



Safeguarding and Promoting the Cultural Values of the Khmu People in Nghe An Province: A Stakeholder-Based Approach

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ABSTRACT: Safeguarding the cultural heritage of the Khmu (Khơ Mú) people in Nghe An requires attention to living practices and to the relationships among communities, authorities, cultural professionals, educational institutions, and market actors. This study analyses stakeholder roles, potential tensions, and governance conditions in safeguarding and promoting Khmu cultural values. Qualitative document analysis integrates heritage-management scholarship, Vietnamese legislation, UNESCO instruments, and publicly documented initiatives in Nghe An. Evidence is interpreted through stakeholder analysis and participatory-governance concepts without claiming field interviews or original survey data. The synthesis identifies five connected governance problems: uneven decision authority, event-centred transmission, weak coordination between documentation and everyday practice, the separation of craft promotion from community benefit, and limited evidence of long-term outcomes. A five-stage SHARE framework-Stakeholder recognition, Heritage co-mapping, Authority and consent, Resource and benefit agreements, and Evaluation of continuity-is proposed. Safeguarding and promotion should be treated as a negotiated, community-accountable process rather than an accumulation of festivals, digital records, or market products. The framework offers operational questions for local planning while requiring subsequent field-based assessment.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Living heritage resides in relationships among language, memory, ritual, material skills and the communities that recreate them. The UNESCO Convention emphasises both viability and participation by heritage bearers (UNESCO, 2003). A public event may showcase a craft or song without improving the conditions in which its knowledge is practised and transmitted.

The Khmu (Khơ Mú) in Nghe An provide an instructive setting. A 2025 Báo Văn Hóa account describes life-cycle customs, oral traditions and performance, and reports training involving more than 70 participants from two villages in Yên Na commune (Quỳnh Vy, 2025). It also identifies concerns about language, clothing and customary knowledge. One reported activity, however, cannot establish regional conservation trends.

A September 2026 report from the Ministry of Science and Technology describes proposals to connect Khmu basket-making and plaiting in western Nghe An with raw-material supply, product development, cooperative organisation, and markets. Its Na Be example is identified using administrative names following the 2025 reorganisation (Ministry of Science and Technology, 2026). The report establishes an initiative and its proposed direction, not verified improvements in household incomes, customary practice, or artisan control. It raises concrete questions of authorship, remuneration, and intergenerational learning.

Specialist evidence complicates simplified narratives. Luong (2018) examines Hrôi worship in the former Ky Son district; Bui (2023) discusses minority-cultural changes in western Nghe An; Panhyathong and Nguyen (2025) study Khmu folk-song transmission across northern Vietnam; and Pham and Nguyen (2025) investigate social ties and livelihood practices in Ky Son. These works concern different units and methods and cannot be combined as a single provincial impact dataset.

The 2024 Vietnamese cultural heritage law, effective 1 July 2025, frames domestic responsibilities (National Assembly, 2024). UNESCO instruments emphasise participation and consent (UNESCO, 2003, 2015). Yet regulations alone cannot resolve conflicts over who selects materials, receives payment or authorises reuse when ministries, households, cultural institutions and buyers pursue different objectives.

Stakeholder analysis clarifies who holds knowledge, resources, decision authority and exposure to harm. Freeman (1984) explains the relevance of affected parties; Bryson (2004) translates that concern into identification and engagement techniques. Colomer (2023) emphasises participatory heritage authority. The policy question is therefore not simply which agency manages a tradition, but how its practitioners influence consequential choices.

The gap is an operational explanation linking stakeholder relationships to both safeguarding and value promotion for documented Khmu practices. Three questions guide the analysis: RQ1, whose roles matter? RQ2, what tensions accompany documentation, teaching and commercial use? RQ3, how could shared decision processes be made reviewable? The contribution is a conceptual framework, not a measured account of stakeholder attitudes or project effectiveness.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. Theoretical background and analytical framework

Cultural values as living, relational heritage

UNESCO defines intangible heritage through practices, knowledge, skills and associated objects and spaces (UNESCO, 2003). An artefact therefore cannot be evaluated independently of material preparation, its maker, functions and learning. Likewise, song notation cannot reproduce vocal conduct, occasions or relations among performers.

