

## Restoring Life Balance through *Lanna* Rituals: The Symbolic Power of Apology and Healing

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### Abstract

The present study aimed to analyze the forms, meanings, and healing mechanisms of *Lanna* holistic and apology rituals as cultural systems for restoring relational and spiritual balance in Northern Thailand. The research focused on understanding how these rituals, such as *Tan Chedi Sai* (Sand Pagoda Offering), *Khan Tang*, *Suma Kaew Sam*, *Suma Phra Kaew Ha Jamphuak*, and *Suma Krua Tan*, function to relieve guilt, fear, and spiritual instability through structured acts of apology, offering, and community participation. A qualitative approach was employed, incorporating in-depth interviews, participant observation, and symbolic content analysis across three provinces: Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang. Data were analyzed within the frameworks of medical anthropology and symbolic healing theory. The findings revealed that *Lanna* apology rituals operate as relational healing systems that transform human suffering, particularly moral distress and relational imbalance, into meaningful experiences of reconciliation. These ceremonies integrate symbolic actions, language, and rhythmic participation

to restore life force, mindfulness, and ethical balance. The results indicate that such rituals complement biomedical and psychological care by addressing spiritual and relational dimensions of suffering often beyond the reach of modern health systems. The study suggests that the incorporation of *Lanna* rituals into community mental health and wellness initiatives could strengthen culturally grounded approaches to mental health promotion and collective strength in Thai society.

**Keywords:** *Lanna* rituals, Life balance, Apology, Symbolic healing, Mental health, Spiritual well-being

## Introduction

In contemporary Thai society, the definition of health has become increasingly biomedical, focusing on physical conditions and clinical indicators. Nevertheless, global evidence shows that a growing portion of human suffering arises not from disease but from spiritual distress, social disconnection, and loss of meaning (Koenig et al., 2023; WHO, 2022). The World Health Organization (2023) reports that mental health disorders now account for nearly 15% of the global burden of disease, with depression and anxiety increasing by more than 25% since the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO news release, 2022; WHO, 2025). In Thailand, data from the Department of Mental Health (2023) reveal that approximately 1 in 6 adults experiences moderate to severe psychological stress, often linked to economic hardship, family fragmentation, and weakened community bonds. These conditions have given rise to new interest in community-based and spiritually integrated healing systems that address both emotional and moral suffering (WHO, 2023).

Mental and spiritual health are deeply interconnected. Spiritual imbalance, exhibited as guilt, loss of purpose, or disruption in one's relationships with others and with nature, can contribute to chronic anxiety and psychophysiological symptoms (Bhugra & Ventriglio, 2024; Hayes, 2002). In Thailand, these experiences are often expressed through culturally specific idioms of distress. Thus, understanding how local cultures interpret and respond to spiritual imbalance is essential for developing holistic approaches to community well-being.

Rituals that promote spiritual health share several universal characteristics across cultures. They are typically symbolic, structured, and repetitive actions that aim to connect individuals with a sense of meaning, supremacy, and community. Such rituals may include prayer, meditation, chanting, lighting candles, communal meals, or mindfulness practices. They often engage both the mind and body, raising emotion, reflection, and sensory experience, thereby reinforcing a sense of belonging and purpose (Hobson et al., 2018). Spiritual health itself is defined as the ability to experience and integrate meaning, purpose, and connection, to oneself, others, nature, or a higher power, forming a vital dimension of holistic well-being (Fisher, 2011; Sadat et al., 2019). These rituals, whether religious or secular, are culturally adapted expressions of humanity's search for consistency and supremacy (Martsolf & Mickley, 1998).

The application of spiritual rituals has demonstrated measurable benefits for mental and physical health. Studies show that individuals engaged in regular spiritual or religious practices exhibit lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as greater optimism, life satisfaction, and resilience (Koenig, 2012; Chen et al., 2021). Participation in communal rituals, such as worship or meditation groups, has been associated with reduced loneliness, healthier lifestyle choices, and even lower mortality risk (Writer, 2022). These outcomes are thought to arise from mechanisms including emotional regulation, social bonding, moral grounding, and meaning-making, core components of spiritual well-being (Hood et al., 2018). Thus, ritual engagement functions not merely as tradition but as a psychosocial process that cultivates inner balance, connection, and holistic health.

