

The Relational Sacred: Rethinking Khmer Occult Knowledge in Southern Isan as Local Religion

Jon Songserm¹, Burin Plengdeesaku², Homhuan Buarabha³

¹ Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University, Thailand.
Email: jonson@kku.ac.th

² Associate Professor, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University, Thailand.
Email: pburin@kku.ac.th

³ Assistant Professor, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University, Thailand.
Email: bhomhu@kku.ac.th

Abstract: Khmer occult knowledge (*sai yasat khmer*) in Southern Isan — rituals, spellcraft, and consecrated objects transmitted through teacher-lineages across Buriram, Surin, and Sisaket provinces — is routinely classified, in Thai popular and scholarly usage alike, as “superstition,” detached from religion proper. Drawing on fieldwork and 120 interviews across the three provinces, this article argues that this classification obscures more than it reveals. Rather than relying on ritual-symbol theory or knowledge-management frameworks alone, the article borrows two analytical categories developed within the study of Chinese local religion — Robert Hymes’s personal model of divine relationship and Adam Yuet Chau’s account of efficacy over doctrine — to describe how legitimacy actually operates in this system. The comparison is explicitly analytical rather than historical: no contact, diffusion, or common origin is claimed between Khmer and Chinese religious traditions. The findings show that authority in Khmer occult knowledge is conferred person to person through teacher-initiation rites rather than through impersonal hierarchy, and that spells and amulets alike derive their power from relationships of transmission and recognized standing rather than from words or materials themselves — a pattern that recurs, through different media, across Buriram’s text-based tradition and Surin’s embodied mediumship. The article also registers, more narrowly, the co-presence in Sisaket of a separate ancestor-venerating tradition maintained by Thai-Chinese communities. Read together, these findings offer a sharper vocabulary than “belief” or “superstition” for vernacular religion in Southern Isan, and suggest that categories built within Daoist Studies to describe Chinese local religion travel further than the Sinophone context in which they were developed..

Keywords: Khmer occult knowledge; local religion; efficacy; personal model of divinity; Southern Isan; comparative religion; Daoist Studies

INTRODUCTION

Across Buriram, Surin, and Sisaket — three provinces of Southern Isan bordering Cambodia and home to substantial Thai-Khmer populations — a body of vernacular ritual knowledge still shapes how communities interpret illness, misfortune, healing, and the presence of ancestors. Known locally as *sai yasat khmer*, this knowledge encompasses ritual practice, spellcraft, and consecrated objects, and is transmitted through teacher-lineages that stretch back for generations. It is also, in both Thai popular usage and much prior scholarship, routinely folded into the category of “superstition” (*sai yasat*) — a label that implies detachment from religion proper, from rational explanation, and increasingly, in Thailand’s booming *mutelu* spirituality market, from anything more serious than commodified belief.

This separation is neither unique to Thailand nor uncontested within Buddhist studies. For Thai Buddhism, McDaniel (2011) has argued that magic, amulets, ghost cults, and image worship are not deviations from an otherwise pure orthodoxy but constitutive of how Buddhism is actually practiced. For Cambodian Buddhism, Davis (2016) makes a parallel case, showing that death ritual, spirit propitiation, and monastic practice form a single interdependent system rather than two traditions held in tension. Read alongside this scholarship, the present article’s resistance to treating Khmer occult knowledge as detached “superstition” continues an argument already underway in mainland Southeast Asian Buddhist studies, before it turns to a second, more distant body of comparative literature..

Recent doctoral research on this knowledge base, motivated primarily by the practical aim of building a digital platform for its preservation and transmission, has approached it through two established frameworks: Victor Turner's theory of ritual and symbol, and the knowledge-management distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge. Those frameworks do valuable work. Turner's apparatus shows how ritual performs meaning rather than merely enacting custom, and the tacit-explicit distinction explains why so much of this knowledge resists straightforward documentation. Neither, however, was built to answer a narrower question that emerges directly from the fieldwork data itself: by what criterion does a community judge a given spell, ritual, or amulet to be legitimate — sacred and efficacious — rather than empty? Why does authority, in this system, attach to specific teacher-disciple relationships rather than to correct performance of a fixed text? These are questions of religious authority and legitimacy, and they call for a different kind of comparative vocabulary than ritual-symbol theory or knowledge management alone supply.

