

## **Transcultural Ancestors and the Politics of Memory: Comparative Rituals in Thailand and Mexico**

**Thachamon Kamlangkuea**

Thaksin University, Phatthalung, Thailand

**Kanokkarn Mueangkaew**

Walailak University, Thailand

**Tashi Wangmo**

Royal Thimphu College, Royal University of Bhutan, Bhutan

Ancestor worship has often been examined within specific cultural or religious contexts, yet its role as a transcultural arena where memory, ritual, and power intersect remains underexplored in comparative scholarship. This article analyzes ancestor ceremonies in Thailand and Mexico, arguing that these practices operate beyond local religiosity to function as sites through which colonial and semi-colonial legacies are negotiated within contemporary global modernities. Drawing on postcolonial theory and transcultural memory studies, the study conducts a comparative review of ethnographic and historical literatures on Thailand's Sat Duen Sip and Mexico's Día de los Muertos. The analysis highlights shared ritual elements offerings, sacred spaces, and cyclical remembrance while also identifying divergences shaped by distinct spiritual formations and colonial experiences: Buddhist-animist traditions within a semi-colonial context in Thailand, and Catholic-indigenous syncretism under Spanish colonial rule in Mexico. Rather than treating ancestor worship as a static cultural inheritance, the article situates these rituals as evolving strategies of cultural negotiation, resistance, and identity-making. By bringing together two rarely juxtaposed cases from the Global South, this study contributes to ongoing Cultural Studies debates on ritual hybridity, transcultural memory, and alternative modernities beyond Eurocentric frameworks .

**Keywords:** Ancestor worship, Transcultural memory, Postcolonial ritual, Thailand and Mexico, Alternative modernities

Rituals of ancestor worship endure as vital cultural practices across the globe, yet they remain understudied as transcultural arenas where memory, ritual, and power intersect. In the context of accelerating globalization and lingering colonial legacies, these ceremonies illuminate how communities in the Global South negotiate identity, resist hegemonic narratives, and sustain alternative visions of modernity (Bhabha, 1994; Rothberg, 2009). Rather than static remnants of "tradition," ancestor worship operates as a dynamic cultural strategy that reconfigures relationships between the living and the dead, between locality and globality, and between memory and resistance (Assmann, 2011; Connerton, 1989).

Existing scholarship on ancestor veneration has largely focused on localized expressions whether in Asia, Africa, or Latin America often examining ritual form, symbolism, or continuity of belief (Nomnian &

Pillai, 2022; Mardones, 2020). While these studies enrich our understanding of cultural heritage, they rarely explore ancestor worship as a comparative phenomenon that traverses continents and historical trajectories. This gap is particularly evident in cross-regional analyses between Asia and Latin America, where colonial histories, syncretic spiritualities, and ritual practices reveal both convergences and divergences that unsettle conventional narratives of cultural difference (Erl, 2011).

This article addresses this gap by juxtaposing two geographically distant yet resonant traditions: Thailand's Sat Duen Sip festival in the southern region and Mexico's Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead). Both rituals emerge from hybrid spiritual cosmologies Buddhist-animist in Thailand and Catholic indigenous in Mexico and center on cycles of remembrance, communal gatherings, and offerings to ancestral spirits (McCleary & Simard, 2021; Enfield, 2020). Yet, the distinct colonial trajectories of Siam and New Spain have shaped divergent ritual forms and memory politics, prompting inquiry into how these traditions negotiate hybridity, bridge cultural worlds, and challenge hegemonic narratives of modernity.

Building on these shared symbolic elements of ancestor worship, it is essential to clarify why Thailand and Mexico have been selected for direct comparison in this study. Although separated by geography and shaped by distinct colonial trajectories semi-colonial encounters in Siam and Spanish colonization in New Spain both societies developed hybrid ritual forms that blend global religions with local cosmologies. Examining these traditions side by side illuminates how transcultural memory emerges not through direct contact but through parallel strategies of negotiating colonial legacies, communal identity, and alternative modernities in the Global South. This rationale positions the study beyond a descriptive cultural comparison, framing it instead as a critical inquiry into the politics of memory and ritual hybridity (Ionesov, 2022). Emphasizing how cultural institutions mediate collective memory and heritage can situate ritual hybridity within broader communicative practices. By differentiating between expressive and muted forms of ritual hybridity, the study refines postcolonial understandings of "third space" beyond contexts of formal colonial domination.

Drawing on postcolonial theory and transcultural memory studies, this article offers a critical-comparative review of ethnographic and historical literatures on Sat Duen Sip and Día de Muertos. By foregrounding ritual as a site of memory politics, the study reframes ancestor worship as an active negotiation of belonging, continuity, and resistance. In doing so, it contributes a rare cross-regional perspective to Cultural Studies bridging Asia and Latin America and advances debates on ritual hybridity, alternative modernities, and the theorization of memory from the Global South. Accordingly, this article examines how ancestor worship rituals in Thailand and Mexico negotiate colonial legacies and hybrid spiritualities, and how these practices function as cultural bridges and forms of resistance within broader transcultural memory frameworks.

