

Stratified Institutional Equilibrium in Sacred Naming: Khmer Temple Denomination Under Minority–Majority Governance in Southwestern Vietnam

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Abstract—This study examines Khmer temple denomination in Southwestern Vietnam through a corpus of 446 officially recognized temples. It argues that institutional temple denomination in this minority–majority setting is best interpreted as a stratified institutional equilibrium rather than as a linear process of assimilation or isolated resistance. All temple names in the corpus conform to the bipartite generic–specific template characteristic of Theravāda naming systems, indicating macro-structural continuity across mainland Southeast Asia. At the same time, lexical-origin stratification, motivational bifocality, and institutional polyonymy reveal systematic multilingual layering. Khmer-dominant specific elements remain prevalent, accounting for 71.7% of the corpus, whereas Vietnamese-including forms are significantly associated with parallel denominations, $OR = 1.74$, 95% CI [1.16, 2.61], $p = .007$. Ecological–geographical and religious–symbolic motivations coexist, with modest but significant covariance across lexical strata. Taken together, the findings suggest that institutional temple denomination operates as a governance-structured semiotic system in which linguistic form, cultural memory, environmental anchoring, and ethnolinguistic negotiation cohere within a relatively stable institutional configuration. The study therefore offers a stratified governance framework as an alternative to linear assimilation models for analyzing sacred denomination in multilingual polities.

Index Terms—onomastics, language contact, cultural memory, linguistic landscape, Theravāda Buddhism, Khmer temples, Vietnam

I. INTRODUCTION

Religious place names occupy a distinctive position within onomastics because they function both as referential identifiers and as culturally organized semiotic forms (Bright, 2003; Hough, 2016; Kadmon, 2000). As proper names, they designate unique entities through conventionalized structural templates; at the same time, they often remain semantically motivated by cosmology, commemoration, locality, and institutional authority (Van Langendonck, 2007). Contemporary onomastic scholarship has further emphasized the patterned relationship between structural form and motivational semantics in place-name systems (Ainiala et al., 2012). Recent work on the heritage value of place names also shows that toponyms should not be treated merely as referential labels, but as culturally embedded forms through which communities encode historical experience, identity, and value (Mácha, 2023). In religious contexts, names may therefore serve as condensed sites of cultural memory through which communities stabilize continuity and legitimacy across time (Assmann, 2011; Nora, 1989).

In Theravāda Buddhist traditions, temple names frequently incorporate Pali-derived lexicon and doctrinal symbolism that connect local institutions to a transregional religious repertoire (Eliade, 1959; Knott, 2005). Yet structural continuity and doctrinal symbolism alone cannot explain multilingual hybridization, nor can they account for the coexistence of multiple institutionalized names for the same temple. Conversely, contact linguistics can model patterned bilingual outcomes, but it does not by itself explain why certain doctrinal, commemorative, or place-bound lexemes resist translation or replacement across generations. Temple denomination must therefore be examined through an integrated framework in which structural convention, contact-mediated adaptation, and mnemonic motivation are jointly operative.

The Mekong Delta of Vietnam provides a particularly suitable setting for such an inquiry. Historically shaped by Khmer, Kinh, Hoa, and Cham communities, the region constitutes a layered multilingual space in which religious institutions operate under asymmetric language governance (Nguyễn, 2002). Recent sociolinguistic evidence from An Giang confirms the multilingual communicative complexity of ethnic minority communities in the Mekong Delta,

showing that minority-language practices coexist with Vietnamese-mediated public and institutional communication (Hoang & Nguyen Van, 2025). Khmer temples in this context serve not only as ritual centers but also as institutions of education, cultural transmission, and community organization (Nguyễn, 2008). Temple names are therefore subject to dual pressures: they must remain meaningful within Khmer community life while also remaining legible within Vietnamese administrative and public domains.

This study focuses on institutional temple denomination, defined here as officially recognized temple names recorded in provincial administrative registers and cross-validated through field documentation. It analyzes a corpus of 446 Khmer temples in Southwestern Vietnam and codes each temple name along two primary dimensions: the linguistic origin of the specific element and its semantic motivation. The study also examines the structural configuration of each name as a whole. On this basis, it proposes a two-register interpretation consisting of an institutional register oriented toward documentary stabilization and public legibility, and a community register oriented toward Khmer lexical continuity and culturally embedded memory. Where these registers converge, hybrid forms and institutional polyonymy are treated as structured outcomes rather than incidental anomalies.

