



MATERNALIZING THE BUDDHA: PATRONAGE, NARRATIVE, AND GENDERED SACRED PERSONHOOD IN SOUTHERN THAILAND'S LAK PHRA PROCESSION

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: The Lak Phra procession of southern Thailand provides a distinctive lens for examining the relationship between Buddhist cosmology, material culture, and communal ritual. Although canonical doctrine presents the historical Buddha as mahāpurisa (Great Man) and venerates him as mahākaruṇiko nātho (Great Compassionate Protector), in several southern Thai communities, standing Buddha images are experienced as maternal presences. This study aims to examine how maternal sacred personhood emerges in Buddha images within the Lak Phra tradition. It also aims to develop an analytical model to identify the interaction of three dimensions: Female patronage, local narrative memory, and communal ritual repetition, through which these images come to be addressed and experienced as mothers. The study also seeks to explain why such maternalization occurs in some communities but not others within southern Thailand.

Methodology: This research was based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2022 and 2025 in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Songkhla, and Phatthalung. The study followed the movements of Buddha images in annual Lak Phra processions, observing how devotees spoke about them, how the images were dressed and carried, and how stories were shared within communities. These qualitative data, together with temple archives, original ornaments, and oral histories, were analyzed through established analytical dimensions and a theoretical framework integrating Butler's concept of gender performativity, Turner's notion of liminality and communitas, and Tambiah's analysis of ritual charisma and sensory participation.

Main Results: The findings showed that the maternalization of Buddha images, where they are ritually addressed as Mae (Mother), emerges only when three conditions converge: Female patronage or lineage dedication, narrative frameworks, and communal continuity through annual Lak Phra processions. Through repeated acts of naming, dressing, ornamentation, carrying, and relational address, ritual practice stabilizes maternal sacred personhood across generations. Where this triad is present, maternal identity becomes enduring; Where it is absent, images remain ungendered despite similar ritual contexts. In this process, compassion is enacted through touch, sound, labor, and care within shared ritual life. Maternalized images also function as vehicles of female religious agency, enabling laywomen within the Fourfold Assembly (Cattāro Parisā) to shape sacred meaning and transmit lineage memory. Ultimately, the Lak Phra tradition shows that the Buddha's compassion



is lived through relationships, leaving a lasting sense of shared movement with a presence both sacred and intimately human.

Involvement to Buddhadhamma: This study is situated within Applied Buddhism, focusing on how Buddhism contributes to the development of wisdom and morality through religious ritual and communal life. It shows that the Buddha's canonical compassion (*Mahākaruṇā*), as articulated in Buddhadhamma, is actively interpreted and enacted in local practice. In the Lak Phra tradition, this enactment aligns with the Fourfold Assembly (*Cattāro Parisā*), where lay participation sustains Buddhist life. Through the maternalization of Buddha images, compassion becomes a relational and accessible form grounded in kinship idioms, reflected in the Pāli dictum "*Mātā Mitaṃ Sake Ghare*" (A Mother is a Friend in the Home). The study thus demonstrates how core Buddhist principles are applied in everyday communal practice through ritual, memory, and social relations.

Conclusions: Maternal Buddha images in the Lak Phra tradition are more than symbolic artifacts; They are socially constituted sacred presences whose maternal personhood emerges through the interplay of ritual practice, narrative memory, and gendered community agency. Their study shows that Buddhadhamma is preserved as doctrine and embodied in lived ritual life, where it actively shapes kinship, gender relations, and communal identity in southern Thai Buddhism.

Keywords: Lak Phra Procession, Maternalization, Buddha Images, Gender Performativity, Thai Buddhism

