



COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE AND THE PRESERVATION OF ISAN SERMON CHANTING AT THE BUN PHAWET FESTIVAL IN THAILAND

Seksan Sonwa, Warachart Wariwan*, Pongsawat Ratchachan

Faculty of Law and Politics, Roi Et Rajabhat University

*Corresponding Author E-mail: warachara@reru.ac.th

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how collaborative governance preserves Isan sermon chanting during the Bun Phawet Festival in Roi Et Province, Thailand. It seeks to 1. examine collaborative governance mechanisms between public agencies, local communities, and community-based networks to sustain this practice, 2. analyse the processes that sustain it, and 3. identify stakeholder networks that preserve it. Content analysis and triangulation were used to strengthen the findings from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 30 purposively selected key informants, including government officials, religious leaders, community scholars, residents, and educational representatives.

The findings show that collaborative governance involves participatory planning, resource support, and collective implementation. These practices go beyond administrative coordination and reflect relational governance based on shared responsibility, trust, and stakeholder engagement. Cultural awareness, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and cross-sector collaboration among local communities, educational institutions, religious organisations, and youth groups support Isan sermon chanting. According to collaborative governance theory, preserving intangible cultural heritage requires institutional arrangements, culturally embedded participation, and locally grounded leadership. We also identified stakeholder participation, multi-level community leadership, and supportive local government policies for long-term cultural continuity.

Public agencies, temples and religious leaders, community leaders and local scholars, villagers and youth, educational institutions, collaborative partner networks, and tourists are all involved in protecting Isan sermon chanting, according to the study. These actors create a community-centered governance ecosystem that strengthens cultural resilience and local identity amid social change. This study shows that collaborative cultural governance can adapt to protect intangible cultural heritage and emphasizes the importance of participatory governance in promoting intergenerational transmission, civic engagement, and local cultural traditions' long-term sustainability.

Keywords: Collaborative Governance, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Isan Sermon Chanting, Cultural Sustainability, Bun Phawet Festival

Introduction

The Bun Phawet sermon chanting tradition, also known as the Mahachat sermon, is important to rural Northeastern Thai communities. Based on Heet 12 and Khong 14, it represents a generation-old communal practice. The provincial slogan recognises the Bun Phawet Festival as part of Roi Et Province's cultural identity, along with other iconic local heritage sites and products. This honour recognises the festival's dual role as a religious merit-making event and a cultural tradition central to Roi Et's identity for over a century. Governor Suporn Suphasorn revived and institutionalised it as a provincial event in 1991, and the community has celebrated it annually.

Festival organizers base the event on the beliefs of the Mahachat sermon. Listeners who listen to all thirteen chapters, totalling 1,000 canonical verses, in one day and perform the ritual offering are believed to gain spiritual merit. This merit can lead to rebirth in the era of the future Buddha Phra Sri Ariya Maitreya, heavenly rebirth, hell avoidance, and enlightenment (Khantisaro, 2018). Failure to follow rituals is believed to bring misfortune. Thus, the festival is a major community event supported by collective participation and a complex system of shared beliefs (Roi Et Provincial Public Relations Office, 2022) and spreads Buddhist teachings and moral values (Pimmasak, 2014).

Modernization and digitalization have impacted Thai society in aspects of consumption, communication, and social relationships in urban and rural areas. Digital media may be eroding traditional values and cultural practices, causing future generations to lose their cultural identity (Samakkarn & Chaiamphon, 1995). Isan sermon chanting may disappear as culture, rapid social change, and technology replace traditional cultural expression. Changes in audience preferences have reduced this practice's local visibility. Lack of cultural awareness, preservation knowledge, and stakeholder collaboration caused this loss.

Maintaining cultural traditions requires cooperation between citizens, local communities, the private sector, and public agencies. Network-based collaboration is particularly essential for preserving the value of the Bun Phawet sermon chanting tradition, encompassing the promotion of accurate cultural knowledge and the provision of financial and institutional support for its long-term sustainability (Pannam, 2000). Cultivating cultural awareness and strengthening cultural practices can also yield economic benefits for local communities (Wasi, 1996).

