



Khmer Palm-Leaf Manuscripts in a Giang, Vietnam, within the Cultural Heritage System: An Integrated Heritage Approach to Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts are a distinctive component of the cultural heritage of the Khmer community in A Giang Province, Vietnam. They preserve Buddhist scriptures together with historical records, traditional knowledge, and cultural values that have been transmitted through generations. This paper examines the place of these manuscripts within the cultural heritage system and considers their potential for sustainable development. The research draws on historical sources, fieldwork, document analysis, and interviews conducted at Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples in Tri Tôn District and Tịnh Biên Town. The results show that palm-leaf manuscripts exist in close association with temples, Buddhist education, traditional festivals, and the knowledge and skills of manuscript production. These relationships have enabled the continuity of the manuscripts as a living heritage. At the same time, the study identifies several threats, including the decline of skilled artisans, the shortage of suitable palm leaves, inadequate conservation conditions, and the limited integration of this heritage into cultural tourism. The paper argues that Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts should be understood and managed as part of an interconnected cultural heritage system. Such an approach provides a stronger basis for heritage preservation, the transmission of traditional knowledge, and sustainable cultural development in A Giang Province.

Keywords: A Giang Province, cultural heritage, Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts, preservation, sustainable development

1. Introduction

Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts (Satra) are among the most distinctive forms of documentary heritage preserved by the Khmer community in southern Vietnam. Inscribed on processed palm leaves, these manuscripts preserve Theravada Buddhist scriptures together with historical accounts, literary works, traditional knowledge, and the Khmer script. Beyond their religious function, they document the historical development of Khmer cultural life and the transmission of knowledge across generations. In An Giang Province, palm-leaf manuscripts are preserved mainly in Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples, particularly in Tri Tôn District and Tịnh Biên Town (Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2021; Thích nữ Lê Thảo, & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[11, 13]. According to a survey conducted in 2021, Xvayton Pagoda (Xa Ton Pagoda) in Tri Tôn District alone houses 98 manuscript collections comprising approximately 320 individual volumes (Nguyễn Văn Lùng & Nguyễn Thị Tâm Anh, 2021) ^[11].

Today, however, this documentary heritage is facing increasing conservation challenges. Suitable palm leaves have become more difficult to obtain, while the number of monks and artisans capable of reading Pali and ancient Khmer scripts or producing new manuscripts continues to decline. At the same time, prolonged exposure to heat, humidity, insects, and the natural ageing of palm leaves has accelerated the deterioration of many manuscript collections (Đỗ & Trần, 2023; Hồ, 2024; Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022; Tran *et al.*, 2025) ^[4, 5, 10, 9].

These conditions have raised growing concerns about the long-term preservation of this unique heritage.

Palm-leaf manuscripts have attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years. Existing studies have examined their philosophical and ethical values (Nguyễn, 2022) ^[12], the traditional techniques of manuscript production and their significance within Khmer Buddhist culture (Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[13], as well as issues related to conservation, digitization, translation, and their use in cultural tourism at Khmer temples (Đỗ & Trần, 2023; Hồ, 2024; Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022; Tran *et al.*, 2025) ^[4, 5, 10, 9]. Together, these studies have contributed substantially to understanding the cultural and historical significance of Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts.

Even so, most previous research has examined palm-leaf manuscripts as individual documentary objects or focused on specific aspects of their value and preservation. Much less attention has been paid to their relationships with the wider cultural heritage of An Giang Province. In particular, little research has explored how palm-leaf manuscripts interact with Khmer temples, historical sites, traditional festivals, religious practices, and other tangible and intangible heritage. This remains an important gap in current scholarship.

This paper approaches Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts from a different perspective by placing them within the cultural heritage system of A Giang Province. It explores the relationships between the manuscripts and other recognised heritage resources and considers how these connections can support sustainable development. By viewing palm-leaf manuscripts as part of an interconnected heritage system rather than as isolated documentary objects, the study offers a broader perspective on heritage conservation and provides a basis for strengthening heritage management, cultural transmission, and sustainable cultural development.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design supported by an interdisciplinary framework that brings together History, Cultural Studies, Religious Studies, and Heritage Studies. Such an approach is well suited to Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts, which function both as historical documentary sources and as an important form of cultural heritage preserved by the Khmer community in southern Vietnam (Đỗ & Trần, 2023; Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2021) ^[4, 11]. The analysis situates the manuscripts within their historical context of production, transmission, and preservation in An Giang Province, while also examining their place within the province's cultural heritage system from the perspective of sustainable development.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws upon two complementary perspectives. The first is a historical-cultural approach, through which Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts are interpreted both as historical sources and as an integral component of the cultural heritage of the Khmer community in southern Vietnam. Their significance lies not only in the texts they preserve but also in their role as evidence of the transmission of knowledge, Theravada Buddhist practice, and the continuity of Khmer cultural traditions across generations (Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2021) ^[11].

The study adopts the concept of cultural heritage as defined in Vietnam's Law on Cultural Heritage. Under this framework, cultural heritage comprises both tangible and

intangible heritage embodying historical, cultural, and scientific values that have been transmitted across generations. Intangible cultural heritage includes scripts, languages, traditional knowledge, festivals, traditional craftsmanship, and other forms of cultural practice. Tangible cultural heritage comprises historical and cultural monuments, archaeological sites, scenic landscapes, artefacts, antiques, and national treasures (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2024) ^[8].