### **Research Objectives**

- To examine how ancestor worship ceremonies in Thailand and Mexico negotiate colonial legacies and shape hybrid spiritualities within their respective cultural contexts.
- To analyze the role of these rituals as cultural bridges that connect past and present while simultaneously functioning as subtle forms of resistance to hegemonic narratives of modernity.
- To explore how a comparative analysis of Thai and Mexican ancestor worship contributes to broader discussions in transcultural memory studies and postcolonial cultural theory.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual**

#### *Postcolonial Theory and Ritual*

Postcolonial theory frames ancestor worship as a cultural practice shaped by colonial power relations and historical asymmetries (Bhabha, 1994). Thailand's rituals developed within a semi-colonial context through accommodation between animist traditions and Buddhist-nationalist reform (Keyes, 1987), while Mexico's Día de los Muertos reflects processes of hybridization forged under Spanish colonial rule (Brandes, 2006; Lomnitz, 2005). These cases illustrate Bhabha's concept of the third space through distinct configurations of hybridity muted hybridity in Thailand and expressive hybridity in Mexico shaped by

divergent colonial trajectories. Recent scholarship has extended the application of the “third space” beyond ritualized events to encompass everyday religious subjectivity. For instance, Khu (2026) demonstrate how Chinese Indonesian Buddhists negotiate ethnicity and nationality through quotidian religious practices, locating hybridity within lived subjectivity rather than ceremonial temporality. Read in dialogue with this perspective, the present study suggests that ritual hybridity constitutes only one register of hybridity among others. By focusing analytically on festivals and ceremonial time, this article foregrounds how the third space becomes publicly staged, symbolically intensified, and socially legible during ritual moments, thereby complementing existing work on everyday hybridity and refining postcolonial understandings of how hybrid identities are enacted across different temporal and social registers.

### *Transcultural Memory Studies*

Transcultural memory shifts focus from national narratives to cross-regional flows of remembrance (Assmann, 2011; Rothberg, 2009). Ancestor worship, while locally rooted, resonates globally through shared concerns with mortality and lineage. Comparing Thai and Mexican rituals highlights parallels in offerings, altars cycles of remembrance that emerge not from direct contact but from convergent memorial strategies, revealing patterns of resilience and hybridity across Global South contexts (Erll, 2011).

### *Ritual and Power*

Rituals, as performative practices, structure social relations and embody power dynamics through which authority and resistance are negotiated (Turner, 1967; Foucault, 1977). Ancestor worship ceremonies in Thailand and Mexico constitute contested arenas where state, religious, and local actors negotiate meaning: state-led heritage promotion often commodifies rituals, while local communities reclaim them as sites of spiritual continuity and subtle resistance (Pattana, 2018). Viewed through this lens, rituals function as dynamic sites where alternative visions of social order and modernity are enacted.

Within Cultural Studies debates, such practices can be understood through the concept of alternative modernities, which emphasize locally grounded reworkings of modernity rather than a binary of tradition versus rupture (Hall, 1996). Recent scholarship further suggests that alternative modernities do not only take collective ritual forms but also emerge as interior and ethical projects. For example, Khu and Khumairoh (2026) show how Muslim meditation practices in Indonesia negotiate modernity through self-reorientation and alternative ways of knowing and being. Read in dialogue with this perspective, the present study argues that ancestor worship represents one publicly visible modality through which alternative modernities are articulated, complementing interior and ethical forms of modern subjectivity.

Together, postcolonial theory, transcultural memory, and ritual-power analysis provide an integrated framework for examining ancestor worship as a site of hybrid negotiation, memory politics, and alternative modernities in semi-colonial and postcolonial contexts.

## **Methods**

### *Research Design and Approach*

This study adopts a comparative qualitative design that triangulates ethnographic observations from fieldwork conducted in southern Thailand in 2023 with a systematic critical review of historical and contemporary literature on Mexico. Rather than seeking strict methodological symmetry between the two cases, the study is intentionally structured as a review-based inquiry that prioritizes comparative interpretation over parallel data collection. This design reflects both practical constraints and a deliberate analytical choice to examine how ritual meanings are articulated and theorized across distinct scholarly and historical traditions.

Primary materials consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, ethnographic monographs, and institutional reports addressing Thailand’s Sat Duen Sip and Mexico’s Día de los Muertos. Sources were selected for their descriptive richness and interpretive value in conceptualizing rituals as contested cultural

narratives. Following Scott's (1990) framework for documentary evaluation, four criteria guided selection: accuracy, credibility, representativeness, and clarity. Eighteen documents published between 2015 and 2025 met these criteria and were deemed sufficient, as the corpus reached thematic saturation across ritual form, symbolism, and interpretive framing in both contexts.

