

# Beliefs and Symbols in the Spirit Worship Rituals of the Ka Leng Ethnic Group in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province

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## ABSTRACT

This research aims to study the historical background of spirit worship beliefs among the Ka Leng ethnic group in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province, and to examine the symbolic meanings embedded in their spirit worship rituals. The study utilized both documentary research and fieldwork data collection, focusing on a target group of 7 key informants, including knowledgeable elders and ritual practitioners, from 6 Ka Leng communities in the study area. The analysis was conducted using the structural-functional theory and the symbolic interactionism theory, while semiotic theory was applied to interpret the symbols present in the spirit worship rituals. The findings are presented through descriptive analysis.

The research reveals that the belief in spirit worship among the Ka Leng people is rooted in ancestral veneration and sacrificial rituals, which have been passed down since their original settlement in Lao PDR. These rituals play a significant role in establishing shared belief systems and communal practices. After the Ka Leng people migrated to Ban Nong Sang in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province, the tradition of spirit worship continued, based on the belief that deceased ancestors become benevolent spirits who protect and bless their descendants. The spirit worship rituals for the guardian spirits, known as Pu Ta and Ya Ban, are performed to honor ancestral spirits and seek their blessings for the well-being of the community, as well as for the protection of nature, including forests, mountains, land, and water sources. The rituals incorporate symbolic elements that reflect the sacred nature of these beliefs. The ceremonies take place in special locations considered the dwelling places of ancestral spirits, serving as focal points for faith and reverence. The community's spiritual and emotional bonds with these beliefs are deeply ingrained. A key figure in the rituals is the Kwan Cham, a designated spiritual intermediary with the authority to communicate between the human world and the supernatural realm. The Kwan Cham performs the ceremonies, offers prayers, and presents sacrificial offerings to the ancestral spirits, ensuring their acceptance of the offerings and bestowing blessings upon the Ka Leng descendants and their community.

**Keywords:** Belief, Spirit Worship Ritual, Symbolism, Ka Leng Ethnic Group.

## Introduction

The northeastern region of Thailand holds significant geographical and historical importance, with the Mekong River serving as a natural border between Thailand's Isan region and the Lao People's Democratic Republic. This river has been a central axis of civilization and human migration since prehistoric times. Archaeological evidence, such as the Ban Chiang archaeological site in Udon Thani Province, which dates back approximately 3,600–5,000 years before the Buddhist era (Pramot Thasanasuwan, 1981), confirms the long-standing human settlements in this region. The development of civilizations in Isan is closely linked to Suvarnabhumi and the Mekong River basin, from the Kottraboon Kingdom to the Dvaravati Kingdom, both of which influenced local beliefs and ways of life. Due

to the region's geography and patterns of human migration, indigenous beliefs in Isan were originally rooted in animism. Later, Brahmanism and Buddhism became influential, resulting in a syncretic religious landscape characteristic of the Southeast Asian region (Taweewat Puntarikwiwat, 2009).

Nakhon Phanom Province, once the center of the Sri Kottraboon Kingdom, played a crucial role in the propagation and development of Buddhism. Continuous migration and cultural exchange in the area led to a fusion of religious and belief systems. The ethnic groups residing in Nakhon Phanom have maintained a blend of Brahmanism, Buddhism, and ancestral spirit worship, which continue to shape their way of life and ritual practices.

One of the significant ethnic groups in Nakhon Phanom is the Kaleng people, who reside in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District. Their belief system concerning spirits is divided into two levels: higher spirits, which include deities, celestial spirits, Phra Phi, Phi Thevada, Phi Thaen, Phi Mahesak, and guardian spirits known as Phi Pu Ta, who protect the community; and lower spirits, believed to cause illness, such as Phi Nam (water spirits), Phi Fa (sky spirits), Phi Ruen (house spirits), Phi Rai (field spirits), and Phi Na (rice field spirits). The intermediaries between humans and spirits are ritual leaders or traditional healers, who play a vital role in maintaining communal well-being. Their healing practices are based on indigenous knowledge, incorporating natural elements, mystical beliefs, and traditional medicine, such as chanting, spirit possession, and diagnosis based on the four elements—earth, water, wind, and fire (Thailand Cultural Encyclopedia Foundation, Siam Commercial Bank, 1999).

The spirit worship rituals of the Ka Leng people are of great significance, particularly the Pu Ta and Ya Ban spirit offerings, which serve as focal points of ancestral veneration and community protection. These rituals have been preserved and passed down through generations, forming an integral part of the cultural heritage that reflects the unique identity of the Kaleng people.

