

Intangible heritage and rituals of spirit purification embedded in the cultural landscape of riverfront communities in Southern Laos

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the indigenous practices of local communities in establishing connections between local spirits and natural features through the cultural process known as *Pop* (ປອບ). The term *Pop* carries multiple meanings: (1) literally, it means 'to soothe, pacify, console'; and (2) culturally, it refers to a malevolent spirit believed to consume the intestines and organs of its host. *Pop* also refers to a social phenomenon involving the exclusion and expulsion of those who are seen as spiritually afflicted or socially alienated from their communities. The study specifically focuses on the purification process, known as *Pua-Pop* (ປວງປອບ), conducted in waterfront villages along the Mekong River in Southern Laos. These villages serve as sanctuaries for individuals accused and expelled from their original communities. Consequently, the village becomes a diverse community comprising people who share collective spiritual connections to the land and its natural resources.

The study employed cultural landscape surveys that provided initial insights into agricultural land-use practices, livelihoods, and the role of spirits and natural features in the village. Through an analysis of the recovery process experienced by individuals previously affected by *Pop* possession, the study examined the emergence of the *Pua-Pop* ritual as a traditional management system in riverfront communities within the Greater Mekong subregion, specifically in Southern Laos. The findings revealed a strong connection between the purification ritual processes and the riverine spiritual landscape, encompassing the Mekong River, grassland and swamp areas.

Keywords

Mekong river, Traditional management systems, Spiritual landscape, Southern Laos, Khalam, Cultural ecology, Spirit mediumship, Riverine settlements, Social exclusion and reintegration, Ritual space

Introduction

In Northeastern Thailand (*Isan*) and in Laos, all the Thai as well as Tai groups have strong beliefs in supernatural beings such as spirits (*Phi*). With the progress of Buddhism, accompanied by nation-state construction, these beliefs have been marginalised, although they are still alive in people's daily lives. While the *Phi* cult in *Isan* seems to have undergone a transformation to become a Buddhist-dominated religious culture, Buddhismisation has not occurred in Laos, contrarily leading to an attribution to the 'indigenous culture' of certain elements (Tsumura 2013; Kouritsky 2010; Holt 2009). In rural Thailand's *Isan* and in Laos, the superstitious belief of *Phi Pop* (ผีปอบ) can still be found. *Phi Pop* is a malevolent entity taking the form of a cannibalistic being composed of human and animal flesh, blood and intestines. Among the various supernatural beings in the area, this particular evil spirit is especially frightening to the local villagers.

Ethnographic accounts have documented instances of individuals being afflicted by *Pop* and subsequently banished from their villages (LePoer 1989; Davis 1999; Ancuta 2017). Early references to the phenomenon of *Phi Pop* can be found in classic ethnographic accounts. Raquez (1902) provided one of the earliest Western descriptions of *Phi Pop* in Laos, noting its role in popular beliefs and local cosmology. Condominas (1968) also discussed *Phi Pop* in his '*Notes sur le Bouddhisme populaire en milieu rural lao (III)*', particularly its persistence in everyday village life and its association with fear, illness and social exclusion. More recently, (Hours 1981) examines how possession and purification rituals in Southern Laos – practised since the 1930s – function as mechanisms of both spiritual healing and social regulation, reflecting territorial marginality and the management of deviant powers. Similarly, in this study, a unique village in the southern region conducts *Phi Pop* purification rituals to avert calamity and mitigate the influence of possession. These rituals serve as a means of eliminating the malevolent forces associated with *Pop* and of safeguarding the community from potential disasters. People from neighbouring villages, the capital Vientiane, northern Luang Prabang and *Isan* in Thailand also visit the village to be purified by a spirit medium there, with several exorcism rituals performed for those believed to be possessed. These rituals have a strong relationship with a small shrine, ritual hut, river, pond and other sacred landscape elements (Nakamura et al. 2022), and such beliefs form a unique cultural landscape. Importantly, in this context, the purification rituals of *Pop* are not only

symbolically linked to water but physically enacted through specific water features – ponds, swamps and the Mekong River – that structure the ritual process.

Several local communities living close to both cultural and natural heritage sites play a key role in the survival of heritage itself through traditional custodianship systems (TCS) and traditional management systems (TMS) (De Jesus Jopela 2011). One of the best approaches for the heritage management of sacred sites and community landscapes should involve a participatory management system (Taruvunga 2007). The important issue is recognition and respect for the rights of people in relation to their heritage while avoiding overlooking stakeholders in the decision-making process and potential conflicts, which is key to the success of community engagement. On the other hand, recognising and respecting the indigenous knowledge system and its people existing in the community would be useful for creating dialogue in the *in-situ* conservation process. Adding a dimension of intangible cultural heritage to this discussion further emphasises the richness and complexity of community heritage. The community is therefore certainly the caretaker and guardian of the heritage resource. Communities have long preserved and protected what today is called *heritage* (Nilson and Thorell 2018). It has been integrated into community life and continues to play an important role in their lives. Although traditional knowledge related to the conservation and management of heritage has been overlooked by modern conservation processes, these knowledge systems can be applied and adapted in contemporary contexts.

The *Pop* rituals intricately intertwine intangible cultural heritage (ICH) with the environment. ICH, including rituals, embodies the essence of tradition and identity that has been passed down through generations. These practices unite communities, preserving collective memory and wisdom. As custodians, communities safeguard these rituals, fostering resilience and solidarity during the process of modernisation. ICH evolves over time, shaping community identity and sustainability (Agus et al. 2023). Through these rituals, specific spaces within the village environment are designated and utilised. It is fascinating that as these spaces become the backdrop for rituals, and that rules and norms emerge naturally to govern the usage of such environments. This symbiotic relationship between rituals and the environment highlights a unique social ecosystem where cultural

practices both shape and are shaped by the physical surroundings. A significant revelation emerging from this research lies in the understanding that the sustainability of both the environment and the landscape is intricately tied to the performance of these rituals.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to reveal the meaning underlying purification rituals submerged in spiritual and cultural landscapes, including the invisible worldviews and beliefs that lie behind the visible ones of houses and material culture. This also reveals that communities view natural sites as sacred places used to connect with ancestors. These beliefs are expressed through local rules and customs that shape behavior in sacred areas, often tied to spirits and ancestral reverence (Kotze and van Rensburg 2003).

