Transnational Khmer cultural landscapes: A comparative analysis of symbols, belief systems, and communal structures in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos

[ID]Nguyen Minh Ca[1], [ID]Nguyen Thuy Diem[2], [ID]Hang Thu Pham[3*]
[1,2,3]Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Communication, Tay Do University, Can Tho, Vietnam;
nmca@tdu.edu.vn (N.M.C.) ntdiem@tdu.edu.vn (T.D.) phamthuhang80@gmail.com (H.T.P.).

Abstract: This article presents a cross-national comparative study of the cultural symbols of the Khmer people in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos—framing them as a transborder semiotic network that operates beyond the confines of nationality and territory. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of cultural semiotics (Barthes, Lotman), ritual theory (Turner), and collective memory (Assmann), the study proposes a three-tiered model of symbolic analysis encompassing the visual, functional, and mnemonic dimensions. Data were collected through fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and participant observation in Sóc Trăng and Trà Vinh (Vietnam), Phnom Penh (Cambodia), Surin (Thailand), and Champasak (Laos), and were analyzed using multi-level semiotic and structural comparison methods. The findings reveal that in Cambodia, the Khmer symbolic system has been nationalized as a cornerstone of national identity. In contrast, in Vietnam, the Khmer community serves as a soft agent of indigenization, reviving and maintaining symbolic forms through rituals, temples, language, and performative practices. Meanwhile, in Thailand and Laos, Khmer symbols have been largely assimilated, simplified, or excluded from public representation. The article proposes a new approach to minority identity studies in regional contexts and highlights the unique intermediary role of the Vietnamese Khmer within the cultural architecture of Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Indigenization vs. Nationalization, Khmer cultural symbols, Minority identity, Southeast Asian cultural structure, Transborder semiotics.

1. Introduction

Within the cultural landscape of Mainland Southeast Asia, the Khmer people are present not only as the second-largest ethnic group in Cambodia but also as an indigenous minority dispersed across borderland regions—from southern Vietnam and northeastern Thailand to southern Laos. This transborder distribution positions the Khmer as a unique cultural subject—both embedded in and marginal to modern nation-state frameworks. Departing from traditional ethnographic approaches that often treat ethnic identity as fixed and nationally bounded, this study focuses on the Khmer system of cultural symbols, conceptualized as a transnational semiotic field in which history, memory, ritual, and cultural politics are intricately interwoven [1, 2].

In a context where minority communities are increasingly subject to soft assimilation policies, cultural globalization, and transformations in ritual practice, the preservation of identity can no longer be addressed solely within national confines. Instead, there is a pressing need to develop a cross-border comparative framework—not to aggregate or homogenize cultures, but to examine the operational logic of symbolic systems, the degrees of cultural resistance, and the potential for identity regeneration under conditions of marginality [3].

Despite this urgency, there remains a notable absence of systematic, interdisciplinary research on Khmer symbolism—particularly studies that synthesize semiotics, visual ethnography, and ritual theory. Moreover, direct comparisons between Khmer communities in Vietnam and those in other regional spaces remain scarce. Much existing scholarship either leans toward localized ethnographic accounts or treats symbols as isolated phenomena, rather than as dynamic, multilayered semiotic networks with the capacity for internal interpretation [4].

To address these gaps, this article undertakes a comparative semiotic analysis focused on six key axes of Khmer symbolic expression: (1) temple architecture, (2) folk belief systems, (3) festivals, (4) music, dance, and performative practices, (5) language and script, and (6) an integrated symbolic map. The data are drawn from fieldwork in Vietnam and supplemented by secondary sources from Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos, with the aim of constructing a model for analyzing living, mobile, and transnational symbolic forms.

The study pursues three core objectives: (i) to trace the Khmer symbolic system as a structure of communal knowledge; (ii) to compare the function and transformation of symbols across divergent institutional environments; and (iii) to propose a multilayered semiotic framework for investigating minority cultural systems within a post-national context [5].

The article is structured as follows. Section One introduces the rationale and objectives of the research. Section Two reviews the relevant literature and theoretical foundations. Section Three presents the research design and analytical framework. Section Four provides an in-depth comparative analysis of the six symbolic axes. Section Five discusses the theoretical, political, and symbolic implications of the findings. The final section summarizes the academic contributions and outlines directions for future inquiry.

2.1. Overview of Existing Research

Current scholarship on Khmer culture largely concentrates on three primary domains: ethnography, religious studies, and tangible heritage preservation. In Cambodia, the Khmer temple system has been examined as a cornerstone of national identity [6]. In Vietnam, research on the Khmer communities of the southern Mekong Delta primarily engages with state policies on ethnic minorities, folk festivals, and language preservation [7, 8]. However, the majority of these studies remain confined within national boundaries, offering limited comparative insight into Khmer communities across transnational spaces.

On the international front, the concept of "transborder culture" has been fruitfully explored in studies on the Hmong [9] the Karen [10] and the Cham [11]. Yet, the Khmer—who are spread across four nation-states with a distinctly defined cultural core in Cambodia—have rarely been analyzed as a polycentric semiotic field. This scholarly omission has left important aspects of Khmer symbolism—its mobility, transformation, and self-referential capacity—largely underexamined.

Moreover, existing semiotic research in Southeast Asia tends to prioritize nationalized Buddhist symbolism [12, 13] often overlooking the symbolic structures of minority communities. As a result, there remains a lack of analytical frameworks capable of unpacking symbols that function simultaneously as ritual mechanisms, political instruments, and vessels of communal memory.

2.2. Theoretical Framework for Analyzing Transnational Khmer Symbolism

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical approach, integrating three foundational pillars to conceptualize Khmer symbols as dynamic, living semiotic systems:

2.2.1. Cultural Semiotics (Barthes, Lotman)

Barthes characterizes cultural symbols as elements of a "second-order discourse," wherein signs are laden with social, political, and mythological connotations Barthes [1]. Lotman [2] extends this framework through the concept of the *semiosphere*, a semiotic environment that encompasses all cultural activity and communication [2]. Within this study, each temple, ritual, or *Dù Kê* performance is

regarded not only as an isolated sign but also as a generative node in a broader communal meaning-making process.