Given the aforementioned background and significance, this study focuses on the beliefs and symbolic meanings embedded in the spirit worship rituals of the Kaleng ethnic group in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province. The research aims to analyze the belief system associated with spirit worship among the Kaleng people in this area, utilizing structural-functional theory and symbolic interactionism theory to understand the origins and roles of these beliefs. Additionally, semiotic theory is employed to examine the symbolic elements within the spirit worship rituals, particularly the Pu Ta and Ya Ban ceremonies, which reflect cultural dimensions, and the deeper meanings embedded in the Ka Leng belief system in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province.

### **Objectives of the Research**

1. To study the historical background of spirit worship beliefs among the Ka Leng ethnic group in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province.
2. To analyze the symbolic meanings embedded in the spirit worship rituals of the Ka Leng ethnic group in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province.

### **Research Methodology**

The study, titled "Beliefs and Symbols in the Spirit Worship Rituals of the Ka Leng Ethnic Group in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province," is a qualitative research project. It focuses on analyzing the beliefs and symbolic meanings embedded in the spirit worship rituals still practiced and preserved within the 6 villages of Nong Sang Subdistrict. Data collection consists of two primary sources: Documentary Research – A review of relevant research studies and academic sources. Field Research – Conducted through interviews and observations. The research subjects are divided into two groups: Key Informants: Individuals with significant roles in the rituals and knowledge of Ka Leng beliefs, including 1 Buddhist monk, 5 community leaders, 1 village elder, and 5 senior members of the community, totaling 12 individuals. Casual Informants: Individuals directly involved in the rituals, including 1 ritual leader and 8 ritual assistants, totaling 9 individuals. The research tools include surveys, non-participant observations, structured interviews, and unstructured interviews. Data analysis is conducted using: Structural Functionalism Theory to explain the role of rituals in society. Symbolic Interactionism Theory to understand the symbols present in the rituals. Semiotic Theory to decode the meanings of symbols related to spirit worship rituals. The findings are presented through descriptive analysis, linking the study's objectives with supporting visual documentation to highlight the cultural dimensions of the Ka Leng spirit worship rituals.

## Research Findings

### **Background on the Belief in Spirit Worship among the Ka Leng Ethnic Group in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province**

Based on both documentary research and field studies, it was found that the Ka Leng ethnic group in Nong Sang Subdistrict has a belief in spirit worship that originates from ancestral reverence. This tradition has been continuously passed down since their migration and settlement. The belief can be divided into 2 historical periods:

#### **Period 1: Pre-Migration Settlement (1782 - 1802)**

During this period, the Ka Leng community faced war, epidemics, and natural disasters, which led to their migration from Khammouane Province (Lao PDR) along the Mekong River to Mukdahan Province. The belief in ancestral spirits, known as "Phi Suea, Phi Chuea, Phi Pu, Phi Ya, Phi Ta, and Phi Yai," has been deeply rooted since ancient times. It represents gratitude and respect towards their ancestors and has been passed down from their original homeland, known as "Phu Vanaka Daeng," currently located in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Woen Nuengkhammee, 2007).

#### **Period 2: Post-Migration Settlement (1802 - Present)**

After crossing the Mekong River into Thailand, the Ka Leng people temporarily settled in Mukdahan Province before establishing permanent roots in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province. They adapted to their new environment based on 3 key relationships: Human-to-Human Relationships - The unification of the Ka Leng lineage to form a strong community, Human-to-Nature Relationships - The selection of suitable locations for sustainable living and livelihood, and Human-to-Supernatural Relationships - The preservation of traditions and rituals, including "Heet-Khrong" (Traditional Customs and Practice) customs associated with religion and spirit beliefs.

The Ka Leng people continue to uphold their belief in spirit worship, viewing their ancestors who led the migration as "benevolent spirits" that protect and bless their descendants. These spirits are regarded as guardian deities who bring peace and prosperity to the community. As a result, the rituals of ancestral spirit worship have been passed down through generations, with the "Kwan Cham" serving as the ritual leader. This belief system remains central to the cultural identity of the Ka Leng ethnic group in Nong Sang Subdistrict to this day.

