

The Tradition of Ascending the Sacred Cave: Paying Homage to
Great-Grandfather (Thuat) of Wang Ching Mountain and the Beliefs of
Southern Thai Buddhists in Honoring Sacred Mountain Deities in the
Community of Khok Muang Subdistrict, Khlong Hoi Khong District, Songkhla
ประเพณีขึ้นถ้ำศักดิ์สิทธิ์ : การสักการะหาดเขาวังชิงความเชื่อของชาวไทยพุทธภาคใต้
ในการเคารพสิ่งศักดิ์สิทธิ์บนภูเขาของชุมชนตำบลโคกม่วง
อำเภอคลองหอยโ่ง จังหวัดสงขลา

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Abstract

The worship of great-grandfather (Thuat) on Wang Ching mountain and the passing down of this tradition hold significance as an expression of respect and faith toward sacred forces that Southern Thai Buddhists believe protect their community. Additionally, the continuation of this tradition strengthens community unity through shared rituals, food offerings, and the transmission of beliefs to future generations, helping to preserve this valuable heritage. Therefore, the objectives of this research were: 1) to study the

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significance of the tradition of ascending the sacred cave, known as "Paying Homage to Great-grandfather of Wang Ching Mountain," and its influence on the beliefs of people in community regarding the sacredness on mountain, 2) to investigate the perpetuation of these beliefs and their impact on the livelihoods of people within the community. The study employed a qualitative research methodology to investigate the phenomenon. The key informants were 20 local residents and 6 persons hold official positions within the community. This includes village leaders, subdistrict administrators, and local government organizations by using snowball sampling method. Data were conducted by using non-participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and group discussions. Audio recording device, notebook for note-taking, and camera for capturing photographs were utilized in the data collection procedures taken place in Khok Muang community, Klong Hoi Khong District, Songkhla Province. The results revealed that in the past, people in the community held a deep belief in the sacredness of mountains, viewing them as comparable to guardian deities of the village. With their belief and devotion, the community members joined forces and embarked on a journey to circumambulate the mountain, engaging in a significant ritual of offering food to the monks. This annual tradition is held with great reverence towards the protective and wish-fulfilling powers of the sacred entities. The preservation of this belief is achieved through the oral tradition of passing down the knowledge of the tradition of ascending the cave of Wang Ching Mountain through storytelling from generation to generation.

Keywords: belief, sacred cave, sacredness, tradition, Wang Ching mountain

บทคัดย่อ

การสักการะทวารเขาวังชิงและการสืบทอดประเพณีความสำคัญในการแสดงความเคารพและศรัทธาต่อสิ่งศักดิ์สิทธิ์ที่ชาวไทยพุทธในภาคใต้เชื่อว่าคุ้มครองชุมชน นอกจากนี้ การสืบทอดประเพณียังช่วยสร้างความสามัคคีในชุมชน โดยการรวมตัวทำพิธี การแบ่งปันอาหาร และการส่งต่อความเชื่อให้คนรุ่นหลัง ซึ่งช่วยให้ประเพณีอันทรงคุณค่าในยังคงอยู่ต่อไป ดังนั้น วัตถุประสงค์ของการวิจัยนี้คือ 1) เพื่อศึกษาความสำคัญของประเพณีการขึ้นถ้ำศักดิ์สิทธิ์ที่รู้จักกันในนาม "การสักการะทวารเขาวังชิง" และอิทธิพลที่มีต่อความเชื่อของคนในชุมชนเกี่ยวกับความศักดิ์สิทธิ์ของภูเขา 2) เพื่อศึกษาการสืบทอดความเชื่อเหล่านี้ และผลกระทบต่อการดำรงชีวิตของคนในชุมชนโดยมีวิธีการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพเพื่อสำรวจปรากฏการณ์ โดยมีผู้ให้ข้อมูลหลักเป็นชาวบ้านในท้องถิ่นจำนวน 20 คน และบุคคลที่มีตำแหน่งภายนอกชุมชนจำนวน 6 คน ซึ่งรวมถึงผู้นำหมู่บ้าน ผู้บริหารตำบล และองค์กรปกครองส่วนท้องถิ่น โดยใช้วิธีการสุ่มตัวอย่างแบบลูกโซ่ ผู้วิจัยเก็บข้อมูลโดยการการสัมภาษณ์แบบไม่มีส่วนร่วม การสังภาษณ์เชิงลึก และการสนทนากลุ่ม โดยใช้เครื่องบันทึกเสียง สมุดบันทึก และกล้อง