This article takes up that question by borrowing two analytical categories from the study of Chinese local religion: Robert Hymes's (2002) distinction between personal and bureaucratic models of divine relationship, and Adam Yuet Chau's (2006) account of efficacy — rather than doctrinal correctness — as the operative ground of religious legitimacy in vernacular practice. The borrowing is deliberately narrow and explicitly analytical. Khmer occult knowledge shares no documented historical contact, no common cosmology, and no shared textual tradition with the Chinese religious material from which these categories were drawn; nothing argued here should be read as a claim of influence, diffusion, or syncretism. What is claimed, more modestly, is that concepts built to move the study of one vernacular ritual system away from doctrine and toward relationship and demonstrated efficacy travel well enough to illuminate the internal logic of an entirely unrelated one — and that doing so affords a more precise vocabulary than "belief" or "superstition" for describing how sacred authority actually operates when it is not backed by scripture, institution, or hierarchy.

The article continues as follows. Section 2 outlines the frameworks already established in the source research — Turner's ritual-symbol theory and the tacit-explicit knowledge distinction — before introducing the comparative categories of personal divinity and efficacy that this article adds. Section 3 describes the study's fieldwork sites and methods. Section 4 presents findings on the structure of Khmer occult knowledge: its character as a living, relationally organized system; its threefold composition of ritual, spellcraft, and amulet; and, centrally, the finding that spells and amulets alike derive their power not from words or materials in themselves but from the relationships — of transmission, recognition, and lineage — within which they are used. Section 5 reads these findings comparatively, arguing that Khmer occult knowledge exhibits an almost purely personal model of divine relationship and an efficacy-based logic of legitimacy, while registering both the limits of the comparison and a further, narrower observation about the co-presence, in the same fieldwork region, of an entirely separate ancestor-venerating tradition maintained by Thai-Chinese communities. Section 6 concludes by considering what this comparative exercise offers in both directions — to the study of Southern Isan's vernacular religion, and, in a modest way, back to Daoist Studies itself.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Present Frameworks: Ritual, Symbol, and Knowledge

The dissertation on which this article draws analyzes Khmer occult knowledge through two established frameworks, each addressing a distinct dimension of the material.

The first is Victor Turner's theory of ritual and symbol (1967, 1969), developed from his fieldwork among the Ndembu of Zambia. Turner treats ritual not as fixed sequences of customary action but as a symbolic system in which objects, words, colors, spaces, and gestures carry layered meaning — simultaneously religious, social, emotional, and bodily. He distinguishes dominant symbols — recurring, meaning-dense elements such as sacred objects, teachers, or consecrated space — from instrumental symbols, which serve specific functions within a given sequence. Turner's related concept of liminality, extending Van Gennep's ([1909] 1960) rites of passage, describes the threshold state in which ordinary social structure is suspended and transformation becomes possible: the sick becomes healed, the unfortunate becomes cleansed of misfortune, the student becomes bound to a teacher. A further concept, *communitas*, names the leveling of ordinary social distinctions — status, age, role — that ritual participation can produce. Applied to Khmer occult knowledge, this framework reads ritual as a system that does not simply enact belief but transacts meaning: teachers, spirits, ancestors, spells, amulets, and consecrated space all function as symbols that carry and communicate sacred authority, protection, healing, and relationship.

The second framework is drawn from knowledge management, specifically Michael Polanyi's (1966) distinction between explicit knowledge — content that can be documented, named, and catalogued (ritual names, spell categories, amulet types) — and tacit knowledge, which resides in experience, interpretive skill, and a practitioner's judgment of when and how to apply what has been learned. This distinction structures the dissertation's finding that Khmer occult knowledge cannot be reduced to an inventory of items; a substantial portion of what constitutes the system exists only as embodied, transmitted skill.

