



## Folk Games in Southern Khmer Culture in Vietnam

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### Abstract

Folk games have long been viewed as a vivid picture reflecting people's materials and spiritual life accumulated through multiple generations. Folk game, whether it serves as an entertainment activity in idle seasons, leisure time, or just jollity for children; is aimed at the solidarity and unity of the communities, villages, and the entire national solidarity. Folk games were once a page of precious memories imprinted on the homeland and villages, which nurtured people with good lifestyles and souls. Nevertheless, these days, the role of folk games is no longer blooming as before. The preferences and ways of entertainment of all classes of people, especially the youth, witness more or less changes. For the Khmer residing in the South of Vietnam, an ethnic group associated with the rice farming tradition, folk games in particular and folklore, in general, are of prime importance. This article presents the origin, gameplay and recognizes the cultural values of folk games in daily life and festivals of the Khmer people in the South to contribute to popularizing and preserving the beauty of Khmer culture in today's society.

**Keywords:** Folk games; Khmer people; Southern region; Folklore; Religion – belief; Festival.

### 1. Introduction

The Khmer people possess a traditional culture with indigenous colors and religions. During the development process, Khmer culture has harmonized and integrated with other cultures, contributing to forming a rich, diverse and imbued Vietnamese culture with national identity. Despite tremendous ups and downs throughout history coupled with arduous economic condition, the Khmer community in the Southern region still preserves a unique cultural heritage, including folk games.

Grounded on demand for entertainment which plays a vital role in human life after hard working hours in association with unlimited creativity, the ancients established a varied folk game world. Folk games occur everywhere in the paddy fields, yards, courtyards, temples, rivers or trees. It is possibly stated that the space of folk games is also the living and working areas of people. Though no valuable material gifts are offered, folk games still attracted numerous participants enthusiastically and passionately because of its unique and virtuous spiritual and cultural values.

### 2. Research Methodology

With the research objects as folk games, following research methods have been applied: Participatory observation: From observation of Khmer folk games taking place in festivals, daily entertainment activities of Khmer people in Phum and Soc (villages and hamlets); Khmer temples in Tran (2016), Soc Trang, the author make the description of the gameplay and procedures. Moreover, initially compare it with the published theories of Khmer folk games. The specific instruments utilized are filming, recording, picturing, attending, note-taking, drawing. In which, research methods of direct observation, participation in games, in-depth interviews with festival attendants and game players are used as the basis to generalize into the typical cultural values of Khmer Southern folk games.

Descriptive method: Upon published documents about games, folk games, festivals in general, and ones of the Southern Khmer in particular and information obtained from field observations, the researchers delineate the information accessed by the fore-steppers and the one being observed as the basis for delivering scientific conclusions.

### 3. Research Findings

#### 3.1. Definition of Folk Games

Given the Vietnamese Dictionary, a game is defined as “activities organized for entertainment and joyfulness” (Phe, 2010, p.1037). In *Relationship between play, playing activities and games*, “Game is a set of systematic and organized playing elements, so the law or rule is the means of organizing the set.” (Dang, 2000, p.392). Thus, games can be conceptualized as communal activities created by humans to satisfy individuals and communities' entertainment needs. The concept of folk games also comes from that general meaning. According to Nadegida Nicolaievanna Egseva: “A folk game is made based on voluntary principles under special conditions of agreement, it is popularized and widely disseminated at a certain stage of the history of social development and reflect its characteristics, folk games are altered under varied influences of society (Tran, 2016, p.11). It is possibly stated that folk games are spontaneous activities launched by one or many people with dynamic principles accepted, practiced and circulated by the community in living and working to serve the entertainment need of humans.

#### 3.2. The Basis for Folk Games Formation

In the history of each ethnic group, there exists folk games that are selected, accumulated and circulated via generations. Folk games are mainly created in order to fulfill the entertainment demand of people. Thereby, players, on the one hand, also raise their awareness about the world and perfect their abilities. Each social stage casts an impact on the game content. A folk game embraces the features of simplicity, unfussiness and inexpensiveness, so that it may take place regardless of time and space; it is possibly set up since the item-for-game is easily visible and creatable, mainly taken from nature, even just a rope, a pebble, a bamboo stick or a brick found in the garden or the field. The quintessence of folk games lies in the illimitation of player number; the more participants it holds, the merrier it becomes. In addition to the suitability for hobbies, emotions, ages involved in promoting excitement in work, folk games also require ingenuity, supple skills of hands and feet, and cleverness of mind.

