

Preservation and promotion of spiritual cultural values in tourism: The case of Ba Bể, Thai Nguyen, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual cultural tourism has increasingly gained attention as a form of sustainable tourism that not only contributes to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage but also fosters local socio-economic development. This study focuses on the case of Ba Bể (Thai Nguyen, Vietnam), a destination closely associated with the Tày community and their distinctive spiritual cultural values such as Then rituals, the Lồng Tồng festival, the legends of Ao Tiên – Widow Island, and indigenous belief systems. A mixed-methods approach was applied, combining in-depth interviews with artisans, local officials, businesses, and tourists (n = 21) together with a quantitative survey of 220 visitors. The findings indicate that tourists demonstrate high awareness and strong expectations of spiritual experiences; however, their actual experiences remain limited, particularly in terms of ritual authenticity. Meanwhile, local communities express a desire to participate more actively in tourism activities but face constraints due to the lack of empowerment mechanisms and fair benefit-sharing. Quantitative analysis confirms that the expectation-experience gap directly influences both tourist satisfaction and revisit intention. This study emphasizes the central role of the community in safeguarding spiritual cultural heritage and proposes three policy directions: (i) preserving the authenticity of rituals, (ii) enhancing the active participation of local communities, and (iii) designing multidimensional experiential products that combine learning, aesthetics, and spirituality. The results provide empirical evidence on spiritual cultural tourism in Vietnam and offer policy implications for sustainable tourism development that balances utilization and conservation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and international integration, spiritual cultural tourism has emerged as one of the most promising forms of tourism, playing a vital role in preserving intangible cultural heritage while simultaneously promoting sustainable socio-economic development [10][9]. Many Asian countries such as Nepal, Bhutan, India, and Thailand have successfully leveraged spiritual values to create distinctive tourism products that not only meet visitors' experiential demands but also reinforce national cultural identities [1]. In Vietnam, spiritual tourism has also become an important component of the national tourism development strategy, as exemplified by well-known destinations such as Yen Tu (Quang Ninh), Trang An (Ninh Binh), Perfume Pagoda (Ha Noi), and Hung Temple (Phu Tho). However, its rapid growth poses significant challenges, including commercialization, the loss of sacredness, and disruptions in the transmission of traditional cultural practices [6].

Ba Bể (Thai Nguyen), one of the key ecological-cultural tourism sites in northern mountainous Vietnam, is not only renowned for its lake-mountain-cave ecosystem but also serves as a sacred space intimately connected with the Tày community. Local legends (Widow Island, Ao Tiên), Then rituals, the Lồng Tồng festival, as well as belief systems associated with mountain and river deities, Mother Goddess worship, and ancestor veneration constitute a distinctive spiritual cultural identity that is both symbolically rich and actively practiced. In 2019, the Then practices of the Tày, Nùng, and Thái peoples were inscribed by UNESCO on the Representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of Humanity, underscoring the international significance of this heritage [13].

However, Ba Bể is currently facing multiple challenges in the process of tourism integration and development: some rituals have been shortened or "staged" for tourist consumption; local communities have not been fully empowered nor have they equitably shared in the benefits; there is a lack of long-term preservation frameworks and policies; and a considerable gap persists between tourists' expectations of "authentic" experiences and the actual services offered. These constitute urgent issues requiring scholarly attention.

Against this backdrop, this article aims to analyze and assess the preservation and promotion of spiritual cultural values in tourism development at Ba Bể (Thai Nguyen). The main objectives are to: clarify the distinctive spiritual cultural values of the Tày community in Ba Bể and their connections with tourism; examine the current practices of utilizing and safeguarding these values within the tourism development process; evaluate tourists' perceptions, experiences, satisfaction, and expectations with regard to spiritual tourism products in Ba Bể; and

propose solutions to balance preservation and tourism development toward a sustainable and community-centered model.

The academic contribution of this research lies in enriching the body of literature with a concrete case study from northern mountainous Vietnam - an area that has received limited attention in international scholarship on spiritual tourism. Practically, the findings provide evidence-based insights and policy recommendations for communities, local authorities, and tourism enterprises to develop sustainable models of spiritual value utilization that preserve cultural identity while enhancing destination competitiveness.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Literature review

Spiritual cultural tourism has been widely studied in a global context, reflecting the growing demand of people seeking spiritual experiences, faith, and connections with sacred spaces. Shackley [9] emphasized that spiritual tourism is not only about visiting religious sites but also about participating in sacred rituals and customs, thereby creating both personal and communal experiences. Timothy and Boyd [10] approached spiritual tourism from a heritage perspective, arguing that sacred values and authenticity need to be preserved; otherwise, tourism risks distorting the original meaning of heritage. Cohen [1] even broadened this concept into “spiritual journeys,” wherein tourists aspire to healing, self-reconnection, and the pursuit of meaning that transcends material experience.

