
Research Article

LOCAL BELIEF SYSTEMS AND CULTURAL LEARNING IN NORTHEASTERN THAILAND: ANIMISM AND SOCIAL NORM FORMATION

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Abstract: Animism has long been acknowledged as a crucial element of cultural and religious existence in Southeast Asia, especially in Northeastern Thailand (Isan), where it persists alongside Buddhism and influences daily social customs. Previous research has thoroughly analyzed animism concerning cosmology, ritual, and socio-political roles; nevertheless, its function as a conduit for cultural learning and social norm development has not been adequately investigated. This study seeks to examine the historical evolution of animism in Northeastern Thailand, delineate its fundamental components, and scrutinize the mechanisms by which it facilitates the establishment and reinforcement of social norms. The research employs a qualitative documentary methodology, utilizing historical documents, anthropological literature, religious studies, and local culture sources. Data were systematically selected and analyzed using content analysis, thematic analysis, and historical analysis to synthesize patterns across different types of evidence. The results show that animism in Northeastern Thailand has changed throughout time, going through pre-Buddhist, syncretic, and modern times. Its principal elements—ancestor veneration, home and nature spirits, ritual practices, taboos, and ritual specialists—function as an interconnected system that governs moral behavior and fortifies communal identity. The study introduces a five-stage process model for the establishment of social norms: belief transmission, ritual involvement, symbolic reinforcement, collective internalization, and norm stabilization. This process converts cosmological beliefs into tangible activities and socially obligatory rules. This study enhances the literature by redefining animism as an unstructured yet organized cultural learning system that fosters social cohesion and facilitates intergenerational knowledge transmission. It underscores the significance of animistic worldviews for modern cultural education, community-oriented learning, and the safeguarding of indigenous knowledge within a swiftly evolving socio-cultural landscape.

Keywords: Animism, Cultural Learning, Social Norms, Indigenous Knowledge, Northeastern Thailand

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1. INTRODUCTION

Animism has experienced significant theoretical reconfiguration in modern anthropology. Previous evolutionary theories characterized animism as a “primitive” belief in spiritual entities; however, contemporary scholarship redefines it as a relational ontology where agency and personhood are allocated among both human and non-human entities (Bird-David, 1999; Ingold, 2006). From this viewpoint, animism transcends a conventional belief system; it constitutes a lived epistemology rooted

in quotidian interactions with landscapes, ancestors, spirits, and ecological contexts. Knowledge, consequently, arises from relational involvement rather than abstract doctrinal frameworks.

Animistic traditions in Southeast Asia endure not as peripheral vestiges but as essential elements of pluralistic religious ecologies coexisting alongside Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Hindu-Brahmanical traditions (Porath & Vaddhanaphuti, 2017). Rituals like ancestor worship, spirit mediumship, and guardian-spirit worship still have an impact on moral communities, local government, and regional identities. Empirical research conducted in Thailand and adjacent regions illustrates that spirit cults serve as platforms for the negotiation of tradition, modernity, and political authority (Baird, 2014; Fukuura, 2011; Irvine, 1984). Instead of fading away as society modernizes, animistic practices have changed and grown in cities and countries, showing how strong they are and how important they are to society and culture.

Animism is very important in shaping community life and cultural identity in Northeastern Thailand (Isan). Beliefs in ancestral spirits, village guardian spirits (*phi pu ta*), territorial spirits, and spirit mediumship are strongly rooted in everyday rituals. Ritual performances link sacred landscapes to shared memory, strengthening a sense of kinship and continuity. Ethnographic studies indicate that spirit mediumship in Isan transcends mere religious expression, serving as a locus for identity construction and political subjectivity (Pinthongvijayakul, 2018, 2019). Furthermore, the reverence for regional spiritual figures frequently connects with nationalism and state narratives, illustrating the integration of local spiritual traditions into wider socio-political discourses (Nilsen, 2011). In this context, animism in Isan is not fixed but is actively influenced by continuous historical changes and current socio-economic dynamics.

Even with all this research, there is still a big gap in the analysis. Previous research has predominantly concentrated on the symbolic meanings, ritual practices, and socio-political roles of animism, seldom framing it as a vehicle for cultural learning. Specifically, little focus has been directed to the transmission, internalization, and reproduction of animistic worldviews throughout generations, and the role these processes play in the establishment of social norms. To fill this vacuum, we need to go beyond just describing what happens and look at how cultural information is gained, stabilized, and institutionalized in communities.

The notion of cultural learning serves as an effective theoretical framework for bridging this divide. Cultural learning theory focuses on mechanisms like imitation, instruction, participation, and shared intentionality that make it possible to pass on and build up cultural knowledge (Tomasello et al., 1993). From an evolutionary and cognitive standpoint, cultural systems are perpetuated by mechanisms like prestige bias, conformity bias, and model-based learning (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Mesoudi et al., 2006). Informal learning processes, especially those involving observation and engagement in daily activities, are essential for the transmission of culturally entrenched knowledge (Paradise & Rogoff, 2009). In this context, religious and ritual systems might be perceived not merely as symbolic constructs but also as structured settings for experiential learning and moral socialization.

Simultaneously, social norm theory elucidates the processes through which communal expectations are formed, internalized, and sustained. Norms develop through recurrent social interactions and are sustained by both descriptive behavioral patterns and prescriptive expectations of suitable conduct (Cialdini et al., 1990). Recent interdisciplinary research underscores that norms endure when integrated into significant social behaviors and bolstered by mechanisms of internalization and social enforcement (Gelfand et al., 2024; Wenzel & Woodyatt, 2025). Ritual situations, distinguished by recurrence, emotional involvement, and symbolic importance, are especially potent in augmenting norm salience and adherence.

When combined, these theoretical viewpoints indicate that animism may serve as more than only a belief system or ritual practice. It can be perceived as an Indigenous knowledge system perpetuated by culturally organized learning processes, significantly influencing the formation of social norms. Ritual

participation, spirit mediumship, holy landscapes, and narrative traditions furnish experiential frameworks wherein individuals acquire the skills to comprehend the world, regulate conduct, and navigate social interactions. These mechanisms not only preserve animistic cosmologies but also transmute them into embodied moral frameworks and socially binding rules.

