

Rational Choice Theory in the Study of Folk Beliefs (The Case of Yiey Mao Belief among the Khmer People in Southern Vietnam)

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Abstract

Folk beliefs play a crucial role in shaping the spiritual, social, and economic lives of communities. Among the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam, the Yiey Mao belief represents a unique cultural-religious phenomenon that has persisted despite modernization and social changes. This study applies Rational Choice Theory (RCT) to examine why the Khmer people continue to practice and maintain the Yiey Mao belief. RCT posits that individuals make decisions based on rational calculations to maximize their perceived benefits. Through an analysis of economic, social, and political factors, this study argues that the worship of Yiey Mao is a rational choice influenced by both tangible and intangible benefits. Economically, rituals associated with Yiey Mao contribute to spiritual tourism and community-based economic activities. Socially, participation in these rituals strengthens social capital, fostering community cohesion and reinforcing Khmer cultural identity. Politically, the belief system provides a mechanism for leadership and social influence within the community. However, this study also acknowledges the limitations of RCT in fully explaining the persistence of the Yiey Mao belief. Factors such as tradition, emotions, and cultural identity play a significant role in religious decision-making, sometimes overriding purely rational calculations. As modernization continues to impact Khmer society, this research highlights the adaptability and transformation of folk beliefs, suggesting that future studies should incorporate interdisciplinary approaches to better understand the dynamics of religious practices in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: *Folk Beliefs, Rational Choice Theory, Yiey Mao, Khmer People, Southern Vietnam.*

Introduction

Folk beliefs play an important role in the spiritual life of communities, reflecting their value systems, beliefs, and social needs. Among the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam, the Yiey Mao belief is a cultural-religious phenomenon that warrants scholarly attention. In recent years, Yiey Mao has been widely worshiped and has significantly influenced the spiritual, economic, and social lives of the people in the region. However, there has been little research on this type of belief.

This paper examines the choice and maintenance of the Yiey Mao belief from a socio-economic theoretical perspective, particularly through the lens of Rational Choice Theory (RCT). Rational Choice Theory posits that individuals make decisions based on cost-benefit calculations to maximize their personal benefits. When applied to the study of folk beliefs, this theory can help explain why the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam continue to maintain and develop the Yiey Mao belief in the modern context. The worship of Yiey Mao can be seen as a rational choice behavior, as people believe it provides material benefits (prosperous business, health, peace) and spiritual benefits (emotional comfort, community cohesion).

Using RCT as a theoretical foundation, this paper analyzes the factors influencing the Khmer people's decision to worship Yiey Mao and proposes a research model to test this hypothesis. Through this, the study not only contributes to the theoretical understanding of folk beliefs but also provides a novel approach to the study of religion from a social science perspective.

Hypotheses of Rational Choice Theory in the Study of Folk Beliefs

Rational Choice Theory is an important theoretical framework in social sciences that explains human behavior based on rational calculations aimed at maximizing personal benefits (Becker, 1976). In the study of folk beliefs, RCT provides a useful approach to analyzing the motivations and changes in religious

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practices among individuals and communities. Specifically, when applied to the Yiey Mao belief among the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam, RCT helps explain why a folk belief can persist or transform under different social, economic, and cultural conditions.

Based on the principles of RCT, folk beliefs can be analyzed through four key hypotheses:

First, Individuals Are Rational Decision-Makers

According to Coleman (1990), human actions are not random or purely emotional; rather, individuals make decisions based on a careful evaluation of benefits and costs. In the context of folk beliefs, Khmer individuals may choose to maintain, adjust, or abandon their belief in Yiey Mao depending on what they perceive as the most beneficial choice.

For instance, if worshipping Yiey Mao provides them with peace of mind, protection from misfortune, or strengthens community bonds, they are likely to continue practicing the belief. Conversely, if they perceive that the belief no longer meets their spiritual or social needs, or if its practice becomes costly without yielding tangible benefits, they may reduce their participation or even abandon the belief entirely. This demonstrates that even in spiritual matters, individuals engage in a decision-making process based on a rational evaluation of benefits and costs.

Second, The Principle of Benefit Maximization Drives Religious Behavior

RCT posits that individuals always seek to maximize their benefits in decision-making. In the context of folk beliefs, these benefits are not limited to spiritual aspects but also extend to social, economic, and political advantages.

For example, maintaining the Yiey Mao belief can help individuals establish and strengthen community relationships. This belief not only preserves Khmer cultural identity but also creates opportunities for social interaction and mutual support within the community. Additionally, in some cases, folk beliefs can generate economic benefits. The association of the Yiey Mao belief with spiritual tourism, for instance, allows local people to gain financial benefits from organizing festivals, selling ritual offerings, or providing related services.

This suggests that even beliefs rooted in the supernatural can be maintained or modified based on a rational logic of benefit maximization.