International research has demonstrated the role of spiritual tourism in sustainable development. In Bhutan and Nepal, tourism products linked to Buddhism are organized based on community models, where monks and local residents play central roles [1]. In Thailand, the government has established strict regulations to manage visitors at temples and festivals, aiming to protect sacredness [9]. These examples show that spiritual tourism can generate both economic and cultural value when managed with a balance between exploitation and preservation.

In Vietnam, spiritual tourism has developed strongly in many regions. Nguyen Van Huy [6] pointed out that, alongside its economic contributions and role in cultural promotion, spiritual tourism also faces the risks of commercialization and the diminishing sacredness of major destinations such as Yên Tử, Tràng An, Perfume Pagoda, and Hùng Temple. Tran Duc Thanh [11] analyzed the role of traditional festivals in tourism development, emphasizing the necessity of integrating cultural and tourism policies. The Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts Studies [15] also affirmed that sustainable preservation and promotion of spiritual cultural heritage in tourism can only be achieved when the State, local communities, businesses, and researchers all participate simultaneously.

In the case of Ba Bể, existing studies have mainly focused on the ecological values of the lake and national park, while the spiritual - cultural aspects - particularly the Then ritual of the Tày people and the Lễ hội Tồng festival - have not been deeply examined from a sustainable tourism perspective. Several ethnographic works (Tran Quang Hai [12]; Nguyen Thi Yen [5]) highlighted that Then is not only a performing art form but also a ritual deeply tied to spiritual life, with the potential to become a unique tourism product if appropriately developed. However, research combining analyses of local culture with empirical surveys of tourists’ experiences and expectations remains scarce. This constitutes the research gap addressed by this study.

2.2. Theoretical framework

To analyze the case of Ba Bể, the study is based on three main theoretical frameworks.

First, the theory of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) by Scheyvens posits that sustainable tourism development should place communities at the center—not only as participants but also as key actors with control and benefits from tourism. This is especially important for spiritual heritage spaces, where local communities are both the custodians and practitioners of rituals.

Second, the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage [14] provides a crucial theoretical foundation. According to this convention, safeguarding is not merely about preserving heritage as a museum object, but about ensuring the continuity of cultural practices through transmission, community participation, and maintenance of original meaning. The inscription of Then practices of the Tày people in 2019 [13] underscores both the international significance of this heritage and the urgency of safeguarding it in the context of tourism.

Third, Pine and Gilmore’s [7] experience economy model allows for analyzing how tourists engage with spiritual culture through four dimensions: entertainment, education, aesthetics, and spirituality. Spiritual experiences in tourism often combine these dimensions, but to ensure sustainability, the element of authentic spirituality must be preserved rather than replaced by staged performances. In connection with MacCannell’s theory of staged authenticity [4], it becomes evident that today’s tourists are highly sensitive to distinctions between authentic sacred experiences and staged ones.

By combining these three theoretical frameworks, this study adopts a comprehensive approach - from community agency and heritage safeguarding mechanisms to the analysis of tourist experiences. This approach clarifies both

opportunities and challenges in preserving and promoting spiritual cultural values at Ba Bể (Thai Nguyen), through tourism.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. A mixed-methods approach was chosen to maximize the depth of analysis regarding spiritual cultural values and indigenous practices, while also measuring tourist experiences and expectations through statistical tools. According to Creswell (2014), such an approach is particularly useful in cultural tourism studies, where it is necessary to capture symbolic meanings as well as evaluate visitor responses.

Study area

The research site is the Ba Bể Lake area, Thai Nguyen province, one of the most prominent national parks in northern mountainous Vietnam. Ba Bể is not only recognized as a natural heritage site but also as a cultural - spiritual center closely linked to the Tày community. Representative sites and rituals include An Mạ Temple, Ao Tiên, Widow Island, Puông Cave, the Lồng Tồng Festival, and especially the Then ritual of the Tày people - which was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity in 2019 [13].

