

Protest and *Ilmu Teluh*: Superstitious Beliefs and Rituals in Thai Youth Political Movements

การประท้วงและมูเตลู: ความเชื่อและพิธีกรรมลึกลับในขบวนการเคลื่อนไหวทางการเมืองของกลุ่มเยาวชนไทย

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คำสำคัญ: มูเตลู, ราชฎรมมูเตลู, การประท้วง, ขบวนการเยาวชน, โสยศาสตร์, การจำลองพิธีกรรมแบบไม่ถูกต้อง

Abstract

Background and Objectives: Between 2019 and 2023, Thailand witnessed waves of student- and youth-led protest movements. Although these young people are part of a new generation raised with scientific knowledge and technological advancements, many have chosen to incorporate supernatural beliefs and rituals—referred to as “ilmu teluh”—into their political activism, for example, the emergence of the “Ratsadon-muteluh”, a group which incorporates beliefs and rituals as a form of political expression.

Methods: This research studies the social phenomenon of superstitious belief and ritual practice among youth protesters using three methods: documentary analysis, non-participatory observation, and in-depth interviews (secondary data).

Results: *Ilmu teluh* rituals are practiced by numerous protest participants from various groups who believe that Thai society is dominated by a culture of privilege and oppression with a long-standing historical foundation, especially the Thai Royal Institution. These youth protesters perceive their political opponents, whom they label as the conservatives, to be highly credulous and devoted to superstition. As such, they therefore chose to use *ilmu teluh* as a symbolic tool to challenge their political opponents. Their protests targeted belief systems associated with prominent figures, while attempting to present an invented culture by reenacting rituals claimed to originate from the people instead. The protest rituals involving *ilmu teluh* were reenactments that did not follow the formal ritualistic principles of any particular belief system or religion, but were instead play-acting which comprises three acts: 1) the speech by protest leaders to clarify the objectives of the demonstration, 2) the role-playing as an artistic ritual to express emotions of resistance, and 3) the burning of effigies or objects as a form of symbolic communication through fire served as a climactic act in the performance. These rituals functioned both as a mechanism for moral healing and as a symbolic violence alternative to physical violence within the youth movements.

Application of this study: This research offers a framework for understanding the use of *ilmu teluh* rituals as a form of symbolic resistance. It serves as an analytical tool for examining youth-led cultural movements and political expressions within the context of an authoritarian society. The study is relevant to scholars, activists, and policymakers seeking to understand movements driven by beliefs.

Conclusions: *Ilmu teluh* rituals in Thai youth protests function as a symbolic expression that integrates political resistance with expressive culture. Through the reinterpretation and reconnection with traditional beliefs, youth protesters can use superstition as a tool for challenging authority, reclaiming public space, and expressing collective frustration. These rituals reflect a shift toward a movement rooted in the people rather than monopolized by the elites.

บทคัดย่อ

ที่มาและวัตถุประสงค์: ระหว่าง พ.ศ. 2562 ถึง พ.ศ. 2566 ประเทศไทยได้เผชิญกับขบวนการประท้วงที่นำโดยนักเรียนนักศึกษา และเยาวชน แม้ว่าเยาวชนเหล่านี้จะเป็นคนรุ่นใหม่ที่เติบโตมาด้วยความรู้และความก้าวหน้าทางวิทยาศาสตร์ แต่หลายคนกลับเลือกใช้พิธีกรรมความเชื่อโสยศาสตร์ที่เรียกว่า มูเตลู เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการเคลื่อนไหวทางการเมือง เช่น การปรากฏตัวของกลุ่มราชฎรมมูเตลู เป็นหนึ่งในกลุ่มที่นำความเชื่อและพิธีกรรมมาใช้แสดงออกเชิงการเมือง

วิธีการศึกษา: งานวิจัยนี้ศึกษาปรากฏการณ์ทางสังคมของความเชื่อไสยศาสตร์และพิธีกรรมในหมู่เยาวชนผู้ประท้วง โดยใช้วิธีการ 3 ประเภท ได้แก่ การวิเคราะห์เอกสาร การสังเกตแบบไม่มีส่วนร่วม และการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก (ข้อมูลทุติยภูมิ)

ผลการศึกษา: พิธีกรรมมูลเหตุถูกใช้โดยผู้เข้าร่วมการประท้วงจากหลายกลุ่ม ด้วยความเชื่อที่มีร่วมกันว่าสังคมไทยถูกครอบงำด้วยวัฒนธรรมอภิสิทธิ์และการกดขี่ ที่มีรากฐานทางประวัติศาสตร์มาอย่างยาวนาน โดยเฉพาะกับสถาบันพระมหากษัตริย์ เยาวชนเหล่านี้มองว่าฝ่ายตรงข้ามทางการเมืองของตน ซึ่งพวกเขาเรียกว่า ฝ่ายอนุรักษนิยม นั้นหลงเชื่อในเรื่องลี้ลับอย่างลึกซึ้ง จึงเลือกใช้ มูลเหตุ เป็นเครื่องมือเชิงสัญลักษณ์เพื่อโจมตีฝ่ายตรงข้ามทางการเมือง การประท้วงของพวกเขามุ่งโจมตีระบบความเชื่อที่ยึดโยงอยู่กับบุคคลสำคัญ โดยพยายามนำเสนอวัฒนธรรมประดิษฐ์โดยการจำลองพิธีกรรมต่าง ๆ ที่อ้างว่ามาจากประชาชนแทน พิธีกรรมการประท้วงที่ใช้ มูลเหตุ เป็นการจำลองพิธีกรรมที่ไม่ได้อาศัยความถูกต้องตามหลักพิธีกรรมของความเชื่อหรือศาสนาใด แต่มีลักษณะเป็นการแสดง ที่ประกอบด้วย 3 องค์ ได้แก่ 1) การกล่าวปราศรัยโดยแกนนำเพื่อชี้แจงเป้าหมายของการประท้วง 2) การแสดงบทบาทสมมติเป็นพิธีกรรมเชิงศิลปะเพื่อสื่อสารมโนทัศน์ และ 3) การเผาหุ่นหรือวัตถุเพื่อสื่อสารเชิงสัญลักษณ์ผ่านไฟ เป็นองค์ที่ใช้ปิดฉากการแสดงสำคัญ พิธีกรรมเหล่านี้จึงเป็นทั้งกลไกเยียวยาทางศีลธรรม และทางเลือกใช้ความรุนแรงเชิงสัญลักษณ์แทนความรุนแรงทางกายภาพของขบวนการเยาวชน

การประยุกต์ใช้: งานวิจัยนี้นำเสนอแนวทางในการทำความเข้าใจการใช้พิธีกรรมมูลเหตุในฐานะการต่อต้านเชิงสัญลักษณ์ โดยเป็นเครื่องมือวิเคราะห์การเคลื่อนไหวทางวัฒนธรรมและการแสดงออกทางการเมืองของเยาวชนในบริบทของสังคมอำนาจนิยม เหมาะสำหรับนักวิชาการ นักเคลื่อนไหว และผู้กำหนดนโยบายที่ต้องการเข้าใจขบวนการที่ขับเคลื่อนด้วยความเชื่อ