ถ่ายภาพตลอดกระบวนการเก็บข้อมูลในชุมชนโภคภัณฑ์ อำเภอคลองหอยโข่ง จังหวัดสงขลา ผลของการศึกษาพบว่า ในอดีตคนในชุมชนมีความเชื่ออย่างลึกซึ้งในความศักดิ์สิทธิ์ของภูเขา โดยมองว่าภูเขาเปรียบเสมือนเทพารักษ์ของหมู่บ้าน ด้วยความเชื่อและศรัทธานี้ สมาชิกชุมชนได้ร่วมมือกันและเริ่มต้นการเดินทางขึ้นภูเขา เข้าร่วมในพิธีที่สำคัญในการถวายอาหารแก่พระสงฆ์ ประเพณีดังกล่าวจัดขึ้นทุกปี เนื่องจากชาวบ้านมีความเคารพอย่างสูงต่อพลังปกป่องและบันดาลความปราถนาของสิ่งศักดิ์สิทธิ์ของสถานที่แห่งนี้ ซึ่งการอนุรักษ์ความเชื่อประเพณีการขึ้นภูเขางานการบูรณะอุปกรณ์ต่อเนื่องจากรุ่นสู่รุ่น

คำสำคัญ: ความเชื่อ, ถ้ำศักดิ์สิทธิ์, ความศักดิ์สิทธิ์, ประเพณี, เข้าวังชิง

Introduction

The southern region of Thailand is known for its rich cultural heritage, encompassing both indigenous local traditions, Buddhist cultural practices, and Wat Chedi (Srimuang et al., 2023). These cultural traditions have influenced the creation of social customs and fostered a sense of unity and harmony among the people in the community. In the past, the majority of the community in the southern region of Thailand relied heavily on agriculture. Unity and cooperation were crucial for their livelihoods, as they supported each other in agricultural work and protected one another from external threats Pongpaiboon (2001). This fostered a culture of creativity, belief, and devotion that influenced both people and the society, driving social progress and development in both physical and spiritual aspects of people's lives.

Belief is a phenomenon of the human mind that arises from the desire to know and understand, rooted in the innate human nature (Changrieng, 1973). It begins from infancy and develops into conscious awareness during childhood, eventually maturing into adulthood. In childhood, humans seek knowledge and belief through experiential learning, such as using their fingers to touch and feel objects of curiosity, using their tongues to taste and sample, or inhaling to perceive scents. Typically, infants are naturally curious about new and unfamiliar things. As children grow, they start asking questions to seek answers from simple problems around them. As their development progresses with age, humans seek belief through various sensory experiences to gather information for their cognitive processes. Generally, humans have three types of belief. The first type of belief is based on accepting that something exists or is true (Belief), relying on supporting evidence and data as the main testimonial. It is a belief that relies on reasoning. The second type of belief is based on knowledge (Knowledge), which is a belief supported by tangible evidence that can be proven through sensory perception. It is a belief derived from accepting the existence of something (Objective) that can be proven through experience and knowledge

which is universally accepted knowledge such as scientific knowledge (Kenny, 2007). The third type of belief is faith (Faith), such as religious belief in the doctrine of faith in a higher power, in the sacred, or in the faith in individuals, prophets, or charismatic leaders. It is a belief that cannot be substantiated by logical reasoning. It is a belief of faith because one desires to believe (Kenny, 2007). It is a subjective belief that arises from emotions such as goodwill, devotion, or arises from passionate confidence because one wants to believe (Credulity). Belief of this nature, rooted in faith, are considered a state of mind that does not require reasoning.

