



THE EVOLUTION OF THE

Khmer Wedding Ceremony

From the seven-day rites of Preah Thong and Neang Neak to the one-day celebrations of modern Cambodia

By Chhay Yiheang • Royal Academy of Cambodia

AI translation prepared by Soeurng Vuthy

A Tradition Amid Globalization

As Cambodian society modernizes, globalization is reshaping daily life — from dress and festivals to how families conduct weddings. Traditions built over centuries are gradually eroding, even as the country embraces the wider world.

This is not a call to reject outside influence, but to preserve and elevate Khmer culture so it holds its own place within a multicultural world.

SECTORS TOUCHED BY GLOBALIZATION

- Economy
- Politics
- Education
- Social welfare
- Dress & fashion
- Festivals & weddings

Three Guiding Questions

1

What forms has Khmer marriage taken?

2

What causes changes in Khmer marriage over time?

3

What consequences follow if these traditions are not preserved?

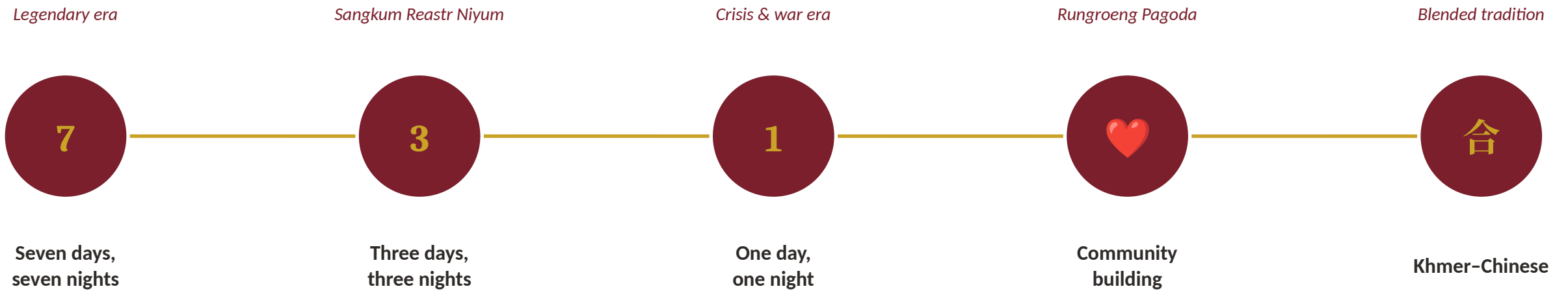
Intellectuals and citizens of every class are called on to help answer these questions and carry the culture forward.

The Meaning of Marriage

- 1 Publicly affirms a couple's love before the community, which then recognizes and supports the union
- 2 A private bond given legal protection by village, commune, and quarter authorities
- 3 A primary family duty — a sincere marriage brings joy to parents, siblings, and relatives
- 4 An expression of a child's gratitude toward their parents
- 5 A mark of human dignity: unlike animals, humans formalize love through ceremony

PART II

The Changing Forms of Marriage



As economic and political conditions shifted, ceremonies once lasting a week condensed into a single night — while new, blended, and community forms also emerged.

The Seven-Day, Seven-Night Marriage

Legend traces the earliest Khmer wedding to Preah Thong and Neang Neak. When King Bhujanga arranged for Neang Neakvatey to become the queen's daughter to Preah Thong at the founding of Angkor Borei, the king ordered a pavilion built for a seven-day ceremony.