The analysis addresses four research questions:

1. Do Khmer temple names in Southwestern Vietnam preserve a stable structural template under multilingual contact?
2. How are specific elements distributed across lexical-origin strata?
3. What motivational patterns govern temple naming, and how do these patterns interact with lexical-origin strata?
4. To what extent does institutional polyonymy reflect a structured outcome of minority-majority governance?

The study makes three contributions. Empirically, it provides a corpus-based account of Khmer institutional temple denomination in Vietnam at a scale not previously documented. Methodologically, it shows how sacred proper names can be analyzed through integrated structural, lexical, and semantic layers. Theoretically, it advances an interpretive framework for the study of minority religious naming under dominant-language governance, offering an alternative to linear assimilation paradigms.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Sacred Toponymy and Structural Onomastics

Classical onomastics treats proper names as structurally organized designators whose generic-specific architecture distinguishes unique referents within classificatory systems (Bright, 2003; Dauzat, 1948; Kadmon, 2000; Van Langendonck, 2007). Historical toponymy likewise shows that place names persist as layered linguistic records of successive sociopolitical formations (Nicolaisen, 1976). In Theravāda contexts, temple names typically instantiate a bipartite structure in which a religious classifier, such as *wat* or *vihāra*, precedes a differentiating element with geographical, symbolic, or commemorative meaning (Hough, 2016).

This structural regularity, however, does not explain why some specific elements remain monolingual, others are translated, and still others develop hybrid or parallel forms under multilingual governance. Structural onomastics is especially effective in explaining why naming systems display durable formal templates, but it is less well equipped to account for patterned lexical layering within those templates. It explains continuity of architecture more readily than differentiation of content. The Mekong Delta corpus makes this distinction analytically important: if the generic-specific structure remains intact while the specific element varies across lexical and motivational dimensions, explanation must move beyond structural description alone. The issue is not whether sacred names have structure, but how a stable structure accommodates multilingual pressure without collapsing into either uniformity or disorder.

B. Language Contact and Matrix-Mediated Framing

Contact linguistics provides a useful framework for analyzing patterned bilingual outcomes. The Matrix Language Frame model distinguishes a structural frame language from embedded lexical insertions in bilingual production (Myers-Scotton, 1993, 2002), while broader work on language contact emphasizes domain sensitivity, asymmetric dominance, and functional differentiation in borrowing and retention (Matras, 2009). Although these models were developed primarily for spoken bilingual production, their underlying logic can be extended to institutional naming. In the present study, matrix effects are understood as operating through documentary and orthographic framing rather than through syntax. The institutional register may impose transliteration conventions, standardization pressures, and sequencing practices aligned with administrative documentation, while the community register may selectively preserve lexemes associated with doctrinal cosmology, local memory, or patronage.

This perspective is particularly relevant in minority-majority settings, where linguistic contact does not necessarily yield homogeneous mixing. Contact outcomes are often selective, domain-sensitive, and stratified. A naming system may retain minority-language dominance in some semantic fields while permitting majority-language inclusion in others. For this reason, contact theory is valuable not simply because it predicts mixing, but because it helps explain why mixing itself is patterned. In the present case, lexical incorporation matters less as a sign of contact in the abstract than as an indicator of how institutional legibility and community continuity are negotiated within sacred denomination.

C. Cultural Memory and Sacred Denomination

Cultural memory theory conceptualizes institutional continuity as the stabilization of selected symbolic forms (Assmann, 2011; Nora, 1989). Applied to sacred naming, this perspective helps explain why some lexical choices remain durable across multilingual settings, particularly when they encode doctrinal concepts, ritual vocabulary, or historically significant patronage. Cultural memory theory therefore complements contact linguistics by clarifying why sacred naming cannot be reduced to simple translation or replacement under minority–majority asymmetry.

Mácha's (2023) account of place-name heritage is useful in this respect because it conceptualizes names as carriers of value that may persist even when administrative, political, or linguistic regimes change. In the present study, this perspective helps explain why Khmer temple names may retain culturally significant lexical elements despite the growing visibility of Vietnamese in institutional and public domains. Religious names often function as more than locational labels. Temple denomination may condense narratives of origin, doctrinal prestige, local sacred geography, and communal self-recognition. In such cases, lexical choice is not merely descriptive but institutionally meaningful. Cultural memory theory thus helps account for why some naming elements appear resistant to replacement even when broader governance conditions favor dominant-language visibility. It also helps explain why multiple denominations may coexist without necessarily indicating instability: different names may preserve different mnemonic layers within the same institutional field.