This study aims to redefine animism in Northeastern Thailand as a dynamic framework for cultural learning that facilitates the creation of social norms. By synthesizing anthropological views on relational ontology with interdisciplinary perspectives from cultural learning theory and social norm theory, the study aims to transcend mere descriptive narratives, striving for a process-oriented elucidation of the transmission, internalization, and stabilization of animistic knowledge within communities.

With this framework in mind, the study looks into the following research questions:

(1) How has animism in Northeastern Thailand changed over time, and what factors have influenced its growth? (2) What are the main parts of the animistic belief system in Isan, and how do they fit into the larger culture? (3) How does animism help shape social norms in small communities? (4) How can animism be understood and utilized as a framework for cultural learning in modern society?

2. OBJECTIVE

This study aims to reconceptualize animism in Northeastern Thailand (Isan) as a cultural learning system that contributes to social norm formation. To achieve this aim, the study pursues four objectives: (1) To examine the historical evolution of animism across pre-Buddhist, syncretic, and contemporary contexts. (2) To identify the core components of the animistic system and their roles within the cultural framework. (3) To analyze the processes through which animism shapes social norms and collective behavior. And (4) To propose a conceptual model of animism as a cultural learning system, articulated as a five-stage process of social norm formation: belief transmission, ritual participation, symbolic reinforcement, collective internalization, and norm stabilization.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Animism as an Indigenous Knowledge System

Recent anthropological research reconceptualizes animism as a relational epistemology instead of a rudimentary belief in spirits. Bird-David (1999) contends that animism ought to be perceived as a framework of relational knowing, wherein personhood and agency are conferred upon non-human creatures through experiential engagement. Ingold (2006) likewise underscores that animistic ontologies are rooted in corporeal engagement with the environment, wherein knowledge arises from interaction rather than abstract thought. These viewpoints transition animism from the realm of “belief” to that of Indigenous knowledge systems integrated within practice, perception, and ethical interactions.

In Southeast Asia, animism functions among diverse religious ecologies and persists in shaping daily life, communal identity, and local governance (Porath & Vaddhanaphuti, 2017). Ethnographic research in Thailand illustrates that spirit cults and mediumship are not peripheral remnants but integral elements of societal structure and boundary negotiation (Baird, 2014). In Northeastern Thailand (Isan), ritual enactment and spirit mediumship play significant roles in the formation of personhood and political subjectivity (Pinthongvijayakul, 2018), whilst embodied performance serves as a mediator of social and moral interactions (Pinthongvijayakul, 2019).

Additionally, Indigenous knowledge studies emphasize the adaptive and ecological aspects of indigenous belief systems. Berkes et al. (2000) illustrate that traditional ecological knowledge operates as a cumulative system of environmental comprehension conveyed across generations. In the same way, animism in Isan can be thought of as a way of knowing that stores cosmological ideas, moral duties, and social rules in ritual and community life.

3.2 Cultural Learning Theory

Cultural learning theory offers a paradigm for elucidating the transmission, stabilization, and reproduction of animistic knowledge. Tomasello et al. (1993) contend that human cultural learning is characterized by shared intentionality and intersubjectivity, facilitating the precise transmission of socially significant knowledge. Through imitation, instruction, and directed involvement, individuals acquire not only technical skills but also culturally organized views of reality.

From an evolutionary standpoint, Mesoudi et al. (2006) assert that cultural transmission functions through discernible mechanisms, including conformity bias, prestige bias, and model-based learning. Henrich and Gil-White (2001) assert that prestige-based transmission facilitates the dissemination of knowledge by guiding learners towards socially acknowledged experts—an observation particularly pertinent in ritual contexts where spirit mediums, ritual leaders, and elders hold authoritative roles.

Informal learning procedures hold similar importance. Paradise and Rogoff (2009) characterize learning via observation and engagement in community activities as a culturally structured kind of socialization. Ritual participation, seasonal rites, and daily spiritual practices create experiential contexts in which animistic cosmologies are progressively assimilated. Legare and Nielsen (2015) stress that imitation and creativity work together to keep cultures alive and help them adapt to new situations. This explains how animistic traditions continue to exist while also changing to fit modern times.

In this context, animism serves as the substance of transmission, but cultural learning processes represent the means by which that substance is replicated.

3.3 Social Norm Formation Theory

The idea of social norm development elucidates the emergence of collective expectations regarding acceptable behavior, their internalization, and their role in governing conduct. Cialdini et al. (1990) differentiate between descriptive norms (what individuals do) and injunctive norms (what individuals approve or disapprove), illustrating that norm salience significantly impacts behavior. Ritual circumstances, defined by repetition, communal involvement, and symbolic significance, may amplify norm salience and enhance adherence.

Interdisciplinary research on norm dynamics views norms as changing systems influenced by psychological mechanisms, ecological factors, and institutional reinforcement (Gelfand et al., 2024). Norms endure when integrated into socially significant practices and reinforced by reputational incentives and penalties. Wenzel and Woodyatt (2025) emphasize that norms shape conduct through internalization, wherein individuals incorporate standards into their moral identity, and through social enforcement mechanisms.

When applied to animistic contexts, these ideas propose that ritualized interactions with spirits, communal ceremonies, and moral narratives rooted in cosmology serve as mechanisms for cultivating collective expectations. In Isan, ritual performance and spirit cults establish organized settings in which obligations, reciprocity, and communal responsibilities are consistently enacted and validated (Baird, 2014; Pinthongvijayakul, 2018).