Smith (2006) treats heritage as a process of authorising and valuing cultural meanings. Selecting only visually attractive items can privilege institutional or tourist priorities over less marketable household knowledge. Community mapping should therefore document neglected activities as well as stage-ready products.

Khmu heritage is not an internally uniform repertoire. Local variants and generational differences require identification rather than assuming that one staged song or object represents every community. The 2025 report does not supply a province-wide ethnography (Quynh Vy, 2025). Research on Hrôi worship in the former Ky Son district shows that ritual practices can persist amid changing interpretations (Luong, 2018). A study of Khmu folk songs across northern Vietnam documents the need for collection and intergenerational transmission but cannot be treated as evidence for every Nghe An village (Panhyathong & Nguyen, 2025). Thus the article distinguishes site-specific documentation from propositions intended for wider testing.

Stakeholder identification, legitimacy, and uneven power

Different actors can value the same practice differently: bearers may stress respectful representation, schools accessible learning, agencies accountability, and enterprises product viability. Stakeholder identification must acknowledge such tensions and connect participation to decisions, rather than merely prepare an organisational list (Freeman, 1984; Bryson, 2004).

Arnstein (1969) distinguishes participation that influences decisions from symbolic consultation. Her model is not a direct scale for ethnic-minority governance, but the underlying distinction is useful: appearing at a festival does not prove control over repertoire, payment, recording or future teaching.

Social-relations research in the former Ky Son border area shows that kinship and cross-border connections matter to Hmong and Khmu livelihoods (Pham & Nguyen, 2025). It does not test the present governance framework, but cautions against limiting the stakeholder map to officials and event organisers.

Colomer (2023) highlights how the concept of heritage communities reshapes relations between professional experts and residents. Expertise remains necessary for conservation standards, legal compliance, and documentation, but its appropriate role is facilitative rather than exclusive. UNESCO's Ethical Principles similarly place communities in a primary position in safeguarding their own intangible heritage and recognise consultation and informed consent (UNESCO, 2015). Together these works support an understanding of legitimacy based on both technical competence and community-recognised authority.

Safeguarding, promotion, and value capture

Safeguarding seeks to maintain the conditions that permit practices to remain viable; promotion increases recognition, access, or economic and social opportunities. The two objectives can support each other without being interchangeable. Cultural performances may attract audiences and generate resources, while a craft-market initiative may create reasons for younger people to acquire specialised techniques. Yet attention, sales, and publicity do not demonstrate that community members still control meanings and transmission conditions. A highly visible heritage product can exist alongside a declining practice.

The 2026 account of Khmu basket-making and plaiting illustrates both sides of this issue. It describes possible links among raw materials, organisation, design, product standards, and markets, while identifying fragmented value-chain relationships as an obstacle (Ministry of Science and Technology, 2026). The account does not establish that a mature value chain has already been achieved. It therefore offers evidence of a current development direction and a useful case for examining responsibilities, rather than proof of successful cultural revitalisation. An appropriate evaluation would also ask whether artisans retain authorship, receive fair compensation, and have time and support to teach.

Vietnamese studies outside the Khmu context help specify which management claims can be examined, but they must not be misread as evidence of local impacts. Research in Hanoi links conservation awareness with behavioural change and participation (Nguyen, 2025), and a study of heritage communication highlights community feedback as an evaluative input (Phuong & Lam, 2025). Evidence from Thanh Hoa marine heritage identifies infrastructure, human resources, policy and participation as interacting conditions (Hung & Tuyen, 2026). Work on brocade-based tourism underscores the need to connect craft promotion to product quality and community relations (Pham et al., 2025). These are bounded comparative insights, not findings about Khmu households.

Institutional coordination and cultural rights

Vietnamese legislation and UNESCO instruments establish safeguarding responsibilities and participatory principles (National Assembly, 2024; UNESCO, 2003, 2015). Their general provisions do not determine who may record a restricted narrative, approve a performance adaptation, authorise commercial reproduction, or resolve disagreements among households. These decisions require locally negotiated protocols with clearly designated participants and routes for correction or appeal.