D. Register Interaction as an Integrated Framework

The present study integrates structural onomastics, contact linguistics, and cultural memory theory into a single explanatory framework. Structural onomastics specifies the formal template of sacred names. Contact theory models patterned bilingual and hybrid outcomes. Memory theory explains why some lexical domains remain conservative despite contact pressure. These perspectives are analytically interdependent. Sacred denomination in multilingual settings cannot be adequately explained by any single tradition because the empirical object itself is layered. A temple name is at once a formal linguistic structure, a socially circulated public sign, and a condensed carrier of institutional memory.

Structural onomastics is therefore necessary but insufficient. It explains why naming systems retain recognizable architectures, yet it does not by itself explain why multilingual pressure yields selective lexical incorporation rather than template collapse. Contact linguistics adds explanatory power by showing that bilingual outcomes are rarely random; they are constrained by asymmetry, functional differentiation, and domain sensitivity. Even so, contact theory remains incomplete if it treats all lexical material as equally available for replacement or borrowing. Religious denomination is especially resistant to such flattening because some naming elements carry doctrinal, commemorative, or place-bound symbolic weight that exceeds their referential function.

The present framework accordingly treats institutional temple denomination as an analytically layered object requiring a layered explanation. Structural continuity, lexical stratification, and motivational differentiation should not be read as competing descriptions of the same phenomenon. Rather, they constitute evidence that sacred naming operates simultaneously at formal, sociolinguistic, and mnemonic levels. The value of a register-based interpretation lies precisely here: it makes visible how a stable naming architecture can coexist with patterned multilingual negotiation without reducing that negotiation either to assimilation or to symbolic residue.

In this study, the institutional and community registers are treated as analytic constructs rather than directly observed variables. They are not measured independently through ethnographic or interactional data; instead, they are inferred from recurrent distributional patterns in institutional temple denomination, including structural stability, lexical stratification, motivational layering, and institutional polyonymy. The proposed framework is therefore interpretive and mechanism-oriented rather than strictly causal in an observational sense. In this sense, the Mekong Delta case is theoretically productive not because it is exceptional in a simple descriptive way, but because it reveals how governance asymmetry can be sedimented within sacred denomination without erasing minority naming continuity.

E. Empirical Scope and Competing Explanations

Scholarship on the linguistic landscape has shown that public inscriptions index language hierarchy and ethnolinguistic vitality (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009), while critical toponymy has framed naming as a form of institutionalized spatial authority (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010). Recent research on urban street naming likewise demonstrates that officially sanctioned naming practices are shaped by institutional authority and social hierarchy, including gendered patterns of public commemoration (Górny & Górna, 2024). Although street names and temple names belong to different naming domains, this work reinforces the broader claim that official names are not neutral labels but institutionalized semiotic forms through which social order becomes spatially visible.

Building on these approaches, the present analysis is restricted to officially recognized temple names documented in provincial registers and verified through field inspection. This restriction is not merely a methodological convenience. It is central to the study's analytical purpose. By focusing on officially stabilized denominations rather than the full range of informal naming practices, the study isolates the institutional layer of sacred naming most directly shaped by governance, documentation, and public legibility. The aim is not to deny the importance of vernacular naming, but to avoid conflating naming regimes that operate under different constraints.

Two alternative explanations are considered. A uniform administrative standardization hypothesis predicts homogeneous hybridization across lexical domains and regions. A random bilingual mixture hypothesis predicts no domain-specific clustering and no association between lexical strata and naming outcomes. The register-interaction

framework becomes more plausible if the empirical pattern is inconsistent with both alternatives and if recurrent naming patterns are more readily explained by layered institutional negotiation than by uniform standardization or random bilingual mixture.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design and Analytical Expectation

This study employs a corpus-based empirical design to investigate institutional temple denomination among Khmer temples in Southwestern Vietnam. The analysis is guided by one central analytical expectation: hybrid forms and institutional polyonymy should exhibit non-random distributions more consistent with layered institutional negotiation than with uniform administrative standardization. The study combines structured coding with descriptive and inferential statistical analysis to evaluate whether the observed naming patterns are compatible with this expectation.

B. Corpus and Supplementary Interview Participants

The empirical dataset consists of 446 officially recognized Khmer Buddhist temples in Southwestern Vietnam. Because this is an onomastic corpus study, the units of analysis are temple names rather than individual human participants. The sampling frame includes all Khmer temples formally recognized by provincial authorities at the time of data collection. Inclusion required both official listing in provincial administrative registers and referent verification through field inspection. Temples without formal recognition were excluded in order to preserve the institutional focus of the study.