Research objective and methodology

This study aims to explore the spiritual and cultural landscape of a waterfront village in Southern Laos. It focuses on how customary knowledge informs the management and preservation of ecological environments and natural resources. The research examines this landscape through the lens of traditional management systems embedded in *Pop* purification rituals practised along the Mekong River. To capture the cultural landscape character, a cartographic inventory of landmarks was recorded, involving both the physical elements and the symbolism of a space that does not physically exist (Grunenberg and Hilpert 2021). Overlaid mapping was then employed to examine the surveyed data, and the trend findings displayed on the map determined their relative position in the space.

The data collected during the survey was then analysed and evaluated to understand the cultural significance of the landscape, as defined by the values recognised by the community – particularly its spiritual and social meanings in relation to local practices and landscape management, in line with the Burra Charter (2013) framework. This analysis included identifying patterns of land use and settlement, as well as the relationship between the natural and cultural features of the landscape, to identify the cultural resources within the spiritual landscape system. However, due to the privacy of the research subjects and the sensitivity of the information, it was essential to keep the survey area confidential, though it is situated in the southern part of Champasak Province, Laos.

Results

In the villages located near the river, people live in constant contact with the ecological environment of the watershed, which offers both sustenance and potential dangers, reflecting a complex relationship shaped by dependence, caution and traditional knowledge. Although efforts to preserve rich cultural diversity in the waterfront are advanced, the cultural landscape has been lost due to changes in the ecological environment and living style.

Cultural landscape, geography and social structure ***Landscape characteristics***

Cultural landscapes are not merely the result of physical interaction with nature but are expressions of deep, lived relationships between people, place and belief systems. As Taylor (2023) emphasises, the cultural landscape construct emerges from an intellectual framework that integrates local values, cosmology and land-use practices. In Southeast Asia, including in Laos, landscapes are often understood through spiritual, relational and customary dimensions rather than static historical monuments (Taylor 2009). A cultural landscape is a term used to describe the way in which a community shapes its natural environment, imbuing it with cultural, historic and social significance (Walter and Hamilton 2014). A cultural landscape emphasises the tangible and intangible ways people shape and interpret their environment (Carboni and de Luca 2016; Martorell Carreño 2003; Pătru-Stupariu, Pascu, and Bürgi 2019). It represents the imprint of human activities, beliefs and traditions on the land, encompassing features such as architecture, agricultural patterns, religious sites and social practices. The distinction lies in the profound interconnection between people and place, where the landscape becomes a canvas upon which the cultural identity of a community is painted. By understanding it as a cultural landscape, the investigation can unravel the intricate layers of significance attached to various elements within the village, such as ritual sites, communal spaces and architectural structures.

The area under study, which is located in the *Siphandone* area along the Mekong River in southern Laos, is characterised by harmonious interaction between the local people and their natural surroundings. The cultural landscape properties in this region (Figure 1) encompass both land- and water-use practices, which are deeply intertwined with the daily lives, traditions and livelihoods of the communities residing there (Huynh, Lagrée, and Drogoul 2021). The area consists of a maze



Figure 1
Cultural landscape of *Siphandone*: villagers fishing and bathing in the Mekong River, reflecting the close link between daily life and the riverine landscape. Source: Photo by Patiphol Yodsurang.

of channels and several small islands that can be reached by taking a short ride in a motorised boat (Jensen 2017). The archipelago consists of notable landscape features characterised by islands, waterfalls, river channels, wetlands, sandy beaches, agricultural fields, traditional villages and abundant biodiversity (Table 1). Thus, the area exhibits a captivating landscape shaped by the overall character of its natural features combined with its cultural heritage.

Water and land use

Fishing is a significant aspect of the local culture and economy. The Mekong River and its tributaries support a rich variety of fish species, making fishing a vital livelihood for many communities. Traditional fishing techniques, passed down through generations, coexist with modern methods, contributing to the cultural diversity of the region (Figure 2). Beyond fishing and agriculture, other water-based livelihoods thrive in the Mekong area. Boat building, handicraft production and ecotourism contribute to the local economy and serve as a testament to the resourcefulness and creativity of the local communities. These activities are deeply rooted in the region's natural resources and cultural heritage, representing a sustainable and mutually beneficial relationship with the water. Water management and irrigation systems also play a vital role

Table 1
Landscape features

Landscape features	Description
Islands	Characterised by a cluster of islands scattered throughout the river. The islands vary in size and shape, providing a diverse and enchanting landscape.
River channels	The river splits into multiple channels as it flows through the area, forming a labyrinth of waterways.
Sandbars and beaches	Numerous sandy beaches and sandbars are natural formations consisting of sediment deposition and erosion processes influenced by various factors, including water flow, sediment load, seasonal variations and the river's geomorphology.
Wetlands and flood plains	Wetlands and flood plains are formed by the seasonal rise and fall of the river. During the rainy season, these areas are inundated, creating a vibrant ecosystem that supports a diverse range of biodiversity.
Agricultural fields	The riverbanks are dotted with lush agricultural fields. Local communities engage in farming activities, cultivating crops such as rice, vegetables and fruits.
Traditional villages	The landscape is filled with traditional villages inhabited by local communities. The villages often feature stilted houses built from bamboo and wood, reflecting the traditional architectural style of the region. The villages offer a glimpse into the local way of life and cultural practices.
Biodiversity	A rich and diverse array of flora and fauna. The surrounding water bodies and wetlands support numerous species of fish. The seasonal fishing practices are influenced by the natural food and water overflow system.