Together, these two frameworks explain a great deal: how ritual produces and organizes meaning, and how a body of vernacular knowledge is structured, catalogued, and unevenly documentable. What they leave less examined is a narrower but consequential question — why certain relationships (a specific teacher to a specific disciple, a specific practitioner to a specific spirit) carry ritual authority at all, and by what criterion a community judges a given rite, spell, or object to be legitimate rather than empty. It is this question of authority and legitimacy — not ritual structure or knowledge typology — that the comparative lens introduced below is built to address.

2.2 A Comparative Lens: Personal Divinity and the Question of Efficacy

To read the internal logic of this knowledge system further, this article borrows two analytical categories developed within the study of Chinese local religion — a body of scholarship that, although rooted in a different cultural and chronological context, has produced conceptual tools whose descriptive reach goes beyond the Sinophone world in which they were first developed. The comparison offered here is strictly analytical: it makes no claim of historical contact, diffusion, or syncretism between Khmer occult knowledge and Chinese religious practice. What is borrowed is vocabulary — the conceptual apparatus scholars of Chinese local religion built to describe how vernacular ritual systems generate and sustain authority — not history.

The first tool is Robert Hymes's (2002) distinction between two coexisting models of divine relationship in Chinese religion — an argument first advanced in the edited volume *Unruly Gods* (Shahar & Weller, 1996), which challenged the then-standard assumption that Chinese deities functioned simply as celestial bureaucrats, and later expanded into a full monograph: a *bureaucratic model*, in which deities function as celestial officials mediating a hierarchical chain of authority, and a *personal model*, in which deities, ancestors, or spirit-teachers act as direct patrons bound to worshippers by reciprocal, particular relationships of favor and obligation. Hymes's point is not that one model historically supersedes the other, but that both remain simultaneously available repertoires practitioners draw upon according to context. Read against the findings reported in section 4, the relationships structuring Khmer occult knowledge — between practitioner and teacher-lineage (*sai khru*), between the living and ancestor spirits, between supplicant and the entities addressed in ritual speech — align far more closely with Hymes's personal model than with any bureaucratic ordering. Authority here is not delegated downward through an institutional hierarchy; it is conferred person to person through initiation rites (*wai kru*, *krop kru*) that bind a specific teacher to a specific disciple under specific prohibitions.

The second tool is efficacy — what Adam Yuet Chau (2006), building on a long tradition of scholarship on Chinese popular religion, identifies as the operative criterion by which practitioners judge ritual practice: not correctness of doctrine, but whether a rite, formula, or object demonstrably works. Chau's ethnography of a revived temple cult in rural Shaanxi describes a religiosity organized around doing rather than believing, where legitimacy accrues to what produces verifiable results through repeated, socially witnessed practice rather than to textual orthodoxy. This is not a claim that Khmer and Chinese vernacular religion share a common source; it is a claim that Chau's category describes something that also appears, independently, in the material examined here — most directly in the finding, presented below, that a spell's power derives not from the sacredness of its words alone but from its correct use, by a recognized practitioner, under lineage conditions. The same relational logic recurs in the treatment of amulets, whose potency is likewise never intrinsic to the object but constituted through the relationship among maker, consecrator, lineage, and holder.

These two categories — the personal model of divine relationship and efficacy as the ground of legitimacy — are not imported to explain Khmer occult knowledge by external analogy. They are proposed as a shared analytical vocabulary: concepts built to make sense of one vernacular ritual system that, this article argues, travel well enough to illuminate the internal coherence of another.

Table 1. What Is Borrowed, and What It Is Read Against

Category	Chinese Local Religion (source)	Khmer Occult Knowledge (this study)
Model of divine relationship	Personal model (Hymes, 2002) — direct, reciprocal patron–client bonds, alongside a coexisting bureaucratic model	Near-exclusively personal — teacher–disciple, human–ancestor–spirit; no bureaucratic ordering found (§5.1)
Ground of legitimacy	Efficacy over doctrine (Chau, 2006) — legitimacy from demonstrated, socially witnessed results	Spell/amulet power is relational and lineage-sanctioned, not intrinsic to words or materials (§4.3, §5.2)
Authorization mechanism	Ordination / register conferring recognized ritual standing (implied in the local-religion literature)	ไหว้ครู / ครอบครู initiation rites binding a specific teacher to a specific disciple (§4.3)

Note. Categories in the center column are drawn from Chinese local-religion scholarship; the right column reports where and how the present study's findings align with them. See sections 4–5 for full discussion.