Rituals serve as complementary tools to enhance spiritual health by fostering meaning, connection, and emotional balance, which support overall well-being. They are not substitutes for medical treatment, but act as holistic practices that strengthen coping, reduce stress, and promote harmony between mind, body, and spirit alongside conventional care.

Across cultures, rituals have long served as complementary mechanisms for promoting spiritual health rather than substitutes for medical treatment. Community reunion ceremonies in post-conflict Africa (Nwoye, 2022), shamanic and mindfulness rituals in East Asia (Xiao et al., 2017; Sun & Kim, 2025), and collective grief rituals in Western countries (Hobson et al., 2018) demonstrate that symbolic and participating acts can effectively reduce anxiety, restore social harmony, and foster emotional resilience. These practices share a common principle that healing occurs through the symbolic transformation of suffering into a shared, meaningful experience. Such evidence underscores the need to study *Lanna* rituals within this broader global conversation on spiritual and community healing.

Within *Lanna*, a diverse range of holistic and apology rituals continue to play a vital role in restoring relationships between humans, spirits, and nature. Key ceremonies include the *Khan Tang* (offering tray ritual), *Suma Kaew Sam* (apology to the Three Jewels), *Suma Phra Kaew Ha Jamphuak* (apology to the Five Kinds of Gems), *Suma Krua Tan* (apology for offerings), and *Tan Chedi Sai* (sand pagoda offering).



**Figure 1** The representative picture showing the *Khan Tang* (A to F) and *Tan Chedi Sai* (G and H)

These *Lanna* folk rituals represent deeply relational and symbolic practices that aim to restore spiritual balance, restore relationships between humans and sacred entities, and promote mental and spiritual well-being. These rituals employ mechanisms of apology, offering, and symbolic self-

representation to reestablish harmony within the cosmology and the natural world. Studies on *Lanna* traditional healing show that such rituals function as community-based psychosocial interventions, enhancing moral strength, reducing emotional distress, and supporting cultural identity and flexibility (Champawan, 2024).

Studies indicate that when practiced alongside biomedical care, these rituals can improve coping, promote collective healing, and strengthen social cohesion within communities. Factors supporting their effectiveness include faith, family involvement, and community health integration, whereas modernization, loss of belief, and lack of formal evaluation pose challenges to their continued use (Champawan, 2024; Jitae, 2020).

They are conducted under the guidance of traditional healers and remain particularly active in Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang, where they serve both personal and communal therapeutic purposes.

□ In Chiang Mai, rituals are often temple-centered and integrate monastic chanting with lay participation.

□ In Lamphun, the *Suma Krua Tan* tradition emphasizes domestic and familial reconciliation.

□ In Lampang, *Tan Chedi Sai* is performed as a collective act of purification during the Songkran festival.

These regional variations reflect how *Lanna* rituals adapt to social context while preserving a shared cosmological logic of balance and moral renewal (Tantipidoke, 2013; Champawan, 2024).

Rather than replacing formal medical treatment, *Lanna* rituals function as complementary cultural systems that provide moral reconciliation and psychological integration where clinical interventions may be insufficient. The rituals' symbolic language, sensory rhythm, and communal participation create a safe and sacred space for expressing guilt, fear, and loss that transforms these emotions into experiences of forgiveness and renewal (Csordas, 1994; Clarke & Waring, 2018). Within Buddhist therapeutic logic (which refers to the way philosophy explains and treats suffering by identifying its causes, understanding its nature, and applying mindful practices, such as meditation, ethical living, and compassion, to achieve healing and liberation of the mind and body), such practices align with the cultivation of mindfulness and compassion, promoting inner balance and acceptance.

Although numerous studies have examined biomedical and psychological models of healing, there remains a significant gap in understanding how ritual practices function as culturally embedded systems of spiritual and relational healing within Thai society. Prior research has occasionally integrated *Lanna* indigenous knowledge into the contemporary mental health framework, leaving unexplored how traditional apology and offering ceremonies restore moral balance, community consistency, and inner well-being. Furthermore, policy and public health initiatives in Thailand have rarely recognized local ritual systems as potential tools for sustainable mental health promotion and community development.