Moreover, stemming from the hardships in labor coupled with intelligence, the ancients have devised games to entertain together in their spare time, play for fun and exercise their health. In such circumstances, folk games are successively made a presence, and widely spread and developed over time.

Folk games enrich the national cultural treasure. Nevertheless, the national cultural background becomes the material for folk games to be established and bring into full play. Researching folk games reveals that there go various games associated with the customs and beliefs of the Khmer people. It is not simply a material to create games but also an environment for games to be preserved through generations.

#### 3.3. Khmer Folk Games

Khmer folk games hold the diversity and colorfulness unfussiness, they can take place anywhere, anytime, including: kol-fighting, stick pushing, tug of war, shuttlecock kicking, Ngo boat race, fat-pole climbing, pot-smashing, release of water lanterns, release of wind lanterns, bull-racing, “còn” (cotton) ball-throwing, duck-catching, lbeng Arak sva, kite-flying, stilt-walking, towel-hiding, snake dragons, cotton-whipping, sack race, etc.

##### 3.3.1. Kol fighting (Leng kôn kol)

The game takes place on a large field, with the main item-in-game is *Kol*. Kol is a tree branch that is short, round, hard, flexible and about 5-8cm long as a thumb and a stick about 1 meter in length. The more players, the merrier, in which both men and women can participate or a men's and a women's team; sometimes the game is only men or only women. Players are divided into two teams; each team contains about 5 to 15 members. The two teams stand about half a football field apart, centering the field is a line dividing the sides and a round hole for the kol in the middle of the line.

In respect of game regulations, each side takes turns to hit the kol flying horizontally towards the opponent, the other side, if catches the kol, brings it to the hole and hits back. If either side can't catch the kol, the person who missed the shot has to quickly run to pick up the kol to return to the hole. To make the game more thrilling and attractive, the opposing team will immediately rush out to win the kol back for their side and find a way to put the kol in the hole. The side succeeding in putting kol into the hole wins. The form of reward and punishment is also varied, depending on the contract of the two parties; for instance, the losers perhaps do the push-up for a penalty, or carry the winners for a few rounds.

Figure-1. A game Leng kôn kol (painter: Danh Long Thien Nhi)



### 3.3.2. Cotton Ball/“Còn”-Throwing (Chol Chhung)

This entertainment form takes place in a large yard (usually at a temple) on Khmer festivals such as Chol Chhnam Thmay, Sel Don Ta, etc. The primary participants are namely young men and women. The game utilizes a round object made from colorful cloth and long tassels to throw (like the “còn” of the northern highland ethnic groups such as Thai, Muong, Tay, Mong, etc).

Considering the gameplay, this game has a form of matchmaking and love affection. The two teams are divided into the male and female sides while singing and throwing cotton balls. On the women's side, the girls sang: *"I throw a cotton ball over, the ball flourishes with five petals, please catch it, we'll be best friends!"*. If a guy catches it, throws it back and sings: *"I throw the cotton ball over, the ball flourishes with five petals, whoever catches becomes my lover!"*. The game takes place in a joyful atmosphere with the cheers from people in the phum soc (villages and hamlets). The folk song Chol chhung was devised upon this game as follow:

*“Anh ném chhung tới  
Chhung tung lên trời  
Duyên em sáng ngời  
Đón lấy chhung anh  
Em ném chhung nhanh  
Chhung mắc trên cành  
Anh đứng anh nhìn  
Đón bắt chhung em”*

*“I throw chhung over  
Chhung up to the sky  
My fate is shining  
Welcoming your chhung  
I throw chhung quickly  
Chhung is stuck on a branch  
He stood watching and  
catching my chhung”  
(Chol chhung folk song)*

**Figure-2.** A Chol chhung game (painter: Danh Long Thien Nhi)



### 3.3.3. Pot-smashing (Vay Chhnăng)

The game of smashing pots is often held at the common playground of “sóc” (hamlets), the temple yard on festive occasions. In this game, players prepare: clay pot, wire (hanging pot), blindfold, stick. Whether male or female can participate in the game. Nowadays, this game has regularly been held in group activities of unions, organizations or schools.