The corpus is situated within a broader Mekong Delta sociolinguistic environment in which Khmer language maintenance remains an active community concern. Recent research on Khmer communities in Sóc Trăng shows that language maintenance is closely tied to family, education, religion, and community institutions (Do et al., 2025). This is directly relevant to the present study because temples are not only religious sites but also institutional spaces in which Khmer linguistic and cultural continuity may be sustained.

The decision to restrict the corpus to officially recognized temples is analytically deliberate. Institutional temple denomination is the domain in which documentary stabilization, administrative visibility, and public legibility most directly intersect. By concentrating on temples with formally recognized names, the study isolates the register in which state-facing and community-facing naming pressures are most likely to become sedimented in durable textual form. This choice necessarily excludes informal oral naming practices, but it also prevents conflation between naming regimes that operate under different constraints and for different audiences. The corpus is therefore intentionally narrower than the full social life of naming, but better suited to the specific question of how sacred denomination behaves under minority–majority governance.

In addition, 38 semi-structured interviews were conducted with temple representatives and community members across provinces. These interviews served a supplementary role by clarifying naming history, validating etymological interpretation, and documenting coexisting denominations. They were not treated as the primary dataset or as independent causal evidence. Rather, they supported the interpretation of coded forms and helped distinguish substantive lexical variation from trivial orthographic fluctuation.

The supplementary interviews serve a limited but important role. They do not function as an independent evidentiary base for causal claims about institutional behavior. Instead, they help clarify lexical histories, confirm whether alternative names remain in active recognition, and distinguish meaningful denomination from routine orthographic variation. In a corpus study of sacred names, this distinction is crucial. Without such validation, formally recorded variants may be mistaken either for duplicate bureaucratic entries or for semantically trivial spelling differences. The interviews therefore strengthen interpretive reliability at the level of coding and classification, while leaving the core inferential structure of the study grounded in the institutional corpus itself.

C. Instruments and Coding Scheme

Each temple name was segmented into two components: a generic element, functioning as the religious classifier, and a specific element, functioning as the differentiating component. For the purposes of the present article, the specific element was coded along two primary analytical dimensions:

1. linguistic origin: Khmer, Vietnamese, Hán Việt/Sino-Vietnamese, or mixed formation; and
2. motivational category: ecological–geographical indexing, religious–symbolic ideology, or composite.

Separate codebooks were prepared for each analytical dimension, and coding protocols were finalized prior to statistical modeling. The coding design reflects the study's theoretical priorities. Linguistic-origin coding captures whether the differentiating component remains Khmer-dominant, incorporates Vietnamese material, or occupies a marginal Sino-Vietnamese stratum. Motivational coding captures whether the same component primarily indexes environmental location, doctrinal symbolism, or a composite of both. Taken together, these two dimensions allow the study to track how linguistic layering and semantic orientation intersect within the same naming system.

D. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection proceeded in four stages. First, temple names were compiled from provincial administrative registers to establish the institutional corpus. Second, field inspection was conducted to verify referent identity and orthographic

form. Third, semi-structured interviews were carried out to clarify naming history, lexical interpretation, and the coexistence of multiple denominations. Fourth, on-site observation documented inscriptional practices and orthographic variation in order to assess correspondence between documentary forms and material signage.

The study explicitly restricts its scope to institutionalized denomination. It does not attempt to capture the full range of vernacular oral labels, temporary landscape inscriptions, or informal naming practices. This delimitation is important because those naming regimes may operate under different social and pragmatic constraints. The present design therefore privileges comparability and institutional relevance over exhaustive coverage of all possible name variants.

E. Coding Procedures and Reliability

Segmentation and coding were conducted according to ex ante rules. Ambiguous compounds and historically fossilized forms were independently reviewed, and adjudication decisions were recorded in an audit log to ensure transparency. Coding for each analytical dimension was performed by trained coders using separate codebooks and without access to inferential predictions. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's κ , with a pre-specified acceptance threshold of $\kappa \geq .80$. Disagreements were resolved through blind third-party adjudication.

This procedure was designed to reduce interpretive drift in the treatment of historically layered names. In sacred denomination, lexical boundaries are not always transparent, particularly when forms have undergone orthographic adaptation or partial phonological accommodation. The coding workflow therefore emphasized consistency in classification rather than impressionistic etymology. Reliability matters here not only as a technical requirement but as a condition of interpretive credibility.

