



The Intersection of Buddhism and Animism in Thai Ritual Practices: An Anthropological Analysis

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Abstract: This paper explores the unique intersection of Buddhism and animism within Thai ritual practices, offering an anthropological perspective on the blending of these two belief systems. Buddhism, which arrived in Thailand over a thousand years ago, focuses on enlightenment and ethical behavior, while animism emphasizes spiritual connections with natural elements and ancestral spirits. In Thai society, these two systems coexist, intertwining in rituals that embody both religious and cultural heritage. Through practices such as merit-making, spirit offerings, and ceremonies invoking protection from nature spirits, Thai rituals reveal an adaptive spirituality that integrates Buddhist doctrines with local animistic beliefs. This synthesis supports social cohesion and fosters environmental awareness, as many rituals are deeply rooted in respect for nature. The study highlights how these blended practices not only shape Thai cultural identity but also serve as a platform for ecological responsibility. By examining the historical, cultural, and social dynamics of these rituals, this research provides insight into the resilience and adaptability of Thai spirituality in a modernized context.

Keywords: Buddhism, animism, Thai rituals, cultural identity, spiritual practices

1. Introduction

Thai ritual practices show a complex view of how Buddhism and animism work together. In this cultural setting, both beliefs shape personal spirituality and group rituals. Buddhism came to Thailand more than a thousand years ago and focuses on the higher nature of life, encouraging thoughts on enlightenment and letting go. Conversely, animism is deeply rooted in local traditions, imparting spiritual significance to nature and fostering a connection between individuals, spirits, and their environment. This paper will look at how these two different belief systems enhance each other in Thai rituals, showing the flexibility of religious practices and the social changes that come from their mix. Ultimately, this understanding highlights the profound essence of Thai identity and the enduring continuity of its cultural heritage.

Buddhism is a spiritual tradition that focuses on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha (Phumirang, P. P., 2024). It highlights the path to enlightenment through activities like meditation, ethical behavior, and understanding suffering. On the other hand, animism is based on the belief that non-human beings such as animals, plants, and even inanimate objects have spiritual importance and agency. This difference is important for understanding the mix seen in Thai rituals, which often merge the organized philosophy of





Buddhism with the more natural and flexible aspects of animism. As noted in Yuto Yabumoto (2022), the blending of these beliefs in artistic expressions in areas like Zomia shows a fundamental anarchistic feeling that questions the dominance of industrial society. Thus, it is vital to examine how these connected spiritual systems impact both personal practices and wider social interactions in Thai culture, providing a rich array of beliefs that go beyond rigid definitions.

Thai culture is linked closely with both its past and current events, which shape spirituality and society in Thailand. At the center of this cultural mix is the interaction between Buddhism and animism, two major belief systems that affect rituals and community life. Religious groups act as places for social and environmental change, showing that “religion influences social ideas and people’s values” (Philipp Öhlmann et al., 2024). This idea highlights how Buddhist teachings blend with animistic views, forming a distinct way to understand nature and human roles. Additionally, the idea of Anarcho Animism, looked at through artistic activities in Zomia, offers a viewpoint to explore how animism can question current political systems while enhancing the connection to the environment (Yuto Yabumoto, 2022). Thus, the Thai cultural landscape illustrates how these belief systems coexist and manifest in daily rituals, fostering community resilience and sustainability.

Rituals in Thai culture are very important as they show cultural identity and community unity, deeply integrated into everyday life. They provide a means for individuals to spiritually connect with both Buddhist and animistic beliefs, while also reinforcing relationships among participants. These rituals, which include ceremonies for making merit and worshiping spirits, show how these spiritual traditions come together, creating a unique blend in Thai culture. Recent studies have found that these practices help promote ecological sustainability, highlighting the close link between human behavior and nature (Philipp Öhlmann et al., 2024). Also, looking at animism through anthropology emphasizes its role as a political idea that supports living in harmony with nature; this is clear in the work of modern artists like Apichatpong Weerasethakul, whose art reflects the ideas of Anarcho-Animism. Therefore, Thai rituals are not just religious events; they are crucial for understanding larger social and political issues and the importance of caring for the environment.

This study looks at how Buddhism and animism connect in Thai rituals, providing a detailed anthropological review. It examines the history and current aspects of these beliefs to show how they affect cultural rituals and community identity. As noted in (Jiyeon Min, 2023), how society accepts different beliefs is very important in shaping these practices and their acceptance. Understanding these connections helps in promoting intercultural discussions, especially in areas where these blends are common. Using ideas from Islamic studies discussed in (Jonathan Benthall, 2016), we will also address the importance of tolerance and adaptation in religious practices. In the end, this analysis adds to academic discussions about Southeast Asian religions and helps us understand the complexities of spiritual expressions in Thai culture.

