, research on the cultural festivals of the Khmer people in Southeast Vietnam has not received much scholarly attention. Studies on the Khmer in Southeast Vietnam primarily provide an overview of their historical, cultural, and social issues, such as the works of Mạc Đường (1985), Nguyễn Ngọc Chúc (2014), Huỳnh Ngọc Thu and colleagues (2021). Studies on festivals tend to focus on introduction and description rather than analyzing the factors influencing the transformation of festivals, with few exceptions such as Trần Vũ (2013) with "The Khmer People in Tay Ninh and the New Year Festival"; Đức Ngự (2017) with "The Sen Dolta Festival of the Khmer in Binh Phuoc"; Thạch Ne (2020), with "The Current State of Khmer Theravada Buddhism in Binh Phuoc: A Case Study of Soc Lon Temple"; Trần Dũng (2021) with "Identifying the Cultural Identity of the Khmer People through the Chol Chnam Thmay Festival in Loc Ninh District, Binh Phuoc Province". Therefore, by studying the Sen Dolta festival of the Khmer in Southeast Vietnam, this article describes the current state of traditional festival practices of the Khmer people and analyzes and evaluates the role and authority of the abbots in restoring and developing traditional festivals in some border localities in Southeast Vietnam.

### **Theoretical Sources**

According to sociologist Max Weber, power can be classified into three basic forms: traditional power, rational-legal power, and charismatic power (Schneiderman, 2015, p. 269). Traditional power is understood as the ability and right to rule passed down through inheritance. Legal power is exercised through an official belief in the content of laws (legality) or natural laws (rationality). Charismatic power is found in a leader with a mission and vision that can inspire others. According to Weber, a charismatic leader is someone with extraordinary characteristics, someone who heads a new social movement, and someone endowed with divine or supernatural strength, like a religious prophet; such a person has a strong attraction in traditional power systems (Thích Đức Thiện and Thích Nhật Từ: 2019, p. 79).

In the Khmer community in Southeast Vietnam today, the abbot is highly respected and trusted by the community. Besides the respect that Khmer Buddhist followers have for the abbot, the abbot also holds legal power (appointed by the state's Buddhist organization) and charismatic power. The charismatic power of the abbot has the most significant impact and is decisive in many aspects of community life, especially in religious activities.

This study utilizes these perspectives to analyze and explain the role and authority of the abbot in the social life of the Khmer people, particularly the role of the abbot in maintaining and preserving traditional culture through the revival and restoration of the Sen Dolta festival of the Khmer in Southeast Vietnam.

### **METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

In addition to using ethnographic/anthropological research methods and utilizing fieldwork data through ethnographic techniques, participant observation, and direct community engagement, this study also applies the methods of document synthesis, analysis, and comparison to clarify the similarities and differences and to explain the cultural characteristics of the Sen Dolta festival of the Khmer in Southeast Vietnam compared to the Khmer in the Southwest in the current context. During the fieldwork in the study area, we primarily employed qualitative methods with in-depth interviews, retrospective interviews, and group discussions using purposive sampling with the support of village elders, monks, local officials, village chiefs, and local residents. From October 2019 to July 2023, we conducted over 30 in-depth interviews and group discussions with various stakeholders, including local officials, monks, village elders, and especially Khmer people in the local communities. We directly participated in the traditional festivals of the Khmer in two districts: Loc Ninh (Binh Phuoc province) and Tan Bien (Tay Ninh province). Additionally, we surveyed and studied the Khmer in Tra Vinh and Kien Giang provinces to compare and analyze the similarities and differences in the Sen Dolta festival of the Khmer in the Southwest compared to the Khmer in Southeast Vietnam.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Current Practices of the Sen Dolta Festival among the Khmer People in Southeastern Vietnam**

#### ***Origin and Significance of the Festival***

For the Khmer people, Sen Dolta means "ancestor worship"; it is the largest of the three traditional festivals for the Khmer in Southeastern Vietnam as well as in other regions of Vietnam. The festival typically lasts about 15 days, from the 15th to the 30th of Bhaddapada according to the Buddhist calendar, corresponding to the eighth lunar month each year.

According to tradition, after grandparents, parents, and relatives in a family or clan pass away, the Khmer in Southeastern Vietnam do not set up an altar or hold annual death anniversaries (as the Kinh people and other ethnic groups do). Instead, they hold a memorial ceremony for their ancestors during specific festivals, with Sen Dolta being the largest ceremony dedicated to their ancestors.

"Sen Dolta is our time to worship our ancestors, parents, and grandparents. Those who have passed away are worshiped. We pray for our ancestors to receive the offerings we send and help our descendants stay healthy and prosperous" (PVS Mr. Lam M., 62 years old, Loc Khanh commune, 2019).

