Thai Cursing Rituals and Anti-Corruption: Symbolic Strength and Social Function

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Abstract

Cursing rituals in Thai society signify culturally ingrained symbolic activities that are increasingly utilized in reaction to perceived corruption and institutional inadequacy. This study seeks to analyze the role of these rituals as instruments of symbolic authority and informal accountability in modern anti-corruption frameworks. The study utilizes a qualitative interpretative research design, employing a multiple-case approach grounded in publicly documented ritual acts linked to corruption claims. Data were gathered from media reports, public pronouncements, and digital sources, and analyzed using thematic and interpretive discourse analysis guided by the theoretical frameworks of symbolic power and accountability.

The findings indicate that cursing rituals function as mechanisms of moral framing, converting technical accusations of corruption into culturally significant tales of guilt, justice, and moral violation. These strategies create

emotional engagement and public visibility through symbolic classification, performative language, and ritual dramatization. Media amplification broadens their influence, allowing ritualized condemnation to serve as a mechanism of informal accountability by exerting reputational pressure on the accused individuals and institutions. Nonetheless, the study reveals that these rituals are fundamentally limited by their absence of legal authority, reliance on collective belief systems, and susceptibility to political interpretation.

This study enhances the interdisciplinary comprehension of governance by illustrating that ritual behaviors can function as culturally rooted, yet context-specific, instruments of informal accountability. It further posits that successful anti-corruption programs must amalgamate institutional reform with a focus on the symbolic and communicative aspects of public trust and legitimacy.

Keywords: Cursing rituals, Corruption, Symbolic power, Thai culture, Anti-corruption

Introduction

Cursing rituals are a deeply ingrained cultural tradition in Thailand and throughout mainland Southeast Asia, where ritual, religion, and socio-political life are intricately interconnected. Aside from their connection to supernatural beliefs, such rituals serve as symbolic public performances that express moral judgment, dramatize social conflicts, and establish claims to justice within culturally significant frameworks (Geertz, 1973; Turner, 1969). In modern Thailand, ritual practices such as curse invocations, oath-taking, and symbolic acts with sacred elements have periodically surfaced in

political protests, illustrating the intersection of cosmological belief systems with legal awareness and political conflict (Engel, 2016; Rajah, 2005). These practices function not only at the level of individual conviction but also as communication acts in public arenas, capable of galvanizing collective sentiment and redefining moral discourse.

Academic examinations of Thai political protests reveal that symbolic and ritualistic actions, especially those including blood symbolism and curse invocations, can convert abstract concerns into morally persuasive public spectacles that contest institutional legitimacy (Cohen, 2012). From a theoretical standpoint, these behaviors can be comprehended via the notion of symbolic power, which denotes the ability to influence perceptions and categorizations of social reality through culturally acknowledged systems of meaning (Bourdieu, 1989, 1991). In ritual contexts, symbolic power is manifested through sacred objects, performative speech acts, and culturally significant symbols that delineate moral classifications of individuals as virtuous or immoral, thus shaping public interpretation beyond formal legal frameworks (Austin, 1962; Geertz, 1973; Turner, 1969).

Corruption in Thailand is a well-documented systemic concern linked to patronage networks, elite capture, and the politicization of accountability mechanisms (Mutebi, 2008; Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016). Notwithstanding the creation of legal frameworks and anti-corruption organizations, the efficacy of formal accountability procedures has frequently been hindered by institutional constraints and diminishing public trust (Dalpino, 1991; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). In these circumstances, informal practices—such as public shaming, civic mobilization, and symbolic protest—may arise as alternative means for individuals to express moral demands and seek justice

(Fox, 2007; Schedler, 1999). Cursing rituals can be located within the broader range of informal accountability practices, serving as culturally ingrained forms of moral censure in circumstances where official responses are seen insufficient.

Although there is an expanding corpus of work on corruption and governance, there has been insufficient academic focus on the distinctive function of ritual practices—especially cursing rituals—as instruments of informal accountability. Previous research has investigated the cultural aspects of protest and the interaction between law, religion, and symbolic action in Thailand (Engel, 2016; Rajah, 2005), but the role of ritualized denunciation in anti-corruption rhetoric is still inadequately researched. This difference is important because ritual practices can offer culturally relevant means to convert technical accusations of corruption into emotionally compelling moral tales that influence public perception and collective reaction.

This study fills this gap by contextualizing Thai cursing practices within the analytical frameworks of symbolic power and accountability theory. It analyzes how ritual acts create narratives of guilt, moral transgression, and justice in circumstances marked by perceived institutional breakdown. The study examines the degree to which ritualized condemnation functions as an informal accountability mechanism by creating social pressure outside formal legal frameworks, together with its structural and normative constraints concerning institutional governance processes. This research enhances the understanding of the interaction between culturally rooted symbolic practices and modern issues of corruption, legitimacy, and public

confidence by incorporating concepts from political anthropology, sociology of law, and anti-corruption studies.

Research Objectives

This study investigates cursing practices as culturally ingrained mechanisms of symbolic authority and informal accountability within anti-corruption frameworks in Thailand. The explicit aims are:

1. To examine the symbolic and communicative aspects of Thai cursing rituals in the formation of meanings related to guilt, moral violation, and justice.

2. To investigate ritualized denunciation as a mechanism of informal accountability in situations of perceived institutional inadequacy.