This research addresses an important gap in understanding how traditional *Lanna* rituals contribute to mental and spiritual health within contemporary contexts. First, it fills the lack of empirical exploration into rituals as culturally grounded healing systems that complement rather than replace medical treatment. Second, it underscores the underappreciated role of indigenous knowledge in fostering community cohesion, conflict resolution, and holistic well-being, areas often overlooked in mainstream mental health frameworks. Finally, it responds to the gap between traditional practice and modern policy, offering evidence-based insights on how local ritual wisdom can be systematically integrated into mental health promotion, wellness programs, and sustainable development initiatives that honor cultural continuity while addressing current societal needs.



Moreover, the research bridges the conceptual gap between medical anthropology and Buddhist therapeutic logic. By integrating these perspectives, it shows how *Lanna* rituals embody both cultural and ethical dimensions of healing, linking mindfulness, compassion, and moral restoration with health and well-being. The study also responds to a policy gap in Thailand, where indigenous wisdom systems have rarely been incorporated into mental health promotion or community wellness programs. It provides evidence-based insights for integrating *Lanna* spiritual traditions into community mental health care, cultural preservation, and sustainable development.

The objectives of the study were to analyze the forms, behaviors, and symbolic meanings of *Lanna* holistic and apology rituals practiced in Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang; examine the healing mechanisms of these rituals through the conceptual frameworks of medical anthropology (is the study of how culture, society, and biology influence health, illness, and healing practices), symbolic healing (refers to the use of rituals, symbols, and meanings to restore balance and well-being in a person's mind, body, and spirit), and Buddhist therapy; and evaluate their potential roles in promoting spiritual health and community well-being as complementary systems along with modern medicine.

## Methodology

### Research design

This study focuses on the traditional healing practices in the Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang provinces. The research methodology comprises documentary research, surveys, and qualitative research.

### Research procedures

The study had reviewed foundational data and relevant documents concerning *Lanna* ritual healing. We had conducted an extensive literature review and formulated a conceptual framework to guide the investigation. Research communities in selected study areas had been identified and chosen for fieldwork, following an analysis of baseline information to determine appropriate sites. The research team had developed and validated qualitative research approaches, including 1) an in-depth interview guide for *mor mueang* (Ritual healers) and experts to explore the origins, theoretical foundations, and procedural elements of ritual healing; 2) a structured interview form for documenting healing methods and assessing their safety, benefits, and preliminary effectiveness; and 3) a focus group discussion guide for eliciting expert perspectives from Thai traditional medicine practitioners on self-care approaches through *Lanna* ritual healing. Field researchers and data collectors had been trained, and qualitative surveys and interviews were subsequently undertaken. The resulting data had been compiled, analyzed, and synthesized, from which key insights were categorized to support the promotion and safeguarding of *Lanna* cultural healing heritage. Finally, the study had consolidated its findings into a proposed model for self-reliant health care through *Lanna* therapeutic rituals and had formulated strategic recommendations for the preservation and integration of this indigenous medical tradition, concluding in the final report and manuscript preparation for academic propagation.

### Target population and research sites

The target population comprises *Lanna* ritual healers who perform health-promoting, preventive, curative, and rehabilitative activities through ritual healing practices. We have screened the subjects from Northern Thailand. These cities (Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang) were selected due to the accepted participants and available spiritual teachers to do the study. Thus, this research area covers the Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang provinces.

### Sample group and sampling technique

In this study, a multistage sampling method was employed, including documentary research (Content analysis was conducted to verify the accuracy and completeness of historical records, ritual procedures, local histories, and oral traditions related to the transmission of ritual knowledge within the target communities, survey (A perfect inductive method was applied to collect socio-demographic data, types of healers, and geographical origins of the sample population, consisting of *Lanna* ritual healers in the upper northern region of Thailand, and qualitative research (Provincial sampling was used based on three criteria: geographical characteristics, healer typology, and place of origin). This allowed for in-depth interviews with selected ritual healers representing the diversity of traditional healing systems in the study area.

### Research instruments

1. Survey form to collect baseline information on *Lanna* ritual healing practices.
2. In- depth interview form to obtain qualitative data regarding worldviews, conceptual frameworks, materials, ritual procedures, and modes of knowledge transmission in *Lanna* therapeutic healing.
3. Focus group interview form to validate and triangulate qualitative findings.
4. Open-ended discussion guide to explore additional systems of thought and knowledge relating to *Lanna* ritual healing beyond the pre-established research framework.