บทสรุป: พิธีกรรมมูลเหตุในการประท้วงของเยาวชนไทยเป็นการแสดงออกเชิงสัญลักษณ์ซึ่งผลานการต่อต้านทางการเมืองเข้ากับวัฒนธรรมการแสดงออก โดยการยึดโยงและตีความความเชื่อดั้งเดิมใหม่ เยาวชนสามารถใช้ไสยศาสตร์เป็นเครื่องมือท้าทายอำนาจ สร้างพื้นที่สาธารณะทางการเมือง และถ่ายทอดความไม่พอใจร่วมกัน พิธีกรรมเหล่านี้สะท้อนถึงการขับไล่สู่ขบวนการที่ตั้งอยู่บนรากฐานของประชาชนแทนการผูกขาดของชนชั้นนำ

Introduction

In modern politics, there is a thought about the feeble traditional representative democracy, so people across the world are getting into public spaces; the streets, the squares to protest according to their constitutional rights. People are directly addressing their needs with their own actions. For the first two decades of the 21st century, we have seen an increase in the number of protests around the world. Across Africa, Europe, the Americas and Asia, people have taken to the streets to demand real democracy, jobs, quality public services, civil rights, social justice, and an end to abuses, among others. What these protests have in common, regardless of where they occur in the world, geographically or on the political spectrum, is the failure of democracy and economic and social development, fueled by dissatisfaction and a lack of faith in the political process in institutions (Ortiz et al., 2022). Friedman (2014), protesters, mostly young people, aspire to a higher standard of living and greater freedom, and seek both through radical reform or revolution, depending on the government at the time. Thailand too has faced the latest wave of protests since 2019-2023, led by mostly students, the remaining force of social movement after the United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) or the Red Shirt movement is subdued by the 2014 coup d'état. Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023), youth and student movement who later called Kana Ratsadon-2563 (or 2020) has been trying to deconstruct Thai social structure of power. These young protesters are connected by public gathering in physical or virtual spaces and united by a shared political narrative and direction. Political narrative which they have in common is related to dissatisfaction from their failure in educational system and romantic relationship. Similar to the youth and student protest in Hong Kong, Shek (2020) said that high competition for academic excellence has become a destructive factor in the quality of life of the youth. This has led young protesters to find meaning and value in their lives by joining revolutionary movements that they believe will create a better future.

As fiercer as it seems, the population of youth and student protest is vulnerable and insecure, so groups of young protesters cope themselves with various practices of superstition and other alternative religious rituals, widely called ilmu teluh by Thai people. Around 2020, Promsorn Weerathamchari started Ratsadon-mutelu, the movement of protesters with similar interest with ilmu teluh. By joining the larger group of political protest, Kana Ratsadon-2563, Ratsadon-mutelu aims to promote democratic development by making people realize the country's problems, and most importantly, they want to liberate the elite's grip on art, history and culture of Thailand. Their protest method is an application of traditional practices and rituals of the local folks. According to Panudomlak & Suthichaya (2021), Promsorn Weerathamchari said what Ratsadon-mutelu has been doing is to enlighten people about the inseparable interconnection of politics and belief and history, woven together by the existing of Thai Royal institution. Ratsadon-mutelu wants to sever the tie of Thai Royal institution and beliefs, arts, religions, and cultures in order to emancipate the people from cultural monopolization. Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023) believe that the significant use of beliefs and cultures in the movement against Thailand's institutional structure stems from divisive discourse, driven by the stigmatization of opponents through conservative rhetoric.

Tapauhirun (2023) assumed that term of ilmu teluh in Thailand, originated from an Indonesian film titled Penangkal Ilmu Teluh, which has the English title Antidote for Witchcraft and the Thai title mū tē lū suk saiyasāt (Mu-teluh: The Battle of Black Magic). Directed by S.A. Karim, the film was released in 1979 and falls under the horror genre. The storyline revolves around two women who use black magic, spells, and witchcraft to compete for the love of the same man. In the film, the incantation includes the word mu-teluh, which, in this context, refers to black magic, sorcery, and dark spells. In Thailand, Tapauhirun (2023) finds that young men and women in this post-modern era have told their stories of achievement through the stories of ilmu teluh practices. This behavior stems from the inherent insecurity of human life where politics becomes a struggle for power. This struggle, driven by insecurity about one's own power manifests as cultural expression. Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023), for the youth and student protest, ilmu teluh has a broad meaning that encompasses all beliefs and faiths related to both positive and negative purposes. Youth and student protesters have adopted ritual performances as their protest method.

This research draws upon Turner (1966) concept of ritual as social drama and artificial play-acting to understand how youth protesters in Thailand employ ilmu teluh as a performative and symbolic tool of protest. It emphasizes the transformative and expressive power of rituals, particularly in moments of social conflict, where participants enact alternative realities and challenge dominant structures through symbolic performances. Simultaneously, Malinowski's (1971) functionalist approach provides a framework for interpreting these ritual acts as mechanisms to cope with anxiety, uncertainty, and structural vulnerability, particularly among youth facing educational, economic, and political pressures. By combining Turner's symbolic lens with Malinowski's pragmatic view of ritual, this study conceptualizes ilmu teluh not only as a cultural performance but also as a psychological and social response to the precarity experienced by a generation in crisis. Together, these theoretical perspectives illuminate how belief systems and ritual practices serve both expressive and instrumental roles within the broader landscape of youth-led political protest in contemporary Thailand.

Research Objectives

This study aims to examine the social phenomenon of superstitious belief and rituals, called ilmu teluh, among the population of youth protesters under the Kana Ratsadon-2563 movements by studying purpose and process of their purpose and process of ilmu-teluh rituals.

Research Methods

To understand the nature of youth protesters who are practicing the rites of ilmu teluh, This study conducted data collection by 3 methods, specifically revolving around the inner circle of protesters.

1. Document Data

The review of document data on this research focuses on 2 well-known figures in youth protest movement. Their public interview from 2021-2022 are collected as follows;

1.1 Promsorn Weerathamchari

Promsorn Weerathamchari is the leader of Ratsadon-mutelu who practices ilmu teluh as their protest method. As the leader of the group, he speaks for them about their political aims for taking part in the trending political movement of students and youths during 2019-2023: by grouping protesters with similar interests, aiming to promote democratic development, pointing out the country's problems, and most importantly, liberating the elite's grip on art, history and culture of Thailand; one example of their movement was to hex everybody who involved with injustice lawsuit on youth protesters. According to Panudomlak & Suthichaya (2021), Promsorn Weerathamchari said what Ratsadon-mutelu has been doing is to enlighten people about the inseparable interconnection of politics and belief and history, woven together by the existing of Thai Royal institution. And Ratsadon-mutelu wants to sever the tie of Thai Royal institution and beliefs, arts, religions, and cultures in order to emancipate the people from cultural monopolization.

