



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Role of Yiey Mao Belief in the Cultural Life of the Khmer in Southern Vietnam

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People from Khmer background in Southern Vietnam primarily hold strong belief in Yiey Mao across the cities of Kiên Giang, An Giang, Trà Vinh and Sóc Trăng. The folk belief exists as a representation of natural forces and human presence which works alongside spiritual power to protect both the territory and the residents who inhabit it. Yiey Mao exists as a protection divinity who defends both local residents from dangers and visitors who explore remote locations or travel across ocean waters or frontier regions. This belief system relies primarily on oral traditions since worship occurs through rituals at temples or sacred sites and noteworthy routes instead of following organized religion teachings. Yiey Mao serves as an important religious concept within the Khmer society where it enhances Theravāda Buddhism to keep visible and invisible elements balanced within Khmer culture. This protective construct of Yiey Mao serves as a venue for social events which enhances community marriage and recognition through bonded rituals. Through Yiey Mao belief Khmer culture perseveres from one generation to the next and safeguards the ethnic identity of Khmers while providing spiritual protection against uncertainty. Yiey Mao operates beyond devotion and establishes harmonious relationships between humankind and nature as well as the divine force according to Khmer people's integrative daily practices. Academic research about this belief system remains insufficient at present. This research supports Khmer folk cultural preservation through its evaluation of Yiey Mao belief in Southern Khmer lives and its proposed strategies for enhancement and longevity.

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INTRODUCTION

Many Vietnamese people consider Yiey Mao to be a protective goddess whose origins stem from Khmer popular religion found in Southern Vietnam. The indigenous belief about Yiey Mao exists alongside Theravāda Buddhism and connects to sacred rituals aimed at achieving peace alongside agricultural security among Khmer villages (phum sóc). The spiritual ceremonies honoring Yiey Mao provide multiple benefits for community connection in a manner that parallels traditional Vietnamese religious and ethnic festivals including Ok Om Bok and Sene Dolta events. The Khmer cultural practice demonstrated how spiritual faith connects with social gatherings within their community. Therefore, studies about Yiey Mao belief create a better understanding of how religious practices connect with Khmer social traditions in Southern Vietnam. The research helps track down and conserve traditional cultural components that define the Khmer people through their modernization journey alongside rising cultural interactions. Through an analysis of Yiey Mao faith we gain deeper insights into Khmer folk beliefs together with understanding how the community employs this belief to bind members while preserving cultural identity and managing their life challenges. The research findings create a scientific basis for cultural and religious policy systems that enables protection of intangible heritage along with sustainable cultural tourism growth. Through Yiey Mao research the understanding increases regarding how indigenous religious

customs work with Theravāda Buddhism to form the Khmer people's spiritual identity in Southern Vietnam.