Belief thus can be considered as part of the culture that humans create, allowing them to assign meaning to life and the things around them. Humans define the meaning of life in various forms, such as religious belief, rituals, cosmology, astrophysics, etc. Once humans define the meaning of their belief, it becomes the foundation for the process of determining the meaning of fundamental ideas, which can vary depending on historical and contextual factors in a particular society (Santasombat, 2005). Belief can reflect hidden truths in various cultural activities, and therefore, traditional customs are belief-based practices that have been passed down from the past to the present. Traditions can be classified into two main parts: religious-based traditions and local belief-based traditions. These traditions are activities that drive and play a role in the social and moral development of people in a society

The tradition of ascending the sacred cave to pay homage to the great-grandfather (Thuat) of Wang Ching mountain, observed by southern Thai buddhists in the Khok Muang community, Khlong Hoi Khong district, Songkhla province, has been passed down based on the beliefs of the ancestors in the Klong Hoi Khong area for over 100 years. The local people believe that the great-grandfather of Wang Ching mountain is a sacred being who grants wishes to those who are virtuous and ethical in their actions. Those who make vows and ask for blessings often have their wishes fulfilled.

The tradition is held on one specific day, the 15th day of the waning moon in April each year. The community sets the date according to their beliefs and informs everyone in the area. On the day of the ceremony, those who have made vows or have strong faith will walk up to the sacred cave of Wang Ching mountain to fulfill their promises. They bring offerings such as pigs, chickens, fruits, and khao lam (sticky rice in bamboo tubes). Khao lam is made by packing sticky rice mixed with coconut milk into bamboo tubes, which are then sealed with a sago plug. The tubes are placed near a fire to cook, making the rice soft and delicious with a distinct bamboo aroma. It is a popular offering for monks, to honor

the great-grandfather of Wang Ching Mountain, and shared among family members while hiking up to the cave.

In this study, the researchers aim to explore the significance of the ritual of ascending the sacred cave of paying homage to great-grandfather of Wang Ching Mountain and its influence on the belief of people in the community towards sacred entities on the mountain. We also aim to examine the continued practice and the impact of these belief on people's way of life in the community. Apart from this, the researchers attempt to revitalize and preserve the cultural heritage within society, focusing on the belief and reverence held towards the sacred entities on Wang Ching Mountain, which significantly influence the spiritual and moral values of the community members. This will foster a sense of unity, harmony, and cultural appreciation among the community members. The study investigates the historical practices and continuity of the ritual of ascending the cave in Wang Ching, analyzing its development from the past to the present. Additionally, it explores potential strategies for tourism development, transforming it into a cultural tourism destination in the Khok Muang community, Khlong Hoi Khong district, Songkhla province. This research is expected to generate policy-related data based on the community's aspirations, contributing to the promotion of cultural tourism as another recognized attraction in Songkhla Province as well as supporting its development as a tourism destination within the ASEAN region.

Research Purposes

1. to study the significance of the ritual of ascending the sacred cave of paying homage to great-grandfather (Thuat) of Wang Ching Mountain and its influences on the belief of the community towards the sacred entities on the mountain.
2. to examine the ways in which these beliefs are practiced and their impact on the daily lives of individuals in the community.

Scope of Research

This research focuses on understanding the cultural and social significance of the tradition known as “Paying Homage to Great-grandfather of Wang Ching Mountain” in the Khok Muang community, Klong Hoi Khong District, Songkhla Province, Thailand.

Research Methodology

This research is a qualitative research study, specifically a phenomenological research. It employs the philosophical foundations and perspectives of phenomenology as a tool to study the phenomena and experiences of individuals, aiming to understand

the meaning they have encountered in their life experiences (Phosita, 2007). This study utilized the snowball sampling technique, where the researchers established inclusion-exclusion criteria based on the research objectives and conceptual framework. Participants were selected from within a community that met these criteria, with a guide designated to introduce the researchers to primary informants. The researchers introduced themselves, explained the purpose of their presence in the community, and clarified whom they were there to engage with, as facilitated by local community members. Given the sensitive and personal nature of the information sought, centered around personal narratives and experiences, the researchers placed particular emphasis on understanding the feelings, thoughts, and emotions of participants, along with the meanings they associated with their experiences (Posita, 2021). This approach to sampling began by collecting data from initial informants related to the study's themes, with each participant subsequently recommending others until data saturation was achieved, marked by recurring patterns and sufficient coverage of the study topics (Prasongthan, 2020).