The reliance on secondary literature in the Mexican case enables engagement with longer historical trajectories and transgenerational memory debates that would be difficult to access through short-term ethnographic observation. In contrast, the Thai case incorporates limited ethnographic observation to illuminate the contemporary enactment of ritual practices. This asymmetrical design is therefore not treated as a methodological limitation, but as an analytically productive strategy for examining ritual parallelism across differently situated epistemic and historical archives.

#### *Comparative and Symbolic Framework*

The comparative analysis draws on symbolic anthropology (Turner, 1967) to identify ritual practices and material forms—such as offerings, altars, and sacred spaces that encode cultural values and mediate ancestral memory. These symbolic elements are subsequently interpreted through postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994) and transcultural memory studies (Rothberg, 2009; Assmann, 2011) to examine how rituals articulate hybrid identities and negotiate hegemonic narratives of modernity across colonial and semi-colonial contexts.

By integrating these frameworks, the analysis moves beyond descriptive comparison toward theorizing ritual as a site where cultural continuity, power relations, and historical experience intersect.

#### *Supplementary Ethnographic Observation*

Although the study is primarily document-based, non-participant observation was conducted by the author during the Sat Duen Sip ceremony in Nakhon Si Thammarat, southern Thailand, in 2023. This ethnographic component is intentionally framed as supplementary rather than foundational to the analysis. Field notes documented publicly observable aspects of ritual performance, including altar arrangements, the sequencing of offerings, and the communal atmosphere of remembrance.

These observations do not function as an independent empirical dataset nor as a basis for cross-national comparison with the Mexican case; rather, they serve to sensitize the analysis to embodied, sensory, and performative dimensions of ritual that are often underrepresented in textual sources. In this sense, the ethnographic extra enriches interpretive depth without claiming methodological equivalence across cases. At the same time, this limited observational engagement does not allow for claims regarding participant interpretation, internal meaning-making, or intra-community variation, underscoring its role as an interpretive supplement rather than a comprehensive ethnographic account.

Observations were conducted in publicly accessible ceremonial spaces without interaction with participants or the collection of personal data. Accordingly, formal institutional ethics approval was not required under prevailing research guidelines.

#### *Analytical Strategy*

Data were synthesized through thematic coding along three analytical axes: (1) shared symbolic motifs linking the two traditions, such as food as a mediator between the living and the dead; (2) divergent ritual trajectories shaped by distinct colonial and religious histories (Buddhist-animist versus Catholic-indigenous); and (3) memory politics, wherein ancestor worship operates as both cultural continuity and subtle resistance under conditions of globalization.

By framing ritual as a dynamic cultural strategy rather than a static tradition, this methodological approach advances Cultural Studies perspectives by integrating symbolic interpretation with postcolonial and

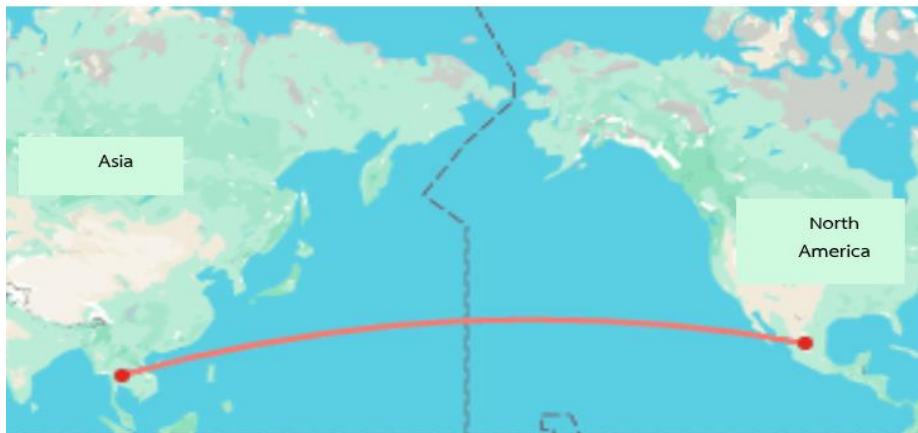
transcultural memory analysis. This strategy allows the comparison to move beyond typological similarity toward theorizing how ritual operates as a flexible cultural repertoire through which communities negotiate power, memory, and belonging under uneven modernities.

## Results

### *Ancestor Worship as Memory Politics: Transcultural Rituals in Thailand and Mexico*

The Sat Duen Sip tradition in Thailand and Mexico's Día de los Muertos exemplify deeply embedded cultural practices through which communities engage with ancestry, memory, and belonging. As illustrated in Figure 1, although Thailand and Mexico are geographically distant yet positioned along comparable latitudinal zones, their ritual forms emerge from markedly different historical, religious, and colonial trajectories. This juxtaposition underscores that transcultural parallels in ancestor worship arise not from direct contact but from parallel strategies of negotiating memory, identity, and continuity within the Global South.