Within this framework, Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts are regarded as a form of documentary heritage possessing both tangible and intangible values. Their tangible significance is reflected in the palm-leaf material, traditional methods of manufacture, and systems of storage and preservation. Their intangible significance resides in the Buddhist scriptures, the ancient Khmer and Pali scripts, Theravada Buddhist knowledge, and the traditional skills associated with manuscript inscription and transmission within the Khmer community. The heritage classification established by the Law on Cultural Heritage also provides the basis for examining the position of palm-leaf manuscripts within the cultural heritage system of A Giang Province. Under the current legislation, heritage sites are classified as provincial, national, or special national heritage sites according to their historical, cultural, and scientific significance (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2024) ^[8].

The second perspective considers sustainable development through the lens of heritage conservation. The concept of cultural tourism resources follows the provisions of Vietnam's Law on Tourism (2017), under which historical sites, architectural heritage, festivals, traditional performing arts, and other cultural assets may serve as tourism resources when appropriately protected and managed. The study likewise adopts the concept of sustainable tourism development established in the same legislation, which emphasises a balanced relationship between economic development, cultural heritage conservation, environmental protection, and community well-being, while ensuring that present-day use of heritage resources does not compromise the needs of future generations (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2017) ^[7].

The analysis is further informed by UNESCO principles concerning authenticity, integrity, and community participation in heritage conservation (Tran *et al.*, 2025) ^[9]. Accordingly, Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts are examined as one element within the wider cultural heritage system of An Giang Province, whose significance is expressed through their relationships with temples, heritage sites, religious institutions, traditional festivals, and other forms of tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide the analytical framework for interpreting the historical and cultural significance of Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts and for evaluating their relationships with the broader cultural heritage system of A Giang Province within the context of sustainable development.

2.2. Data Collection

The study draws upon both documentary and field-based sources.

Documentary materials include published studies, heritage documentation, government policy documents, and other sources relating to Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts in southern Vietnam (Đỗ & Trần, 2023; Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2021; Tran

et al., 2025) [4, 11, 9].

Fieldwork was carried out at selected Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples in Tri Tôn District and Tịnh Biên Town, An Giang Province, where substantial palm-leaf manuscript collections are still preserved. These temples continue to play an active role in conserving the manuscripts and maintaining the traditional teaching and use of ancient Khmer and Pali scripts (Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2021; Tran *et al.*, 2025) [11, 9].

To complement the documentary evidence, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Buddhist monks, manuscript custodians, traditional manuscript artisans, and researchers specialising in Khmer culture. The interviews focused on manuscript production, conservation practices, the transmission of traditional knowledge, and the continuing role of palm-leaf manuscripts in the religious and cultural life of the Khmer community.

2.3. Research Methods

Historical analysis was employed to reconstruct the development, transmission, and transformation of Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts within the Khmer communities of southern Vietnam. This approach provided the historical context necessary for understanding the continuity of the manuscript tradition over time.

Document analysis was undertaken by comparing published sources with materials collected during fieldwork. Particular attention was paid to the manuscripts' documentary characteristics, their historical and cultural significance, and their present conservation status.

Fieldwork consisted of direct observation at Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples where palm-leaf manuscripts are still preserved. Observations focused on storage environments, conservation practices, and cultural activities associated with the production, use, and transmission of the manuscripts.

Semi-structured interviews provided first-hand accounts from those directly involved in safeguarding this documentary heritage. These narratives complemented the documentary record by offering perspectives that are seldom captured in written sources.

A comparative approach was used to examine the relationships between Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts and other forms of cultural heritage in A Giang Province. The comparison helped clarify the position of the manuscripts within the province's wider cultural heritage system and identify their connections with other heritage resources.

2.4. Data Analysis

Evidence from documentary sources, field observations, and interviews was analysed through source triangulation. Historical source criticism was applied throughout the analytical process to assess the reliability and authenticity of the evidence. The data were subsequently organised into four thematic categories: historical significance, cultural significance, conservation status, and the relationships between Khmer palm-leaf manuscripts and the cultural heritage system of A Giang Province.

The findings were then used to assess how palm-leaf manuscripts can be more effectively integrated with other heritage resources in the province. On this basis, the study proposes directions for heritage conservation and sustainable heritage management that strengthen cultural continuity while safeguarding the authenticity and integrity of the heritage.

3. Results

3.1. The Cultural Heritage Context of Tri Tôn, A Giang Province

3.1.1. Geographical Setting and the Khmer Community

A Giang Province is situated in the western part of the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam. Before the administrative reorganisation introduced in 2025, the province consisted of eleven district level administrative units, including seven districts, two district level towns, and two provincial cities, in accordance with Resolution No. 1285/NQ UBTVQH15 issued by the Standing Committee of the National Assembly (2024). Among these localities, Tri Tôn has long been recognised as one of the principal settlement areas of the Khmer community and remains an important centre for preserving the cultural traditions of Khmer Theravada Buddhism (Standing Committee of the National Assembly, 2024).