2.2.2. Ritual and Performance Theory (Turner, Bell)

Ritual, according to Turner, is not merely the repetition of tradition but a "drama of power"—a performative space through which communities negotiate hierarchy, reaffirm social roles, and address internal tensions [4]. The ritual cycle of Khmer festivals—including agricultural rites, ancestor worship, and *ghe ngo* boat races—serves as a codified system encoding Khmer social structures across generations.

2.2.3. Cultural Memory Theory (Assmann):

Assmann conceptualizes cultural symbols as "carriers of memory," through which collective remembrance is materialized and transmitted via ritual, script, and performance [3]. The erosion of traditional language, script, or ritual practices thus signals a "silencing of memory," wherein a community loses its capacity to articulate identity through its own symbolic repertoire.

3. Research Methodology and Data

3.1. Research Design and Methodological Approach

This study adopts a cross-national comparative framework, integrating interdisciplinary approaches from cultural semiotics, visual ethnography, ritual theory, and cultural memory studies. The central aim is to identify both similarities and differences in Khmer symbolic systems across four countries—Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos—while interpreting the cultural, political, and historical forces that shape these symbolic variations.

The primary methodological approach is multi-layered semiotic analysis, supported by two key sources of data:

- Ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam (Sóc Trăng, Trà Vinh, Vĩnh Long), involving direct observation of festivals, ritual documentation, and interviews with artisans and senior monks [7];
- Secondary sources from Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos, including ethnographic studies,UNESCO archives, scholarly monographs, documentary films, and Khmer temple ritual records [8, 14].

This methodology enables a reading of symbols not merely as cultural artifacts, but as dynamic components of a knowledge–ritual–discourse system. It also highlights the capacity of minority communities to reconstruct and negotiate identity under shifting sociopolitical conditions [1].

3.2. Field Data and Site Description

Fieldwork focused on three provinces in southern Vietnam with dense Khmer populations:

- Sóc Trăng: recognized as a major cultural hub for the *Ok Om Bok* festival, *ghe ngo* boat races, and *Dù Kê* theatre. Data include eight audio recordings of festival events, three videos of *Romvong* dance performances, and two handwritten Khmer-language ritual texts.
- Trà Vinh: distinguished by its network of historic Khmer temples (e.g., Âng, Hang, and Kompong Pagodas) and bilingual Khmer-Vietnamese education programs. Data include five interviews with *ngũ âm* musicians, documentation of a Khmer language class, and a symbolic map of temple structures.
- Vĩnh Long: characterized by more dispersed Khmer settlements. Data consist primarily of interviews with Khmer youth regarding language use, festival memories, and ethnic identity perceptions.

For Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos, secondary data were curated from the following sources:

- The documentary *Khmer Surin: The Vanishing Language* (Thailand) [15];

- Articles from the *Journal of Lao Studies* and ethnolinguistic studies on *Bunpimay* and minority identity in Champasak (Laos) [16];
- UNESCO records concerning Khmer temples, Apsara dance, and the Pchum Ben festival in Cambodia [14].
- In total, the study processed more than 150 units of data, including audio recordings, photographs, ritual videos, prayer manuscripts, spatial charts, and facsimiles of Khmer-script documents.

3.3. Analytical Strategy: Multi-Layered Symbolic Comparison

The analysis followed a three-step process:

(1) Symbolic Axis Coding – All data were classified into six thematic axes: (i) temple architecture, (ii) folk belief systems, (iii) festivals, (iv) music–dance–performance, (v) language and script, and (vi) integrated symbolic networks.

(2) Multi-Layered Semiotic Analysis – Each symbol was interpreted across three levels: material form, ritual function, and memory encoding. This layered approach helps reveal how symbols contribute to the restructuring of social space and the articulation of collective identity [4].

(3) Cross-National Comparison – Khmer symbols identified in Vietnam were systematically compared with their equivalents in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos to assess: (i) levels of symbolic preservation, (ii) mechanisms of variation and transformation, and (iii) the role of national policy in sustaining or desacralizing symbolic forms [3].

By combining ethnographic data with a rigorous semiotic framework, the study moves beyond descriptive analysis to interpret how Khmer symbolism is localized, nationalized, and reconfigured in the broader context of minority identity formation in mainland Southeast Asia.

4. Results

4.1. Khmer Temples as Sacred Spatial Symbols

Within the symbolic structure of Khmer culture, the temple (*wat*) transcends its religious function to become a cosmic and communal center—a site where sacred authority, ancestral memory, ritual knowledge, and cultural expression converge. With its tiered roofs, iconography of *Naga*, *Garuda*, and *Kinnari*, and multifunctional courtyard hosting both festivals and script instruction, the temple emerges as the most integrative symbol in Khmer cosmology: a fusion of materiality, semiotics, and ritual [1].

4.1.1. Cambodia: The Temple as a National Symbol

In Cambodia, temples function as central religious and cultural institutions present in nearly every village, supported by the state as pillars of national identity. Beyond their role in Theravāda Buddhist worship, they embody cultural sovereignty through standardized architecture, *Reamker*-inspired reliefs, and a distinctive pantheon of Buddha–Brahma–Asura figures. The spatial organization follows a sacred axis: *Naga* gate, flag courtyard, *sala*, main sanctuary, and cremation stupa [6].

Khmer temple architecture has been nationalized, becoming a template reproduced in urban planning, currency, and state iconography—e.g., Wat Phnom and Angkor Wat featured on the national flag and coat of arms. This reflects the strategic incorporation of Khmer symbolism into statecraft [17].