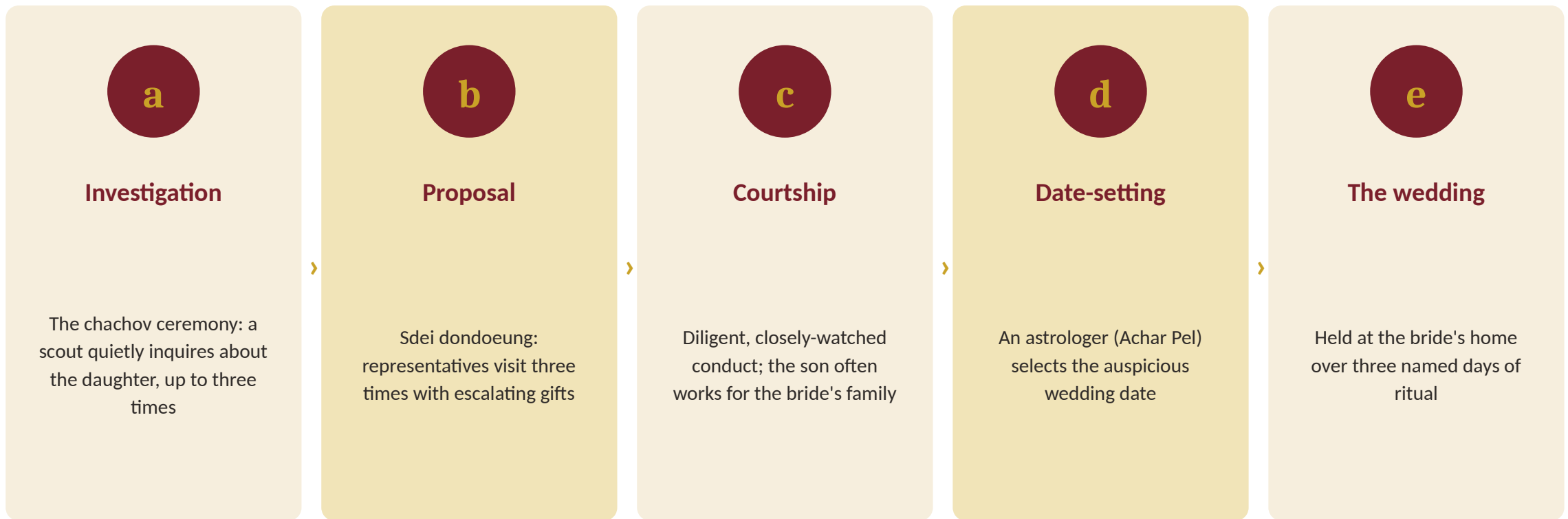
Elder Chhun Bib of Prang village, Kandal province, recalled that a full seven-day, seven-night wedding could still be arranged there, as it also was in Trapeang Chorng commune, Battambang — though whether it belonged only to royalty or to all families remains debated.

WHAT REMAINS UNKNOWN

- Whether rites were mainly Brahmanic or Buddhist
- When and why the seven-day form was lost
- Whether it was reserved for royalty or open to all families

The Three-Day, Three-Night Marriage

Practiced through the end of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum era, this form followed a long, deliberate process:



Investigation & Proposal

THE INVESTIGATION (PITHI CHECHOV)

A groom's family sends a representative — the “chachov person,” or matchmaker — to inquire discreetly about a daughter, often using veiled language such as asking for “a flower cutting from this village.”

- 1st visit — initial inquiry
- 2nd visit — confirmation
- 3rd visit — mutual confirmation

THE PROPOSAL (SDEI DONDOEUNG)

If the bride's family agrees, three women represent the groom's side across three visits, bringing more gifts each time to show humility and honor the daughter.

By the third visit, an elder guarantor may join for reassurance. The couple exchanges jewelry to confirm the match — though the wedding itself may still wait while the son works for the bride's family.

The Three Wedding Days

Day 1

Entering the Pavilion

Families jointly raise a three-part pavilion — flower/candle, dining, and end sections — with formal requests made to the mother for each task.

Day 2

Confirmation Day

Morning music leads the groom in; ancestors are informed; the “confirmation platter” is eaten. Afternoon brings hair-cutting; night ends with the coconut/egg-breaking rite.

Day 3

Prostration Day

At dawn, betel-areca is divided by family line. The groom prostrates, candles circle the couple, hands are tied, and he is carried piggyback into the room by the bride's brother.

At 8pm, two elder women arrange the “sleeping place” — the couple share food together as a symbol of lasting love before the night ends.

The One-Day, One-Night Marriage

From the economic crisis of 1968 through the 1970 political upheaval, escalating turmoil left no room for lengthy ceremony. Weddings were compressed into a single day and night.

Full Ceremony

- Musicians play for the flower-cutting from the tree
- A pavilion is built to host the groom
- Multi-day sequence of named rites

One-Day Form

- Flowers simply cut and brought, no music — coconut flowers if none found
- Groom lodges with a neighbor, or stays at the bride's house directly
- Astrologer keeps only the most essential points

Marriage as Community Building

At Rungroeng Reangsei Pagoda, Battambang, a wedding is staged each Khmer New Year — not to unite the couple in life, but to draw visitors and raise funds to build the pagoda.