Introduction

On October 8-9, 2025, the Buddha image known locally as Mae Setthi was brought out from the inner chamber of Wat Ronna in Nakhon Si Thammarat and temporarily enshrined on a ritual elevated structure with a pyramid roof known in Thai as a *mondop* or *butsabok* constructed from carved banana trunks. While the image rested on this ceremonial structure, a percussion ensemble of drums, cymbals, and wooden instruments played rhythmic patterns as devotees gathered around the shrine. The music stopped as the assembled crowd began the final communal chanting that marked the moment before the image would be moved to the *ruea phra* (Ceremonial Float). Men and women then jointly lifted the image, holding a ritual parasol above it as a sign of care and reverence, and carried it toward the float waiting outside the temple gate while firecrackers sounded to mark the transition. At dawn the following morning, around 6 a.m., the float departed Wat Ronna and was collectively pulled along the road by devotees using long ropes extending along both sides of the route. The procession traveled approximately three kilometers to the Ron Phibun District Office to commemorate the district's Chak Phra festival, an itinerary that reflects the recognized ritual authority of Mae Setthi beyond the temple community, before returning to Wat Ronna later on October 9, 2025. This ritual sequence illustrates a distinctive feature of the Lak Phra tradition in southern Thailand: Certain Buddha images are addressed and experienced by devotees as maternal figures known as Mae.

Maternal Buddha images, standing icons ritually addressed as Mae and adorned in matriarchal attire, are a distinctive feature of the Lak Phra procession celebrated across southern Thailand following Buddhist Lent. While the festival canonically commemorates the Buddha's descent from *Tāvātimsa* Heaven, it also functions as a living ritual in which these images move through villages and waterways



and are encountered as socially active beings within a kinship idiom. This article argues that certain Lak Phra images are not only revered as sacred icons but are also understood as maternal figures. It shows that this maternal identity emerges through the interaction of three dimensions: Female patronage, narrative traditions, and communal ritual repetition, which together produce the maternalization of the Buddha image. Despite the centrality of Buddha images in Thai ritual life, the emergence of maternal sacred personhood in Lak Phra has received limited scholarly attention, leaving key questions about compassion, kinship, and gender insufficiently explored.

In this article, maternalization refers to the culturally mediated process through which Buddha images are ritually addressed, adorned, and remembered as maternal figures, thereby acquiring relational sacred personhood grounded in kinship language and communal memory. This phenomenon poses a clear analytical challenge: How does the Buddha, canonically defined as mahāpurisa (Great Man), acquire maternal personhood in local ritual practice?

Previous scholarship has examined Thai Buddhist images through consecration ritual, charisma, and amulet cults, emphasizing how ritual processes activate sacred presence and social efficacy (Tambiah, 1984); (Swearer, 2004). Studies have also explored female religious authority emerging through charismatic devotion and community recognition, particularly in the lives of female saints (Seeger, 2013). Research on the Lak Phra tradition has addressed its historical development, regional forms, and craftsmanship traditions of processional images.

While these studies provide important insights, the maternal personhood attributed to certain Lak Phra images remains largely unexplored. This study examines how such gendered sacred identities emerge through the interaction of ritual practice, narrative memory, and communal participation, showing how maternal personhood is articulated within lived Thai Buddhist practice.

Fieldwork revealed a significant regional variation: Not all Lak Phra communities maternalize their images. At the same time, some use maternal names such as Mae Kae, Mae Chum, or Mae (Phra Lak) (Standing Processional Images) without gendered attributes. This variation frames the central analytical question of this study: Why does maternalization occur in some locations but not others? Using purposive sampling, the study focuses on prominent images whose maternal sacred personhood is actively recognized and sustained within local ritual communities.

Situating this variation within a broader context, the article argues that maternal sacred personhood in the Lak Phra tradition does not emerge spontaneously but within specific "Ritual Ecologies" where female agency and material culture converge. Identifying these conditions is essential for understanding how gender, agency, and local narratives intersect with doctrinal ideals in Thai Buddhism. The study thus offers a clearer model of how sacred personhood, grounded in the idiom of mother, is locally produced.

Objectives

This study aims to examine how maternal sacred personhood emerges in Buddha images within the Lak Phra tradition. It also aims to develop an analytical model to identify the interaction of three dimensions: Female patronage, local narrative memory, and communal ritual repetition, through which



these images come to be addressed and experienced as mothers. The study also seeks to explain why such maternalization occurs in some communities but not others within southern Thailand.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative ethnographic methods to investigate how forms of maternal sacred personhood of Buddha images emerge within Lak Phra ritual practice. Fieldwork was conducted between 2022 and 2025 in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Songkhla, and Phatthalung. The research combined participant observation during Lak Phra processions, semi-structured interviews with monks, artisans, float builders, elders, and laywomen, and visual documentation of Buddha images and ritual ornamentation. Interviews were recorded through field notes and follow-up discussions, and interpretations were cross-checked with multiple informants and temple custodians to ensure interpretive reliability. In addition to site visits and interviews conducted in Nakhon Si Thammarat, the study also analyzes video documentation of the Lak Phra processions recorded by temple communities and local participants, which provides detailed visual records of ritual sequences.