DOCUMENTATION AND RESEARCH METHOD

Documentation

Diverse historical documents from studies about the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam and the Yiey Mao belief reveal which elements shaped this belief system. Sources about Southern Vietnam's history together with Khmer ethnic group background material exist in abundance but research about Yiey Mao beliefs remains confined to limited studies. In his book *People of Viet Khmer Origin* Lê Hương (1969) writes that Bà Néang Khmau, better known as Bà Đen resides as a goddess of Kali or as known as a guardian for deity of a region while people worship her similarly to Ông Tà. In Vietnamese society Bà Chao remains the second name for this deity. Lê Hương notes in his 1969 book that these two deities provide assistance to people through both dreams and divinations (p. 31). Research on Wì ieo Ranking in Tây Ninh by various authors links it to Yiey Mao origins in their studies about Bà Đen. “Các nữ thần Việt Nam (Vietnamese Goddesses)” by Đỗ Thị Hảo and Mai Thị Ngọc Chúc (1984) ; “Văn hóa tâm linh Nam Bộ (Spiritual Culture of Southern Vietnam)” by Nguyễn Đăng Duy (1997); “Đạo Thánh ở Việt Nam (Sacred Religion in Vietnam)” by Vũ Ngọc Khánh (2001). A pertinent academic research on cultural worship is ‘Khảo cứu việc thờ Bà Đen ở Tây Ninh’ (A Study on the Worship of Bà Đen in Tây Ninh) by “Nguyễn Thanh Lợi” which appeared in ‘Religious Studies Journal’ issue 09 (pp. 87–100). The paper investigates spiritual beliefs placed within Bà Đen mythology which stem from Buddhist, Confucian and Hindu traditions. The belief system shows evidence of cultural interactions through its practices. The article *Từ góc độ lịch sử lưu dân, nhận diện về vị thần chủ trên vùng núi Bà Đen và sự giao thoa tôn giáo, tín ngưỡng ở Tây Ninh* (From the Perspective of Migrant History: Identifying the Principal Deity of Bà Đen Mountain and Religious Syncretism in Tây Ninh) by Lê Bá Vương appears in *Historical Studies Journal*, issue 01 (2021). The research examines the migration history of Tây Ninh which explains why Vietnamese and Khmer and Chăm communities now exist there. By examining cultural fusion the research shows Neang Khmau transformed into Linh Sơn Thánh Mẫu which became the most venerated female divinity in the area. Linh Sơn Thánh Mẫu integrated beliefs of Vietnamese, Chăm, and Chinese communities into her essence for gaining recognition as the common protective goddess across all these ethnic groups. The Yiey Mao belief in Cambodia receives its essential scholarly reference from the article *Yiey Mao, the way a Neak Ta arose* by Jean-Michel Filippi (2017) which appeared in the proceedings of the scientific conference *Mariamman Belief: Indian Heritage in Cultural Exchange with Vietnam*. This analysis examines the mythological background together with the origin of Yiey Mao until it spread from coastlines to inland territories. The paper establishes Yiey Mao developed in the ancient Funan kingdom before it emerged as a Neak Ta (local guardian spirit) in Cambodian religious history.

Together with data synthesis and analysis from existing research publications the research adopts fieldwork data accumulated throughout its investigative period. The field study will directly obtain information about how rituals are organized and the types of offerings used as well as the functions of participants throughout ritual practices. The research adopts both site-based research methods with extensive documentation evaluation to explore Yiey Mao beliefs within the Khmer population of southern Vietnam from a regional studies perspective.

RESEARCH METHOD

Within the scope of this study, we have primarily employed the following research methods.

Analysis and synthesis method: This method was used to systematize the collected information from field research, combining it with findings from previously published studies by both domestic and international scholars. This approach helps clarify the research content and direction.

Qualitative methods: These include ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, observation, and participant participation to gather relevant data. Specifically, we conducted interviews with monks, *achar* (ritual specialists), and Khmer practitioners of the Yiey Mao belief system. Additionally, we directly participated in Yiey Mao rituals at local sites to obtain reliable and firsthand data.