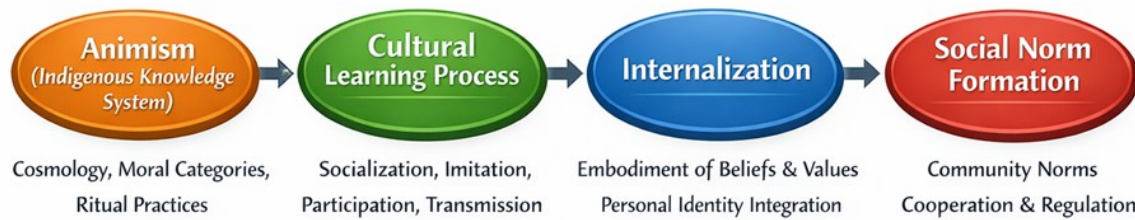
3.4 Integrative Conceptual Framework

This study posits that Animism operates as an Indigenous knowledge system, offering cosmological frameworks, ethical classifications, ritualistic behaviors, and socially acknowledged roles. Individuals progressively acquire and embody relational understandings through cultural learning processes, which encompass socialization, informal involvement, imitation, and prestige-based transmission. Consistent participation in ritual and communal activities promotes internalization, leading to the integration of cosmological interpretations and moral demands into human identity and perception. The internalization process, bolstered by communal engagement and sanctioning mechanisms, ultimately

facilitates the creation of social norms, influencing patterns of cooperation, obligation, and moral regulation within the society. Consequently, the relationship may be delineated as:

Figure 1

Integrative Conceptual Framework



4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative research design grounded in documentary analysis to examine animism in Northeastern Thailand (Isan) as an Indigenous knowledge system and a framework for cultural learning and the establishment of social norms. This study is well-suited for documentary research as it facilitates a methodical analysis of historical evolution, structural components, and normative processes across various temporal and disciplinary frameworks. Ethnographic fieldwork focuses on observations that are limited to a specific place and time, while documentary analysis allows for the use of long-term perspectives and sources from different fields. This gives a wider analytical base for understanding how things stay the same, change, and pass on culture. This methodology is suitable considering the study's aim to amalgamate anthropological, historical, and cultural learning views into a cohesive conceptual framework.

4.2 Data Collection

Data were gathered by a systematic and intentional selection of documentary sources. There are five types of materials in the corpus:

1. Historical materials, such as regional chronicles, archival records, and official reports, that show how animistic practices have changed over time and how they have interacted with political and religious organizations.
2. Anthropological literature that analyzes ceremonial activities, spirit mediumship, cosmology, and community organization in Northeastern Thailand and Southeast Asia.
3. Religious studies literature that talks about syncretism, ceremonial systems, and how animism can live with Buddhism and other belief systems.
4. Legal and customary texts that show the rules, norms, and moral standards of the community.
5. Local cultural materials, such as folklore, oral traditions, and regional publications, provide us with a better understanding of real-life experiences and symbolic representations.

We chose sources based on how well they fit the research goals, how much they added to the theory, how credible they were (for example, peer-reviewed papers and well-known scholarly works), and how well they represented diverse time periods. The search technique included academic databases (such as Scopus-indexed journals and Google Scholar), institutional archives, and cultural materials made in the area.

To make sure the analysis was thorough, a screening process was used to get rid of sources that were not relevant, were duplicates, or were deficient in terms of methodology. Sources that directly addressed animism, cultural learning, or the establishment of social norms were given precedence.

When different interpretations were found, the data were analyzed and put together using thematic consistency and theoretical alignment instead of just adding them up.

4.3 Data Analysis

The research utilizes three synergistic qualitative analytical methodologies:

1. **Content Analysis** - employed to methodically discern and classify essential concepts, persistent motifs, and normative assertions about animism, cultural learning, and social regulation.
2. **Thematic Analysis** – used to create higher-level conceptual patterns, such as relational ontology, ritual transmission, moral responsibilities, authority systems, and community identity.
3. **Historical Analysis** – employed to situate animistic activities within various socio-political epochs, emphasizing continuity, transformation, and adaptive mechanisms.

These strategies were used over and over again and in different ways. theme categories were created through initial coding and content analysis. These categories were then improved through theme analysis. Historical analysis offered temporal grounding and contextual interpretation, facilitating the incorporation of data into a cohesive explanatory framework.

The analytical method finally facilitates the creation of a process-oriented model that connects animism, cultural learning, and the establishment of social norms.

4.4 Analytical Rigor and Reflexivity

Several tactics were used to make the study more credible and trustworthy. First, data triangulation was accomplished by employing many sorts of sources from diverse fields and temporal contexts. Second, theoretical triangulation was utilized by synthesizing viewpoints from anthropology, cultural learning theory, and social norm theory. Third, the study integrates a reflexive recognition of the researcher's interpretative function in examining culturally ingrained belief systems. Because documentary research is more about interpreting and synthesizing than directly observing, it was important to keep the analysis clear and consistent in how the data was coded and interpreted. Lastly, the study emphasizes conceptual coherence by methodically connecting empirical observations with theoretical notions, guaranteeing that results are anchored in both evidence and recognized academic frameworks.

5. RESULT

5.1 Development of Animism in Northeastern Thailand

The documentary evidence reveals that animistic traditions in Northeastern Thailand (Isan) have not seen a straight decline; instead, they have followed a pattern of continuity-through-transformation, influenced by changing political authority, religious heterogeneity, and modern globalization. The examined literature presents animism as a relational epistemology that structures communal interpretations of causality, morality, and social responsibilities through connections with ancestors, place-spirits, and nature-centric entities (Bird-David, 1999; Ingold, 2006). The evolution of animism in Isan can be systematically categorized into three interconnected phases: (1) Pre-Buddhist Period, (2) Syncretic Period, and (3) Contemporary Period.

Before Buddhism.

The earliest layer is marked by cosmologies focused on ancestor spirits and nature/territorial spirits, which served as fundamental frameworks for elucidating misfortune, fertility, and the moral structure of communal existence. Documentary sources rarely yield “pure” pre-Buddhist material; nonetheless, comparative historical analysis indicates that indigenous spirit categories (phi) were already integrated into regional imaginaries before and concurrent with the institutionalization of Theravāda. Kirsch

(1977) shows that the Thai religious system has always had many parts that work together and that ideas about spirits were present even in early state inscriptions. This shows that reverence for spirits and sacred power based on place were important parts of stories about political and community success. This study corroborates the perspective that spiritual beliefs were not marginal but fundamentally important, facilitating societal regulation through duties to ancestors and local spirit guardians (Kirsch, 1977). During this phase, animism functioned chiefly through kinship and locality: ancestral spirits established moral obligations to lineage, while nature spirits emphasized proper behavior towards landscapes, forests, water sources, and settlement boundaries—thus creating initial frameworks for normativity and belonging (Bird-David, 1999; Ingold, 2006).