4.1.2. Vietnam: The Temple as a Community Symbolic Space

In Vietnam, Khmer temples serve as multifunctional institutions—religious, educational, and cultural. With more than 600 temples across the Mekong Delta (as reported by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs [18]), these sites function as centers for Khmer script and Pali instruction, ritual practices (e.g., *bathing the Buddha*, ancestor veneration, *Ok Om Bok*), and community arts (e.g., *Romvong* dance, *ngũ âm* music, *Dù Kê* theatre) [8].

Temples in Trà Vinh and Sóc Trăng often retain traditional layouts but adapt to modern materials—using corrugated iron and cement in place of hardwood—while preserving key symbolic elements such as the *Naga* gate, stupas, and triple-arched entrance. These temples are also sites of collective memory: bilingual signage (Vietnamese–Khmer), inscribed steles, and senior monks acting as living repositories of communal knowledge underscore their role in identity preservation [7].

4.1.3. Thailand: Assimilation of Khmer Temples into Thai Buddhist Architecture

In Thailand, the Khmer Surin community maintains a few original temples, but most have been assimilated into the Royal Thai Theravāda Buddhist system. Khmer architectural forms have been replaced by Thai-style *wats*—with golden curved roofs, tall columns, and Ayutthaya-influenced Buddha images. Key Khmer features such as *Naga* and *Garuda* sculptures are rare, Khmer reliefs have faded, and ritual practices have been reduced to standardized Pali–Thai liturgies [15].

As a result, these temples no longer function as symbolic centers of Khmer identity but have been restructured as generic, nationalized Buddhist spaces. While surface-level religiosity persists, the distinctive semiotic system of Khmer temples has been marginalized [10].

4.1.4. Laos: Contraction and De-ritualization of Khmer Temples

In southern Laos, existing Khmer temples have largely become subsidiary units within the dominant Lao Buddhist system. Architecturally minimal—often consisting of a small prayer hall without a main sanctuary—these temples lack Khmer reliefs and no longer offer script instruction. All ceremonies are conducted in Lao and follow Lao ritual formats. Consequently, the temple has lost its role as a mnemonic and ritual center for the Khmer community [16].

This comparative analysis reveals the asymmetric trajectories of a shared cultural symbol—the temple—across different national contexts. In Cambodia, it is nationalized; in Vietnam, it serves as a community anchor; in Thailand and Laos, it is either assimilated or desacralized. The Khmer temple thus operates not merely as an architectural form but as a barometer of cultural memory, political incorporation, and symbolic agency [3].

Table 1.
Comparative Analysis of Khmer Temples in Four Southeast Asian Countries.

Comparative Element	Cambodia	Vietnam	Thailand	Laos
Symbolic Role	National symbol of Khmer cultural sovereignty	Community symbol; identity pillar of Southern Khmer	Nationalized Buddhist site; diminished Khmer identity	Generic religious space; no distinct Khmer symbolism
Cultural–Social Function	Religious–ritual–national identity center	Ritual, education, artistic, and mnemonic hub	Retains surface religiosity; no communal function	Loss of ritual and memory functions
Architectural and Ritual Form	Standardized with *Reamker*, *Naga*, stupas	Hybrid traditional-modern; retains *Naga* gate, stupas	Replaced by *Wat Thai*; Khmer features erased	Simplified layout; no sanctuary, reliefs, or stupas
Language and Knowledge	Khmer script with Pali; formal instruction present	Khmer–Pali literacy; inscriptions and oral transmission	Pali–Thai rituals only; Khmer script absent	Lao-only liturgy; no Khmer instruction
Degree of Identity Preservation	State-supported; embedded in national symbolism	Flexible preservation; negotiated with state policies	Strong assimilation; symbolic erosion	Full desacralization; symbolic space erased

The comparative table illustrates that Khmer temples are not merely religious edifices, but symbolic junctions where collective memory, institutional authority, and cultural self-identification intersect. As they traverse national boundaries, these temples evolve along three axes: architectural transformation, functional reconfiguration, and the restructuring of linguistic and epistemic frameworks.

4.2. Folk Beliefs and Religious Coexistence with Buddhism

In addition to Theravāda Buddhism, the Khmer maintain a layered system of folk beliefs, including ancestor worship, veneration of local deities (*Neak Ta*), agricultural spirits (tree and water deities), and life-cycle rituals (e.g., marriage, funerals). These practices do not stand in opposition to Buddhism but coexist within shared spaces—temples, homes, and communities—forming a distinctive model of syncretic religiosity. The preservation or erosion of this symbolic system depends on each country's institutional accommodation and ritual infrastructure.

4.2.1. Cambodia: Full Integration of Neak Ta and Buddhist Rituals

In Cambodia, *Neak Ta*—village guardian spirits—are worshipped at shrines located within temple grounds or on village peripheries. These beliefs are not dismissed as superstition but are incorporated into official ritual frameworks. Offerings to *Neak Ta* commonly precede Buddhist ceremonies. Life-cycle and agricultural rituals—such as house blessings, field opening rites, or wedding ceremonies—also require spiritual consent from *Neak Ta*. Seasonal rituals like rain invocation or fishing festivals continue to be practiced and are often Buddhist-inflected, yet remain fundamentally rooted in Khmer cosmology [6].

This coexistence is state-recognized and institutionally supported, enabling a sustainable symbolic configuration between indigenous deities and Buddhist liturgy—an ideal environment for preserving deep ritual codes.

4.2.2. Vietnam: Ancestor and Spirit Worship Within Communal Temple Space

In Vietnam, Khmer communities in the Mekong Delta retain vibrant practices of ancestor worship within households and spirit veneration within temples. Ancestral altars often display bilingual inscriptions (Vietnamese–Khmer) and become focal during festivals such as *Chôl Chnăm Thmây* and *Sen Đolta*. While *Neak Ta* worship lacks formal institutional recognition in temple settings as in Cambodia, it remains embedded through subtle ritual forms such as *xin vía* (spirit invocation), *cầu an* (blessing rites), and *xua tà* (spirit expulsion) [8].