Pot-smashing can be played individually or in pairs. In single mode, the participant is blindfolded and stand a few meters away from the stretched string with the number of clay pots hanging usually corresponding to the number of players or maybe more. After the start signal rang, the player must determine the direction and start smashing the clay pot. In dual mode, the unblindfolded person is in charge of carrying the other blindfolded and the carrier will guide the way so that the person on his back can accurately hit the pot without beating the opponent. The arduousness, also the most attractive part of this game, is that the player is blindfolded which fails to determine the exact location of the pot. This brings hilariousness and drama to the spectacles. Rewards and penalties are also a glamorous part of the game, maybe the reward is placed in the pot, making the player surprised of what will be obtained until the pot is broken. Unlike other games, depending on the game’s rules, without a time allowance, in some cases this game can be won by all when they break any pot. This also claims the spirit of harmony in the ancients’ mind and directs the game to its true nature of entertainment.

**Figure-3.** A pot-smashing game (painter: Danh Long Thien Nhi)

### 3.3.4. Shuttlecock Game (Tot say)

The shuttlecock is a ubiquitous game of the Khmer people in the South. It frequently occurs in large yards, which can be home yards, temple yards or common areas in phum, soc (villages and hamlets). The item-for-game is a shuttlecock including 2 types: A ball that fits the hand and is woven with bamboo, and the other is a shuttlecock made of duck or chicken feathers with a plastic or paper base. The game of shuttlecock is for all kinds of participants regardless of gender and age; even older people with good health can still join. Each turn contains at least 3 people, the more participants; the more joyful the game is.

Regarding the principle, this game started with a member kicking the shuttlecock up in the direction being aimed. Other players standing around skillfully handle and kick it towards others. The shuttlecock must be kept out of the ground as long as possible. The image of the shuttlecock falling on one's feet and then flying up into the air and falling into another's feet satisfies both players and viewers. Whoever misses the shuttlecock have to quit the game or pay the penalty. The shuttlecock symbolizes agility and exhibits ingenuity through unique kicking techniques such as hook, arch, diagonal and cross kick. Each player moves their legs, turns, and jumps to handle the shuttlecock like true artists. The game of shuttlecock does not seem to hold any signs of competition but skillful cooperation to deliver an excellent performance.

**Figure-4.** A shuttlecock game (painter: Danh Long Thien Nhi)

### 3.3.5. Tug of War (Tianh Prot)

Khmer people, through generations, are familiar with the tug of war, which is often held in the temple, home yard or community place during festivals. Like the pot-smashing game, tug of war embodies a strong pervasive influence, evidenced by the fact that, it is considered a board game at school or activities of groups, organizations, ...

This game requires only a rope 7 meters in length, with a red cloth tied in the middle of the rope as a boundary between the two teams to easily distinguish the winner and loser side. It needs many joiners for the game to divide equally into 2 teams, at least about 5 people, but the more the merrier. In addition to strength and good coordination, there must be a competitive strategy. Both men and women can participate in the game, stand together in the same team, or split up men-to-men or women-to-women competitions.

As for the gameplay, the two teams firmly holding their ropes stand on two opposite sides. In the middle, there is a line marking the losing line of both teams. When the referee gives the voice or whistle signal, both teams try to pull the rope to their side. The team being dragged across the line loses the game.

**Figure-5.** Tug of war (painter: Danh Long Thien Nhi)



### 3.3.6. Release of Wind Lantern (Boong hos kôm)

Releasing wind lanterns is an interesting folk game of the Khmer people in the South, held on the occasion of Ok Om Bok (Moon Worship Ceremony). Ok Om Bok is annually organized on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of the lunar October. According to the Khmer's concept, the rainy season lasts from April to October of the lunar calendar, whilst the dry season abides from October to April. Those two seasons are presumed upon the moon's orbit around the earth. Therefore, October 15 is considered the last day of summer and also the time to harvest crops, including sticky rice. To pay tribute to the Moon-god for giving blooming crops, the Khmer pounds sticky rice into flat rice flakes with other crops to worship the moon. On this holiday, various other social activities are also organized, including folk games. This game takes place in temples and community areas with open spaces. The wind lantern is made simple but also requires the meticulousness and ingenuity of the maker. Materials in use consist of thin beveled bamboo rods to ensure a certain curvature for the lantern mouth, lantern paper - high-endurance paper and fuel. The diameter of the lantern mouth is about 0.8m wide, and its body is about 1m high. Other details of the lantern are glued together. The burning part of the lantern is a wick made up of cloth or cotton impregnated with peanut oil, lard or coconut oil. The lantern mouth contains a string to tie the wick.