In operational terms, a project should identify the practice and its bearers before seeking permission; record the purposes and limits of access; state whether images and recordings may be reused; provide a correction route; and negotiate benefit sharing if commercial development is proposed. These are design recommendations, not a claim that the procedures currently exist throughout Nghe An.

2.2. Research methods

Research design

This article uses qualitative documentary analysis and a structured conceptual synthesis. Its analytical object is the allocation of stakeholder roles in safeguarding and promoting living Khmu cultural practices in Nghe An, not the statistical distribution of heritage attitudes. The methodological choice reflects the availability of policy, scholarly, and publicly reported local material, as well as the absence of a supplied field-interview archive or representative community survey. The objective is to develop questions and operational principles that can be tested and negotiated in subsequent participatory research.

Source scope and selection

Five source categories informed the synthesis: (1) UNESCO instruments; (2) Vietnamese law; (3) stakeholder and heritage-governance scholarship; (4) specialist works on Khmu ritual, folk songs, minority culture and border livelihoods; and (5) two dated reports on transmission and basket-making initiatives (Luong, 2018; Bui, 2023; Panhyathong & Nguyen, 2025; Pham & Nguyen, 2025; Quynh Vy, 2025; Ministry of Science and Technology, 2026). These categories serve different evidentiary functions.

Materials were selected for their relevance to a specified conceptual, legal or contextual claim and the availability of traceable authorship. Scholarship establishes limited observations and theory; official and media reports document initiatives. The review does not claim exhaustive screening, representative interviews or measured effects. Its framework must be tested in participatory fieldwork.

Analytical procedure and credibility

The analysis compared five fields: heritage practice, stakeholders, decision authority, intervention, and continuity evidence. First, reported observations were separated from legal and ethical principles. Second, tensions were identified by contrasting actors' objectives. Third, the tensions informed the SHARE stages. Findings, inferences and recommendations were kept distinct throughout.

Primary instruments support normative claims; scholarship supports bounded cultural observations; dated reports support descriptions of initiatives. Evidence from other provinces is considered only to formulate questions. Direct accounts of consent, income distribution or local effectiveness are unavailable and cannot be inferred.

III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. Mapping the differentiated stakeholder ecology

A stakeholder map cannot treat either "community" or "administration" as a single actor. Heritage bearers include singers, artisans, ritual specialists, families and young learners; their priorities may differ. Additional actors include public cultural offices, schools, researchers, cooperatives, designers and buyers. Different interests and uneven access to resources make explicit responsibility assignment necessary; the map is analytical, not a census.

Table 1. Stakeholder roles, contributions, and accountability questions

Stakeholder group	Potential contribution	Decision right requiring attention	Evidence to review
Heritage bearers and households	Source knowledge, skills, transmission, local meanings	Selection, attribution, consent, correction	Signed or otherwise documented agreement; community feedback

Stakeholder group	Potential contribution	Decision right requiring attention	Evidence to review
Local cultural authorities	Coordination, legal procedures, budgets, inventories	Priorities and allocation of public resources	Published criteria; records of consultation
Schools and cultural educators	Intergenerational learning and teaching continuity	Curriculum adaptation and representation	Teaching materials; learner progression
Researchers and documentation teams	Description, audiovisual recording, cataloguing	Interpretation, data storage, access levels	Provenance metadata; review and correction trail
Craft groups and market partners	Material supply, design, income and distribution	Product changes and sharing of value	Agreements, price transparency, artisan remuneration

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis from UNESCO (2003, 2015), Bryson (2004), Colomer (2023), specialist Khmu studies, and the two recent reports.

The table is a normative role map, not a roster of organisations confirmed to be participating in one programme. Its main contribution is to require each proposed project to specify who supplies cultural knowledge, who takes decisions, who carries risks, and who can question an outcome. This distinction becomes especially relevant when funding bodies and promotional partners hold substantial resources but practitioners bear the greatest risk of misrepresentation.

3.2. Transmission initiatives and the continuity problem

The reported 2025 training involving more than 70 participants confirms that an organised transmission activity took place (Quynh Vy, 2025). Its duration and subsequent effects on sustained practice are not established. An evaluation would track repeated learning, practitioner leadership and learners' opportunities to use knowledge beyond a short course.