F. Analytical Procedures

The analysis combines descriptive and inferential procedures. Descriptive statistics were used to establish the prevalence of structural patterns, lexical-origin strata, motivational categories, and institutional polyonymy. Inferential analysis then tested the hypothesized associations.

For binary outcomes such as polyonymy and mixed-origin formation, the study employed frequentist logistic regression. Models were estimated with province-clustered robust standard errors to account for provincial nesting. As a robustness check, multilevel logistic models with province-level random intercepts were also estimated. Results are reported as odds ratios, 95% confidence intervals, and exact two-tailed p-values.

Logistic regression was chosen because the principal outcomes are binary and the study's aim is to assess whether certain naming configurations are more likely under particular lexical or motivational conditions. The method does not establish causality, but it allows the study to evaluate whether observed patterns depart meaningfully from random or uniform distribution. In this context, the value of the models lies less in prediction than in disciplined comparison across naming categories.

The study does not directly observe the interaction between institutional and community registers. Rather, it evaluates whether observable naming patterns in the corpus are consistent with a register-based interpretation. All inferential claims are therefore framed as evidence of patterned association and interpretive plausibility rather than direct demonstration of underlying mechanisms.

G. Methodological Delimitation

All reported effects are interpreted as statistical associations rather than causal relationships. The design is cross-sectional, and the scope of inference is limited to institutionalized Khmer temple names under contemporary administrative governance in Southwestern Vietnam. The findings are not assumed to generalize automatically to informal oral naming practices or to other national contexts.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Institutional Polyonymy as a Structured Regional Pattern

Of the 446 temples in the corpus, 227, or 50.9%, are documented with more than one institutionalized denomination. Under a binomial specification, the estimated proportion of polyonymy is 0.509, 95% CI [0.462, 0.556]. Within this bounded corpus, multiplicity is therefore not marginal but structurally salient.

Institutional polyonymy was defined as the coexistence of lexically or structurally distinct name tokens referring to the same temple in administrative records and/or validated public usage. Minor orthographic normalization was excluded from classification. Field validation further suggests that, in most cases, the alternative denominations remain concurrently recognizable rather than functioning solely as archival remnants of sequential renaming.

Although provincial rates range from 34.8% in Bạc Liêu to 57.7% in Kiên Giang, the chi-square test does not reach conventional significance thresholds. This indicates that institutional polyonymy is broadly distributed across the region rather than concentrated in only a few provinces. Table 1 presents the provincial distribution of institutional polyonymy across the corpus.

TABLE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF INSTITUTIONAL POLYONYMY BY PROVINCE (N = 446)

Province	Total Temples (N)	Polyonymous (n)	% Polyonymy
Cần Thơ	42	20	47.6
Vĩnh Long	28	11	39.3
An Giang	61	34	55.7
Trà Vinh	92	50	54.3
Sóc Trăng	118	63	53.4
Long An	19	7	36.8
Kiên Giang	52	30	57.7
Bạc Liêu	23	8	34.8
Phú Quốc	11	4	36.4
Total	446	227	50.9

Note. $\chi^2(df=8) = 11.98$, $p = .151$. Percentages are calculated within province. Minor orthographic variants were excluded prior to classification.

Source. Author's corpus and calculations based on coded institutional denominations.

The substantive significance of this result lies not in strong provincial differentiation, but in the durability of the pattern across the region. Even without statistically significant interprovincial concentration, the prevalence of institutional polyonymy suggests that the coexistence of multiple denominations is not an exceptional local residue. It is better understood as a regionally distributed feature of institutional temple denomination.

From the register-based perspective advanced here, this pattern suggests that institutional temple denomination in Southwestern Vietnam is not best understood through assumptions of canonical singularity. Instead, institutional polyonymy appears to be a stable outcome of overlapping administrative and community-based naming logics.

B. Structural Template Stability Under Contact Conditions

Across the full corpus, all temple names conform to a bipartite generic-specific template. No counterexamples were identified under the segmentation protocol. The generic element consistently functions as a religious classifier, while the specific element provides differentiation through geographical, symbolic, or commemorative content.

This result indicates macro-structural continuity with Theravāda naming systems elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia. More importantly, it narrows the site of analytical variation. Because the architectural template remains fully stable under multilingual contact, contact-induced change in this corpus must be located primarily within the specific element rather than in the overall name structure. The evidence therefore points to a layer-sensitive system in which macro-structure is conserved while lexical and semantic negotiation occurs internally.