Figure 2
A local fisherman casts a net using traditional methods.
Source: Photo by Patiphol Yodsurang.

in the Mekong area. Given the importance of agriculture, local communities have developed various methods to control water flow and distribute it to agricultural fields. Canals, channels and reservoirs are constructed to provide efficient irrigation, particularly during the dry season, ensuring the success of crops and sustaining livelihoods.

The primary land-use practice in this area is agriculture. The fertile soil and abundant water resources from the Mekong River enable the cultivation of a variety of crops. Rice, maize, vegetables and fruits are grown extensively, forming the backbone of the local economy. The traditional flood-plain farming techniques employed by some communities reflect a deep understanding of the land and its resources (Yodsurang, Uekita, and Shimizu 2022). Farmers depend on rainfall as the primary source of water to irrigate their fields. They carefully monitor weather patterns and make use of rainwater collection to maximise water availability during the crucial planting period. This enables farmers to supplement the water needs of their rice fields, ensuring proper growth and crop development. This traditional approach to farming demonstrates the

ingenuity and resourcefulness of the local communities in utilising the available natural resources to sustain their agricultural practices.

The local community actively manages these wetlands and flood plains, ensuring they retain water throughout the dry season. They construct small dams or barriers to retain water within the swamps, allowing for a sustained water supply to nearby rice fields. By utilising the water stored in the swamps, farmers can mitigate the impact of drought and maintain sufficient moisture levels in their fields during critical growth stages. Moreover, swamps also contribute to the overall health and biodiversity of the ecosystem in the area. They provide a habitat for various aquatic species, including fish, frogs and waterbirds. The presence of swamps adds to the cultural and environmental significance of the landscape, showcasing the intricate relationship between local communities and their surrounding natural resources.

In addition to relying on rainwater for irrigation, farmers in this area also recognise the importance of swamps within their landscape. Swamps are scattered along the riverbank and serve as valuable resources for agricultural purposes. They act as natural reservoirs, capturing and storing water during periods of rainfall. Local communities also rely on these wetlands for fishing and for the collection of aquatic resources.

Swamps are often surrounded by a forest cluster. These forests play a vital role in the management and preservation of the swamp ecosystem. The forests serve as a buffer zone around the swamps, safeguarding them from encroachment and unsustainable exploitation. They are indirectly managed collectively by local communities, with rules and regulations to ensure sustainable use of the forest and swamp resources. The area holds cultural and spiritual significance for the local communities. Within these forests, community members may establish spirit houses – small shrines dedicated to protective or ancestral spirits believed to inhabit the area – and/or designate areas as community graveyards. By utilising the forests for spiritual and burial practices, the local communities express a pragmatic respect for the land, rooted in beliefs that seek to appease spiritual forces and prevent misfortune or illness. These practices contribute to the cultural identity and heritage of the community, further enhancing the significance of the entire landscape.

Rules have been established to protect natural resources, aligning with the beliefs and spiritual practices of the communities – particularly through *Hit-Khoung* (ຮີດ-ຄອງ) and *Khalam* (ຄະລຳ). *Hit-Khoung* simply means ‘customs and traditions’ and refers to longstanding cultural practices passed down among the people of *Isan* and Laos. This includes the well-known set of *Hit Sip Song Khoung Sip Si* (ຮີດສິບສອງ ຄອງສິບສີ່), which outlines 12 monthly rituals (*Hit*) and 14 moral and social codes (*Khoung*) guiding communal life (Punnotok 2004; Prammanee 2013). These rituals have evolved through continuous practice into a structured and customary tradition. Such traditions reflect the deep-rooted cultural values and beliefs of the *Isan* and Laos people and are essential for maintaining social harmony and preserving their cultural identity. These cultural traditions and practices, which are rigidly adhered to, place importance on fulfilling one’s responsibilities and obligations for the betterment of society.

Meanwhile, *Khalam* (taboo) is considered sinful and punishable when one goes against cultural traditions, violates the law, disobeys regulations or acts against the moral principles of religion. The severity of the punishment may vary, ranging from significant consequences to minor penalties or, in some cases, societal disapproval. *Khalam* is often straightforward and clear, making the taboos easily comprehensible to individuals within the community. They are communicated through oral traditions, stories and cultural practices, ensuring widespread awareness and understanding. The simplicity of the taboos allows for their practical application in daily life. Community members can easily identify actions or behaviours considered to be taboo and adjust their conduct accordingly. This shared understanding fosters a sense of unity and collective responsibility since everyone is aware of the boundaries and expectations set by the taboo. Moreover, the ease with which taboos are used facilitates their enforcement within the community. Since community members are familiar with the consequences of violating taboos, they are more likely to self-regulate and adhere to the established norms. Certain taboos exist to ensure the protection and preservation of the forest and swamp environments. These taboos explicitly prohibit actions such as cutting down trees, filling the swamp with tap water, polluting the water sources, and so on. The community recognises the vital role that these natural habitats play in maintaining the ecological balance and providing various benefits, with the spirit and ritual laid on top.