The province is home to four major ethnic communities, namely the Kinh, Khmer, Chăm, and Hoa, which have coexisted for centuries. Before the 2025 administrative restructuring, A Giang comprised 156 commune level administrative units distributed across two cities, one town, and eight districts. The province extends from Khánh An Commune in the north to Thoại Giang Commune in the south, and from Vĩnh Gia Commune in the west to Bình Phước Xuân Commune in the east. Its long history and cultural diversity have created a rich heritage landscape that includes numerous historical monuments, religious sites, and places of scenic value.

A Giang occupies an important position within the Mekong Delta because of its well-developed road and waterway networks and its shared border with Cambodia (Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022) [10]. Within the province, Tri Tôn and Tịnh Biên have the largest concentrations of Khmer inhabitants and continue to preserve many distinctive features of Khmer cultural heritage (Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) [13].

The Seven Mountains region has provided a favourable setting for the long-term continuity of Khmer settlement. Its semi mountainous landscape has helped preserve many traditional cultural practices that have gradually disappeared elsewhere. As a result, religious beliefs, customary practices, festivals, and other expressions of Khmer cultural heritage have remained closely connected with community life over successive generations (Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) [13].

Before 2025, Tri Tôn District consisted of the three townships of Tri Tôn, Ba Chúc, and Cô Tô, together with the twelve communes of Lạc Quới, Lê Trì, Vĩnh Gia, Vĩnh Phước, Châu Lăng, Lương Phi, Lương An Trà, Tà Đảnh, Núi Tô, An Túc, Tân Tuyền, and Ô Lâm. Many Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples within these localities continue to preserve valuable collections of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts as well as the traditional knowledge and religious practices associated with their production, preservation, and use.

Following Resolution No. 1654/NQ UBTVQH15 issued in 2025, the commune level administrative units of Tri Tôn were reorganised into five new communes, namely Ba Chúc, Tri Tôn, Ô Lâm, Cô Tô, and Vĩnh Gia. These administrative changes do not affect the spatial scope of the present research. Field sites are identified according to the administrative boundaries that were in place when the fieldwork was undertaken, while the corresponding current administrative units are also provided to facilitate contemporary reference

and heritage management (Standing Committee of the National Assembly, 2025).

Located within the Seven Mountains region, Tri Tôn has long served as one of the principal cultural centres of the Khmer community in A Giang Province. The combination of favourable environmental conditions and a long history of settlement has supported the continuity of Khmer cultural traditions, particularly the network of Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples and the preservation of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts (Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[13].

The district possesses a rich cultural heritage shared by the Kinh, Khmer, Chăm, and Hoa communities, encompassing both tangible and intangible heritage. Its location along tourism routes linking A Giang with neighbouring Cambodia also provides favourable opportunities for the development of cultural and spiritual tourism. Within this broader heritage landscape, Khmer palm leaf manuscripts can be understood not as isolated documentary objects but as one element of an interconnected cultural heritage system.

The Khmer population in Tri Tôn continues to live primarily in phum and sóc, the traditional forms of community settlement that have shaped Khmer social organisation for generations (Nguyen *et al.*, 2025; Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[13]. Agriculture remains the principal source of livelihood, complemented by a range of traditional crafts that continue to support local economic life (Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[13]. Theravada Buddhism occupies a central place in community life and continues to influence social values, customary practices, and religious ceremonies. The principles of mutual assistance, social cohesion, and respect for Buddhist teachings remain fundamental to the everyday life of the Khmer community (Nguyễn, 2022; Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[12, 13].

3.1.2. The Role of Khmer Theravada Buddhist Temples in the Preservation of Khmer Palm Leaf Manuscripts

In every phum and sóc, the Khmer Theravada Buddhist temple forms the centre of both religious and community life. It is a place of worship, learning, and cultural transmission, where many of the community's traditions have been preserved over generations (Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[13]. According to long established custom, many Khmer men spend a period in the monastery before marriage. During their religious education, they learn ancient Khmer and Pali scripts, study Buddhist teachings, and become familiar with the ethical principles that shape community life (Đỗ & Trần, 2023; Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[4, 13].

The principal Khmer festivals, including Chôl Chnăm Thmây, Sen Dolta, and Ok Om Bok, all take place within the temple precincts. As a result, the temple functions not only as a religious institution but also as the principal setting in which cultural knowledge, ritual practices, and community traditions are maintained and passed from one generation to

the next (Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[13].

Field observations confirm that Tri Tôn remains one of the few areas in southern Vietnam where substantial collections of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts (Satra) have survived. Their continued existence reflects the combined influence of environmental conditions, historical circumstances, and enduring religious traditions.

One important factor is the natural environment of the Seven Mountains region, where Trang palms were once widely distributed. Their leaves possess the strength, flexibility, and durability required for manuscript production and, when properly treated, are highly resistant to insect damage. For centuries, they provided the principal writing material for Khmer palm leaf manuscripts (Đỗ & Hồ, 2024; Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022; Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[5, 10, 13].

Equally important has been the role of Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples in safeguarding manuscript collections. During periods of armed conflict and social instability, monks often transferred manuscripts to safer locations or concealed them within temple grounds to prevent loss or destruction (Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022) ^[10]. Several temples, including Prây Veng, Svayton, and Soài So, continue to preserve collections that are valued both as religious texts and as documentary heritage of the Khmer community (Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022; Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2021) ^[10, 11].