3. Research Site and Methods

This article draws on a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods study carried out across three provinces of Southern Isan — Buriram, Surin, and Sisaket — selected for their continuous presence of Thai-Khmer communities and the living occult, ritual, and belief systems associated with them. Fieldwork concentrated in districts where this knowledge is most clearly documented: Khu Mueang, Nang Rong, and Phutthaisong in Buriram; Mueang Surin and Prasat in Surin; and Khun Han and Sri Rattana in Sisaket.

Figure 1. Fieldwork Provinces of Southern Isan

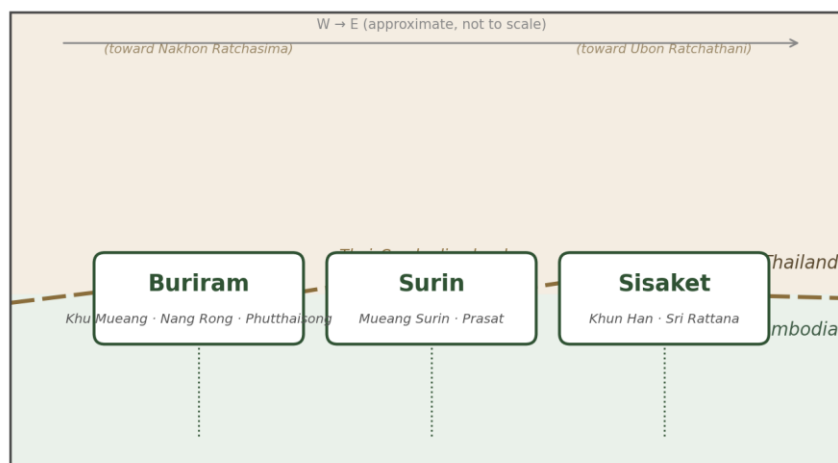


Figure 1. Fieldwork provinces of Southern Isan along the Thai–Cambodian border, west to east: Buriram, Surin, Sisaket. Schematic; not to scale.

Data were drawn from two sources: documentary material (published research, local historical records, and palm-leaf manuscripts, *samut khoi*) and fieldwork comprising in-depth interviews, participant observation, and a supplementary survey. Informants were purposively selected across three groups, chosen to triangulate structural, practice-based, and experiential perspectives on the same knowledge system: (1) scholars, local historians, and recognized experts ($n = 12$); (2) ritual practitioners, teachers, and their disciples, including *mamuat* and *mo tham* ($n = 24$); and (3) ritual participants, believers, and interested community members ($n = 84$), reached through purposive, snowball, and maximum-variation sampling to capture diversity of age, gender, occupation, and degree of involvement. Sample sizes were determined by data saturation for the interview-based groups and were distributed evenly across the three provinces (Table 3.2).

in the source dissertation).

Interviews and observations proceeded with informed consent, with participants free to withdraw at any point; no participants' faces, audio, or video were recorded, and photography was restricted to consecrated objects, ritual spaces, and settings for which explicit permission had been granted. The study received human-subjects research ethics approval (HE693200). Data were coded and de-identified before analysis, with material judged culturally sensitive segregated from general data.

Analysis combined content and thematic analysis, coding interview and field-note data inductively before grouping codes into major themes aligned with the study's three objectives — the structure of Khmer occult knowledge, the present condition of its transmission, and the requirements for a digital knowledge platform (the last of which lies outside the scope of this article). Trustworthiness followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was pursued through triangulation across data sources (comparing the three informant groups), method (comparing documentary, interview, observational, and survey data), and interpretation, with ambiguous or sensitive findings returned to informants for verification before being finalized — a step of particular importance given that a portion of the knowledge examined is, by the community's own account, restricted or conditionally disclosable.

