

The Image of Neak Ta in the Thinking and Lifestyle of the Southern Khmer Community in Vietnam

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Abstract

In the development process of humans and human society, accompanying factors such as economics, politics and culture are the factors of spiritual life, belief and religion. Particularly, it is believed that thinking and lifestyle are the two fundamental components that best capture the evolution of human existence and progress throughout any nation's history. Likewise, for the Southern Khmer community in Vietnam, during the process of settlement and long-term survival in the new land, the thinking and lifestyle of the Khmer community are always influenced by foreign influences. Many different factors to form a community with diverse but profound lifestyles and ways of existence to be able to stand and live for a long time for centuries in the South. Belief and religion are regarded as the two main factors in that significant impact of living circumstances, directly impacting the way the Khmer community thinks and lives as spiritual therapy. Assists in resolving issues and ideas that people are unable to resolve on their own as well as life's challenges. To be able to maintain long-term survival, the Southern Khmer community in Vietnam relies on gods and placing full trust in the gods to ask for salvation and protection from the strong impact of climate change natural event. Among them, the image of *Neak Ta* is mentioned in the entire way of living in the community, having a significant influence on the thinking and lifestyle of the Khmer people during the process of settlement and gathering long-term in the Southern region.

Keywords: The Khmer Southern Vietnam, Neak Ta, Thinking, Lifestyle.

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INTRODUCTION

The course of human development has demonstrated that the initial interaction between humans and their society and the outside world is not only theoretical but also real-world. Individuals can shape and develop their thoughts and lifestyle in a more comprehensive way through practical activities and practice. However, it is also necessary to see that the process of forming and developing thinking and lifestyle is a long-term process, regulated by certain conditions and factors, first of all the natural geographical situation, social circumstances and culture. In particular, cultural factors always play a fundamental role in social, spiritual life and contribute to forming the social appearance of each human community in each country and nation.

As one of the elements in the spiritual and religious cultural structure of the Khmer community, worshiping gods and supernatural beings in the way of life of Khmer society in the South is considered a form of worship. Long-standing beliefs are associated with the

process of long-term settlement in the southern region. Among these is Neak Ta, a well-liked type of folk belief that speaks about spiritual and religious aspects as well as the natural world, the land and residential areas, all of which have an impact on the environment. Specific to the way of life and way of thought of the Khmer community during the protracted centuries-long period of settlement. Within the framework of this article, the author wants to clearly point out the influence of the image of Neak Ta in the thinking and lifestyle of the Southern Khmer community associated with the diversity, richness of cultural and spiritual life, beliefs and spirituality of the Khmer community to gain a deeper insight into the traditional cultural values typical of the community's lifestyle throughout the process of self-development in the Southern region in Vietnam.

CONTENT

The Khmer community lives mainly in 5 provinces in the Southern Delta including Tra Vinh, Soc Trang, An Giang, Kien Giang and Can Tho city. In

addition, there is another small group of Khmer people residing in the two provinces of Binh Phuoc and Tay Ninh in the Southeast region. According to data from the General Statistics Office on the 2019 Population and Housing Census, there are about 1,319,652 Khmer people living in the South, distributed into 323,688 households in the Mekong Delta and 73,152 households in the Southeast region (General Statistics Office, 2020, p. 44). This is an ethnic group that has had a long process of settling and gathering in the southern region to integrate with other ethnic groups to form densely populated areas.

The Khmer population has always encountered numerous challenges with regard to circumstances and living situations, dating back to their early days of colonizing and recovering territory in the southern region. In addition to strengthening the resolve to overcome obstacles, influences from the outer world, the living world, supernatural forces, gods and demons also greatly inspire the Khmer people to remain steadfast and self-assured. Makes the struggle against nature more ferocious and focused. On the one hand, the Southern Khmer people have conquered nature to maintain life; on the other hand, they show respect through worship of natural forces with the desire to ask for favors and receive many blessings. healthy in the process of exploiting and conquering nature before the living environment. Among these, Neak Ta is a customary and well-liked type of worship practiced by Khmer people, directly linked to and evolving from the Khmer community's presence in the southern area.

