

The cuisine of ethnic minority communities in the mountainous areas of Da Nang within an expanded urban space: From indigenous knowledge to contemporary values

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Abstract:

In recent years, Da Nang has often been recognised as a dynamic coastal city and a major centre for tourism, services, and events in Central Vietnam. While this image accurately reflects part of the city's development, it has inadvertently overshadowed another cultural space that receives far less attention: the mountainous areas and ethnic minority communities living in the western and northwestern parts of the city, associated with the Truong Son mountain range. After July 2025, in the context of administrative boundary expansion and the restructuring of urban space, the mountainous areas of Da Nang have been more deeply integrated into the overall development structure of a modern city. In this process, the culinary culture of ethnic minority communities has emerged as a domain that both embodies indigenous knowledge and is significantly influenced by the market economy, tourism, and cultural exchange. By employing methods of synthesis, analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork, this article approaches the cuisine of ethnic minorities in the mountainous areas of Da Nang as a form of indigenous knowledge and a type of living heritage, examining it in relation to the process of urbanisation and the expansion of Da Nang's urban space. On that basis, the study points out the values, transformations, and challenges facing ethnic cuisines, while also proposing several orientations for their preservation and promotion in the contemporary urban context.

Keywords: cuisine, Da Nang City, ethnic groups, mountainous areas, urban space.

Classification numbers: 4.3, 9.3, 10

1. Introduction

Through contemporary anthropological and cultural studies approaches, cuisine has been increasingly viewed as a system of indigenous knowledge that has been formed, accumulated, and transmitted across generations through the interaction between humans, the natural environment, and social structures [1-6]. For ethnic minority communities in mountainous areas, culinary knowledge encompasses not only an understanding of ingredients, preparation methods, and taste preferences, but also conceptions of worldview, human existence, and social order encoded through food-related practices [7-11]. On this basis, recent studies on the preservation of gastronomy heritage have shifted from a static approach, which views traditional cuisine as a practice to be preserved unchanged, towards a dynamic approach emphasising the role of communities in maintaining and reproducing culinary heritage as a living practice [12-14].

This perspective expands the notion of preservation from the "preservation of artifacts" to the "preservation of practices," in which cultural values are sustained through continuous adaptation and transformation.

Alongside this, international discussions on cultural/indigenous knowledge mobility suggest that cultural/indigenous knowledge does not exist as a closed system but is constantly restructured when transferred into new social/spatial contexts, particularly under conditions of globalisation and urbanisation [15-24]. This process involves not only reception and transformation but also reflects the active role of communities in selecting, reinterpreting, and reaffirming indigenous culture/knowledge through everyday practices [8, 25-28]. In this regard, theories of cultural adaptability and evolution emphasise that cultural practices, including cuisine, can transform in response to new environments without necessarily losing their essential characteristics [29-34].

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This is particularly evident in transitional spaces, where cuisine becomes a form of hybrid cultural expression, reflecting interactions between traditional and modern value systems [34-38].

Building upon and extending these approaches, our study goes beyond affirming the dynamic nature of gastronomy heritage and further clarifies the relationship between indigenous knowledge, living heritage, and urban space. Specifically, in the case of ethnic minority communities in Da Nang, the evolution of ethnic culinary practices has not occurred within isolated cultural spaces but has increasingly shifted toward new contexts shaped by urbanisation and tourism. This indicates that the transformation of gastronomy values is not merely a process of passive adaptation, but rather one of active restructuring, in which traditional elements are selectively retained, reinterpreted, and integrated into new contexts. In doing so, this study contributes to existing academic discussions by demonstrating that the dynamic nature of heritage is shaped not only by temporal change but also by spatial mobility, particularly within expanding urban environments in Southeast Asia in general and Vietnam in particular.

