

Ancestral Sports, Brahmanical Mediation, and Buddhist Merit: Religious Syncretism in Pubbapetabali Rituals of Si Sa Ket, Thailand

Prachatip Makmool¹, Burin Plengdeesakul², Preechawut Apirating³

¹Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University, Mueang District, Khon Kaen Province, Khon Kaen – 40002, Thailand Email: prachatip.m@kkumail.com

²Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University, Mueang District, Khon Kaen Province, Khon Kaen – 40002, Thailand Email: pburin@kku.ac.th

³Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University, Mueang District, Khon Kaen Province, Khon Kaen – 40002, Thailand Email: preechawutap@kku.ac.th

*Corresponding author: prachatip.m@kkumail.com

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This study considers the development of belief and the patterns of religious syncretism in the Pubbapetabali ritual as practised by the Lao, Kuy, Yoe, and Khmer ethnic groups of Si Sa Ket Province, Thailand, comparing Bun Khao Pradap Din, Hua Bun Boek Fa, the veneration of Pu Ta, and Bun San Don Ta. Using a qualitative design, data were collected from documentary sources and fieldwork in four communities through field surveys, observation, and interviews with sixty-two informants in three groups: twelve key informants, thirty ritual practitioners, and twenty general informants. Data were triangulated and analyzed by inductive interpretation, categorization, and cross-case comparison. Three main findings emerged. First, the ritual's development shows religious layering rather than replacement: belief in spirits and ancestors persists, while Brahmanical ritual mediation and Buddhist conceptions of merit, karma, and merit transference have been added alongside it. Second, although the four communities' ritual forms differ, they share a common moral core of gratitude, reciprocity, and the living's obligation to ancestors and benefactors. Third, religious syncretism does not take a single form across communities yet is configured differently according to each community's history, sacred space, ritual officiants, practices, and contemporary conditions. The study suggests continuity through religious layering as an analytic contribution, arguing that ritual continuity depends not on an unchanging form but on communities' capacity to absorb and rearrange shifting religious and social elements, sustaining the relationship with ancestors as the ritual's enduring core of meaning.

Keywords: Pubbapetabali; religious syncretism; ancestor veneration; religious layering; Si Sa Ket

1. INTRODUCTION

Si Sa Ket Province is a multicultural setting where the Lao, Kuy, Yoe, and Khmer ethnic groups have long settled and interacted socially and culturally. Successive waves of migration, settlement, and religious influence mean the province was never built upon a single belief system alone; rather, it is a context

in which belief in spirits and sacred power, elements associated with Brahmanism, and Buddhism exist together and are put to use in the life and ritual practice of different communities. Relations among these ethnic groups have also contributed to cultural sharing and overlap within the province (Siriwong, 2013).

One domain in which this relationship is especially evident is ritual concerned with ancestors and the deceased, which connects to the Buddhist concept of Pabbapetabali: the making of merit and its offering to deceased relatives. Ideas about preta, karma, the realms of existence, and the transference of merit allow the living to sustain a relationship with the dead through religious and ritual practice (Siriwan, 1993; Khamnoi, 2010).

In Si Sa Ket, this relationship between the living and their ancestors is expressed through rituals bearing different names and forms: Bun Khao Pradap Din among the Lao, Hua Bun Boek Fa among the Kuy, the veneration of Pu Ta among the Yoe, and Bun San Don Ta among the Khmer. Although these rituals differ in timing, location, officiants, procedure, and ritual paraphernalia, all are concerned with remembrance, offering, dedication, reciprocity, and the maintenance of relationships with ancestors and the deceased.

Prior scholarship illuminates rituals for the dead from several angles. Holt (2012) shows that Pchum Ben in Cambodia binds together the dedication of merit, giving to the dead, and family reunion. Ledgerwood (2012) stresses the role of Buddhist ritual in ordering and restoring relationships among community members, kin, monks, the living, and the dead. Tavor (2020), meanwhile, argues that ancestral and mortuary rites in the Chinese context should not be read merely as beliefs about the afterlife, but as a process through which the relationship with the dead is managed and rendered meaningful through ritual practice.