About the play mode, after worshipping the Moon God, people start gathering. Due to the large size of the lantern, a few people keep its balance and then lighting the fire. When igniting, care should be taken to keep the flame out of the paper-wrapped outside the lantern. The heat expands the air inside the lantern, creating a force that pushes itself to fly up slowly, and the wind leads the lantern higher and farther. Before releasing the toy lamp, people rotate it a few times to dilute the air. The flying lanterns carry the people's dream about a peaceful and prosperous life, with favorable natural conditions and bountiful seasons.

**Figure-6.** A Boong hos kôm game (painter: Danh Long Thien Nhi)

### 3.3.7. Release of Water Lantern (Lôi Protip)

On the occasion of Ok Om Bok festival, and the release of wind lanterns, the Khmer simultaneously release water lanterns. This is both a folk game and a Buddhist ritual organized solemnly by the Khmer in the riverbed to worship the remaining footprints of Buddha Shakyamuni (Prince Sidharta), whose family name is Gotama; the founder of Buddhism, enlightened to the philosophies of life and liberated people from darkness) remained on the river "Nanithi", or they build a model of the "Molamuni" tower, where the Buddha's hair is kept in the upper world. Currently, water lanterns are made with fabulous designs and sizes to fulfill the needs of the residents.

Regarding the organization method, before releasing the water lanterns, monks and dwellers in Phum Soc make incensation around the lanterns and listen to the monk chanting for the Buddhist Triratna and worshipping the moon to pray for prosperity and peace for each family. After that, people carry lanterns to nearby rivers to unleash them. The river becomes marvelous than ever, the festive atmosphere becomes colorful with sparkling lights.

**Figure-7.** A Lôi protip game (painter: Danh Long Thien Nhi)

### 3.3.8. Ngo Boat Race (Um tuk ngô)

Rooted in a folk tale, Ngo boat racing is a high-profile game of Khmer people. Currently, it is held as a major festival within the framework of Ok Om Bok festival. It is assumed that this collective sports game draws the most participants of the Khmer people in the South. Not only is the audience cheering, but each group participating in the competition also includes a vast number of members since each team contains around 50 people. They can be vigorous, muscular men or solid and resilient women. The race encompasses men-to-men, women-to-women matches, and a single round involves multiple teams taking part in. Each team represents a locality or a certain temple. The main vehicle of the game is the Ngo boat, which consumes a lot of energy and resources of the workers to build a beautiful and satisfactory one. Wood selection for boatbuilding is also an arduous task, requiring both

large and stiff materials. The body of Ngo boat is elongated like a snake, decorated with colorful patterns with spiritual meanings such as the Naga serpent, lions, tigers, leopards, bears and crocodiles. A Ngo boat is as splendid as a dragon ship. A Ngo boat usually comprises 46 to 50 seats, members of a team will sit along both sides of the boat, and a person at the front of the boat shouts the rowing rhythm for the whole team. Before entering the match, and practicing and renovating the Ngo boat, each team also performed the launching ceremony. The offerings are presented on a mat in front of the boat. The monks chant blessings and members of the temple's executive board preside the ceremony, pray to the patron god to follow and support the boat to win the upcoming competitions.

Considering the game principles, to start the contest, the Ngo boats gather in horizontal rows at the starting point under the regulations of the organizers. Athletes prepare themselves for the game and hold the beam firmly. When the signal rings, the race begins. The person sitting at the prow spreads his arms and shouts to beat the command. The driver must be very experienced to control the boat sailing at high speed without overturning. The game happens exhilaratingly in the sound of drums, gongs and people's applause which echoes a whole river. The team reaching the finish line first wins. The preparation for the game is elaborate and in order to be sufficiently healthy, athletes must be trained and fostered, the rewards for the winning team in this game are often precious. Not only attaining material value, but the winning team also gains the honor and pride for the homeland or temple they represent. Other residents or the temple winning the victory also share the same pride.