4. Findings: The Structure of Khmer Occult Knowledge

4.1 A Living System, Not Detached Belief

Fieldwork across Buriram, Surin, and Sisaket provinces indicates that Khmer occult knowledge in Southern Isan is not a detached body of supernatural belief but a structure of relationships: between practitioner and teacher-lineage (*Sai kru*), between the living and ancestor spirits, between supplicant and sacred entity, and between community and consecrated place or object. Practitioners (*Puru*) function within this structure not as interchangeable service providers but as custodians of a particular lineage and interpreters of affliction, their standing derived from a specific teacher rather than from technical competence alone — the relational premise on which the comparative reading developed in section 5 depends.

Analytically, this knowledge base comprises at least five interlocking components: (1) practitioners and their teacher-lineages, (2) rituals and the spaces in which they are performed, (3) spells, sacred script, and consecrated speech, (4) amulets and sacred objects, and (5) the believers or participants who complete the ritual circuit. None of these operates independently. Producing an amulet requires a practitioner, a spell, a script, a consecration rite, a set of prohibitions, and the belief of whoever will carry it; a healing or misfortune-clearing ritual requires diagnostic interpretation, invocation of the teacher, spellwork, ritual paraphernalia, and the assent of those present. What holds the system together, in each case, is the relationship among these components rather than any one of them in isolation — a point the sections below develop specifically in relation to religious authority and efficacy, rather than to the questions of transmission and disclosure that a companion analysis of this same fieldwork data addresses at length (Songserm & Plengdeesakul, unpublished manuscript).

4.2 Three Interlocking Components

Analysis of field data, historical manuscripts (*samut khoi*), and interviews across the three provinces yields a threefold taxonomy: rituals and beliefs, spells and incantations, and amulets and sacred objects. Applying a twelve-facet classification scheme adapted from Spiteri (1998), the study catalogued 170 discrete items — 60 rituals, 50 spells, and 60 amulet types — each coded for cultural function, context of use, associated practitioners, mode of transmission, sensitivity level, and permissible degree of disclosure. The three categories are not treated as separate inventories but as functionally interdependent: ritual is the site where knowledge is enacted and transmitted; spellwork is the linguistic and sonic mechanism that governs sacred efficacy; amulets are the material form through which belief and spellwork become tangible.

Rituals documented across the three provinces include teacher veneration and teacher initiation (*krop kru*), misfortune-clearing, soul-calling, belief-based healing, ancestor and guardian-spirit offerings, and — most distinctively in Surin — the mediumship and trance ritual known as *chol mamuat* or *ram mamuat*. These rituals perform at least three functions beyond their stated purpose: they furnish a cultural mechanism for explaining and managing life's uncertainties (illness, misfortune, fear); they offer psychological reassurance to participants and their families; and they restore relationships — between individual and family, family and community, the living and their teachers or ancestors. Critically, ritual is also the principal channel through which knowledge is transmitted across generations, less through written instruction than through

participation, observation, memorization of ritual speech, and internalization of prohibition — making ritual simultaneously a site of use and a site of learning.

4.3 The Relational Ground of Efficacy

A pattern that recurs throughout the fieldwork data — and that a companion analysis of this same material treats primarily as a question of knowledge transmission and disclosure (Songserm & Plengdeesakul, unpublished manuscript) — bears directly on the narrower argument of this article: how legitimacy is established within the system. Briefly: a spell does not derive its power from being sacred language in itself; it is efficacious only when used in the appropriate context, by a practitioner recognized as legitimate, under the conditions set by that practitioner's teacher-lineage. Correct wording matters, but correctness alone is insufficient; what completes efficacy is the relationship — of transmission, of recognized standing, of lineage-sanctioned intention — within which the words are spoken. The same relational logic governs amulets: their sacredness is never intrinsic to material or form, but constituted through the relationship among maker, consecrating practitioner, spell, script, ritual procedure, lineage, and the precepts the holder is obliged to keep. What that companion analysis reads as a problem of transmission and ethical disclosure, the present article reads through a more distant comparative lens: as a real-world instance of what Chau (2006) calls efficacy over doctrine — a category built within Chinese local-religion studies that, applied here, does analytical work a transmission framework alone does not supply.