HOW IT WORKS

- 1 A pre-arranged bride is presented on stage
- 2 Young men buy lottery tickets for a chance to “win” her hand
- 3 The winning ticket-holder performs the ceremony: respects, garland, hair-cutting, hand-tying
- 4 Both sign a contract: the marriage is festivity only, not real

WHEN FICTION BECAME REAL

Since 1986, only one couple has broken the contract and married in earnest: Chan Dy and Phoeun Sreymom, who still live near the pagoda — and now have three children.

Proceeds from ticket sales fund the pagoda's temple hall, monks' quarters, dining hall, and wells — a rare wedding that serves the whole community, not just the couple.

Khmer–Chinese Marriage

Many Khmer families trace Chinese ancestry through five dialect communities, each with its own guardian deity:

Teochew <i>Worship Kong Kong</i>	Cantonese <i>Worship Kong Kong</i>	Hokkien <i>Worship Kong Kong</i>	Hainanese <i>Worship Ma Chor</i>	Hakka <i>Worship Ma Chor</i>
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In weddings, the two traditions blend: red paper with Chinese characters and the ceremonial “pai” bow appear alongside Khmer forehead-greeting, hand-tying, candle-circling, and hair-cutting. Many ethnic Khmer have, in turn, adopted these Chinese customs as their own.

Of Cambodia's ethnic minorities, these communities most readily adopt Khmer civilization — and have given back in turn, helping build schools, roads, hospitals, and Buddhist institutions.

Cohabitation Before Marriage

WHY IT HAPPENS

Increasingly common among former street or orphaned children, who lack money and parental support. Without guardians to arrange a formal proposal, couples form spontaneous bonds, build livelihoods, and raise children on their own.

FINDING THEIR WAY BACK TO TRADITION

Some couples never hold a wedding at all. Others, once they can afford it, arrange a full ceremony — or a simpler blessing — to honor Khmer custom and be recognized as properly married. Communities of former orphans often support one another generously when these weddings are held, giving couples lasting peace of mind.

Khmer Marriage Today

A widening gap between rural and urban practice:

Rural Areas

2 days, 2 nights

Retains much original content — music for flower-cutting, respects to village elders, and floor-testing dances.

Cities & Capitals

1 day, 1 night

A condensed form, done quickly to save time and money — and increasingly distant from tradition.

NEW ARRIVALS AT THE MODERN RECEPTION

- European-style dress replaces traditional attire
- A cake-cutting rite marks the union's "birthday"
- The bride may change outfits 5–6 times per reception
- An emcee — not the astrologer or elder — now runs the program
- The piggyback-carrying rite has nearly disappeared

Voices from the Field

Religious-affairs officials and teachers across the provinces shared their views on today's weddings:

Regional divergence

Weddings in Phnom Penh, home to many ethnicities, differ sharply from those held in the provinces.

Blended traditions

Khmer, Chinese, and Christian customs increasingly mix, even among ethnic Khmer families.

Lost virtue teachings

Some urge that a monk's sermon on mutual support be restored, so couples grasp their roles for life.

Money over meaning

Officials warn that some weddings now prioritize money and appearances, at times harming brides.

Outside organizers

Makeup artists, photographers, and emcees increasingly replace the astrologer, mother, and elders.

Calls for authenticity

A recurring appeal: whatever the length, weddings should keep a genuinely Khmer character.

CONCLUSION

Preserving Identity Amid Change

From seven-day royal rites to a single crisis-era night, Khmer marriage has continually adapted to its times — through war, upheaval, and now globalization.

Globalization and modernization cannot be blocked — and they bring real benefits. But neither should Khmer culture be abandoned in the process.

THE PATH FORWARD

- Keep a genuinely Khmer character, however long the ceremony lasts
- Curb excess: overlong negotiations and spending meant only to impress
- Restore the astrologer's and monks' role in guiding new couples
- Let outside influence add to — not replace — Khmer identity



Sarawan Sursour

Thank You

The Evolution of the Khmer Wedding Ceremony — Chhay Yiheang, Royal Academy of Cambodia