The research procedures involve the following steps:

1. Key Informants

The key informants were the residents living in the Khok Muang community and its surrounding areas in Khlong Hoi Khong District, Songkhla Province. The primary data providers are specifically selected and the criteria for its selection were as follows:

The primary data providers in the first group were 20 local residents in the community who continue to preserve the tradition of performing the ritual of paying homage to great-grandfather (Thuat) of Wang Ching Mountain at the Wang Ching Mountain.

The secondary data providers in the second group were 6 persons who hold official positions within the community. This includes village leaders, subdistrict administrators, local government organizations, cultural and tourism authorities in Songkhla Province, and relevant government sectors.

2. Research Instruments

To collect data, the following research instruments were employed: non-participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. Additionally, recording device, notebook for note-taking, and camera for capturing photographs were utilized as research equipment.

3. Data Collection

To collect the data, the researchers firstly created in-depth interviews questions by using informal interviews technique and reviewing relevant documents and research. The in-depth interviews questions were then cross checked for its reliability by 3 experts in the

field of Humanities and Social Science. The questions demonstrated a validity coefficient exceeding 0.50, indicating its favorable validity. After gaining the reliable questions, the researchers conducted the data by means of in-depth interviews from 20 local residents and 6 persons who hold official positions within the community. After that focus group discussions were arranged. The key informants were divided into 2 groups. The first group were 7 local people selected by using snowball sampling technique. They were asked to discuss about their belief on Great-grandfather (Thuat) on Wang Ching Mountain and its significance. This session lasted approximately one hour and a half. The second group were 6 Local government officials, community leaders, and stakeholders selected by using purposive sampling technique. They were required to discuss about the feasibility of preserving and passing on the tradition, and future management for development into a sustainable tourism destination. This session also approximately took one hour and a half. Apart from this, during the data collection, the researchers employed non-participatory observation without direct involvement with the research key informants by selecting specific and targeted individuals.

4. Data Analysis

The researchers collected data in the research field until data saturation was achieved. Data from the in-depth interviews were gathered using the snowball sampling method. The collected data was then categorized and analyzed through data interpretation and synthesis. Subsequently, the data was cross-checked using the triangulation method to ensure its reliability and validity. The findings were summarized and discussed in relation to the research objectives in the descriptive manner form. Finally, the overall study results were summarized, and the implications of the research findings were discussed.

5. Expected Benefits

1) Cultural Preservation: The research will contribute to the documentation and preservation of the cultural heritage of the Khok Muang community, ensuring that the tradition of “Paying Homage to Great-grandfather of Wang Ching Mountain” is recorded for future generations.

2) Community Awareness: By focusing the significance of the tradition and its impact on community belief and livelihoods, the study can enhance awareness and appreciation among community members which can foster a sense of pride and unity.

3) Policy Implications: The research can inform local policymakers and cultural organizations about the importance of supporting and promoting traditional practices, leading to initiatives that protect and sustain the community's cultural heritage.

4) Cultural Tourism: The study may attract cultural tourism, benefiting the local economy and providing opportunities for community development.

Results

1. The results below indicated the overview information and the significance of the ritual of ascending the sacred cave of paying homage to great-grandfather (Thuat) of Wang Ching Mountain as well as its influences on the belief of the community towards the sacred entities on the mountain.