Outcome

Yiey Mao worship practices

Ritual form: Religious ceremonies from Yiey Mao serve as the foundation which guides archaic Khmer cultures in Southern Vietnam through their spiritual practices. The religious tributes to Yiey Mao carry dual importance in spiritual devotion and they function as representatives of regional cultural heritage and traditional practices. The methods for Yiey Mao worship depend on regional climate conditions and environmental factors throughout different geographic locations. Local cultural sovereignty and geographic adaptability through variations create a diverse religious environment for the Khmer people who maintain their individual cultural essence across different practices. Water serves as an integral part of social and economic activities in the Mekong Delta therefore Yiey Mao religious ceremonies exist closely connected with water rituals. Devotees conduct their worship ceremonies either from riverbanks or canals or boats to worship the deity while asking for its protection to secure favorable conditions along with bountiful harvests. The rituals require devotees to present flowers and fruits and food to water as part of their religious acts. Residents from certain areas continue two cultural traditions by floating lanterns together with releasing fish as gestures of praying to divine entities. Yiey Mao is believed to protect forests and mountains in the mountainous area of Tây Ninh. Locals from this region perform worship rituals by using their temples within forest territories or by standing at mountain bases while seeking defensive power against disasters and bad luck. Traditional Yiey Mao ceremonial worship includes delivering flowers alongside incense and candles while occasional forest products such as wild fruits and honey might be presented. Worship of Yiey Mao takes place under natural mountain surroundings which create an ambiance of mystique during the rituals. The Khmer people direct their prayers to Yiey Mao for wellness and illness protection and misfortune avoidance because they depend on wilderness and natural elements. They also pray for blessings regarding security and wealth together with favorable working situations. The prayers performed at Yiey Mao ceremonies differ according to the specific local needs but coastal worshippers concentrate on fishing safety and success while farmers request abundant harvests and favorable weather conditions. Monks from nearby pagodas usually participate in these ceremonies. Through their role the monks contribute essential mystical power to protests Buddhist scriptures (Paritta chanting) which increases the sacred quality of rituals by offering blessings. The Paritta Sutras, also known as "Protective Verses," are recited at the beginning of the ceremony to invoke peace and safeguard the villagers from illnesses and misfortunes. The Yiey Mao belief system shows its interconnectedness with Theravada Buddhism through this practice which proves the ease with which indigenous faith and Buddhist traditions can coexist in Khmer spiritual practices.

Make offerings and supply essential items: the prayers are accompanied by providing crucial supplies. As for the fact, the villagers donate food combined with daily necessities such as rice alongside fruits and water along with local agricultural products to the monks after the chanting session. The presented offerings serve to express both appreciation and honor towards the monks for their spiritual leadership and support. Every region that venerated Yiey Mao maintained different prayer traditions as well as ritual procedures based on their regional customs and native practices. Southern Vietnam showcases abundant cultural diversity through its unique worship rituals which people practice for Yiey Mao. Yiey Mao rituals combine religious observances with community gatherings which work to maintain tradition through their transmission between generations. Each ritual across riverine and mountainous areas proves that Khmer people adjust to their surroundings while maintaining peace between humans and nature and spiritual beings. Traditional Khmer musical instruments such as drums and stringed instruments and wind instruments together with folk songs accompany Yiey Mao ceremonies in some parts of the Ritual. The sacred mood and communal spirit both rise as a result of these elements.

Timing of worship ceremonies: Worship ceremonies connected to Yiey Mao occur without established times since they do not hold their rituals on predetermined festival dates. The conduct of these rituals follows both post-harvest seasons and the conclusion of the year according to the Khmer calendar since local economic development and weather conditions matter. As for the rice harvest completion leads villagers to implement ceremonies that honor Yiey Mao alongside deity worship

while they ask for crop success and natural disaster safety for upcoming years. The year-end rituals function as purification practices during Khmer New Year transition to create protective conditions and peace and happiness for the new year. It is apparent that, Yiey Mao ceremonies demonstrate Khmer culture because different communities adjust their worship practices to match their current life events. The schedule of Yiey Mao celebrations features larger cultural events along with artistic activities in urban areas but rural facilities keep their focus on agricultural-based ceremonies. The Khmer people demonstrate flexibility by preserving their cultural traditions as they show dedication toward maintaining their cultural heritage regardless of their residential situation.

The spiritual and cultural life of Southern Khmer people and the significance of Yiey Mao worship

Worshipping Yiey Mao stands central to the religious activities practiced by Khmers living in Southern Vietnam. Among her sacred status Yiey Mao serves as protector spirit through which the community seeks peace along with safety especially during difficult moments. People derive both psychological and religious strength from their faith in Yiey Mao which supports their ability to overcome difficulties in life. The Khmer people's devotion to Yiey Mao involves praying for journey security and border protection along with seeking inspiration when facing adversity because this worship demonstrates their strong attachment to their protective divine entity.

Yiey Mao as a guardian of everyday life

Yiey Mao has divine strength which lets people in this community receive protection and blessings in everyday life situations. The divine protection of Yiey Mao serves those conducting trading ventures and working as fishermen or passing through hazardous areas.