**Figure-8.** An Um tuk ngô (painter: Danh Long Thien Nhi)



## 4. Discussion

Undergoing tremendous historical upheavals, despite burdening arduous economic conditions, the Khmer community in the South still preserves a unique cultural heritage, including its folk games. The vitality of Khmer folk games is fostered through the roles, meanings and functions of folk games for the Khmer ethnic group, such as: *contributing to reflecting the daily life of workers, carrying educational lessons, connecting the community, primarily reflecting the national culture*. As elucidated above, this study generalizes and discusses in depth the cultural characteristics of the Khmer folk games in contribution to affirming the intense and persistent vitality of the folk games in the cultural life of the Khmer inhabitants dwelling in the South as follows:

### 4.1. Folklore

Folklore is reflected in the origin and circulation of games. No one can identify or name a specific author or group of authors of any folk games. They are perceived to be created during the working process and passed down through generations. The circulating method of folk games also varies, which can be viewed as activities that are repeated in imitation done by following generations after seeing their beloved or people in their “phum” “soc” (villages and hamlets) playing those games. Because of their vividness and attractiveness, folk games encounter no obstacles to infiltrate into the hearts of generations and are handed down till these days.

### 4.2. Humanity

From the perspective of cultural characteristics, humanity allows to distinguish culture from natural values. It considers culture as a product created and accumulated and modified through human working process. As a part of culture, humanity is also a feature of the Khmer Southern folk games. Humanity is exposed through the creation of games, so it is undeniable that Khmer folk games are the product of the creativity and exchange of Khmer generations. Human are the author and subject practicing, disseminating and evaluating the games for further improvement, promotion or deletion. A folk game, despite being accepted, does not mean to be preserved by the community until today. Whether accepted or not by the community depends on the popularity, people’s interest and humanity.

Moreover, over time, the players themselves can alter some elements to suit the actual situation better. For instance, in terms of rewards and penalties, in the past, the prize and punishment form of folk games was simply a mental incentive such as the losing team would carry the winning one for 3 rounds or something like that. However in a more advanced society and better economic condition, Khmer folk games now entail various forms of reward and penalty such as: the winners will be rewarded with gifts like cakes, candies, living utensils, or even a modest amount of money to encourage morale, etc.

### 4.3. Collectiveness

Almost all Khmer games are of collectiveness, which means that they involve various participants, including direct players and cheerers. In some games, the victory or failure depends on the collectiveness, the tactical coordination of joiners, frankly evidenced by Ngo Boat Race when a team with up to 40-50 members in competition, each person must not work individually but become an arm of a large boat that must be rowed under the same beat, identical goal and shared enthusiasm. The team's skillful collaboration turns the great mutual strength into the team's victory. Alternatively, in the game of kite flying, it is unforgettable that neighboring people gather in the fields in windy afternoons regardless of age, like the festive occasions of “phum” “soc”. Kite flying will no longer be of joyfulness and meaningfulness without the participation of numerous people.

### 4.4. Communicativeness and Adaptiveness

Exchange and acculturation occur naturally between ethnic groups co-residing in a shared area or with other neighboring ethnic groups. The Mekong Delta region is a peaceful coexistence of Kinh, Khmer, Hoa, Cham, etc. Each ethnic group possesses its own unique cultural identity. Throughout dwelling and working together, the ethnic groups have undergone a process of cultural exchange, including folk games. In addition to the typical Khmer games such as releasing wind lanterns, Ngo boat racing, bull racing, Lbeng Arāk Sva, chol chhung, some others namely tug of war, stick pushing, kite flying, pot smashing, shuttlecock kicking, sack race, ... are familiar with the Kinh, Hoa and Khmer in the South; but in fact, no one can identify the origin of these given games. Cultural interference is also reflected in the participants in the game, as mentioned above, folk games are an equal type of culture in which Khmer residents and Kinh, Hoa, Cham or any other ethnic groups can join.

## 5. Conclusion

The researchers said that, with the trend of deeper integration and exchange accompanied with the strong influence of the Western wave as well as the impact of modern music genres, the Khmer folklore had encountered tremendous difficulties and challenges; many types and genres are on the verge of extinction or losing their unique identity.

Folk games embody historical, cultural, and scientific values circulating via generations with many variations to suit social life better. Folk games are an indispensable part of the childhood memories of many generations, creating a bond between generations of communities. However, modern life pertaining to tons of cultural shifts leads to fewer folk games in Vietnam than before, especially in major cities. However, for the Khmer, the cultural values of folk games are always present in their mind, in their life viewpoint, in the festival activities, beliefs and religions of the ethnic group. The problem of seeking solutions to preserve and popularize folk games at schools, community activities, etc., should be considered a strategy to develop an advanced and prosperous Vietnamese culture with a charming national identity./.

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