In our view, the concept of “expanded urban space” used in this article emphasises that modern urban areas are not confined to the central urban core, but also encompass peripheral zones, transitional areas, and distinctive ecological-cultural spaces such as mountainous regions. Accordingly, the western and northwestern areas of Da Nang, which are associated with the Truong Son mountain range, have evolved from being regarded as peripheral spaces into integral components of a multi-centred and multifunctional urban structure. This space can be understood as a “cultural transition zone”, where cultural practices, particularly cuisine, are continuously restructured under the influences of urbanisation, tourism, and interregional exchange. Approaching cuisine within an open spatial framework enables a broader perspective beyond traditional dichotomies such as “rural-urban” or “traditional-modern”, moving instead toward a more flexible understanding of the intersections and interactions among multiple layers of space and culture.

At the research site, the mountainous region of Da Nang has long served as a settlement area for ethnic groups such as the Co-tu, Gie-Trieng, Xo-dang, and Cor peoples, primarily concentrated in Hoa Bac and Hoa Phu communes (formerly part of Hoa Vang district), as well as border areas adjacent to Quang Nam province, including Tay Giang, Dong Giang, Nam Tra My, and Phuoc Son. This region represents a transitional zone between the coastal plains and the Truong Son mountain range, characterised by hilly terrain, rich forest ecosystems,

and high biodiversity. Through generations of habitation, local communities have developed distinctive cultural characteristics, notably indigenous knowledge related to forest resource use, community organisation, and interactions with the natural environment. However, under the impacts of urbanisation, tourism development, and cultural exchange, the lives of these ethnic communities have undergone significant transformations, creating a context in which traditional cultural values are simultaneously preserved and reshaped. Within this context, cuisine emerges as an important, and particularly revealing, “observational lens” through which these processes of cultural transformation can be identified and examined. This article seeks to affirm the value of the research as an effort to connect international academic approaches with the practical context of Vietnam, thereby contributing empirical evidence to scholarly discussions that view culinary knowledge as a form of living heritage. At the same time, it highlights the dynamic nature and adaptability of ethnic cultures within contemporary urban spaces.

On this basis, the study addresses three main research questions: (1) Through what dimensions can the culinary knowledge of ethnic minority communities in the mountainous areas of Da Nang be identified? (2) How has this culinary knowledge been transformed and reconfigured in the context of the expanding urban space? (3) What values does the presence and transformation of this culinary knowledge reflect for the cultural life of ethnic minority communities and for Da Nang’s urban cultural space? By addressing these questions, the study seeks to clarify the nature of culinary knowledge as a living heritage that continuously evolves through processes of spatial transformation. It also provides empirical evidence of the adaptation and reconfiguration of ethnic cultures in the context of urban expansion in Vietnam.

2. Methodology

To achieve the research objectives, this study employs methods of synthesis, analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork. The ethnographic fieldwork adopts a qualitative approach, combining data collection techniques such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions to gain direct access to culinary practices and indigenous knowledge systems within communities undergoing transformations in cultural space in Da Nang. The research sample was selected through purposive sampling, focusing on groups of participants who play different roles in preserving, practicing, and transmitting culinary knowledge, including: (1) elderly members of the Co-tu and Xo-dang ethnic groups; (2) women, who are directly involved in food preparation and the maintenance of culinary practices; and (3) different

generational groups within the community. Specifically, the study conducted four interviews with elderly participants, four unstructured in-depth interviews with women, and two focus group discussions divided into two age groups (50-70 years old and under 45 years old) in order to identify intergenerational differences in the reception and transformation of knowledge.

Data were collected through field notes and subsequently synthesised and analysed thematically, with particular attention to indigenous knowledge of ingredients, food preparation techniques, the organisation of eating spaces, and transformations in culinary practices under conditions of urbanisation. Data analysis was conducted using content analysis combined with intergroup and intergenerational comparison, while interpretations were situated within theoretical perspectives on living heritage and the transformation of cultural values. The reliability of the study was strengthened through triangulation and cross-verification of information from multiple primary and secondary data sources. The procedures for data collection and analysis were implemented consistently to ensure transparency in data processing and the interpretation of findings.