3. To assess the advantages and drawbacks of cursing rituals in comparison to formal anti-corruption measures.

Research Scope

1. Literature Review

1.1 Ritual, Symbolic Power, and Social Influence

1.1.1 Conceptualizing Ritual

Ritual has historically been acknowledged as a systematic kind of symbolic behavior integrated into religious, political, and social spheres. Instead of being merely a superstition or repetitive ceremony, ritual serves as a structured kind of communication that generates shared meanings and strengthens community identities. Modern ritual theory posits that rituals are performative actions that create social realities, delineate moral limits, and structure authority relations (Bell, 1997; Collins, 2004). From a sociological

standpoint, ritual produces emotional energy and cohesion, enhancing group consciousness and reinforcing normative order (Durkheim, 1912/1995; Turner, 1969).

Recent scholarship has redefined ritual as a dynamic and contentious practice, particularly in politically heated contexts. Political rituals, such as protest performances and symbolic dramatizations, function not just as expressive acts but also as processes that recontextualize political concerns in moral terms (Kertzer, 1988; Alexander, 2011). In these circumstances, ritual acts as a conduit between emotion, conviction, and authority, converting abstract assertions—such as injustice or corruption—into publicly discernible moral tales.

1.1.2 Symbolic Power

Bourdieu's (1989, 1991) concept of symbolic power offers a theoretical framework for analyzing the role of ritual within systems of domination and legitimacy. Symbolic power denotes the ability to influence perceptions and classification systems in ways that seem natural or self-evident. In contrast to coercive power, symbolic power operates through recognition, persuading individuals to embrace specific interpretations of reality without the use of overt force.

In ritual contexts, symbolic power is enacted through sacred objects, performative speech acts, and culturally meaningful symbols that construct moral classifications of individuals as virtuous or immoral (Geertz, 1973; Austin, 1962; Turner, 1969). Ritualized condemnation, including cursing behaviors, serves as a mechanism for morally categorizing individuals and reinforcing communal standards. Such techniques are especially effective in

communities whose cosmological beliefs are integrated with public life, enabling symbolic actions to affect reputational status and social validity.

1.1.3 Ritual and Social Control

Ritual may also be perceived as a mechanism of societal regulation. Utilizing Foucault's (1977) examination of disciplinary authority, researchers contend that ritual performances facilitate the creation of normative individuals by reinforcing moral expectations and penalizing noncompliance. Mary Douglas (1966) also highlighted how symbolic systems of purity and pollution delineate moral boundaries and stigmatize transgressions. In this context, ritualized cursing may serve as a mechanism of moral tagging that publicly identifies persons alleged to have committed misconduct.

Ritual has been utilized at the political level to both bolster and challenge authority. Kertzer (1988) illustrated the utilization of ritual symbols by political actors to reinforce legitimacy, whereas Scott (1990) emphasized that symbolic rituals may function as covert transcripts of resistance. When institutional mechanisms are regarded as inadequate, ritualized protest can convert individual dissatisfaction into a collective moral spectacle.

1.1.4 Ritual and Social Solidarity

Ritual is essential in fostering communal togetherness. Turner (1969) introduced the term communitas to denote the profound sense of collective connection generated by ritual performance. Recent interaction ritual theory posits that emotionally intense assemblies enhance group bonding and stimulate ongoing collective activity (Collins, 2004). In situations characterized by corruption scandals or political crises, ritualized

condemnation may cultivate solidarity among citizens who view themselves as morally united against unjust power.

Nonetheless, the efficacy of ritual is not boundless. The processes of modernization and rationalization may diminish the social effectiveness of ritual symbols, especially in contexts where bureaucratic and legal reason prevail in public discourse (Weber, 1922/1978; Giddens, 1991). Moreover, ritual authority may be disputed in pluralistic communities because conflicting value systems undermine religious or cosmological credibility (Asad, 1993). Consequently, the impact of ritual is contingent upon collective belief systems, media exposure, and overarching political circumstances.

1.2 Cursing Beliefs in the Thai Cultural Context

Thailand offers a unique environment where ritual, religion, and political life converge. Anthropological research has recorded the amalgamation of Buddhism, animism, and Brahmanical traditions within Thai cosmology, resulting in a moral cosmos where supernatural endorsement is culturally comprehensible (Keyes, 1987; Pattana, 2012). Rituals that include oath-taking, spirit invocation, and imprecation have traditionally served to confirm loyalty, resolve conflicts, and indicate moral violation.

In modern politics, ritual symbolism has sometimes infiltrated protest groups. Research on Thailand's public protests has revealed the utilization of blood rituals, sacred symbols, and cosmological references to emphasize injustice and contest state legitimacy (Cohen, 2012; Engel, 2016; Rajah, 2005). These performances recontextualized political conflict in moral and spiritual dimensions, thus broadening the interpretive scope beyond mere legal discourse.

Cursing rituals aimed against purportedly corrupt individuals might be contextualized within this extensive tradition of moral cosmology. They signify not only manifestations of wrath but also culturally significant efforts to summon transcendent justice when institutional justice is deemed inadequate.

1.3 Corruption in Thailand: Context and Consequences

Corruption has been extensively analyzed in the political science and governance literature as a chronic structural problem in Thailand. Notwithstanding the creation of monitoring bodies and legal reforms, enforcement has frequently been impeded by elite networks, patron-client dynamics, and the politicization of anti-corruption institutions (Mutebi, 2008; Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016). Previous analysis highlighted Thailand's persistent challenge in institutionalizing accountability under democratic governance (Dalpino, 1991).

In addition to institutional design, corruption significantly undermines public trust. Reports from Transparency International and comparative governance studies indicate that perceived corruption undermines trust in legal institutions and diminishes citizens' inclination to utilize official avenues for redress (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). In these circumstances, informal accountability measures such as media scrutiny, civic activity, and public shaming may become more significant (Fox, 2007).