Moreover, being Buddhists, they believe that after death, their ancestors and parents may become ghosts suffering in hell. These ghosts can only come to the mortal world to enjoy the offerings from their descendants during specific ceremonies, especially during the Sen Dolta festival – the season of pardoning the souls of the deceased. However, if these ghosts bear heavy "karma" (due to accidental or intentional evil deeds during their lifetime), they will not be able to return home to enjoy the offerings. Only after the monks perform specific rituals can these spirits receive the offerings [Tran Dung: 2021, 61]. Additionally, they believe that during the Sen Dolta season, the spirits of their ancestors will search for the offerings from their descendants at the temples. If they visit seven temples without finding any offerings from their descendants, they will become upset and punish their descendants. Therefore, besides organizing the ceremony at home, the Khmer in this region also go to the temples for rituals conducted by the monks to ensure they have fulfilled their duties and responsibilities towards their deceased relatives. This is a distinctive feature of the festival and beliefs of the Khmer people in Southeastern Vietnam today.

#### ***Festival Proceedings***

Like the Khmer in other regions, the Sen Dolta festival for the Khmer in Southeastern Vietnam includes the main rituals: the sticky rice ball offering ceremony (Banh canh banh), the ancestor worship ceremony (Banh Sen Dolta), and the ceremony to send off the ancestors (Banh chuôn Dolta). However, the timing and location of these rituals differ from those of the Khmer in the Southwestern region. While the festival in the Southwestern region typically lasts three days, from the 29th of the 8th lunar month to the 1st of the 9th lunar month [Vo Van Thang and Dinh Van To: 2019, 33], the festival in Southeastern Vietnam often extends up to 16 days (from the 16th of the 8th lunar month to the 1st of the 9th lunar month). In many villages in Tay Ninh province, the festival can last up to 30 days. This extended duration has led the Khmer in this region to refer to the festival as the Sen Dolta season [source: field data, April 2022]. In terms of location, while the Khmer in the Southwestern region primarily celebrate at the temples [Vo Van Thang and Dinh Van To: 2019, 33], the Khmer in Southeastern Vietnam maintain the tradition of celebrating at both their homes and temples, except during times of war or unrest when temples might be inactive.

#### ***Home Rituals***

Unlike the Khmer in the Southwestern region, the Khmer in Southeastern Vietnam still keep the Neak Ta offering ritual before the main ceremony to inform and seek permission from the protective spirits for the festival. This practice is no longer observed by the Khmer in the Southwestern region: "some animistic rituals are rarely practiced, such as Arak and worship of Neak Ta, are no longer practiced" [Nguyen Thi Song Ha and Pham Thi Cam Van: 2019, 70]. Next, people visit the cemetery to clean their ancestors' graves and perform a

small offering with incense, fruits, and flowers to invite their ancestors to enjoy the offerings during the festival. This is a unique practice of the Khmer in Southeastern Vietnam, as the Khmer in the Southwestern region do not perform this ritual. The difference is partly due to the fact that the Khmer in Southeastern Vietnam rarely cremate their dead, preferring burial instead.

After the Neak Ta and cemetery offerings, the Khmer in Southeastern Vietnam begin the official rituals at home. Families prepare three trays of offerings, including rice, soup, fruits, betel, wine, and incense. One tray is for the ancestors, one for the Earth God, and one for wandering spirits. Additionally, there is a tray prepared for the ancestors on their way back to the ancestral world during the send-off ceremony [PVS Mr. Lam U., 84 years old, Loc Khanh commune, Loc Ninh district, October 2019].

One of the distinctive features of the Sel Dolta festival among the Khmer in Southeastern Vietnam is the home and clan-based ceremonies. These ceremonies are held once a day at any time chosen by the host, though usually before noon so that monks can be invited to have lunch with the family, as Theravada monks do not eat after this time.

“Since more monks have come to the temples, some families invite them to their homes for ceremonies during the festival” (PVS Mr. Lam M., 62 years old, Loc Hung commune, Loc Ninh district, October 2019).

Before holding the ancestor worship ceremony, families inform the clan leaders or village elders about the time of their ceremonies. Conversely, the elders or clan leaders also notify the families about the ceremony times in the community. This coordination helps families avoid scheduling conflicts and allows relatives to attend each other's ceremonies, making the event lively and well-attended. Therefore, even though these are family or clan ceremonies, they often attract many participants, especially for ceremonies held at the homes of village elders or clan leaders.