The belief began with the image of Neak Ta. According to traditional folk beliefs, Neak Ta, also known as Louk Ta, is worshiped by the Southern Khmer community with sacred stones found in the natural environment. In Khmer, "Neak" is a noun used to refer to people in general, "Ta" is an older man, respected and trusted by the community. Khmer people have a habit of calling Neak Ta Louk Ta. This name is similar to the current way of calling Neak Ta among the Khmer people in Cambodia. The two words "Neak Ta" combine to form the idea of a spirit responsible for many functions related to nature, such as land, rivers, forests, mountains, fields, boat docks, residences, termite mounds and giant trees (Phan Anh Tu, 2021, p. 41). However, the most important function and deepest attachment to the agricultural life of the Khmer people is Neak Ta, the earth god, who governs the land and villages. This function is similar to the Vietnamese belief in worshipping Thanh Hoang. Neak Ta originates from the belief in worshipping nature and mystical phenomena in nature that the Khmer people cannot explain. Traces of Neak Ta's natural spirit can be recognized today when this belief is often related to large tree species associated with the living space of the Khmer people such as the Trom tree (*Sterculia foetida*/ ឆើមសំរោង, daeum samrong), the tree *Ficus religiosa*/ ដេអ៊ីម ឫក្ខ, daeum bot), tamarind trees/

ដូម ដូមក្រីល្ប, daeum ompil (Guillou, 2012, p.20). The temple worshipping Neak Ta is often built by villagers under the canopy of such giant trees. Although it has a natural origin, over time, Neak Ta was assimilated by the Southern Khmer community into the belief of worshipping ancestors or worshipping those who built squirrel villages (srok). According to Khmer folk beliefs, in all natural phenomena related to human life, heaven and earth arrange a protective Neak Ta whose task is to eliminate all disasters and suppress all evil spirits and demons, protecting a peaceful and prosperous life for people and villages. Neak Ta also comes in a variety of forms, based on the area and extent of influence. Neak Ta of phum, squirrel, hamlet, canal, forest, mountain, boat station, and family are the divisions of the Southern Khmer people. They frequently have their own temples, constructed in the Khmer community's residential neighborhoods. By calling Neak Ta, in terms of belief, it shows that the Southern Khmer community sees Neak Ta as a deity with meritorious deeds to the villagers and assimilates Neak Ta with humans, thereby clearly demonstrating the transition process. Changing the thinking and perception of the Khmer people, considering the image of Neak Ta as a deity or a legendary character and emphasizing the assimilation of Neak Ta beliefs with the ancestors who contributed to the creation process.

If Vietnamese people in the South often call Neak Ta Mr. Ta or God of Wealth, then Khmer people see Neak Ta as the local god whose responsibility is to look after the health and prosperity of the places he governs. Neak Ta of the Southern Khmer community bears the mark of Brahmanism with many different types of worship in different spaces, such as Neak Ta Day Khmau, Kro-hom (red neck), Buon Muk (four-faced), Potthobol (big belly),... These are folk images that are assigned attributes, incarnations or hold a position as a courtier of the god Visnu or Shiva. In particular, there are some Neak Ta, such as Neak Ta Morey, Neak Ta Proum or Neak Ta En, that are often used by the Khmer community to call Brahman gods, such as Visnu, Brahma, and Indra.

The worshipping Neak Ta in the thinking and lifestyle of the Southern Khmer community. The custom of worshipping Mr. Ta as well as other gods in nature such as rain, wind, thunder, lightning, etc. has long occupied an important position in the spiritual lives of Khmer farmers before the entry of Buddhism. Neak Ta can be in a temple, Neak Ta can be named after something, it can be a specific object in nature, such as a stone; it can also bear the name of a person or the name of a legend related to that person. The names of gods in Brahmanism, such as Visnu, Shiva, Brahma, etc., express the sacredness and superiority of the living world. Based on this idea, the Khmer community in the South frequently constructs the Neak Ta temple at the start of the village, at the intersection of the road, in the corner of the field, etc., so that the locals can organize a ritual to pray for peace in

front of the temple at least once a year. I hope the family is content, the weather is nice and they are prosperous.

Among the Ta men in Khmer folk, there are some who are very strong, governing an entire town or even a province, while others only govern a hamlet, a road, a mountain or a hill. But all Mr. Ta have the common task of looking after the health, protecting lives, as well as the prosperity of the village where they govern. Southern Khmer people greatly worship Neak Ta. They believe that natural disasters such as droughts, floods, epidemics or disasters occur due to people's disrespect towards Mr. Ta. Therefore, whenever something bad causes difficulties in life, the Khmer community often holds a ceremony to pray to the Ta men so that they can reduce their anger and bless them.