This finding also prevents overstatement about contact effects. The corpus does not show wholesale restructuring of temple denomination. Instead, it shows that multilingual negotiation occurs within a durable naming architecture. This distinction supports the broader argument of the study: sacred naming in this case is neither structurally destabilized nor uniformly standardized, but selectively layered.

C. Lexical-Origin Stratification of Specific Elements

Origin coding reveals a strongly patterned distribution of specific elements. Khmer-dominant forms account for 71.7% of the corpus, Vietnamese-including forms for 24.2%, and Sino-Vietnamese strata for 4.1%. This distribution departs sharply from uniformity, confirming that lexical origin is a highly structured feature of institutional denomination. Table 2 reports the full distribution of lexical-origin categories in the corpus.

TABLE 2
LINGUISTIC ORIGIN OF SPECIFIC ELEMENTS IN INSTITUTIONAL TEMPLE NAMES (N = 446)

Origin Category	n	%
Khmer, Latinized	219	49.1
Khmer, Vietnamese-adapted	101	22.6
Vietnamese lexical	67	15.0
Hybrid Khmer-Vietnamese	41	9.2
Sino-Vietnamese	12	2.7
Sino-Vietnamese hybrid	6	1.4
Total	446	100.0

Note. Percentages are calculated relative to the total corpus. Categories are mutually exclusive and based on independently coded lexical-origin criteria. Hybrid forms require identifiable morphemic contribution from more than one linguistic system.

Source. Author's corpus and calculations based on coded specific elements.

For analytical clarity, these categories were further aggregated into broader lexical-origin strata. Table 3 summarizes these aggregated categories and highlights the predominance of Khmer-dominant forms.

TABLE 3
AGGREGATED LEXICAL-ORIGIN CATEGORIES FOR ANALYTICAL CONTRAST (N = 446)

Aggregated Category	n	%
Khmer-dominant: Latinized + adapted Khmer	320	71.7
Vietnamese-including: Vietnamese + hybrid Khmer–Vietnamese	108	24.2
Sino-Vietnamese: pure + hybrid	18	4.1
Total	446	100.0

Note. Aggregation reflects analytical contrasts between lexical retention, incorporation, and marginal Sino-Vietnamese strata.

Source. Author's aggregation based on Table 2 origin coding.

More importantly, logistic regression shows that Vietnamese-including forms are significantly associated with higher odds of institutional polyonymy than Khmer-dominant forms, OR = 1.74, 95% CI [1.16, 2.61], $p = .007$. Sino-Vietnamese forms do not differ significantly, although inference is constrained by small cell counts. Multilevel models with province-level random intercepts produce substantively equivalent estimates, indicating that the association is not driven by regional clustering.

Two points follow from this result. First, the predominance of Khmer-dominant forms indicates the continued resilience of minority religious lexicon within a majority-language administrative environment. This finding is consistent with recent evidence on Khmer language maintenance in the Mekong Delta, particularly in Sóc Trăng, where religious and community institutions continue to support Khmer linguistic continuity despite broader Vietnamese-dominant public conditions (Do et al., 2025). It also aligns with evidence from An Giang that ethnic minority communication is often multilingual and domain-sensitive rather than uniformly shifted toward the majority language (Hoang & Nguyen Van, 2025). Second, the association between Vietnamese-including forms and institutional polyonymy suggests that contact does not take the form of simple lexical replacement. Rather, Vietnamese lexical incorporation appears to increase the probability of parallel denomination, not the categorical displacement of Khmer forms.

The distinction between incorporation and replacement is central to this interpretation. If Vietnamese lexical material were functioning primarily as a replacement mechanism, one would expect a much stronger contraction of Khmer-dominant forms across the corpus. That is not what the data show. Instead, the corpus reveals a configuration in which Vietnamese inclusion becomes more probable in relation to institutional polyonymy, while Khmer-dominant naming remains numerically predominant overall. This combination suggests that majority-language visibility is being added to the institutional field without fully displacing minority lexical continuity.

This pattern shifts the interpretation of multilingual sacred naming away from a zero-sum model. The coexistence of minority lexical predominance with patterned majority-language inclusion implies that naming outcomes are redistributed across overlapping institutional demands rather than resolved through simple substitution. In practical terms, the data point to a naming system in which Khmer-denominational continuity remains strong enough to structure the corpus as a whole, even as Vietnamese forms become selectively salient in contexts associated with parallel naming. The findings are therefore better interpreted as evidence of stratification than of transition alone.