Read alongside data gathered in the source research, however, this literature leaves room for asking how, when several ethnic communities located within the same cultural setting each maintain their own ancestral rituals, elements of belief and religion come to be arranged in relation to one another, and why certain beliefs persist amid the ongoing incorporation of changing religious and social elements.

The central problem, then, is not simply whether belief in spirits, Brahmanical elements, and Buddhism appear together, but how these elements are added, arranged, and put to joint use while the relationship with ancestors remains the ritual's core.

This study therefore has two objectives: (1) to examine the development of belief and the Pabbapetabali ritual in Si Sa Ket Province, and (2) to examine the patterns of religious overlap that appear in the rituals of the Lao, Kuy, Yoe, and Khmer ethnic groups. It proposes to approach this phenomenon cautiously via the concept of religious syncretism — not as the fusion of once-pure, discrete religious systems, but as a process of religious layering, arrangement, and local adaptation.

2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM, RELIGIOUS LAYERING, AND LOCAL CONFIGURATION

The concept of religious syncretism refers to the fusion and integration of elements from different

religious traditions. Stewart and Shaw (1994), however, caution that the concept becomes problematic when it starts from the assumption that "pure," wholly discrete religions existed before mixture, since defining what counts as original, new, or mixed is itself bound up with history, power, and the construction of religious boundaries.

This critique matters for the study of religion in Thailand. Kitiarsa (2005) criticizes the paradigm of "inclusive syncretism," which portrays Thai religion as a system that readily absorbs multiple elements, and calls instead for closer attention to the construction and transformation of practiced religion. Jackson (2020) further argues that syncretism and hybridity alone cannot fully represent the complexity of Thai religious culture, since multiple elements may coexist, intersect, or run in parallel, shifting according to *kala-thesa* — contextual sensitivity to time and place.

McGovern (2024) counsels even greater caution against reading Thai religion through a fixed "Buddhist–Brahmanical–spirit" tripartite division, showing that what appears to be a religious mixture may itself be an artifact of the historical construction of religious categories. Analysis should therefore attend to how practitioners organize relationships among the sacred, belief, and action, rather than presupposing the limits of each religion in advance.

Within this debate, the present study does not invoke religious syncretism to assert that the Pabbapetabali ritual results from the union of "three religions" that were once purely distinct. Rather, it is used as a framework for tracing how multiple elements of belief and ritual are retained, added, arranged, and made to function together.

The article accordingly uses religious layering to denote the process by which religious and ritual elements that emerged or gained significance at different times can be added onto a pre-existing relational base without necessarily erasing what came before. At the same time, it uses local configuration to describe how individual communities do not assemble these parts in the same way.

The comparative study proceeds along five dimensions: (1) belief system and cosmology; (2) ritual officiants and ritual authority; (3) sacred space; (4) practices, symbols, and ritual objects; and (5) contemporary adaptation. These five dimensions are not used to score or rank the "degree" of syncretism, but to consider how the various elements are arranged to function within each community.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the development of belief and the Pabbapetabali ritual, and to compare patterns of religious overlap among the Lao, Kuy, Yoe, and Khmer ethnic groups in Si Sa Ket Province. Data collection combined documentary research and fieldwork to capture historical background, community characteristics, and present-day ritual practice alike.

3.1 Study Sites

1. Ban Hua Na, Nong Kaeo Subdistrict, Kanthararom District — site for the study of Bun Khao Pradap Din among the Lao ethnic group.

2. Ban Ku, Ku Subdistrict, Prang Ku District — site for the study of Hua Bun Boek Fa among the Kuy ethnic group.

3. Ban Prasat Yoe Nuea, Prasat Yoe Subdistrict, Phrai Bueng District — site for the study of the veneration of Pu Ta among the Yoe ethnic group.

4. Ban Lumphuk, Kanthararom Subdistrict, Khukhan District — site for the study of Bun San Don Ta among the Khmer ethnic group.