This article posits that maternalized Buddha images do not arise spontaneously, but emerge within a specific ritual ecology defined by a triadic analytical model:

1. **Female Patronage:** The inscription of female lineage or agency into the image's origin.
2. **Narrative Frameworks:** The anchoring of the icon within local legends and moral biographies as recorded in local legends (Tamnan).
3. **Communal Continuity:** The annual repetition of Lak Phra processions that sustain the image's gendered identity.

These conditions render acts such as painting lips or offering a Sabai, an upper-body garment associated with traditional femininity, constitutive rather than decorative. Turner's concept of liminality supports their public recognition, while Tambiah's sensory analysis explains their experiential force. Maternalization in the Lak Phra tradition thus emerges as a ritually produced and communally sustained form of sacred personhood grounded in sensory participation.

This study adopts a qualitative design combining ethnographic observation, visual documentation, and analysis of local narratives. Fieldwork was conducted in temple communities across southern Thailand, including Nakhon Si Thammarat, Songkhla, and Phatthalung, where Lak Phra remains active. Data were collected through site visits, photographic documentation, informal interviews with custodians and community members, and examination of local legends. Cases were selected purposively based on clear expressions of maternal sacred personhood in practice or narrative. Analysis draws on a performative framework to examine how such personhood emerges through ritual, memory, and communal participation. This article also examines the maternalization of Buddha images in the Lak Phra tradition through an integrated lens combining gender performativity, ritual movement dynamics, and sensory engagement. Together, Judith Butler, Victor Turner, and Stanley J. Tambiah provide a framework for understanding how Buddha images acquire maternal personhood, how processions generate collectivity, and how sensory acts activate this specific, gendered sacred presence.



Judith Butler's theory forms the conceptual foundation. Butler argues that gender is not a stable attribute but a repeated, culturally regulated "Doing" that materializes identity (Butler, 1999) and is understood as a stylized repetition of acts (Butler, 1999). In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler adds that identity emerges through the forcible reiteration or citation of norms (Butler, 1993). In the Lak Phra tradition, femininity does not inhere in the Buddha image; It is constituted through the repeated social labor of naming, dressing, and addressing images as mothers. These acts enact gender as a social fact, producing maternal sacred personhood through iteration.

Victor Turner's analysis of liminality and *communitas* explains the context in which this identity is affirmed. Lak Phra processions disrupt ordinary hierarchies, creating "Intense Comradeship and Egalitarianism" (Turner, 1991). As monks and laity collaborate to pull the *ruea phra*, they enter a "Moment in and Out of Time." This mobility allows images to function as moving centers of communal cohesion, where gendered personhood is collectively recognized.

Stanley J. Tambiah clarifies how this power is experienced through multisensory modalities-visualization, touch, ingestion, and hearing (Tambiah, 1984). Devotees engage charisma by seeing elevated images, touching robes, and hearing processional sounds. Tambiah notes that charisma intensifies through reproduction, explaining how images like Mae Yupha acquire potency through embodied engagement rather than antiquity alone.

Scope and Selection of Case Studies

Given the vast number of Buddha images for the Lak Phra procession preserved in Southern Thailand, most notably the extraordinary collection housed at Wihan Khian in Wat Phra Borommathat, Nakhon Si Thammarat, this study does not intend to provide an exhaustive historical catalog. The collection at Wihan Khian stands as a testament to the profound devotion and meticulous preservation efforts of local lineages and temple guardians who have safeguarded these high-material-value icons for generations, ensuring the survival of Southern Thailand's artistic heritage.

While these collections provide an invaluable archive of regional craftsmanship, the specific oral histories or local legends for many individual images remain deeply private or have naturally evolved over centuries into a more generalized sacred presence. Consequently, this research employs a purposive sampling method, selecting a curated group of maternal Buddha images, such as Mae Setthi and Mae Yupha, that currently serve as active focal points for communal identity.