1.4 Cursing Rituals and Anti-Corruption: Moral Legitimacy and Informal Accountability

The nexus between ritual censure and anti-corruption activity is inadequately examined. Nonetheless, theoretical perspectives from accountability research offer a valuable foundation. Accountability methods are classified

into formal (judicial processes, supervisory bodies) and informal (public opinion, media exposure, civil society mobilization) categories (Schedler, 1999). When formal institutions are regarded as compromised or ineffectual, informal processes emerge as vital venues of conflict.

Cursing rituals may serve as culturally distinctive mechanisms of informal accountability by creating moral narratives that stigmatize accused individuals and incur reputational consequences. Symbolic dramatization and ritual performances convert intricate accusations into emotionally impactful moral assertions. Media amplification can elevate localized ritual behaviors to the level of national political discourse, hence intensifying institutional pressure to respond (Cohen, 2012).

Nonetheless, ritual sanction lacks binding legal authority. The efficacy is contingent upon public perception, symbolic significance, and the political environment. In the absence of institutional transformation, ritual condemnation may articulate frustration without effecting structural change. Consequently, ritualized anti-corruption movement occupies an equivocal stance: potent in moral symbolism yet constrained in formal enforcement capability.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This research employs a qualitative interpretative design based on a multiple-case study methodology. Considering that the research seeks to elucidate the role of cursing rituals as symbolic performances in anti-corruption contexts, an interpretive technique is suitable for examining meaning-making processes, moral framing, and mechanisms of informal

accountability. The study emphasizes the examination of how ritual behaviors establish narratives of guilt, mobilize social sentiment, and generate public pressure, rather than statistically quantifying causal influence.

The qualitative case study approach facilitates comprehensive contextual examination of ritual performances as socially entrenched occurrences within distinct political and cultural contexts.

2. Case Selection

The research used purposive sampling to find recorded instances of ritualized cursing or symbolic denunciation publicly aimed at persons or institutions alleged to be corrupt or abusive of power in Thailand. Cases were chosen according to the subsequent criteria: The ceremonial performance was directly associated with accusations of corruption or misbehavior. The event garnered public attention via national media coverage or extensive online dissemination. The ceremony featured discernible symbolic components, such as curse invocation, oath-taking, sacred artifacts, blood symbolism, or cosmological allusions. Ample documented evidence was accessible to facilitate methodical study. The objective of case selection was not statistical representativeness but rather analytical profundity and theoretical significance.

3. Data Sources

Data were obtained from publicly available sources, including: National and regional newspaper articles. Television and internet media coverage. Public declarations and addresses regarding protests. Video recordings and documentation via social media. Official reactions from governmental institutions (where applicable). Secondary academic analyses of pertinent protest incidents. The utilization of numerous sources facilitated

triangulation, hence augmenting the credibility and interpretive validity of the results.

4. Analytical Framework and Procedure

Data analysis employed a synthesis of thematic analysis and interpretive discourse analysis, informed by the theoretical framework of symbolic power and informal accountability. The analytical procedure consisted of four stages: (1) Identification of Ritual Elements, wherein ritual components, including language, symbols, gestures, objects, and spatial arrangements, were recognized and classified. (2) Coding of Moral Narratives: Textual and visual materials were coded to find patterns that have to do with guilt, wrongdoing, justice, legitimacy, and institutional failure. (3) Analysis of Symbolic Power The analysis investigated the manner in which ritual performances formulated classifications of moral order and how these classifications endeavored to attain public acknowledgment. (4) Assessment of Accountability Effects: The study examined media amplification, public reactions, and institutional responses to determine if ritual behaviors produced discernible social pressure.

The investigation focused on the interplay between ritual performances and overarching governance frameworks and political circumstances.

5. Validity and Trustworthiness

To improve analytical rigor, the study utilized various qualitative validity strategies: (1) Data triangulation, which involves looking at different types of media and documents to see how they compare. (2) Theoretical triangulation, using both symbolic power theory and accountability literature to make sense of the results. (3) Analytical transparency, clearly delineating

coding and interpretative methodologies. The study does not assert statistical generalizability; instead, it seeks theoretical generalization, offering conceptual insights into the nexus between ritual performance and informal accountability.

6. Ethical Considerations

The research utilized just publicly available data, no direct human participants were engaged. Still, the study doesn't make personal attacks and instead looks at symbolic processes instead of moral judgments about people. Ritual practices are regarded as culturally significant phenomena rather than subjects of derision or conventional rejection.

Research Results

1. Ritual as Moral Framing: Constructing Narratives of Guilt and Justice

The investigation shows that Thai cursing rituals work as a way to frame morals in anti-corruption situations by turning claims of wrongdoing into stories of guilt, wrongdoing, and justice that people from that culture can understand. These ritual performances do not represent leftover superstition; instead, they serve as public symbolic actions that categorize participants, dramatize misconduct, and establish moral authority that transcends institutional protocols. In this regard, cursing rituals illustrate symbolic power: they influence perceptions of corruption by establishing categories of moral assessment that are socially acknowledged and emotionally resonant (Bourdieu, 1989, 1991). Ritual practices reframe public perceptions of legitimacy and responsibility by portraying corruption as a breach of both legal and moral or cosmological order, especially in situations

where formal accountability is viewed as ineffective or compromised (Dalpino, 1991; Mutebi, 2008).