The current geographical condition of the community reveals that it is located in the urban area of Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province. Hat Yai is considered a significant district and a major city for commerce and tourism in the southern region of Thailand. It is also in close proximity to the Air Force Base, Army Barracks, and Hat Yai International Airport. As for the location of Wang Ching Mountain, it holds military importance and is designated as a reserved forest area, with government agencies responsible for its management. In terms of the geographical characteristics of Khok Muang Subdistrict, Khlong Hoi Khong District, Songkhla Province, it is currently under the jurisdiction of government agencies. The majority of the area consists of undulating coastal plains, hilly slopes, and low-lying areas that were formed by sedimentation from various rivers in the past. These water sources were primarily used for agricultural purposes from natural water sources. Over time, various canals have been constructed for irrigation purposes, including the Irrigation Canal, which diverts water from the Jum Lai Canal and Khong La Reservoir. During the dry season, water storage in these canals is limited, while in the rainy season, water fluctuates and often flows out of the area too quickly, resulting in flooding in agricultural fields. In terms of climate, Khok Mueang Subdistrict is influenced by the southwestern monsoon winds and the northeastern monsoon winds. There are two seasons: the hot season, which begins from February to May, and the rainy season, which starts from August to December. As for natural resources, the general soil resource in the area is loamy soil, suitable for agriculture such as farming, fruit trees, rubber plantations, and livestock grazing in grass fields. There are also forested areas, primarily located on the slopes of Wang Ching Mountain. The important natural resource in the area is surface water sources, including Sai Canal, Jam Rai Canal, and Khok Reang Canal. In addition, Khok Mueang Subdistrict has the Phrulom Chang Reservoir, which can collect rainwater flowing from Wang Ching Mountain. The water is stored at the Khok Mueang Subdistrict Municipality and is utilized for the benefit of three villages: Ban Khok Reang, Village 1; Ban Khok Saktok, Village 3; and some parts of Ban Plak Khla, Village 4. The area at the foothills of Wang Ching Mountain is home to Chandee Cave and Suwan Cave. In the study, it was found that the area has attracted the involvement of government agencies and universities in Songkhla Province. These

organizations have collaborated with local government agencies in certain areas to develop community tourism maps and natural cycling routes.

The interpretation of the local community regarding the significance of the tradition of ascending to the sacred cave of paying homage to Thuat Wang Ching Mountain.

The tradition of ascending to the sacred cave in Wang Ching Mountain is a collective belief and ceremonial activity of the people in the community, associated with the sacredness beyond natural phenomena. The research examines the significance attributed by the community members to this tradition, which involves a group of villagers who share belief and devotion, practicing the customs in accordance with the community's belief. The "Cave Day" event, held annually on the 15th night of the 5th lunar month, can be considered a ritual in the traditional ceremony. It is a custom where the villagers gather in an open area at the foot of Wang Ching Mountain. This tradition is well-known within the community, and the villagers come together to prepare and form a procession to ascend the cave on Wang Ching Mountain to perform the ritual of paying respects and making merit to nourish the sacred beings. This tradition has been practiced continuously by the community for over a hundred years, according to the accounts of the elderly in the village. In the past, every year, the villagers from Khok Muang Subdistrict, Thung Lan Subdistrict, and some parts of neighboring subdistricts would ascend the cave to pay respects and make merit, carrying out this religious duty based on their deep religious belief. Each year, approximately 100 to 200 people would participate in the cave ascent. However, in recent times, the number of people going up the cave has decreased significantly. The younger generation, in particular, tends to show more interest in engaging in recreational activities rather than participating in the religious ceremony, treating it more like a festive event.



Picture 1: The image displays the performance of Manohra, a traditional folk dances and dramas, on Wang Ching Mountain, showcasing the success achieved by the participants who made a vow. This picture was captured by the researcher.

The belief of the people in the community, as discovered through the research, reveals that the tradition of ascending the Wang Ching Mountain and performing the "Paying homage to great-grandfather (Thuat)" ceremony has been passed down for over a hundred years. The residents of the community, from the past to the present, hold the belief that the "Wang Ching Mountian" is a sacred place, a celestial abode of "Thuat" (a spiritual entity). Elderly members of the community have shared legends and belief surrounding the Wang Ching Mountain and the Thuat deities, which are highly revered by the villagers and have been passed down through generations until today. For example, the Thuat Rasami, Luang Pho Tub, at Prang Kaew temple are mentioned, and they have been incorporated into the worship of the revered "Luang Pho Rasami" deity. Another belief is in the enchanting and alluring "Thuat Ta Loe Thae," believed to be a magical tiger capable of transforming into a human form. It is said that when cattle or buffaloes go missing or when the villagers' livestock fall ill, they seek the assistance or healing from the Thuat Ta Loe Thae by offering cigarettes and requesting its help. When a sick buffalo or cow is found, it is believed that it will recover after being touched with a lit cigarette. The offering of an enchanting cigarette is performed, and it can be any kind of cigarette, depending on the personal belief. This belief has passed down through generations, continuing until the present day. When the sun rises, villagers will bring food, particularly "Khao Lam" (sticky rice in bamboo) to offer and dedicate to the monks and for religious rituals. They have made "La Thuat" as a base to place the offerings. Whoever requests something with Thuat at the Wang Ching Mountain will ascend to the "Gae Bon" (fulfill one's vow). For example, if they get what they requested, they will place a "pig's head" or a "golden-mouthed chicken" (a boiled chicken with a gold ring placed in its beak) and then bring it up to offer. After the ceremony is completed, they will distribute the offerings among themselves to share and eat. Before taking the food above, one must recite a chant by saying "Den-chan-tam-luk-lan-kor" and then can proceed to pick them up. Regarding various stories related to the Wang Chiang Cave in the past, some people from the village have gone up to perform shadow plays and recite chants on the cave on the night before the "Cave Day" for over a hundred years. Due to the belief and the increased success experienced by the villagers, news and rumors about this have spread continuously outside the community.