1.2 Sam Samet

Sam Samet often titled himself as an alien protester because of the ambiguity of his race and citizenship. He gains his infamous reputation by climbing a barrier, urinating on crowd-control police officers, and vandalizing the shrine with high-heel. Sam Samet takes part as the leader of ilmu teluh rituals when he joins the Dragonis Revolution, later called Thaluwang (Sandhinera & Nakratok, 2023). According to Ongwanich (2022) Dragonis Revolution was a group of political activists who conducted political activities aimed at abolishing Thai Monarchy beginning with challenges to the article 112 in Thailand's Penal Code. Earlier, the Dragonis Revolution was based in Nakhon Sawan by students who were interested in political unrest. However, their majority of the radicals wanted to attack Thai Monarch, so most of them left Nakhon Sawan then Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023) said they joined other violent groups under the Kana Ratsadon-2563, operated in Bangkok. They protested and vandalized to deliver their messages about abolishing royal-related cultures and histories (abolishing the Royal Institute) e.g., to cancel graduation ceremonies and spray-painting the archaeological site such as the Temple of Emerald Buddha.

2. Non-participatory Observation

This study conducted non-participatory observations on 2 distinct events of ilmu teluh ritual performed by the mentioned protest leading figures, from 2021-2022.

2.1 Thalufah Candle Festival



Figure 1 Ritual protest leader dancing around burning mannequin during Thalufah Candle Festival
(Source: Voice TV, 2021)

2.2 Hunting You by Ilmu Teluh



Figure 2 Ritual protest leader performing the hexing during Hunting You by Ilmu Teluh
(Source: Ratsadon News, 2022)

3. Interview Data

The interview data were drawn from Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023) research in which they conducted semi-structured interview with youth protesters in Chiang Mai. The significant of the youth protests in Chiang Mai northern region of Thailand for this research lies in the fact that they demonstrated a protest mimicking their local culture.

3.1 Key-informant [in 01.023]

Key-informant [in 01.023] is a student at Chiang Mai University, aged between 18-19 years old. She was born in Chiang Mai and a member of the Neo-Lanna, an active group of protest movements in the northern region of Thailand. Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023) classified her into protest management level because she had been coordinating youth protest in Chiang Mai e.g., h̄maikam prachāthipatai. According to Chiang Mai National Museum, it is the religious tradition for parading the decorated large forked stick (maikam). Instead of supporting the over-weight branches of sacred tree, the protest symbolizes the decorated large forked stick as a symbol of supporting democracy. She also has a connection with the very well-known protest leader, Puthita Chaianan who is now a Member of Parliament.

3.2 Key-informant [in 01.024]

Key-informant [in 01.024] was born to a family of member of the UDD (Red-shirt)'s member. She said that having been born to the Red-shirt parents exposed her to protest and insurgency. As she grew up, she remembers deciding to join the protest on her own. It was when people protested against the construction project of jurisdiction staffs' resort on the hill. She is now studying political science in Chiang Mai University.

3.3 Key-informant [in 01.025]

Key-informant [in 01.025] began participating in youth movement while she was a 14-to-15-year-old student. Back then, she noticed school regulations that seemed unreasonable and illogical. She noted that her participation with the youth protest became serious when she joined the Lanna Student Group at 16 years old. According to Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023), Lanna Student is one of the most renowned youth movements in Chiang Mai. This group can organize protest with large turnouts.

Research Results

1. Ilmu teluh and Thai youth protest

Once Ratsadon-muteluh was formed during the Kana Ratsadon-2563 movement, it became evident that religious and superstitious practices had become central to youth and student protest methods. Despite ongoing scientific and technological advances, these practices have re-emerged as coping mechanisms among Thai youth facing structural uncertainty and existential pressures. As part of this shift, Promsorn Werathamchari, leader of the Ratsadon-muteluh group, proposed a concept he calls the Thai religion, a newly formed belief system derived from the assimilation of Hinduism, Buddhism, and local animistic traditions. This imagined religious framework provides a counter-narrative to the dominant historical discourse imposed by the state, particularly the royalist interpretation of Thai culture and history.

Absolutely. We, the Ratsadon-muteluh, work on matters of belief, art, religion, history, and culture. The more we bring up and disclose these matters, the more people will realize how politics has always been entwined with belief and history. They will recognize that Thai education presents only one perspective of fact. (Prachatai, 2021)

As seen in the quotation above, the movement of youth and student protest grounded in supernatural belief systems does not merely invoke ritual for its own sake, but engage belief, art, history, and culture as fields of political contestation.

Protesters argue that the Thai people are subjected to a regime that conceals its mechanisms of control through historical myth-making and cultural norms, which have naturalized obedience and suppressed dissent. Thus, the adoption of supernatural rituals and spiritual language in protest becomes a deliberate effort to re-educate the public about the connections between political power, cultural symbolism, and national history.

In line with Shek (2020) study, this movement can be understood in the broader psychosocial context of youth vulnerability. Shek identifies the competitive nature of educational systems as a key source of psychological strain among young people, especially in East and Southeast Asia. This environment not only produces a sense of failure for those who fall behind, but also limits avenues for finding authentic purpose and identity outside academic performance. Drawing on Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, Shek suggests that many young people enter a stage of foreclosure identity, where they commit to externally imposed identities without critical self-exploration. In this light, movements like Kana Ratsadon-2563 and subgroups like Ratsadon-muteluh offer youth an alternative identity narrative grounded in activism, symbolism, and collective meaning-making.

Being in a welfare state in terms of health care and education for all people in the country, regardless of who they are and which social status they belong, everyone should be able to get access to these rights. It is desirable that every person in our country; the ethnic and marginalized people can get access to these two mentioned factors, which are important factors of being human. (Prachatai, 2021)

This aspiration for a more inclusive and egalitarian state reflects growing demands for structural transformation, particularly around education, healthcare, and class mobility. The perceived inferiority imposed by social class, coupled with competitive pressures in both education and workplace, has catalyzed a call for a welfare-oriented political system. The rhetoric used by leaders like Promsorn Werathamchari frames these demands not only in socioeconomic terms but also through a moral and cultural lens, invoking rights and dignity as spiritual values. However, it is important to emphasize that terms like elite beliefs or elite culture are used rhetorically by the protest movement. They are not precise sociological categories, but discursive tools used to highlight the perceived cultural dominance of the monarchy and upper classes. These terms signal the movement's effort to reclaim belief systems and ritual practices from the elite, positioning them instead as common property which open to reinterpretation and use by people.