1.1 Symbolic Classification of the Accused

In all of the cases, ritual performances always put accused officials or institutions in moral categories that were linked to impurity, betrayal, and social harm. By using curse invocations, oath-like statements, and culturally significant artifacts and locations, participants symbolically changed the way they saw alleged corrupt people from “morally polluted” characters to just “administrative wrongdoers”. This categorization is important because accusations of corruption are typically made in technical or procedural language that not everyone understands. Ritual performance turns those accusations into physical indications that audiences can easily understand as moral deviation. This kind of symbolic classification shows how powerful ritual can be in forcing people to come up with ways to explain things, such as who is to blame and why, using culturally acceptable ways of expressing themselves (Bourdieu, 1989; Douglas, 1966).

In this process, moral typologies are utilized to frame the accused in public, which raises the stakes for their reputation. The ritual act creates a visible moral judgment that can spread through communities and media ecosystems. This allows condemnation to continue even if there is no formal legal decision. This dynamic is similar to research on Thai public protest and morality, which has shown that symbolic acts and culturally coded performances can impact political interpretation and social appraisal outside of official channels (Rajah, 2005).

1.2 Ritual Language and Moral Cosmology

A fundamental aspect of these rites is in their moral-cosmological lexicon. Participants often employ concepts such as karmic retribution, merit–demerit, and transcendent punishment to contextualize purported corruption within a more extensive moral framework. Ritual discourse supports the idea that misbehavior can't be totally contained within procedural legality by bringing up cosmological justice. Instead, corruption is shown as a moral break that goes beyond state-centered punishment. This trend aligns with studies examining the intersections of Buddhism, law, and ritual symbolism in Thailand, illustrating how moral cosmologies influence legal consciousness and societal perceptions of justice (Engel, 2016).

Ritual language does not merely mimic religious idioms; it frequently amalgamates moral cosmology with current governance issues—such as integrity, public trust, and accountability—thereby allowing ritual to resonate with both culturally rooted and politically relevant audiences. In this manner, the ritual does not vie with legal discourse as an alternative court; instead, it establishes a distinct moral framework through which corruption is perceived as ethical contamination and a betrayal of communal expectations.

1.3 Emotional Intensification and Public Dramatization

The results also show how powerful rituals may be in making corruption "felt" by the people. Corruption is often talked about in abstract and impersonal bureaucratic terms, but ritual performance makes accusations real by involving everyone in the process, using theatrical gestures, and using emotionally charged language. These kinds of performances heighten moral emotion and turn complaints into shows, allowing people to see corruption as a group problem instead of just a problem with one

person in charge. This corresponds with extensive examinations of symbolic action in Thai protest contexts, wherein ritualistic components—especially those entailing blood and imprecation—have demonstrated the capacity to transform political assertions into morally charged public spectacle (Cohen, 2012).

From a micro-sociological standpoint, the emotional energy derived from communal ritual participation can bolster unity and encourage ongoing involvement by fostering a collective moral opposition to perceived injustice (Collins, 2004). Thus, cursing rituals do not only "express" rage; they structure fury into socially comprehensible forms, intensify indignation, and establish a transient moral community that positions the anti-corruption campaign as an issue of morality and justice. In conclusion, these findings illustrate that cursing rituals operate as a form of symbolic power by delineating moral reality: they publicly establish who is culpable, what constitutes transgression, and the conceptualization of justice—frequently preceding or existing independently of formal adjudication (Bourdieu, 1989, 1991). Through symbolic classification of the accused, cosmological-moral discourse, and emotional dramatization, ritual performances redefine corruption as moral contamination and legitimacy failure. This elucidates the emergence of such practices with notable intensity in contexts characterized by perceived institutional fragility: when legal accountability is regarded with skepticism or deferred, ritual transforms into a culturally potent instrument for generating moral judgment, amplifying public scrutiny, and perpetuating assertions of justice (Dalpino, 1991; Mutebi, 2008).

2. Ritualized Condemnation as Informal Accountability

The results indicate that cursing rituals in anti-corruption settings function as culturally ingrained systems of informal accountability, especially when official institutions are regarded as ineffectual, politicized, or unattainable. Instead of taking the place of legal processes, ritualized condemnation becomes a new place where moral judgment is made public and reputational consequences are enforced. This dynamic corresponds with overarching divisions in accountability theory between formal mechanisms—such as courts and oversight agencies—and informal mechanisms based on public opinion, civil society, and symbolic sanction (Schedler, 1999; Fox, 2007).

2.1 Emergence under Perceived Institutional Failure

A general pattern observed in the analyzed examples is that ritualized denunciation typically emerges in contexts of perceived institutional failure. People often said that their routine activities were a response to investigations that took too long, a lack of openness, or the belief that politics were getting in the way of anti-corruption efforts. This view of institutional failure created a legitimacy vacuum, and ritual performance filled that gap as a moral correction. Political science research on Thailand has extensively recorded systemic issues within the nation's anti-corruption framework, such as elite capture, patronage networks, and the politicization of oversight institutions (Mutebi, 2008; Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016). When people think that formal accountability systems are weak or only sometimes used, they lose faith in institutional justice (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). In these situations, ritual actions of denunciation may become culturally

comprehensible substitutes for expressing moral assertions and indicating public discontent.

Ritualized condemnation does not inherently signify a repudiation of law. Instead, it is a symbolic call for justice in cases where people don't believe that legal enforcement will work. By invoking cosmic or moral sanction, participants in a ritual assert that misbehavior will not go unpunished, even if institutional systems fail to bring immediate penalties. In this context, ritual transforms into a mechanism of moral escalation induced by perceived institutional stagnation.