D. Motivational Patterns and Their Interaction With Lexical Strata

The semantic motivation of temple names was coded into three categories: ecological–geographical indexing, religious–symbolic ideology, and composite forms. Religious–symbolic ideology constitutes the largest category, accounting for 50.2% of the corpus, followed by ecological–geographical indexing at 37.7% and composite forms at 12.1%. This distribution is significantly uneven, indicating that motivational structure is patterned rather than random. Table 4 presents the distribution of motivational categories across the institutional corpus.

TABLE 4
MOTIVATIONAL CATEGORIES OF SPECIFIC ELEMENTS IN INSTITUTIONAL TEMPLE NAMES (N = 446)

Motivational Category	n	%
Ecological–geographical indexing	168	37.7
Religious–symbolic ideology	224	50.2
Composite	54	12.1
Total	446	100.0

Note. Percentages are calculated relative to N = 446. Inter-coder reliability for motivational coding: Cohen's $\kappa = .86$, 95% CI [.82, .90]. Categories are mutually exclusive and based on semantically transparent criteria.

Source. Author's corpus and calculations based on coded motivational categories.

Ecological–geographical indexing names anchor temples to salient environmental features such as ridges, hills, forests, riverbanks, or distinctive flora and fauna. In a deltaic environment characterized by hydrological mobility, such lexemes plausibly function as devices of referential stabilization. Religious–symbolic ideology names, by contrast, draw on translocal Theravāda doctrinal vocabulary and align local temples with wider symbolic and cosmological repertoires.

Cross-tabulation reveals a significant association between motivational category and lexical-origin stratum. Vietnamese-including forms are disproportionately represented in religious–symbolic ideology and composite categories relative to ecological–geographical indexing, indicating that lexical and motivational layers are not distributed

independently. Instead, semantic selection appears to be structured in relation to contact-sensitive lexical stratification. This relationship is shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5
ASSOCIATION BETWEEN MOTIVATIONAL CATEGORY AND LEXICAL-ORIGIN STRATA (N = 446)

Motivational Category	Khmer-dominant	Vietnamese-including	Sino-Vietnamese	Total
Ecological–geographical indexing	139	26	3	168
Religious–symbolic ideology	142	74	8	224
Composite	39	8	7	54
Total	320	108	18	446

Note. $\chi^2(df = 4) = 27.63$, $p < .001$; Cramér's $V = .18$, indicating a small-to-moderate effect.

Source. Author's calculations based on integrated motivational and lexical-origin coding.

A further logistic regression predicting institutional polyonymy from motivational category shows that composite names have higher odds of parallel denomination than religious–symbolic ideology-only names, $OR = 1.69$, 95% CI [1.02, 2.80], $p = .041$, whereas ecological–geographical indexing-only names do not differ significantly. This suggests that names combining ecological and symbolic motivations are especially compatible with layered institutional representation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that institutional temple denomination in the Mekong Delta is governed not by a single motivational principle but by a layered motivational configuration in which environmental anchoring and doctrinal projection coexist and interact with lexical stratification. Although the effect size is modest, it should not be dismissed as trivial. In naming research, especially in historically layered institutional systems, small-to-moderate associations can be substantively meaningful because they indicate patterned ordering rather than noise. What matters is that motivational categories are not randomly distributed across lexical strata; they exhibit a structure that is interpretable in relation to governance and contact.

E. Institutional Temple Denomination as Stratified Equilibrium

Taken together, the findings support an interpretation of Khmer institutional temple denomination as a site of negotiated equilibrium under minority–majority governance. Three features are especially salient. First, the naming system is structurally insulated: all names retain the generic–specific template. Second, it is lexically stratified: Khmer-dominant forms remain prevalent, while Vietnamese-including forms are associated with higher odds of institutional polyonymy. Third, it is motivationally bifocal: ecological–geographical and religious–symbolic motivations coexist and are differentially distributed across lexical strata.

This configuration does not fit linear models that place minority naming on a continuum from resistance to assimilation. The corpus displays neither straightforward preservation nor unidirectional replacement. Instead, institutional temple denomination is more plausibly interpreted as a stratified institutional equilibrium in which administrative legibility, Khmer continuity, cultural memory, and environmental anchoring are redistributed across coexisting naming layers.