### Data analysis

Qualitative data and documentary evidence were analyzed using the method of agreement and content analysis techniques. The method of agreement is a comparative approach used to identify causal relationships by examining multiple cases that share a common factor leading to a similar outcome. It helps researchers determine which elements consistently contribute to observed effects, such as shared features in ritual practices that promote well-being. Meanwhile, content analysis is a systematic technique for analyzing textual or qualitative data to identify patterns, themes, and meanings within communication. It enables researchers to interpret symbolic expressions, beliefs, and cultural values embedded in narratives or rituals, providing a structured and reliable means of understanding qualitative data. These methods were applied to verify the accuracy, consistency, and credibility of information obtained from diverse sources concerning *Lanna* ritual healing traditions.

## Results

### Structure and components of *Lanna's* holistic and apology rituals

Field investigations across Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang revealed that *Lanna* holistic and apology rituals comprise a coherent collection of ceremonies designed to restore relational harmony between humans, spirits, and nature. The principal forms identified include *Tan Chedi Sai* (Sand Pagoda Offering), *Khan Tang*, *Suma Kaew Sam* (Apology to the Three Jewels), *Suma Phra Kaew Ha Jamphuak* (Apology to the Five Kinds of Gems), and *Suma Krua Tan* (Apology for Offerings).

Each ceremony exhibits a defined ritual structure consisting of (i) symbolic offerings prepared in a tray, (ii) verbalized acts of apology or repentance, and (iii) mediation by a ritual specialist. These elements collectively function to re-establish moral and cosmological balance, particularly after experiences of misfortune, illness, or interpersonal conflict.

### Symbolic mechanisms and ritual logic

Symbolic analysis indicated that these rituals employ the offering tray (*khan tang*) as a substitute self, representing the individual's life force (*khwan*). The process of offering an apology transfers negative energy or karmic burden into the symbolic object, which is then ritually purified or dispersed. The rhythmic arrangement of chants, gestures, and offerings forms a ritual syntax through which guilt, fear, and loss are transformed into socially intelligible experiences.

### Psychological and social healing functions

Participants described immediate psychological relief, including decreased feelings of guilt, anxiety, and relational tension following ritual performance. Observations confirmed that rituals are commonly conducted after major life disruptions (death, illness, or community conflict) to release accumulated distress and renew emotional stability. At the communal level, collective participation fosters reconciliation and reinforces shared moral norms, thereby functioning as a social therapy parallel to biomedical models.

### Levels of Healing: *Kwan-Khan-Sathi-Karma*

Analysis of ritual language and participant narratives revealed a four-tiered structure of healing:

- *Kwan* (life force): restoration of vitality and protection against misfortune.
- *Khan* (body aggregate): purification of physical and energetic imbalances.
- *Sathi* (mindfulness): cultivation of awareness through apology and reflection.
- *Karma* (moral action): release of guilt and creation of a new relational equilibrium.

This multilayered approach illustrates how healing in *Lanna* tradition extends beyond somatic recovery to include moral, emotional, and cosmological realignment

## Discussions

### Rituals as relational healing systems

The results demonstrate that *Lanna's* holistic and apology rituals function as relational healing systems, rather than isolated cultural performances. Consistent with Csordas (1994) and Kleinman (1980), healing occurs through the reorganization of meaning within a shared symbolic framework. Ritual acts (apology, offering, and chant) mediate communication between visible and invisible realms, allowing participants to manage suffering that biomedical discourse cannot easily define.

### Symbolic healing and the embodied self

The findings support symbolic-healing theory, which posits that transformation arises through embodied symbols acting on perception and emotion. Through tactile and auditory experiences, handling offerings, reciting formulaic apologies, and hearing rhythmic chants, participants reorganize internal chaos into structured awareness. This aligns with Wiseman (2022) and Kundtova & Geertz (2018), who highlight ritual as an embodied cognitive process translating disorder into meaning.

### The Therapeutic Logic of Apology

From a spiritual-therapy perspective, apology (*khama*) functions as a moral technology of mindfulness and release rather than superstition. It enables acknowledgement of suffering and non-attachment to rigid dualities of right and wrong (Wallace 2001; Hayes 2002; Keng et al. 2011). The act of apology thus transforms guilt into insight, echoing the concept of wise

reflection. Participants reported renewed inner calm and acceptance, suggesting that these rituals cultivate psychological flexibility associated with acceptance and commitment therapy.