3. Culinary knowledge of ethnic minority communities in the mountainous areas of Da Nang

The culinary knowledge of ethnic minority communities in the mountainous areas of Da Nang has been formed and developed through these communities' long-term adaptation to the forested mountain environment of the Truong Son range. This knowledge is reflected in various aspects allowing for a deeper understanding of the relationship between humans, the environment, and culture.

First, there exists a close relationship between culinary ingredients and ecological knowledge.

Given the region's steep topography, distinct seasonal climate, and the uneven distribution of natural resources across space and time, the selection of food ingredients among ethnic minority communities is not merely an act of exploiting nature. Rather, it reflects indigenous ecological knowledge systems accumulated and transmitted across generations. Evidence suggests that traditional food sources among these communities are primarily derived from three fundamental ecological spaces: swidden fields, forests, and streams. The fieldwork data demonstrate that most in-depth interview participants consistently reported that the selection of food ingredients is intrinsically linked to seasonal availability and the ecological characteristics of local habitats. In addition, focus group discussions documented more than 30 traditional food ingredients regularly incorporated into local diets, with approximately

two-thirds originating from forests and streams, while the remainder were obtained from swidden cultivation and household gardens. These findings provide empirical evidence that indigenous culinary knowledge is deeply embedded in, and fundamentally shaped by, the ecological systems of the Truong Son mountain region. Crops such as upland rice, maize, and cassava serve as staple foods, while wild vegetables, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, tubers, and small aquatic species found along rivers and streams provide important seasonal nutritional supplements. Notably, community knowledge regarding these food resources extends beyond simple identification, encompassing comprehensive understandings of growth cycles, harvesting periods, regenerative capacities, and the biological safety of particular plant and animal species within their ecological environment. Data from the in-depth interviews further indicated that all elderly participants recognized that each food resource has an "appropriate harvesting season". According to their accounts, harvesting resources outside the appropriate season not only compromises food quality but also undermines the natural regenerative capacity of the ecosystem. Participants also demonstrated the ability to differentiate between morphologically similar plant species with distinct levels of toxicity or different culinary uses. These findings suggest that indigenous culinary knowledge is founded upon long-term ecological observation, accumulated experiential knowledge, and intergenerational transmission through everyday practice. For example, the Co-tu people distinguish among various types of wild bamboo shoots and apply different processing methods accordingly: some varieties require repeated boiling to remove toxins, whereas others must be dried or fermented before consumption to reduce bitterness. Similarly, among the Xo-dang people (particularly the Ca-dong subgroup), resource extraction practices are governed by unwritten customary rules, such as prohibitions against harvesting early-season bamboo shoots or hunting animals during reproductive periods [39, 40]. Clearly, these practices demonstrate a worldview grounded in harmonious coexistence with nature, in which communities utilise resources at sustainable levels to maintain ecological balance and regenerative capacity, rather than perceiving humans as possessing absolute control over the natural world. From an ecological anthropology perspective, these findings indicate that the more extensive the community's knowledge of local food resources, the more closely resource harvesting is guided by principles of sustainable use. This pattern highlights the intrinsic relationship between indigenous ecological knowledge and culinary practices, demonstrating that food-related practices are embedded not only in cultural traditions but also in locally developed systems of environmental stewardship.

Thus, from this perspective, the culinary knowledge of ethnic minority groups may be understood as a form of “cultural ecological mapping”, whereby knowledge of food simultaneously constitutes knowledge of the environment, seasonal rhythms, and the limits governing the exploitation of natural resources.

Second, the culinary knowledge of ethnic minority communities in the mountainous areas of Da Nang is clearly reflected in their methods of food preparation and ways of adapting to the living environment.