These sites were selected based on a preliminary survey that identified continuity of ritual practice and connections to a historical background, sacred space, temples, Pu Ta shrines, ancient temple ruins, and communal grounds still in ritual use.

3.2 Informants

Informants relevant to the issues addressed in this article comprised three groups totalling sixty-two persons:

Informant Group	Number	Type of Information
Key Informants	12	History, development, belief, ritual, and community context
Ritual Practitioners	30	Ritual performance, procedure, belief, and actual practice
General Informants	20	Experience of, and participation in, the site and ritual activities

Informants were assigned codes for data management and to protect their privacy.

3.3 Data Collection

Documentary data were gathered from books, textbooks, prior research, local documents, museums, cultural centers, and related sources to examine historical progress and the context of belief.

Field data were collected using three instruments: field surveys, observation, and interviews. Observation functioned as both participant and non-participant, spanning the periods before, during, and after each ritual, in order to record space, procedure, role-holders, participants' behaviour, and ritual objects.

Interviews combined structured and unstructured formats, allowing key informants to explain the history and meaning of the ritual in their own terms while yielding data that could be compared across communities.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were checked for completeness and triangulated before being analysed by inductive interpretation, data categorization, and cross-event and cross-case comparisons.

For this article, the first dataset was reorganized analytically along five dimensions: belief system and cosmology, ritual authority, sacred space, practice and ritual objects, and contemporary adaptation. This regrouping synthesizes existing data to make patterns of religious overlap more clearly comparable; it does not generate new data or new findings.

The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Khon Kaen University on 1 April 2025, certificate number HE683103.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Layering Rather than Replacement

Evidence from both documentary and field data shows that the belief system found in the present-day Pabbapetabali ritual did not emerge all at once, but

reflects the accumulation and arrangement of multiple elements over the course of a historical process.

Belief in spirits, ancestors, and sacred power is a core element of community life, while doctrines and practices associated with Brahmanism and Buddhism have come to coexist alongside this relational base. In Buddhist terms, the relationship with the deceased is articulated through the concepts of karma, merit, demerit, the realms of existence, and the transference of merit, enabling the living to make merit for the dead through water libation, robe-offerings for the dead (bangsukun), alms-giving, and other practices (Siriwan, 1993; Khamnoi, 2010).

At the same time, Brahmanical doctrine and invocation practices have not displaced the relationship with ancestral spirits; this relationship persists through the calling and address of spirits, offerings, and, in some communities, the use of ritual specialists. The process is therefore not a linear shift from "spirit" to "Brahmanical" and then to "Buddhist," but one in which multiple elements operate together within the same ritual cycle.

Field data from all four communities reflect this continuity in different ways. Bun Khao Pradap Din, among the Lao, centers on dedicating merit to the deceased. Hua Bun Boek Fa, among the Kuy, links ancestor veneration to the land and to livelihood. The veneration of Pu Ta, among the Yoe, links ancestors to the protection of place. Bun San Don Ta, among the Khmer, joins household offerings with merit-making activities at the temple.

Present-day rituals still feature the calling or speaking to spirits in the local dialect, ritual offerings, Pali chanting, the taking of precepts, water libations, bangsukun, and merit-making, occurring in continuity or in parallel with one another. Belief in ancestors has therefore not lost its significance as other religious elements have come to play a role.

FINDING ONE: The development of the Pabbapetabali ritual reflects religious layering rather than the replacement of prior belief. New elements have been added and arranged upon a persisting relational base with ancestors.

4.2 Shared Moral Core, Differentiated Ritual Forms

Comparison of the four rituals shows that the relationship with ancestors is not expressed through a single ritual form, but is determined by each community's history, setting, way of life, and specific customs.

Bun Khao Pradap Din, among the Lao, is held on the fourteenth day of the waning moon of the ninth lunar month and centers on making merit and dedicating it to the deceased and to preta. The ritual links villagers, the temple, monks, and the deceased through the preparation of rice parcels, the setting out

of food, the offering of water libations, and merit-making.