Period of Syncretism.

The evidence robustly indicates a subsequent period characterized by the syncretic amalgamation of Buddhism and animism, wherein spiritual activities persisted but were recontextualized and restructured within Buddhist moral and ritual ecologies. This era is more accurately characterized not as a mere “mixing,” but as a continuous negotiation of religious authority, legitimacy, and ritual function (Kitiarsa, 2005; Kirsch, 1977). Syncretism is seen in the simultaneous practice of Buddhist merit-making and spirit appeasing, as well as in the rise of ritual specialists and mediums who facilitate interactions between Buddhist and spiritual realms. Irvine (1984) chronicles the endurance of spiritual beliefs amid modernization and urbanization, highlighting the transition from country spirit cults to the proliferation of urban spirit mediumship. This indicates that the syncretic period encompasses not merely theological amalgamation but also the reorganization of religious practices in response to evolving socio-economic circumstances (Irvine, 1984). In Northeast Thailand, ethnographic studies reveal that spirit-medium cults and ritual performances facilitate boundary formation and community affiliation, demonstrating how syncretic religiosity serves as a framework for social organization (Baird, 2014). The syncretic phase signifies a lasting arrangement: animistic connections with spirits and locations persist, while Buddhism introduces supplementary moral frameworks (merit, precepts, karmic causality) that are understood locally and pragmatically integrated.

Modern Era.

In the current phase, the examined literature highlights a heightened transition propelled by globalization, mobility, media, and political-economic shifts, which reshape the practice, narration, and institutionalization of animism. Instead of being pushed out, animistic practices have become more visible in new areas of value, like tourism, commodified sacred consumption, and media-amplified cults. They still serve community functions like healing, protection, and forming identity (Kitiarsa, 2005; Ruengmak & Dejpawuttikul, 2024). Comparative data suggest that the connection between spirit mediumship and the state is dynamic; mediums can represent charismatic power that occasionally complements, negotiates with, or indirectly challenges official legitimacy (Cohen, 2020). In Isan, spirit-related rituals persist in shaping personhood and political subjectivity through performance and corporeal enactment, illustrating that animism continues to be socially useful in modern moral and political contexts (Pinthongvijayakul, 2018). Additionally, spiritual practices influence gendered and corporeal negotiations of identity, illustrating how animism operates not merely as tradition but also as a context for modern social meaning-making (Pinthongvijayakul, 2019). The reverence for regional guardian characters and spirit shrines illustrates the intersection of animism with nation-building and civic religiosity, particularly in Northeastern contexts where local heroes and spirits are incorporated into public religious frameworks (Nilsen, 2011). Overall, the recent findings indicate that animism in Isan endures through adaptive mechanisms—integrating with institutional religion, restructuring via new social infrastructures, and broadening its reach to larger audiences—while maintaining its fundamental relational framework of obligations among humans, ancestors, spirits, and places (Porath & Vaddhanaphuti, 2017).

5.2 Forms and Components of Animism in Northeastern Thailand

Documentary and ethnographic evidence demonstrates that Animism in Northeastern Thailand (Isan) functions as an internally separate yet interconnected system of cosmological concepts, ritual mechanisms, normative restrictions, and ritual authority. These elements work together to set moral standards, control social interactions, and keep the community's identity alive. They are not just separate beliefs; they are part of a structured cultural framework that is part of everyday life (Bird-David, 1999; Porath & Vaddhanaphuti, 2017). Below, we look at the main parts and the societal roles they play.

5.2.1 *Spirits of the Ancestors (Phi Banphaburut)*

In animistic cosmology, ancestor spirits are the most important moral force. They are perceived as deceased relatives who persist in exerting influence on their descendants, overseeing behavior, and offering protection or punishment. From a relational standpoint, ancestor veneration fortifies lineage continuity and moral responsibility within kinship networks (Bird-David, 1999). In society, ancestral spirits serve as a means of intergenerational unity. Duties to commemorate ancestors through offerings and memorial rites strengthen filial piety, inheritance systems, and collective memory. These customs preserve lineage identification and validate power throughout extended families. Research on ritual enactment in Isan indicates that interaction with ancestral spirits has a role in the development of moral personhood, integrating social duty into cosmological narratives (Pinthongvijayakul, 2018). So, ancestral spirits act as symbolic protectors of social order in kinship systems.

5.2.2 *Spirits of the House (Phi Ban Phi Ruen)*

Household spirits are protecting beings that are linked to the home. They protect the home, make sure everyone is doing well, and keep an eye on how people behave in the house. In terms of function, household spirit worship strengthens family ties and the distribution of ceremonial work by gender. Ritual offerings, spatial configurations (like spirit houses), and regular ceremonies organize family collaboration and shared duty. These actions turn home into a moralized domain where good behavior is always encouraged. Irvine (1984) shows that beliefs in spirits change as society changes, yet they nevertheless play a role in regulating behavior in both rural and urban areas. So, household spirits help keep order in the home and at the micro level of society.

5.2.3 *Spirits of Nature (Spirits of the Forest, Water, and Sky)*

Nature spirits, such as forest spirits (phi pa), river spirits (phi nam), and sky spirits (phi fa), show how animism is a part of biological ecosystems. People think that these beings affect fertility, weather, health, and the balance of the environment because they are linked to certain natural areas.

Their social function goes beyond explaining the metaphysical; they also encode environmental ethics and territorial bounds. By giving trees and waterways the power to act, communities encourage respect, self-control, and regular interactions with natural resources. Ingold (2006) underscores that animistic attitudes influence perception and environmental engagement, determining the relationship of communities with their surroundings. In Isan, ceremonies honoring nature spirits often strengthen community cooperation in farming cycles and managing resources. This connects cosmology to ecological sustainability.