The focus is directed toward images in which the "Maternal" identity is clearly articulated and continuously revitalized through contemporary narrative frameworks and recurring ritual performance. These images are treated not as static representations but as dynamic presences whose identities are sustained through communal engagement. By prioritizing these living traditions, this study aims to theorize the conditions under which a Buddha image transitions from an object of historical veneration to a relational, "Maternal" member of the community. In doing so, it attends to how such identities are reproduced, negotiated, and reaffirmed over time. This approach also honors past preservation efforts by emphasizing not only conservation but the continued vitality and spiritual evolution of the Lak Phra tradition in the present.

Table 1 presents the maternal Buddha images from southern Thailand analyzed in this study, including examples from Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phatthalung such as Mae Setthi, Mae Chum, Mae Ho Chae, Mae Thaut Yai Sam Li, Mae Aep, Mae Muli, and Mae Yupha. These cases were selected purposively for their significance in shaping maternal affect within local communities and their roles in contemporary Lak Phra practices. Selection criteria included: 1) Clear articulation of maternal sacred personhood through naming, narrative, ornamentation, or communal address; 2) Relevance to local memory, either through ongoing participation in Lak Phra processions or historically influential veneration, as at Wat Chantharam; and 3) Availability of ethnographic or documentary evidence for analyzing how feminization emerges and persists across generations. This approach integrates both active ritual images and historically significant icons that continue to shape local religious imagination.

Table 1 Maternal Buddha Images Included in This Study

Image Name	Temple	Province	Date of Commission/ Origin	Narrative / Patronage Notes
Mae Setthi	Wat Ron Na	Nakhon Si Thammarat	Unknown; Est. post-Ayutthaya to 19th century.	Legend of deceased Setthi's daughter; Original ornaments preserved; Long-standing Lak Phra participation; Extensive oral history.
Mae Chum	Wat Tha Chang	Nakhon Si Thammarat	Unknown; Est. early-mid 20th century.	Legend of Chum's tragic death; Image commissioned in her memory; Maternal identity reinforced through procession and kinship language.
Mae Ho Chae	Wat Khuan Sombun	Nakhon Si Thammarat	Unknown	Commissioned by a female patron, feminization is anchored in donor memory and sustained through ritual care.
Mae Thuat Yai Samli	Wat Phakho	Songkhla	Unknown	Linked to a female ancestor teaching cotton (Samli); Maternal identity sustained through ongoing veneration.
Mae Aep	Wat Chantharam	Nakhon Si Thammarat	1948 (Inscription Confirmed)	Commissioned by Madam Aep Thipphayamongkhon; Inscription records female patronage.
Mae Muli	Wat Chantharam	Nakhon Si Thammarat	Early 20th century	Commissioned by the Satsananon family; Honors female ancestor; Shapes maternal lineage identity.
Mae Yupha	Wat Chantharam	Nakhon Si Thammarat	2022	Commissioned by Madam Yupha Bowonrattanak; Contains cremation-urn relics; Demonstrates ongoing maternalization.



To strengthen interpretive validity, the study employs triangulation by integrating multiple forms of evidence, including temple records, local legends, interviews with local experts and ritual participants, visual documentation of Lak Phra processions, and relevant secondary scholarship. Interpretations were developed through systematic cross-checking of these sources in order to verify key details of ritual practice and narrative traditions. The analysis further proceeds through pattern identification of recurring ritual practices and narrative motifs across the selected cases, allowing the study to trace how female patronage, narrative memory, and communal ritual performance collectively contribute to the formation of maternal sacred personhood.

Results and Discussion

The following sections present the findings according to the analytical model that encompasses three dimensions: Female patronage, narrative frameworks, and communal ritual continuity, demonstrating how each element contributes to the emergence and stabilization of maternal sacred personhood within the Lak Phra tradition.