If food ingredients reflect communities’ understanding of the ecological environment in general, cooking techniques demonstrate their flexible responses to the natural conditions of the Truong Son region. In these communities, common food preparation methods practiced by the Co-tu, Xo-dang include grilling over charcoal, cooking meat and fish in bamboo tubes, hanging wild game or stream fish above kitchen hearths for smoking, as well as pickling and natural fermentation. Basically, in contexts where modern preservation technologies are limited, such traditional food processing techniques serve not only to create distinctive flavours but also function as practical food preservation strategies adapted to local environmental conditions and subsistence patterns. In addition, the use of readily available natural materials such as bamboo, reeds, and leaves facilitates daily activities during extended periods of labour in swidden fields or forests. These materials can be used directly for food preparation on-site while reducing the need to carry complex cooking utensils, thereby contributing to savings in water, fuel, and labour. Participants in focus group discussions shared: “I often go into the forest for three to four days and usually bring com lam (bamboo-tube rice) and some smoked meat prepared at home because it is more convenient than cooking”; and “Whenever I go to work in the fields, I do not bring many cooking tools because there are plenty of natural materials available there that can be used instead” (Fieldwork, 7/2024).

Thus, it can be seen that these food preparation practices suggest that cuisine extends beyond the basic function of meeting nutritional needs. Rather, they reflect accumulated survival experience in challenging mountainous environments and demonstrate the intersection between ecological knowledge and the deeper cultural dimensions embedded within the community’s worldview and philosophy of life. Through this, the culinary knowledge and cooking practices of local communities have become a form of indigenous technology, reflecting the adaptability, creativity, and close relationship between ethnic communities and their familiar ecological spaces.

In our view, an evocative image that illustrates both culinary techniques and environmental adaptation in the lives of many ethnic minority communities in the mountainous areas of Da Nang is the hearth fire. In traditional houses (such as stilt houses or communal houses like the Guol/Rong), the hearth is not merely a place for cooking but also a common living space where family members gather, share experiences, and transmit knowledge. For example, simply by observing elders lighting the fire, selecting firewood, adjusting heat, or dealing with ingredients, younger generations gradually acquire culinary knowledge through direct learning from everyday practice rather than through formal instruction. This mode of transmission shows that culinary knowledge exists as a form of experiential knowledge - “learning through practice” [25, 41-43]. At the same time, the hearth space reinforces family bonds and social relationships while maintaining community structures, thereby reproducing and transmitting cultural values across generations [29, 30]. Therefore, cooking methods and environmental adaptation not only produce food but also sustain the social life and cultural identity of the community. Findings from our ethnographic fieldwork indicate that the hearth remains the most common gathering space within households, serving as a place where family members share experiences and transmit knowledge in everyday life. Focus group discussions consistently revealed that, after a day of labour, household members often gather around the fire to prepare meals, discuss daily work activities, teach one another how to identify food resources, and share appropriate preparation methods for different ingredients. One female participant explained: “We share and teach one another everyday food practices, from simple to more complex tasks. For example, in using fire, children and grandchildren simply sit by the hearth, watch adults, and gradually learn how to cook, choose firewood, and keep the fire burning steadily. I do not really teach them directly.” (Fieldwork, August 2024). These observations suggest that culinary knowledge within the community is not transmitted primarily through formal instruction or explicit teaching, but rather accumulated through participation, observation, and repeated daily practice. In this sense, the hearth functions not only as the material centre of domestic life but also as a distinctive cultural “school”, where culinary knowledge and environmental adaptation practices are preserved, reproduced, and naturally transmitted across generations.

Third, the culinary knowledge of ethnic minority communities in the mountainous areas of Da Nang is also expressed through dining spaces and their social meanings.

In the lives of these communities, eating is a social practice with ritualistic and relational significance rather than a purely biological activity. Meals associated with festivals, agricultural rituals, or life-cycle ceremonies serve to reaffirm the bonds between individuals, families, and the broader community.