Qualitative research

The qualitative component was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation. Interviewees included: 10 Then artisans and village elders of the Tày community; 5 cultural - tourism management officials from Ba Bể District and the National Park Management Board; and 6 representatives of tourism businesses, homestay owners, and local tour guides. The interviews focused on the meaning of rituals and sacred spaces, processes of preservation and transmission, the impacts of tourism, risks of commercialization, community participation, and proposed solutions.

Participant observation was carried out at key events and sites such as the Lồng Tồng Festival, Then performances, An Mạ Temple, and Ao Tiên, in order to gather empirical data on community - tourist interactions within spiritual spaces.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic content analysis. Coding was conducted under key themes: spiritual values, tourist experience, authenticity, preservation, and community roles.

Quantitative research

In parallel, a quantitative survey was administered to tourists at Ba Bể.

The survey targeted both domestic and international tourists who had experienced at least one activity related to spiritual culture at Ba Bể.

A structured questionnaire was developed with five-point Likert scales, drawing on previous research and adapted to the local context [4], [3]. The survey content included:

- Awareness of spiritual cultural values;
- Experiences at the destination;
- Level of satisfaction;
- Expectations regarding spiritual tourism products;
- Revisit and recommendation intention.

A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed, with 220 valid responses collected (response rate: 88%). Among these, 70% were Vietnamese visitors and 30% were international tourists. This sample size meets the minimum requirement for factor analysis.

Data analysis techniques

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify key issues related to spiritual cultural values and community participation in preservation.

Quantitative data were processed using SPSS 26.0 following this procedure:

- Descriptive statistics of sample characteristics and mean values of observed variables;
- Reliability test of measurement scales using Cronbach's Alpha;
- Exploratory factor analysis (EFA).

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. In-depth interview findings

Analysis of data from 21 in-depth interviews with Then artisans, village elders, cultural-tourism officials, business representatives, and tourists reveals several salient themes concerning the preservation and promotion of spiritual cultural values in Ba Bể's tourism development.

First, the spiritual values and community identity were emphasized by all groups. Then artisans regard Then as the “cultural soul” of the Tày people, stressing its function as a bridge between humans and deities. One artisan shared: “Without Then, we Tày people would lose part of our cultural soul” (Then artisan, 65 years old).

Second, the risk of commercialization was a major concern. A local cultural officer admitted: “Some Then rituals are shortened for tourists, losing their sacred nature compared to before.” This view was echoed by some international visitors, who noted that rituals are sometimes turned into “shows.”

Third, regarding the community’s role, local residents and homestay owners expressed their wish for more active participation in developing spiritual tourism products. A homestay owner in Pác Ngòi stated: “Residents want to participate more in organizing spiritual tourism, not just perform on demand for travel companies.”

Fourth, the desire for authentic experiences was prominent among tourists. An international visitor (34 years old, female) remarked: “I enjoyed Ao Tiên and Then singing, but I would prefer less commercialization and greater respect for sacredness.” This reflects the rising demand for authenticity among spiritual tourists.

Finally, issues of transmission and generational continuity were also emphasized. A 72-year-old village elder observed: “Young people are no longer interested in learning Then; policies are needed to support training and encouragement.” This highlights a serious challenge to the sustainability of the heritage.

Table 1 summarizes the main themes, illustrative quotations, frequency of occurrence, and associated respondent groups..

Table 1. Thematic findings from in-depth interviews on spiritual culture in Ba Bể

Main Theme	Illustrative quotation	Frequency (n=21)	Respondent group
Spiritual values and identity	“Without Then, we Tày people would lose part of our cultural soul.” (Then artisan, 65)	15	Artisans, elders, tourists
Risk of ritual commercialization	“Some Then rituals are shortened for tourists, losing their sacred nature.” (Cultural officer)	12	Artisans, officials, businesses
Community role and aspirations	“Residents want to participate more in organizing spiritual tourism.” (Homestay owner, Pác Ngòi)	10	Residents, businesses
Demand for authentic experiences	“I enjoyed Ao Tiên and Then singing, but I prefer less commercialization.” (International tourist, 34)	14	Domestic and international tourists
Transmission and younger generation	“Young people are no longer keen to learn Then; more training support is needed.” (Village elder, 72)	9	Artisans, officials

(Source: Field interviews)

The interviews reveal that tourists value Ba Bể’s spiritual culture highly, but their actual experiences fall short of expectations for authenticity. The local community recognizes its role as custodians of culture but wishes for greater involvement in tourism. Commercialization was identified as a shared weakness, acknowledged by both community members and visitors. Furthermore, the lack of younger successors in practicing Then represents a significant sustainability challenge.