### **Semiotic Interpretation of the Ka Leng Ethnic Group's Spirit Worship Rituals in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province**

The ancestral spirit belief among the Ka Leng people of Nong Sang continues to be practiced today, having been maintained for over 200 years. The annual spirit worship ceremony for "Pu Ta" (ancestral spirits) and "Ya Ban" (village guardian spirits) remains a cornerstone of the community's spiritual and cultural life. Led by the "Kwan Cham," the ritual is performed to communicate with the ancestral spirits, ensuring prosperity and well-being.

This research applies F. De Saussure's semiotic theory, analyzing the relationship between the Signifier and the Signified through Denotative Meaning and Connotative Meaning (Kajornkiet Chanthaphao, 2015). Additionally, it employs the framework of ritual elements proposed by Thawon Damnet (2002), which includes 5 components: location, people, ritual objects, time, and procedural steps. The semiotic analysis of the Ka Leng ethnic group's spirit worship rituals in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province, is as follows:

#### **1. Analysis of Ritual Location and Its Symbolism**

The Pu Ta and Ya Ban spirit worship ceremonies take place at the "Pu Ta and Ya Ban Shrine," which is situated on an elevated clearing with trees on a hill west of Nong Sang. The shrine consists of two open rooms with no partitions, a wooden-floored terrace, and 2 staircases made of steel. The shrine's roof is supported by bamboo poles, with 5 metal rings decreasing in size, resembling a tiered umbrella. The structure is adorned with dried brown yang-na fruit and multicolored fabric decorations.

**Denotative Meaning:** Part 1: The shrine serves as the official location for the Ka Leng people of Nong Sang Subdistrict to conduct their ancestral spirit worship rituals.



**Connotative Meaning:** Part 1: The shrine symbolizes a sacred space where supernatural forces reside, housing the spirits of Pu Ta and Ya Ban, as well as the ancestral spirits who protect the land, forests, and water. It also represents a communal place for unity, collective effort, and the spiritual well-being of the Ka Leng community.



**Picture 1:** The Shrine of Pu Ta, Ya Ban, and Kwan Cham,  
Pho Chandai Saensamart in the past

Source: The book "Background of Nong Sang Land," 2007

## 2. Analysis of Ritual Participants and Their Symbolism

The spirit worship ritual is led by "Kwan Cham," a respected elder known as Pho Chandai Saensamart in the past. The ceremony involves elders, community leaders, and household representatives of the Ka Leng people, who gather annually at the designated time.

**Denotative Meaning:** Part 2: The ritual participants include community members and household representatives who take part in the annual ancestral spirit worship ceremony.

**Connotative Meaning:** Part 2: The ritual participants can be divided into 2 groups:

The Ritual Leader (Kwan Cham) - Symbolizes a person of spiritual authority who communicates with supernatural entities, praying for blessings and well-being. The Community Members - Represent the descendants of the ancestors, demonstrating their enduring faith and spiritual connection to the supernatural realm.



**Picture 2:** Ka Leng Ethnic Group Performing the Pu Ta and Ya Ban Spirit Worship Ceremony

### 3. Analysis of Ritual Offerings and Their Symbolism

In the ceremony of honoring the spirits of the ancestors, another important aspect that the Ka Leng ethnic group from Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province, still preserves in its traditional form is the method and the objects used in the ritual. These include a woven bamboo tray known as "Khan Kayong," a five-sided bowl with 5 pairs of flowers on top, topped with 5 pairs of candles. There is also an eight-sided bowl with 8 pairs of flowers on top, topped with 8 pairs of candles. Steamed sticky rice is placed in a woven bamboo rice container. Pigs are raised as livestock and are used for food preparation, either boiled or steamed, while maintaining their original shape. Chickens, raised as livestock, are also used for food preparation, either boiled or steamed and plucked, while keeping their original shape. Other items include water, various colors of soft drinks, and liquor.

**Denotative Meaning:** Part 3: Ritual implements, offerings, and objects in the ceremony for the spirits of the ancestors. These objects are items that can be found locally and are essential for the basic livelihood of the people. The Ka Leng ethnic group from Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province, brings these items together to conduct the ritual.

**Connotative Meaning:** Part 3: Ritual implements, offerings, and objects in the ceremony for the spirits of the ancestors serve as symbols. These offerings represent an abundance in food, vitality, and brightness, symbolizing the light that guides life. They also reflect hard work, dedication to livelihood, and the hope for prosperity and success. These objects are used to pay respect and make petitions to the spirits of the ancestors, asking for their protection and care over the descendants and the community of Ka Leng, Nong Sang.