The continuity of this manuscript tradition has also depended on the knowledge preserved by senior monks and skilled artisans. Preparing palm leaves, inscribing the texts, and conserving completed manuscripts require specialised knowledge of ancient Khmer and Pali scripts together with traditional methods of processing palm leaves (Nguyen *et al.*, 2025; Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022) ^[10]. Interviews conducted during fieldwork identified Venerable Chau Ty of Soài So Pagoda as one of the few remaining custodians who continues to teach these skills to younger generations of novice monks (Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022; Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[10, 13].

Religious belief has also played an essential part in the survival of the manuscripts. Within the Khmer community, palm leaf manuscripts are regarded as sacred Buddhist texts and are treated with deep respect. This reverence has encouraged careful custodianship and has allowed many manuscript collections to remain in ritual use rather than becoming museum objects or archival holdings removed from community life (Nguyễn, 2022; Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2021) ^[12, 11]. Their continuing use in temple ceremonies has helped sustain both the physical manuscripts and the traditional knowledge associated with them (Đỗ & Trần, 2023; Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2021) ^[4, 11].

Xvayton Pagoda serves as the principal repository of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts in An Giang Province, preserving one of the region's most significant manuscript collections. The pagoda and representative examples of the manuscripts preserved there are shown in Figure 1.



Source: Photographs by the author

Fig 1: Xvayton Pagoda and Khmer palm leaf manuscripts in A Giang Province: (a) Xvayton Pagoda, the principal repository of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts; (b) a collection of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts preserved at the pagoda.

3.2. The Place of Khmer Palm Leaf Manuscripts within the Cultural Heritage System of a Giang Province

The research findings demonstrate that Khmer palm leaf manuscripts occupy a distinctive position within the cultural heritage of A Giang Province. Their significance lies not only in the manuscripts themselves but also in their close relationship with the religious landscape, cultural traditions, and everyday life of the Khmer community. Rather than existing as isolated documentary objects, the manuscripts remain closely integrated with temples, ritual practices, traditional knowledge, and the institutions through which cultural values continue to be transmitted.

Documentary evidence indicates that the traditional knowledge and techniques of inscribing palm leaves practised by the Khmer communities of Tri Tôn and Tịnh Biên were included in Vietnam's National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2017 under the category of folk knowledge (Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2021; Nguyễn, 2022) ^[11, 12]. Recognition, however, has been limited to the knowledge and skills associated with manuscript production. The palm leaf manuscripts (Satra) themselves, as original documentary sources and historical artefacts, have not yet been recognised either as National Treasures or as an independent category of documentary heritage (Hò, 2024; Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022) ^[5, 10]. Most manuscript collections continue to be preserved in Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples according to long established custodial practices, while local authorities are preparing a nomination for inscription on UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme (Đỗ & Trần, 2023; Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2021) ^[4, 11].

This contrast highlights a gap in the current heritage framework. Official recognition has focused on safeguarding the knowledge required to produce palm leaf manuscripts, whereas the manuscripts themselves have yet to receive formal recognition that reflects their historical, religious, and documentary value.

In acknowledgement of its outstanding cultural significance, the traditional knowledge and techniques of inscribing palm leaves practised by the Khmer communities of Tri Tôn and Tịnh Biên were formally recognised by the Ministry of

Culture, Sports and Tourism as National Intangible Cultural Heritage under the category of folk knowledge through Decision No. 217/QĐ BVHTTDL, issued on 23 January 2017 (Cultural Heritage Administration, 2017) ^[2].

An equally important component of this heritage system is Xvayton Pagoda (Xa Ton Pagoda), in Tri Tôn Town. The temple preserves the largest known collection of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts in Vietnam and has also been designated a National Architectural and Artistic Monument. Founded in the late seventeenth century, the monastery was originally constructed from timber, thatch, and earth before being rebuilt in brick in 1896. Although the complex has undergone several phases of restoration, its principal architectural character has remained intact.

The layout of the temple includes the main sanctuary, the sala, monks' residences, and other buildings serving religious activities. At the centre of the complex stands the principal sanctuary, whose roof rises in three tiers to a pointed summit. The sweeping roof forms evoke the image of the Naga, the sacred serpent that symbolises spiritual protection and continuity in Khmer Buddhist tradition. Within the sanctuary, a large image of the Buddha occupies the central place of worship, while the interior walls, columns, and ceiling are decorated with finely executed murals depicting Buddhist narratives together with traditional floral and animal motifs. The temple is distinguished not only by its architecture but also by its exceptional manuscript collection. Numerous Khmer palm leaf manuscripts have been preserved there for generations, making the monastery one of the most important centres of documentary heritage in southern Vietnam. In recognition of these values, Xvayton Pagoda was designated a National Architectural and Artistic Monument on 12 December 1996 under Decision No. 235/VH QĐ. Ten years later, the Vietnam Records Centre recognised the monastery as the temple preserving the largest collection of palm leaf manuscripts in the country. It was also here that a senior monk initiated the revival of palm leaf manuscript production so that Buddhist scriptures could continue to be copied, studied, and transmitted to future generations.