Hua Bun Boek Fa, among the Kuy, is tied to the period following the rice-growing season, to ancestor veneration, and to reciprocity with the soil and its fertility. The ritual later came to be centered at Prasat Prang Ku and has since gained additional public activities.

The veneration of Pu Ta, among the Yoe, links the expression of respect and gratitude with requests for protection, prosperity, safety, and security in livelihood. Pu Ta is thus tied simultaneously to ancestors, communal memory, and sacred space.

Bun San Don Ta, among the Khmer, expresses the relationship between descendants and ancestors across both household and temple space. It involves the preparation of offerings, merit-making, the Bai Tabat Tabo procession, bangsukun, water libation, and alms-giving, allowing offerings to ancestral spirits and Buddhist merit-making to operate together within a single ritual cycle.

Table 1. Comparison of the Relational Core of the Four Rituals

Group	Ritual	Salient Form	Relationship to Ancestors
Lao	Bun Khao Pradap Din	Dedication of merit and food to the deceased	The living make merit and dedicate it to the dead
Kuy	Hua Bun Boek Fa	Ancestors, land, and fertility	Reciprocity toward ancestors and the land that sustains livelihood
Yoe	Veneration of Pu Ta	Offerings, apology, and requests for protection	Pu Ta as both ancestor and communal guardian
Khmer	Bun San Don Ta	Household rites paired with Buddhist merit-making activities	Descendants make offerings and dedicate merit to ancestors

In spite of these differing forms, the data reveal a shared relational principle: gratitude, reciprocity, and the recognition that the present generation still owes obligations to ancestors and benefactors.

"Gratitude" here is thus not simply an abstract value; it is realized concretely through offerings, merit-making, dedication, seeking forgiveness, remembrance, and a return to participate in the ritual.

FINDING TWO: Differences in ritual form do not indicate differences in moral logic. All four rituals share a relational core that binds the living to their ancestors through gratitude, reciprocity, and an obligation to those who came before.

4.3 Locally Configured Forms of Religious Syncretism

Although the four communities share several elements of belief, the specific arrangement of those elements differs markedly. The analysis therefore compares them along five dimensions.

4.3.1 Belief System and Cosmology

All four communities share a belief in ancestors, sacred beings, and the merit-karma system, but the positions and functions of these parts differ.

Bun Khao Pradap Din emphasizes the dedication of merit to the deceased; Hua Bun Boek Fa links ancestors to the land; the veneration of Pu Ta links ancestors to the protection of place; and Bun San Don Ta emphasizes the obligation between family and the deceased through both offerings and merit-making.

4.3.2 Ritual Officials and Ritual Authority

In Bun Khao Pradap Din, monks play the leading role in performing the ritual, whereas in the Kuy, Yoe, and Khmer rituals, local ritual specialists take on the role of calling, addressing, making offerings to, or communicating with sacred beings, alongside Buddhist activities.

This study does not equate the phor cham with a Brahman in terms of religious status. Instead, it uses the term Brahmanical mediation to describe elements of invocation, summoning, and ritual mediation that earlier scholarship has interpreted as related to Brahmanical doctrine, while still recognizing the distinct standing of local ritual specialists.

4.3.3 Sacred Space

Ritual space encompasses temples, houses, the ground, trees, Pu Ta shrine grounds, ponds, and ancient temple ruins. Bun Khao Pradap Din centers on the temple but also involves placing food at sites

associated with the dead. Hua Bun Boek Fa has developed to center its activities at Prasat Prang Ku. The veneration of Pu Ta is tied to several Pu Ta shrine sites. Bun San Don Ta moves between household and temple.

Space is therefore not simply the location of the ritual, but an element that helps organize the relationship among history, community, religion, and ancestors.

4.3.4 Practices and Ritual Objects

Overlap also appears in the continuous performance of multiple kinds of activities, such as calling spirits in the local dialect, food offerings, soul-calling (su khwan), divination, precept-taking, Pali chanting, water libation, bangsukun, and merit-making.

The key issue, then, is not simply which "religion" each activity originates from, but how communities can sequence multiple kinds of activity to function together within a single ritual cycle.