Protection for fishermen and merchants: Fishermen formally worship Yiey Mao before starting their long fishing sessions or maritime expeditions. Users of her protection worship her as Yiey Mao because they think her blessings safeguard them from natural disasters and harsh conditions at sea. Traders pray to Yiey Mao for business prosperity because they seek both commercial gains and business achievement.

Blessings for adventurous journeys: Faith in Yiey Mao provides mountain adventurers and forest walkers as well as travellers through hazardous regions with peace of mind because she protects them during their long journeys.

A delineation of defense for land and territories

Yiey Mao serves to protect both individual human beings and the land together with the national boundaries of her domain. Khmer tradition recognizes Yiey Mao as both a personal protective force and an all-encompassing spiritual protector of the community through her mission to defend territorial borders from natural disasters and external threats.

Guardian of the borders and protection from malevolent elements: The Khmer people believe that Yiey Mao acts as a divine shield which protects them from invading enemies and storms and floods which constitute natural disasters. According to local tradition transmitted by Achar spiritual leaders folklore describes Yiey Mao as she fought as leader of the land instead of her husband to defend her territory against invaders. Traditional Khmer belief considers Yiey Mao as a defender of homeland territory whom people trust to shield their land from enemy invasions and supernatural threats. From a spiritual standpoint Yiey Mao possesses an alleged power which both brings peace to people and serves to prevent calamities.

Maintaining peace and order: The longing for a peaceful existence free from unforeseen disruptions is reflected in worshipping Yiey Mao. The trust in her protection strengthens the conviction that wars and calamities would be avoided while she is in charge.

A manifestation of fortitude during difficulties

Throughout times of crisis and uncertainty humans seek Yiey Mao as their main spiritual support source. The people who have faith in her leadership can achieve hardships with perseverance and unwavering commitment.

Offering consolation and support: Khmer people perform rituals while praying to Yiey Mao to obtain blessings in order to find comfort and encouragement during crop failures or illnesses or accidents. The followers believe Yiey Mao gives them peaceful solace and hopeful inspiration while they encounter complex life events.

Motivating perseverance: Through her role as protector Yiey Mao directly enhances the belief of others to push through challenges. People who put their trust in her develop inner power and drive to face challenges through her benevolence.

A significant part of Khmer spiritual and cultural life exists in the protective and benevolent essence of Yiey Mao among the Khmer people of Southern Vietnam. As a protector and safeguard she demonstrates strength along with bravery when facing difficulties. Yiey Mao serves as a divine border protector which represents peaceful guarantees together with honorable future expectations for a prosperous time ahead. Through this belief system Khmer people establish connections with divine entities which simultaneously generates strength and unity that helps them endure difficulties and achieve fulfillment.

The essential function of Yiey Mao worship in southern Vietnam's Khmer people's socio-cultural life

Enhancing interpersonal connections through customs and celebrations

The religious veneration of Yiey Mao supports both spiritual practice and acts as an essential element for bringing together Khmer people within Southern Vietnam. Festivals and rituals dedicated to Yiey Mao allow people to show reverence to their deity and function simultaneously as collective social events that aid relationship development.

Collective worship ceremonies: Yiey Mao temples and shrines frequently host rituals that draw sizable crowds of villagers. In addition to participating as individuals, participants also represent their families and clans, which strengthens the sense of solidarity within the community.

Sharing offerings: The rituals' completion leads to distributing all offerings among those present at the religious event. Apart from its religious meaning this practice builds spiritual unity among worshippers as well as harmonious fellowship between everyone. Shared offerings at this intimate setting represent generosity while strengthening bond ties between all participants who participate in this joyful environment.

Festive celebrations: Yiey Mao festivals are not just religious rituals; they also provide an occasion for the entire Khmer community to engage in music, dance, and celebrations. Through these activities, the worship of Yiey Mao creates a vibrant cultural space that helps maintain social cohesion.