In Southeast Asia, ancestor worship is widely practiced as a form of merit-making and intergenerational reciprocity embedded within Buddhist-animist cosmologies (Keyes, 1987; Tambiah, 1970). In southern Thailand, the Sat Duen Sip festival emphasizes gratitude toward ancestors and wandering spirits (preta), reinforcing familial obligations and ethical conduct through offerings and temple-centered rituals (McDaniel, 2011; Pattana, 2018). These practices sustain cultural memory through routinized domestic and community-based forms, reflecting a semi-colonial historical context in which spiritual plurality persists within regulated religious frameworks rather than through overt public spectacle (Reynolds, 2006; Jackson, 1989).



**Figure 1: Map of Thailand and Mexico**

Source: <https://www.google.com/maps> (2025)

By contrast, Día de los Muertos reflects a syncretic fusion of Indigenous cosmologies and Catholic traditions shaped by Spanish colonial rule (Brandes, 1998; Lomnitz, 2005). As shown in Figure 1, Mexico's ritual landscape developed within a colonial setting that produced visible and performative expressions of hybridity. Public altars (ofrendas), marigolds, ritual foods, and communal celebrations transform ancestral remembrance into a shared and nationally legible cultural practice (Carmichael & Sayer, 1991; Brandes, 2006), asserting collective identity while reclaiming Indigenous meanings within imposed religious forms.

Despite these contextual differences, both traditions share core symbolic practices most notably food offerings that mediate relationships between the living and the dead. From Mrap ritual foods in southern Thailand to Pan de Muerto and Calavera confections in Mexico, material culture operates as a tangible conduit of memory and belonging. Read alongside Figure 1, these convergences demonstrate how ancestor worship functions as a form of transcultural memory politics: locally grounded yet globally resonant practices

through which communities sustain cultural legacies, negotiate historical power relations, and assert resilience amid globalizing pressures.

### ***A Comparative Analysis of the Sat Duen Sip Tradition in Thailand and Día de los Muertos in Mexico Using the Theory of Symbolic Behavior and Symbolic Objects in Rituals***

The rituals in the Sat Duen Sip tradition in Thailand and Día de los Muertos in Mexico both involve symbolic objects used during the ceremonies, which share several similarities, though they differ slightly according to geographic location and cultural practices. Regarding the symbols in these rituals, Saipan (1996: 14-16) summarized Turner (1967) concept of ritual symbolism analysis, stating that rituals, in Turner's view, are part of a social process made up of symbols and sets of symbolic behaviors. Rituals, therefore, form a system of meaning that can be traced back to the social structure within which the ritual occurs. Understanding the meaning of symbols in rituals thus aids in comprehending the relationships that exist within the social structure as well. In studying the co-root culture in ancestor worship rituals in Thailand and Mexico, the researcher applied this approach in data analysis and found the following common features in both traditions:

### ***The Arrangement of Ancestor Altars in the Sat Duen Sip Tradition in Thailand and Día de los Muertos in Mexico***

Both Sat Duen Sip in southern Thailand and Día de los Muertos in Mexico construct ancestor altars through layered arrangements that materially encode relationships between the living and the dead. While the specific ritual objects differ, the shared use of hierarchical tiers reflects a common symbolic logic in which offerings mediate moral obligation, memory, and continuity across realms of existence.

In the *Sat Duen Sip* tradition, offerings are organized within the *Mrap* (or *Samrub*) into five ascending tiers that move from basic subsistence to ritualized and symbolic goods. Lower tiers emphasize material sustenance such as rice, dried foods, and long-lasting vegetables while upper tiers contain daily necessities, ritual sweets, and monetary or decorative items. This vertical progression symbolically maps the transition from bodily survival to moral reciprocity, reflecting a Buddhist–animist worldview in which ancestors are sustained through acts of merit-making and everyday provision.

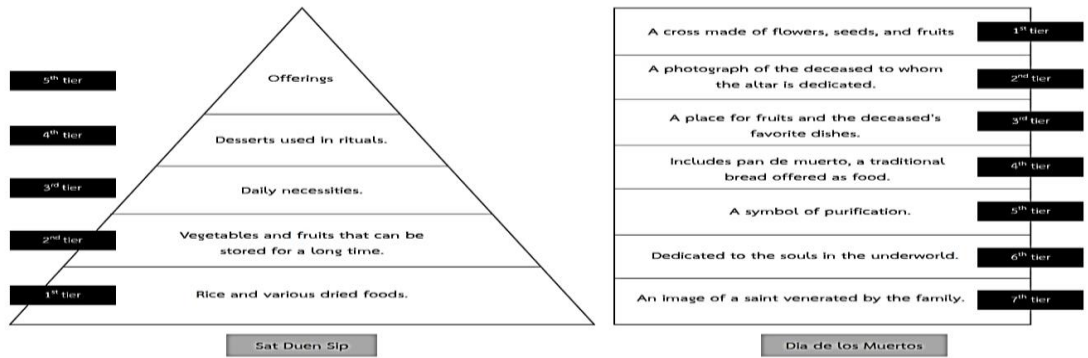
Similarly, the *Ofrenda* constructed during *Día de los Muertos* follows a stratified structure, typically comprising between two and seven layers, each associated with specific cosmological meanings (Malvido, 2006; Macedo, 2023). The arrangement incorporates photographs of the deceased, food offerings, bread for the dead (*pan de muerto*), symbols of purification, and religious icons. Rather than emphasizing material sufficiency, the *Ofrenda* foregrounds remembrance, spiritual guidance, and the soul's journey across cosmic realms shaped by Catholic and indigenous cosmologies.