A practical distinction follows between outputs and continuity. A workshop can be counted as an output; its contribution to safeguarding depends on subsequent participation, the quality of acquired skill, the availability of masters and practice contexts, and the ability of younger participants to integrate learning into their lives. Attendance is therefore insufficient as a standalone indicator. A more useful record would document repertoire taught, source holders recognised, learner follow-up, and locally defined indicators of meaningful practice.

3.3. Craft development and the distribution of value

The 2026 report places plaiting and basket-making within a proposed supply-and-market chain, but does not document the actual distribution of profit or authority (Ministry of Science and Technology, 2026). The relevant governance test is whether makers shape design, negotiate fees and retain transmission opportunities as products develop.

Four safeguards emerge from the cross-source analysis: traceability of source knowledge, agreement over substantial design alterations, fair recognition and compensation for artisans, and ongoing investment in transmission. For instance, a new woven household product may responsibly vary dimensions or colours for contemporary use, provided that the innovation is not misleadingly presented as an unchanged ritual object. These criteria constitute proposed management tests; the available reports do not establish whether specific current products already meet them.

3.4. Five recurring governance tensions

The synthesis identifies five governance risks, not five proven province-wide failures: unequal authority, event-centred transmission, fragmented documentation, weak benefit arrangements and output-centred evaluation. Each risk is plausible in the intersection of cultural management and promotion, but its presence and extent in any locality must be empirically examined.

Table 2. Governance tensions and proposed balancing measures

Tension	Risk when prioritised narrowly	Proposed balancing measure
Administrative authority / community authority	Attendance is mistaken for decision influence	Co-approval of source descriptions and use conditions
Public event / everyday transmission	Short-lived visibility without durable learning	Follow-up sessions and locally defined practice indicators

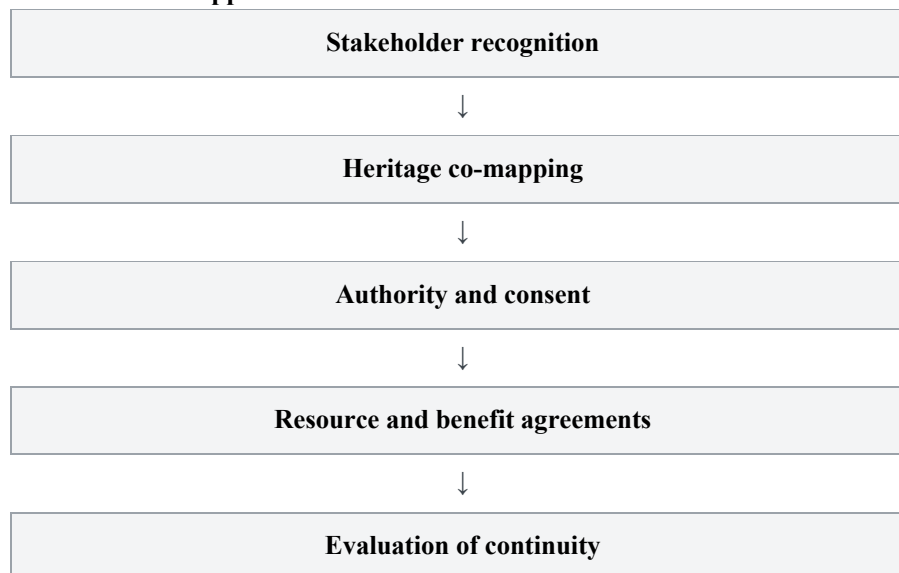
Tension	Risk when prioritised narrowly	Proposed balancing measure
Open documentation / cultural consent	Uncontextualised copying or unrestricted reuse	Tiered access, attribution, and correction procedures
Market innovation / community benefit	Cultural symbolism detached from makers	Transparent product histories and benefit agreements
Output counting / safeguarding impact	Activity volume presented as vitality	Track continuity, capability, and community assessment

Source: Author's synthesis of stakeholder and safeguarding principles; not a statistical assessment of Nghe An.