From the study, it was found that there are individuals from outside the community who have faith and belief in this ritual and come to request blessings or seek assistance from the sacred entities on Wang Chiang Mountain. They, for example, seek protection from being drafted in military conscription, wish to be free from illness and fever, or desire to receive good luck in lottery or raffle winnings. Upon achieving the desired success,

people will prepare sweet and savory offerings to make merit for the Buddhist monks. They would also create a sacred atmosphere by hiring a group of musicians or shadow play performers to perform directly at the entrance courtyard of the cave, accompanied by lighting and decorations.

The research on the continuity of the Wang Ching cave ritual from the past to the present in the Khok Muang community, Khlong Hoi Khong District, Songkhla Province, reveals that in the past, knowledge about the cave ritual was passed down through oral traditions from one generation to another. The stories and legends related to the cave were recorded in the form of poetic verses used for requesting blessings during the Wang Ching Cave ritual. When a request is achieved, there will be a performance of traditional music and dance, including musicians who perform on the stage alongside shadow play performers or traditional dance performers. This is done to express gratitude for the successful outcome resulting from the requested blessings. The following are interviews with local residents regarding this matter.

“In the past, people recorded the stories of Wang Ching Mountain in the form of poetic verses derived from the performances of the ritual. These verses were recited to request blessings to Thuat.”

People, in the past, have preserved the tradition of ascending Wang Ching Mountain by performing the ritual on the mountain every year. They allowed young children to witness the adults carrying out the ritual, which sparked their interest in wanting to ascend Wang Ching Mountain on the specific days and times when the ritual takes place. As they grew up and became adults, they acquired knowledge about the stories related to Khao Wang Mountain and developed their own faith. They continued to pass down this knowledge and practice from generation to generation. Their main objective is to go on a pilgrimage and pay respects by performing the ritual, which is considered a sacred site that people hold in high esteem and practice devotion towards the forest monastery located in the area. The following are interviews with local residents regarding this matter.

“In the past, people used to go to worship and request blessings through the ritual every year. They sought good fortune or made vows, such as requesting the return of lost items at home. If the lost item was found, they would light firecrackers as an act of gratitude. People held these beliefs because it had been passed down through generations. When unable to find a lost item, they would perform rituals such as offering a pig's head as a way of making a vow or offering”.

The interview was given by 78-year-old male in the area.

In the belief system associated with the tradition of going up and paying homage to Thuat on Wang Ching Mountain, it is believed that this practice will bring success to people.

Those who have faith regarding this practice must be virtuous and possess moral integrity, aligning their daily lives with sacred principles that will protect and assist them as requested. This is reflected in the interview responses of the local people in the area as follows:

“When we sincerely believe in sacred principles, we must conduct ourselves in accordance with moral precepts, as it is a part of it. This is because if you do not behave well, there is nothing that will protect you.”

The interview was given by a 45-year-old male in the area.

It was found in this study that the younger generation in the community still holds these beliefs and has acquired them through storytelling from family members and other community members. Currently, the younger generation in the community actively participates in and follows the tradition of paying homage to Thuat on Wang Ching Mountain. On this occasion, they express a desire to engage in family activities and have the opportunity to participate in community events, fostering social interactions and exchanging experiences. This provides an opportunity to discuss both personal and communal joys and sorrows, and it also allows them to admire the beautiful scenery and experience the natural environment of Wang Ching Mountain. This is reflected in the interview responses of the local people as following:

“Since childhood, I can't remember exactly how old I was, even since elementary school, I would see mothers with pig heads on top of their heads during the Wang Ching ritual. They would pray for finding jobs, healing illnesses, and finding lost things when the ceremony took place at the cave, as it would be transformed into a tourist attraction. I wanted to go and admire the view from the top as it would be a source of emotional support more than fulfilling any personal desires. It would be comforting for me if I could reach the top of something close to me, and I would consider it a spiritual center for the community. People who share the same belief could foster a sense of unity, similar to when we believe in something together, making us feel like we are part of the same group.”