Therefore, collaborative governance plays a vital role in tackling intricate cultural sustainability challenges that no single institution or sector can manage. Government agencies, local communities, civil society actors, and cultural networks collaborate on cross-sector participation, shared decision-making, resource mobilization, and implementation. Collaboration is crucial to cultural heritage preservation because community members must actively participate in and incorporate local cultural knowledge into governance processes to preserve local traditions. Preserving the Bun Phawet sermon chanting tradition requires more

than symbolic cultural promotion; it requires sustainable collaborative networks that raise cultural awareness, engage youth, and strengthen community-based cultural continuity.

Previous studies have examined the Bun Phawet Festival's religious significance, historical background, and cultural values, but most have focused on descriptive cultural interpretation and ritual practices. Governance of cultural preservation, particularly how state agencies, religious institutions, local communities, educational sectors, and civic actors collaborate to preserve intangible cultural heritage, has received little attention. Prior research has neglected how community participation and inter-organizational collaboration maintain cultural continuity during social change. Thus, the mechanisms by which collaborative governance can adapt to protect local cultural identity are unknown.

This study examines collaborative governance among public agencies, community actors, and local networks to preserve Isan sermon chanting during the Bun Phawet Festival in Roi Et Province, Thailand. The study focuses on collaboration and cultural continuity.

Research Objective

1. To examine the forms of collaboration among state, community, and local network partners in preserving the cultural identity of Isan sermon chanting in the Bun Phawet Festival of Roi Et Province.
2. To investigate the processes that contribute to the preservation of Isan sermon chanting's cultural identity during the Bun Phawet Festival in Roi Et Province.
3. To identify the networks of collaboration that contribute to preserving the cultural identity associated with Isan sermon chanting during the Bun Phawet Festival in Roi Et Province.

Methodology

This qualitative study examined how public agencies, local communities, and local networks collaborate to preserve Isan sermon chanting during the Bun Phawet Festival in Roi Et Province, Thailand. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study focused on participants' experiences, perceptions, and interactions in culturally embedded governance processes. Fieldwork took a year, from August 2024 to August 2025.

1. Key Informants

Purposive sampling recruited 30 key informants with direct experience and contextual knowledge of Isan sermon chanting and Bun Phawet Festival. Five Isan sermon-chanting monks (Thae Lae practitioners); ten residents and youth representatives; ten local scholars, community leaders, and religious leaders; and five Provincial Office of Buddhism academics and officials participated.

Participant functional roles in collaborative governance determine selection.

1. Sermon-chanting monks were primary custodians and transmitters of ritual knowledge, oral tradition, and Buddhist cultural practices, demonstrating how religious authority preserves heritage.

2. Local residents and youth representatives were chosen because community participation and intergenerational transmission are crucial to cultural sustainability. Youth participants offered perspectives on changing cultural attitudes and the challenges of sustaining traditional practices in modern society.

3. Community leaders, local scholars, and religious leaders were included for mobilizing participation, coordinating cultural activities, and connecting local communities and institutional stakeholders.

4. To examine governance across multiple levels, academics and Provincial Office of Buddhism officials were chosen for their cultural policy implementation and institutional support for preservation initiatives.

All participants had to live or work in Roi Et Province for at least one year and know or practice Isan sermon chanting or the Bun Phawet tradition.

2. Data Collection

Data was drawn from both primary and secondary sources.

1. In-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and field notes collected primary data. An extensive literature review on collaborative governance, cultural sustainability, and intangible cultural heritage preservation yielded semi-structured interview protocols and focus group guidelines. Five experts assessed content validity using the Index of Item–Objective Congruence (IOC) on the instruments. All instruments had acceptable to high IOC scores, indicating a strong alignment with the study's research objectives.