Within the traditional societies of ethnic minority groups in the mountainous areas of Da Nang, eating spaces have functioned not merely to satisfy everyday subsistence needs but also as important socio-cultural environments through which knowledge, norms, and community values are naturally transmitted. Ethnographic findings indicate that food-related practices are commonly organised according to strong communal principles, particularly during village festivals and collective activities held in the *Guol* house/*Rong* house. In these settings, food is typically arranged collectively on mats, and participants gather to eat within an atmosphere characterised by solidarity and mutual sharing. Unlike urban contexts, where individual portions are often clearly separated, what matters most in these communities is the presence and participation of each member within the collective. As one participant explained: “Eating together is what makes the occasion joyful and meaningful. Everyone contributes something and then shares the meal; that is what represents our village’s food culture.” (Fieldwork, August 2024). This communal orientation extends beyond festivals and collective rituals into everyday family life. Observations in several households showed that family members commonly share meals from the same tray or serving arrangement, while children are guided on how to invite elders to eat, sit in appropriate positions, and behave according to family hierarchy. One interviewee noted: “Children must invite elders before eating, learn how to eat together with others, and should not eat separately.” (Fieldwork, August 2024). These seemingly ordinary practices suggest that behavioural norms, hierarchical relations, and collective consciousness are transmitted and internalised naturally through everyday domestic and communal interactions. In this way, food practices become an important medium through which social values are reproduced across generations. Seating arrangements, the sequence of inviting others to eat, and the selection and sharing of dishes all express respect for age hierarchy, kinship relations, and the social roles of community members. In this context, culinary knowledge extends beyond techniques of food preparation to encompass systems of social norms and ethical values. Through everyday eating practices, values such as communal solidarity, respect for elders, reciprocity, and social cohesion are maintained and continually reaffirmed, thereby contributing to the preservation and expression of ethnic cultural identity. Taken together, these findings suggest that eating among these communities should not be understood merely as a biological activity of nourishment, but rather as a socially embedded practice with deep

cultural significance, playing an important role in sustaining communal relationships and preserving ethnic identity.

4. Transformations of cuisine in the expanded urban space

The integration of the mountainous areas of Da Nang into an expanded urban space has become an inevitable trend, creating momentum for transformations in cultural practices, including the cuisine of ethnic minority communities. Previously, the cuisine of these communities existed mainly within village settings, closely associated with swidden agriculture, community rituals, and traditional social relations. Today, however, dishes, cooking techniques, and the “cultural narratives embedded in food” of these communities are gradually moving beyond their original living spaces to appear in cultural festivals, community-based tourism activities, local promotional events, and urban media platforms.



Fig. 1. A traditional meal in a community-based tourism setting. Source: Tran Tan Vinh.

This transformation reflects a process that anthropologists often describe as “cultural recontextualisation”, whereby traditional cultural practices are relocated into new social settings and, in the process, acquire additional functions and meanings. Currently, within ecotourism programs, community-based tourism initiatives, and ethnic village tourism in areas such as Dong Giang, Tay Giang, Tra My, and Hoa Bac in the mountainous region of Da Nang, many traditional dishes of the Co-tu, Xo-dang peoples, including bamboo-tube rice, grilled meat cooked in bamboo tubes, stream fish, wild vegetables, and traditional fermented rice wine - have become distinctive cultural markers of ethnic identity and popular attractions for visitors. These foods, once primarily consumed as part of everyday subsistence practices, have increasingly been transformed into culinary products with unique cultural and tourism value. This transformation can be clearly observed in the way traditional dishes are selected, prepared, and arranged into complete meals for visitors. The meal setting therefore serves not

only to meet visitors' culinary needs but also as a means of showcasing and communicating elements of local culture through the ingredients used, preparation techniques, and presentation of the dishes (Fig. 1). As a result, indigenous cuisines have gained broader social recognition, contributed to the visibility of ethnic cultural identities, and created additional sources of income and opportunities for participation in service-based economies among local communities.