These findings directly address the study's objective by showing how maternal sacred personhood emerges through the interaction of these three dimensions. By examining each dimension in turn, the analysis demonstrated how they operate together to produce the conditions under which Buddha images come to be addressed and experienced as mothers. It also clarified why such maternalization occurs only in some communities, depending on the presence or absence of this triadic configuration by analyzing maternal Buddha images of Mae Setthi, Mae Chum, Mae Ho Chae, Mae Thaut Yai Sam Li, May Aep, Mae Muli, and Mae Yupha.

Building on this framework, the findings showed that Buddha images in the Lak Phra tradition are engaged as living sacred presences whose efficacy arises through ritual activation and communal participation. This observation resonates with Swearer's (2004) account of consecration practices, in which prolonged chanting transforms an image into a ritually empowered presence. In the Lak Phra context, however, such activation extends beyond initial consecration rites and is continually renewed through annual processional practices, where the image's presence is sustained through movement, sound, and collective labor. In line with Tambiah's (1984) analysis of sensory mediation, these images become effective through embodied interaction, through touch, ornamentation, and coordinated participation within a shared ritual environment. Following Fleming & Mann (2014) emphasis on the centrality of material culture in Thai Buddhism, they are thus best understood as integral to religious life rather than as merely symbolic or peripheral objects.

However, ritual activation alone does not fully explain the emergence of maternal sacred personhood. Said activation depends on the convergence of three interrelated conditions: Female patronage or lineage dedication, narrative frameworks preserved in local legends, and communal continuity through annual Lak Phra processions. Together, these elements form a triadic structure through which Buddha images come to be recognized and sustained as mothers within specific communities. Within this structure, material culture is embedded in narrative memory and sustained through communal practice: Local legends provide the interpretive basis that identifies the image



as a relational being, while repeated ritual engagement ensures the durability of this identity across generations. From this perspective, the Lak Phra tradition illustrates how material forms operate within an applied dimension of Buddhadhamma, where doctrinal principles are realized through the interaction of objects, narratives, and social relations. Below appear detailed discussions of this study conceptualized from Buddhist texts, historical documents, and field studies.

1. Buddhist Cosmological Framework and Ritual Narrative in Lak Phra Processions

This section examines the narrative foundations mobilizing Buddha images in the Lak Phra processions. At the canonical level, the festival is anchored in the narrative of the Devorohana Miracle, the moment when the Buddha returned from Tāvātimsa Heaven after teaching abhidhamma to his mother, which provides the scriptural rationale for circulation. However, in southern Thailand, oral histories known as local legends play an equally formative role by endowing images with biographical depth. Together, these strata create a layered interpretive field: The Devorohana narrative supplies the theological logic for movement, while local legends articulate the specific identities of these images, whether as daughters, patrons, or maternal figures. This narrative intertwining shaped the conditions under which images became maternalized and embedded in communal memory.

1.1 Cosmology, Visual Traditions, and the Logic of Presence

Lak Phra procession commemorates the narrative of the Devorohana Miracle that is preserved in the Devorohana-vatthu of the Dhammapada Commentary. As Buddharakkhita (1985) observes, the Dhammapada is "An Ever-fecund Source of Themes for Sermons and Discussions, a Guidebook for Resolving the Countless Problems of Everyday Life." The prominence of Devorohana could also be understood within the broader significance of the Dhammapada texts in Theravāda Buddhist cultures, where the text remains central to the Thai monastic Pali language curriculum and functions as a pervasive ethical and pedagogical text. Within this wider textual framework, the Devorohana narrative frames the festival as a moment of supreme compassion and renewed connection between the Buddha and the human realm, grounding ritual practice in a living tradition of doctrinal instruction.

The idea that the Buddha's presence can be mediated through images appeared early in Buddhist historical sources. Xuanzang's seventh-century account recorded how King Pasenadi of Kosala commissioned a sandalwood image of the Buddha during the Buddha's temporary absence (Beal, 1884). Similarly, I-Tsing described Buddhist ritual practices in the Malay Archipelago in which sacred images were bathed, dressed, and carried in processions, demonstrating that images could function as ritual substitutes for the Buddha's physical presence (Takakusu, 1896). These accounts suggest that the ritual activation and movement of Buddha images formed part of a broader Buddhist devotional culture across the maritime Silk Road region more than a millennium ago.

