



**SEAMEO REGIONAL CENTRE
FOR HISTORY AND TRADITION**
**Hybrid Symposium on "Southeast Asian
Indigenous Culture and Traditions:
Interaction, Inclusion and Integration"**



**INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN RITUALS AND
ECOLOGICAL SETTINGS IN SETTLEMENT
SPACES: TRADITIONAL CREATIVITY AND
CULTURAL CHANGE AMONG THE KHMER IN
CONTEMPORARY VIETNAMESE SOCIETY**

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1. Introduction

- The Khmer are one of the 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam, with a population of approximately 1.3 million.
- They are primarily settled in the Mekong Delta and the east of Southern Vietnam.
- Three key elements shaping their life and culture are the ecological environment, cultural values, and livelihoods



2. Research Theory and Methodology

- This study applies classical theoretical frameworks, including **Malinowski's psychological function, Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown's structural–functional theory, and Julian Steward's cultural ecology**, to analyze the beliefs and cultural practices of the Khmer.
- The qualitative research method was applied for this study, combining **fieldwork at Khmer residential sites, participant-observation, and in-depth interviews** with community members and spiritual intermediaries. Fieldwork was conducted annually from **April 1st to 16th during 2018–2025.**

3. Constructing Ecological Zones through Neakta Beliefs

- In the culture of the Khmer, Neakta is regarded as the deity governing both the residential area and the ecological system within their living space.
- The Khmer tends to organize Neakta shrines into a Mandala-like system that reflects the local ecology.
- This system is based on the relationship between higher-ranking Neakta and ordinary Neakta.
- Higher-ranking Neakta are worshiped at ancient sites or old villages (central locations) and serve as the principal deity over a large area.



The Neakta (Louk Ta) shrine, located beneath a large tree on Son Thong Street, Tra Vinh Ward.

3. Constructing Ecological Zones through Neakta Beliefs

- Lower-ranking Neakta are venerated in newer villages which located surrounding an old village.
- This Neakta system thus structures an ecological space encompassing multiple villages.
- Neakta shrines are often constructed beneath large trees, surrounded by highly diverse ecological systems.
- The Neakta ritual takes place at the beginning of April each year, marking the end of the dry season and the onset of the rainy season.



Neakta (Louk Ta) shrine under big trees in Loc Khanh hamlet, Loc Ninh



Neakta (Louk Ta) shrine in Tan Trung Giong, Vinh Long

4. Rituals as Reflections of the Ecology of Settlement Areas

- Neakta rituals always reflect the ecological characteristics of the residential areas.
- Our study focused on two Neakta shrines located in Hamlet 6 and Hamlet 9, Tra Vinh Ward.
- According to Khmer cultural narratives, Neakta Yeay Tra, worshiped in Hamlet 6, and Neakta Ku, worshiped in Hamlet 9, are considered a married couple.
- They cannot live together harmoniously because each prefers a different type of food. Yeay Tra (the wife) favors rice paddy herb, while Neakta Ku (the husband) prefers duck eggs and Vietnamese coriander. As a result, the couple must each oversee a separate ecological zone.

4. Rituals as Reflections of the Ecology of Settlement Areas

- During the annual ritual, the Khmer in Hamlet 6 offer a large amount of rice paddy herb (rau om in Vietnamese) to Yeay Tra, while the Khmer in Hamlet 9 offer numerous duck eggs to Neakta Ku.



The statue of Neakta Yeay Tra in Hamlet 6



The rice paddy herb offered to her by the Khmer.



Neakta Ku altar in Hamlet 9 and the duck eggs offered to him by the Khmer



4. Rituals as Reflections of the Ecology of Settlement Areas

- Our analysis of the local ecological characteristics shows that the Neakta Yeay Tra shrine is located in front of a flooded field where rice paddy herb grows abundantly. The ecosystem here serves as a natural resource that sustains the villagers and provides a variety of produce, with rice paddy herb being the most prominent. However, when water resources are plentiful, villagers tend to pursue livelihoods through duck farming. This activity can pollute the water and impact the ecological environment.

- As a result, the Khmer constructed a cultural narrative in which Yeay Tra favors rice paddy herb and conflicts with her husband, who prefers duck eggs. She then drives him to a neighboring area so that he can freely consume duck eggs. Conversely, in the territory overseen by Neakta Ku, villagers can raise ducks, and during the annual ritual, they offer him many duck eggs as a symbolic representation of their livelihood

4. Rituals as Reflections of the Ecology of Settlement Areas

- Our study at another Neakta shrine, where the Khmer worship Neakta Yeay Rja, shows that it is located about 1 km from Bà Om Pond, an ancient site dating back to the Funan period (1st–6th centuries CE).
- Yeay Rja is believed to be the female deity who guards the southern part of Bà Om Pond, where rainwater flows into the pond

Image: The Yeay Rja shrine, a Vishnu statue discovered in 1970 who is considered the husband of Yeay Rja, and Bà Om Pond, an ancient Khmer Baray.



4. Rituals as Reflections of the Ecology of Settlement Areas

In the 1970s, a farmer accidentally discovered a Vishnu statue dating back to the Funan Kingdom while plowing his field.

The Khmer subsequently created a new cultural narrative, portraying Preaek Noirii as the husband of Yeay Rja, who had been away for many years before finally returning to her.

The “reunion” of Yeay Rja and Preaek Noirii is believed to bring good fortune to the villagers, as these two deities are thought to ensure a steady supply of water for Bà Om Pond. As a result, the community will not suffer from water shortages during the dry season.