These findings align with MacCannell’s theory of authenticity in tourism [4] and UNESCO’s intangible heritage safeguarding framework [14], while highlighting the need for Community-based tourism models to balance development and preservation.

4.2. Quantitative survey findings

4.2.1. Sample description

The survey was conducted with 220 tourists visiting Ba Bể, including both domestic and international visitors. The aim was to identify demographic characteristics and thereby define the target markets for spiritual cultural tourism.

The sample was fairly balanced by gender, with females slightly higher (55.5%). This reflects a tendency for women to have stronger interest in combining cultural–spiritual tourism with leisure, consistent with prior research on tourism consumption behavior [10].

In terms of age, the 21–30 group was the largest (40%), followed by 31–40 (35%). These represent young and middle-aged tourists with higher mobility, spending capacity, and demand for integrated cultural–nature experiences. Notably, those above 40 years accounted for only 18.2%, suggesting that Ba Bể has not yet strongly attracted older tourists, who are typically more associated with spiritual practices.

By nationality, domestic visitors dominated (70%), while international tourists accounted for 30%. This indicates considerable potential to expand the international market, given the global rise in interest for indigenous cultural experiences [1].

Regarding visit frequency, 60% were first-time visitors, 30% had visited 2–3 times, and 10% had been more than three times. This shows both the destination’s appeal and its limitation in repeat visitation, underlining the need to improve authenticity and overall experience quality.

Overall, the survey suggests Ba Bể mainly attracts young, domestic, and first-time tourists, highlighting opportunities to target these groups while diversifying products to better appeal to older and repeat visitors.

4.2.2. Reliability test of measurement scales

Cronbach’s Alpha was used to test reliability. Items with corrected item–total correlation <0.3 were removed.

All scales achieved Cronbach’s Alpha between 0.801 and 0.876, exceeding the 0.7 threshold [Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994]. Corrected item–total correlations ranged from 0.412 to 0.727, indicating good internal consistency. No items were eliminated, confirming the survey instrument’s reliability.

Table 2. Reliability test results

Scale	Items	Cronbach’s Alpha	Corrected Item–Total Correlation (min–max)
Awareness	4	0.812	0.412–0.654
Experience	5	0.853	0.456–0.711
Satisfaction	2	0.801	0.487–0.633
Expectation	5	0.876	0.502–0.727
Revisit intention	2	0.834	0.490–0.661

(Source: SPSS analysis)

4.2.3. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)

EFA was conducted using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation. KMO = 0.826 (>0.6) and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1025.34$; $p < 0.000$), confirming suitability.

Four factors were extracted, explaining 67.5% of variance, exceeding the 50% threshold [Hair et al., 2010]. All loadings were >0.5, indicating good convergence.

The four factors matched the original conceptual structure: (i) Awareness, (ii) Experience, (iii) Expectation, and (iv) Satisfaction & Revisit Intention.

Table 3. Summary of EFA results

Factor	Items	Factor Loadings (range)	Variance Explained (%)
Awareness	4	0.655–0.812	17.2
Experience	5	0.671–0.799	19.5
Expectation	5	0.744–0.833	16.3
Satisfaction & Revisit	4	0.731–0.812	14.5
Total	18	>0.5	67.5

(Source: SPSS analysis)

4.2.4. Descriptive statistics of observed variables

Awareness: Tourists showed strong awareness of spiritual cultural values, especially the sacred meaning of Then (Mean = 4.4).

Experience: Average score was only 3.6, significantly lower than awareness. Ritual authenticity scored lowest (Mean = 3.4), reflecting concerns about staging.

Expectation: Very high (Mean = 4.3), with the strongest expectation being “maintaining sacredness, avoiding commercialization” (Mean = 4.6).

Satisfaction & Revisit Intention: Tourists were generally satisfied (Mean = 3.9) and willing to revisit or recommend (Mean > 4.0). However, satisfaction was not maximized due to the expectation–experience gap.