1.1 Ilmu teluh for countering political opponent

Youth protesters share their perception toward their political opponent whom they call the conservatives. They create social-constructed reality that the conservatives hold credulous belief in superstition, so the conservatives repeat old tradition which widened the social gap; therefore, the conservatives are the enemy who slow down country development. Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023), the significant use of beliefs and cultures in the movement against Thailand's institution power structure stems from divisive rhetoric, which emerges from stigmatizing the movement opponents with conservative language. In alignment with Kerdphalanan (2021), youth movement believes their political opponents called the conservatives always credulously hold on to patterns of religious traditions and cultures. She refers to a specific political event; the replacing Kana Ratsadon's street plate which considered black magic or ilmu teluh. So, later in 2020 Kana Ratsadon-2563 replicated that event by putting Kana Ratsadon-2563's street plate at the Royal Plaza with Atthaphon Buapat, one of the leaders, jokingly took on the role of a brahma-guru to lead the ritual. Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023) describe the ceremony for installing Kana Ratsadon-2563's street plate led by Atthaphon Buapat, who acted as a shaman

in a white robe similar to a brahma-guru, chanting to invite the gods, lost ghosts of the old People's Party, and the so-called democratic heroes to witness their ceremony of installing the street plate as the pinpoint of democratic revolution and the victory of the people. He then gave a speech through a loudspeaker and had nearby protesters repeat in a loud voice to curse those who might remove their street plate.

Ratsadon-mutelu is the movement of beliefs. Whatever Thai elites believe, we can believe. After organizing 2 protests, Ratsadon-mutelu has significantly increased engagement on our social media account which focuses on providing information about beliefs; what our opponent believes and what we believe. I also get a lot of feedback from people of younger generation and I don't care whether it is from the believers or non-believers. The main idea is that if the elites hold a belief, the people have rights to access it too. I don't want to get a response from people who believe or don't believe, but the main concept is that if the elite believes, the people also have the right to access that belief. (Kerdphalanan, 2021)

As seen in quotation above, Promsorn Werathamchari, leader of the protest ilmu teluh movement, does not focus on scientific or reasonable persuasion by saying that he does not care about the feedback to Ratsadon-muteluh. However, what matters to him is the social-constructed reality in which his opponents, the conservatives, do believe in ilmu teluh. So, by practicing ilmu teluh as protest method, the student and youth protest can spark fear among their opponents.

It is understood that my fellows have tried to abolish some cultures. I see their intention. What they are trying to achieve is to abolish only cultures that came from the monarch which symbolizes any kind of oppression, such as bowing down, paying respect, or even the seniority system. I see those cultures they are trying to abolish.... But they will leave alone the culture in everyday life. However, those cultures are different to our culture, so I do not worry about their movement. (Key-informant in 01.023)

In alignment with Kana Ratsadon-2563 student and youth protest want to deconstruct Thai cultures which is related to Thai Monarch. This rhetorical and performative approach shows a core strategy within the youth protest movement: to mirror the symbolic structures of their opponents while inverting their meanings. By engaging in rituals that resemble those used by the state or Thai Royal Institution such as invoking spiritual power, performing consecration ceremonies, or using religious symbols, the protesters challenge the exclusive right of the elite to define cultural and religious legitimacy. In doing so, youth protesters reclaim belief as a public right, not a tool to be monopolized by those in power. Their actions demonstrate that if sacredness can be invoked by the state to justify its authority, it can likewise be used by the people to contest and critique that authority. This deliberate subversion allows the protesters to destabilize the cultural foundations of their opponents, undermining the narrative that traditional values and rituals belong solely to conservatives or royalists. Moreover, by using ilmu teluh in protest settings, youth movements effectively weaponize belief as a symbolic form of resistance. Ilmu teluh becomes a form of cultural satire and resistance, reshaping the terrain of political discourse to include the emotional, the spiritual, and the symbolic. This approach also reflects an effort to deconstruct Thai national identity, which has long been built upon reverence for the monarchy and hierarchical traditions. As key-informant in 01.023 notes, the youth protest is not a wholesale rejection of culture, but a targeted critique aimed at dismantling those elements of culture that reinforce oppression such as practices of enforced respect, the seniority system, and ceremonial obeisance.

1.2 Ilmu teluh for gaining public attention

According to Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023), it is obvious that the student and youth movement has been trying to gain more public attention. They find that performance arts like contemporary and traditional singing and dancing, are common protest method used during 2020-2024. They also believe that the mastermind of the movement has been implanting their ideals and drawing public attention through these performance arts. This phenomenon is much resembled to what happened in the mass protest of the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), during 2013-2014, whose leaders arranged recreational activities called the eventful protest composing with series of stage performances and street arts (art lane).

Cultures and beliefs have been with us for a long time. By incorporating these elements into political campaigns, this creates a sense of unity and togetherness among people in our society. It makes us feel that those who champion these issues are truly part of our community. When we consider what these people do and who they do it for, we recognize they do it for all of us. This fosters a sense of solidarity, making people in society feel that the movement isn't limited to just one group. It helps people realize that they too can join our movement. (Key-informant in 01.025)

Moreover, the integration of culture and belief into political activism serves to deepen communal ties and foster solidarity among participants. As expressed by a key informant (in 01.025), embedding rituals, symbols, and cultural narratives into protest activities generates a sense of unity and belonging. This cultural grounding makes the movement appear more approachable and inclusive, thus expanding its appeal beyond the core group of activists. It allows people from various social backgrounds to perceive themselves as part of a shared struggle, thereby facilitating broader participation and identification with the movement's goals. Promsorn Werathamchari (Prachatai, 2021), who led Ratsadon-muteluh has been aiming to deconstructed belief systems, history, religion, and culture. According to Promsorn Werathamchari, shedding light on these domains enables the public to recognize the deeply political nature of cultural narratives and to question the monolithic historical interpretations propagated by the state, particularly through formal education. By revealing the plurality of historical and cultural perspectives, the ilmu teluh movement challenges dominant stream of culture and national identity and solidarity. In this context, the ilmu teluh movement functions not only as a cultural revival but also as a potent political instrument. Its reliance on familiar and cultural practices enables it to connect emotionally with the public, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of what constitutes legitimate political discourse. Through performance, ritual, and cultural symbolism, the movement expands the terrain of protest beyond the rational and argumentative, into the affective and symbolic, ultimately reshaping the way political engagement is conceived and enacted in contemporary Thailand.

Another aspect of attracting public attention for social movements involves the strategic use of confrontational tactics. Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023) observe that young protesters in Thailand demonstrate a preference for violent methods similar to those employed by youth protesters in Hong Kong. Although peaceful demonstration represents the idealistic form of protest, it often lacks the dramatic impact and revolutionary quality that activists seek. Dupuis-Déri, (2017), through sociological observation of communication patterns, explains that peaceful and orderly protests frequently fail to secure media coverage because news organizations typically neglect to report on the demands of non-confrontational demonstrators. Empirical data indicates that student and youth protests, particularly those organized by

lower socioeconomic groups, faced numerous legal charges related to violent incidents between 2020-2024. The ilmu teluh movement follows similar patterns, favoring violent approaches that are primarily symbolic or disguised. These include the vandalization of shrines at police stations and prisons, significant acts in Thai culture where shrines are commonly installed and consecrated to bestow blessings upon properties and occupants, whether at family residences or public/private properties. Another manifestation of symbolic violence involves the burning of personalized effigies, as exemplified during the Thalufah Candle Festival rally where Promsorn Werathamchari, who led the ceremony, immolated three mannequins representing the prime minister, minister of public health, and a prominent pediatrician. However, the legal challenges confronting this movement stem primarily from what Udupa & Pohjanen (2019) categorize as extreme speech; communication that includes stereotyping, incitement to hatred, and insulting or degrading language directed at specific targets, particularly Thai Royal Institution.