Third, Information Sources and Subjective Perception Influence Religious Decisions

One of the key aspects of RCT is that individuals do not always have complete information when making decisions. Simon (1955) introduced the concept of "bounded rationality," which suggests that individuals often make decisions based on limited information and subjective perceptions.

In the case of the Yiey Mao belief, not all Khmer people fully understand its origins, meanings, or impacts. Some continue practicing it simply because it is a family tradition without critically evaluating its rationality or practical benefits. This aligns with Kahneman & Tversky's (1979) Prospect Theory, which emphasizes that human decisions are not always based on absolute rational calculations but are also influenced by emotions, experiences, and cultural traditions.

For example, many Khmer people maintain their worship of Yiey Mao because they believe that failing to do so may bring bad luck or misfortune. This reflects the psychological tendency of "loss aversion," where individuals are more motivated to avoid risks than to seek gains. Therefore, even in the absence of concrete evidence of Yiey Mao's spiritual influence, the belief continues to persist due to subjective perceptions and cultural traditions.

Fourth, Religious Behavior Can Be Predicted Based on Economic and Social Factors

Downs (1957) argues that if we understand an individual's preferences, motivations, and constraints, we can predict their behavior. This principle is also applicable in the study of folk beliefs: when economic conditions change, the level of religious practice may also shift accordingly.

For instance, during economic hardships, Khmer people may reduce expensive Yiey Mao rituals while still maintaining simpler spiritual practices, such as praying or offering small-scale tributes at home. Conversely, when living standards improve or when religious practices become crucial for strengthening cultural identity, they may increase their religious activities, organize larger festivals, and attract more participants.

Furthermore, in the context of modernization and globalization, many folk beliefs undergo restructuring to adapt to new social conditions. Some rituals may be modified to fit urban lifestyles, while others may be integrated into tourism and cultural events to attract younger generations and visitors.

In summary, Rational Choice Theory provides a powerful analytical tool for understanding the motivations, behaviors, and transformations of the Yiey Mao belief among the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam. By examining factors such as benefit maximization, the influence of information, subjective perception, and economic-social conditions, we can better explain why folk beliefs persist, evolve, or decline over time.

Applying RCT not only enhances our understanding of how folk beliefs function in contemporary society but also offers a new perspective in religious and cultural studies—one that views religious beliefs not merely as spiritual phenomena but also as social constructs that can be analyzed through rational decision-making principles.

Applying Rational Choice Theory to the Study of Yiey Mao Belief

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) originates from economics and has since been extended to other fields such as political science and sociology to explain human behavior in various contexts. When applied to the study of the Yiey Mao belief of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam, this theory helps to explain why this belief continues to persist and develop even in the context of modernization. Based on the aforementioned hypotheses, we apply RCT to analyze the motivations of the subjects (the Khmer people) in choosing the Yiey Mao belief from economic, political, and social perspectives.

Economic Perspective

The Khmer people may consider the costs and benefits of practicing the belief to make their choice. According to Iannaccone (1998), the costs of religious practice include the time, money, and effort spent on participating in rituals and worship activities. From the perspective of Rational Choice Theory, an individual decides to engage in religious belief when they perceive that the benefits obtained outweigh the costs incurred (Becker, 1976). In the Yiey Mao belief, the Khmer people are willing to incur significant costs to perform rituals in exchange for the "protection" of the goddess.

These costs include:

- Offerings expenses: Offerings to Yiey Mao often include fruits, chickens, pigs, or other valuable items. According to field surveys conducted in O Lam Commune, Tri Ton District, An Giang Province, participants in Yiey Mao worship activities may spend up to three million VND per year on these practices, depending on the economic conditions of that year.
- Time costs: The Khmer people not only spend time attending major rituals but also participate in the preparation and maintenance of worship sites. Large festivals, such as the Yiey Mao worship ceremony on the full moon of the fourth lunar month, attract many participants, with each person spending from one to several days on these religious activities.

- Labor costs: Beyond financial contributions, many Khmer individuals participate in maintaining temples, organizing community activities, and supporting traditional rituals. This demonstrates that the cost of religious belief is not only material but also involves labor efforts.

Alongside these expenses, the Khmer people believe that the Yiey Mao belief brings them certain benefits. These benefits are not only spiritual but also include economic advantages. For example, at some Yiey Mao worship sites, religious tourism activities can generate income for the local community, thereby increasing the motivation to maintain this belief. This aligns with the viewpoint of Stark & Bainbridge (1987), who argue that religion and belief can be seen as a system of exchange in which individuals invest in faith to receive rewards in the present or future. Moreover, many Khmer families maintain the Yiey Mao belief with the conviction that it brings prosperity to agricultural production and fishing. In some localities such as Tra Vinh and Soc Trang, fishermen often worship Yiey Mao before setting out to sea, seeking blessings for a safe and successful voyage. This illustrates that the practice of belief is not only culturally driven but also an economic strategy to maximize benefits through faith in the goddess's protection.