Table 2. Comparative Matrix of Elemental Configuration in the Four Communities

Dimension	Lao	Kuy	Yoe	Khmer
Belief/ Cosmology	The deceased, preta, merit and dedication	Ancestors, land, fertility	Pu Ta, guardian of place	Ancestors, the deceased, merit-karma
Ritual Authority	Monks predominate	Local specialists alongside monks	Phor cham / local specialists	Ritual specialists alongside monks
Space	Temple, ground, trees, relic-interment area	Fields and Prasat Prang Ku	Pu Ta shrine grounds, ponds, ancient ruins	Household and temple
Practices	Rice-parcel offerings, water libation, food offerings, alms-giving	Offerings, soul-calling, precept-taking, chanting, blessed-water sprinkling	Offerings, divination, turmeric-water pouring, thread-binding	Offerings, procession, bangsukun, water libation, merit-making
Contemporary Adaptation	Relatively little change	Growing public/tourism activities	Retention of specific sites and rites	Retention of household rites alongside temple

FINDING THREE: Religious syncretism in the Pabbapetabali ritual is not a single formula replicated identically across communities, but a configuration of religious and ritual elements whose specific form is shaped by each community's history, space, ritual officiants, and contemporary conditions.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Syncretism as Layering Rather Than Religious Replacement

The first finding shows that change in the Pabbapetabali ritual should not be read as a sequence in which a new set of beliefs replaces the old, but as a process in which multiple elements are added and arranged together. Belief in spirits and ancestors has not disappeared as merit-making, chanting, the karmic

4.3.5 Contemporary Adaptation

Each ritual has adapted differently. Bun Khao Pradap Din retains much of its earlier form. Hua Bun Boek Fa has gained public activities and a growing tourism dimension. The veneration of Pu Ta remains tied to the community's specific sites. Bun San Don Ta continues to link family-level rites to the temple, serving as an occasion for family members to return and participate.

These changes involve monks, community leaders, local authorities, and community members. The term local configuration, as used in this article, therefore refers to the process by which ritual elements are selected, retained, added, reduced, repositioned, or given new meaning in keeping with the conditions of place and time — not to imply that every community negotiates or contests these parts formally.

system, or Brahmanical-related practices have come to play a role; rather, it continues to function within the ritual.

This reading is consistent with Stewart and Shaw's (1994) caution against assuming pure, discrete religions prior to syncretism, and is especially important in the Thai context, where Kitiarsa (2005) criticizes the overly broad application of inclusive syncretism.

Evidence from Si Sa Ket shows that these parts need not merge to the point of losing their distinctiveness. Local ritual specialists and monks can operate within the same ritual cycle while performing different roles; offerings and merit-making can occur in sequence without practitioners regarding them as conflicting activities.

Jackson (2020) helps clarify this pattern via the concept of kala-thesa, which foregrounds

sensitivity to time and place, while McGovern (2024) cautions that the division into "Buddhist–Brahmanical–spirit" may itself partly result from applying modern religious categories to practices that, in practice, are not so rigidly separated.

The contribution of this finding, then, is not simply to confirm that spirit belief, Brahmanical elements, and Buddhism appear together, but to propose that religious change in the case of Pabbapetabali can occur through the accumulation and rearrangement of elements without necessarily destroying the pre-existing relational base with ancestors.

5.2 Ancestor Veneration as the Moral Core of Ritual Continuity

The second finding shows that appreciation is not simply an abstract value but is made concrete through what the living do for the deceased: offerings, dedication, merit-making, seeking forgiveness, and remembrance.

Holt (2012) shows, in the Cambodian context, that merit-making and ritual performance for the deceased can build relationships between the living and the dead and help draw family members back together. Ledgerwood (2012) demonstrates the role of Buddhist ritual in binding together kin, community, monks, and the deceased. Tavor (2020), in the Chinese context, argues that mortuary ritual allows the relationship with the deceased to be systematically managed and enacted through ritual form.