Analytically, the similarity in layered altar construction across these two geographically and historically distinct traditions supports the argument for ritual parallelism without direct cultural contact. The vertical ordering of offerings operates as a shared symbolic grammar through which communities organize relationships between life, death, and morality. At the same time, the differences in altar composition reveal how ritual form is inflected by distinct historical trajectories. In the Thai case, the emphasis on consumable goods and daily necessities reflects a form of *muted hybridity*, where resistance and cultural continuity are embedded in ordinary practices rather than overt symbolism. In contrast, the Mexican *Ofrenda* exemplifies *expressive hybridity*, making syncretism between indigenous and Catholic elements visibly central to ritual performance.

By shifting attention from enumerating ritual items to interpreting their spatial and symbolic organization, this comparison demonstrates how altar arrangements function not merely as devotional

displays, but as culturally situated strategies for negotiating memory, power, and belonging under conditions of uneven modernities (see Figure 2).

*Figure 2: The*



*hierarchical arrangement of the ancestor altars in the Sat Duen Sip Tradition in Thailand and Día de los Muertos in Mexico, which share similar characteristics.*

These altar structures thus provide the material and cosmological infrastructure through which ancestral mediation becomes ritually possible.

### ***Rituals and Symbols: Mediating the Boundary Between the Living and the Dead***

In the Sat Duen Sip tradition of Southern Thailand, the sacred thread serves as a critical symbolic device that physically and metaphysically links the realm of the living with that of the deceased. This thread connects ritual loci such as the Urn of Ashes, Alms Bowl, Mrap, and Preta Grounds, establishing a liminal space where communication with ancestral spirits is made possible. This aligns closely with Turner's (1967) concept of liminality, which describes rituals as threshold moments where normal structures dissolve, enabling transformation and connection between worlds. Alongside the sacred thread, ritual offerings including flowers, incense, and candles operate as sensory mediators, materializing spiritual presence and facilitating relational bonds between the living and their ancestors. The participation of Buddhist monks as ritual intermediaries highlights the embeddedness of these practices within Buddhist cosmology and ethics, particularly the transfer of merit as a form of ongoing social and spiritual reciprocity.

Conversely, Mexico's Día de los Muertos utilizes Cempasúchil (marigold) flowers as central ritual symbols that animate the relationship between the living and the dead. As shown in Figure 3, the scattering of these flowers to form a pathway guides ancestral souls back to familial altars, symbolizing an embodied invocation and celebration of collective memory and belonging. This use of marigolds exemplifies Rothberg's (2009) theory of multidirectional memory, wherein multiple histories and cultural narratives intersect and coexist within ritual performance, allowing indigenous and colonial memories to be simultaneously recognized and reinterpreted. The vibrant color and pungent scent of the Cempasúchil, rooted in Nahuatl cosmology and colonial syncretism, are believed to attract and sustain the spirits during their earthly visitation (Macedo, 2023). This ritual use of flowers reveals a powerful transnational motif: floral offerings enact a sensory language through which ancestral presence is both evoked and maintained.

This comparative analysis elucidates how, despite differing religious and cultural frameworks Buddhist animism in Thailand and Catholic-indigenous syncretism in Mexico ritual symbols such as the sacred thread functions as a materialization of Turner's liminal space and marigolds evoke Rothberg's concept of multidirectional and identity. They facilitate encounters across temporal and spiritual boundaries, contesting linear notions of time and progress, and reaffirming intergenerational relationality.

Moreover, the use of flowers in ritual veneration reflects a broader regional and global practice, where fragrant and vibrant blooms serve as vehicles of affective and symbolic power within diverse Asian and Latin American spiritual traditions (Department of Cultural Promotion, n.d.). This shared emphasis underscores how ritual objects transcend particular religious doctrines to become sites of cultural negotiation, collective memory, and social cohesion.



**Figure 3:** Marigold flowers and sacred thread used in offerings during the *Sat Duen Sip* ritual in Nakhon Si Thammarat, southern Thailand.