**Picture 3:** Kwan Cham is preparing to offer ritual items to the spirits of the ancestors.

### 4. Analysis and Symbolism of the Duration of the Ritual Ceremony

The ceremony for honoring the spirits of the ancestors is held annually on the morning of the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the waxing moon in the 3<sup>rd</sup> lunar month (approximately February to March), from 06:30 AM to 09:30 AM. This is the appropriate time for the Ka Leng ethnic group to gather and perform the ritual.

**Denotative Meaning:** Part 4: The date is determined by the lunar calendar, which is based on the movement of the moon, known as the lunar calendar. The time is counted according to the universal time system.

**Connotative Meaning:** Part 4: The time for the ceremony holds symbolic significance as an auspicious day, a fortunate time for new beginnings, according to the local beliefs of the Ka Leng people, as well as nearby ethnic groups. The time between 06:30 AM and 09:30 AM is considered an auspicious period, marking the right moment to begin various activities in the daily life of the Ka Leng people.

### 5. Analysis of Ritual Procedures and Their Symbolism

The ceremony to honor the spirits of the ancestors is held annually. When the designated date arrives, the community leader will inform the people of the Nong Sang Ka Leng community about the ceremony and decorate the area around



the spirit house of the ancestors. The people bring pairs of flowers and candles, which are placed on trays or woven bamboo baskets to offer to the spirits. The ritual involves the offering of a two-year-old chicken or a pig every third year, with specific foods prepared according to the year of the offering. Elders and community scholars arrange the offerings in the appropriate bowls, placing them on the bamboo tray, along with the chicken or pig, depending on the year. Drinks like water, red soda, and liquor, along with sticky rice, are prepared. Kwan Cham leads the community in offering ritual items to the spirits of the ancestors. During the ceremony, food and drinks are poured onto the ground or onto the food as an offering. Afterward, the ritual offerings are used to prepare food at the pavilion near the spirit house. If it is a chicken year, a chicken stew is prepared, and if it is a pig year, spicy minced pork salad is cooked. The Ka Leng people of Nong Sang then share the meal together.

**Denotative Meaning:** Part 5: The procedures in the ritual are a gathering of the people of the Ka Leng ethnic group in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, for the annual ceremony to honor the spirits of the ancestors. The process has been passed down through generations, and it includes offerings to the ancestors and supernatural deities, with a focus on honoring and communicating with the spirits.

**Connotative Meaning:** Part 5: The procedures in the ritual symbolize a sacred process, originating from the unity of the descendants of the ancestors. The people of the Ka Leng ethnic group are deeply connected to their spiritual beliefs, respecting and honoring the spirits of their ancestors, such as the spirits of the grandfathers and grandmothers. Kwan Cham is the chosen leader who communicates with the spirits, offering ritual items to the spirits and requesting their blessings. These items symbolize abundance in food, vitality, and brightness, representing the light that guides life. They also symbolize hard work and dedication to prosperous living. The offerings are meant to honor the ancestors and request their protection over the forest, soil, water, and the descendants of the Ka Leng people in Nong Sang.

### Research Summary

This research examines the belief in spirit worship among the Ka Leng ethnic group, particularly their reverence for their ancestors—who led the migration from Laos and established their community in the region. These ancestors are regarded as benevolent spirits, akin to deities, who protect and bless their descendants, ensuring their peace and happiness. The practice of spirit worship has been a continuous tradition within the Kha Leng community. It is embodied in the "Pu Ta" and "Ya Ban" (Ancestor Spirits) rituals, which have been passed down through the generations, reflecting the spiritual and cultural values of the Ka Leng people. The ritual, conducted by a spiritual leader known as "Kwan Cham," is a form of communication with the spirits of the ancestors. It is still practiced today in the Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province, with the participation of the Ka Leng people. The study utilized semiotic theory to analyze the symbols present in the spirit worship rituals. The analysis concluded that the "Pu Ta" and "Ya Ban" rituals are sacred ceremonies performed during auspicious times, with the intention to begin anew. These rituals take place in special, sacred spaces considered to be the dwelling place of the supernatural spirits of the ancestors. The rituals are a manifestation of the unity and collective spirit of the descendants, who honor and revere these supernatural beings, particularly the spirits of "Pu Ta" and "Ya Ban." The "Kwan Cham" holds special rights and powers to communicate with these spirits, asking for blessings and protection. Offerings presented during the ceremony are symbolic, representing abundance, prosperity, vitality, and light, guiding the community toward success and well-being. These offerings express the community's devotion and respect for the spirits, ensuring their protection over the land, forests, water, and the health and happiness of the descendants. The spirit worship rituals of the Ka Leng people of Nong Sang Subdistrict have been practiced for over 200 years and remain vital to the community. They symbolize respect for the ancestors, unity within the community, and serve as an expression of the unique cultural identity of the Ka Leng ethnic group.