5.2.4 *Rituals*

Ritual activities are the main way that animistic systems work. These encompass spirit appeasement ceremonies, healing rites, annual festivals, and possession rituals. Rituals function as embodied instructional occurrences wherein cosmological knowledge, moral demands, and social duties are performed and conveyed (Baird, 2014). From a sociological standpoint, ritual repetition bolsters communal cohesion and the prominence of social norms. Kitiarsa (2005) contends that ritual

hybridization in modern Thailand exemplifies the flexibility of popular religion while preserving its cohesive social role. In Isan, ritual performance creates a sense of community and strengthens the hierarchies of knowledge and power. Through involvement in rituals, people learn about relational cosmology and shared moral standards.

5.2.5 Taboos

Taboos are rules that are built into animistic cosmology that say what people shouldn't do. They might set rules about how to act around holy places, how to deal with family, how to eat, when to plant crops, or how to talk to spirits. Taboos act as informal rules that keep everything in order. They make strong deterrents by tying violations to spiritual consequences like illness, bad luck, or social banishment. These deterrents don't need to be enforced by law. According to social norm theory, injunctive norms work when they are backed up by a common belief and group monitoring (Cialdini et al., 1990). In animistic settings, taboo systems enhance conformity and collective responsibility, therefore solidifying moral standards.

5.2.6 Leaders of Rituals (Shamans / Ritual Specialists)

Ritual leaders, such as shamans, spirit mediums, and ceremonial specialists, act as go-betweens for the spirit and human worlds. They know how to do rituals, cure people, read spiritual signals, and lead group ceremonies. Ritual experts serve as moral authority and cultural transmitters in social settings. Henrich and Gil-White (2001) characterize prestige-based learning as a process that augments cultural transmission; ritual leaders frequently occupy such prestigious roles, hence promoting intergenerational continuity. In Isan, spirit mediums serve as intermediaries for cosmological relationships while simultaneously shaping political subjectivity and communal identity (Pinthongvijayakul, 2018; Pinthongvijayakul, 2019). Cohen (2020) also says that the power of spirit mediums may be linked to state institutions. This shows how ritual specialists fit into larger social and political systems. In conclusion, when you put all of these parts together, you have a system where cosmology, ritual practice, authority, and normative regulation all work together to support each other. (1) Ancestor spirits keep the family together and the morals strong. (2) Spirits of the home keep order in the home. (3) Nature spirits encode environmental ethics and community collaboration. (4) Rituals let people feel like they are part of a group and share meanings. (5) Taboos control behavior through unofficial punishment systems. (6) Ritual experts make sure that transmission, mediation, and interpretative authority are all in place. Animism in Northeastern Thailand acts as a socially embedded knowledge system that structures belonging, moral expectations, and communal government through these interconnected activities.

5.3 Process of Animism in Social Norm Formation

The results demonstrate that Animism in Northeastern Thailand (Isan) facilitates the creation of social norms via a systematic and cumulative process, rather than through discrete belief assertions. Based on anthropological theory, cultural learning frameworks, and social norm scholarship, this study presents a five-stage process model elucidating the integration of animistic cosmology into communal behavioral regulation: Belief Transmission → Ritual Participation → Symbolic Reinforcement → Collective Internalization → Norm Stabilization. This model shows how cosmological concepts become socially binding norms through emotional, sensory, and symbolic means.

5.3.1 Belief Transmission.

The initial phase encompasses the intergenerational conveyance of animistic beliefs via familial socialization, narrative sharing, informal education, and observation. Concepts of ancestor spirits, household spirits, and nature spirits are generally not conveyed through formal teachings but are ingrained in daily rituals and communal stories. Cultural learning theory posits that this transmission

transpires via shared intentionality and guided engagement (Tomasello et al., 1993). Transmission based on prestige is significant, as elders, ritual specialists, and spirit mediums serve as authoritative cultural exemplars (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). In Isan cultures, narratives of spirit intervention, punishment, and protection convey moral expectations related to respect, reciprocity, and social duty. Consequently, the transmission of beliefs establishes the cognitive and narrative basis for normative expectations.

5.3.2 Ritual Participation.

The second stage converts conveyed beliefs into lived experience via ritual engagement. Rituals, including ancestor ceremonies, spirit appeasement rites, and communal festivals, establish organized settings for collective participation. Participation in rituals enhances social cohesion by aligning behavior, mood, and focus. Anthropological studies indicate that ritualized behaviors enhance group identity and strengthen collective cosmological interpretations (Baird, 2014; Pinthongvijayakul, 2018). Through repetitive performance, individuals acquire both symbolic significances and suitable social roles and responsibilities. At this stage, ritual serves as a means of engagement, converting abstract beliefs into tangible collective activity. Group participation amplifies the prominence of norms and intensifies conformity pressures (Cialdini et al., 1990).

5.3.3 Symbolic Reinforcement.

The third stage entails symbolic reinforcement via myths, sacred artifacts, taboos, and spatial indicators like shrines and spirit houses. Symbolic systems consistently reinforce the cosmological authority and moral demands within the community. Accounts of spiritual retribution or favor strengthen behavioral norms. The fear of spiritual retribution and veneration for guardian spirits function as emotional controllers of behavior. Social norm theory differentiates between injunctive norms (prescriptive behaviors) and descriptive norms (typical behaviors); animistic symbolism enhances both by associating moral conduct with supernatural repercussions (Cialdini et al., 1990). At this juncture: (1) Ritual fosters engagement. (2) Fear and reverence govern conduct. (3) Narratives convey fundamental values. Symbolic reinforcement guarantees the ongoing activation of moral expectations within the communal mind.

5.3.4 Collective Internalization.

Continued engagement and symbolic affirmation result in internalization, whereby individuals assimilate communal expectations into their personal identity. Norm internalization transpires when moral obligations are regarded not as externally enforced but as inherent elements of self-conception. Research on norm dynamics indicates that internalization enhances compliance, since adherence transforms into self-regulation rather than being only reliant on sanctions (Gelfand et al., 2024). In Isan, ritual performance facilitates the construction of relational personhood, wherein identity is delineated by commitments to kin, spirits, and the community (Pinthongvijayakul, 2018). In this process, animistic cosmology is manifested as a moral inclination rather than a mere belief.