Data from Si Sa Ket add an important point: broadly similar moral relationships need not produce identical ritual forms. The Lao community may express its obligation through the dedication of merit, the Kuy through the relationship between ancestors and the land, the Yoe through veneration of Pu Ta, and the Khmer through linking household rites to the temple.

Ritual continuity, then, need not equal formal constancy, so long as the relational core that the ritual serves to maintain can still be expressed via practices the community accepts.

Ritual continuity does not require formal sameness.

In this case, what persists more deeply than form is the moral relationship between the living and their ancestors.

5.3 Syncretism as a Locally Configured Process

The third finding guards against letting the term religious syncretism flatten all four cases into the same "spirit + Brahmanical + Buddhist" formula.

If the same religious elements were mixed in the same way, we would expect to find broadly similar ritual structures. The data show otherwise: monks play different roles, local ritual specialists occupy different positions, sacred spaces differ, and patterns of contemporary adaptation differ.

This pattern accords with Jackson's (2020) argument that religious relations in Thailand are sensitive to the context of time and place, and it supports Kitiarsa's (2005) critique that the co-presence

of multiple elements should not automatically be read as fusion.

The study therefore shifts the question from "which community shows the most overlap" to "which elements are arranged to perform what function, by whom, in what space, and under what conditions."

This shift in question matters methodologically, because the source research did not construct a quantitative measure of the "degree" of syncretism. Ranking communities as showing "the most" or "the least" overlap therefore risks over-interpreting beyond what the data can support. By contrast, comparing configurations makes it possible to preserve the distinctiveness of each community's data.

5.4 Conceptual Proposal: Continuity through Religious Layering

Taken together, these three findings lead the study to propose continuity through religious layering as an analytic contribution grounded in these cases.

The concept comprises three interlocking elements: (1) Ancestral relational core — the relationship with ancestors that functions as the ritual's continuous axis; (2) Religious layering — the capacity to add and arrange elements of belief and ritual without necessarily erasing the pre-existing base; and (3) Local configuration and modification — the way each community arranges these parts to suit its own history, space, ritual officiants, and social conditions.

Ancestral relational core → Religious layering → Local configuration and adaptation → Ritual continuity through changing forms

This proposal requires distinguishing continuity from changelessness. A ritual can change location, add activities, alter the character of participation, or absorb new practices, while the underlying relationship it serves to maintain remains continuous.

Change is therefore not always the opposite of transmission. In some cases, the capacity to adapt may itself be part of the mechanism that keeps a ritual meaningful in present-day society.

Continuity through religious layering is, however, put forward as an analytic proposal developed from four community case studies, rather than as a universal theory of Thai religion or ancestral ritual as such.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the Pabbapetabali rituals of the Lao, Kuy, Yoe, and Khmer ethnic groups in Si Sa Ket Province differ markedly in form, yet are connected through the relationship between the living and their ancestors and deceased kin.

The first finding indicates that the ritual's development proceeds through religious layering rather than the replacement of prior belief: belief in spirits and ancestors persists, while elements associated with ritual mediation and Buddhism have been added and arranged alongside it.

The second finding indicates that, although the four rituals differ, they share a common moral core — gratitude, reciprocity, and the living's obligation to ancestors and benefactors.

The third finding shows that religious syncretism does not take the same form in every community, but is configured differently through ritual officiants, sacred space, the sequencing of practice, ritual objects, and accommodation to present-day conditions.

Taken together, the study suggests that the continuity of the Pabbapetabali ritual does not arise from preserving an unchanging form, but from communities' capacity to absorb and arrange recent elements while sustaining the relationship with ancestors that constitutes the ritual's core meaning.

In sum, the Pabbapetabali ritual in Si Sa Ket Province persists not because it has never changed, but because it can change without severing the relationship that gives it continuing meaning for the community.

This study is limited, as qualitative research, to four communities in Si Sa Ket Province; the proposal of continuity through religious layering should not be generalized to all ancestral rituals without further study. Subsequent research should compare rituals among other ethnic groups and in other locations, and track long-term change to examine how population movement, younger generations, tourism, and the role of community organizations affect the configuration and transmission of rituals.

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