A notable feature is the semiotic interweaving of folk and Theravāda practices: rituals such as soul-calling or land consecration are conducted alongside Pali chanting, reflecting a non-disruptive ritual integration that sustains Khmer symbolic logic [7].

4.2.3. Thailand: Desacralization and Buddhist Standardization

Among the Khmer Surin in Thailand, public practice of *Neak Ta* or ancestor worship has largely disappeared. These rituals are frequently classified as superstition under the Royal Buddhist orthodoxy. The *Thai-ization* of Khmer temples has displaced ritual space for indigenous practice. Ancestor worship, if it occurs, is confined to private households and simplified, often performed in Thai and following Thai liturgical conventions [15].
This constitutes a form of double desacralization: both the physical space for ritual and the symbolic system needed to articulate Khmer cosmology have been erased from institutional religion.

4.2.4. Laos: Ancestor Worship Through Laoized Ritual Forms

In southern Laos, the small Khmer minority exists within a dominant Lao Buddhist and animist context, where *phi* (spirit) worship prevails. While ancestor worship persists among the Khmer, it has been *Laoized*—conducted using Lao language, chants, and rituals folded into Lao temple practice. *Neak Ta* has been reinterpreted or replaced by *phi*, erasing its symbolic distinction and undermining the continuity of original Khmer spiritual transmission [16].

Khmer folk belief is not a peripheral tradition but a core symbolic structure through which the community interprets the cosmos, life cycles, and collective memory. Its viability depends on ritual space, institutional legitimacy, and semiotic expression. Vietnam and Cambodia preserve dynamic forms

of religious coexistence, while Thailand and Laos represent two extremes of institutional desacralization—where Khmer spiritual systems dissolve into dominant religious orders [3].

Table 2.
Comparative Analysis of Khmer Folk Beliefs Across Four Southeast Asian Countries.

Comparative Element	Cambodia	Vietnam	Thailand	Laos
Position of Folk Belief	Fully integrated with Buddhism; state-recognized	Ancestor and spirit worship coexist with Theravāda Buddhism	Not recognized; labeled as superstition	*Neak Ta* merged with Lao *phi* spirits
Ritual Space	*Neak Ta* shrines within temples or villages	Household altars and symbolic *Neak Ta* spaces in temples	Only home-based worship; temples *Thai-ized*	No distinct space; practices merged into Lao temples
Integration with Buddhism	Harmonious; folk rites embedded within Buddhist rituals	Flexible overlap; soul-calling and chanting coexist	No integration; Khmer rituals excluded	Ancestor worship follows Lao forms; *Neak Ta* absent
Language and Ritual Practice	Khmer language; folk rites institutionally supported	Bilingual (Vietnamese–Khmer); integrated ritual performance	Thai language; simplified or lost rituals	Lao language; original Khmer rites replaced
Degree of Preservation	Strong; supported by state and sangha	Moderate; sustained by community-led practice	Dual desacralization; loss of space and symbolic system	Symbolic independence lost; ritual transmission disrupted

Khmer folk belief systems embody a profound symbolic stratum, encoding cosmological views, ancestral reverence, and the communal life cycle. Cambodia and Vietnam maintain a model of ritual coexistence between *Neak Ta* spirits and Theravāda Buddhism, thereby safeguarding the structural continuity of indigenous memory. In contrast, Thailand and Laos exhibit processes of desacralization and assimilation, where the Khmer pantheon has lost both ritual space and symbolic coherence. The presence or erasure of *Neak Ta* is not merely a matter of religious practice—it serves as a critical indicator of a minority community's cultural sovereignty.

4.3. Festivals and the Politics of Emotion: From Agricultural Cycles to Community Identity

In Khmer cultural life, festivals serve as ritualized mechanisms for re-encoding sacred time, marking agricultural cycles, life-course transitions, and the cyclical reconstruction of communal structures. Major ceremonies such as *Chôl Chnăm Thmây* (Khmer New Year), *Sen Đolta* (Ancestor Festival), and *Ok Om Bok* (Moon Festival and young rice offering) function not merely as events but as symbolic rites through which communal emotions are mobilized, collective memory is reactivated, and sociocultural order is reaffirmed. Depending on the national context, these festivals are preserved, transformed, or diminished—revealing the emotional politics of Khmer identity formation across different geopolitical environments.

4.3.1. Cambodia: Festivals as Components of Nationalized Identity

In Cambodia, the three principal Khmer festivals are officially recognized as national holidays, celebrated on a wide scale from village to state level. *Chôl Chnăm Thmây* spans three to five days and includes Buddha bathing, sand stupa construction, and ancestral spirit processions. *Sen Đolta* is observed as a communal ceremony held at temples, where families offer ancestral tributes in tandem with mass monastic rituals. *Ok Om Bok* features large-scale *ghe ngo* boat races—a multidimensional symbol of spirituality, sport, and statehood—drawing thousands of participants annually.

Here, festivals are not merely religious or cultural expressions; they are performative instruments of national identity, with full institutional support and symbolic political capital [6].

4.3.2. Vietnam: Festivals as Arenas for Negotiating Communal Identity

In Vietnam, Khmer communities actively observe all three major festivals, despite the absence of formal public holiday recognition. Nonetheless, these festivals remain central to communal life, especially in provinces such as Sóc Trăng, Trà Vinh, and Kiên Giang. *Chôl Chnăm Thmây* is held in temples and features Buddha bathing, *Romvong* dance, and traditional games. *Sen Đolta* serves as an intergenerational bridge, as communities gather to offer rice to monks, perform ancestor summoning rituals, and reaffirm kinship ties. In Sóc Trăng and Trà Vinh, *Ok Om Bok* is marked by vibrant boat races, moon offerings, and floating lanterns—rituals that not only reinforce spiritual cohesion but also assert Khmer identity within a pluralistic cultural framework.