Considered the local gods, these Mr. Ta will be in charge of different large and small areas, and depending on the place where each man governs, people will call him by different names. There is a man who preserves and manages the fields; people call him Neak Ta Sre. He was built and worshiped at the temple; people called it Neak Ta Vatt, or water god (Neak Ta Tuc), mountain god (Neak Ta Phnon), river god (Neak Ta Prek), and tree god (Neak Ta Dam Po)... Khmer folk have two legends about Neak Ta. There is a legend that Neak Ta originated from the story of a sage named Moeum. In order to help Prince Chan Reacha restore his throne, his father and son dug a hole filled with spikes and then jumped. He committed suicide, transformed into a god of evil, controlled the evil army and overpowered the enemy army so that Chan Reacha could win. After restoring the throne, the king ordered the people to build a temple to worship Moeum and his son as heroes who saved the country. Another legend in Khmer folklore is that, once upon a time, there was a father and son from a very poor family who were despised by people, but they still spent half of their rice every day to worship monks. When the father passes away, the son often goes to the grave to ask for his father's blessing so that he can be respected by people. One night, the son dreamed that his father appeared and told him to go straight to the north and his wish would be fulfilled. The next day, the son set out, traveled for exactly 10 days, came to a rocky mound halfway up the mountain, and while he was tired of thinking, he turned into a stone statue. Some people, when encountering misfortune, bring incense, lamps, and offerings to ask Neak Ta Komlos (the god of youth) for help because the god is very spiritual. Gradually, Khmer people from near and far came to invite the remains of the god Neak Ta Komlos to set up temples in all localities. According to such legends and folk tales, Khmer society in the South not only has Ta men who take care of the people's lives but also has Ta men who specialize in protecting the peace, the most common of which are three. Mr. Ta is red-necked (wrapped in a red scarf around his neck). His role is to protect the citadel and fight to protect his homeland and country. Currently, on the top of Ba The

mountain in Thoai Son district, An Giang province, the Red-necked Ta is solemnly worshiped and is especially respected by the Kinh and Khmer communities here. They often come here to pray and hope. They want peace for my family, Ta Phum has the role of protecting the village, protecting health, preventing epidemics and taking care of people's lives. Mr. Ta is very popular in Khmer society, present everywhere in villages. Worshiping Mr. Ta is a way for the Khmer people to express gratitude and ask for favors for their loved ones. They ask for Mr. Ta's blessings so they can have a happy life and do business successfully. This is Mr. Ta, also known as Ta Bayad. His duties include guarding the fields, crops, workers throughout production, and assisting in preventing accidents involving severe winds and seas. This Mr. Ta is a rare find, found only in a few places, including an Giang and Kien Giang. Although their roles are different, all Neak Ta have the common purpose of protecting and blessing all living activities of the entire community. This form is similar to the Vietnamese custom of worshiping the Thanh Hoang.

Unlike the shrines of other ethnic groups, the spaces for worshiping the Ta people are often very diverse, they can be on the bends of the road, on the banks of fields or under big trees in each hamlet with roofs made of leaves, made of ton or tile in the style of a stilt house, square, 5 inches long x 1 foot long. In some places, a large and spacious shrine is built (like the shrine to Mr. Ta in Ta Danh commune, Tri Ton district, An Giang province) to serve the maximum spiritual needs in the spiritual life of the Khmer community. Accordingly, the location of the shrines worshiping Mr. Ta often faces the east, the direction of light, wisdom, and power, according to Khmer folk beliefs. The god statue does not have a specific shape, represented by different oval stones and large (Thmâr xom) and small (Thmâr tauth, symbolizing the attendant demons) shiny rings placed in front of the temple worship. Neak Ta, for the Southern Khmer community, is not only a protective god but also a god of healing and judgment. In the past, when conflicts occurred, Khmer people often went to Neak Ta temple to resolve the matter by swearing in front of Mr. Ta's witness.