From another perspective, however, the incorporation of traditional cuisine into urban spaces and tourism markets has also brought significant changes to both the form and content of ethnic culinary practices. Such transformations include adjustments to flavour profiles to accommodate broader consumer preferences, increased attention to visual presentation, greater standardisation for larger numbers of guests, and shortened preparation processes to meet the demands of faster consumption patterns. For example, in the preparation of bamboo-tube rice, community members traditionally filled bamboo tubes to approximately two-thirds of their length with rice, added water just above the rice level, sealed the openings with banana or "dong" leaves, and then roasted the tubes around charcoal or wood fires for approximately 45 minutes to over an hour. In some places today, however, rice is partially cooked beforehand and only later placed into bamboo tubes for roasting, reducing preparation time to approximately 15-20 minutes (Fieldwork, 7/2024). Although this modified method differs from traditional techniques, the taste and overall eating experience remain relatively similar, continuing to provide an appealing experience for visitors, albeit often regarded as less authentic than the traditional version. This example illustrates that traditional ethnic cuisines no longer exist as static or immutable cultural forms. Rather, they continue to change and adapt in response to new socio-economic conditions, demonstrating the capacity of cultural practices to evolve while maintaining elements of continuity [21, 28, 44]. Indeed, such ongoing processes of adaptation and recreation may be understood as essential conditions enabling ethnic culinary heritage to persist and remain meaningful within new social contexts.

For this reason, as discussed in the theoretical framework, a growing body of international scholarship no longer interprets transformations in traditional ethnic cuisine as evidence of cultural decline or rupture. Instead, such changes are increasingly viewed as expressions of cultural resilience, adaptation, and the dynamic reproduction of living heritage. In practice, this process reflects an ongoing negotiation of identity, in which communities simultaneously adapt to the demands of the market and expanding urban spaces while striving to preserve elements regarded as essential to tradition. In other words, heritage can only truly survive when it is continuously reinterpreted and performed

within new social contexts [13, 15]. However, from another perspective, excessive tourism-oriented commercialisation may also give rise to important concerns: when cuisine becomes increasingly detached from ritual systems, community relations, and the symbolic meanings embedded in dishes and traditional preparation processes, and is instead transformed into a consumer product primarily serving tourism or market demands, the risk of cultural simplification and the erosion of ethnic groups' socio-cultural depth becomes difficult to avoid. Nevertheless, it is emphasised that the core issue does not lie in whether traditional culinary practices should remain unchanged or be transformed, but rather in the ability to identify the boundary between creative adaptation and reductive commercialisation. Accordingly, the discussion of culinary transformation within Da Nang's expanding urban space reflects a dual process in theoretical inquiry: on the one hand, it creates opportunities to enhance cultural values and community livelihoods; on the other, it raises the need to recognise and safeguard the foundational layers of cultural meaning so that ethnic minority cuisine may continue to exist as a living social practice, rather than merely as commodified products designed for display and consumption.

5. Values of ethnic minority cuisine in the mountainous areas within Da Nang's urban space and directions for preservation and promotion

The presence of ethnic minority cuisine from the mountainous areas within the expanded urban space, as discussed above, not only reflects processes of cultural transformation but also highlights the multidimensional values that this form of living heritage contributes to the sustainable development of Da Nang.

First, from a cultural perspective, the cuisine of mountainous ethnic groups contributes to deepening the city's identity. If Da Nang has long been recognised as a coastal city associated with tourism and modern services, the presence of ethnic minority culinary practices from mountainous areas adds a new cultural layer to this identity. This layer is rooted in the forested landscapes of the Truong Son range, encompassing ecological knowledge, collective memory, and ways of life closely connected to nature among ethnic minority communities. In the context of globalisation and the growing homogenisation of urban spaces, such indigenous culinary values become important sources of cultural distinctiveness, contributing to the formation of a more multilayered and inclusive urban identity for Da Nang.