Here, festivals function as spaces for identity negotiation, enabling the Khmer to craft symbolic autonomy within the national multicultural structure—avoiding both total assimilation and ethnic isolation [7].

4.3.3. Thailand: Khmer Festivals Absorbed into Thai Ritual Order

Among Khmer Surin communities in Thailand, *Songkran* (Thai New Year) is commonly practiced, yet distinct Khmer elements—such as sand stupas, boat races, and ancestral invocations—have been either diluted or fully absorbed into the Thai national ritual framework. *Sen Đolta* is no longer publicly recognized, and ancestor worship is restricted to private, often simplified, domestic observances. *Ok Om Bok* has been entirely lost, as moon-centered rituals are absent from mainstream Thai Theravāda liturgy.

This ritual erasure signals a rupture in communal memory, as festivals lose their collective emotional resonance and become fragmented vestiges of Khmer identity [15].

4.3.4. Laos: Khmer Festivals Laoized and Ritual Distinctiveness Lost

In southern Laos, *Bunpimay*—celebrated as the Lao equivalent of *Chôl Chnăm Thmây*—has replaced the Khmer New Year, conducted entirely in Lao language and ritual form. Original Khmer components, including sand stupas, ancestral rites, and moon offerings, have been removed or replaced by standardized Lao Buddhist practices. The absence of *Ok Om Bok* and boat racing has also led to the disappearance of agrarian-aquatic symbolism that once anchored Khmer cosmological rhythms.

Here, festivals have been politicized through cultural homogenization, eliminating the performative space necessary for expressing Khmer identity in the public sphere [16].

In sum, Khmer festivals operate as emotional theatres where culture is performed, memory is regenerated, and social order is ritually reassembled. In Cambodia and Vietnam, they remain collective symbols of identity formation. By contrast, in Thailand and Laos, the erosion of festival space results in the silencing of communal memory. Ritual symbols not only require continuity—they require spatial enactment. This performative spatiality marks the most profound divide in the lived ritual experiences of Khmer communities across national borders [3].

Table 3.
Comparative Analysis of Khmer Festivals Across Four Southeast Asian Countries.

Festival Dimension	Cambodia	Vietnam	Thailand	Laos
Chôl Chnăm Thmây (New Year)	National holiday; large-scale celebrations integrating Buddhist and folk rites; symbol of national identity	Celebrated in temples; includes Buddha bathing, *Romvong* dance; not a public holiday but widely upheld	Practiced as *Songkran*; many Khmer rituals replaced by Thai forms	Substituted by *Bunpimay*; conducted in Lao language and ritual style
Sen Đolta (Ancestor Festival)	Communal ceremony in temples; mass monastic rites and ancestral offerings	Soul-calling, food offerings to monks; emotionally significant intergenerational event	Not institutionally recognized; limited to private observance	Laoized; no longer distinct; symbolic forms replaced
Ok Om Bok (Moon Festival, Boat Race)	Large-scale *ghe ngo* races; state-supported symbol of cultural–spiritual unity	Celebrated in Sóc Trăng, Trà Vinh; includes moon offering, lantern floating, boat races	Not practiced; symbolic function lost	Not celebrated; agrarian–aquatic symbolism erased

The table illustrates starkly contrasting trajectories of Khmer festivals across national contexts. In Cambodia, these celebrations are nationally institutionalized and serve as pillars of cultural identity. Vietnam sustains them through community-based temple rituals, even without official recognition. In contrast, Thailand and Laos show marked ritual erosion, where Khmer elements are either assimilated into dominant traditions or eliminated altogether. The loss of symbolic space and performative agency signals a rupture in the transmission of collective memory. Ultimately, the vitality of these festivals reflects each state's broader approach to minority cultural preservation.

4.4. Music, Dance, and Performance: The Auditory–Visual Semiotic System of Khmer Identity

Within the Khmer symbolic universe, music, dance, and theatrical performance are not merely cultural expressions, but a dynamic grammar through which memory, ethics, and collective affect are encoded. These forms—*pinpeat* (five-tone ensemble), *Romvong* and *Lamthon* dances, *Dù Kê* folk theatre, and *Rô băm* epic drama—are deeply embedded in ritual space (temple), sacred time (festivals), and social function (narration, instruction, emotional release). The preservation or erosion of these expressive modes across borders reflects the vitality of non-textual cultural transmission in transnational Khmer communities.

4.4.1. Cambodia: Performance as Nationalized Symbolism

In Cambodia, Khmer performance arts have been formalized and institutionalized. The *pinpeat* ensemble and *Rô băm* dance-drama—especially its *Reamker* rendition—are recognized by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage. The *pinpeat* is performed during all major temple festivals and maintained through structured pedagogy. *Romvong* and *Lamthon* are practiced widely as expressions of collective emotion and are mobilized by the state in public cultural and political events [14].

Dù Kê and *Rô băm* theatre remain vibrant in many provinces, serving as platforms of "vernacular discourse," dramatizing ethical, historical, and social themes using Khmer language, stylized gesture, and symbolic music [6].

4.4.2. Vietnam: A Living Semiotic Network in Community Practice

In Vietnam, Khmer communities in the Mekong Delta have preserved a robust system of auditory–visual performance, including *pinpeat*, *Romvong*, and *Dù Kê*. These are actively performed during key festivals such as *Ok Om Bok* and *Chôl Chnăm Thmây*, especially during Buddha bathing rituals, ancestral processions, and folk gatherings. *Romvong* transcends its entertainment value to symbolize social harmony, equilibrium, and empathetic collectivity.

Dù Kê, a composite art form that integrates speech, music, movement, and storytelling, functions as a culturally embedded semiotic system. It serves as a medium of ethical instruction, cultural memory, and linguistic preservation. Troupes perform cyclically in temples and village festivals, ensuring the continuity of Khmer symbolic expression [8].