Phi Pop and Pua: an alienation and purifying system

It has been widely reported in ethnographies that people possessed by *Phi Pop* were exiled from the village over time (Tsumura 2015; Hayashi 2000; Fukuhara 2007; Raquez 1902; Condominas 1968; Hours 1981). However, an important aspect that remains unclear and unreported is the living reality of individuals following their exclusion from certain locations. Throughout the process of investigating the cultural landscape, it has become evident that a strong relationship exists with the cultural landscape protection system. Consequently, there arises a need to delve into the intricacies of these rituals to comprehensively understand the relationship between the local populace and the landscape. Such an investigation would clarify how the local community engages in preservation practices under specific circumstances using the snowball method. The snowball research technique is where initial participants refer others to participate, creating a growing snowball of respondents. It is used for studying hard-to-reach or hidden populations, although it can introduce biases due to its reliance on social networks (Dragan and Isaic-Maniu 2022). The results revealed that three specific locations in Laos were identified as exhibiting characteristics of exclusionary practices and engaging in *Phi Pop* purification rituals. However, it is noteworthy that these practices manifested in a distinct manner within each location, shedding light on the diverse manifestations of exclusionary behaviours and purification rituals within the context of the area under investigation.

Although the immediate aim of the ritual appears to be the exorcism of *Phi Pop*, the annual repetition suggests deeper, ongoing communal functions. These rituals serve not only to purify individuals but also to reaffirm social cohesion, manage moral boundaries and maintain the village’s spiritual equilibrium. The cyclical nature of the ritual points to its role in sustaining collective identity and negotiating the tension between exclusion and reintegration. Understanding these layered meanings is key to interpreting the full significance of the ritual practice.

In most cases, individuals come to the village either after being accused of being possessed by *Phi Pop* or due to their own involvement in spirit manipulation practices (*Lièn Khouang*, ເລີ່ມຂອງ). These cases spread through word of mouth, leading afflicted persons to seek purification. Some return to their original communities after completing six consecutive rituals over three years, while

others choose to remain due to fear, stigma or a sense of belonging. The ritual is not repeated for the same spirit, but as part of a recurring cycle of renewal, reflecting the belief that ongoing spiritual balance is needed to maintain order within the village.

Within the community under study, purification has historically been performed twice a year in approximately January and April (the third day of the waxing moon of the third month and the sixth day of the waxing moon of the sixth month of the Laos lunar calendar). A significant aspect of the ritual process is the collective participation of participants, individuals (people possessed by *Phi Pop*) and villagers at the residence of *Mae Thiam* (ແມ່ທຶມ, woman spirit medium), a key figure in the purification process. Throughout the entire process, *Mae Thiam* is supported by three key male assistants, known as *Pho Ja* (ພໍ່ຈາ), who play crucial roles in facilitating the ceremony. These assistants contribute their knowledge, skills and dedication to ensure the smooth execution of the ritual and its associated activities. Their assistance encompasses various responsibilities, such as preparing the ceremonial space, coordinating offerings, managing the participation of attendees, and assisting in the communication between *Mae Thiam* and the spiritual realm. It is worth mentioning that within the community, there exist two prominent spirit mediums (for the north and south of the village) who jointly orchestrate the purification ritual. As the village has expanded in size and population, the collaborative effort between these spirit mediums has become essential to ensure the efficacy and inclusiveness of the purification process. Together, they collaborate in the arrangement and establishment of a dedicated ceremonial space. The ritual venue is adorned with a multitude of offerings intended for *Pho Thao Tuem* (ພໍ່ຖ້າຕຸ້ມ), an ancestral spirit revered for his purifying power. As the name suggests – ‘*Pho*’ meaning father and ‘*Thao*’ denoting an elder – he is regarded as a powerful ancestral figure within the local belief system, embodying both protective and disciplinary spiritual roles, the revered spirit *Pho Thao Tuem*, who possesses *Mae Thiam* during the ritual, as well as other spirits of significance within the local belief system.

As the ritual progresses, *Mae Thiam*, now possessed by *Pho Thao Tuem*, leads the gathering known as *Liang Phi* (ເລີຍຟີ), which literally means ‘feeding the spirits’ and refers to offerings of food, drink and other items to appease and honour them. She is accompanied by a group of mediums of lesser spiritual rank, regarded as acquaintances or

companions of *Pho Thao Tuem*, who symbolically support her during the ceremony.

The ceremony extends into the night, creating an atmosphere filled with music, dance and lively interactions. In this vibrant setting, participants indulge in sensory experiences, immersing themselves in the ambiance of the ritual. They engage in conversation, share laughter, and partake in smoking and drinking, fostering a sense of community and camaraderie. Meanwhile, the villagers observe this enchanting dance performance, captivated by the graceful movements and the spiritual energy permeating the gathering. Through this visual display, the ritual’s cultural importance is conveyed, reaffirming the connection between the community and its spiritual traditions. Notably, *Mae Khan Maak* (ແມ່ຂັນມາກ), literally meaning ‘betel tray women’, play an integral role in preparing meals and crafting intricate offerings. Traditionally responsible for arranging betel nut trays in ritual contexts, they dedicate their efforts from the early hours of the morning to support the ceremony through food preparation and ceremonial presentation. This communal engagement and the meticulous attention to ritual decorations reflect the cultural and spiritual values attached to the practice, highlighting the significance of collective participation and the reverence for ancestral spirits.

On the second day of the ritual, the main process of the purifying rite commences. The participants, including *Mae Thiam* and the villagers, gather at *Mae Thiam*’s house and then proceed to a designated ritual hut (*Hor Pho Thao*



Figure 3
Hor Pho Thao Tuem and Nong Chuet during the dry season.
Source: Photo by Patiphol Yodsurang.

Tuem, Figure 3) located near *Nong Chuet* (ນ້ອງຈືດ, Figure 4), a pond in the central area of the village. According to a local tale, this pond derives its name from the presence of *Van Chuet*, a pale herb discovered by *Pho Thao Tuem* in ancient times. *Van Chuet* is believed to possess the power to counteract the harmful effects associated with séances of possession, known locally as *Lièn Khouang* in reference to ritual acts of spirit invocation and manipulation often associated with *Phi Pop*. The ritual hut, chosen specifically for its proximity to *Nong Chuet*, holds cultural and symbolic significance. It functions as a designated ritual space where the purification ceremony unfolds, mediating the interaction between participants, natural elements and the spiritual forces involved. The presence of the nearby pond adds another layer of symbolism since water is often associated with cleansing, renewal and spiritual purification in various cultural traditions.