3.3. Khmer Palm Leaf Manuscripts within the Cultural Heritage System of a Giang Province

3.3.1. Nationally Recognised Cultural Heritage in A Giang Province

A Giang possesses a rich and diverse cultural heritage that reflects its long history and ethnic diversity. By 2022, the province had eighty-eight protected heritage sites, including two Special National Relic Sites, twenty-eight National Relic Sites, and fifty-eight Provincial Relic Sites. Alongside these protected sites, the province is also home to several National Treasures and a number of nationally recognised elements of intangible cultural heritage. Together, they form an important cultural heritage system that preserves the historical development and cultural identity of the province.

Five National Treasures are currently housed in the A Giang Provincial Museum. These include the Giồng Xoài Brahma Statue, the Đá Nồi Linga and Yoni Assemblage, the Khánh Bình Stone Buddha, the Giồng Xoài Wooden Buddha, and the Linh Sơn Linga and Yoni Assemblage (A Giang Provincial Portal, 2026) ^[1]. An Giang also contains two Special National Relic Sites, namely the Tôn Đức Thắng Memorial Site and the Óc Eo and Ba Thê Archaeological Site. Archaeological research at Óc Eo and Ba Thê has established the area as one of the principal centres of the Óc Eo culture within the Kingdom of Funan between the first and the early seventh centuries.

Tri Tôn District contains several nationally recognised heritage sites, including the Ba Chúc Memorial Site, Tức Dụp Hill Historical Site, the Ô Tà Sóc Revolutionary Base, An Lợi Mound, and Xvayton Pagoda. Among them, Xvayton Pagoda is particularly significant because it preserves one of the largest collections of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts in Vietnam while continuing to serve as an active centre of Khmer Theravada Buddhist religious practice.

Recognition has also extended to the province's intangible cultural heritage. By 2022, four heritage elements had been inscribed on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage: the Lady of the Realm Festival at Sam Mountain, the Bảy Núi Ox Racing Festival, the Knowledge and Techniques of Inscribing Palm Leaves of the Khmer People, and the Kỳ Yên Festival at Thoại Ngọc Hầu Communal House. Three additional elements were added in 2023: the Social Customs and Belief Practices Associated with the Life Cycle Rituals of the Chăm Islam Community, Di Kê Traditional Theatre of the Khmer People, and the Traditional Brocade Weaving Craft of the Chăm Community (Government News, 2023) ^[6].

Viewed within this broader heritage context, Khmer palm leaf manuscripts are closely associated with other recognised heritage resources rather than existing as an independent cultural asset. The relationship is especially evident in the connection between the manuscripts, the nationally recognised knowledge and techniques of palm leaf inscription, and Xvayton Pagoda, where manuscript production, preservation, religious practice, and cultural transmission continue to take place. These relationships provide the context for examining the place of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts within the wider cultural heritage system of A Giang Province.

3.3.2. Relationships between Khmer Palm Leaf Manuscripts and the Cultural Heritage System

Khmer palm leaf manuscripts are preserved within a broader cultural setting rather than as an independent heritage resource. Their continued survival depends on close

connections with Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples, traditional festivals, manuscript making, and Buddhist education. Together, these relationships have sustained the historical, religious, and cultural significance of the manuscripts within the Khmer community of An Giang.

3.3.3. Khmer Theravada Buddhist Temples

Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples remain the principal custodians of palm leaf manuscripts. Besides preserving manuscript collections, the temples continue to provide the religious setting in which the texts are read, interpreted, and incorporated into everyday Buddhist practice (Đỗ & Hồ, 2024; Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022) ^[5, 10].

Among the temples surveyed, Xvayton Pagoda occupies a particularly important place. It preserves one of the largest collections of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts and continues to use them in scriptural recitation, religious instruction, and the education of novice monks. In 2006, the Vietnam Records Centre recognised Xvayton Pagoda as the temple holding the largest collection of palm leaf manuscripts in the country (Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2021; Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[11, 13]. The manuscripts therefore remain closely associated with the sacred space of the temple and with the living traditions of Khmer Theravada Buddhism.

3.3.4. Traditional Festivals

Palm leaf manuscripts also continue to play an active role in Khmer religious festivals. During fieldwork, monks were observed using Satra Tê while chanting scriptures and delivering sermons during Chôl Chnăm Thmây, Sen Dolta, Kathina, and Ok Om Bok (Đỗ & Trần, 2023; Đỗ & Hồ, 2024) ^[4, 5].

Their continued use during these ceremonies demonstrates that the manuscripts remain part of contemporary religious life. The recitation of these texts reinforces the spiritual meaning of the festivals while contributing to the continuity of Khmer cultural identity (Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022; Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[10, 13].

3.3.5. Knowledge and Techniques of Palm Leaf Inscription

Every palm leaf manuscript embodies the traditional knowledge and techniques of palm leaf inscription recognised as National Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2017. The value of the manuscripts cannot be separated from the knowledge required to produce them.

Preparing a manuscript involves a sequence of specialised skills, beginning with the selection and treatment of palm leaves and continuing through the preparation of ink and the inscription of the text with a traditional metal stylus known as dek cha. Scribes must also possess a thorough knowledge of ancient Khmer and Pali scripts together with the techniques transmitted through successive generations of monks and artisans (Đỗ & Trần, 2023; Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2021) ^[4, 11]. Each manuscript therefore represents both a historical documentary source and an outstanding example of traditional craftsmanship.