Once a year, during the first month of summer or dry season, from early April to May in the solar calendar, the Khmer community has a significant influence on all living activities, including spiritual life. In An Giang, people get together frequently to perform ceremonies in which they worship Mr. Ta and beg him to bless the fields with an abundance of water, which would enable the crops to remain green all year long. According to custom, the ceremony to worship Mr. Ta is always carefully and thoughtfully prepared by the Khmer people to express their sincerity towards them. About 10 days before the worshiping ceremony, representatives of Phum Soc people go to each house to announce the date and time of the Neak Ta worshiping ceremony and at the same time, mobilize materials, rice, salt and money to

organize the worshipping ceremony. The offerings to Mr. Ta include a "xom" made of a banana tree trunk with 3 levels of pointed towers, at the top of which are placed young coconut leaves wrapped with a string, a tray made of banana peel; in the tray there is a place to put incense, 5 pieces of fresh areca nuts and 5 rolled betel leaves. In addition to these two main offerings, there are also pig heads, chickens, ducks, wine, rice trays and fruit cakes. During the worshipping ritual, Khmer people often invite monks to recite sutras and prayers, followed by a representative of the people in the hamlet reporting to Mr. Ta about the villagers' crop production situation in the past year, offering offerings to Mr. offerings to pay homage to Mr. Ta and pray for him to continue to protect and protect the villagers' health, and bless them to produce the next crop with high efficiency. When entering the ceremony, starting from the temple door, the procession goes three times clockwise to symbolize praying for more rainwater and peace for the Phum Soc. Leading the way is the shaman and then everyone performing the ceremony goes freely, not in order. After the ceremony, they came to burn *Thmo Neak Ta* incense to pray, praying for peace, happiness, good health, favorable weather, and good crops. After every prayer,

the shaman calls out "Sochom" which translates to "strong and good" and everyone sings in response. He then pours wine and places a small amount of food in the offering tray, known as *Pe*. In order to both invite the gods to the event and attest to their sincerity, they play traditional songs and concert music with lyrics by Khonh and Chron, such as:

God Prac In, please bless us
 God Maha Brum, please come down and help
 May the rain pour down and flood the fields.
 Inspired! Inspired!
 Be rich and live long, come to us
 Buddhism has permeated everyone
 Fields of heaven and earth,
 Human effort.
 Inspired! Inspired!
 A rain falls: Happiness will take us to Nirvana.
 (*Song for rain*) (Truong Luu, 2014, p.182)

After the worship rituals, the Southern Khmer people invite the monks to eat rice, and then the people in the Khmer hamlet eat together. This is what the Southern Khmer people call a solidarity meal (**Samaki**).



Figure 1: Neak Ta the brave man symbolizes the protective deity



Figure 2: Neak Ta Vatt symbolizes for luck



Figure 3: Neak Ta Dam Po



Figure 4: Neak Ta Sre

Because of the long-standing agricultural practices that depend heavily on the weather, trusting and relying on gods is deeply ingrained in the traditional production thinking of the community and Mr. Ta is such a god.

In short, Neak Ta in the thinking and lifestyle of the Southern Khmer community is the god who directly protects farming, fields and community life and also determines the success or failure of activities and production during the year. For that reason, Mr. Ta has a certain influence on the thinking, lifestyle and living habits of the community in Southern Khmer villages in Vietnam.

CONCLUSION

The image of Neak Ta and Neak Ta worship are long-standing folk beliefs that are closely linked to the history of the formation of the Khmer people in southern Vietnam. Originating from angel beliefs associated with the ecological characteristics, geographical location, and agricultural activities of Khmer villages, the image of Neak Ta has a certain influence on the thinking and

lifestyle of the Khmer community in the southern region. Through the form of worship and ritual practice, the awareness of remembering one's roots and ancestors has been shown that today's generations of Southern Khmer people still maintain and carry out this practice this practice effectively. It is the sense of returning to the origin as a system of spiritual, humanistic and aesthetic values to express gratitude and gratitude to the God of Phum Soc for blessings and blessings in the lifestyle. of the Khmer community. Worshiping Neak Ta also signifies a new development in the beliefs and lifestyle of the Southern Khmer society, which combines religion and thought in a harmonious manner agriculture combined with a modest, rural lifestyle, between artistic ideals and the humanistic attitude and between the vibrant, problem-solving mentality of the people of Cambodia. Through the image of Neak Ta, the Southern Khmer community has established a form of great spiritual strength through which to maintain, strengthen and develop thinking and awareness of origins and achievements. The efforts of our predecessors throughout the process of shaping the lifestyle over more than two centuries of arriving in the Southern region to

the present period.

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