This relational grounding of authority is most visible in the teacher-initiation rites themselves, whose graduated structure and social mechanics a companion analysis of this same fieldwork treats in detail (Songserm & Plengdeesakul, unpublished manuscript). For the present argument, what matters is narrower: ceremonies such as *wai kru* and *krop kru* function as acts of authorization, confirming that a specific teacher has granted a specific disciple access to a specific level of knowledge under that lineage's particular prohibitions. Authority, in this system, is conferred person to person and does not exist independently of the relationship that grants it — precisely the structure of divine and human relationship that Hymes (2002) calls the personal model.

Provincial variation illustrates how this relational logic is enacted through different media. In Buriram, where practitioners (*mo tham*) often combine Buddhist monastic training with the reading of Khmer script and inherited manuscripts, legitimacy is expressed through what informants describe as "the correctness of the discipline" and "the legitimacy of the one who uses it" — spellcraft is inseparable from the practitioner's moral standing and accountability to the teacher who transmitted it. In Surin, by contrast, the same relational logic is enacted through embodied and oral practice rather than text: knowledge exists less in manuscripts than in the body, voice, music, and possession-trance of *mamuat* ritual. There, the *mamuat* functions not merely as a ritual leader but as an interpreter of affliction, a receiver of signals from the ritual encounter, and a custodian of both cultural memory and the community's relationship with the unseen world — a role learned only through observation, participation, and the community's recognition, never from text alone. This therapeutic and interpretive function closely parallels what Bertrand (2005) documents among Khmer mediums (*kru boramei*) across the border in Cambodia itself, where mediumship is likewise constituted through diagnosis, relationship, and community recognition rather than fixed doctrine — a further, independent instance of the same relational pattern. What differs across the two provinces of the present study is the medium through which relational authority is enacted — script and moral discipline in one case, voice and embodied trance in the other — not the underlying structure: efficacy, in both cases, is something granted through relationship rather than possessed as an inherent property of words or objects.

Table 2. Provincial Variation in the Medium of Relational Authority

Province	Primary Medium	Practitioner	Criterion of Legitimacy	Distinctive Ritual
Buriram	Text / script	<i>mo tham</i>	"Correctness of the discipline" + practitioner's moral standing and accountability to teacher	Manuscript-based healing / protective rites
Surin	Embodied / oral / trance	<i>mamuat</i>	Community recognition earned through performance, interpretation, and demonstrated	<i>chol / ram mamuat</i>

Province	Primary Medium	Practitioner	Criterion of Legitimacy	Distinctive Ritual
			result	

Note. Sisaket is treated separately in §5.3 for a distinct, ancestor-veneration-specific observation rather than this table's practitioner-authority axis; see discussion there.

5. Discussion: Reading Efficacy and Authority Comparatively

5.1 A Personal, Not Bureaucratic, Model of Divinity

The findings presented above converge on a single structural fact: authority within Khmer occult knowledge is never delegated downward through an impersonal hierarchy. It is conferred person to person — a specific teacher recognizing a specific disciple, a named ancestor spirit addressed by a specific descendant, a particular practitioner's lineage sanctioning a particular rite. Read against Hymes's (2002) distinction between the bureaucratic and personal models of Chinese divinity, this places Khmer occult knowledge almost entirely within the personal register: relationships of reciprocal obligation and particular favor, rather than delegated office within a ranked celestial administration.

This is worth noting precisely because it marks a point of divergence from, rather than simple convergence with, the material Hymes describes. In Chinese local religion, Hymes argues, the personal and bureaucratic models coexist as two available repertoires, invoked differently depending on context — a deity may be approached now as celestial official, now as personal patron. Nothing resembling the bureaucratic model — no equivalent of a ranked administrative pantheon mediating petitions upward through office-holders — appears in the Khmer material examined here. Teachers, ancestors, and guardian spirits are approached exclusively as particular beings in direct relationship with particular people. That a category built to describe the coexistence of two models in one tradition instead throws into relief the near-total dominance of a single model in another is itself an analytically useful result: it suggests the personal/bureaucratic distinction has descriptive range beyond the specific historical conditions — an imperial bureaucracy whose structure shaped the popular imagination of divine office — that produced it in the Chinese case.