3.3.6. Khmer Theravada Buddhist Education

Palm leaf manuscripts continue to occupy an important place in Buddhist education. Manuscripts belonging to the Satra Chơ báp tradition are used to teach ancient Khmer and Pali scripts, Buddhist doctrine, and the ethical principles that guide community life (Nguyễn, 2022; Nguyễn, Tô, &

Nguyễn, 2022) ^[12, 10].

For many Khmer men, a period of monastic education before marriage remains an important stage of life. During this time, palm leaf manuscripts serve as essential learning materials through which Buddhist teachings, traditional scripts, and moral values are passed to younger generations (Đỗ & Trần, 2023; Nguyen *et al.*, 2025) ^[4].

The manuscripts also preserve a wide range of traditional knowledge extending beyond religion. Satra Rung records folktales and mythological narratives. Satra Lô beng documents traditional games and aspects of communal life. Satra Chơ báp contains customary law, proverbs, folk poetry, agricultural knowledge, and traditional medicine (Nguyễn, 2022; Tran *et al.*, 2025) ^[12, 9]. Together, these texts preserve the cultural memory and indigenous knowledge of the Khmer community.

The value of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts therefore derives not only from the texts themselves but also from the cultural relationships that have sustained them over time. Temples, religious festivals, manuscript production, and Buddhist education continue to support one another, ensuring that the manuscripts remain an integral part of the cultural heritage system of A Giang Province rather than surviving merely as historical objects.

4. Discussion

Khmer palm leaf manuscripts possess considerable potential to contribute to the sustainable development of An Giang Province. Their value extends beyond the Buddhist texts preserved on palm leaves and is rooted in the cultural relationships that have sustained the manuscripts over many generations. Temples, religious festivals, traditional craftsmanship, and Buddhist education together provide the social and cultural setting in which the manuscripts continue to function as living heritage. This interconnected character creates opportunities to strengthen heritage conservation while supporting cultural education and spiritual tourism. At the same time, several constraints continue to limit the long-term safeguarding and wider use of this heritage.

4.1. Enhancing the Value of Khmer Palm Leaf Manuscripts through the Cultural Heritage System

The research suggests that the future of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts depends less on the manuscripts themselves than on the cultural environment in which they continue to exist. Their significance is created through continuous interaction with Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples, traditional festivals, the knowledge and techniques of palm leaf inscription, and Buddhist education. Considering these elements as a single cultural heritage system provides a stronger basis for heritage conservation than treating each component separately.

The heritage landscape of A Giang already provides favourable conditions for such an approach. Xvayton Pagoda combines several heritage values within a single cultural setting. It is recognised as a National Architectural and Artistic Monument and preserves the largest known collection of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts in Vietnam. At the same time, the knowledge and techniques of palm leaf inscription have been recognised as National Intangible Cultural Heritage. Traditional Khmer festivals continue to incorporate palm leaf manuscripts into religious ceremonies, allowing documentary heritage, sacred space, ritual practice, and traditional knowledge to remain closely connected.

These existing relationships create favourable conditions for developing cultural routes and spiritual tourism that reflect the distinctive heritage of the Khmer community (Đỗ & Hồ, 2024; Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022) ^[5, 10].

The continued involvement of the local community is equally important. Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples remain the cultural centres of phum and sóc, where religious practice, education, and community life continue to intersect (Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[13]. Palm leaf manuscripts are still used during Chôl Chnăm Thmây, Sen Dolta, Ok Om Bok, and the Kathina ceremony for scriptural recitation and Buddhist teaching (Đỗ & Hồ, 2024; Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022) ^[5, 10]. Because these practices remain part of everyday religious life, visitors encounter living cultural traditions rather than reconstructed performances created solely for tourism.

The transmission of traditional knowledge also provides an important foundation for long-term conservation. Fieldwork confirms that the skills required to produce palm leaf manuscripts continue to be taught in several Khmer temples. At Soài So Pagoda, Venerable Chau Ty continues to instruct novice monks in the preparation of palm leaves and the traditional techniques of inscription. Although only a small number of practitioners now possess these specialised skills, their continued transmission offers an important basis for safeguarding both the manuscripts and the knowledge associated with them (Đỗ & Hồ, 2024; Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023) ^[5, 13].

Conservation conditions have also improved in recent years. Several temples have received support for appropriate storage cabinets, insect prevention, and better preservation environments for manuscript collections. These measures help reduce physical deterioration while creating more favourable conditions for research, education, and public access to this documentary heritage (Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022) ^[10].

The value of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts is therefore best understood through the relationships that connect them with the wider cultural heritage of A Giang. Their historical significance, religious function, educational role, and cultural meaning continue to depend on temples, traditional festivals, manuscript production, and the communities that sustain these practices. Conservation strategies that recognise these relationships are more likely to preserve both the manuscripts and the living traditions that give them meaning.