2.2 Public Visibility and Media Amplification

The data further illustrate that ritualized denunciation acquires accountability primarily via public awareness. Media coverage, whether traditional or digital, is very important for turning local rituals into bigger political conversations. When ritual performances are recorded and shared, they go beyond the people who are there and become part of national discussions about corruption, legitimacy, and justice.

Research on Thai protest movements demonstrates that symbolic performances can be magnified through media depiction, transforming ritual gestures into politically significant moral declarations (Cohen, 2012). Social media platforms amplify this process by facilitating swift dissemination, criticism, and reinterpretation among varied audiences. Digital circulation can give ritual activities that start in local contexts national importance, changing the way people think about corruption claims by putting them in emotionally charged symbolic stories.

This process of amplification is key to understanding ritual as a way to hold people accountable informally. Ritual is just a local symbolic act

without visibility; with visibility, it puts pressure on discourse. Media reproduction changes the ritual from a limited cultural event into a public accountability performance that can change how people see reputations and how institutions respond.

2.3 Social Pressure and Reputational Cost

The results show that ritualized denunciation can lead to reputational damage, even if there is no explicit legal punishment. By publicly labeling accused individuals as morally deviant, ritual performances can undermine symbolic capital—such as honor, credibility, and perceived integrity—thereby inflicting indirect costs (Bourdieu, 1989). Reputational damage functions as a mechanism of social coercion. Public naming, moral exaggeration, and collective denunciation may force the accused people or organizations to make statements, start investigations, or do anything else to protect themselves. Ritual, while devoid of coercive power, has the potential to transform the symbolic context in which political actors function. According to accountability research, informal mechanisms frequently work by making inaction or denial more damaging to one's image (Schedler, 1999; Fox, 2007). But the responses of institutions are different. In certain cases, ritualized criticism may elicit symbolic actions from authorities, such as public clarification or further investigation; conversely, it may be regarded as theatrical or politically driven. The efficacy of ritual pressure is contingent upon contextual elements, such as media intensity, political polarization, and the prevailing credibility of monitoring institutions. In conclusion, Ritual as Informal Accountability, these results show that cursing rituals are culturally distinctive ways of holding people informally accountable. They arise in situations where institutions are seen as weak,

gain power through media amplification, and create societal pressure by imposing reputational costs. Ritualized condemnation works through symbolic punishment and moral dramatization, while formal responsibility relies on legal compulsion and bureaucratic procedure.

This analysis does not imply that ritual supplants institutional reform. Instead, it shows how symbolic actions can momentarily make up for a lack of responsibility by making moral judgments clear to everyone. In this way, ritual is part of the larger system of accountability processes that affect governance and public trust in modern Thailand (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

3. Limits of Ritual Sanction: Structural and Normative Constraints

The findings indicate that cursing rituals can serve as culturally significant forms of informal accountability; yet, they also highlight significant structural and normative limitations. Ritualized condemnation has a powerful symbolic effect, but it can't bring about long-term changes in institutions or the law. A fair evaluation necessitates an analysis of both the mobilizing power of ritual and the constraints under which it functions.

3.1 Absence of Legal Coercive Authority

The primary restriction of ritual sanction is its absence of official coercive authority. Ritual performances cannot inflict legal fines, demand testimony, or mandate institutional change, unlike courts, anti-corruption commissions, or prosecutorial authorities. Formal accountability methods depend on written rules, standards for evidence, and punishments that the state may implement (Schedler, 1999). In contrast, ritual works in the realm of symbolic judgment rather than legal enforcement.

This difference shows that moral censure and legal accountability are not the same in terms of their structure. Ritual can publicly announce guilt,

but it can't officially decide it in a court of law. Because institutions don't have the power to enforce rules, ritualized denunciation might put more pressure on the public without changing the results of bureaucratic processes. As governance research indicates, informal accountability systems frequently rely on their ability to indirectly affect formal institutions rather than supplant them (Fox, 2007).

Additionally, the rational-legal authority inherent in contemporary bureaucratic regimes prioritizes procedural legality over symbolic penalty (Weber, 1978). In situations with a lot of rules, authorities may see ritual as just a performance or a way to express culture, not anything that has real meaning. As a result, its effect on formal processes is not assured but rather conditional.

3.2 Dependency on Public Belief and Media Attention

A second barrier has to do with how rituals depend on common beliefs and the ability to communicate. Symbolic power functions via recognition, necessitating that audiences acknowledge the validity of the evoked symbolic framework (Bourdieu, 1989, 1991). When faith in cosmological justice or moral sanction is feeble, the ability of ritual to inflict reputational consequences wanes. Modernization and the diversification of value systems may disrupt the moral consensus that rituals inherently rely upon (Giddens, 1991). In circumstances characterized by social diversity or significant secularization, ceremonial language referencing supernatural vengeance may not resonate uniformly among audiences. Because of this, its metaphorical power may not be spread out evenly.

The role of media amplification is just as important. As shown by studies of Thai protest movements, symbolic performances have more

political power when they are shared and mediated extensively (Cohen, 2012). Without media presence, whether through traditional journalism or social media platforms, ritual behaviors remain confined and possess a restricted ability to impact broader discourse. So, informal accountability depends on both moral framing and the infrastructure for communication. This reliance engenders susceptibility: should media focus shift, public interest diminish, or other narratives prevail, ritual condemnation may falter. Because of this, its effects are frequently short-lived rather than long-lasting.

3.3 Political Polarization and Instrumentalization

Another limitation comes from the fact that ritual could be used for political purposes. In politically divided settings, symbolic actions may be perceived not as impartial moral interventions but as partisan tactics. Studies on Thai political conflict indicate that symbolic performances are often integrated into larger contests on legitimacy and authority (Rajah, 2005; Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016).