2. Historical Context of Buddhism and Animism in Thailand

In the history of Thailand, the mix of Buddhism and animism has made a special cultural area where both beliefs live together and influence one another. Buddhism came to the area many years ago but had trouble merging with the strong animist habits that were part of local spiritual practices. This mix of beliefs shows a detailed kind of religious change, allowing Buddhism to include local gods and ancestor spirits while changing some rituals. The way these traditions exist together is especially clear in village life, where animistic ceremonies are added to Buddhist events, like temple festivals that celebrate both the Buddha and local spirits. As





shown in studies about the part of religious groups in social and ecological change (Philipp Öhlmann et al., [2024](#)), the merging of these traditions shows a deep understanding of community identity and ecological health. Also, the ideas presented by scholars about animism reveal how these connected beliefs can relate to larger political theories, shining a light on matters of local independence and resistance (Yuto Yabumoto, [2022](#)). Therefore, the past of Buddhism and animism in Thailand shows a lively connection that brings together spiritual, cultural, and social-political aspects into a rich ritual practice.

The arrival of Buddhism in Thailand

The arrival of Buddhism in Thailand changed the spiritual and cultural landscape of the area significantly, creating a mix with local animistic beliefs. As Buddhism gained a foothold, it did not just replace earlier beliefs; it interacted with local practices, altering both religious expressions and social systems. This can be clearly seen in ceremonies and festivals that combine Buddhist and animistic components, showing wider socio-cultural negotiations. For example, the naga, an important character in Thai folklore, represents this blend, acting as a symbol of protection and wealth in cities like Bangkok, where people from rural areas are still finding their cultural identities (Jakkrit Sangkhamanee, [2024](#)). Additionally, engaging stakeholders in religious practices illustrates how educational institutions can help maintain these complex identities, while also recognizing the historical influences and hopes shaped by both Buddhism and animism (Nopporn Peatrat et al., [2020](#)). In this way, it is clear that Buddhism's arrival triggered not just a change in religion but also a significant reshaping of Thai sociocultural identity.

Pre-Buddhist animistic beliefs and practices

Before Buddhism reached Thailand, the region was deeply rooted in animistic beliefs and practices that significantly shaped its culture. These pre-Buddhist traditions emphasized a deep connection to nature, with spirits believed to inhabit elements such as trees, rivers, and mountains, which were honored through various rituals. This spiritual perspective fostered a profound respect for the environment, influencing agricultural practices and community values. The arrival of Buddhism did not erase these animistic beliefs but rather integrated them, creating a distinct religious landscape. Rituals emerged that honored spirits alongside Buddhist teachings, preserving ancient customs and bridging the gap between differing belief systems. Understanding these early animistic elements is essential for comprehending the complexities of contemporary Thai rituals and the interplay between tradition and modernity in this socio-religious context (Brian Morris, [2006](#)).

Syncretism between Buddhism and Animism

The lasting connection between Buddhism and animism in Thai rituals shows a complicated mix that makes it hard to classify belief systems neatly. This mixture creates a detailed picture of cultural and spiritual identity, as the local people switch between Buddhist teachings and respect for animistic beings. This blend is clear in the community rituals that respect both Buddhist and animistic ideas, where participants may call upon land spirits for protection alongside Buddhist gods to promote well-being and success. This dual approach is not just living together but a merging of values, where, as seen in studies of Khmer Christians' conversion experiences, the relationship aspect of spirituality is very important. Likewise, the naga, representing both myth and environmental importance, reflects this blended idea. By understanding how these belief systems depend on one another, we can better appreciate the cultural factors influencing modern Thai religious practices.





Historical case studies of ritual practices

Ritual practices are important parts of cultural identity, often highlighting complicated connections between spirituality and everyday life. Past examples show how animistic beliefs mix with Buddhist ideas in Southeast Asia, creating a cultural mix that does not fit strict categories. For example, the ritual of honoring spirits with offerings is quite similar to Buddhist actions of merit-making, showing a flexible cultural system, where local customs are maintained and changed within a Buddhist setting. These interactions promote community unity and also enhance individual spiritual power in a structured universe. The blending of these practices can be seen in many festivals and temple events, which combine animistic and Buddhist aspects to form rich, layered experiences. Overall, these historical observations highlight the importance of viewing ritual practices as changing processes, influenced by social and historical situations and the constantly changing needs of communities (Kaj Arhem et al., [2015](#)).