### ***Ritual Confections: Symbolism and Cultural Meaning in the Sat Duen Sip and Día de los Muertos Traditions***

Building on this structural framework, ritual confections translate cosmological order into embodied and affective forms of ancestral engagement. Ritual confections occupy a central symbolic position in both Thailand's *Sat Duen Sip* and Mexico's *Día de los Muertos*, functioning as material mediators that translate relationships between the living and the dead into embodied, sensory forms. Rather than serving merely as consumable offerings, these sweets operate as culturally legible symbols through which moral obligation, remembrance, and continuity are enacted in everyday ritual practice.

In southern Thailand, ritual confections such as *Kanom Pong*, *Kanom La*, *Kanom Ba*, *Kanom Dee Sam*, and *Kanom Gong* encode metaphorical references to ancestral needs in the afterlife, including passage, protection, sustenance, continuity, and honor. Their placement within the *Sat Duen Sip* ritual reflects a Buddhist-animist moral economy in which care for ancestors is expressed through ordinary, reproducible food items. Analytically, these confections exemplify what this study conceptualizes as *muted hybridity*: the integration of spiritual belief and everyday material culture without overt symbolic spectacle, allowing resistance and continuity to be sustained through routine acts of provision rather than explicit ritual dramatization.

In contrast, confectionery symbolism in *Día de los Muertos* is characterized by a more visibly expressive aesthetic. Sugar skulls (*calaveras*) and *Pan de Muerto* transform mortality into a shared cultural experience by rendering death playful, edible, and visually prominent. The circular forms, decorative motifs, and ritualized consumption of these sweets foreground cyclical understandings of life and death, while marigolds and ornamental designs intensify affective engagement with ancestral presence. This mode of ritual expression aligns with *expressive hybridity*, in which indigenous cosmologies and Catholic symbolism are openly displayed and reworked through festive material culture.

Comparatively, ritual confections in both traditions operate within what Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes as a “third space,” where everyday materials are re-signified into hybrid symbols that negotiate boundaries between life and death, absence and presence, and tradition and modernity. The contrast between muted and expressive forms of confectionery symbolism demonstrates that ritual resistance and cultural continuity do not follow a single aesthetic or performative model. Instead, these edible symbols function as culturally specific languages of memory politics, enabling communities to sustain affective bonds, transmit moral values, and reaffirm collective identity through embodied and sensorial engagement with the past.

***Rituals Honoring Ancestors in the Sat Duen Sip Tradition of Thailand and Día de los Muertos in Mexico***

The ritual practices of the Sat Duen Sip tradition in Thailand and Día de los Muertos in Mexico converge on the shared human impulse to honor and maintain relationships with the deceased, though they manifest through culturally distinct forms and symbolic expressions. Within the Sat Duen Sip tradition, an important rite involves inscribing the names of deceased ancestors on paper, which are then ritually burned to ash and mixed with water. This water is ceremonially poured as a symbolic act of merit transfer to the departed. Rooted in Brahmanical influence, this practice resonates with the Shradha rites described by Harvey (1995), where offerings and commemorative acts serve to sustain the well-being of ancestral spirits and reaffirm familial continuity through ritual merit.

Contrastingly, Día de los Muertos centers on the presence of photographs of the deceased, prominently positioned atop the altar (Ofrenda) as focal points of remembrance and respect. Macedo (2023) elucidates that these images are often arranged so that the photograph faces away from the viewer, with a mirror placed before it, thereby reflecting the living relatives instead of the departed, as illustrated in Figure 4. This nuanced configuration symbolizes the porous boundary between life and death, inviting contemplation on the interdependence of the living and the dead within communal memory. The mirror thus becomes a metaphorical intermediary, underscoring the dialectic of absence and presence, loss and remembrance, which is fundamental to the ritual’s affective power.

Through this comparative lens, both traditions articulate complex ritual languages that negotiate the transmission of memory and the politics of ancestral honor. While their symbolic practices diverge one emphasizing ritual merit and transformation through elementally charged water, the other invoking visual presence and reflection their shared aim is to sustain the ongoing relational ties that bind communities across temporal divides.



***Figure 4: The altar for honoring ancestors in the Día de los Muertos tradition of Mexico.***

***The Celebration of the Sat Duen Sip Tradition in Thailand and Día de los Muertos in Mexico***

At the level of public ritual, the mediating logics discussed above are amplified and socially enacted through festival performances. In Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, the Sat Duen Sip tradition is enacted through the

Bun Sat Duen Sip festival, which integrates Buddhist merit-making practices with ancestral veneration and locally embedded cultural expressions. Beyond its religious function, the festival operates as a moral and pedagogical arena in which ethical values, cosmological beliefs, and local identity are actively transmitted across generations. The participation of younger community members underscores the role of ritual not merely as commemoration, but as a socially embedded mechanism for sustaining moral order and intergenerational continuity within a rapidly changing context.