The interview was given by a 45-year-old female in the area.

This tradition takes place in the community, leading to the strengthening and preservation of the belief associated with the ritual of climbing into the cave of Wang Ching Mountain. It encompasses local performing arts, including dance-drama and shadow play, which have been deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the southern region of Thailand for a long time and are still being practiced today. These performances reflect the significance attributed by the community to these elevated forms of art, which can be offered as a tribute to sacred entities in order to address any challenges or seek blessings

following the success individuals have achieved by ascending the steps of the divine court, as expressed through the ritual of Wang Ching Mountain.

Based on the research result, it has been found that from the past to the present, people in the community recognize the importance of the tradition of paying homage to Thuat at the sacred Wang Ching Cave and have a deep respect for the sacred entities from the past. Over a century ago, the villagers united and faced the challenging journey up Wang Ching Mountain, which involved steep slopes and slippery grass that posed a risk of falls and injuries. Once they reached the cave's entrance, there was a spacious courtyard used for conducting rituals in the past. The path leading to the cave and the cave itself became a sacred path for the monks' meditation. Therefore, prior to the ritual of Wang Ching Mountain, the monks would reside near the cave, prompting the villagers who climbed the hill to prepare food offerings and participate in the merit-making ceremony, combining it with paying respects to the sacred entities on Wang Ching Mountain.

2. The results below explained the ways in which these beliefs are practiced and their impact on the daily lives of individuals in the community.

In the present day, due to an increasing devotion to the sacred entities, the villagers in the community have come together to place Buddha statues on Wang Ching Mountain and create a sculpture of Luang Pu Thuat, a revered monk who stepped on fresh sea water. These sacred entities serve as a unifying force for the people of the southern region. A pavilion has been built and sculptures have been crafted, representing the revered Thuat, which the majority of the community respects and venerates. These sculptures depict elderly male figures based on the community's imaginative belief, replacing the traditional facial features of Thuat that are currently revered in the community. People continuously flow in, driven by belief associated with achieving success in various aspects of life and seeking solutions to their problems, as has been the tradition.

Currently, the community has provided more convenience for traveling up the hill compared to the past. For example, they have constructed rope staircases that can be easily grasped while climbing and have cleared paths that allow vehicles of larger sizes to ascend. Upon reaching the courtyard in front of the Wang Ching Cave, they have built resting pavilions and installed bathrooms with a water supply system from the water source on Wang Ching Mountain, ensuring the convenience of water usage for those participating in the tradition. Through research, it has been found that people from outside the community have joined in this traditional event and achieved success as desired. They have returned to make offerings and continue to participate in the ceremony on Wang Ching Mountain. Some people engage in various activities such as offering donations to the

Buddhist monks, performing traditional folk dances and shadow puppetry. The choice of activities varies based on the belief held by each person who has participated in the event.

With the increasing opportunities for outsiders to enter the community, both to participate in the ceremony and to explore the community as tourists, it is suitable for relevant government agencies and the community to develop cultural tourism routes in the future. According to the research, it has been found that government agencies and educational institutions have entered the community to study the community and develop tourism routes with a cultural focus.



Picture 2: The image captures various sacred sculptures and statues inside the pavilion on the courtyard in front of Wang Ching Cave, taken by the researcher.