4.4.3. Thailand: The Decline of Performative Language

Among the Khmer Surin in Thailand, much of the traditional Khmer performance repertoire has been lost. *Romvong* survives only in simplified, entertainment-based forms, often absorbed into Thai musical aesthetics. *Pinpeat* has been displaced by Thai music in ritual spaces. *Dù Kê* is no longer staged; its fragments survive only in the memories of a few elders, without audiences or intergenerational transmission [15].

The erosion of performative language has led to a collapse in the auditory–visual semiotic infrastructure, weakening the community's capacity to enact and rearticulate cultural identity.

4.4.4. Laos: Symbolic Silence and Transmission Breakdown

In southern Laos, Khmer music, dance, and theatrical performance have nearly vanished. Khmer participation in festivals is mediated through Lao musical and choreographic frameworks, with no remaining venues for indigenous performance. The absence of apprenticeships, spaces of enactment, and intra-community audiences has rendered the symbolic language of performance silent—preserved only as residual memory, severed from its generative function [16].

In sum, Khmer music, dance, and performance constitute a living symbolic corpus—through which memory, emotion, and ethical order are transmitted across generations. When performance languages remain active, communal memory thrives; when symbols fall silent, cultural self-definition erodes. Cambodia and Vietnam have sustained dense networks of performative meaning, while Thailand and Laos exemplify symbolic disintegration in both form and function.

Table 4.
Comparative Summary of Khmer Music, Dance, and Performance Across Four Countries.

Artistic Element	Cambodia	Vietnam	Thailand	Laos
Pinpeat Ensemble	UNESCO-recognized; central to temple rituals and state events; formally taught	Sustained during festivals; symbolic in ritual and communal ties; artisan transmission active	Discontinued; replaced by Thai music; absent from rituals	No longer practiced; supplanted by Lao Buddhist music
Romvong / Lamthon Dances	Ubiquitous; culturally emblematic; mobilized in public ritual and state events	Central to festival life; expressive of communal balance and harmony	Reduced to entertainment; symbolic meaning lost	No space or transmission infrastructure
Dù Kê / Rô băm Theatre	Regular performances; dramatize ethics, history, and community memory	Temple- and village-based performance; sustain narrative and language	No active practice; only remnants in elderly recollection	Fully discontinued; no performers or oral scripts

This table underscores the uneven preservation of Khmer performing arts across national contexts. In Cambodia and Vietnam, forms like *pinpeat*, *Romvong*, and *Dù Kê* remain vital to ritual expression and cultural continuity. By contrast, Thailand and Laos exhibit significant artistic decline—where traditional performances are either reduced to generic entertainment or have disappeared entirely. The loss of transmission infrastructures and symbolic function signals a rupture in intergenerational memory. These performative traditions, once central to Khmer identity, now delineate the threshold between cultural resilience and erasure.

4.5. Khmer Language and Script: A Semiotics of Memory and Resistance

The Khmer language and its script are not merely communicative tools—they form a deep semiotic structure through which collective memory, cultural identity, and spiritual knowledge are encoded. From Buddhist scriptures and oral folktales to temple inscriptions and *Dù Kê* lyrics, Khmer functions as a mnemonic medium. In contexts shaped by intense nationalization and imposed linguistic regimes, the act of speaking, writing, and teaching Khmer becomes a symbolic resistance—a refusal to relinquish the right to interpret the world through one's indigenous epistemology and semiotic system.

4.5.1. Cambodia: Khmer as a National Symbolic Infrastructure

In Cambodia, Khmer is the official national language, used across government, education, media, and religious life. The script is ubiquitous—appearing on signage, currency, legal documents, and in religious manuscripts. In temples, it coexists with Pali (used for chanting), producing a dual religious language structure: Khmer as vernacular memory and Pali as liturgical sanctity [19].

This integration sustains not only linguistic continuity but a national semiotic infrastructure that reinforces cultural identity and perpetuates traditional modes of meaning-making [6].

4.5.2. Vietnam: Khmer as a Code of Cultural Survival

In southern Vietnam, Khmer remains actively spoken in communities such as Trà Cú, Cầu Kè, Mỹ Xuyên, and Châu Thành. While not a national language, it receives limited institutional support through bilingual education programs, ethnic boarding schools, and temple instruction. Khmer script is visible in temple names, stelae, ritual calligraphy, and select educational materials. Monks (sư cả) play a crucial role in informally transmitting the script to younger generations.

In this context, learning Khmer is not simply acquiring linguistic competency—it is a way of accessing communal memory, understanding ritual structures, and resisting cultural anonymization [7].

4.5.3. Thailand: Linguistic Attrition and the Disappearance of Script

Among Khmer Surin communities in northeastern Thailand, Khmer is primarily spoken within households, and often in non-standardized dialects. Younger generations increasingly lack fluency due to education and media dominated by Thai. Khmer script has vanished from public space, schools, and religious practice; even temple chanting is conducted in Thai or Pali [15].

The loss of script signifies more than linguistic decline—it severs access to ritual texts, ancestral knowledge, and the mnemonic grammar of Khmer identity

4.5.4. Laos: The Collapse of Linguistic Transmission

In southern Laos, Khmer has disappeared from both public and domestic use. Children do not learn the language, and temple rites rely solely on Lao or Pali. Khmer script is no longer taught, read, or preserved. Sacred texts, ancestral prayers, and folktales—once written in Khmer—can no longer be accessed or transmitted.

Here, Khmer survives only as a nominal identity: one can still "be Khmer," but no longer "speak Khmer" through the symbolic codes that once sustained cultural memory [16].

In conclusion, Khmer language and script form the semiotic backbone of the community's mnemonic sovereignty. When spoken and written, they keep memory active and interpretative capacity intact. When they disappear, the community loses not just cultural expression but the symbolic grammar through which it defines and remembers itself. Cambodia and Vietnam have preserved dynamic infrastructures for linguistic continuity, while Thailand and Laos exemplify a deeper erosion— not merely of language, but of the community's right to signify, narrate, and resist through its own terms.