### Discussion of Results

Based on the analysis of the historical background of the belief in spirit worship among the Ka Leng ethnic group in the Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province, it can be concluded that the belief in ancestor spirits and spirit worship existed even before the migration of the Ka Leng people to their current settlement. The Ka Leng community has long practiced rituals of spirit worship, honoring the spirits of their ancestors, including the spirits of the grandparents ("Pu Ta") and other revered ancestral spirits. This belief aligns with the Structural Functionalist theory (Talcott Parsons, 1902-1979), which suggests that beliefs are created by individuals and communities to establish a system of shared beliefs and practices, ensuring social cohesion and common

understanding within society (Sunet Photisarn, 2015). As the Ka Leng people settled in their community in Nong Sang, a place they have inhabited for over 222 years, their belief in spirit worship remained strong. They continued to honor the spirits of those who had established their settlement, considering them to be benevolent beings who protect the community and bless their descendants with prosperity and peace. This belief evolved into the "Pu Ta" and "Ya Ban" rituals, which have been passed down through generations and are conducted with the participation of the Ka Leng people. The rituals are led by a spiritual leader known as "Kwan Cham" in Nong Sang Subdistrict, Na Kae District, Nakhon Phanom Province, and they remain an important part of the community's cultural and spiritual practices today. The analysis also supports George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interactionism theory (1863), which emphasizes that symbols, such as rituals, are created through belief systems and serve as a means of exchange in communication. The rituals are a form of interaction through which people interpret and share meanings, allowing them to collectively reinforce their beliefs and practices (Burin Plengdeesakul, 2012).

When applying Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory (1857-1913), which divides signs into two categories—Denotative Meaning (literal meaning) and Connotative Meaning (symbolic or cultural meaning)—the spirit worship rituals of the Ka Leng people can be understood as sacred ceremonies imbued with cultural meanings that vary across societies. According to Thirayuth Boonmee (2015), the rituals are an important part of the Ka Leng community's culture, reflecting their beliefs in the supernatural and ancestral spirits. The rituals also align with the framework provided by Thawon Damnet (2002), who identified 5 components of ritual. These include the use of sacred spaces, the timing of the ritual, the unity of the community, and the role of the spiritual leader (Kwan Cham). The "Pu Ta" and "Ya Ban" rituals are conducted at auspicious times, in sacred locations, and are rooted in the community's collective belief system. These rituals symbolize the unity and spiritual connection between the descendants and their ancestors. Through these ceremonies, the Ka Leng people ask for blessings and protection from the spirits of their ancestors, ensuring the well-being and prosperity of their community. The offerings made during the rituals are symbolic of abundance, vitality, and spiritual guidance. They represent the community's hopes for a prosperous life, free from disease and adversity, and are meant to express gratitude and respect toward the spirits of the ancestors, asking them to bless and protect the land, water, forests, and the well-being of the people. The importance of understanding the symbols and values within these rituals is crucial for preserving the cultural heritage and fostering continued social interaction within the community today. In conclusion, the knowledge of the symbols and the values conveyed through the various ritual components plays a vital role in the preservation and continuation of cultural traditions, as well as in strengthening the social bonds within the community. The study of these rituals contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural identity of the Ka Leng people and their beliefs.

## Recommendations

### 1. Suggestions for Applying Research Findings

The findings of this research should be further explored and expanded to establish it as a crucial database on beliefs and rituals in the community. This data could be valuable for local government agencies and organizations. Additionally, semiotic information can be used to inspire the creation of contemporary artworks that reflect the community's belief in the supernatural, particularly in the form of ancestor spirits, which remain an integral part of the Ka Leng ethnic group's practices. The research could be used to create works that reflect the continued adherence to these beliefs, as expressed through the rituals and their components.

### 2. Suggestions for Future Research

This research can serve as a foundation for future studies on beliefs and spirit worship rituals, particularly with regard to how these beliefs may evolve over time. Future research could explore any changes, additions, or modifications to the rituals and practices. However, the enduring presence of these beliefs and rituals offers an opportunity for continued study within the context of ethnic communities and local tribes, allowing for an understanding of their persistence in contemporary society.

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