Before collecting data, the researchers visited the study area to build trust with local communities, religious institutions, and community leaders and gain access to culturally sensitive information. 1. Participants from all four groups were interviewed individually in temples, community centers, and administrative offices. 2. Community members and youth were asked to reflect on cultural participation and collaboration in focus groups. 3. Fieldwork also involved observing the festival's ritual activities, participation patterns, and stakeholder interactions. With participants' consent, all interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded and accompanied by detailed field notes on context, non-verbal communication, and researcher reflections. After verbatim transcription, recordings were checked for accuracy.

2. Secondary data were obtained through documentary analysis of academic literature, research reports, government documents, and policy materials related to cultural preservation and the Bun Phawet Festival.

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, member checking was carried out through a research dissemination forum with relevant stakeholders and selected participants, whose

feedback was incorporated into the interpretation of results to ensure contextual and interpretive accuracy.

3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis, with analysis proceeding concurrently with data collection to allow for ongoing reflection and refinement. All transcripts, field notes, and documentary materials were reviewed repeatedly to achieve thorough data familiarization.

Coding was conducted in three stages. Open coding revealed preliminary concepts, recurring statements, and meaningful units about collaborative governance, cultural participation, and continuity. By categorizing related concepts like stakeholder participation, resource mobilization, cultural transmission, leadership, and institutional support, axial coding established relationships between codes. Later, selective coding and thematic synthesis were used to integrate these categories into themes explaining how collaborative governance sustains Isan sermon chanting.

The researchers also compared monks, youth, community leaders, and government officials' perspectives to determine how they saw their roles and contributions in governance. To improve analytical rigor and interpretive consistency, data and methodological triangulation cross-validated interviews, observations, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis to strengthen trustworthiness. Extended field engagement, detailed documentation, and member checking strengthened the findings' credibility, dependability, and confirmability.

4. Ethical Considerations

This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Roi Et Rajabhat University (COA No. 054/2568). Participants were given information about the research prior to providing informed consent. The researchers maintained the confidentiality of the data and used it solely for academic purposes.

Results

1. Forms of Collaborative Engagement among State, Community, and Local Networks

The findings show that state, community, and local network actors collaborate through participatory planning, resource support, and practical implementation. (1) Raising awareness of traditions and cultural heritage among youth and the public and (2) building collaborative networks facilitate these collaborative processes. Details of the findings:

1.1 Cultivating Awareness of Cultural and Traditional Values among Youth and the Public

The study indicates that local communities, temples, and schools must collaborate to promote cultural traditions through joint activities. The development of digital and print educational media, such as online platforms and instructional manuals, makes Bun

Phawet's knowledge more accessible to students, youth, and interested parties. Educational institutions can also help by hosting public forums or academic seminars on the cultural significance of Isan sermon chanting during the Bun Phawet Festival. These findings match interview data below.

“Promoting awareness among youth and younger generations regarding the value of traditions and cultural heritage requires collaboration among multiple sectors, including families, temples, and schools. It is necessary to develop instructional materials and supporting media to enhance accessibility and understanding. In addition, the provision of online resources can further facilitate the absorption of knowledge and deepen understanding of Isan Bun Phawet sermon chanting.” (Suthamdee, interview, 10 March 2025)

The “Bowon” (Ban–Wat–Rongrian) framework suggests that families, temples, and schools must work together to promote cultural and traditional values. This integrative model is crucial for multidimensional mobilization and coordination. Participatory planning processes involve all relevant stakeholders in the design and implementation of festival and non-festival activities. Participants must prioritize collective goals over individual interests, collaborate, plan strategically, and allocate resources. Additionally, relevant agencies must actively generate and disseminate accurate Bun Phawet knowledge. This includes improving information access for youth, students, and the public on traditional and digital platforms to strengthen cultural understanding and sustainability.

1.2 Development of Collaborative Networks

The findings show that stakeholder unity and commitment are essential for successful collaborative networks. Collective action can come from charitable groups (e.g., community food donation groups), public organizations, local community groups, business actors, government agencies, private sector organizations, and sermon-chanting monks. Collaborative networks enable learning and knowledge exchange in idea generation, consultation, resource mobilization, and activity co-design. These processes improve cultural events and practices.