2. Ilmu teluh: Protest method

The findings show that the protesters' ilmu teluh rituals are not auxiliary to their political activities, but rather core components of their protest methods, often manifested through performance arts and ritualized acts. These performances blend traditional belief systems with dramatic expression, reinforcing both political messages and cultural identity. According to Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023), the youth-led movements in Thailand exhibit a high degree of religious and belief pluralism. Their protests commonly feature elements from Buddhism, Hinduism, local folklore, astrology, and animism, deployed not in strict religious form, but in adapted, hybridized, and symbolic ways. For instance, performances frequently include singing, dancing, ritualized burning, and symbolic actions at significant religious or historical sites. These practices are often free-form, deliberately subverting the structured traditions.

Throughout this country's history, we have been steeped in a society rich with beliefs in both superstition and religion. Historical records consistently show the presence of these supernatural beliefs. Furthermore, during numerous military coups, astrology and other belief systems have been invoked to legitimize power, ensuring these elements have remained intertwined with Thai society continuously and have never once disappeared from the Thai social fabric. Over the past year, we have witnessed news related to both magical and religious beliefs. For example, at the beginning of the year, various astrologers presented their readings of the nation's fortune, predicting what the year would bring. These practices have consistently existed alongside Thailand's political history. (Prachatai, 2021)

This observation underscores the long-standing entwinement of spirituality and governance in Thai political history. The use of rituals by the youth movement, therefore, is not anomalous but rather reflects and reclaims a tradition that has long been monopolized by ruling institutions. One such example is the deliberate selection of auspicious time and location for events. As noted by Promsorn Werathamchari (Prachatai, 2021), the protest at Wat Saket on February 13 was scheduled according to astrological belief. The site was also chosen for its symbolic association with the people, as the temple's tradition allows the use of red cloth, a color closely linked to the UDD (Red Shirt movement), in opposition to the PAD's yellow, associated with royalist elites. This spatial and color-coded symbolism reveals how deeply protest methods are embedded in cultural semiotics.

The event today (2021, February 13) was planned by earlier scheduling the auspicious date and time to find the most suitable day for holding the folk's event...And the reason for choosing Wat Saket is because it is the only temple whose old tradition allows the use of red cloth to decorate the pagoda, and this temple is located on a high ground in the center of the city, which is considered a good location for holding people's event. (Hawae, 2021)

According to Tapauhirun (2023), one of the common practices of ilmu teluh observed in youth-led protests is the deliberate selection of auspicious dates and locations for conducting political rituals. This reflects a belief that cosmic alignment and spatial symbolism can enhance the efficacy and legitimacy of the protest, empowering turnouts through perceived spiritual supremacy. In this context, superstition is not seen as irrational, but as a form of cultural empowerment grounded in traditional cosmology and collective belief. Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023) further contextualize this practice by highlighting the symbolic use of space and color in Thai political culture. For instance, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), aligned with royalist and conservative forces, is symbolically associated with the color yellow, representing monarchy and elite values. In contrast, their political rival, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), also known as the Red Shirts, is associated with the color red, symbolizing grassroots resistance and the people. This symbolic color dichotomy often finds spatial expression in protest rituals.

Additionally, the regional cultural variation among youth protests illustrates the adaptability and locality of ilmu teluh practice. In Northern Thailand, youth groups such as the Neo-Lanna and Lanna Student Group incorporate traditional northern rituals, artistic expression, and folklore into their protest designs. As Key-informant in01.023 explained, rallies in Chiang Mai often resemble Buddhist merit-making ceremonies, blurring the lines between religious gathering and political demonstration. These performative acts create a sense of cultural continuity while simultaneously reconfiguring the meanings of those rituals in a democratic and participatory context.

We discovered that Chiang Mai is a city rich in culture and art. We enjoy engaging in these kinds of activities. Many groups of people from various places come to Chiang Mai to practice art, creating a consistently artistic atmosphere throughout the city. The movement aims to convey that cultural essence. For instance, during our recent rally, we incorporated elements of traditional Lanna culture, structuring it similarly to a merit-making ceremony. (Key-informant in 01.023)

Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023), student and youth movement in the North relies on the culture and traditions of the North as a tool for organizing the movement and assembly activities. In addition, the researcher also found attempts to create rhetorical meaning in the form of traditional and cultural performances, which were used by the movement against the state power structure as a symbol of the cultural revolution to create equality.

The Draconis Revolution further exemplifies this cultural-political fusion. Their event, Ilmu Teluh Trip: Husband Hunting (thūa mū lā phūa), served both as a public demonstration and symbolic pilgrimage, visiting key historical and sacred sites tied to Thai leftist history. Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023) argue that this event, while seemingly playful, served a deeper purpose: to address emotional insecurities (particularly around love and loneliness) that are often intertwined with broader feelings of disenfranchisement. Such integration of personal and political themes through ritual reflects the movement's ability to connect affective experience with collective resistance.

2.1 The structure of the 3 acts

The rites within Thailand's youth protest movement do not follow a rigid or orthodox religious pattern. As Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023) observe, the youth protests reflect a high degree of religious pluralism, with limited attachment to any singular belief system. Instead, these movements creatively draw from multiple traditions including local animism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and urban folklore to construct accessible, symbolic rituals that serve political purposes. In places such as Chiang Mai, protest events are often hybrid performances, combining political speeches, poetry readings, art exhibitions, and participatory performances. These events are highly localized and community-driven, often concluding with acts of collective sharing such as dramatic symbolic gestures like the burning of effigies, which serve to finalize the emotional and political climax of the gathering.

In Chiang Mai, protest methods typically include speeches, performance art, poetry readings, and offering an open microphone to participants who wish to express themselves. Afterward, we would share a meal together. Finally, the Chiang Mai protest group tends to conclude events dramatically by burning something, creating an appearance of chaos and excitement to bring the demonstration to a thrilling close. (Key-informant in 01.023)

Building on Turner (1966) notion of ritual as social drama, these protest performances can be understood by unfolding them in three metaphorical acts, much like a theatrical production. Each act carries symbolic weight and serves a distinct function within the protest narrative. The rites in youth protest movement do not follow a traditional pattern. Evidence shows that adherence to a single religion or belief is low, yet religious pluralism is highly prevalent.