As the participants move from *Mae Thiam*'s house to the ritual site, the collective energy and anticipation build, signifying the beginning of the central phase of the purifying rite. This transition marks a pivotal moment in the ritual process as the focus shifts towards the purification of individuals, the community and the surrounding environment. The shift in the ceremonial space symbolises the transition from the personal realm of *Mae Thiam*'s house to a communal setting. The path taken for the procession traverses the entire village, following an unpaved road that runs alongside the Mekong River. This route is chosen for its symbolic connection to the community's history and landscape and its deep cultural significance for the villagers. The river itself is a prominent

feature in the region, playing a vital role in the livelihoods and traditions of the local people. Its flowing waters symbolise continuity, resilience and interconnectedness. By walking along this path, the participants in the procession are not only physically moved through the village but also symbolically connected to their ancestral roots and the natural elements that shape their way of life. The unpaved road serves as a tangible representation of the village's humble beginnings and the journey of its inhabitants.

Upon reaching the ritual hut, *Mae Thiam*, accompanied by another spirit medium (both of whom are believed to be possessed by *Pho Thao Tuem*), conducts an offering to the revered spirit. As the village has grown, the presence of two mediums allows for broader spiritual protection and support for the larger community. *Mae Thiam* then proceeds to perform a dedicated dance while the participants gather tightly beneath the floor, eagerly awaiting the commencement of the ritual. As part of the purification process, *Mae Thiam* places her feet in a bucket of water, allowing it to cascade onto the floor, ultimately splashing onto the heads of the individuals gathered below. The participants respond by swiftly running, still clothed, and leaping into the pond, *Nong Chuet*, where they fully submerge themselves in the muddy water. Upon exiting the pond on the far side, the participants, now coated with traces of mud and dirt, hastily make their way to the Mekong River. In a transformative final act, they cleanse themselves in the flowing waters of the sacred river (*Tone Nam Kong*, Figure 5), symbolically purging their physical and spiritual impurities.



Figure 4
Nong Chuet in the rainy season. Source: Photo by Patiphol Yodsurang.



Figure 5
Participants plunge enthusiastically into the Mekong River. Source: Photo by Patiphol Yodsurang.

The participants venture more than 100 metres downstream, where they shed and discard their clothes, symbolising their release from their previous impure state. Awaiting their arrival on the riverbank are families with fresh garments, ready to assist the participants in their transformational journey. The participants, now purified and revitalised, don the new clothes provided by their families, signifying a symbolic rebirth and a renewed connection with their community.

This sequence of actions – from the water splashing ritual to immersion in the muddy pond and culminating in the cleansing ritual in the Mekong River – serves as a profound expression of purification and spiritual renewal. It highlights the embodiment of transformative experiences and the symbolic significance of water in the ritualistic practices of the community, underscoring the deeply rooted connections between purification rituals, water symbolism and spiritual rejuvenation.

The participants then proceed to another hut situated along the river, where the ritualistic proceedings continue. This transition serves as a pivotal moment, signifying the progression from one phase of purification to the next while emphasising the collective support and involvement of the community in this transformative experience. Inside the hut, *Phor Jar* takes on the responsibility of calling out the names of the participants one by one, signifying the completion of the purification ritual. This orderly process serves as a formal acknowledgement of their participation and reaffirms their commitment to the ritual's purpose. Within the confines of the hut, the esteemed presence of both *Mae Thiam* and the village head (*Nai Baan*, ນາຍບ້ານ), representing the local authority and local spirit, holds great significance. Together, they convey a message to the participants, emphasising the importance of maintaining respectful conduct and social cohesion within the community. The village head imparts words of wisdom and guidance, urging the participants to lead peaceful lives and to contribute to the collective wellbeing of the community. Furthermore, the spiritual realm asserts its influence as the spirit communicates through *Mae Thiam*, emphasising the significance of placing trust and belief in the village head.

This proclamation reinforces the authority's role as a guardian and figure deserving of reverence and adherence. The interaction within the hut, encompassing the involvement of *Mae Thiam*, the village head and the spirit's



Figure 6
A miniature spirit house constructed by *Phor Jar*.
Source: Photo by Patiphol Yodsurang.

message, underscores the establishment of a social order and the embodiment of community values. It serves as a reminder of the interdependence between the physical and spiritual realms and the role of respected figures in guiding individuals towards a peaceful coexistence within the village.

On the third day, the participants engage in the dismantling and cleaning of the ritual hut (*Mang Pham*). This process signifies the conclusion of the purification ritual. With meticulous care, the items used during the ceremony are gathered and organised, and the hut is disassembled. Following the conclusion of the purification ritual, the participants reconvene at *Mae Thiam's* house to construct a miniature spirit house (*Khrueang Noi*, ເຄື່ອງນ້ອຍ) resembling a traditional dwelling (Figure 6). This symbolic act represents their reverence for the spiritual forces invoked during the ceremony and serves as a physical reminder of their ongoing connection to the spiritual realm. The meticulous construction process involves the use of traditional materials, such as wood and thatch, to replicate the architectural styles prevalent in the local culture. The placement of the spirit house within *Mae Thiam's* residence holds significance, as it becomes a focal point for ongoing spiritual reverence and offerings, reaffirming the commitment of the participants to maintaining a harmonious relationship with the spiritual world.