This equilibrium should not be understood as an absence of asymmetry. Nor does it imply that institutional and community registers exercise equal power. Rather, the term refers to the relative stabilization of naming outcomes within a field structured by unequal linguistic and administrative power. What appears stable in the corpus is not social symmetry, but the recurrent organization of denomination across distinguishable layers: a durable formal template, persistent Khmer lexical presence, selective Vietnamese inclusion, and motivational differentiation that is neither random nor reducible to a single semantic logic.

This clarification matters because alternative readings remain inadequate. A straightforward assimilation model cannot explain why Khmer-dominant specific elements remain so prevalent across the corpus despite majority-language governance. A simple resistance model is equally incomplete because it cannot account for the patterned association between Vietnamese-including forms and institutional polyonymy. Likewise, a purely symbolic reading of sacred naming would miss the extent to which environmental indexing, administrative framing, and multilingual legibility shape denomination alongside doctrinal symbolism. The present framework is therefore not intended to replace one deterministic model with another, but to provide a more proportionate account of how sacred names can remain structurally stable while being internally redistributed across institutional pressures.

More broadly, this argument contributes to contact onomastics by suggesting that sacred denomination under minority governance should be analyzed not only as a linguistic artifact but also as an institutional arrangement. Names do not merely reflect contact; they organize it in publicly durable form. This point resonates with Mácha's (2023) argument that place names possess heritage value because they mediate relationships among language, memory, place, and community identity. It also parallels findings from official street-naming research, where naming practices are shown to encode institutional hierarchies and social visibility within public space (Górny & Górna, 2024). In the present corpus, sacred denomination similarly functions as a durable public form through which minority memory and majority-governed legibility are jointly organized.

When examined at the level of an institutional corpus, sacred names may reveal not a linear path from minority continuity to majority replacement, but a layered configuration in which continuity and incorporation become mutually legible without becoming identical. That possibility is what the Mekong Delta case brings into sharp analytical focus.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined 446 officially recognized Khmer temples in Southwestern Vietnam in order to explain how institutional temple denomination operates under minority–majority governance. The findings suggest that Khmer temple denomination in this setting is best interpreted not as a process of linear assimilation or insulated resistance, but as a stratified institutional equilibrium.

Several findings are especially important. First, all temple names preserve the generic–specific structural template, indicating macro-architectural continuity with Theravāda naming systems more broadly. Second, Khmer-dominant specific elements remain prevalent, accounting for 71.7% of the corpus, which indicates strong continuity in minority religious lexicon. Third, Vietnamese-including forms are significantly associated with institutional polyonymy, $OR = 1.74$, 95% CI [1.16, 2.61], $p = .007$, suggesting that lexical incorporation increases the probability of parallel denomination rather than replacing Khmer forms. Fourth, ecological–geographical and religious–symbolic motivations coexist, and their significant covariance across lexical strata points to a layered semantic organization. Finally, approximately half of the temples exhibit multiple institutionalized names, indicating that temple denomination in this context is not monodenominational but structurally parallelized.

These findings carry several implications. Theoretically, they support a governance-based framework in which naming systems are shaped by interacting institutional pressures rather than by unidirectional language shift alone. Methodologically, the study shows the value of integrating structural segmentation, lexical-origin coding, motivational analysis, and institutional polyonymy within a single empirical design. Practically, the results suggest that administrative standardization and minority-language continuity are not necessarily structurally incompatible; instead, they may coexist within stable naming systems. This implication is particularly important in light of recent research on Khmer language maintenance in the Mekong Delta, which emphasizes the continuing role of community and religious institutions in sustaining minority-language vitality (Do et al., 2025). It also supports the broader view that place names should be treated as heritage-bearing forms rather than as administratively interchangeable labels (Mácha, 2023). This has relevance for language policy, heritage documentation, and digital cartography, where reducing sacred sites to a single standardized denomination may erase important institutional and mnemonic layers.

The study also opens several directions for future research. Diachronic work is needed to examine how naming layers change over time and how administrative policies shape denomination trajectories. Comparative research across other minority religious communities and Theravāda settings would help assess the broader applicability of the stratified equilibrium interpretation. Further work on vernacular oral naming and linguistic landscape variation would also complement the present focus on institutionalized denomination.

These conclusions are bounded by design. The study is cross-sectional and correlational, and it is limited to officially recognized temple names in Southwestern Vietnam. It does not reconstruct policy causality, model long-term temporal change, or capture the full range of informal naming practices. Within these limits, the evidence supports interpreting institutional temple denomination in this case as a governance-structured semiotic system in which linguistic form, cultural memory, environmental anchoring, and ethnolinguistic negotiation coalesce within a relatively stable institutional configuration.

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