The findings also show that local communities, educational institutions, private sector organizations, public agencies, and key stakeholders like community leaders, local scholars, villagers, and youth groups must work together to build collaborative networks to preserve Isan sermon chanting's cultural identity. Collaboration strength and effectiveness indicate network capacity and community potential. Stronger collaboration indicates greater cultural practice sustainability. Therefore, state, community, and local networks should collaborate using integrated processes like participatory planning, resource allocation, and collective implementation. These processes integrate context, operational mechanisms, and outcomes into a sustainable cultural preservation framework.

2. Processes Contributing to the Preservation of the Cultural Identity of Isan Sermon Chanting in the Bun Phawet Festival, Roi Et Province

The findings revealed that the processes contributing to the preservation of the cultural identity of Isan sermon chanting at the Bun Phawet Festival in Roi Et Province comprised three major dimensions.

First, network driven participation is a relational process that enables stakeholders to collaborate in planning, sharing knowledge and working together in action. This participatory approach fosters interpersonal trust, common goals, and flexible decision making, and extends ritual preparation to an interactive cultural negotiation process.

Second, community leadership is an important catalyst for intergenerational continuity. Cultural mediators, such as spiritual figures, village headmen and local scholars, help to make institutional directives more locally relevant. These actors promote youth engagement, strengthen the sense of community ownership, and maintain the social relevance of ritual meanings in the face of change today by engaging in participatory leadership and embedded mentorship.

Third, coordination of local government institutions supports grassroots initiatives by aligning policies, providing funds, and coordinating administrative systems. Importantly, this institutional function is not hierarchical; rather, it works synergistically with community agency, creating a polycentric governance system where the formal and the informal work together, with the formal supporting the informal cultural practices.

3. Collaborative Networks in Preserving the Cultural Identity of Isan Sermon Chanting in the Bun Phawet Festival, Roi Et Province

The findings reveal that the preservation of the cultural identity of Isan Bun Phawet sermon chanting involves seven key stakeholder groups, as follows:

3.1 Government agencies: Local administrative organizations play a crucial role in providing financial support, formulating policies, and promoting cultural preservation. Cultural offices may also contribute to integrating the Bun Phawet tradition into local learning curricula.

3.2 Temples and religious leaders: These actors are responsible for delivering the sermon chanting, preparing venues, and creating an environment conducive to cultural learning.

3.3 Community leaders and local scholars: They function as custodians of knowledge, transmitting principles and practices related to the organization of the Bun Phawet Festival. Additionally, they act as coordinators, facilitating collaboration among communities, government agencies, and private organizations.

3.4 residents and youth: Community members actively participate in festival activities, such as processions, ritual performances (e.g., Kand Jop, Kand Lon), sermon listening, and the establishment of charitable food stalls. Youth, students, and university participants

play a vital role in learning, practicing, and ensuring intergenerational transmission, as well as contributing to public communication and dissemination.

3.5 Educational sector: Educational institutions serve as platforms for integrating the Bun Phawet tradition into teaching and research, while also facilitating student engagement through experiential learning within community-based activities.

3.6 Network partners (e.g., local entrepreneurs): These stakeholders support tourism promotion, local product marketing, and the development of cultural goods and services.

3.7 Tourists: Tourists play a dual role as both “learners” and “disseminators,” sharing their experiences and knowledge gained from cultural sites. Moreover, they contribute to local economic circulation, which can further support the development of cultural tourism.

The results show that developing collaborative networks to preserve Bun Phawet sermon chanting's cultural identity requires a truly integrated approach to planning and stakeholder engagement. Effective collaboration requires inclusive participation so stakeholders can “co-think, co-create, and co-develop” cultural initiatives. This approach turns local cultural spaces into dynamic cultural learning hubs that can lead to cultural-based economic development. Cultural heritage can be transformed into value-added products, thereby generating income for local communities. Thus, collaborative networks enable stakeholder participation in decision-making and participatory mechanism design as a form of public management. These mechanisms allow communities, civil society, and local organizations to meaningfully organize cultural festivals, strengthening and sustaining community culture.