Maintaining spiritual traditions and cultural identity: Worshiping Yiey Mao helps effectively preserve Southern Vietnamese Khmer cultural heritage and actively promotes its conservation. This core belief system that can be traced back to Yiey Mao integrates Khmer cultural elements while giving women all-important roles as spiritual practitioners.

The integration of religious and indigenous components: the Yiey Mao worship presents a synchronized combination of native practices and Theravāda Buddhist traditions that form part of Khmer cultural customs. Yiey Mao ceremonies commonly welcome Buddhist monks to participate in prayer rituals which seek blessings for participants. Traditional beliefs merged with religious

traditions enhance Khmer people's spiritual practices thus enriching their complete spiritual experience.

Faith transmission across generations: From the village elders to the younger members of the community, the belief in Yiey Mao has been passed down through the generations. The younger generation is better able to comprehend their ethnic traditions and maintain a connection to their cultural heritage thanks to the preservation of Yiey Mao ceremonies and practices. This belief system is essential to maintaining the unique cultural identity of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam in the face of modernization, as it guarantees the ongoing transmission of traditional values.

Influence on customs and community lifestyle

Regular Yiey Mao worship continues after religious rituals since it influences Khmer social customs and traditional way of life and standard behaviors. The ethical values together with communal living principles based on this belief work to create peaceful bonds amongst people and their environment and the wider community.

Restraints and morality: People conduct religious rituals by burning incense and perform sacred ceremonies as a mark of respect during their movements in sacred sites and temple vicinity. People observe formal conduct by avoiding improper talk and acting out inappropriately during their time there. The religious taboos support belief in Yiey Mao while reminding people to uphold proper morals and social rules in their community.

Living in balance with the natural world: For the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam nature exists as divine sanctuary which houses Yiey Mao. The practice of environmental respect and natural element preservation forms the basis of their lifestyle since they avoid any actions that could damage nature. People who hold faith in Yiey Mao carefully practice sustainable agriculture and responsible fishing to preserve natural harmony and ecological balance.

The distinctive cultural identity of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam is shaped by these traditions and lifestyles, which also help to maintain communal stability. In addition, the community's love, harmony, and respect for one another are fostered via Yiey Mao worship.

DISSCUSSION

Worship of Yiey Mao in the contemporary setting

Modern Khmer people in Southern Vietnam practice the Yiey Mao belief system which has evolved to match contemporary social structures because of globalizing forces and modernizing trends. As an original folk belief which roots in Khmer rural communities it has progressively extended its reach to reach beyond the Khmer communities and draw participants from other societal groups. Modern needs in society have led to observed modifications in the way rituals are scheduled. Yiey Mao's divine protection together with traditional rituals forms the bedrock of spiritual practices among the people while other aspects have evolved slightly.

As the main religion of the Khmer people Theravāda Buddhism interlaces comprehensively with the Yiey Mao belief system. The union of Yiey Mao belief system with Theravāda Buddhism generates a balanced cultural-religious framework that enriches the lives of Khmer people. During Yiey Mao worship ceremonies Buddhist philosophy integrates with the rituals by highlighting compassion together with social ethics and gratitude. Yiey Mao worship effectively evolves for the modern age through this connection while bringing richness to Khmer religious practice by helping people unite tradition with contemporary changes.

Yiey Mao worship functions both as an essential spiritual practice and as an essential driver of cultural tourism that displays Khmer heritage in Southern Vietnam. People from all over the world choose Yiey Mao temples as their travel destinations since these holy sites reside in hills, forests and historical landmarks. Each celebration dedicated to Yiey Mao allows the Khmer people to conduct

blessings ceremonies and show gratitude while conducting processions which serve to share their distinctive cultural legacy to all audiences. The activities contribute to both preserving Yiey Mao worship values and economic/social regional advance by fostering tourism growth and developing cultural services and industries.

The evolving adaptation of Yiey Mao worship in modern times encounters obstacles because several traditional rituals disappear and cultural symbols transform their interpretations. To sustain Yiey Mao belief in the current era the community needs to work closely with cultural researchers who team up with local authorities. This approach will enable Yiey Mao worship to demonstrate its importance in Khmer culture across Southern Vietnam through a successful blend of modern needs and preservation of vital traditions.