5.2 Efficacy Over Doctrine

The finding that a spell's power lies not in its words but in its correct, lineage-sanctioned use — and that an amulet's sacredness lies not in its material but in the relationships through which it was made and consecrated — corresponds closely to what Chau (2006) identifies as the operative logic of Chinese popular religion: legitimacy judged by demonstrated efficacy and correct practice, not by conformity to fixed doctrine. This is not incidental to the present material; it is close to the center of it. It also explains why Khmer occult knowledge resists classification as "superstition" separable from ordinary life, and instead functions, as the findings show, as a living system continuous with community relationships, healing, and meaning-making. A system organized around efficacy has no need of doctrinal orthodoxy to police its own legitimacy; it is instead policed by lineage, by demonstrated result, and by the community's ongoing recognition of a given practitioner's standing.

The provincial contrast documented in section 4.3 — Buriram's emphasis on textual correctness and the moral standing of the practitioner, Surin's embodied, oral, trance-based *mamuat* tradition — might appear to complicate this picture, since one leans toward text and doctrine-adjacent discipline while the other leans toward embodied performance. Read through the efficacy framework, however, the two are not opposed logics but two media serving the same underlying criterion: in Buriram, textual correctness is one component of a relational standard of legitimacy that still depends on the practitioner's accountability to a teacher and community; in Surin, embodied competence serves the identical function without recourse to text at all. Neither province treats correct doctrine, independent of relationship and demonstrated result, as sufficient grounds for legitimacy on its own.

5.3 Co-Presence, Not Convergence

A further, narrower observation is worth registering here, concerning ancestor veneration specifically.

Sisaket — one of the three fieldwork provinces in this study — has itself been the site of long-standing Thai-Chinese settlement since the late Rattanakosin period, intensifying after the 1928 railway connection (Wannathong, 2024). Thai-Chinese communities there maintain their own ancestor-veneration calendar — (Lunar New Year) and the Chinese Ghost Festival) — through a syncretism of Taoism, Buddhism, and local folk belief (Wannathong, 2024), practiced in the same social and geographic space as the Sen Dolta tradition of Khmer-Thai communities in the adjoining province of Surin, itself organized around calendrical ancestor visitation, filial obligation, and family reunion (Khaodee, 2016; Channuwong & Ruksat, 2022). The two traditions share no documented historical contact and draw on entirely distinct cosmological foundations — Brahmanic-Buddhist-animist in one case, Taoist-Buddhist-folk in the other. What is offered here is not a claim of mutual influence but a narrower observation: that Southern Isan hosts, side by side, more than one calendrical system organized around the same underlying logic of ancestral obligation — a reminder that the personal model and the efficacy criterion discussed above are not unique imports from Chinese religion into this analysis, but recur independently wherever ancestor-centered vernacular religion is practiced.

5.4 What Travels, and What Does Not

The comparative move made throughout this article carries a deliberate limit. It borrows analytical vocabulary — the personal model of divinity, efficacy as the ground of legitimacy — without importing the historical or cosmological apparatus that vocabulary originally described. Khmer occult knowledge shares no textual canon, no shared deity, and no documented line of transmission with Chinese local religion; the resemblance argued for here is structural, not genealogical. This limit is not a weakness of the comparison but its condition of honesty: the value of the exercise lies precisely in showing that categories built to describe one vernacular ritual system can illuminate the internal logic of an entirely unrelated one, without requiring — or implying — that the two systems share a common origin.

For the study of Khmer occult knowledge, this comparative reading offers a sharper vocabulary than "belief" or "superstition" for describing how legitimacy actually operates in a system where doctrine is thin and relationship is everything. For Daoist Studies, conversely, the exercise suggests that its own hard-won analytical categories — developed to move Chinese religion away from theological description and toward an anthropology of practice and efficacy — travel further than the Sinophone context in which they were built, and may have comparable purchase across the vernacular ritual systems of mainland Southeast Asia more broadly.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that Khmer occult knowledge in Southern Isan, while historically and cosmologically unrelated to Chinese religion, can be productively read through two categories developed within the study of Chinese local religion: Hymes's (2002) personal model of divinity and Chau's (2006) criterion of efficacy over doctrine. The findings support this reading closely — authority in this system is conferred person to person through teacher-lineage, and legitimacy is judged by demonstrated, relationally sanctioned efficacy rather than textual correctness alone. The comparison offered here is explicitly analytical rather than historical: no contact, diffusion, or common origin is claimed between the two traditions. What is claimed is that a vocabulary built to move the study of Chinese religion away from doctrine and toward practice travels further than the context in which it was built.