In these circumstances, ritualized condemnation may be reconceptualized as a mechanism of factional rivalry rather than a universal ethical assertion. This new way of looking at it can make it seem less fair and less able to provide cross-cutting accountability pressure. Instead of bringing people together around a common value against corruption, ritual may unintentionally make ideological divides stronger. Political actors may also use ritual symbols to help them reach their strategic goals. When ritual is used for practical purposes, it can lose its moral authority. Accountability research stresses that informal punishment works best when people believe it is fair and credible (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). If ritual denunciation is commonly seen as politically motivated or aimed at specific groups, its

credibility may suffer. In conclusion, Balancing Power and Constraint, these data suggest that ritualized denunciation holds a contradictory role within the framework of accountability systems. It has a lot of symbolic power on the one hand: it can change the way people think about corruption, bring people together emotionally, and put pressure on people's reputations. On the other hand, it doesn't have the power of the law to force people to do things, relies significantly on common beliefs and media coverage, and is still open to political division and being used for other purposes. This dual nature shows how important it is to be precise with your ideas. Ritual should neither be idealized as a transformative substitute for institutional reform, nor should it be regarded as an ineffectual display. It should be seen instead as a temporary and context-dependent type of informal responsibility that can have a big impact on moral discourse but is limited in its potential to bring about long-lasting changes in institutions.

Table 1

Comparative Dimensions of Ritualized Condemnation in Anti-Corruption Processes

Dimension	Ritual as Moral Framing	Ritual as Informal Accountability	Limits of Ritual Sanction
Core Function	Frames corruption as a moral and cosmological violation rather than just legal wrongdoing	Acts as a culturally grounded system of informal accountability when institutions are weak	Reveals the constraints and limits of ritual in producing real institutional change
Mechanism of Action	Uses symbolic classification, ritual	Operates through public visibility,	Limited by lack of legal authority,

Dimension	Ritual as Moral Framing	Ritual as Informal Accountability	Limits of Ritual Sanction
	language, and emotional dramatization	media amplification, and reputational pressure	dependence on belief, and political context
View of Corruption	Seen as moral contamination and betrayal of social order	Seen as a public moral issue requiring social judgment	Recognition that corruption still requires formal legal resolution
Source of Authority	Derived from cultural beliefs, moral cosmology, and symbolic power	Derived from public opinion, collective participation, and media exposure	Weak because it lacks formal legal coercive power
Key Processes	- Moral categorization of accused - Use of karmic/religious language - Emotional engagement	- Emerges under institutional failure - Amplified by media - Imposes reputational costs	- No enforcement power - Depends on shared belief - Vulnerable to politicization
Impact on Society	Shapes public perception and moral judgment	Creates social pressure and reputational consequences	Produces temporary and uneven effects
Relationship with Institutions	Exists alongside but beyond legal systems	Functions as a supplement when formal systems fail	Cannot replace institutional accountability mechanisms

Dimension	Ritual as Moral Framing	Ritual as Informal Accountability	Limits of Ritual Sanction
Strengths	- Culturally resonant - Easily understood - Emotionally powerful	- Mobilizes public attention - Encourages accountability through pressure	- Highlights need for formal reform - Shows boundaries of symbolic action
Weaknesses	- Not legally binding - Interpretation may vary	- Effect depends on media and visibility - Outcomes are inconsistent	- No coercive authority - Short-lived impact - Susceptible to political misuse
Overall Role	Constructs moral narratives of guilt and justice	Acts as a symbolic enforcement mechanism	Serves as a context-dependent and limited form of accountability

4. Integrated Analytical Model

The foregoing findings can be consolidated into a cohesive analytical framework that elucidates the functioning of cursing rituals within anti-corruption contexts as culturally ingrained mechanisms of informal accountability. Utilizing the theoretical constructs of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1989, 1991) and responsibility theory (Schedler, 1999; Fox, 2007), the research conceptualizes ritualized condemnation as a sequential and relational phenomenon rather than a mere isolated expressive act. The procedure starts with a claim of corruption, which usually includes

claims of wrongdoing, misuse of power, or illegal gain. At this point, corruption is mostly a judicial or administrative charge that is often made in technical terms. But when these kinds of claims are made along with perceived institutional failure, such as investigations that take too long, a lack of openness, or suspected political intervention, a legitimacy gap opens up. This notion of procedural inadequacy is essential; it establishes the moral and political framework that renders other forms of sanction significant (Mutebi, 2008; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

In this atmosphere of skepticism, ritual performance becomes a symbolic intervention. Participants perform a public judgment by calling on curses, making oath-like statements, and using artifacts and references that are culturally significant and related to the cosmos. This ritual moment exemplifies the use of symbolic power: it aims to enforce a specific classification of reality by designating the accused as morally deviant and reinterpreting corruption as a transgression of ethical and cosmic order (Bourdieu, 1989; Engel, 2016).

The next step is to build a moral story. Ritual language combines ideas like karma, justice, betrayal, and harm to the community, turning vague accusations into a narrative that people can understand emotionally. At this point, corruption goes from being a problem with the process to a moral drama that speaks to common values and beliefs. Research on Thai political symbols illustrates that these performances transform grievances into morally charged spectacles that can redefine public discourse (Cohen, 2012; Rajah, 2005).

Nonetheless, ritualized condemnation attains more political significance solely by media transmission. Traditional journalism and internet

platforms disseminate ritual acts beyond their immediate participants, enhancing symbolic messages and integrating them into national discourse. In this approach, media visibility is a structural mediator because it turns localized moral judgment into a globally accepted assertion of responsibility. Without this communication amplification, ritual stays important to culture but not to politics.