By contrast, the Día de los Muertos tradition in Mexico is characterized by highly visible and performative public celebrations, including parades, cemetery rituals, and the construction of elaborate *ofrendas* (Figure 5). As Cordova (2019) observes, the festival has maintained cultural vitality not only within Mexico but also among Mexican diasporic communities, particularly in the United States. In these transnational settings, Día de los Muertos functions as a public affirmation of cultural identity, transforming remembrance into a collective spectacle that reinforces social cohesion and cultural resilience under conditions of migration and globalization.



*Figure 5: The parade celebrating the Día de los Muertos festival in Mexico.*



*Figure 6: The procession of the Sat Duen Sip tradition in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Southern of Thailand.*

While differing in scale and performative intensity, both festivals employ ritual symbolism to mediate relationships between the living and the dead. In Southern Thailand, this mediation is rendered through moralized symbolism, most notably in the incorporation of *Preta* effigies (Figure 6). Rooted in Buddhist cosmology, the *Preta* embodies the consequences of moral transgression, making ethical teachings visible and emotionally resonant. These effigies extend the ritual beyond remembrance, positioning the festival as a site of ethical reflection and social pedagogy. In contrast, Día de los Muertos emphasizes affective

engagement through celebratory aesthetics, wherein death is rendered familiar, communal, and emotionally accessible rather than morally cautionary.

Rather than reiterating ritual sequences already summarized in Table 1, this comparison highlights a shared cultural logic of ancestral mediation expressed through divergent ritual modalities. Both traditions mobilize material symbols altars, offerings, and performative practices to bridge temporal and ontological boundaries between life and death. Their differences, however, illuminate contrasting strategies for negotiating modernity and collective memory. Sat Duen Sip foregrounds moral discipline and ethical continuity within a Buddhist cosmological framework, whereas Día de los Muertos emphasizes expressive visibility and cultural affirmation within pluralistic and transnational social contexts.

**Table 1**

*Comparative overview of the Sat Duen Sip tradition (Thailand) and Día de los Muertos (Mexico): Ritual Sequence and Symbolic Meaning*

Aspect	Sat Duen Sip (Thailand)	Día de los Muertos (Mexico)	Symbolic Meaning
<b>Ritual days</b>	1st and 15th nights of the 10th lunar month (September-October)	November 1-2 (All Saints' and All Souls' Days)	Both reflect cyclical cosmologies of death and renewal tied to agricultural and spiritual calendars
<b>Altars</b>	"Mrap" with five tiers: food, tools, sweets, money	"Ofrenda" with 2-7 tiers: cross, food, Pan de Muerto, saints	Layered altars symbolize cosmological order and bridge between earthly and spiritual realms
<b>Offerings</b>	Five symbolic sweets (Kanom La, Kanom Pong, etc.)	Sugar skulls, Pan de Muerto, marigolds	Confections encode cultural metaphors of passage, dignity, memory, and celebration of life/death
<b>Mediating symbols</b>	Sacred thread linking ritual loci	Marigold flowers guiding spirits	Material mediators between living and dead, embodying liminality and multidirectional memory
<b>Community practices</b>	Almsgiving, merit-making, burning ancestor names	Cemetery cleaning, parades, music, costumes	Both reinforce intergenerational ties and collective memory through performative ritual
<b>Moral/Educational role</b>	Preta effigies teach Buddhist ethics	Mirrors on altars emphasize reflection on life/death	Ritual pedagogy transmits moral values and cultural resilience

Theoretically, this comparison contributes to debates on ritual hybridity and cultural parallelism by demonstrating that analogous ritual functions can emerge independently across cultural contexts without direct historical diffusion. These traditions exemplify parallel ritual formations, in which communities confronting distinct socio-historical conditions develop comparable symbolic responses to shared existential concerns surrounding death, memory, and belonging. Such parallelism challenges diffusionist explanations and instead highlights ritual as a flexible cultural resource through which moral values, collective memory, and social identity are continually negotiated in context-specific ways.

Ultimately, the celebration of Sat Duen Sip and Día de los Muertos illustrates how ancestor veneration operates not only as an act of remembrance but as a dynamic social practice that reconfigures identity, ethical values, and communal cohesion. By situating these festivals within a comparative analytical framework, this study demonstrates that ritual similarity does not imply cultural sameness; rather, it reveals how shared human concerns are articulated through culturally distinct yet theoretically comparable forms of symbolic practice.

## Discussion

This comparative analysis of ancestor worship in Thailand (Sat Duen Sip) and Mexico (Día de los Muertos) demonstrates how ritual practices simultaneously sustain cultural continuity and negotiate modern transformations. Despite emerging from distinct cosmological traditions Buddhist-animist in Thailand and Catholic-indigenous in Mexico both rituals operate through shared cultural logics of remembrance, sacred space, and cyclical time, linking the living and the dead to reaffirm collective belonging across generations.