The contribution runs in two directions. For the study of vernacular religion in Southern Isan, this comparative vocabulary offers sharper descriptive purchase than "belief" or "superstition" — categories that this article's findings suggest obscure more than they reveal about how legitimacy actually functions in a system where doctrine is thin and relationship is everything. For Daoist Studies, the exercise suggests that its own analytical categories — efficacy, the personal model of divinity, lineage-conferred authority — are not bound to the Sinophone context in which they were developed, and may have comparable reach across the vernacular ritual systems of mainland Southeast Asia.

Two limitations bear noting. First, fieldwork in Surin and Sisaket was conducted against a backdrop of periodic tension along the Thai-Cambodian border, which at times constrained access to certain border-adjacent communities; the findings presented here should accordingly be read as characteristic of the areas reached rather than exhaustive of the three provinces as a whole. Second, the comparative move undertaken in this article is deliberately narrow — confined to two categories drawn from a much larger body of Daoist Studies scholarship — and further comparative work, extending to Southeast Asian vernacular systems beyond the Khmer-Thai case examined here, would be needed to establish how far this analytical vocabulary generalizes.

What this article has offered, more modestly, is a single test case: that the sacred, in a system built on relationship rather than doctrine, does not reside in words or objects themselves, but in the bonds — between teacher and disciple, the living and their ancestors, practitioner and community — that make those words and objects work.

REFERENCES

- Bertrand, D. (2005). The therapeutic role of Khmer mediums (kru boramei) in contemporary Cambodia. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 8(4), 309–327.
- Channuwong, S., & Ruksat. (2022). Buddhist teachings for improving mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 17(2), 29–41.
- Chau, A. Y. (2006). *Miraculous response: Doing popular religion in contemporary China*. Stanford University Press.
- Davis, E. W. (2016). *Deathpower: Buddhism's ritual imagination in Cambodia*. Columbia University Press.
- Guo, X. (2026). Construction and Empirical Validation of The “Faculty-Student-Ai-Environment-Culture” Five-Element Synergistic Model In Higher Education: Evidence From The Integration Of Sdg 4 And Artificial Intelligence. *International Journal of Engineering Sciences & Research Technology*, 15(1), 16–32. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.64149/j.ijesrt.15.1.16-32>
- Hymes, R. (2002). *Way and byway: Taoism, local religion, and models of divinity in Sung and modern China*. University of California Press.
- Khaodee, S. (2016). The Sandonta tradition: Transmission and persistence in its traditional local context]. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (Ubon Ratchathani University)*, 7(2), 131–163.
- Khatun M., Gupta P., (2026). Gender Inclusivity and Sustainable Community Development: Socio-economic and Policy Perspectives. *International Journal of Education, Society and Policy*, 1(1), 5–23. <https://ijesp.org/index.php/ijesp/article/view/5>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- McDaniel, J. T. (2011). *The lovelorn ghost and the magical monk: Practicing Buddhism in modern Thailand*. Columbia University Press.
- Polanyi, M. (1966). *The tacit dimension*. University of Chicago Press.
- Shahar, M., & Weller, R. P. (Eds.). (1996). *Unruly gods: Divinity and society in China*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Spiteri, L. (1998). A simplified model for facet analysis: Ranganathan 101. *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, 23(1–2), 1–30.
- Turner, V. (1967). *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*. Cornell University Press.
- Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine Publishing.
- Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage* (M. B. Vizedom & G. L. Caffee, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1909)
- Wannathong, S. (2024). *Thai-Chinese people and the making of urban Sisaket* [Doctoral dissertation, Burapha University].