As diffusion increases, ritual performance creates social pressure, mostly through effects on reputation. When the public sees accused actors as morally compromised, it might hurt their symbolic capital, such as their credibility, honor, and perceived integrity. This makes it more costly for them to do nothing (Bourdieu, 1991; Schedler, 1999). This pressure does not work by forcing people to do things; instead, it works by making them feel bad about themselves and making them look bad in public. It embodies the fundamental mechanism of ritual as casual accountability.

The last step is when the institution only responds in a limited or conditional way. In some circumstances, increased visibility and pressure on the authorities' reputation may lead to symbolic gestures, fresh investigations, or public pronouncements. In other cases, institutions may reject or dismiss ritual acts as being done for show or for political reasons. The response is thus dependent on contextual factors, such as political polarization, media intensity, and the current legitimacy of monitoring institutions (Fox, 2007; Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016).

This analytical sequence illustrates that ritual does not supplant formal accountability systems but rather engages with them within a comprehensive governance framework. The efficacy of ritual predominantly resides in its ability to structure moral perception and produce reputational

ramifications; its constraint is its incapacity to enforce legal compliance. The integrated model bolsters the study's principal thesis: cursing rituals serve as contingent, culturally rooted mechanisms of informal responsibility that draw their efficacy from symbolic power and communicative amplification rather than legal authority.

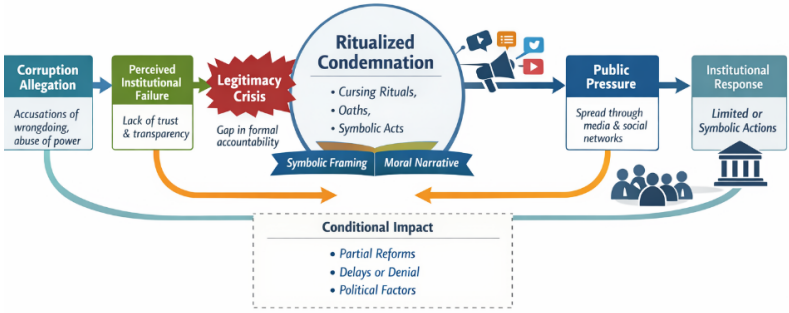

Figure 1

Ritualized anti-corruption process flow

Discussion of Results

This study aimed to investigate the role of Thai cursing rituals as culturally ingrained mechanisms of informal accountability within anti-corruption frameworks. The results indicate that ritualized denunciation functions not only as an expressive protest but also as a systematic symbolic mechanism that transforms corruption claims into morally comprehensible narratives. By combining symbolic power theory (Bourdieu, 1989, 1991) with accountability research (Schedler, 1999; Fox, 2007), the study helps us better understand how moral authority is negotiated outside of formal institutions.

1. Ritual as Symbolic Reframing of Corruption

The results show that ritual performance turns corruption from a technical legal problem into a moral drama. This change is in line with Bourdieu's (1989) idea of symbolic power, which says that agents impose classification schemes that change how people see things. By invoking curses, assigning moral labels, and referencing cosmological concepts, participants recast the accused officials as morally aberrant individuals whose acts disturb not only administrative order but also ethical and communal equilibrium.

This reframing aligns with research in symbolic politics, which underscores that political legitimacy is frequently challenged through performative activities that highlight injustice (Alexander, 2011; Kertzer, 1988). In the Thai context, ritualized condemnation serves as a cultural script that makes corruption emotionally perceptible and ethically significant (Cohen, 2012; Rajah, 2005). Instead of competing with legal speech, ritual establishes an alternative framework of judgment rooted in moral cosmology and social sentiment (Engel, 2016). By placing corruption within a larger moral context, ritual performance broadens the lens through which misconduct is assessed. This indicates that anti-corruption initiatives cannot be comprehended solely through structural analysis; they must also incorporate the symbolic and cultural aspects of moral appraisal.

2. Ritual as an Informal Accountability Mechanism

The results bolster the argument that ritualized condemnation functions as a mechanism of informal accountability. Accountability theory differentiates between vertical and horizontal control mechanisms, encompassing official institutional monitoring and informal societal pressure

(Schedler, 1999). When people think that formal institutions are weak or not working, informal processes may become more important (Fox, 2007; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). In line with research on Thailand's anti-corruption issues (Mutebi, 2008; Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016), ritualized denunciation often arises when public confidence in procedural justice diminishes. Ritual thus occupies a symbolic void, allowing citizens to express moral assertions and inflict reputational penalties even in the absence of formal enforcement. The reputational aspect corresponds with Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic capital: public designation as morally corrupt can diminish legitimacy and necessitate a reaction, even in the absence of formal consequence.

Ritualized responsibility, on the other hand, is very different from institutional accountability. It depends on being seen, having a moral impact, and being able to communicate rather than on legal force. Consequently, its efficacy relies on media diffusion and audience acknowledgment, as evidenced in research on mediated protest (Cohen, 2012). This research highlights the significance of communication infrastructures in influencing the extent of informal sanctions.

3. Structural and Normative Constraints

The research shows that ritual has symbolic power, but it also shows that it has structural boundaries. Ritual cannot force prosecution or institutional reform without coercive authority. Weber's (1978) differentiation between traditional and rational-legal authority persists in relevance: contemporary bureaucratic frameworks emphasize procedural legality above symbolic sanction. As a result, ritual denunciation may have an effect on discourse without necessarily changing the results of institutions.