Besides praying for the spirits of their ancestors, this is also a time for descendants to give gifts and wish good health to their living grandparents and parents. This practice reflects the Khmer people's filial piety and affection. After the rituals, family and community members gather for a meal, dance, and sing, creating a lively and joyous atmosphere. Most Khmer families in Southeastern Vietnam still maintain the tradition of home ceremonies while also participating in the temple-organized festivities.

### ***Temple Rituals***

Similar to temples in the Southwestern region, the Khmer temples in Southeastern Vietnam also perform the main rituals during the Dolta season: the sticky rice ball offering, ancestor worship, and the send-off ceremony. However, there are some differences between the two regions. The festival at the Southwestern temples usually lasts three days, while at the temples in Loc Ninh, it lasts 15 days. Thus, the sticky rice ball offering at these temples also extends to about 15 days. During this period, offerings (mainly sticky rice balls) are brought to the temple around 4 am. After monks chant prayers for the spirits in the main hall, the offerings are placed outside the temple grounds. This activity must be completed before 5 am while it is still dark. The locals believe that their ancestors, after death, may not know where they will go, so this ensures the spirits can receive the offerings: “Once the sun rises, the spirits can't take it. Those who have sinned, died tragically, or unjustly only come to take it at night...” (PVS Mrs. Thi N., 60 years old, Hoa Hiep commune, Tan Bien district, April 2022).

Following the sticky rice ball offering is the main day of the Sel Dolta season – the ancestor worship ceremony (Banh Sen Dolta). Around 7 am, Buddhists gather at the main hall with offerings to perform the ritual of bowing to the Triple Gem. Then, the monks chant prayers for all the departed souls. After the chanting, the offerings are given to the monks for their meal, and the remaining food is shared in a communal meal in the temple hall.

The final ritual is the send-off ceremony. Nowadays, the send-off ceremony is often conducted collectively at the temple. Instead of individual family ceremonies, the temple prepares a large boat where families place their offerings. This boat is then carried to a stream or pond to "send off" the ancestors back to the ancestral world. In addition to the main rituals, the temple also organizes other activities such as offering bowls, communal meals, gifts for the poor, cultural performances, and games.

Today, not only Khmer Buddhists from within and outside Binh Phuoc province but also Khmer people from Cambodia and Kinh and Hoa Buddhists from distant provinces attend the festival, making the temple festivities more diverse and lively with inter-ethnic interactions. Visitors to Khmer households during the festival are warmly welcomed and invited to participate in cultural activities, dancing, and singing with great enthusiasm.

### **The Role and Authority of the Abbot in Reviving Community Festivals**

Surveys conducted in Khmer communities in Southeast Vietnam show that in places where the abbot possesses strong leadership, management, and organizational skills, and significantly helps the people in various aspects of life, he is more revered and trusted by the community. In other words, an abbot with charismatic authority will have an advantage in asserting his influence over the community. This is evident through the community's obedience to the orders and decisions made by the abbot.

According to Venerable Devinda, "a good leader in Buddhism is based on moral virtues, kindness, reliability, decisiveness, and intelligence," and "Apart from playing an essential role in spiritual development, a Buddhist leader also contributes in many areas of contemporary society, including sustainable spiritual, social, political, and economic development." (Thich Duc Thien and Thich Nhat Tu: 2019, 80). These qualities contribute to the charismatic authority of the abbot. However, to gain such authority, besides innate abilities like intelligence and talent, an abbot must undergo rigorous training, cultivate ethics, and continuously study to accumulate knowledge and social skills. Additionally, an abbot must understand the traditional customs and culture of the community, possess management and leadership capabilities, and guide and help people in various life aspects (such as livelihoods, social conduct, and even mediating conflicts within the community). Most importantly, he must organize and guide the community in practicing rituals and beliefs. These factors consolidate the abbot's power, making him not only a top religious leader but also a significant figure in the social and cultural life of the Khmer community.

### **The Role and Authority of the Abbot in Reviving Community Festivals**

Although Buddhism plays a crucial role in the Khmer community life, historical circumstances, ecological environment, and socio-political conditions have influenced the degree of Buddhist impact and the monks' influence on the Khmer community in each region and historical period. In the Southwest region, there are up to 436 Theravada Buddhist temples, with thousands of monks practicing (Tran Van Bon: 2002, 37); the monks have helped the people in stabilizing and developing various aspects of social life, especially in maintaining and developing the cultural identity of the Khmer people (Taylor, P., 2014, 269). Meanwhile, the Khmer community in Southeast Vietnam faced many upheavals and instability due to wars before 1986; the few temples (only about 10) were also destroyed by bombs, ceasing their operations. Hence, during this period, the influence of Buddhism and the abbots on the social life of the Khmer community was limited. Abbots had no conditions to support the Khmer people in socio-economic and cultural activities. Consequently, the practice of traditional community festivals faced many difficulties and obstacles.