Discussion

Collaborative Governance and the Creation of Cultural Networks

The results reveal that the survival of Isan sermon chanting in the Bun Phawet Festival is not achieved by individual institutional efforts but rather by a governance system that involves participatory planning, mobilizing resources, and joint implementation among state agencies, religious institutions, local communities, and civic networks. The results of this research aim to answer the first question, which is about the structural patterns of how multi-sector collaboration works in cultural heritage preservation. Collaborative governance is a process of negotiation between stakeholders that can be understood as a relational process in which they negotiate together the responsibility for culture and create together the sustainability of the local identity.

This approach emphasises face-to-face conversation, trust building, and shared understanding like Ansell & Gash (2008)'s collaborative governance paradigm. Local performers participate in ritual preparation, cultural performances, planning meetings, and community activities at the Bun Phawet Festival. These contacts allow stakeholders from different

institutional or social locations to negotiate directly. According to Sokhuma et al. (2023), integrated collaborative networks at central, regional, and local levels improve problem-solving, information exchange, and cross-institutional sharing. Therefore, only policy coordination, socially negotiated relationships, and ritual engagement can satisfy stakeholders and strengthen collective ownership.

Although the results are similar to previous research on community engagement in cultural maintenance, this study provides a more complex view of collaborative governance and cultural adaptation in rapid social and economic change. The findings suggest that collaborative governance can help communities modernize rituals without losing their essence. According to Bochon (2019), changing socio-economic conditions have necessitated cross-sectoral collaboration between public agencies, private entities, and community networks to ensure cultural continuity and sustainable cultural tourism development. Collaborative governance is a political negotiation and socialization process where local actors can reinterpret and reposition intangible heritage in changing developmental contexts without undermining its spiritual and communal values.

Mechanisms and Enabling Factors Supporting Cultural Continuity

The long-term sustainability of cultural identity requires collaboration to survive. The Bun Phawet Festival's coordinated governance relies on local actors' ability to promote participation, organize cultural events, and maintain mutual commitment in the face of social change.

The study finds community leaders, monks, and scholars as cultural intermediaries. As a bridge between formal institutions and grassroots networks, these actors could help resolve conflicts and reconcile stakeholder expectations. Participatory leadership and adaptive flexibility are key to successful collaborative networks, according to Maneewat (2023). These leaders encourage transparency, strengthen stakeholder capacity, and amplify local voices, creating a sense of collective ownership that goes beyond individual and institutional interests, making ritual coordination a continuous governance practice based on mutual recognition and shared cultural responsibility.

Both informal community participation and formal institutional support sustain cultural heritage. Through endorsements and budget allocations, government agencies legitimize and scale community-driven initiatives. Central, regional, and local network integration reduces operational redundancy, improves resource sharing, and strengthens governance by fostering public, private, and civic coordination. Rhodes (1997) describes collaborative networks as management models that distribute power and resources among interdependent organizations and groups. Collective bargaining, trust, and non-hierarchical relationships define collaborative networks.

The study shows how cultural sustainability is adaptive and politically negotiated, breaking from preservation stories. Maintaining Isan sermon chanting continuity requires the community to reinterpret and reconceptualize cultural practices in new developmental settings, supported by flexible leadership, institutionally responsive structures, and participatory networks that prioritize cultural meaning over economic functionality.

Stakeholder Networks and the Sustainability of Cultural Identity

The Isan chanting of the sermon is maintained by a network of many stakeholders, which is interdependent within a dynamic governance ecosystem where responsibilities, resources, and cultural knowledge are negotiated and shared on an ongoing basis. This structural relationship demonstrates the growing move from a hierarchical to a polycentric approach to heritage stewardship, with legitimacy, authority, and capacity being spread across institutional and community boundaries.

