

# Global Dialogues in Humanities and Pedagogy

## Cultural Tourism and Local Language Use in Siem Reap

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the intricate relationship between cultural tourism and local language use in Siem Reap, Cambodia, focusing on how tourism development impacts the preservation and evolution of Khmer language practices. Through ethnographic observation, interviews, and linguistic analysis, this research explores how the tourism industry influences language dynamics among local communities surrounding the Angkor Archaeological Park. The findings reveal complex patterns of linguistic adaptation, where local communities navigate between preserving traditional Khmer linguistic heritage and adapting to tourism demands through multilingual competence. The study demonstrates that while tourism creates opportunities for language maintenance through cultural performances and heritage interpretation, it simultaneously introduces challenges related to language commodification and shift. The research contributes to understanding the dual nature of tourism's impact on linguistic heritage in developing nations, offering insights for sustainable tourism planning that balances economic development with cultural preservation. Results indicate that strategic language planning initiatives can harness tourism's potential to support rather than undermine local linguistic diversity.

## INTRODUCTION

Siem Reap, Cambodia, stands as one of Southeast Asia's most prominent cultural tourism destinations, attracting millions of visitors annually to experience the magnificent Angkor Archaeological Park and its surrounding cultural landscape. The relationship between tourism development and local language use in this context presents a compelling case study for understanding how heritage tourism impacts linguistic diversity and cultural preservation in developing nations. As tourism continues to expand in Cambodia, questions arise regarding the effects of this industry on the maintenance and evolution of local Khmer language practices among communities whose livelihoods have become increasingly intertwined with the tourism economy.

The significance of language in cultural tourism extends beyond mere communication, encompassing identity formation, cultural transmission, and community cohesion (Muhsyanur, 2023). Crystal (2000) argues that language serves as the primary vehicle for cultural expression and community identity, making its preservation crucial for maintaining authentic cultural tourism experiences. In the context of Siem Reap, where ancient Khmer civilization is the primary tourist attraction, the role of contemporary Khmer language becomes particularly complex, as it must serve both as a living community language and as a medium for heritage interpretation.

Tourism's impact on local languages has been extensively documented across various global contexts, with scholars identifying both preservative and erosive effects. Hinch and Butler (2007) observe that tourism can create economic incentives for language maintenance through cultural performances and heritage interpretation services, while simultaneously introducing pressures for linguistic homogenization through the dominance of international languages in tourism interactions. This duality is particularly pronounced in destinations like Siem Reap, where tourism development has transformed local economic structures and social dynamics over the past three decades.

The rapid growth of tourism in Siem Reap following Cambodia's political stabilization in the 1990s has created unprecedented opportunities for economic development while raising concerns about cultural commodification and authenticity. UNESCO (2008) emphasizes that heritage sites like Angkor represent living cultural landscapes where contemporary communities maintain traditional practices alongside tourism activities. The linguistic dimensions of this living heritage require careful examination to understand how tourism influences language use patterns, intergenerational transmission, and community language attitudes.

Linguistic diversity in tourism contexts presents both challenges and opportunities for destination communities. Nettle and Romaine (2000) demonstrate that economic pressures often force minority language communities to prioritize dominant languages for economic survival, potentially leading to language shift and cultural homogenization. However, in cultural tourism destinations, local languages

may acquire economic value through their association with authentic cultural experiences, creating new contexts for language maintenance and revitalization.

The Cambodian context adds additional complexity to language-tourism dynamics due to the country's history of political upheaval and cultural disruption during the Khmer Rouge period (1975-1979), which significantly impacted traditional knowledge transmission systems. Ledgerwood (2012) notes that post-conflict Cambodia has experienced challenges in maintaining traditional cultural practices, making tourism's role in cultural preservation particularly significant. The revival of cultural tourism in Siem Reap has coincided with broader efforts to reconstruct Cambodian cultural identity and heritage knowledge systems.

Community-based approaches to cultural tourism have gained recognition as strategies for ensuring that tourism development benefits local populations while preserving cultural authenticity (Muhsyanur, 2020). Salazar (2012) argues that community involvement in tourism planning and implementation can help maintain cultural practices, including language use, by ensuring that tourism activities align with community values and priorities. In Siem Reap, various community-based tourism initiatives have emerged, offering insights into how local communities can leverage tourism for cultural preservation.

The digital age has introduced new dimensions to language use in tourism contexts, with social media and online platforms creating new spaces for linguistic interaction between tourists and local communities. Thurlow and Jaworski (2010) explore how digital technologies reshape tourism communication, creating opportunities for language preservation through documentation and sharing of cultural content. These technological developments have particular relevance in Siem Reap, where digital platforms increasingly mediate tourist-community interactions.

Gender dynamics in tourism-related language use present another important consideration, as women and men may have different roles in tourism activities and consequently different patterns of multilingual competence development. Swain (1995) highlights how tourism can create new economic opportunities for women while potentially altering traditional gender roles and associated linguistic practices. Understanding these gendered dimensions is crucial for comprehensive analysis of tourism's linguistic impacts.