From this perspective, a cultural heritage systems approach offers a practical framework for future conservation. Rather than focusing exclusively on individual manuscripts, it encourages coordinated management of documentary heritage, sacred architecture, intangible cultural heritage, and community participation. Such an approach not only strengthens heritage conservation but also provides a sound foundation for developing educational programmes, cultural initiatives, and spiritual tourism that remain closely connected with Khmer cultural identity.

4.2. Challenges for the Conservation and Promotion of Khmer Palm Leaf Manuscripts

The potential of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts can only be fully realised if a number of long-standing constraints are addressed. Fieldwork suggests that the principal challenges are no longer confined to the condition of the manuscripts themselves. They also involve the gradual decline of traditional knowledge, the availability of suitable raw

materials, conservation practice, and the limited integration of this heritage into broader cultural activities.

The number of people capable of reading, translating, and producing palm leaf manuscripts has declined considerably. Proficiency in Pali and ancient Khmer scripts is now largely confined to senior monks and a small number of elderly artisans. Learning the traditional methods of palm leaf inscription requires years of practice together with patience, precision, and manual skill. These demands have made it difficult to cultivate a new generation of practitioners, leaving the continuity of the manuscript tradition increasingly dependent on a very limited group of custodians (Đỗ & Hồ, 2024; Đỗ & Trần, 2023; Thích nữ Lê Thảo & Thích Hạnh Tuệ, 2023; Tran *et al.*, 2025) ^[5, 4, 13, 9].

The supply of raw materials presents another obstacle. T rang palms, once widely distributed across the Seven Mountains region, have become increasingly scarce as agricultural expansion and infrastructure development have altered the natural landscape. Several temples now obtain palm leaves from Cambodia in order to continue producing manuscripts. Reliance on external sources reduces local capacity to sustain the craft and makes the transmission of traditional knowledge more vulnerable over the long-term (Đỗ & Hồ, 2024; Tran *et al.*, 2025) ^[5, 9].

The physical care of manuscript collections also remains uneven. Although some temples have received support through improved storage cabinets and pest control measures, many collections are still stored alongside printed books and other documentary materials. Environmental conditions remain difficult to regulate consistently, while rodents, termites, and insects continue to threaten fragile manuscripts (Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022; Tran *et al.*, 2025) ^[10, 9]. Documentation practices also vary from one temple to another. Differences in cataloguing and inventory management increase the risk of loss and complicate research, conservation, and long-term collection management (Nguyễn, Tô, & Nguyễn, 2022) ^[10].

The relationship between palm leaf manuscripts and cultural tourism has likewise remained relatively limited. Public access to the manuscripts is largely confined to temple settings, while exhibitions, educational activities, and interpretation programmes remain modest in scale. Connections between palm leaf manuscripts and other recognised heritage sites across An Giang have not yet been fully developed. As a result, the educational, cultural, and tourism potential of this documentary heritage has yet to be fully realised.

These issues point to a broader challenge for heritage conservation. Preserving the manuscripts alone is not sufficient if the cultural setting that gives them meaning continues to diminish. The survival of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts depends equally on the people who read them, produce them, preserve them, and continue to use them in religious life. Temples, traditional craftsmanship, Buddhist education, and ritual practice together form the cultural environment that has sustained the manuscripts for centuries. Weakening any one of these elements inevitably affects the resilience of the heritage as a whole.

Future conservation efforts therefore need to move beyond the protection of individual manuscript collections. Greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening community-based knowledge transmission, supporting traditional craftsmanship, improving conservation standards, and creating closer connections between documentary heritage

and other cultural resources in A Giang Province. Such an approach offers a stronger basis for ensuring that Khmer palm leaf manuscripts remain a living part of the province's cultural heritage rather than becoming solely archival objects preserved for historical reference.

4.3. Implications for the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Khmer Palm Leaf Manuscripts

Khmer palm leaf manuscripts represent more than a collection of Theravada Buddhist texts. Their heritage value arises from the close relationship between the manuscripts, the knowledge and techniques of palm leaf inscription, Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples, and the communities that continue to preserve and use them. This relationship suggests that conservation should be directed towards the cultural heritage system as a whole rather than towards manuscript collections in isolation.

A favourable policy framework has already been established in An Giang Province. Decision No. 2608/QĐ UBND, issued by the People's Committee of An Giang Province on 8 November 2021, provides a legal basis for safeguarding and promoting the heritage of the Knowledge and Techniques of Palm Leaf Inscription of the Khmer People in An Giang Province through 2030. The programme includes the inventory of manuscript collections, restoration, research on traditional scripts, guidance for conservation practice, and preparation of a nomination for the UNESCO Memory of the World Committee for Asia and the Pacific (Đăng Phương, 2023) ^[3]. These measures create favourable conditions for developing conservation activities within a coherent and long-term framework.

The preservation of existing manuscript collections remains an essential priority. Palm leaf manuscripts require systematic inventory, cataloguing, and documentation based on common professional standards. Conservation facilities within Khmer temples also require further improvement in order to reduce the effects of humidity, insects, and other environmental factors. Expanding the digitisation of manuscript collections would strengthen documentation, facilitate scholarly research, and improve long-term access to these documentary sources.