3. Ritual Practices in Thai Buddhism

In the complicated structure of Thai cultural identity, rituals play a key role in blending Buddhism and animism. These rituals are not just religious events; they show a mixed identity that reflects Thailand's historical and social background (Wirat Thongphu, [2024](#)). For example, merit-making ceremonies highlight how Buddhist ideas about karma mix with animistic beliefs concerning nature spirits. People often make offerings that respect both the Buddha and local spirits, showing a deep respect for nature that is central to these practices. This blending demonstrates how Thai Buddhism can adapt, including local beliefs while staying culturally significant. Additionally, these rituals help strengthen community ties and social unity, focusing on group identity more than personal beliefs. By looking at these practices, one can see that Thai Buddhism is not fixed but rather a lively mix of beliefs that connects to the daily lives of its followers (Catherine Bell, [2009](#)).

Key Buddhist rituals and their significance

The various Buddhist rituals hold an important place in Thai society's spiritual life, mixing devotion, community, and awareness of the environment. Events like the Songkran Festival and the Wai Khru ceremony showcase essential parts of Buddhist practice while also showing animistic beliefs present in Thai culture. For instance, during Songkran, the action of pouring water on Buddha statues not only cleans and protects but also highlights how all beings are connected, reminding people of life's importance, which ties into animistic beliefs. Additionally, the Wai Khru ceremony, where students show thanks to their teachers, creates a strong community bond that helps promote social unity and shared identity. The blend of Buddhist rituals and animistic practices reveals how spirituality can support ecological sustainability and community values, reflecting ideas in (Philipp Öhlmann et al., [2024](#)) and (Yuto Yabumoto, [2022](#)).

The role of monks in ritual practices

In Thai Buddhism, monks play a key role in rituals, acting as spiritual leaders and links between people and the supernatural. Their involvement in events like ordinations or merit-making gives these ceremonies a deep meaning that goes beyond just cultural tradition. Monks perform specific chants and prayers that are thought to draw on spiritual forces, helping to connect ordinary people with the teachings of the Buddha. By following strict rules and undergoing extensive training, these monks represent the ethical and moral values important in Thai society. Additionally, their participation in local animistic rituals shows how Buddhist



beliefs mix with regional ideas, highlighting how monks adapt to and encompass various spiritual aspects to help their communities. Therefore, monks are essential not just for keeping religious traditions alive but also for promoting social unity and identity (Justin Thomas McDaniel, [2013](#)).

Influence of local animistic beliefs on Buddhist rituals

The mixing of local animistic beliefs with Buddhist practices shows a complicated relationship that plays a big role in shaping spiritual activities and community involvement in Thailand. A key part of this is the idea that animism, described by people like James C. Scott, comes from a history that questions the power of dominating systems (Yuto Yabumoto, [2022](#)). When combined with Buddhist practices, animistic beliefs create a detailed set of rituals that respect local spirits, which are crucial to the community's identity and its ties to the environment. Additionally, as religious groups work for social and ecological changes, they use the connections between animistic values and Buddhist teachings to strengthen their efforts for sustainability and responsible interactions with nature (Philipp Öhlmann et al., [2024](#)). This blend not only makes the experience of rituals more meaningful but also encourages important conversations about identity, belief, and caring for the environment, stressing the importance of looking at these practices from an anthropological viewpoint.

Case studies of specific rituals blending both traditions

Looking at the complex relationship between Buddhism and animism in Thailand shows important rituals that show how these two beliefs mix. One clear example is the spirit house ceremony, which is a common part of Thai homes and acts as a place for offerings to the spirits of the land. Although it comes from animistic traditions, the practice often includes Buddhist features, like chanting Pali sutras or using lotus flowers, which hold special meaning in Buddhism. This combination shows a respect for both nature and the spiritual world, where people regularly offer food and incense to the spirits, helping to create harmony and safety in the home. These rituals not only aim to honor ancestral spirits but also connect with the Buddhist principle of merit-making, resulting in a diverse cultural expression that echoes through both belief systems (Kaj Arhem et al., [2015](#)).