Preaek Noirii (Phra Narai), a manifestation of the god Vishnu in his role as the lord of all water sources

4. Rituals as Reflections of the Ecology of Settlement Areas

- In our research in Lộc Khánh Commune, found that during the Neak Ta ritual, in addition to food offerings, plants constitute an essential and indispensable part of the ceremony.
- On the offering tray, villagers are required to present at least seven types of leaves to Neakta, and offering an even greater variety is strongly encouraged.
- Among these plant offerings, some are edible such as betel leaves and areca nuts while the rest consist of leaves collected from home gardens and nearby forests, symbolizing respect for the ecological environment.
- This practice reinforces community awareness of preserving their local ecology and encourages the cultivation of diverse indigenous plant species in household gardens.

4. Rituals as Reflections of the Ecology of Settlement Areas



The offerings presented to Neakta in Lộc Khánh commune include food items and various types of leaves.



Some types of leaves are used as decorative items in the Neakta worship ceremony in Lộc Khánh

5. Cultural Change and the Creativity of Tradition

- In traditional Khmer society, people worshipped Neakta through small pebbles collected during the plowing season.
- During the summer, children often gathered at the Neakta shrine to seek shade while herding cattle. They would playfully throw these stones across the fields.
- When the rainy season arrived, farmers plowing their fields would find the stones again and bring them back to the Neakta shrine.
- This recurring cycle has given rise to a shared cultural narrative throughout Khmer settlements: Neakta enjoys playing with children, and he always returns to his home shrine when the rainy season begins



5. Cultural Change and the Creativity of Tradition

Cultural Change

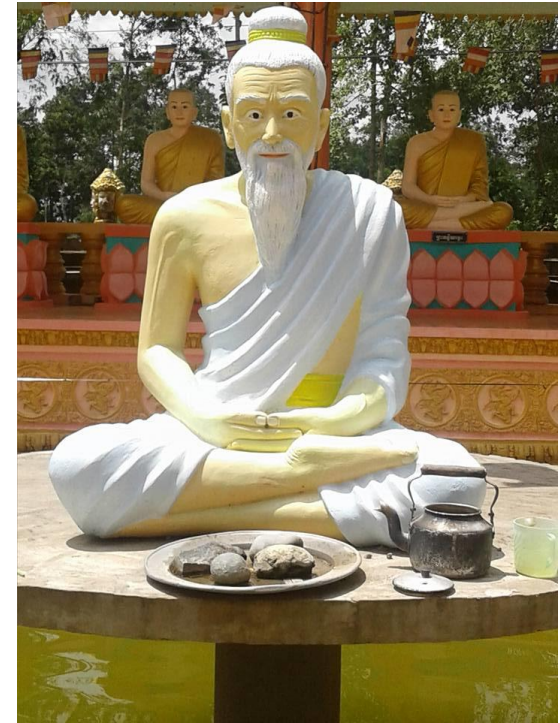
Ecological transformations as a cause of changes in the Neakta belief

- The expansion of residential areas has reduced the availability of natural grasslands so children no longer take cattle out to graze during the dry season.
- As a result, the traditional interaction between herding children and Neakta has gradually disappeared.
- Khmer farmers now use mechanical plows instead of cattle for tilling the fields.
- Without direct contact with the soil surface, the practice of collecting pebbles scattered across the fields and returning them to the Neakta shrine is no longer maintained.”

5. Cultural Change and the Creativity of Tradition

Traditional Innovations

- There is a growing tendency to erect statues as a way to mark the sacred location of Neakta shrines and guide villagers in their worship practices.
- The installation of anthropomorphic Neakta statues enhances the sacredness of these shrines, prompting children to adjust their behavior when visiting them.
- The previous practice of throwing pebbles around the shrine is now considered inappropriate for school-aged children.



The statue of Neakta Aysei, with a plate placed in front of it containing pebbles that symbolize the earlier form of Neakta worship. Location: Long Trường Commune, Vĩnh Long Province.

5. Cultural Change and the Creativity of Tradition

- The iconography of Neakta remains closely connected to nature, yet has been modernized through the addition of weapon imagery.
- This represents an assertion of Neakta's renewed authority and power within the natural world.



The higher-ranking Neakta and his wife are depicted with forms connected to the wild natural environment. Weapons symbolize their authority over a large territory, beneath which reside numerous lower-ranking Neakta. Location: Lộc Khánh Commune

5. Cultural Change and the Creativity of Tradition

- In some Khmer communities in the East of Southern Vietnam, ritual responsibilities have begun to shift from men to women, reflecting an emphasis on enhancing healing roles and protecting the ecological environment.
- Today, Neakta worship rituals combined with spirit possession (rup Arak) constitute the predominant practice in this region



The woman wearing a red scarf is a spirit medium (rup Arak), currently overseeing the Neakta shrine in Lộc Khánh Commune, Lộc Ninh. She is preparing to perform spirit possession rituals to heal the villagers.

6. Conclusion

- This study demonstrates the interconnections between rituals, ecological settings, and cultural practices among the Khmer in Southern Vietnam.
- Neakta worship not only reflects the ecological characteristics of settlement spaces but also plays an active role in shaping and sustaining local livelihoods, environmental awareness, and social order
- Environmental changes and social transformations, such as mechanized farming and settlement expansion, have altered traditional practices, while innovations like anthropomorphic statues and the increasing role of women as medium (rup Arak) ensure the continued relevance of Neakta worship
- These rituals demonstrate the adaptive resilience and cultural creativity of the Khmer in navigating ecological and social change.

SPECIAL THANKS TO SEAMEO CHAT



Mảnh gốm có hình người
Pottery plaque inscribed human image