"Before 1986, organizing rituals was very difficult. There were no monks in the temples, so we had to invite monks from other provinces. But it wasn't easy to invite them... so many years we didn't organize anything. Only since 2002, when the chief monk became the abbot, the rituals were regularly organized" (PVS. Lam N., 77 years old, Hoa Hiep commune, Tan Bien district, April 2022).

Since 1986, when Vietnam implemented renovation policies for economic, social, and cultural development, people's lives gradually improved; religious activities and ethnic festivals also gradually revived across the country. However, in Southeast Vietnam, only in the 2000s did people's lives stabilize and improve, i.e., in the last 10+ years. The contributions of the monks, especially the role of the abbots in the Theravada temples within the community, are noteworthy. Since 2000, monks from the Southwest region have been appointed to abbots in Southeast Vietnam, with increasing numbers of monks practicing in the Southeast. This is the ritual of offering alms to the monks conducted by Khmer Theravada temples in the Southeast region during Sel Dolta and other traditional festivals of the Khmer people. Temples in the Southwest do not perform this ritual during the Sel Dolta festival. Therefore, during this period, religious activities and traditional festivals of the

Khmer community gradually revived and flourished. Nevertheless, the process of reviving traditional community festivals faced many challenges. Although permitted by local authorities, the temple takes the initiative in determining the form and content of traditional festival ceremonies held at the temple; and actively supported by the Buddhist followers, due to the long hiatus, modern life influences, and a portion of the population forgetting their traditional festivals, there was a diminishing awareness of traditional culture and festivals, especially among the younger generation.

“In 2009, when the new monk came to Loc Ninh, people's lives were still difficult and backward. Rituals were performed differently everywhere, mainly with prolonged feasting... The monk had to advise and guide many things, and gradually people changed and improved” (PVS. monk Thach N., 45 years old, abbot of Soc Lon temple, 2019).

According to the people, since the temple had an abbot, community festivals have been restored after a long hiatus:

“Since the chief monk arrived, he has called the village elders, village leaders, and Achars to meet and discuss restoring traditional culture and organizing festival activities for the people. The monk said it must be done according to the ancestors' customs...” (PVS. Lam N., 62 years old, Loc Hung commune, 2022).

Studies on festivals at several temples in Southeast Vietnam show that about two months before the festivals, the abbot invites the organizing committee members to discuss the festival's organization. Under the abbot's guidance, the committee members discuss the content, scale, and form of the festival, as well as changes in festival practices. After the members exchange views on organizing the festival (such as adjusting the ritual sequence, adding guests, introducing new games, and including performances), the abbot makes the final decision and assigns responsibilities to each committee and individual. For example, the economic committee handles the festival budget; the cultural committee manages the festival script; village elders and Achars inform families about the festival and list participants for both ceremonial and festive parts; they also assist the temple in guiding and conducting rituals during the festival. About ten days before the festival, the abbot organizes another meeting to review preparations and make timely adjustments. Based on the members' discussions, the abbot decides on necessary changes to the festival's form and content to suit the community's specific conditions. Naturally, all committee members strictly follow the abbot's assignments.

“Last year (2021), due to the prolonged pandemic, economic difficulties, and restrictions on large gatherings, the abbot organized a simple Sel Dolta festival, mainly performing ancestor rituals and distributing gifts to the people without feasting or performances. This year (2022), the abbot plans a grand festival for the people to enjoy. For the upcoming almsgiving ceremony, the abbot will invite 100 monks from temples in and outside the province (Binh Phuoc), including Northern Buddhist temple. This year, with stable economic conditions, many benefactors contribute more to the temple... The best part is that all committee members, village elders, and people support the abbot's way of doing things” (PVS. monk Thach N., 45 years old, abbot of Soc Lon temple, 2021).

Currently, cultural activities and festivals in the community directly organized by the temple and the abbot are gradually stabilizing and developing, attracting more participants from various groups. Not only local Khmer people but also people from other areas, including Kinh, Hoa, and Cham ethnic groups, join the festivals. However, in Khmer communities in the border provinces of Southeast Vietnam, where the abbot demonstrates charismatic authority, he is more revered and trusted, attracting more community participation in temple-organized activities.