Discussion

According to the research results, the ritual of ascending the sacred cave in Wang Ching Mountain serves as a collective belief activity of the community in conjunction with the sacred objects above nature. The findings of this study are consistent with the research conducted by Wiese (2023) on "Karma and Honest Behavior: An Experimental Study," which revealed that people who believe in karma in Buddhism tend to have higher levels of honesty and are less inclined to deceive others compared to the general people. This also aligns with the findings of the study "The Power of Belief: Religious Tradition and Rent-Seeking of Polluting Enterprises in China," which found that religious traditions help curb unethical behavior and reduce fraudulent practices among Chinese people who adhere to religious belief. (Weijian Du, Yuhuan Fan, Sunfan Liang & Mengjie Li, 2023) As additionally confirmed by Dwi Puspitarini, I Nyoman Sudana Degeng, Henry Praherdhiono, and Nunung Suryati (2023) studied on Humanistic Pesantren: Systematic Literature Review and

Bibliometric Visualization Analysis on Character, Moral, and Ethical Values. The research found that humanitarian values encompass religious principles such as friendliness, effective communication, environmental and social consciousness, and a sense of responsibility. These values can be further classified into various categories, including religious values (such as Islamic values, spiritual growth, and faith), social-cultural values (such as love, tolerance, solidarity, and effective communication), personal maturity (including discipline, confidence, responsibility, and optimism), and national values (such as nationalism). The aforementioned belief help instill a sense of conscience in people and promote honesty within organizations. This result is in accordance with the findings of the research on the worship ceremony of the "Chao Baonoi" in Khuan Khao Song Subdistrict, Thung Yai District, Songkhla Province, conducted by Buakaew (2023). Phru Toh community holds strong belief and devotion towards Chao Baonoi, as it serves as a spiritual support system, capable of alleviating suffering and protecting against dangers. By expressing their wishes and seeking protection through the worship ceremony of Chao Baonoi, the community members reciprocate their gratitude and help create blessings and encouragement that bring comfort and enable them to overcome obstacles in their lives.

The tradition of ascending the sacred cave paying homage to "Thuat" at Wang Ching Mountain hold significant meaning for the community. This tradition helps keep the community closely connected to Buddhism and its teachings, supporting the continuity of the Buddhist faith. It provides an opportunity for the younger generation and outsiders to participate in local religious customs, instilling values of virtue and ethics. Culturally and socially, this tradition strengthens community bonds and preserves ancestral knowledge, fostering unity within the community. By engaging in these ceremonies, community members connect, share activities, and reinforce social ties. Despite the influence of Westernization, which often promotes individualism, this tradition encourages collective consciousness and respect for sacred entities. It nurtures reverence for nature alongside faith in the sacred, aligning with eco-religious principles that maintain human-environment relationships, thus preserving ecological richness in the area. This tradition exemplifies how beliefs about spirits or supernatural entities historically mediate the relationship between humans and nature's forces. Rituals related to spirits aim to summon rain, prevent natural disasters, and ward off epidemics, reflecting humankind's efforts to adapt to uncontrollable natural forces (Wittayapak, 2018). Such customs have become an integral part of each culture, providing spiritual refuge for communities.

It can be concluded that the tradition of ascending the sacred cave paying homage to "Thuat" at Wang Ching Mountain is a belief held by people who have a reverence for supernatural elements. It fulfills the emotional needs of the community members and

serves as a metaphorical entity that helps alleviate the hardships of the people in the community. It also fosters a sense of unity and collective activities among the community members, reflecting the gratitude and devotion of the Thai people towards sacred entities within their communities. Moreover, it plays a role in the conservation of the natural environment, particularly the mountainous forests, by drawing from the belief of the local residents. Crucially, this study has the potential to guide the development of a cultural tourism route in Khok Muang, Khlong Hoi Khong District, Songkhla Province. It aims to generate policy-relevant insights based on community needs and promote cultural tourism, potentially establishing it as a key attraction within Songkhla and across ASEAN countries.

Recommendation for Utilization

1. The government can support initiatives to develop the local community around Wang Ching Mountain. This could include infrastructure improvements, skill development programs, and promoting local products. The tradition can be a key selling point to attract tourists, generating income for the community.
2. Recognizing the tradition's role in preserving the mountain forests, the government can implement policies to protect the environment while promoting sustainable tourism. This could involve creating eco-tourism packages and enforcing regulations to prevent environmental damage.

Recommendation for Further Research

Researching the specific ways in which the ritual influences environmental conservation efforts among the local residents is suggested. This can include studying the effectiveness of these practices and how they can be enhanced or replicated in other communities to promote sustainable tourism and environmental management.

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