The sustainability of cultural tourism depends significantly on maintaining authentic cultural expressions, including language use, while meeting tourist expectations and economic needs. Richards (2007) emphasizes that sustainable cultural tourism requires balancing preservation with adaptation, allowing cultures to evolve naturally while maintaining their distinctive characteristics. This balance is particularly challenging in language use, where authenticity must be negotiated alongside practical communication needs in multilingual tourism environments.

## **METHOD**

This research employed a mixed-methods approach combining ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews, and linguistic analysis to examine the relationship between cultural tourism and local language use in Siem Reap. The methodology was designed to capture both the quantitative patterns of language use and the qualitative experiences of community members engaged in tourism activities. Data collection took place over a twelve-month period from January 2023 to December 2023, allowing for observation of seasonal variations in tourism patterns and their linguistic implications.

The study population consisted of 120 participants from various tourism-related occupations, including tour guides, hotel staff, restaurant workers, artisans, cultural performers, and community members involved in homestay programs. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across age groups, gender, occupational categories, and levels of tourism engagement. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) note, mixed-methods research requires careful attention to sampling strategies that support both quantitative analysis and qualitative understanding of complex social phenomena. Additionally, 30 tourists from different cultural backgrounds were interviewed to provide insights into their language expectations and experiences during their visits to Siem Reap.

Data collection methods included participant observation in various tourism settings, recorded interviews in Khmer and English, linguistic competence assessments, and analysis of tourism materials and signage. Ethnographic observation was conducted in key tourism sites including Angkor Archaeological Park, local markets, cultural performance venues, and community-based tourism locations. Following the methodological frameworks suggested by Pink (2015), the research employed visual ethnography techniques to document linguistic landscapes and multilingual signage throughout the tourism areas. Interview protocols were developed based on established frameworks for investigating language attitudes and use patterns in multilingual communities, incorporating insights from Garrett (2010) regarding effective approaches to studying language attitudes in tourism contexts.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Linguistic Adaptation Patterns in Tourism Contexts**

The analysis reveals sophisticated patterns of linguistic adaptation among Siem Reap's tourism workers, characterized by strategic multilingual competence development that serves both economic and cultural preservation functions. Tourism workers demonstrate remarkable linguistic flexibility, seamlessly switching between Khmer for community interactions, English for international tourists, and increasingly, Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean for specific tourist demographics. This multilingual competence extends beyond basic communication to include cultural interpretation skills, where workers must translate not only language but cultural concepts and historical narratives for diverse audiences.

Participants consistently reported that tourism work has enhanced rather than diminished their appreciation for Khmer language, particularly in its role as the authentic voice for explaining Cambodian culture and history. Tour guides specifically mentioned developing specialized vocabulary in Khmer related to archaeological and historical topics, as they found that understanding traditional Khmer terms improved their ability to provide accurate cultural interpretations in foreign languages. This finding challenges assumptions about tourism leading to language erosion, instead suggesting that cultural tourism can create new contexts for language learning and maintenance.

The data indicates a generational divide in linguistic adaptation strategies, with younger tourism workers (ages 18-35) demonstrating greater comfort with rapid code-switching and multilingual performance, while older workers (ages 45+) often prefer maintaining clearer linguistic boundaries between professional and community contexts. Younger participants frequently described their multilingual abilities as a source of pride and cultural identity, viewing their linguistic skills as a way of representing Cambodia positively to international visitors.

Seasonal variations in tourism patterns significantly influence language use dynamics, with peak tourist seasons creating intensive multilingual environments where workers may use four or five languages daily, while low seasons provide opportunities for linguistic reflection and traditional language practice. Workers reported that these seasonal rhythms help maintain balance between international communication demands and community language maintenance, suggesting that tourism's cyclical nature may actually support rather than undermine linguistic diversity.

### **Cultural Performance and Language Preservation**

Traditional cultural performances for tourists have emerged as significant contexts for Khmer language preservation and transmission, creating formal and informal learning environments where traditional linguistic forms are maintained and taught. Apsara dance performances, traditional music presentations, and storytelling sessions conducted for tourists require performers to maintain expertise in classical Khmer vocabulary, pronunciation patterns, and narrative structures that might otherwise be declining in everyday community use.

Performance contexts create intergenerational learning opportunities where master artists pass traditional linguistic knowledge to younger performers, often explicitly connecting language skills to cultural authenticity and professional success in tourism. Performers consistently emphasized that tourist audiences' appreciation for authentic cultural expression motivates them to maintain high standards in traditional language use, creating economic incentives for linguistic preservation that extend beyond the performance context into community cultural education programs.

The analysis of performance texts reveals that traditional stories and songs presented for tourists often retain archaic Khmer vocabulary and grammatical

structures that have largely disappeared from conversational Khmer, effectively making tourism venues repositories for historical linguistic forms. This preservation extends to religious and ceremonial language, as many cultural performances incorporate Buddhist chants and traditional blessings that maintain Sanskrit and Pali loanwords in Khmer.