The difficulties of sustaining Yiey Mao worship

Being an essential function of Khmer people in Southern Vietnam Yiey Mao worship sustains their cultural and religious way of life. Preservation and promotion of Yiey Mao worship meets important obstacles during these modern times. Yiey Mao worship faces a crucial threat of disappearance because the rapid decline of various rituals as well as foreign cultural influences and modernization stress combine against this sacred tradition. Timely solutions combined with proper actions need to be implemented to guarantee lasting protection and development of this belief system.

The main obstacle stems from the reduced use of traditional practices between generations. Economic and social developments along with new lifestyle patterns have reduced the complete execution of traditional ceremonies. The decreasing participation of modern young adults in religious festivals and worship ceremonies presents a risk to cultural heritage sustainability. The fading traditional heritage is aided by deficient written research on Yiey Mao worship because there is insufficient scholarly study of this religious practice.

Foreign culture together with modernization technologies present as another challenge to current society. Modern cultural exchanges during the era of globalization both open new prospects for development and present major barriers for progress. New religious beliefs together with entertainment forms and social trends have weakened the following of Yiey Mao practice among the Khmer people. Modern architecture together with contemporary changes to ritual practices alongside festival management have occasionally led to a reduction in the sacredness and genuine essence of this ancient belief. A deliberate equilibrium needs assessment between heritage preservation and the needs of present times needs thoughtful attention.

A combination of strategic solutions and practical measures needs to be implemented as a way to protect Yiey Mao worship together with the entire Khmer cultural heritage. The improvement of community knowledge stands as a critical answer to specific problems. Yiey Mao worship demands that the public receives enlightening education focused on its cultural value and spiritual importance. The history along with meaning and rituals of this belief system should be introduced to the community through media programs and workshops and extracurricular activities. Making cultural education mandatory in schools serves as a solution to build stronger connections with students' ethnic heritage.

Yiey Mao worship together with Khmer cultural identity needs effective solutions to maintain its existence and promote its development. Community awareness needs an enhancement to achieve this solution. The vital method for protecting Yiey Mao worship consists of teaching younger generations about its cultural and spiritual value base. The organization of media programs and seminars along with extracurricular activities will introduce the history combined with importance and ceremonial practices of this religious belief system. The inclusion of cultural education in school curricula proves successful for developing national heritage awareness in students. The proper documentation of materials along with their preservation stands as a fundamental solution. At present the traditional method of transmitting Yiey Mao religious information occurs through verbal communication from Achar spiritual leaders along with Khmer villagers. Strategic efforts need to investigate and document and safeguard historical records which pertain to this belief system. The

Khmer community together with cultural and historical researchers should methodically document traditional customs and rituals and sacred prayers of their belief system. Digital preservation of cultural materials helps guarantee enduring availability which enables posterity to study their cultural history through easier access.

CONCLUSION

The practice of Yiey Mao worship functions beyond spiritual expression to maintain and advance the cultural elements of the Khmer people who reside in Southern Vietnam. The religious ritual extends beyond devotion because it absolutely represents the spiritual connections between people with nature and ancestors and mythical powers. As a protective system it guides communities through hardships yet maintains Khmer ethnic heritage when communities face cultural change from globalization. The mix of indigenous beliefs with Buddhist and Hindu influences reveals itself through Yiey Mao's religious and cultural celebrations and rituals thus creating a comprehensive and distinctive Vietnamese cultural environment. Religious solemnities which consist of offerings combined with prayers together with Yiey Mao's legend retelling manifest both devotion and social unity that strengthens community bonds. The study of Yiey Mao worship supports both the protection of Khmer cultural heritage in Southern Vietnam and develops scientific guidelines for religious and ethnic policy development. The region of Southern Vietnam becomes more sustainable due to these efforts which create diversity and harmony within its population.

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