Table 5.
Comparative Summary of Khmer Language and Script Across Four Southeast Asian Countries.

Language–Script Dimension	Cambodia	Vietnam	Thailand	Laos
Khmer in Daily Life	National language; used in all official, educational, and religious domains	Actively used in Khmer-majority districts; family and ritual communication	In sharp decline; limited to older generations and private settings	No longer in use; replaced by Lao in all spheres
Language Instruction	Taught throughout national school system; standardized curriculum	Supported in ethnic schools, bilingual programs, and temples	No formal instruction; generational fluency lost	Not taught; Khmer youth are linguistically disconnected
Khmer Script Usage	Present in all public media; coexists with Pali in religious settings	Appears in temple names, inscriptions; taught informally by monks	Disappeared from public and religious life	Fully lost; no transmission or surviving texts

Table 5 highlights a stark divergence in the status of the Khmer language and script across national boundaries. In Cambodia, Khmer is fully institutionalized as the national language. Vietnam demonstrates flexible preservation through minority schooling and temple-based instruction. By contrast, Thailand and Laos exhibit a sharp decline or complete disappearance of both spoken and written Khmer. The loss of educational infrastructure and public usage signals a rupture in cultural memory. Ultimately, language serves not only as a communicative medium but as a vital marker of ethnocultural survival.

4.6. Transnational Khmer Symbolic Mapping: Synthesis and Semiotic Depth

Following the analysis of six core symbolic domains—temples, folk beliefs, festivals, music–dance–theatre, language, and script—it is possible to conceptualize a semiotic map of Khmer culture across four national contexts. Each symbolic form is redefined along three interpretive axes:

Level of Persistence: presence – transformation – disappearance
Functional Structure: sacred – communal – performative – linguistic
Symbolic Politics: nationalization – localization – assimilation – desacralization [2]

4.6.1. Cambodia: Khmer Symbols as Instruments of Nationalization

In Cambodia, the entire Khmer symbolic system has been nationalized—integrated into state-supported narratives through education, legal frameworks, and mass media. From temple architecture and script to ghe ngo boat races and Rô băm theatre, these symbols simultaneously preserve communal memory and assert national identity [6].

While this model of "total internalization" ensures symbolic continuity, it also risks over-standardization and the politicization of communal affect, thereby diminishing symbolic plurality.

4.6.2. Vietnam: Flexible Localization and Cultural Agency

In Vietnam, Khmer symbols persist as locally grounded expressions within a minority context. Despite not being nationally standardized, temples, festivals, language, and folk performance are actively preserved by Khmer communities in the Mekong Delta. These communities serve as cultural agents who negotiate between state policy and vernacular transmission through ritual, education, and performance [7].
This model of "soft localization" allows Khmer symbols to survive, adapt, and function within a multiethnic national space.

4.6.3. Thailand: Symbolic Assimilation and Mnemonic Residue

In Thailand, Khmer symbols have largely been absorbed into dominant cultural forms. Khmer temples are rebranded as Thai wats, traditional festivals are reduced to Songkran, Khmer script has disappeared, and the language is in sharp decline. Symbols remain as fragments—remembered but no longer practiced [15].

This model of assimilation dissolves the semiotic infrastructure of memory, leaving the Khmer community without the symbolic tools to articulate cultural identity.

4.6.4. Laos: Symbolic Desacralization and Erasure

In southern Laos, Khmer symbolic systems have almost entirely disappeared. Rituals, language, and belief systems have been Laoized; the script has vanished; and no formal or informal transmission mechanisms remain. The Khmer community has become culturally invisible within the national symbolic landscape, leading to a rupture in the transmission of collective memory [16].

This represents a case of complete symbolic desacralization, wherein expressive agency, ritual space, and epistemic continuity are all lost.

Taken together, the transnational Khmer symbolic map illustrates more than degrees of persistence or loss. It reveals how culture, power, and memory interact across national borders. Cambodia enforces nationalization; Vietnam facilitates negotiated preservation; Thailand enacts symbolic dilution; and Laos reflects near-total erasure. Cultural symbols are not neutral—they are semiotic battlegrounds where identity, memory, and political agency are negotiated.

Table 6.
Comparative Structure of Khmer Symbols Across Four Southeast Asian Nations.

Dimension	Cambodia	Vietnam	Thailand	Laos
Symbolic Model	Full nationalization	Flexible localization	Assimilation into dominant Thai culture	Complete desacralization
Agent of Expression	Central state and Khmer community	Khmer community as autonomous cultural actor	Khmer community stripped of discursive agency	Khmer community rendered culturally invisible
Space of Expression	Official national space	Local community space through vernacular practice	Symbolic space overwritten; only fragments remain	Symbolic space erased
Status of Language, Ritual, Script	Fully preserved; state-supported	Partially preserved; hybrid traditional–modern	Steady decline; loss of script, ritual, and fluency	Full loss of script, ritual, and transmission
Symbolic Risk	Over-standardization; emotional politicization	Ongoing negotiation; risk of reductionism	Symbolic fragmentation; erosion of cultural memory	Total rupture of semiotic continuity

The transnational status of Khmer symbols reflects stratified regimes of cultural memory and political recognition across Southeast Asia. Cambodia institutionalizes symbols to reinforce national identity [6]; Vietnam sustains them through community negotiation [7]; Thailand erases symbolic autonomy through cultural absorption [15]; and Laos exhibits the most severe case of symbolic rupture [16]. As such, symbolic systems are not passive cultural artifacts, but dynamic indicators of whether a minority's memory and identity can persist—or be rendered silent—within dominant national frameworks [3].