Furthermore, the efficacy of rituals is contingent upon collective belief systems and moral agreement. In communities that are becoming more diverse and politically divided, symbolic gestures are more likely to be seen through partisan lenses (Rajah, 2005; Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016). When ritual is viewed as politically useful rather than ethically neutral, its validity as a vehicle for accountability may diminish. Accountability literature underscores that credibility and perceived justice are crucial to effective sanctions (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). Ritualized denunciation occupies a paradoxical position: it can significantly influence moral discourse while being structurally limited in effecting lasting institutional change.

4. Theoretical Contributions

This research adds to three different areas of study: First, it expands symbolic power theory by illustrating the role of ritual performance in modern governance situations, rather than solely in religious or traditional spheres (Bourdieu, 1989; Alexander, 2011). Second, it enhances the literature on accountability by integrating cultural and symbolic aspects into assessments that are usually focused on institutional design (Fox, 2007; Schedler, 1999). Third, it enhances Southeast Asian political studies by elucidating the intersection of local moral cosmologies with contemporary anti-corruption efforts (Cohen, 2012; Engel, 2016). By synthesizing these viewpoints, the research proposes a hybrid framework wherein ritualized condemnation is perceived as a culturally rooted yet politically significant style of informal accountability.

5. Implications for Anti-Corruption Governance

The results indicate that successful anti-corruption programs must acknowledge the symbolic aspect of legitimacy. If people don't trust the

government, institutional improvement alone may not be enough. Policymakers ought to contemplate the interplay between transparency initiatives, civic participation, and communication techniques with culturally ingrained moral frameworks (Fox, 2007; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). But it would be wrong to rely on ritualized censure instead of institutional reform. For anti-corruption governance to last, formal accountability systems need to be made stronger, and the moral and communicative frameworks in which they work need to be recognized.

Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that ritualized condemnation functions as a culturally embedded form of informal accountability, capable of shaping moral discourse and generating reputational pressure in anti-corruption contexts. Nonetheless, its symbolic efficacy is inherently constrained without institutional reform. This section makes suggestions for policies, practices, and research that will help the relationship between cultural legitimacy and formal governing processes.

1. Policy Recommendations

First, anti-corruption policy frameworks ought to encompass a more comprehensive conception of legitimacy that integrates symbolic and cultural aspects. Research on governance has consistently demonstrated that public trust and perceived fairness are fundamental to institutional efficacy. When formal methods are seen as unclear or politically biased, people may use informal symbolic behaviors to make moral claims. So, policymakers should put transparency, clear procedures, and public

communication tactics that directly address trust issues at the top of their list of priorities.

Second, anti-corruption institutions should improve the ways they get people involved. Instead of calling ritualized condemnation “irrational” or “theatrical”, authorities should see these behaviors as signs of perceived accountability inadequacies. Institutional responsiveness—like timely communication, transparent investigation updates, and mechanisms for public oversight—can fill the symbolic void that allows ritual escalation to happen.

Third, policy changes should work on making institutions fairer. Structural problems like elite capture and manipulation of monitoring organizations make both formal and informal accountability less effective. To have long-lasting anti-corruption governance, we need to strengthen independent investigative authorities, protect whistleblowers, and make sure that the law is applied equally.

Lastly, governments should be aware of the communicative ecosystem in which anti-corruption talk happens. Regulation of the media should defend free speech and stop false information from spreading. Informal accountability measures depend on media amplification; thus, responsible journalism and digital transparency policies are important for keeping public conversation balanced.

2. Practice Recommendations

At the practical level, civil society organizations and community actors should use culturally relevant means of communication in a responsible way. Ritualized denunciation illustrates the significance of symbolic framing in fostering moral awareness. But these kinds of actions should not make

polarization worse or go after people without good proof. Accountability scholarship stresses that fairness and credibility are what make something legitimate.

Those who work to stop corruption should combine symbolic engagement with measures based on data. Rituals or symbolic actions may raise awareness, but real change needs campaigns to teach people about the law, working together to investigate, and organized civic monitoring. Moral dramatization and factual documentation work well together to make both the audience and the institution more credible. People who work in the media also play a very important role. Responsible reporting should put ritual acts in the perspective of bigger arguments about governance instead of making them sound exciting. Journalists can assist in turning moral anger into an educated public conversation by connecting symbolic acts to institutional critique. Schools can also help by supporting civic education programs that teach people about ethical government, how to think critically about the media, and how to get involved in a positive way in their communities. Strengthening the normative commitment to accountability can lessen the necessity for extreme symbolic escalation.

3. Further Research Recommendations

Future studies should adopt comparative and multidisciplinary methodologies to enhance the comprehension of ritualized accountability. First, comparative research in Southeast Asia or other areas would help us understand if ritualized condemnation works the same way in diverse cultural and political settings. Cross-national examination might show how differences in the strength of institutions, media systems, and belief systems affect how well rituals work.

Second, a quantitative study could examine the correlation between ritual visibility and quantifiable changes in public trust or institutional responsiveness. Survey-based studies can evaluate the impact of symbolic protest exposure on perceptions of legitimacy, corruption tolerance, or political engagement.

Third, ethnographic fieldwork would enhance comprehension of participants' motivations and interpretive frameworks. While this study relies on documented cases, in-depth interviews could reveal how actors conceptualize the relationship between ritual, morality, and governance. Fourth, future research should investigate the digital transition and ritual. Social media platforms change the size and speed of how symbols are spread, which could make both accountability pressure and polarization worse. Researching the impact of digital settings on ritual performance and reception would enhance modern governance studies.

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