3.5. The SHARE framework for stakeholder-based safeguarding

The five tensions are translated into a governance sequence termed SHARE: Stakeholder recognition, Heritage co-mapping, Authority and consent, Resource and benefit agreements, and Evaluation of continuity. The sequence is iterative rather than a one-off checklist. Its logic is to establish legitimate participation before selecting public outputs, then attach each activity to rights, responsibilities, and indicators of continued cultural practice. A project can revisit the first stages when new practitioners, variants, or concerns become visible.

Figure 1. The SHARE framework for applied review



Source: Author-developed conceptual framework (proposed; not empirically validated).

Table 3. Operational questions and evidence for the SHARE framework

Stage	Decision question	Minimum evidence
Stakeholder recognition	Who holds knowledge, resources, interests, and cultural risks?	Inclusive actor map; identified under-represented groups
Heritage co-mapping	Which practices, variations, contexts, and transmission pathways matter?	Community-reviewed heritage descriptions
Authority and consent	Who may record, represent, publish, alter, or commercialise?	Documented permissions and correction process
Resource and benefit agreements	Who contributes and who receives cultural or economic value?	Assigned responsibilities; transparent payment and reinvestment rules
Evaluation of continuity	Do people continue to learn, practise, and shape decisions?	Follow-up evidence; bearer-led evaluation; revisions

Source: Author's proposed conceptual framework, informed by UNESCO (2003, 2015) and participatory-governance literature.

SHARE begins with identifying cultural bearers before selecting a product. Co-mapping documents local variants; negotiated authority establishes consent and conditions of use; resource agreements identify contributions and benefits; continuity evaluation examines repeated practice and community judgement. These stages are iterative and can be revisited when circumstances change.

IV. DISCUSSION

4.1. Theoretical contribution: participation as decision infrastructure

The conceptual contribution is to move from listing stakeholders to examining how decisions are actually authorised. Freeman (1984) and Bryson (2004) support stakeholder identification, while Arnstein (1969) warns against confusing attendance with influence. Applied here, the central issue is whether cultural bearers can shape recording, teaching, public display and market use, alongside the legitimate statutory responsibilities of public agencies.

Participatory heritage governance requires a balance between institutional expertise and community agency (Colomer, 2023). SHARE turns that principle into decisions about access, attribution and benefits before publicity or product design begins, without assuming that a single representative speaks for all households.

4.2. Implications for cultural management in Nghe An

Two documented initiatives illustrate distinct management demands: a Khmu performance-transmission activity and an exploration of market pathways for plaited craft products (Quynh Vy, 2025; Ministry of Science and Technology, 2026). Specialist studies point to ritual interpretation, song knowledge and family networks that cannot be reduced to those initiatives (Luong, 2018; Panhyathong & Nguyen, 2025; Pham & Nguyen, 2025). Both strands need protocols for recognising bearers, setting conditions of use, recording contributions, and reviewing whether activities lead to continued practice.

For public cultural programmes, an annual activity plan might distinguish documentation outputs, transmission activities, and continuity outcomes. Documentation records should explain source village, source holder, recording circumstances, linguistic variations, and access conditions. Training programmes could connect one-off workshops with recurring local clubs or school-community partnerships. Craft projects could make artisan recognition and benefit-sharing explicit in agreements with cooperatives, designers, and distributors. These are recommendations supported by governance principles, not descriptions of existing province-wide practice.

Administrative naming requires similar care. Public reports sometimes refer to former district and commune designations, while 2025 restructuring changed local administrative labels. Researchers should preserve the original designation when citing historical documents and identify the corresponding current place where official sources permit this (Ministry of Science and Technology, 2026). Such precision is part of provenance, especially when tracking the same people and traditions across documents produced in different years.

This boundary matters when incorporating wider research on heritage memory and narrative. Vu and Nguyen (2026) link identity, memory, place attachment and community engagement to sustainable cultural tourism, while Nguyen and Nguyen (2026) analyse storytelling in heritage visitor experiences. Neither study measures Khmu ritual continuity. Their narrower relevance is to suggest that public interpretation, memory and the ability of participants to correct representations should be evaluated alongside visitor numbers or market exposure. Digital documentation also needs consent and stewardship arrangements rather than merely more storage, as Phuong (2026) argues in the Vietnamese context.