5. Discussion

5.1. Khmer Cultural Symbols as a Semiotic System of Resistance

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the Khmer symbolic system—including temples, festivals, language, and performance—is not merely an ethnographic residue but a resilient semiotic structure capable of resisting imposed political and cultural authority. This resistance does not take the form of

overt confrontation, but instead operates through ritual encryption, affective performance, and the preservation of symbolic autonomy.

As Barthes argues, when dominant discourse "naturalizes" a sign, minority communities must undertake a process of "de-mythologization" to reclaim semiotic agency and construct alternative grammars of meaning [1]. Khmer communities in Vietnam exemplify this strategy: they do not seek state recognition of their symbols as national icons, but instead maintain their sacredness, social function, and interpretive sovereignty within a multiethnic framework. This study introduces the concept of semiotic resistance—a form of symbolic endurance that allows marginalized communities to sustain meaning outside the center of national power.

5.2. Collective Memory and the Transmission of Non-Textual Knowledge

Khmer symbolic practices—especially in ritual, music, and theatre—serve as carriers of memory, in the sense articulated by Assmann [3]. In contexts where writing systems decline and oral language weakens, these performative forms become repositories of cultural knowledge: *Dù Kê* conveys ancestral narratives, *Romvong* encodes moral teachings, and ritual events transmit life-cycle wisdom.
These symbolic acts are dynamic, evolving in tandem with the emotional life of the community. As Ahmed notes, emotions are not private but circulate through social and political structures [20]. The politics of affect is evident in Khmer ancestor rites, moon ceremonies, and boat races—where emotion becomes a conduit for memory and identity, generating secondary symbolic spaces that are unofficial, vernacular, and densely encoded with cultural significance.

5.3. Postnational Symbolism: From Cultural Frontier to Transborder Network

The concept of postnationalism, developed by Appadurai [21] and Ong [22] emphasizes that in the context of globalization, migration, and homogenizing policies, identity is no longer bounded by the territorial state. Rather, it operates through transnational symbolic circuits, embedded in memory, language, and ritual.

Khmer communities in Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos are illustrative: although they reside outside Cambodia, they preserve Khmer symbolic systems through temples, performances, names, and festivals. These symbols, while mutable, continue to define the community—forming a cultural space that is "proximate to the homeland but not subsumed by the nation."

This paper proposes reconceptualizing Khmer symbols as postnational signs, endowed with three core capacities:

- To reconstitute cross-border collective memory;
- To cultivate culturally autonomous zones within multiethnic states;
- To function as regional semiotic nodes linking dispersed Khmer communities.

5.4. Theoretical Implications and a Three-Tier Model of Minority Symbolism

From these findings, the study proposes a three-tier model for analyzing minority symbolism in postnational contexts:

Table 7.
Symbolic Dimensions of Cultural Resilience: Functions and Enabling Conditions.

Symbolic Layer	Core Function	Conditions for Survival
Visual–Material	Spatial identity (e.g., temples, script, dress)	Public recognition, cultural policy, spatial autonomy
Ritual–Performative	Transmission of collective memory, affect, and cohesion	Ritual infrastructure, intergenerational participation, artisanship
Epistemic–Linguistic	Cultural reproduction through endogenous symbolic systems	Native-language education, epistemic agency, symbolic rights

This framework underscores that symbolic survival depends not merely on visibility but on the maintenance of an integrated symbolic ecology—where material form, performative function, and epistemic systems intersect to sustain communal identity.

6. Conclusion and Academic–Policy Implications

6.1. General Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Khmer cultural symbols—ranging from temples and script to festivals and performance traditions—do not exist as neutral artifacts. Rather, they operate as dynamic semiotic systems through which memory, identity, and epistemology are encoded and negotiated in daily communal life. By comparing six symbolic axes across four Southeast Asian countries (Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos), the research shows that the same Khmer symbol can take on four distinct politico-semiotic configurations: nationalization, soft localization, assimilation, and complete desacralization.

Among these, Vietnam stands out for its model of flexible localization, enabling the Khmer community in the Mekong Delta to preserve ritual spaces, language, and performative traditions as mechanisms of collective memory. In contrast, in Thailand and Laos, the erosion of Khmer symbolic systems signifies more than cultural decline—it reflects a profound diminishment of the community's capacity for self-definition and cultural agency.

6.2. Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the scholarly discourse in three principal areas:

(1) Minority Cultural Semiotics: It extends the theoretical lineage of Barthes and Lotman by integrating insights from ritual theory (Turner) and cultural memory (Assmann), demonstrating that symbols not only signify meaning but also serve as repositories of communal memory.

(2) Postnational Symbolism: It proposes an original framework for understanding cultural symbols as transnational semiotic units that register fragmentation, reconnection, and reconstitution of ethnic identity beyond the territorial confines of the nation-state.

(3) Soft Semiotic Resistance: It introduces the concept of soft semiotic resistance to describe nonviolent negotiations of cultural power that unfold through ritual, artistic expression, and the everyday resilience of symbolic structures.

6.3. Policy Implications and Future Research Directions

The findings suggest three strategic directions for both cultural policy and scholarly inquiry:

(1) Policy for Minority Cultural Rights should extend beyond material considerations to guarantee spaces for ritual practice, intergenerational transmission, native-language education, and symbolic expression—ensuring that communities can articulate memory and identity through their own semiotic systems.

(2) Cultural Institutions such as Khmer temples, *Dù Kê* stages, and script-learning classrooms should be recognized as epistemic spaces for community-based "memory education," rather than merely as sites of traditional or folkloric activity.

(3) A Transnational Digital Archive of Khmer cultural symbols should be developed to reconnect fragmented memory circuits across Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos—facilitating knowledge sovereignty and symbolic cohesion within the wider Khmer diaspora.

Future research could extend this comparative model to other transborder minority groups such as the Cham, Hmong, or Karen. In doing so, it would contribute to the theorization of regionalized memory ecologies as a critical counterbalance to the dominant logic of nationalized symbolic systems.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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