Second, from an economic and tourism perspective, ethnic cuisine holds significant potential as a resource for the development of cultural tourism, community-based tourism, and eco-tourism in the western and northwestern mountainous areas of the city. Traditional dishes, when introduced through community tourism models or cultural

events, not only offer distinctive experiences for visitors but also create new livelihood opportunities for local communities. Notably, the tourism value of culinary products lies not only in their taste but is also constituted by knowledge of ingredients, food preparation techniques, methods of wrapping, and ways of presenting the products. The use of natural leaves for wrapping food, combined with traditional woven implements for preserving and presenting the products, demonstrates the interweaving of culinary knowledge, environmental knowledge, and the community's craft skills (Fig. 2). When incorporated into tourism settings, these elements can become an integral part of the cultural experience, while also enhancing the value of the products and creating additional livelihood opportunities for local communities. However, the economic value of ethnic minority cuisine can only be sustainably realised when local communities maintain a central role as key actors in preserving, producing, presenting, and benefiting from their own culinary heritage. If communities participate merely as labour providers, while elements of ethnic cuisine are exploited only as illustrative images or supplementary products for tourism activities, culinary heritage risks becoming commodified and detached from its original cultural context. Such a process not only diminishes the social significance and indigenous knowledge embedded in ethnic cuisine in particular, and ethnic culture more broadly, but also risks transforming vibrant living cultural practices into performative products designed solely to satisfy tourism consumption demands.



Fig. 2. Traditional food products wrapped in leaves and placed in woven baskets. Source: Tran Tan Vinh.

Third, ethnic cuisine carries profound educational and social values. Through food practices, knowledge about the environment, community history, and the relationship between humans and nature is conveyed in a direct and accessible way to urban residents. Engaging with ethnic cultures through cuisine contributes to raising awareness of cultural diversity, fostering respect for differences, and strengthening connections between urban areas and mountainous regions within a shared socio-cultural framework.

However, in practice, the integration of ethnic minority cuisine from the mountainous areas of Da Nang into urban spaces also presents several notable challenges. Excessive commercialisation may lead to the reduction of traditional dishes into purely consumable products, detached from their original cultural and ritual contexts. Simultaneously, asymmetries of power in tourism promotion and heritage commodification may erode the agency of ethnic communities in interpreting and narrating their own culinary traditions. In many instances, tourism enterprises, media institutions, and intermediary actors exercise disproportionate influence over the construction of cultural representations, the selection of promotional narratives, and the modes through which cultural value is transformed into economic capital. This may result in culinary cultural elements being simplified, detached from their socio-historical contexts, or even selectively reinterpreted to satisfy tourism demands and commercial interests. Furthermore, the economic gains derived from the exploitation of culinary heritage are often unevenly distributed among stakeholders. Whereas businesses and tourism operators capture a significant share of commercial benefits, local communities, as the original bearers, creators, and transmitters of heritage, frequently receive only limited returns or participate primarily as providers of labour. Such imbalances not only reinforce community dependence on external actors but also risk undermining cultural autonomy and weakening the internal motivation necessary for sustaining heritage preservation. These issues indicate that the preservation, utilisation, and promotion of ethnic culinary heritage should be approached with caution, through interdisciplinary perspectives, and with a long-term orientation.

In our view, based on the identification of the values and challenges in the "story" of ethnic minority cuisine in the mountainous areas of Da Nang discussed above, several orientations for appropriate preservation and promotion strategies in the current context of urbanisation can be proposed: (1) culinary preservation should be understood as a process of adaptive preservation, which acknowledges inevitable changes while maintaining the fundamental values of knowledge, techniques, and the social meanings embedded in ethnic culinary practices; (2) a community-centred approach should serve as a guiding principle throughout the process of preservation and promotion. Ethnic minority communities should not be regarded merely as beneficiaries, but as active agents who create, transmit, and determine how their culinary heritage is to be sustained and developed; (3) from a governance perspective, ethnic cuisine should be recognised as a form of soft cultural resource, strategically integrated into planning of cultural-tourism development and the urban spaces of Da Nang, in order to ensure a balance between economic development, cultural preservation, and social sustainability.