From a spiritual perspective, field surveys in several areas reveal that the Khmer people believe Yiey Mao is a protective deity with the power to shield and bring peace to the community. The devotion to Yiey Mao stems from the belief that she can help them avoid natural disasters, illnesses, and other life threats. This aligns with Iannaccone's (1998) view on the economics of religion, which suggests that people accept investing in religious practices to attain "rewards" in their spiritual lives. Many Khmer individuals, particularly farmers and fishermen, believe that worshiping the goddess ensures bountiful harvests, successful fishing, and protection from natural calamities and diseases. Field research shows that in areas with Yiey Mao temples, people regularly conduct worship ceremonies at the beginning and end of agricultural seasons to seek divine blessings. Khmer respondents in the study affirmed their belief that worshiping Yiey Mao brings them good fortune and minimizes risks in their work.

From the perspective of Rational Choice Theory, the Khmer people continue practicing the Yiey Mao belief because they perceive that the benefits outweigh the costs. Despite financial, time, and labor expenses, the sense of spiritual peace, community cohesion, and faith in the goddess's protection motivate them to maintain this belief. Furthermore, as Yiey Mao worship is linked to religious tourism activities, local communities can also gain economic benefits, thereby reinforcing the motivation to uphold the belief in the goddess. Thus, the Khmer people's worship of Yiey Mao can be seen as a rational decision when analyzed through the lens of cost-benefit evaluation. Under the framework of Rational Choice Theory, religious belief is not merely a cultural tradition but also a calculated choice aimed at maximizing both individual and communal benefits.

Political Perspective

In political science, Rational Choice Theory helps analyze voter behavior, political strategies, and decision-making in public policy (Downs, 1957). When applied to the study of Yiey Mao belief, it becomes evident that this belief and its practices are not just personal matters but also play a role in maintaining social order and political power within the Khmer community.

Khmer monks and achar (religious leaders) often utilize the Yiey Mao belief as a tool to strengthen their influence. They may organize major rituals, lead the community in religious activities, and leverage their status to advocate for decisions that benefit their group. For instance, field research in An Giang and Kien Giang indicates that many Khmer achar have close ties with local authorities, acting as intermediaries in the allocation of economic and social development resources, gaining trust through their religious practices.

Furthermore, belief can be seen as a social strategy that helps individuals enhance their status and maintain relationships within the community. According to Coleman (1990), religion can be understood as a form of social capital that fosters cooperation and community cohesion. The practice of Yiey Mao belief is not merely an individual activity but also holds significant social value. Participants in rituals are often regarded more highly within the community, forming connections with like-minded individuals, and even attaining

political or economic advantages. This aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, where individuals use religious practices as a means to sustain or elevate their social status.

Finally, modernization impacts the decision to maintain or alter belief systems. As alternative choices such as mainstream religions, science, and materialist philosophies become more prevalent, some individuals may shift their beliefs if they perceive that the Yiey Mao belief no longer offers significant benefits (Bruce, 2002). However, this change does not occur uniformly across the community. Some continue practicing the belief due to its social and spiritual advantages, while others gradually transition to alternative belief systems that better align with their circumstances.

Sociological Perspective

In sociology, Coleman (1990) expanded Rational Choice Theory to explain social behavior and cultural norms. The Yiey Mao belief is not only a spiritual practice but also a mechanism for maintaining and strengthening social relationships within the Khmer community. Rituals related to Yiey Mao facilitate social interactions, allowing people to meet, communicate, and bond through collective activities such as organizing festivals, engaging in charitable work, and supporting each other during important occasions.

For example, in some Khmer villages in Soc Trang, families often jointly organize Yiey Mao worship ceremonies at the beginning of the year, where each household contributes offerings for the communal ritual. This practice not only preserves religious traditions but also reinforces communal solidarity. In certain localities, Khmer respondents in surveys indicated that participating in religious ceremonies strengthens their sense of belonging to the community and helps maintain their cultural identity.

Thus, applying Rational Choice Theory to the study of Yiey Mao belief reveals that the persistence or transformation of this belief among the Khmer people is not solely based on tradition but is also influenced by economic benefits, social advantages, and modernization. This perspective helps explain the adaptability of folk beliefs within the context of societal development.

Discussion

Although Rational Choice Theory (RCT) provides a useful analytical framework for understanding the Yiey Mao belief among the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam, applying this theory to the study of social and cultural phenomena presents certain limitations. One of the biggest challenges is the assumption that individuals always have complete information and make decisions based on rational cost-benefit calculations. However, in reality, human decision-making, especially in the realm of religious beliefs, is often influenced by non-rational factors such as emotions, traditions, and cultural identity.