Act 1: the speech

By observing 2 protest events and studying the interview data, It was observed that Ratsadon-muteluh and other smaller group of protest are not really independent from Kana Ratsadon-2563. Instead, they rely on high member of Kana Ratsadon-2563 as their beacon of revolutionary ideal, so each protest begins with speeches from their leaders or influential figures from Kana Ratsadon-2563. As seen in Thalufah Candle Festival, before the rite of ilmu teluh takes place Jatupat Boonpattaraksa widely known as Pai Dao Din takes time to deliver his speech to the crowd. Then Promsorn Weerathamchari would lead the rite of ilmu teluh.

The first act is typically initiated with political speeches by prominent leaders, most often figures from the Kanaratsadon-2563 network. These speeches are not just informative but serve as ritualistic invocations, aligning the audience on shared grievances and ideals. The speeches frame the event, articulate its goals, and establish emotional momentum. For instance, at the Thalufah Candle Festival on July 25, 2021, Jatupat Boonpattaraksa (Pai Dao Din) opened the event with a forceful address, establishing the tone for the ceremony that followed. After the speech, Promsorn Weerathamchari stepped forward to lead the ilmu teluh ritual. This sequencing of speech followed by ritual exemplifies how political discourse is interwoven with symbolic action, transforming protest into a form of performative storytelling.

Act 2: the artificial play-acting

From the interview data, it is evident that many participants perceive their protest activities not solely as political acts but also as forms of performance art. One key-informant describes that protest events involving traditional dance, theatrical play, and symbolic dramatization, blurring the line between ritual and political satire. These performances do not mimic religious ceremonies with precision; rather, they draw upon their visual and emotional power to communicate dissent in culturally resonant ways. Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023) note that these performances are alternative narratives.

Protesters use storytelling, parody, and improvisation to critique institutions and historical narratives, particularly those linked to Thai Royal Institution and state power. This method is especially prevalent among lower-class youth groups, such as the Thalu collectives, who use satire to express resistance in accessible and creative forms.

Turner (1966) uses the term artificial play-acting to describe rituals that depart from canonical religious or cultural practices. Such performances, while not formally sacred, serve powerful communal and psychological functions. They are carried out not for spiritual salvation, but to satisfy a social and emotional audience; a shared protest community seeking both catharsis and solidarity. In this sense, artificial play-acting becomes a ritual of protest, grounded in theatricality rather than theological orthodoxy. In the case of ilmu teluh, this artificiality is intentional. The rituals are often performed in Thai vernacular, rather than in Pali or Sanskrit, symbolizing a rejection of elite religious authority and an effort to democratize spiritual expression. This linguistic shift transforms the ritual from a formal religious act into a popular, participatory performance, open to reinterpretation by people.

The movement aims to make rituals more accurate, clearer, and more connected to the essence of our country. For example, many traditions and rituals have historically been created for the elite. In the near future, the people of ilmu teluh may introduce rituals that belong to the common people, allowing everyone to view these traditions from their own perspective. (Kerdphalanan, 2021)

As this quote illustrates, the Ratsadon-muteluh intentionally reclaims and redefines sacred rituals as tools for the people. They have been simplifying the structure, altering the language, and incorporating familiar cultural symbols, they create a new form of ritual practice that reflects the lived experiences of the marginalized people rather than reinforcing elite hegemony. Therefore, the second act, the artificial play-acting, represents a profound symbolic intervention. It reframes belief not as something to be inherited unquestioningly, but as something that can be reimagined, satirized, and repurposed. Through humor, parody, and vernacular symbolism, these performances articulate a collective aspiration for a more inclusive cultural identity, grounded not in hierarchy, but in shared experience and creative defiance.

Act 3: setting fire

As mentioned in 3.1.2.1, the act of setting fire during protests functions as a strategic, symbolic form of violence, used to dramatize resistance and capture public and media attention. This final act typically involves the burning of effigies, mock coffins, protest banners, salt, or ritual items, each carefully chosen to represent political figures, institutions, or ideologies that the protesters oppose.

This act reflects what Turner (1969) might describe as a *communitas* moment, where a collective emotional climax is reached through shared symbolic destruction. In this context, fire becomes a cultural language of rupture, signaling the desire to burn away the existing order and clear space for newcomers. While the act mimics traditional rituals, it simultaneously subverts their usual meanings. Instead of being led by monks or Brahmins and chanted in Pali or Sanskrit, Ratsadon-muteluh protesters speak their intentions aloud in Thai, reclaiming spiritual authority and democratizing ritual practice.

This vernacular shift underscores a broader rejection of elite-controlled religious expression. It allows protesters to perform sacredness on their own terms, asserting that ordinary people have the right to reshape and repurpose traditional rituals for contemporary political struggles. Moreover, this act of setting fire often marks the emotional and narrative climax

of the protest event. It leaves behind powerful visual symbols. These scenes are designed to linger in the media, making the protest harder to ignore and harder to erase.

2.2 The observation: structure of the rites

The rites in youth protest movement do not follow a traditional pattern. Apart from, Ratsadon Mutelu, there are also many protests that use ritual based on mystical/urban legends to promote their movement. As Turner (1966) suggests term of artificial play-acting, it was found that Thai youth protests use performances (a play), along with setting fire, as a tool to express themselves in line with cultural beliefs. There is singing, dancing, and performances at important religious sites. In addition to the case of the target group in Northern region who uses local traditions as a tool to drive the protesters, there is also a protest group that emphasizes the form of ritual performances based on religion.