As the ritual nears its conclusion, another medium – distinct from *Mae Thiam*, and possessed not by *Pho Thao Tuem* himself but by a subordinate spirit under his command – is entrusted with the final act of releasing the

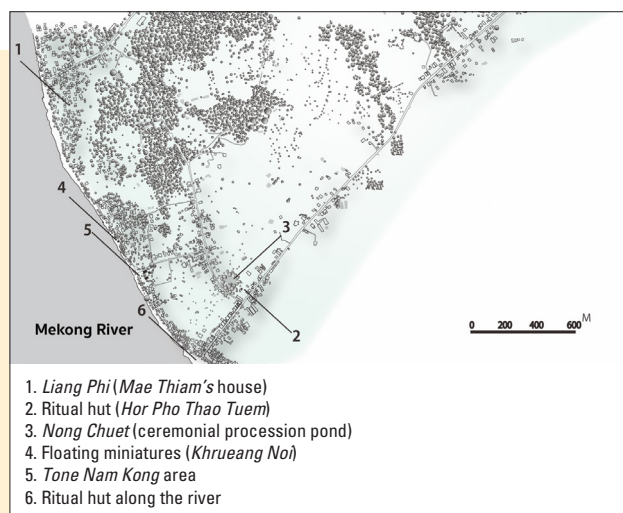


Figure 7
Important purification ritual features. Source: Map by Ikuro Shimizu.

ritual object, marking the closure of the ceremony. This medium sets fire (*Chut Fai*) to the constructed miniature spirit house, which represents the spiritual presence invoked throughout the ceremony, and releases it into the flowing waters (*Loy*) of the Mekong River. This symbolic act signifies the culmination of the ritual and the transference of spiritual energies back to the natural elements. By offering the spirit house to the river, the participants believe they are returning the spiritual forces to their rightful place, harmonising with the natural order and concluding the ritualistic proceedings. Once the ritual hut has been dismantled and the space cleared, attention turns to the symbolic act of bidding farewell to the spiritual realm. **Figure 7** illustrates the key features of the purification ritual, highlighting the spatial layout and significance of each site within the ritual landscape.

Upon completion of six consecutive rituals – typically within three years – a letter known locally as *Bai Yang Yuen* (ໄບຍັງຢືນ) is issued to confirm the expulsion of the malevolent spirit of *Pop*. However, the status of this letter remains unclear, as accounts vary; some describe it as an informal document from the village headman, while others refer to it as a more official recognition. This ambiguity reflects the fluid nature of local authority and belief systems surrounding the ritual. The document serves as tangible confirmation that the spiritual cleansing has taken place, providing participants with the assurance they need to safely return to their respective villages. By obtaining this document, individuals can regain a sense of security and resume their lives within the familiarity of

their original community. However, it should be noted that a significant number of individuals have continued to live in this present village due to the lack of belief or persistent fear from their former village communities. Consequently, they have made the decision to establish their permanent residence in the area. The interviews conducted with the participants shed light on two distinct categories. First, some individuals were expelled from their original villages due to being genuinely believed to be afflicted by *Pop*'s possession, leading them to seek refuge and purification in this community. Second, despite not being possessed by *Pop*, some people were the subject of rumours and were subsequently expelled from the village. Interestingly, it has been observed that certain individuals chose to remain in the village even after undergoing the purification ritual, indicating their desire to continue residing in the community despite their past experiences.

Khalam: a traditional mutual living system of landscape management and taboos

The cultural restrictions imposed by *Khalam* guide human behaviour and interactions not only within traditional landscapes but also more broadly across all aspects of social life. Rooted in local beliefs and traditions, these sacred rules ensure sustainable resource management, conservation and cultural preservation. They dictate activities such as hunting, fishing and access to sacred sites, playing a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance and spiritual harmony. The accessibility and comprehensibility of taboos play a crucial role in their effectiveness. While *Khalam* is a widespread concept across Lao communities, in this village its application is closely tied to the ritual landscape – in particular, forest and swamp areas – where adherence is emphasised as a way to prevent spiritual disruption and to maintain ecological balance, extending beyond the more general moral boundaries seen in other villages. The prohibition against cutting trees helps to maintain biodiversity, prevent soil erosion, and preserve the natural habitat for flora and fauna. Avoiding the introduction of tap water into the swamp ensures the integrity of the water sources since they are naturally replenished by rainwater and groundwater.

The descriptions of *Khalam* among local communities exhibited minor divergences based on personal perspectives. However, despite these variations, a common thread prevails, emphasising the fundamental essence of the ritual. While specific practices and customs may vary, the overarching purpose of *Khalam* remains consistent