4. The Role of Animism in Thai Cultural Identity

When looking at how animism fits into Thai culture, it is important to see how much it affects social habits and spiritual views. The blend of animist practices and Buddhism forms a special cultural mix that shows the importance of ancestral spirits and nature in daily activities. This mix shows a wider view where the sacred and everyday life are closely linked. As seen in the discussions about animism's history, it shapes individual and group rituals and allows for the expression of ethical and environmental issues - topics that are more important today (Yuto Yabumoto, [2022](#)). Moreover, community members take part in these beliefs through active participation, which helps build social ties and a sense of identity. Therefore, animism is not just an old tradition but a lively influence that continues to impact Thai culture in many ways (Nopporn Peatrat et al., [2020](#)).

Animistic beliefs in everyday life

In the everyday lives of many Thai communities, there are animistic beliefs that deeply affect how they interact with the environment and shape social norms. These beliefs create a sense of connection, where people acknowledge the existence of spirits in natural things and objects, leading to rituals meant to honor and satisfy these spirits. These practices show a blend





of animism and Buddhism, as Buddhist ceremonies often include animistic aspects, forming a complex spiritual expression. For example, the changing view of the naga as more than just a mythical serpent illustrates this complicated connection, representing the social challenges and hopes of marginalized groups. Moreover, ideas like those from Iwata Keiji regarding animism in Zomia encourage a new look at how these beliefs are key to both personal and group identities. In the end, animism enhances the daily lives of individuals, rooting them in a spiritual and cultural tradition that contributes to their wider social structure.

The significance of spirit houses and local deities

The way spirit houses connect with local deities shows the complicated mix of beliefs in Thai society, combining animistic traditions and Buddhist thought. These spirit houses are clear signs of cultural respect, signifying not just protective spirits but also creating a link between the physical and spiritual worlds. Local deities, often closely linked to particular places or family histories, support this connection by acting as guardians of community welfare, which helps strengthen social bonds. Taking care of spirit houses, usually involving offerings and rituals, emphasizes the ongoing connection between the past and present, demonstrating how these customs preserve cultural identity while adjusting to modern influences. Thus, the importance of these spiritual elements goes beyond simple superstition, representing a deeply ingrained viewpoint that acknowledges the unseen forces that influence daily life in Thai society (Kaj Arhem et al., [2015](#)).

Community rituals and their social functions

Rituals in a community function like social glue, strengthening shared values and group identities. These activities go beyond just tradition; they play important roles in creating social unity, forming bonds between individuals, and promoting a feeling of belonging. By taking part in rituals, people show their commitment to the community's rules and beliefs, ensuring a sense of continuity for future generations. Such group activities often occur during important life moments, allowing for emotional release and support during happy or sad times. In Thailand, for example, the blend of Buddhism and animism shows that these rituals not only create spiritual connections but also meet practical social needs, like solving conflicts and fostering community support. This complex link between rituals and social interactions highlights their crucial role in building resilience and adaptability in communities, addressing the intricacies of cultural identity and shared memories (Julia Cassaniti, [2015](#)).

The impact of globalization on animistic practices

As traditional cultural expressions deal with globalization, the strength of animistic practices in Thailand shows both change and adaptation. This situation increasingly mixes local rituals with global cultural trends, raising questions about the authenticity of indigenous practices while also creating chances for renewal. For example, Hastilinga funeral art, based in old belief systems, demonstrates how modernization brings in new materials and influences that change how it is performed and its look. These changes, noted in (Prayoot Sarrang et al., [2024](#)), highlight larger social and religious transformations and show that animism is not fixed but actively responds to outside influences. Moreover, globalization creates chances for cultural sharing, helping animistic beliefs to be seen outside local areas, but this visibility can also lead to commodification, which threatens to weaken their original meaning. This complexity highlights the importance of community-led efforts to preserve culture, stressing the delicate balance between adopting modern ideas and maintaining traditional values, a notion supported in (Philipp Öhlmann et al., [2024](#)).





5. Conclusion

In looking at how Buddhism and animism work together in Thai rituals, it is clear that these traditions are not just existing side by side; they actively influence one another. To understand these rituals, we must consider their historical and cultural backgrounds, which reveal larger social and political forces. As noted in, rethinking animism could improve our understanding of its significance in rituals, serving as a response to the top-down impacts of industrial society. This idea is relevant in Thailand, where local beliefs often push back against dominant ideas. Additionally, Jonathan Benthall (2016) highlights the adaptability in Islamic views, similar to how local animistic traditions adjust and add meaning to Buddhist practices. Ultimately, the blend of these spiritual traditions not only enhances the variety of rituals but also sheds light on how religious beliefs can withstand and change in a global context, encouraging more research into these important connections.