However, adaptation for tourist audiences sometimes involves linguistic simplification or modification of traditional texts to enhance comprehensibility and engagement. Performers must navigate between maintaining linguistic authenticity and ensuring tourist accessibility, often developing multiple versions of traditional pieces tailored to different audience types. This adaptive process demonstrates creative linguistic negotiation rather than simple preservation or erosion, suggesting that tourism creates new evolutionary contexts for traditional linguistic forms.

### **Tourism-Driven Language Policy and Planning**

The growth of tourism in Siem Reap has stimulated both formal and informal language planning initiatives aimed at supporting multilingual competence while maintaining Khmer language vitality. Government-sponsored training programs for tourism workers emphasize English language skills while incorporating modules on Khmer cultural vocabulary and traditional knowledge systems, reflecting recognition that effective cultural tourism requires deep community language knowledge alongside international communication abilities.

Local educational institutions have developed specialized curricula combining foreign language instruction with Khmer cultural studies, creating new academic contexts where traditional language knowledge is systematically documented and transmitted. These programs often involve collaboration between schools, tourism businesses, and cultural organizations, creating networks that support both economic development and cultural preservation. The analysis reveals that these educational initiatives have increased community awareness of Khmer language richness and cultural significance.

Private sector language planning efforts, including hotel chain training programs and tour operator certification requirements, have established standards for cultural knowledge that require workers to demonstrate competence in traditional Khmer terminology related to history, archaeology, and cultural practices. These professional standards create economic incentives for maintaining specialized Khmer vocabulary while developing foreign language skills, effectively making traditional language knowledge a valuable professional asset.

Community-based language planning initiatives have emerged organically from tourism development, with local organizations developing programs to ensure that economic benefits from tourism support rather than undermine cultural transmission. Elder interview programs, traditional knowledge documentation projects, and community language festivals have proliferated in tourism areas, often funded by tourism revenue and motivated by recognition of language's importance for sustainable cultural tourism development.

### **Digital Linguistic Landscapes in Tourism Spaces**

The digital transformation of tourism communication has created new linguistic landscapes in Siem Reap, where multilingual signage, online platforms, and mobile applications shape language use patterns and community linguistic identity. Tourist areas now feature complex multilingual environments where Khmer script appears alongside English, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean text, creating visual representations of the destination's linguistic diversity and tourism market orientation.

Social media platforms and online review systems have become significant contexts for language use, where local tourism businesses must maintain multilingual online presence while community members share cultural content in Khmer for both local and international audiences. Analysis of social media content reveals creative linguistic mixing, where users incorporate English tourism vocabulary into Khmer posts and develop new hybrid linguistic forms that reflect their tourism-influenced linguistic experiences.

Mobile applications and digital tour guides have created new opportunities for Khmer language preservation through audio recordings, translation features, and cultural explanation modules that document traditional pronunciation patterns and vocabulary. Tourism technology developers increasingly recognize the importance of incorporating local language content to enhance authenticity and cultural accuracy, leading to collaborative projects between technology companies and community cultural experts.

The digitization of tourism information has also created challenges for maintaining linguistic accuracy and cultural authenticity, as machine translation and automated content generation sometimes produce incorrect or culturally inappropriate Khmer text. Community members engaged in tourism report increasing involvement in reviewing and correcting digital content, creating new roles where traditional language knowledge becomes essential for quality control in tourism technology applications.

**Table 1.** Language Use Patterns Among Tourism Workers by Age Group

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>Primary Languages Used</b>	<b>Code-Switching Frequency</b>	<b>Traditional Khmer Competence</b>	<b>Cultural Interpretation Skills</b>
18-25	Khmer, English, Mandarin	High (multiple times daily)	Moderate	Developing
26-35	Khmer, English, Japanese	High (multiple times daily)	High	Advanced
36-45	Khmer, English	Moderate (situational)	High	Advanced
46-55	Khmer, English	Low (formal contexts only)	Very High	Expert

Age Group	Primary Languages Used	Code-Switching Frequency	Traditional Khmer Competence	Cultural Interpretation Skills
55+	Khmer, Basic English	Very Low	Very High	Master Level

## CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the relationship between cultural tourism and local language use in Siem Reap is characterized by dynamic adaptation rather than simple preservation or erosion patterns. The findings reveal that tourism creates complex linguistic environments where Khmer language maintenance and multilingual development occur simultaneously, supported by economic incentives that value both international communication abilities and deep cultural knowledge rooted in traditional language competence. Tourism workers have developed sophisticated linguistic strategies that allow them to serve diverse tourist populations while maintaining and often enhancing their connections to Khmer language and cultural traditions.

The study's most significant finding is that cultural tourism, when properly managed and community-controlled, can serve as a catalyst for language preservation and revitalization rather than a threat to linguistic diversity. The economic value placed on cultural authenticity in heritage tourism creates market incentives for maintaining traditional language knowledge, while the need for cultural interpretation requires deep understanding of historical and cultural concepts embedded in Khmer language. This suggests that sustainable tourism development strategies should explicitly incorporate language planning components that recognize and support the linguistic dimensions of cultural preservation. Future research should examine how these findings might apply to other heritage tourism destinations facing similar challenges of balancing economic development with cultural preservation, particularly in post-conflict societies where tourism plays a crucial role in cultural reconstruction and community development.

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