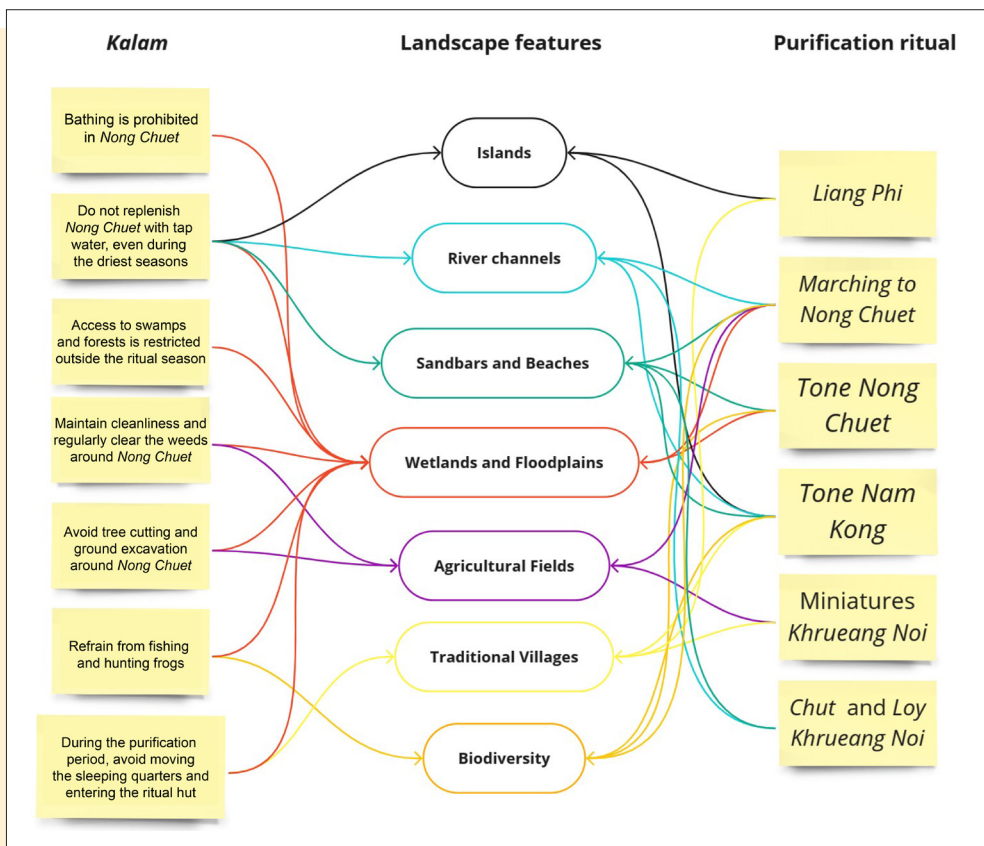


Figure 8
Khalam and landscape features
 Note: Although the belief in the exact same *Khalam* is not universally embraced among local people, this research aimed to gather information from all individuals, regardless of their personal beliefs about the ritual. Source: Diagram by Patiphol Yodsurang.

among the participants. Figure 8 provides an organised presentation of the various elements associated with *Khalam*, offering insights into the relationship between this cultural practice and the landscape features of the surrounding environment. The following example serves as an illustration of *Khalam*, relating to its typical landscape features discussed in the previous section. It is important to note that while there may be variations, this example captures the essence of the landscape elements mentioned earlier.

An example of *Khalam* is sought, wherein the practices and beliefs of the ritual are exemplified. Various beliefs and practices associated with *Khalam* have been reported by local people, including the restriction of access to swamps and forests outside the ritual season. It is advisable not to refill *Nong Chuet* with tap water, even during the driest seasons. Furthermore, emphasis is placed on maintaining cleanliness and regularly clearing weeds in the vicinity of *Nong Chuet*. Cutting trees and excavating the ground around *Nong Chuet* are discouraged, while activities such

as fishing and hunting frogs are prohibited. Additionally, bathing in *Nong Chuet* is strictly prohibited. In addition, throughout the purification period, it is recommended that individuals refrain from relocating their sleeping quarters and entering the ritual hut. However, if one individual should encounter another violating these prohibitions, they are recommended not to greet or interact with them since it is believed that doing so may invite negative effects of the spirit.

Alongside the main purification ritual – performed twice annually – various ceremonial practices are carried out across its three-day sequence: *Liang Phi* (a ritual involving the invocation and appeasement of spirits); a ceremonial procession to the *Nong Chuet* pond; leaping into *Nong Chuet* as part of the purification process); *Tone Nam Kong* (a ritual where water is poured over the body for purification); *Khruelang Noi* (the construction of small spirit houses resembling traditional houses); and *Chut and Loy Khruelang Noi* (the act of setting fire to and floating the miniature spirit houses down the Mekong River).

Thus, *Khalam* serves as a significant cultural practice, deeply rooted in the local traditions and beliefs. It encompasses the purification of individuals and the restoration of spiritual harmony within the community. Despite the nuanced differences in personal accounts, the underlying principle of cleansing and warding off negative influences is universally acknowledged. The diverse perspectives provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of *Khalam* and shed light on its enduring significance in the traditional cultural landscape management system. The interviews conducted with the participants helped to unveil the intricate tapestry of beliefs, customs and communal dynamics associated with *Khalam*. By exploring the various perspectives, the researchers gained a comprehensive understanding of the shared values and principles underpinning this ritualistic tradition. *Khalam* serves as a reminder of the community's responsibility to protect and conserve their valuable natural resources. By respecting and abiding by these taboos, community members actively contribute to the sustainability and longevity of the forest and swamp environments, ensuring their availability for future generations.

Intertwining of ritual and tradition with the local landscape

The purification ritual and the *Khalam* tradition are closely intertwined with the features of the surrounding landscape. These features play a significant role in ritual practices and add depth to the cultural and spiritual symbolism of the purification process, highlighting how the natural environment is intricately connected to ritualistic practices. One of the key landscape features associated

with the purification ritual is *Nong Chuet*, a central pond in the village. *Nong Chuet* holds immense significance as a sacred space where participants gather and undergo the cleansing process. It serves as a focal point for various ritual practices, such as leaping into its waters, symbolising the removal of impurities and the initiation of a purified state. The presence of *Nong Chuet* in the village landscape serves as a physical and spiritual connection to the purification ritual. Another landscape feature linked to the purification ritual is the Mekong River. After participants emerge from *Nong Chuet*, they proceed to the riverbank to engage in the practice of *Tone Nam Kong*, bathing in the flowing waters of the river. The Mekong River represents a powerful force of purification, symbolising the cleansing and renewal of the participants' spirits. Its presence in the landscape provides a natural element that enhances the spiritual significance of the ritual.

The prohibition on cutting trees and digging the ground around *Nong Chuet* reflects a reverence for the natural environment and a commitment to preserving the designated ritual space used for purification ceremonies. The restricted access to swamps and forests outside the ritual season signifies respect for the ecosystem and the need to maintain its integrity. These landscape-related restrictions and guidelines demonstrate the deep connection between the purification ritual and the preservation of the surrounding natural environment.