Collaborative governance can enhance cultural sustainability by bringing together various institutional and community capacities. Structural and financial support comes from government agencies and ritual authenticity and spiritual continuity from religious institutions. Cultural intermediaries, community leaders, and local scholars link formal policy systems with local knowledge systems. Cultural transmission is integrated into the curriculum, and learning is experiential in educational institutions; youth participation is a means of intergenerational renewal that ensures continuity of traditional practices at the social level in the modern world.

The present study demonstrates multi-actor networks foster culturally adaptive capabilities. Regular communication with stakeholders allows the group to work together to solve problems and share information and resources. This makes the community better able to cope modernization and changing pressures. This aligns with Emerson et al.'s (2012) Integrative Framework, which holds that continuous stakeholder interaction generates collaborative learning, shared motivation, and adaptive capacity. Within the Bun Phawet context, such learning extends beyond formal pedagogy to encompass ritual participation, intergenerational dialogue, and community engagement.

Overall, The findings suggest that collaborative governance is a social process based on community relationships, not just a management technique. Maintaining cultural continuity during rapid change requires ongoing negotiation. The Bun Phawet Festival is more than a cultural event; it's a civic space where intangible cultural heritage is created and passed down.

Body of Knowledge

This study is a contribution to the study of collaborative governance and cultural heritage management. The findings suggest that the protection of intangible cultural heritage depends on the interaction between participatory processes, leadership, and support of local policies in a collaborative governance framework.



Participatory Mechanisms and Community Engagement: The participation of various stakeholders is essential for maintaining cultural traditions. Residents and youth were directly involved in festival-related rituals and activities such as the Phra Upakhut procession, setting up ceremonial spaces, arranging merit-making activities, and organizing public performances related to the Mahachat sermon tradition. Furthermore, school and temple cultural programs taught and practiced Isan sermon chanting to youth and students.

Leadership Dynamics in Collaborative Cultural Governance: Leadership plays an important role in maintaining the cultural identity of Isan sermon chanting. Differentiate between spiritual-cultural and operational-administrative leadership. The spiritual and cultural guidance is largely provided by monks and religious leaders, who have a role beyond ritual in maintaining oral traditions, teaching Buddhist principles, and maintaining moral leadership in the community. Operational management is the responsibility of community leaders, including village headmen, local officials, and community scholars. They organize stakeholders, assign resources, manage the organization of the festival, ensure communication between sectors, and request support from government and private parties.

Local Policy Support and Institutional Integration: Local administrative organizations incorporated cultural preservation into their annual development plans and community promotion strategies and provided funding for festival organization, public outreach, infrastructure, youth cultural activities, and agency coordination. Several municipalities and subdistrict administrative organizations created local action plans to promote cultural tourism and conserve local knowledge through community activities. These policy measures allowed public agencies to provide regular financial and administrative assistance and communities to keep real control over the festival activities.

Therefore, successful collaborative governance in heritage preservation depends on both meaningful community participation and institutional structures that connect policy support with locally rooted cultural practices.