5.3.5 Norm Stabilization.

The concluding phase entails the consolidation of norms via repetition, collective oversight, and social reinforcement. Once internalized, norms are maintained through social expectations, reputational mechanisms, and regular ritual renewal. Norm stabilization transpires when collective expectations become foreseeable, socially mandated, and culturally validated. Ritual cycles, seasonal ceremonies, and life-cycle rites consistently reinforce communal responsibilities and limits. Cohen (2020) illustrates that spirit-medium systems can support social legitimacy and authority structures, so contributing to normative continuity despite socio-political transformation. At this juncture, Animism operates not merely as a cosmology but as a resilient normative framework that governs collaboration, dispute resolution, and ethical behavior within the society.

In conclusion, the five-stage model illustrates that Animism in Northeastern Thailand functions as a dynamic process of norm generation rather than as a static belief system. Belief Transmission constructs cosmological narratives. Ritual participation fosters collective involvement. Symbolic reinforcement facilitates emotional and cognitive regulation. Collective internalization integrates norms into identity. And Norm stabilization guarantees enduring continuity. This sequence demonstrates that ritual encourages participation, fear and reverence govern conduct, and storytelling conveys ideals. The outcome is a morally structured society maintained by cultural education and symbolic power.

5.4 Animism Cultural Learning in Northeastern Thailand: Implications and Guidelines

The findings indicate that Animism in Northeastern Thailand (Isan) functions not only as a religious belief system but also as a culturally ingrained learning environment for the transmission and reproduction of cosmology, moral values, and social standards. This section suggests practical and educational consequences for preserving Animism as a vital cultural resource in modern society, based on the theoretical connection between Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural learning processes, and norm development. These principles are organized into four interconnected domains: informal learning, community-based learning, educational integration, and preservation strategies.

5.4.1 Informal Learning

1) Learning Through Ritual Participation.

Rituals serve as experiential learning environments where participants gain cosmological understanding, moral standards, and communal identity through physical involvement. Cultural learning theory posits that individuals obtain socially significant knowledge through engagement and imitation rather than exclusively through formal education (Tomasello et al., 1993). In Isan, ceremonies associated with ancestor veneration, seasonal agricultural rituals, and spirit appeasement function as educational settings where individuals observe ritual experts, assimilate symbolic significances, and acquire proper behavior. Repeated engagement fortifies memory recall and emotional connection, hence augmenting the internalization of moral responsibilities (Legare & Nielsen, 2015). Rituals offer casual yet meticulously organized settings for the intergenerational transmission of animistic worldviews.

2) Learning Through Family Socialization.

The family serves as a fundamental locus for the transmission of beliefs. Accounts of ancestral spirits, taboos, and moral causation are conveyed through narrative, quotidian rituals, and intergenerational discourse. The prestige-based learning theory posits that children preferentially acquire knowledge from esteemed and authoritative individuals, such as elders and ritual leaders (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). In this framework, familial transmission guarantees the perpetuation of values such as reciprocity, reverence for elders, and environmental stewardship. Informal learning within households integrates animistic cosmology into daily moral reasoning, rendering it resilient and self-regulating.

5.4.2 Community-Based Learning

1) Role of Community Leaders.

Community leaders, such as village heads, monks, ritual specialists, and spirit mediums, act as cultural mediators and guardians of communal knowledge. Ethnographic research indicates that ritual leaders not only conduct ceremonies but also influence communal identity and political subjectivity (Pinthongvijayakul, 2018). From a norm dynamics approach, authoritative persons augment norm salience and legitimacy by publicly exemplifying anticipated conduct (Gelfand et al., 2024). Their participation in cultural education enhances social cohesion and guarantees the precise conveyance of ritual knowledge and ethical standards.

2) *Cultural Activities and Collective Events.*

Culturally organized events—such as annual festivals, spiritual rites, and heritage celebrations—foster interactive learning environments. These activities strengthen common narratives and collective memory while promoting intergenerational engagement. Ritualized assemblies enhance collective identity and collaboration (Baird, 2014). Communal participation validates animistic symbols and behaviors, aiding in the stabilization of norms and the continuity of culture. Community-based learning thereby converts tradition into proactive civic involvement instead of mere heritage conservation.

5.4.3 *Integration into Formal Education*

1) *Integration into Local Curriculum.*

Integrating animistic knowledge into local educational curricula helps improve cultural literacy and contextual comprehension. Indigenous knowledge studies underscore the necessity of acknowledging traditional cosmologies as valid epistemologies rather than mere folklore (Berkes et al., 2000). Curricular integration may encompass local history modules, folklore studies, ecological ethics rooted in spiritual beliefs, and the examination of ritual symbols. This combination fosters cultural pride and critical engagement with local traditions while upholding academic rigor.

2) *Multicultural Education.*

Animism can be contextualized within multicultural education to promote intercultural respect and pluralistic awareness. By positioning Isan's animistic traditions alongside other belief systems, students cultivate an appreciation for religious diversity and relational perspectives. This method corresponds with modern educational goals that prioritize inclusive identity development and cultural sustainability. Instead of relegating animism to a mere local curiosity, intercultural integration contextualizes it within wider discourses on spirituality, environment, and societal standards.

5.4.4 *Preservation Strategies*

1) *Digital Documentation.*

Digital preservation provides a robust method for protecting oral narratives, ritual practices, and communal knowledge. The documentation of ceremonies, myths, and local histories using audiovisual archives might mitigate loss resulting from generational transition and urban migration. Research on globalization reveals that religious practices are increasingly disseminated via media and digital platforms, altering their visibility and accessibility (Kitiarsa, 2005). Digitization preserves knowledge and facilitates reinterpretation and renewed involvement in modern technology environments.

2) *Youth Participation.*

Engagement of youth is essential for sustainable transmission. Promoting youth participation in cultural events, ritual preparations, narrative initiatives, and digital documentation projects guarantees continuity. Research on cultural learning indicates that active engagement enhances identity development and the enduring retention of values (Tomasello et al., 1993). When youth are regarded as co-creators instead of passive beneficiaries of tradition, animistic knowledge remains dynamic and adaptive.