The landscape acts as a catalyst for purification, providing sacred spaces and resources that facilitate the cleansing and renewal of an individual's spirit. Integration of landscape features into the purification ritual reflects

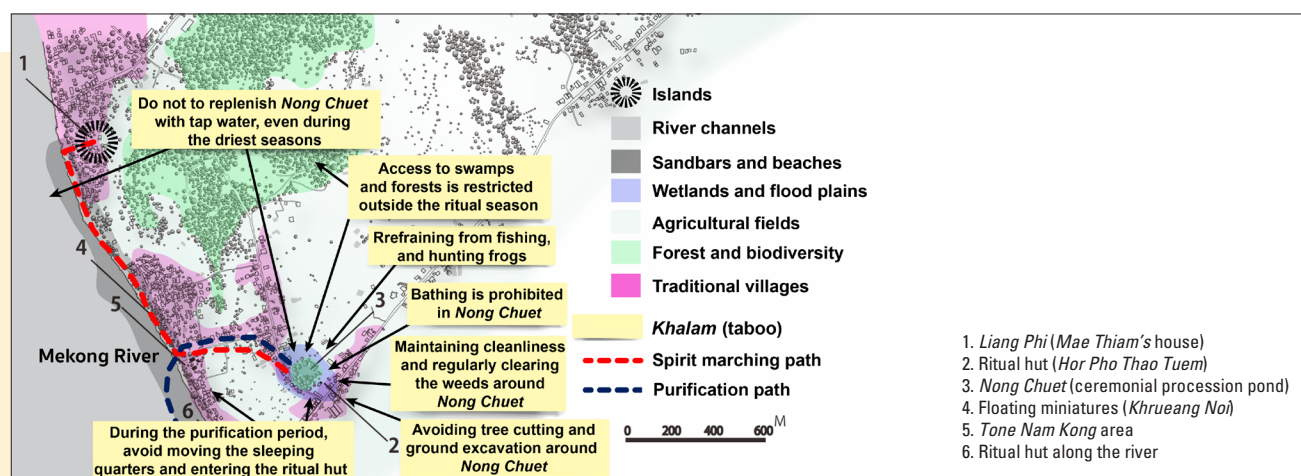


Figure 9
Association between the cultural landscape and traditional authorities.
Source: Map by Ikuro Shimizu.

the enduring connection between cultural practices such as *Khalam* and their surrounding environment – though traditionally, this relationship was not framed in terms of environmental protection but rather as a means to regulate and contain a wild, unpredictable nature seen as both vital and threatening.

Association between the cultural landscape and traditional authorities

The geographical distribution of the aforementioned ritual sites can be observed in [Figure 9](#), which reveals their association with various water-related features such as ponds, the Mekong River and ritual huts. These sites exhibit a distinct connection to water, highlighting its significance within the context of the ritual practices under study. The inclusion of water-related elements in these locations suggests the presence of symbolic and functional attributes that contribute to the cultural significance of the rituals performed in these settings. The mapping of these sites provides valuable insights into the spatial patterns and relationships between the ritual practices and the water-centric features within the studied cultural landscape.

The connection between the cultural landscape and the traditional authorities is significant in preserving and managing that landscape. This association highlights the interplay between cultural heritage, traditions, and the individuals or groups responsible for safeguarding and maintaining them.

Conclusion and discussion

The traditional mutual living system and *Khalam* practices help to shape and preserve cultural landscapes by guiding how communities interact with their natural surroundings. These customs reflect a deep link between people and nature, where taboos support sustainable land and water use. *Nong Chuet*, as both a spiritual and an ecological site, plays a key role in agriculture and rituals, showing how local beliefs and environmental care are closely connected.

Despite experiencing socio-economic transformation, a cultural landscape deeply rooted in its spiritual heritage remains, similar to observations in other riparian communities undergoing change (Wattanamano, Yodsurang, and Nacher 2024; Capon et al. 2013; Tran et

al. 2022). Ritual spaces reflect not only protection from spiritual and natural threats but also a growing awareness of environmental conservation amid deforestation. This tension – between defence and preservation – invites deeper reflection. Water bodies, central to purification rituals, shape both physical and symbolic aspects of the landscape. Through ritual huts and related structures, the natural and built environments converge, expressing the community's spiritual values and cultural identity.

This cultural landscape serves as a testament to the enduring traditions and practices of the village. Despite societal changes, the villagers maintain a strong connection to their spiritual world and continue to preserve and engage with the cultural elements that define their identity. The cultural landscape of the village stands as a living testament to the intertwined relationship between humans, nature and spirituality, reflecting the rich heritage and ongoing vitality of the community.

The Mekong area in southern Laos exemplifies this profound intangible cultural heritage and cultural landscape, where the local inhabitants have developed an understanding of their environment. Through agricultural practices, wetland utilisation and forestry, they demonstrate a harmonious coexistence with the land, utilising its resources in sustainable ways. Additionally, their water-related activities, such as fishing, irrigation and river transportation, reveal an intimate knowledge of water use and management.

This study reveals that *Pop* purification rituals, embedded within riverfront cultural landscapes, serve as a traditional management system addressing both social exclusion and environmental stewardship. The integration of ritual space, water use and communal norms demonstrates how these communities actively regulate behaviour, mediate reintegration and maintain ecological balance – directly responding to how culture and landscape intersect in sustaining both social and environmental systems.

The findings demonstrate that ritual practices not only reinforce community structure but also provide a framework for environmental regulation rooted in ICH. The *Pop* ritual illustrates how spiritual belief systems govern space, behaviour and identity, effectively functioning as a localised form of cultural landscape governance. 🇰🇷

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