Thalufah Candle Festival

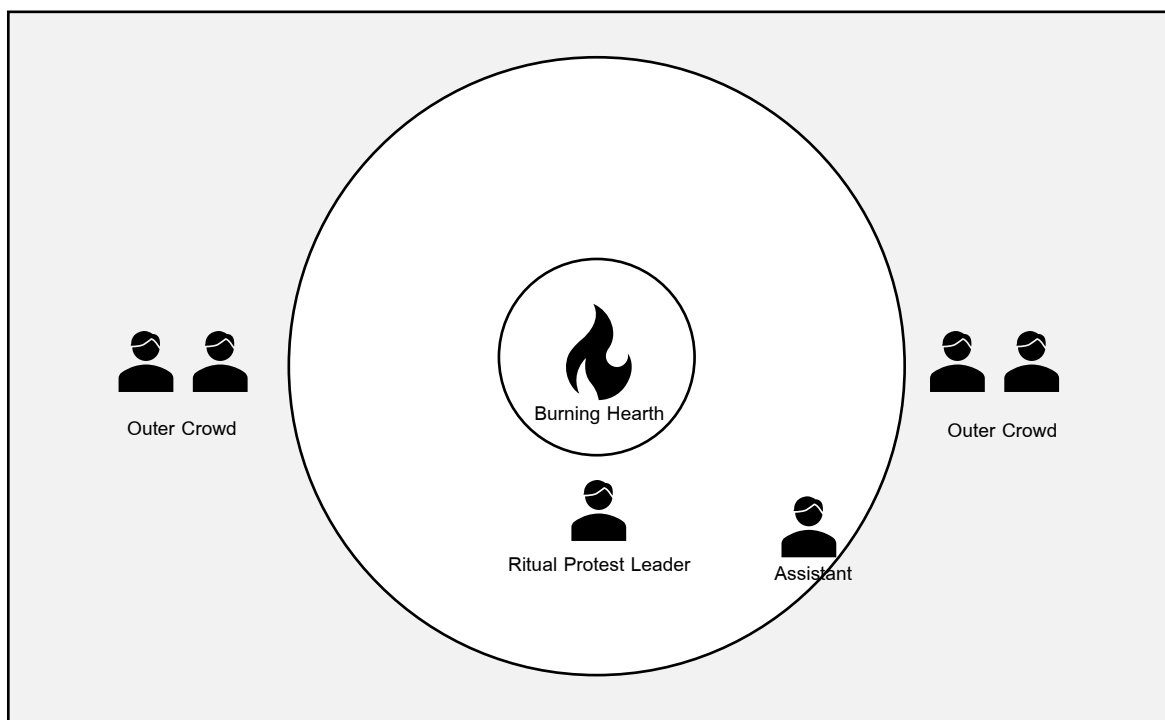


Figure 3 Layout of Ritual Precinct in Thalufah Candle Festival

(Source: Sandhinera, 2025a)

On July 25th, 2021, Thalufah rallied the protest from Victory Monument to the House of Government. They called the rally, Thalufah Candle Festival (hǎe thīan thalu fā). They arrived at the House of Government around 5pm. The rally stopped at the bridge near the House of Government by the barrier. After Jarupat Boonpattarakaksa and other protesters gave their speeches and taunted crowd-control police, Ratsadon-muteluh was called to perform the Candle Festival-Rid of evil. The crowd circled around forming a circular ritual precinct. They brought 3 mannequins representing 3 public figures; Prayuth Chan-o-cha, Anutin Chaweearakul, and Yong Phuworawan (M.D.), to the heart of circular precinct. Then, an assistant lit the mannequins on fire from the festival candle. Once they caught fire and became the hearth, Promsorn Weerathamchari, leader of the ritual, danced around the hearth while the assistant play music from their playlist.

Hunting You by Muteluh

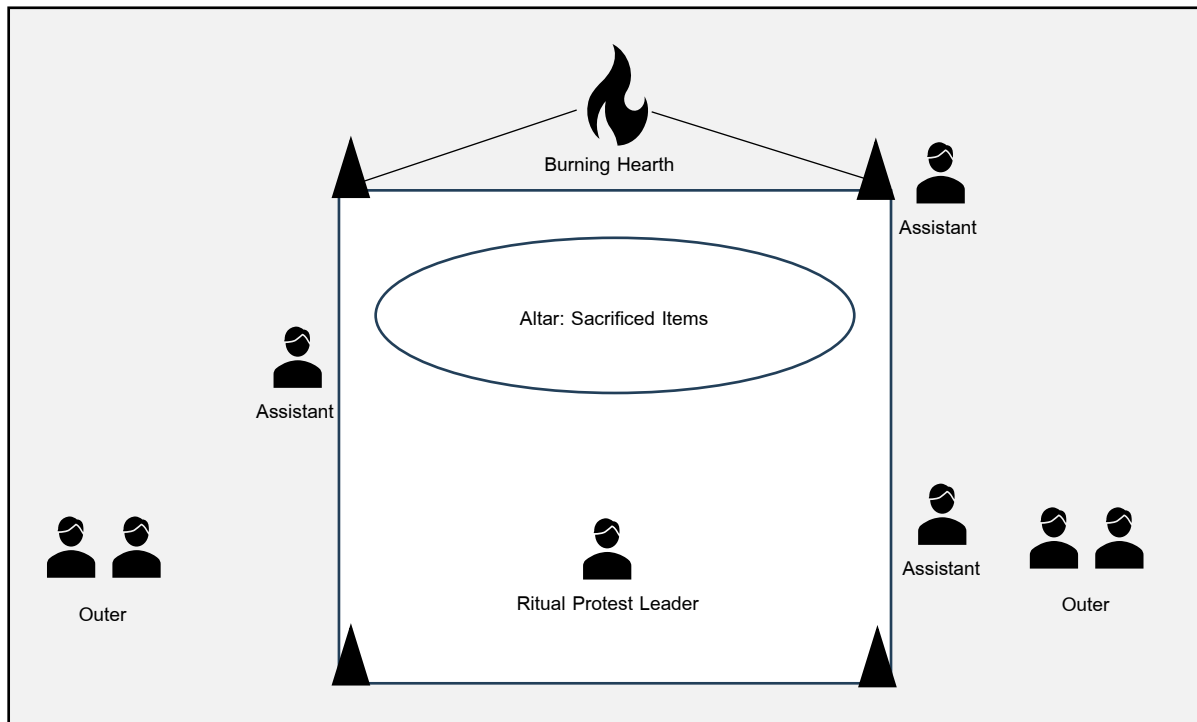


Figure 4 Layout of Ritual Precinct in Hunting You by Muteluh
(Source: Sandhinera, 2025b)

On the evening of May 7th, 2022, groups of youth protesters led by the Dragonis Revolution were gathering in front of Klong Prem Central Prison, demanding the authority to release their fellow protesters who were imprisoned. In this event, Sam Samet, an undocumented alien who had gained his reputation among the protesters, planned with his friends to perform an ilmu teluh hexing ritual called Hunting You by Ilmu Teluh, bringing 13 magical items for sacrificing. They built the ritual precinct using street cones and roped the holy thread around them to make a rectangular ritual precinct. Right next to the precinct, they used gasoline to light a fire in a ritual bucket. To start the ritual, Sam Samet's assistant played traditional funeral song. Sam Samet naked his top and stepped into the precinct. Then he kneeled down to burn black incense while the first assistant wrote the targets' name on the paper to hex them. The second and the third assistants put lotus flowers on the two front precinct pillars. Then Sam Samet grabbed the sacrificial items. He threw shredded lotus flower, raw duck eggs and stale rice; pour the cow blood and rice whiskey; held the incense while chanting as the assistants put paper with target's name in the fire bucket. Repeating the cycle one more time, Sam Samet added the 7-grave water, old ginger, dried chill, and salt into the fire bucket. Finally, they threw every ingredient left into the fire and Sam Samet stepped out the precinct to pour the remaining 7-grave water inside the Prison's security station. Differing to the previous observation, the ritual consists of items that are considered to be magical such as blood of cattle, rice whisky, and raw duck eggs, among others. The 13 magical items can be to 4 categories; items for feeding evil entities, items commonly known for hexing, items for common auspicious rites, and, items of other dark magic. Discerned that, the quality of these items must be spoiled, rotten, old or shredded which reflects the malevolent or ill intention of ilmu teluh practiced by the Dragonis Revolution.