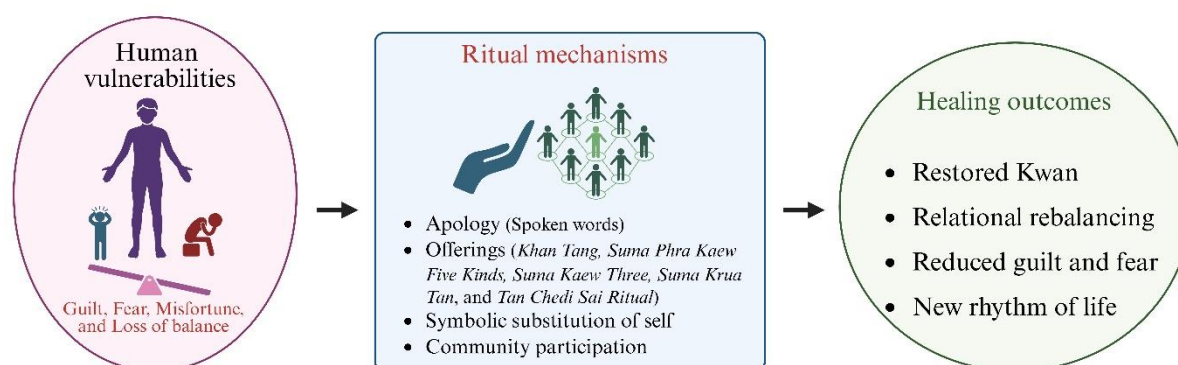
### Comparison with Western therapeutic paradigms

Unlike Western psychotherapy, which often isolates the individual as patient, *Lanna* rituals emphasize collective participation and cosmic interdependence. Healing is achieved through restoring relationships with spirits, community, and environment, corresponding to Obeyesekere (1990) and Hobson et al. (2018) on the social meaning of ritual action. This communal dynamic repositions the sufferer from passive patient to active co-creator of meaning, enhancing agency and social cohesion.

### Implications for mental-health integration

These insights reveal substantial potential for integrating ritual-based frameworks into community mental-health and wellness programs. Ritual participation offers neutral avenues for emotional release, moral reconciliation, and identity restoration, dimensions often neglected by clinical interventions (Bhugra & Ventriglio, 2024; Chutiya et al., 2025). Moreover, aligning ritual practice with sustainable cultural preservation initiatives could support mental-wellness tourism and culturally grounded psychosocial care.

The overall social and spiritual healing mechanisms embedded in the studied rituals in the current study are illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2** The conceptual framework of *Lanna*'s holistic and apology rituals as relational healing systems. The social and spiritual healing mechanisms are fixed in the studied rituals

### Limitations and future directions

While qualitative in scope, the study underscores the need for quantitative and comparative evaluations of ritual efficacy, such as measuring changes in anxiety, social connectedness, or biomarkers of stress pre- and post-ritual participation. Future research may explore adaptive models that translate symbolic healing into therapeutic frameworks applicable in diverse cultural settings.

### Conclusion and suggestions

*Lanna*'s holistic and apology rituals are more than just old traditions. They are living practices that help people and communities heal both spiritually and emotionally. Through symbols, sacred objects, and words of apology, these rituals allow individuals to face feelings of guilt, imbalance, or broken relationships in ways that are meaningful within their culture.

Based on the study through medical anthropology and Buddhist healing perspectives, these rituals are not just beliefs or superstitions. They form a system that helps people



understand and transform pain into forgiveness and peace. The act of apology is not about shame, but about accepting human weakness and opening space for healing between people, with nature, spirits, and oneself.

Although this research focuses on *Lanna* traditions, its ideas can be applied to other Thai regions. Each area has its own rituals and beliefs, yet all share a Buddhist foundation that values compassion, balance, and mindfulness. These findings suggest that such traditional practices could inspire new, culturally appropriate healing systems in Thailand, especially where modern medical approaches cannot fully reach emotional and relational suffering.

### New knowledge and the effects on society and communities

Rituals complement biomedical and psychological care by addressing spiritual and relational dimensions of suffering often beyond the reach of modern health systems. The study suggests that the incorporation of Lanna rituals into community mental health and wellness initiatives could strengthen culturally grounded approaches to mental health promotion and collective strength in Thai society.

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