The mixing of Buddhism and animism in Thai rituals shows a complicated relationship that questions the clear separation people often think exists between religion and local beliefs. Important results show that these two spiritual systems do not work apart but instead combine to create a distinct cultural fabric that shapes identity and social unity in Thai culture. Rituals, like spirit worship and making merit, illustrate how animistic features are deeply integrated into Buddhist customs, permitting followers to have a complete spiritual experience that touches on both higher and worldly matters. Moreover, research indicates that this blend not only creates a feeling of belonging but also acts as a way to cope with life's uncertainties, especially during periods of social change and personal trouble. In the end, understanding these connected spiritual practices highlights the need for a detailed view in anthropology that recognizes the changing nature of belief within cultural settings.

The complex connection between Buddhism and animism in Thai rituals helps us understand Thai culture, showing a mixture of old and new ideas. This blend of beliefs influences both religious practices and the wider social scene. Looking at eco-theological discussions and the active roles of religious groups noted in the work of Philipp Öhlmann et al. (2024), we see how these beliefs affect views on ecological sustainability, pointing to a shared duty that enhances national identity. Additionally, the historical role of animism mentioned in the study of Yuto Yabumoto (2022) places Thai culture in a context that questions dominant stories, calling for a new look at native philosophies. This mix of beliefs highlights an ongoing struggle over identity that is complicated, indicating that Thai cultural identity is built on strength and change, shaped by both spiritual traditions and modern environmental issues.

The changing field of anthropology calls for a careful review of old ideas, especially about cultural mixing and religious customs. Future studies could focus on how animism interacts with mainstream religions, much like the discussion around Buddhism and earlier beliefs in places like Bhutan, where Bon traditions still exist despite efforts to suppress them by Buddhist groups (Kelzang Tashi, 2020). Through ethnographic studies in different areas, researchers can find out how local beliefs change and persist today, helping to understand cultural strength. Additionally, looking at the details of religious tolerance and adaptability in Islamic charities might shed light on interfaith relationships and community support (Jonathan Benthall, 2016). By using these mixed methods, anthropology can play a significant role in global talks about cultural identity and religious harmony, enhancing our understanding of human actions.

The relationship between Buddhism and animism in Thai rituals shows a special mix of spiritual beliefs that enhances the cultural scene in Southeast Asia. This coexistence creates a lively interaction that Buddhist ideas about compassion and impermanence blend with animistic respect for nature and spirits of ancestors. This combination is not just placing two



different belief systems side by side; instead, it forms a flexible setup for how people connect with their surroundings, as demonstrated in rituals that celebrate both the Buddha and local spirits. Furthermore, the flexibility of these practices highlights a bigger anthropological trend in which cultures grow through historical exchanges, showing that spirituality can include rather than exclude. In the end, this merging calls for a new look at religious limits, suggesting that successfully balancing different belief systems can result in a deeper and more detailed grasp of spirituality in today's world.

Originality & Body of Knowledge

Originality: This paper explores the intersection of Buddhism and animism in Thai ritual practices, offering a fresh anthropological perspective on their coexistence and mutual influence. Unlike prior research that treats these belief systems as separate entities, this study uniquely examines how they integrate to create hybrid rituals that embody cultural and ecological values. By analyzing historical evolution, specific ceremonies, and the role of spiritual leaders, the research highlights the adaptive nature of Thai rituals in blending traditional beliefs with contemporary social and environmental challenges. The focus on community-driven practices and the ecological implications of animistic beliefs adds originality to the discourse, positioning the study as a valuable contribution to understanding spiritual practices in a globalized context.

Body of Knowledge: This study significantly advances the understanding of Thai ritual practices by addressing the interplay between Buddhism and animism as a cornerstone of cultural identity. It expands the discourse by exploring the historical roots of animistic traditions and their integration into Buddhist rituals, offering insights into how these practices foster social cohesion and ecological responsibility. The paper also examines the role of monks, spirit houses, and community rituals, highlighting their multifaceted functions in reinforcing cultural values and addressing contemporary issues. By bridging anthropological theory with practical examples, the study provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the resilience and evolution of Thai spiritual practices, making it an essential resource for scholars, cultural practitioners, and policymakers interested in Southeast Asian religions and cultural sustainability.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical treatment of experimental subjects (animals & human): The research was conducted in compliance with the principles of the Helsinki Declaration regarding human subjects, so formal ethical approval was not required.

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