At the same time, significant divergences emerge in ritual scale, visibility, and institutional mediation. In Thailand, ancestor rites remain largely domestic and temple-centered, embedded in merit-making practices regulated by Buddhist calendars and monastic authority. In contrast, Mexico's Día de los Muertos functions as a highly public and performative festival, mobilizing communities, state institutions, and national heritage narratives. These differences reveal how religious hierarchies and state formations shape ritual expression, producing intimate and localized practices in Thailand and nationalized spectacles in Mexico.

These contrasts are best understood through each society's relationship to colonial power. Mexico's rituals developed under formal colonial domination, where indigenous cosmologies were subordinated to Catholicism. The resulting hybridity reflects direct confrontation between colonizer and colonized, exemplifying Bhabha's (1994) "third space" as an arena of visible negotiation and counter-hegemonic rearticulation. Thailand, by contrast, occupies a semi-colonial position in which imperial pressure operated through reform, regulation, and selective incorporation rather than rupture. Here, animist traditions persist within Buddhist orthodoxy through accommodation rather than overt resistance.

This distinction produces different configurations of hybridity. In Mexico, hybridity is expressive, public, and politicized; in Thailand, it is muted, routinized, and embedded in everyday ritual practice. Thai ancestor worship thus sustains plurality through continuity rather than symbolic opposition, complicating universalist applications of postcolonial theory that privilege confrontation as the primary mode of resistance. Ritual symbols materialize these dynamics. Sacred threads in Sat Duen Sip enact liminality within a regulated Buddhist cosmology, while marigolds in Día de los Muertos publicly stage multidirectional memory and collective belonging. Ritual foods in both contexts function within a third space, transforming everyday materials into hybrid symbols mediating tradition and change.

Finally, both traditions confront pressures from globalization, tourism, and generational change. Rather than signaling decline, these adaptations underscore ritual resilience, affirming Hall's (1996) argument that cultural identity is continuously negotiated and reshaped through social practice and collective memory. Similar dynamics of cultural preservation and adaptation have been observed in other societies facing modernization pressures, where communities actively sustain traditional cultural practices as part of collective identity (Nguyen & Khuat, 2025). Overall, the analysis advances Cultural Studies by demonstrating that third spaces in the Global South are historically contingent, producing multiple forms of hybridity and alternative modernities shaped by distinct colonial and semi-colonial trajectories.

Furthermore, the contemporary evolution of these rituals reveals a critical tension between sacred preservation and global commodification. In Mexico, the Disneyfication of Día de los Muertos, accelerated by global media and cultural industries, has transformed local memory into a visible brand of national identity, often risking the dilution of its subversive indigenous roots. Conversely, Thailand's Sat Duen Sip maintains a more localized and muted resilience against global consumerism, remaining closely tied to monastic merit-making practices. However, both contexts demonstrate that ancestor worship is not a static relic but a dynamic form of memory politics. These rituals function as a Global South response to Eurocentric modernity, illustrating how cultural traditions are mobilized to negotiate identity and social change within contemporary societies. Similar patterns of culturally embedded beliefs and ritual practices have been documented in other communities where traditions are transmitted across generations as part of collective cultural identity (Shahzad et al., 2024). Such dynamics suggest that the past is not merely a historical residue but remains an active and negotiated presence that continues to shape political and cultural belonging in the twenty-first century.

### Conclusion

This study demonstrates that ancestor worship rituals in Thailand's *Sat Duen Sip* and Mexico's *Día de los Muertos* function as dynamic and transcultural sites of memory politics rather than static cultural inheritances. While grounded in distinct religious cosmologies and historical trajectories, both rituals articulate shared human concerns with ancestry, continuity, and belonging, illustrating how communities actively negotiate identity within socio-political contexts shaped by colonial legacies and contemporary globalization.

The comparative analysis shows that ritual practices, despite cultural and geographical distance, converge as strategic forms of cultural resilience and symbolic negotiation rather than overt resistance. Thailand's Buddhist-animist merit-making traditions and Mexico's Catholic-indigenous public commemorations illustrate how memory is materially and performatively mediated through offerings, sacred objects, and ritual spaces. Read through the analytical lenses of liminality (Turner), multidirectional memory (Rothberg), and the postcolonial third space (Bhabha), these cases reaffirm the continued relevance of established theoretical frameworks for interpreting hybrid ritual formations in the Global South.

Rather than treating ancestor worship as a residual or folkloric practice, this study refines existing discussions in postcolonial and transcultural memory studies by showing how such rituals operate as evolving cultural strategies through which communities sustain collective memory, negotiate power relations, and articulate alternative modernities. By bringing together two rarely juxtaposed cases from Southeast Asia and Latin America, the article offers a cross-regional perspective that extends ongoing debates on ritual, memory, and identity. In doing so, it invites further interdisciplinary and comparative research into how transcultural ritual practices continue to shape social belonging and historical consciousness in postcolonial contexts.

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