6. Discussion

The findings indicate that the culinary knowledge of ethnic minority communities in the mountainous areas of Da Nang does not exist as a fixed system of knowledge; rather, it is continuously transformed and reconfigured as it moves into the expanding urban space. This finding is consistent with recent perspectives in anthropology and heritage studies, which conceptualise heritage not as a set of values preserved in an unchanged form, but as living heritage that is continuously recreated by communities through everyday practices and adaptation to changing social contexts. In the case examined in this study, the transformation of culinary practices does not signify the erosion of tradition. Instead, it demonstrates the initiative of local communities in selectively adapting and reinterpreting their cultural practices in response to new economic, social, and spatial conditions.

A notable contribution of this study is its emphasis on the role of the expanding urban space as a transitional cultural space. While many previous studies have primarily interpreted cultural transformation as a consequence of globalisation or commercialisation, the findings presented here suggest that urban expansion itself also functions as a significant driver of the reconfiguration of indigenous knowledge. This perspective extends current discussions of cultural transformation by foregrounding the spatial dimension of change, demonstrating that the dynamics of heritage unfold not only over time but also through the movement of communities and their cultural practices across different social spaces.

Furthermore, this study provides additional empirical evidence supporting the perspective that culinary knowledge constitutes an integral component of indigenous ecological knowledge. Knowledge concerning the selection of ingredients, food preparation techniques, meal organisation, and intergenerational modes of transmission demonstrates that cuisine serves not only to meet biological needs but also as a repository of communal memory, environmental knowledge, adaptive experience, and the social norms of ethnic communities. As this system of knowledge is incorporated into the urban context, it continues to be reconfigured while retaining its core cultural values, thereby demonstrating the adaptive capacity of ethnic cultures in responding to the changing conditions of contemporary development. From a theoretical perspective, the findings suggest that culinary practices in the context of urban expansion should be understood beyond the conventional dichotomies of “tradition” versus “modernity” and “preservation” versus “transformation”. Rather, the transformation of culinary practices should be viewed as an ongoing process of negotiation between local communities and the new economic, social, and cultural conditions they

encounter. Through this process of negotiation, culinary knowledge is continually recreated while continuing to function as a vital cultural resource that enriches urban identity and reinforces cultural diversity within the broader process of urban development in Vietnam.

7. Conclusions

In summary, the culinary practices of ethnic minority communities in the mountainous areas of Da Nang reflect not only everyday subsistence needs but also embody a system of indigenous knowledge formed through long-term interactions between humans, the natural environment, and social life. The ways in which ingredients are selected, foods are prepared, eating spaces are organised, and meals are shared demonstrate that culinary traditions function as a form of living heritage, sustained through community practice and intergenerational transmission. In the context of Da Nang’s expanding urban landscape and the ongoing reconfiguration of cultural spaces, the culinary traditions of mountainous communities no longer exist solely as conventional practices but are increasingly evolving through continuous processes of adaptation and renewal, becoming sites of interaction between indigenous knowledge and contemporary urban life.

From this perspective, the study suggests that culinary heritage should be understood as a dynamic system of values capable of transformation within new socio-economic and spatial conditions, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the role of heritage within processes of urbanisation. The integration of culinary heritage into urban spaces not only enriches cultural identity and enhances the diversity and depth of urban life, but also creates opportunities for sustainable tourism development when organised on the basis of respect for cultural context and community agency. However, this process also raises challenges related to the risks of value reduction, commercialisation, and the detachment of culinary practices from their original cultural environments. Accordingly, fully recognising the value of the culinary heritage of ethnic minority communities in mountainous areas, while developing adaptive strategies for its preservation and promotion, constitutes an essential requirement in the context of contemporary urban development. This calls for a combination of interdisciplinary approaches, meaningful participation of local communities, and appropriate policy mechanisms to ensure that indigenous knowledge in general, and culinary heritage in particular, are not only safeguarded but also continuously revitalised and promoted as important cultural resources in the sustainable development of contemporary Da Nang.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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