The educational ramifications of Animism Cultural Learning in Northeastern Thailand indicate a multifaceted approach: Informal learning perpetuates daily transmission via ritual and familial interactions. Community-based learning strengthens collective identity and emphasizes the importance of social norms. Formal educational integration legitimizes Indigenous knowledge within institutional structures. Preservation solutions guarantee adaptive continuity in a worldwide digital age. Collectively, these methodologies frame Animism not as an antiquated remnant but as a dynamic cultural learning framework that may enhance moral education, bolster community resilience, and foster intercultural comprehension in modern Thai society.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Animism and Cultural Learning Processes

The results of this study are in great agreement with Cultural Learning Theory, especially in elucidating the transmission, stabilization, and reproduction of animistic worldviews over generations. Cultural learning research underscores that knowledge is not solely conveyed through formal instruction but is ingrained in socially organized practices, including imitation, participation, and shared intentionality (Tomasello et al., 1993; Mesoudi et al., 2006). The suggested five-stage model—belief transmission, ritual participation, symbolic reinforcement, collective internalization, and norm stabilization—offers a process-oriented explanation of these mechanisms in the context of animism in Northeastern Thailand.

Within this theory, belief transmission aligns with initial socialization processes whereby cosmological tales are disseminated through familial, communal, and ceremonial authority figures. This stage illustrates the significance of prestige-based learning, as individuals preferentially obtain knowledge from culturally esteemed authorities, such as elders and ritual specialists (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Ritual participation then converts abstract beliefs into tangible experiences, fortifying shared intentionality and collective identity through continual communal involvement (Baird, 2014; Pinthongvijayakul, 2018).

The next two steps, symbolic reinforcement and communal internalization, are also important for understanding how animistic information becomes morally binding. Symbolic structures, such as myths, taboos, and sacred spaces, perpetually reinvigorate cosmological significances and synchronize individual cognition with communal anticipations. Through ongoing involvement and symbolic exposure, individuals assimilate these norms, incorporating them into their moral identity. This phase shows how cultural learning processes go from being passed on from one person to another to being used to control behavior, which helps norms stay stable throughout time.

6.2 Animism as a Mechanism of Social Control

The results show that animism works as a decentralized yet very effective way to control people, in addition to being a way to learn. Combining Social Norm Theory with the suggested five-stage model makes it clearer how cosmological ideas become rules that control conduct.

Initially, the fear of spiritual retribution—exhibited through beliefs in illness, misfortune, or divine punishment—functions predominantly within the realm of symbolic reinforcement. Stories about spirits intervening, sacred rules, and ceremonial punishments provide emotional signals that strengthen injunctive norms (Cialdini et al., 1990). These symbolic mechanisms amplify norm salience by associating moral behavior with supposed supernatural repercussions, so fostering compliance outside of formal legal frameworks. This conclusion aligns with studies examining religious systems as instruments of moral control, wherein divine oversight and retribution foster prosocial conduct (Norenzayan et al., 2016).

Second, enforcement based on status is strongly linked to both passing on beliefs and taking part in rituals. However, it becomes especially important when people start to internalize things as a group. Ritual specialists, spirit mediums, and community leaders hold epistemic and moral authority, directing proper conduct and elucidating cosmological significance (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Pinthongvijayakul, 2018). Their authority bolsters the legitimacy of rules and promotes their acceptance via imitation and respect. As people interact with these authoritative persons again and over again, norms stop being seen as rules that originate from outside and start being seen as rules that come from inside.

Third, symbolic authority, which is the power of cosmic symbols, sacred locations, and ritual activities, works on several levels, but it is strongest in symbolic reinforcement and collective

internalization. Symbolic systems organize how we see things and make sense of them, turning abstract cosmological ideas into real moral truths. Through frequent ritual performance and narrative reinforcement, these symbols gain legitimacy and normative power, influencing both individual cognition and collective expectations. This is in line with interdisciplinary views on norm dynamics, which say that norms last when they are part of meaningful practices and are supported by common symbolic frameworks (Gelfand et al., 2024; Wenzel & Woodyatt, 2025).

When you look at all of these systems together, you can see that animism controls behavior through a mix of emotional, cognitive, and social processes. The five-stage model elucidates that social control does not manifest at a singular juncture but develops cumulatively: symbolic reinforcement stimulates moral expectations, whilst collective internalization converts these expectations into self-regulation. Animism, therefore, operates as a system of distributed governance, wherein social order is upheld through collective beliefs and symbolic force rather than centralized authority.

6.3 Animism in Contemporary Contexts

The ongoing existence of animism in contemporary Northeastern Thailand defies linear modernization theories that anticipate the erosion of Indigenous belief systems. The results, on the other hand, corroborate the idea of adaptive continuity, which says that animistic practices change over time but keep their basic relational logic (Kitiarsa, 2005). The five-stage model elucidates this resilience by illustrating how cultural learning processes facilitate both stability and transformation.

In modern settings influenced by urbanization, mobility, and digital media, animistic behaviors are being recontextualized within novel social and economic frameworks. Media and tourism spread rituals, sacred places, and spirit cults, making them more visible and powerful. However, aside from commodification, animism still offers moral grounding, social solidarity, and ways to negotiate identity (Pinthongvijayakul, 2019).

Additionally, the relational ontology inherent in animism presents profound implications for modern concerns, including environmental ethics. Animistic worldviews ascribe agency and moral value to natural elements, hence fostering ecological responsibility and sustainable actions (Berkes et al., 2000). In the five-stage model, these ecological standards are communicated, reinforced, and assimilated through ritual participation and symbolic frameworks, demonstrating how traditional belief systems can pose contemporary ethical dilemmas.

6.4 Theoretical Implications

This research enhances the literature by amalgamating three previously separate analytical domains: animism as relational ontology, cultural learning processes, and the construction of social norms. Previous studies have focused on symbolic meanings and ritual practices (Bird-David, 1999; Ingold, 2006; Baird, 2014), but this research proposes a process-oriented paradigm that elucidates how these components operate as instruments of cultural transmission and normative regulation.

The five-stage model serves as a conceptual link between micro-level interactions, such as ritual participation and socialization, and macro-level consequences, including social norms and collective identity. By connecting cultural learning mechanisms to social norm theory, the study shows that animism is not just a belief system, but also a way of running moral governance that is built into society.