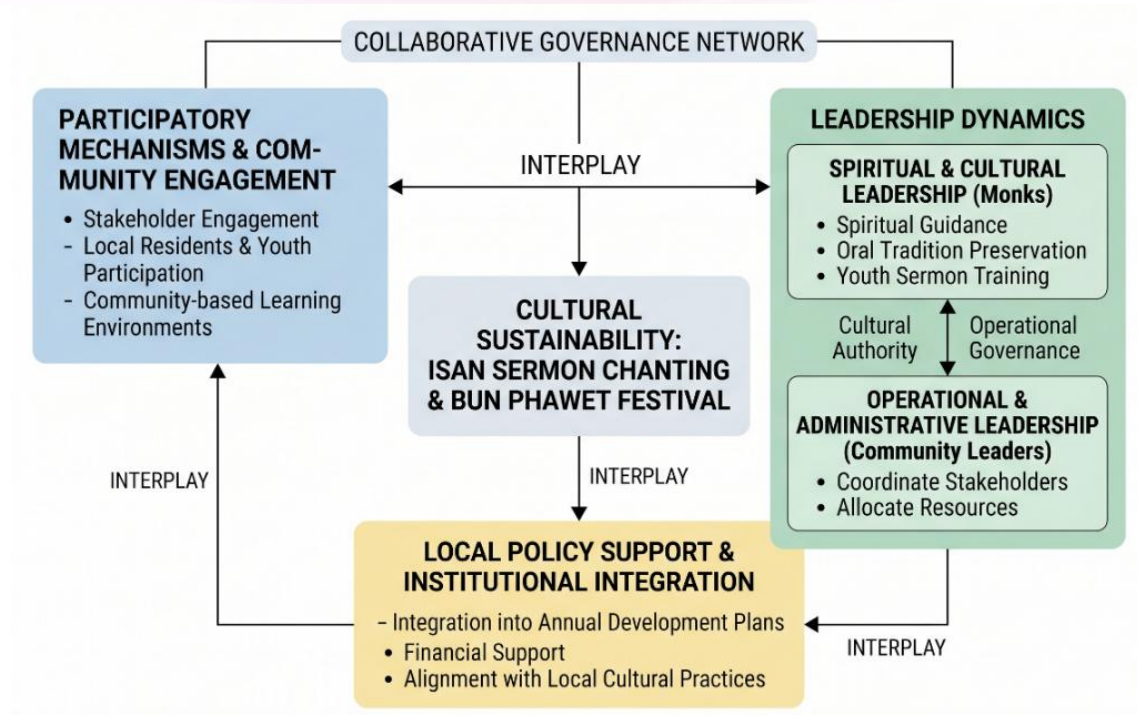


Figure 1: Collaborative Governance for Isan Sermon Chanting Sustainability
(Bun Phawet Festival)

Source: The Researchers (2025)

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The study indicates that the current practice of Isan sermon chanting at the Bun Phawet Festival in Roi Et Province is based on a collaborative governance approach. This strategy involves the convergence of government, religious institutions, communities, schools, civic groups, and cultural networks. There are three types of collaboration that are apparent: participatory planning, sharing of resources, and joint implementation. These activities are complemented by initiatives to increase cultural awareness among young people and residents and by the establishment of networks to foster shared responsibility and community cohesion. The findings also show that cultural sustainability is not only institutional but also the result of continuous interactions in common cultural contexts among the stakeholders. The community leaders and monks are complementary in their leadership styles, and the local administration bodies provide the needed policy guidance and resources for ongoing practice. Youth and educational organizations are engaged, pointing to the importance of collaborative governance in the context of intergenerational cultural transmission, despite the changing social and technological landscape.



Policy Recommendations

1. Municipalities, SAOs, and the Roi Et Provincial Administrative Organization must include Bun Phawet cultural preservation projects in their five-year development plans. This would assure continuity beyond short-term political or administrative changes.

2. Provincial cultural and local authorities must collaborate on strategic cultural management plans and link cultural heritage protection to community-based tourism. To avoid overcommercialization, these activities should emphasize cultural authenticity and community ownership.

3. Universities, vocational colleges, and other educational institutions should incorporate Isan sermon chanting and Bun Phawet tradition into their curriculum, extracurriculars, and community learning initiatives. This would improve cultural literacy and involve youth in heritage conservation.

4. Local communities and temples should develop “Youth Isan Sermon Chanting Clubs” to teach sermon chanting, traditional music, ceremonial performance, and storytelling. Monks, local scholars, and younger community members can learn together in these clubs.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies to assess the efficacy and sustainability of collaborative governance networks in cultural heritage protection.

2. Collect quantitative data from locals, youth, visitors, community leaders, monks, and local government officials to validate governance dynamics and community participation patterns.

3. Measure stakeholder trust, commitment to common goals, resource-sharing capacity, communication effectiveness, participation intensity, network density, and perceived cultural ownership as they affect collaborative governance success.

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