The findings from these two observations show Thalufah Candle Festival and Hunting You by Muteluh have demonstrated that ilmu teluh has become deeply integrated into the structure and rhythm of youth-led protests in Thailand. Both events exemplify how protest is ritualized into a three-act performance, where speeches articulate political ideals, performative rituals dramatize dissent, and the symbolic act of burning creates a cathartic climax. These acts are not simply theatrical but they are grounded in cultural logics, religious pluralism, and a conscious effort to challenge elite symbolism and reclaim traditional expression for them. Through these structured yet fluid protest methods, the youth movement transforms public space into a stage of political and cultural reimagination, where traditional rituals are no longer tools of obedience but vehicles of resistance, empowerment, and collective identity. Turner (1966) uses the term artificial play-acting to describe the ritual performance which is done barely to satisfy the audience, both insiders and outsiders. To this definition, the performed ritual is artificial, since it does not follow cultural or religious process. It becomes merely a play-acting. Fire is an essential element to youth protest methods; the violent protesters rioted using fire to vandalize public and private property, and make a riot. Protest group that practices ilmu teluh used fire in burning their sacrificed items to the supernatural being. As well as, to display symbolic violence toward their targets.

Discussion and Conclusion

1. Discussion

The results of this study reaffirm the complex entanglement between belief, identity, and political protest in contemporary Thailand. As Tapauhirun (2023) suggests, belief in ilmu teluh is strongly correlated with heightened anxiety and feelings of insecurity, particularly in contexts marked by uncertainty, social instability, and personal disempowerment. The COVID-19 pandemic, competition in education, political volatility, and widening inequality have all contributed to a climate in which Thai youth, especially students and those from poor families, seek symbolic anchors to regain a sense of control and direction. This corresponds with Shek & Siu (2019) findings on the difficulty of upward social mobility among youth, where structural pressures within education and the economy leave them feeling trapped in a competitive, unequal system. In this context, ilmu teluh becomes not merely a spiritual belief but a symbolic coping mechanism, a form of ritualized resistance through which young people express both their disillusionment and their desire for change.

Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023) classification of youth protest behavior based on classes and geographies further reveals a differentiated protest culture. While middle-class urban students favor speeches and performance art, provincial groups rely on ritualized occupation of space. However, all of them have engaged deeply in ilmu teluh. These rituals reflect not only political dissatisfaction but also psychosocial vulnerability, particularly in several topics such as education, employment, and even romantic life. The act of sacrificing or invoking supernatural beings, as noted in both participant interviews and field observations, is often less about superstition per se and more about externalizing internal insecurity into a ritualized, performative form.

Drawing from Turner (1966) theoretical frameworks, these ilmu teluh rituals can be seen as both expressions of collective values and psychological responses to collective instability. Turner's notion of artificial play-acting is particularly useful for understanding the performative dimension of these protests. The rituals observed whether they involve binding ginger with holy thread, installing symbolic plaques, or burning effigies do not conform to orthodox religious tradition. Rather, they are deliberately constructed symbolic acts, shaped to satisfy the emotional and political needs of the community in the present moment. They communicate frustration, and violence through improvised sacred language and imagery. Malinowski's functionalist interpretation of myth and ritual supports this view by situating these acts within a

pragmatic need to reduce anxiety and reestablish control over life's uncertainties. By invoking supernatural elements through simplified, vernacular rituals, protesters assert that the sacred should be publicly accessible, not monopolized by elites or the monarch.

The emergence of Ratsadon-muteluh as a sub-group within the Kana Ratsadon-2563 also demonstrates a shift from elite to folk culture.^t It is seen that religious symbolism is often revitalized when institutional trust erodes. Yet, these rituals are not simply symbolic; they are strategic interventions in Thailand's cultural discourse. First, they counter political opponents by appropriating and parodying traditional rituals long used to legitimize power. Second, they capture public and media attention through visually and emotionally compelling acts, fire, chanting, and dramatic symbols. Third, they subvert and reimagine the cultural integrity of Thai Royal Institution, exposing its symbolic foundations and challenging its sacralized status. Ultimately, the practice of ilmu teluh is a form of protest that reflects broader generational discontent and an urgent desire to reshape national identity. These rituals operate as discursive tools, allowing protesters to reclaim spiritual language, build collective meaning, and engage in a symbolic struggle for democratic reform. By occupying sacred space, reconfiguring ritual performance, and reinterpreting cultural symbolism, the youth movement offers a radical vision of cultural decolonization and inclusive identity-building, grounded not in hierarchy, but in shared vulnerability and imaginative defiance.

Tapauhirun (2023) found that anxiety is significantly related to the personality traits of people who believe in ilmu teluh. When someone feels anxious or insecure due to uncertainty and a lack of control over their life - particularly regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, rapid technological changes like digital disruption, or the country's political climate - all of which impact daily life, they may seek something stable to cling to, such as answers or guidance to help shape their decision and provide direction. Sandhinera & Nakratok (2023) found that the modern protests of school and university students, and other youths that occurred during 2020-2023 have different protest methods. It is clear that school and university students (upper middle class or urban middle class) often organize protest activities by giving speeches and organizing performances in public areas. Similarly, student groups, together with villagers in the provinces (middle class), often organize protest activities by performing in public areas, which sometimes may travel to occupy areas for a long period or camp out in Bangkok. However, the role of thought leadership has decreased, as shown by the fact that the middle class in the provinces often delegate speech activities to core leaders who travel from the main protest groups in the central region (Bangkok). Finally, youth groups (lower class) do not like activities that compete for thought leadership or various performances, but instead prefer violence by causing chaos, looting or setting fire to public property.

2. Conclusion

In summary, the findings of this research underscore the significant role of traditions, beliefs, and cultural practices in shaping and mobilizing youth-led political movements in Thailand. The use of ilmu teluh rituals by groups such as Ratsadon-muteluh illustrates how supernatural beliefs have been recontextualized to serve as tools of political protest. These practices are not isolated behavior but are embedded within a broader context of dissatisfaction with the status quo, including concerns over education, inequality, cultural hegemony, and governance. Rituals such as symbolic sacrifices, performance art, and public acts of defiance serve as both protest strategies and means of fostering collective identity. They provide a shared language and set of symbols through which young protesters can critique the dominance of the monarchy and the cultural systems that support it. Drawing from the literature, these ritual performances align with Turner's (1966) notion of ritual as a medium for expressing group values and challenging dominant structures, as well as his concept of artificial play-acting, which underscores the performative and constructed nature of these acts.

Moreover, the movement's strategic deployment of culturally resonant practices blurs the lines between religion, superstition, and political activism. This hybridity not only broadens participation but also allows for new forms of meaning-making that reflect the lived experiences and anxieties of the youth population. Ultimately, the adoption of ilmu teluh in youth protests should be viewed as a symbolic method substituted violence. It represents a reclaiming of belief systems, a subversion of traditional authority, and a call for a more inclusive cultural and political future. As such, these rituals function as both acts of protest and propositions for alternative cultural identities grounded in people's lived realities rather than institutional dogma.

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