In a broader sense, the results indicate that Indigenous knowledge systems ought to be perceived as dynamic and adaptive frameworks that encompass cognition, emotion, and social structure. This viewpoint adds to discussions across several fields on cultural sustainability, moral regulation, and the place of religion in modern cultures.

7. CONCLUSION

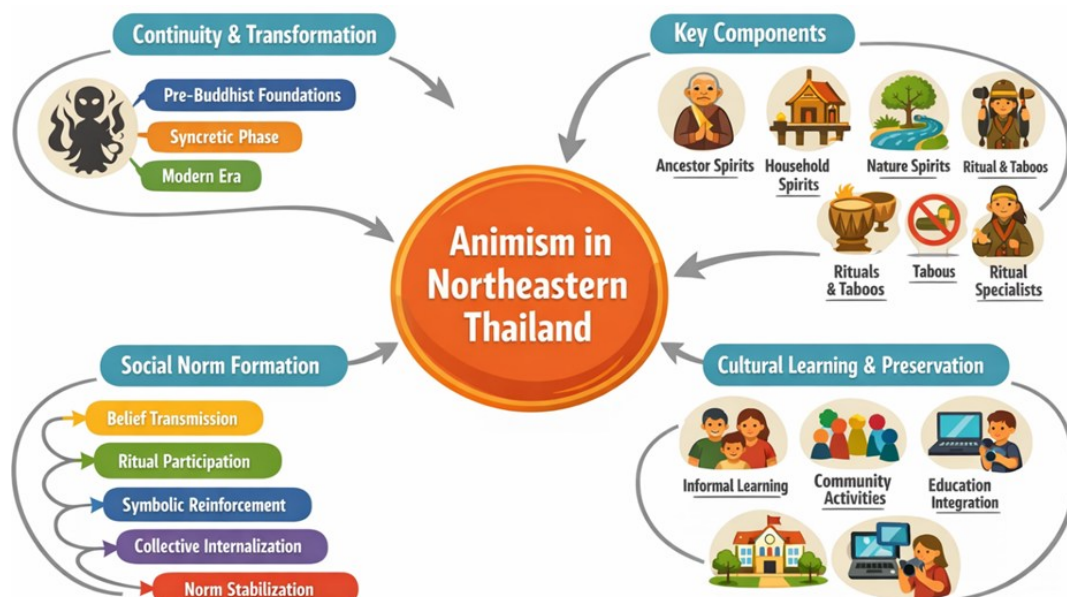
The research findings demonstrate that animism in Northeastern Thailand (Isan) has not simply waned; instead, it has persisted through continuity-by-transformation, adapting to shifts in political authority, the influence of Buddhist institutions, and contemporary globalization. Across three historical phases—pre-Buddhist foundations, Buddhist–animist syncretism, and the contemporary era—animism remains a relational worldview that shapes community understandings of causality, morality, and social responsibility through lasting obligations to ancestors, household guardians, and the spirits of place and nature.

Evidence further demonstrates that animism operates as a unified socio-cultural system rather than a mere assemblage of different concepts. The fundamental components—ancestor spirits, household spirits, nature spirits, rituals, taboos, and ritual specialists—work together to maintain familial ethics, domestic structure, environmental principles, communal unity, and rightful authority. Animism shapes belonging and identity through these mechanisms, while also adjusting to modern conditions such as media prominence, tourism, commodification, and changing state-religion interactions.

The results predominantly demonstrate that animism promotes the establishment of social norms through a five-stage process: belief transmission, ritual participation, symbolic reinforcement, collective internalization, and norm stabilization. This method clarifies how cosmological ideas evolve into socially enforceable regulations through repeated embodied actions, emotional regulation (fear and awe), and collective supervision.

Ultimately, animism functions as a cultural pedagogical framework with significant implications for conservation and education. Informal learning within families and rituals, community-driven activities led by cultural authorities, integration into formal curricula, and preservation techniques such as digital documentation and youth involvement collectively create a framework for sustaining animistic knowledge as an essential resource. Animism in Isan should be regarded not as an antiquated tradition, but as a dynamic framework for cultural education and ethical governance that continues to enhance community resilience and intercultural understanding within modern Thai culture.

Figure 2
Animism in Northeastern Thailand map



8. RECOMMENDATION

7.1. Policy Recommendations

7.1.1 Cultural policy frameworks should officially acknowledge Animism in Northeastern Thailand as an Indigenous knowledge system, rather than merely classifying it as folklore or intangible heritage. Government entities and local administrative bodies ought to endorse community-driven documentation, ritual preservation, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

7.1.2 Secondly, educational policy needs to promote the incorporation of local cosmologies and cultural practices into regional curricula within multicultural and culturally responsive educational frameworks. Such policy support would legitimize local knowledge within formal institutions while strengthening cultural identity and social cohesion.

7.1.3 Third, cultural preservation policies must designate financing for digital archiving, community museums, and participatory heritage initiatives to guarantee sustained transmission amid globalization and swift socio-economic transformation.

7.2. Practice Recommendations

7.2.1 Local leaders, ritual specialists, and educators should work to develop participatory cultural programs that involve youth in ritual preparation, storytelling, and heritage activities at the community level. Ritual events should be regarded not merely as religious celebrations but also as venues for intergenerational learning.

7.2.2 Educators ought to create experiential learning activities—such as excursions to sacred locations, oral history initiatives, and cultural workshops—that link students with local cosmology and ethical narratives. These events should prioritize critical reflection in conjunction with cultural enjoyment.

7.2.3 Digital instruments, such as community-managed archives and social media platforms, facilitate the documentation of oral traditions, rites, and local histories, while safeguarding community ownership and interpretative authority over their knowledge.

7.3. Further Research Recommendations

7.3.1 Future research should utilize empirical fieldwork to investigate the role of Animism as a cultural learning process among modern youth, especially in urbanizing regions of Northeastern Thailand.

7.3.2 Comparative analyses across Southeast Asian regions would enhance comprehension of the adaptation of animistic systems under varying political, religious, and economic circumstances.

It is advisable to conduct an interdisciplinary study that combines anthropology, education, psychology, and environmental studies to investigate the role of animistic relational worldviews in moral growth, the stabilization of social norms, and ecological sustainability in contemporary civilizations.

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