The continuity of the manuscript tradition depends equally on the transmission of knowledge. Teaching Pali, ancient Khmer scripts, and the traditional techniques of palm leaf inscription within Khmer temples remains essential because these institutions continue to provide the cultural environment in which the manuscripts retain their religious, educational, and social functions. Continued support for monks and artisans engaged in manuscript production and conservation would also strengthen the capacity of local communities to safeguard this living heritage.

Attention should also be given to the conservation of raw material resources. Field observations indicate that natural populations of t rang palms have declined throughout the Seven Mountains region. Measures to restore and cultivate this species should therefore accompany the conservation of manuscript collections. Maintaining a stable supply of palm leaves will help ensure the continuity of traditional manuscript production while reducing dependence on imported materials.

The relationships linking palm leaf manuscripts with other components of the cultural heritage system also deserve greater attention. Xvayton Pagoda, traditional Khmer festivals, and heritage sites in Tri Tôn provide opportunities

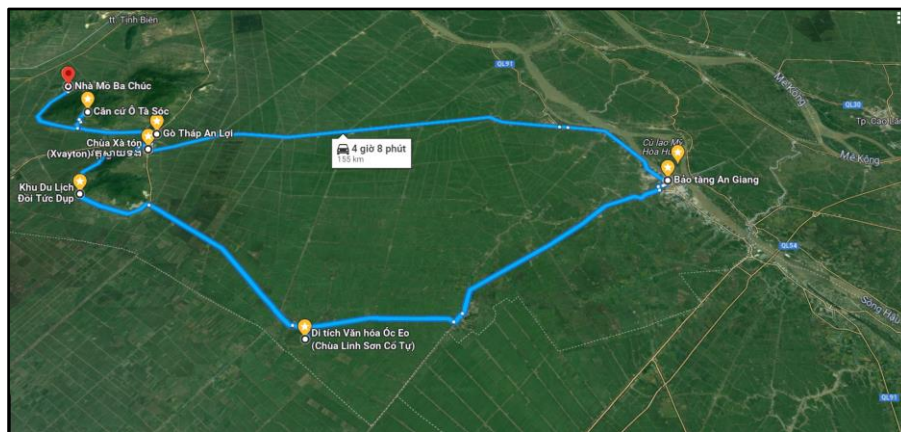
to develop thematic cultural programmes that present the manuscripts within their historical, religious, and cultural context. Any form of heritage interpretation should remain grounded in the protection of authenticity and cultural significance. Cultural tourism can support conservation and public education, but it should not become the principal objective of heritage management.

Long-term conservation also requires close cooperation among heritage authorities, Khmer temples, researchers, and the Khmer community. Each contributes knowledge, experience, and responsibilities that cannot readily be replaced by other institutions. Community participation remains especially important because the cultural meaning of palm leaf manuscripts continues to depend upon religious practice, knowledge transmission, and everyday engagement

within Khmer society.

Viewing Khmer palm leaf manuscripts as part of an interconnected cultural heritage system offers a more appropriate framework for future conservation. The manuscripts cannot be separated from Khmer temples, traditional craftsmanship, religious festivals, or the communities that continue to sustain these traditions. Recognising these relationships provides a stronger basis for integrating heritage conservation with cultural development, education, and sustainable tourism in A Giang Province.

Figure 2 illustrates the connectivity route linking Xvayton Pagoda with nearby heritage sites in A Giang Province, highlighting its strategic position within the provincial cultural heritage system and its potential to support integrated heritage conservation and sustainable cultural tourism.



Source: Compiled by the author using Google Maps (<https://www.google.com/maps>).

Fig 2: Connectivity route linking Xvayton Pagoda (Xa Ton Pagoda) with nearby heritage sites in A Giang Province.

5. Conclusion

Khmer palm leaf manuscripts occupy a distinctive place within the cultural heritage of A Giang Province because they preserve not only Theravada Buddhist texts but also the historical knowledge, traditional craftsmanship, and cultural practices of the Khmer community. Their heritage value is created through enduring relationships with Khmer Theravada Buddhist temples, the knowledge and techniques of palm leaf inscription, traditional festivals, and the communities that continue to preserve and use them. Understanding these relationships is essential for interpreting the manuscripts within their original cultural context.

The novelty of this research lies in examining Khmer palm leaf manuscripts through the perspective of a cultural heritage system. Instead of treating the manuscripts as isolated documentary sources, the study considers their connections with tangible cultural heritage, intangible cultural heritage, religious institutions, and community practice. This perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of how documentary heritage acquires and maintains cultural significance within a living heritage environment.

The study also contributes to heritage scholarship by demonstrating that the conservation of documentary heritage cannot be separated from the continuity of traditional knowledge, religious practice, and community participation. This perspective extends current research on Khmer palm leaf manuscripts and offers a framework that may be applied to the study of comparable manuscript traditions elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

From a practical perspective, the research supports an

integrated approach to heritage conservation that combines the protection of manuscript collections with knowledge transmission, conservation practice, traditional craftsmanship, and heritage interpretation. Strengthening these relationships creates opportunities to support cultural education and sustainable tourism while maintaining the authenticity and cultural significance of Khmer palm leaf manuscripts. Such an approach also provides a useful foundation for heritage management policies that seek to balance cultural continuity with sustainable development in A Giang Province and the Mekong Delta.

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