### **The Role of the Abbot in Contributing to Community Socio-Economic Development**

A survey of Khmer communities in the southeastern border provinces of Vietnam shows that temples and abbots actively participate in supporting the community's economic improvement, contributing to social welfare. However, the effectiveness of these activities varies depending on the abbot's leadership and management skills, as demonstrated through their charismatic authority. Among the temples we surveyed, Sóc Lớn Temple in Lộc Ninh, Bình Phước, has achieved significant success in contributing to the community's

socio-economic development. This success is attributed to the abbot's leadership and his charismatic authority within the community.

Until the early 2000s, despite more than a decade of economic reforms in Vietnam, residents in the southeastern border provinces, including the Khmer people, still faced hardships, with many families lacking sufficient food and a high dropout rate among children.

Mr. Lâm B., 72 years old, a village elder from Lộc Khánh, now part of a well-off household, recalls, "In the 1980s, people here were still very poor. My family and others had to work as laborers everywhere to make a living, but it was never enough. Life only began to improve in the last ten years."

According to residents and local officials, the state's socio-economic development policies began to have a noticeable impact on this area from 2000 onwards, gradually improving living conditions, although many families still faced difficulties.

"By 2009, when the abbot arrived at Sóc Lớn Temple, the people here were still struggling. Living conditions were inadequate and unsanitary. The abbot mobilized benefactors to help improve living conditions by constructing roads for better access, digging wells for clean water, building houses for the poor, and providing funds for children's education," (PVS. Thạch N., 45 years old, abbot of Sóc Lớn Temple).

In the Khmer community in Lộc Ninh, the efforts and compassion of the abbots are remembered and praised, particularly for the abbot of Sóc Lớn Temple: "Since the abbot arrived, the people here have been very happy. He teaches us how to live, cultivate, and raise livestock; distributes rice to the poor, funds children's education, helps dig wells, and builds roads," (PVS. Lâm K., 81 years old, Lộc Khánh, 2022).

"Every month, the abbot provides rice, fish sauce, and cooking oil to poor households. During the festivals, he gives even more. He also invites teachers from the Mekong Delta to teach Khmer language and traditional music to the children," (PVS. Thị C., 63 years old, Lộc Khánh, 2022).

"If a household is struggling, the abbot supports them. The temple provides free rice for a year, which helps alleviate people's hardships," (PVS. Thị KhL, female, 57 years old, Lộc Khánh, 2022).

The abbot of Sóc Lớn Temple shared that since 2009, the temple has enabled Khmer children to attend primary and secondary schools and has taken in about 250 children for religious studies. Regarding the efforts to encourage education within the community, the abbot said: "As long as the children come to the temple to study, we take care of everything. The temple supports them from primary school to high school, and if they wish, we support them through university. Some go on to work in factories after high school, while others graduate from university and get jobs, helping their families. Overall, education reduces hardship. Here, the temple covers all costs, including a monthly allowance of 20,000,000 VND for university students. This money comes from the temple, as the state only provides moral support, and the children's parents, lacking funds, send them to the temple for education." (PVS. Thạch N., 45 years old, abbot of Sóc Lớn Temple).

It is evident that where an abbot displays charismatic leadership and effectively organizes activities, the community respects and trusts the abbot more, and actively participates in temple activities. This respect and trust sometimes surpass the engagement seen with local government meetings.

Therefore, for the Khmer community in the southeastern border provinces, the abbot's role and authority, particularly their charismatic influence, are crucial not only in maintaining and developing cultural and religious activities but also in enhancing the socio-economic development and preserving the cultural and educational aspects of the community.

## **CONCLUSION**

Sen Dolta is one of the traditional festivals of the Khmer people in the Southern region, sharing its origins and significance with the Khmer festivals in the Southwestern region and other areas. This festival is an occasion for people to express gratitude to their ancestors and deities who have blessed them with a peaceful and



prosperous life. However, due to specific economic conditions, historical contexts, and particularly the natural and ecological environments, the Sen Dolta festival of the Khmer people in the Southeast region exhibits unique characteristics alongside its similarities with the Khmer community in the Mekong Delta - Southwestern region and other areas.

With the development of society, the festival has undergone changes to suit the conditions and circumstances of the Khmer community in the Southeast region today. Besides the influences of Vietnam's socio-economic-cultural development policies, cultural exchange, and integration, these changes in the festival are also driven by the community's creative activities, including the role and authority of the abbots in the Khmer Theravada temples, manifested through their charismatic and legal powers. Particularly, through their charismatic influence, the abbots have significantly contributed to preserving and promoting the cultural values of the festival.

Currently, the restoration and revival of traditional festivals not only satisfy the spiritual and religious needs of the community but also meet the material needs of a segment of the population. Additionally, the festival provides an environment for entertainment and cultural and artistic enjoyment for the Khmer community in the Southeast region.

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