4.3. Evaluation without reducing culture to indicators

Quantitative measures remain useful for administration: the number of transmission sessions, documented repertoires, participating artisans, or learning products can make delivery auditable. Their limitation is that they do not automatically indicate cultural significance or continuity. Evaluating safeguarding thus requires qualitative review by recognised practitioners and affected households. Questions concerning accuracy, opportunities for participation, and control over representation may be more informative than simple counts of visitors or views.

The framework also avoids a romantic assumption that 'authenticity' means unchanged practice. Communities can legitimately innovate, adopt new techniques, and decide which forms of knowledge may circulate. The purpose of joint governance is to make transformations intelligible and accountable, not to freeze cultural life. The value of a revised craft product or adapted performance therefore depends on its relation to identified sources, the opportunities it creates for practitioners, and the fairness of its representation.

Evidence from the Hue Imperial Citadel illustrates how interpretation quality can matter for responsible visitor behaviour (Ha et al., 2026); however, this is an architectural tourism study and cannot establish causal effects of Khmu cultural programmes. Such cross-domain sources are used only to formulate evaluative questions, not to substitute for field-based ethnic-cultural inquiry.

4.4. Limitations and future research

This study has four limitations. First, the analysis draws on selected published studies and public reports; it does not itself conduct ethnographic fieldwork across Khmu villages. Second, the stakeholder map is conceptual and cannot establish the actual distribution of authority, internal community differences, or the quality of existing agreements. Third, the proposed criteria were not piloted

with artisans, singers, youth, or cultural officials. Fourth, economic and cultural outcomes of weaving-related initiatives cannot be inferred from reporting on plans and early activities. Future work should undertake participatory mapping, interviews in appropriate languages, observation of transmission and production, and longitudinal assessment with community-defined indicators.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusions

Safeguarding and promoting Khmu cultural values in Nghe An requires more than placing inherited practices on public stages or presenting traditional skills as marketable resources. Published evidence documents specific ritual, musical, social, and livelihood relationships as well as newer initiatives in performance transmission and craft development, but does not establish the long-term effects of those initiatives. Drawing on stakeholder theory, participatory governance, national legislation, and UNESCO principles, this study identifies five relationships requiring active management: authority, transmission, documentation, economic value, and evaluation.

The SHARE framework provides an integrated sequence through which cultural bearers, authorities, educators, researchers, and market partners can negotiate those relationships. Its central proposition is that a safeguarding outcome should be judged by the continuity of people, knowledge, practice, and decision rights, not only by the quantity of cultural products delivered. Community-based field testing is needed before the framework can be regarded as an empirically validated model.

5.2. Policy and practical recommendations

First, cultural management programmes should begin with stakeholder recognition and community-reviewed mapping of heritage practices. The proposed SHARE sequence requires identifying bearers, local variants, learning contexts and the parties affected by decisions before choosing promotional activities. Participation should include documented opportunities to review descriptions, challenge misrepresentation and influence the conditions of use.

Second, documentation and public communication should specify source holders, recording circumstances, permissible access, attribution and procedures for correction. Agreements should distinguish archival preservation, school-based transmission and commercial reproduction so that greater visibility does not imply unrestricted reuse of culturally sensitive material.

Third, transmission initiatives should extend beyond one-off workshops and festivals. Schools, cultural agencies and recognised practitioners can cooperate on recurring learning activities, while evaluation records participation over time, skills acquired and opportunities to practise in the community. Workshop attendance should be reported as an output rather than as proof of long-term safeguarding.

Fourth, any craft value-chain initiative should make artisan attribution, remuneration, design changes and reinvestment in transmission transparent. Community consultation and benefit-sharing arrangements should be established before presenting new commercial products as representative cultural heritage.

Finally, implementation of the SHARE framework should be piloted through participatory mapping, field interviews and longitudinal assessment. Local practitioners and households should help select continuity indicators; claims of effectiveness should be made only after gathering evidence on actual decision authority, cultural practice and the distribution of benefits.

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