The quantitative findings confirm that:

Tourists value and respect Ba Bể’s spiritual culture (high Awareness). A significant expectation–experience gap exists, especially in ritual authenticity. Satisfaction is moderate, potentially undermining revisit intention. Tourists strongly prefer authentic, less commercialized experiences and are willing to pay more for products involving direct participation of artisans.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings from Ba Bể reveal a common reality in spiritual cultural tourism: tourists possess high awareness and strong expectations for spiritual experiences, yet their actual encounters fall short—particularly regarding the authenticity of rituals. This aligns with recent scholarship on spiritual tourism, which emphasizes that the perceived sacredness of destinations is closely tied to tourist experiences and the organization of rituals [2]. Recent studies have even developed scales to systematically measure spiritual tourism experiences [8].

From the results, tourists’ low evaluation of ritual authenticity indicates a gap in the design of spiritual tourism products: when rituals are “performed” to satisfy visitors, they risk losing their inherent sacredness and becoming staged representations.

From the perspective of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), the in-depth interviews highlight the need to grant greater empowerment to local communities in designing and managing spiritual tourism products. This is consistent with emerging CBT research, which demonstrates that community participation is not only a matter of benefit-sharing but also a crucial condition for cultural preservation and sustainability. At the same time, some analyses acknowledge that CBT still faces challenges such as unequal benefit distribution, weak participatory mechanisms, and limited control.

In practical terms, the study suggests that to enhance satisfaction and revisit intention, policymakers and tourism businesses should focus on three key aspects:

Preserving ritual authenticity: Rituals should be organized with transparency regarding which components can be shared with visitors and which should remain reserved for community practice. This approach corresponds with findings from Catholic pilgrimage studies, where authenticity was shown to influence both religious and spiritual dimensions of visitor experiences [3].

Strengthening community agency in management, transmission, and ritual control: Empowering communities ensures not only fairness in benefit distribution but also strengthens cultural preservation. CBT research has shown that this model can drive local economic development when communities hold genuine voice and control.

Designing multidimensional spiritual experiences: Tourism products should integrate elements of learning, aesthetics, tranquility, and participation, moving beyond superficial sightseeing. This resonates with recent research suggesting that spiritual tourism experiences should evoke a sense of “touching the sacred” rather than merely observing.

A considerable challenge is how to manage tourist growth without eroding sacred values. Recent models demonstrate that when visitor numbers exceed the carrying capacity of sacred spaces, the perceived sense of sacredness declines.

Nevertheless, this study also has limitations. As the survey was conducted within a single time frame and did not capture seasonal variations, results may not fully reflect temporal dynamics. The in-depth interviews did not include all stakeholders such as cultural NGOs, academic experts, or international tourists with specialized knowledge. Future studies should conduct comparative analyses between Ba Bể and other spiritual tourism sites in Vietnam or abroad to test generalizability, as well as employ longitudinal SEM models to explore causal relationships.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the preservation and promotion of spiritual cultural values in tourism activities at Ba Bể, Thai Nguyen, using a mixed-methods approach that combined qualitative and quantitative research. The findings show that spiritual culture - particularly Then rituals, the Lồng Tồng festival, and legends associated with Ba Bể Lake - plays a vital role in the cultural identity of the Tày community as well as in the attractiveness of the destination. Tourists demonstrate high awareness and strong expectations for authentic experiences, yet their actual encounters remain limited, especially regarding ritual authenticity, which in turn affects satisfaction and revisit intention. At the same time, the local community expressed a strong desire for greater involvement in the design and management of tourism products, though mechanisms for equitable empowerment remain lacking.

The study contributes empirical evidence to the growing body of research on spiritual cultural tourism in Vietnam, underscoring the central role of communities in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Practically, it proposes three policy directions: (i) preserving the authenticity and sacred meaning of rituals; (ii) enhancing community agency in tourism organization and management; and (iii) developing multidimensional experiential products to meet the diverse needs of both domestic and international tourists.

However, the study has certain limitations, such as the restricted temporal scope of the survey and the limited range of respondents. Therefore, future research should expand the sample size, include seasonal and cross-destination comparisons, and apply advanced structural equation modeling to examine the relationships between authenticity, community participation, satisfaction, and tourist behavior.

In conclusion, the case of Ba Bể demonstrates that sustainable development of spiritual cultural tourism can only be achieved by ensuring a balance between utilization and preservation - between the experiential needs of tourists and the rights and responsibilities of local communities.

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