Limitations of RCT in Explaining Religious Behavior

According to RCT, individuals make decisions based on cost-benefit considerations to maximize their personal gain. However, in the case of the Yiey Mao belief, many Khmer people continue practicing this faith even when they do not have a clear assessment of the specific benefits they receive. For example, some poor families in rural areas allocate a significant amount of money each year for the Yiey Mao worship ceremonies, despite facing financial difficulties. At first glance, this behavior appears inconsistent with the "rational" model of RCT, as it does not follow a clear cost-benefit calculation in economic terms.

However, if we expand the concept of benefits beyond material gains, we can see that practicing this belief provides spiritual value and peace of mind for the Khmer people, helping them maintain community cohesion and cultural identity. In this case, the concept of benefit may include non-material aspects, such as spiritual tranquility, belief in divine protection, or social acceptance. This suggests that RCT needs to be adjusted when applied to the study of religious phenomena to account for psychological and social factors.

The Impact of Emotions and Non-Rational Factors

One of the significant limitations of RCT is its assumption that individuals make decisions purely rationally based on careful calculations. However, human decision-making is often influenced by emotions, personal experiences, and cognitive biases. In the case of the Yiey Mao belief, many Khmer people continue practicing this faith not because they have clear evidence of its effectiveness, but because it provides them with a sense of security and a connection to cultural traditions.

For example, surveys conducted in various Khmer communities show that most individuals who practice the Yiey Mao belief cannot provide a concrete reason for its effectiveness, yet they continue the practice because it makes them "feel at ease." This aligns with theories on non-rational aspects of human behavior, where decisions are not solely based on logic but are also shaped by emotions, beliefs, and cultural habits.

Furthermore, the role of community influence is also crucial. Practicing the Yiey Mao belief is not merely an individual choice but a social act, where participation in religious rituals helps maintain social bonds within the community. In many cases, Khmer people engage in these practices due to social pressure or the desire for community recognition rather than purely rational decision-making.

The Over-Idealization of Human Rationality

RCT for idealizing individuals as purely rational actors who always optimize their benefits. However, in reality, the continued existence of the Yiey Mao belief despite the availability of alternative choices—such as mainstream religions and modern scientific explanations—suggests that religious beliefs cannot be fully explained by the model of benefit maximization.

For instance, many Khmer people who migrate to urban areas continue practicing Yiey Mao worship, even though the urban environment offers many other religious and secular alternatives, such as orthodox Buddhism, modern scientific approaches, or a more secular lifestyle. This indicates that belief in Yiey Mao is not solely a choice based on material benefits but also reflects deep connections to cultural identity and personal emotions. Additionally, practicing this belief may be linked to cultural heritage, where individuals feel responsible for preserving ancestral traditions, even when their living environment has changed.

In summary, while RCT provides a valuable analytical framework for studying the Yiey Mao belief, this theory needs to be adjusted and integrated with other approaches to more accurately reflect the influence of non-rational factors, emotions, and cultural identity in religious behavior. This is particularly important in the study of religion and belief systems, where human decisions cannot be understood solely through the lens of economic or purely rational optimization.

Conclusion

Rational Choice Theory provides an essential analytical tool for understanding the persistence and evolution of the Yiey Mao belief within the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam. Through this framework, we see that religious practices are not merely spiritual traditions but also socially and economically motivated behaviors. Individuals and communities continue to practice the Yiey Mao belief not only for spiritual reasons but also to preserve cultural identity, strengthen social cohesion, and take advantage of economic opportunities linked to religious practices.

However, as analyzed, RCT is not an all-encompassing theory that can explain every aspect of the Yiey Mao belief. The theory assumes that people always act rationally and seek to optimize their benefits, but in reality, tradition, emotions, and social influences also play significant roles in individuals' religious choices. Many Khmer people maintain the Yiey Mao belief despite the absence of empirical proof of its efficacy, highlighting that not all decisions are purely rational.

Furthermore, the Yiey Mao belief is not static—it adapts and changes over time. In the face of modernization, some Khmer individuals adjust their practices, integrating Yiey Mao worship with other religious traditions or, in some cases, gradually abandoning it if it no longer aligns with their contemporary

lifestyle. This shift can also be explained by RCT, as individuals constantly seek the most beneficial options based on their evolving circumstances.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Yiey Mao belief, RCT should be combined with other approaches in anthropology, sociology, and religious studies. Future research could explore the impact of modernization, migration, and state religious policies on the maintenance and transformation of this belief. Studying the Yiey Mao belief in greater depth not only enhances our understanding of Khmer culture and religious life but also contributes to broader theoretical discussions on folk beliefs in the context of social change.

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