This cosmological event was visually elaborated across centuries in Thai Buddhist art. A fourteenth-century stucco relief at Wat Traphang Thonglang depicts the Buddha descending from Tāvātimsa Heaven on a triple staircase (Diskul, 1970). Silpa Bhirasri (2015) described this composition as "A Heavenly Vision Moving with a Divine Rhythm." Figure 1 shows the later representation of Devorohana Miracle in stucco relief at Wat Chaiwatthanaram, a major royal temple of the Kingdom



of Ayuthaya, presenting the descent as a sacred moment when the Buddha's compassion became accessible to the human world. In combination, these textual and visual traditions articulate a shared Buddhist understanding that when the Buddha is physically inaccessible, his presence may be ritually mediated through sacred images. This principle resonates with Thai visual culture, in which Buddha images are not treated as static symbols but as active conduits through which authority and compassion become present within communal life.



Figure 1 Stucco relief at the northeastern spired roof hall of Wat Chaiwatthanaram, Ayuthaya, depicting Devorohana Miracle (Photographed by author, 2025)

1.2 Local Legends and the Narrative Grounding of Maternalized Images

Across southern Thailand, maternalized Buddha images rely not on doctrinal reinterpretation, but on narrative frameworks that embed the icons within a woman's moral world. The legend of Mae Setthi (Mother Millionaire) at Wat Ron Na exemplifies how local storytelling anchors this maternal sacred identity.

While oral and temple-recorded versions vary (Ubonphan, 1998), the core narrative remained coherent: A prosperous family lost a virtuous daughter, often by drowning. Grief-stricken parents cast a standing Buddha image in her memory to create the icon to make merit for her spirit. This illustrates the first enabling condition of maternalization: Female Patronage or Female-Lineage Dedication. Here, the woman's biography and relational significance were ritually inscribed into the image at its inception.

The legend itself provided the second condition to this analysis: Narrative Frameworks. Whether through stories of dreams or miraculous discovery, the daughter's spirit was understood to guide the image's trajectory. This narrative allowed the community to view the image as a symbolic vessel for her presence and authorized the community to address the Buddha image as Mother and to adorn the image with feminine regalia.

The third condition, Communal Continuity through annual Lak Phra processions, sustained the maternal identity through repeated ritual acts. Aligning with Butler's (1999) concept



of the "Stylized Repetition of Acts," maternal sacred personhood becomes a ritual fact through continual naming, ornamentation, and kinship address. Each Lak Phra procession renews Mae Setthi's gendered presence in the social imagination.

These triadic dimensions: Female patronage, narrative frameworks, and communal continuity, extend beyond Mae Setthi. Other regional examples follow a similar logic: Mae Chum (Wat Tha Chang) is associated with tragic love; Mae Ho Chae (Wat Khuan Sombun) connects to female wealth; And Mae Thuat Yai Samli (Wat Pha Kho) links to ancestral generosity. Despite these narrative variations, the underlying structure remained identical: A woman's life was commemorated through an image, embedded in legend, and ritually renewed across generations.

Ultimately, local legends provide the symbolic foundation that allows a Buddha image to become maternal, not through doctrinal change, but through the cultural linking of biography, memory, and practice. Maternalization unfolds where stories give moral coherence to the image, and where communities repeatedly enact that identity in the present.

1.3 Ritual Life of Lak Phra: Embodied Practice and the Emergence of Sacred Personhood

While cosmology and legend provide the narrative ground for Lak Phra, the ritual's lived enactment animates the Buddha image as a socially embedded presence. Across southern Thailand, local expressions vary, yet the core structure remains consistent: A sacred image, a community-built float, and a dawn procession following the end of Buddhist Lent. Within this framework, gendered labor, restricted access, soundscapes, and relational address produce the conditions through which sacred personhood emerges.

1.3.1 Ritual Preparations and Gendered Labor

Preparations revealed a persistent gendered rhythm. At Wat Buranaram, for instance, monks and men undertook the long-term structural work of constructing the *ruea phra*; Float preparation for the 2025 festival in October began as early as May. Conversely, women coordinated the aesthetic and sensory dimensions. Senior women led the preparation of *khanom tom* (Palm-wrapped Rice Parcels), anchoring the festival in a moral economy of care. This division ensures the ritual atmosphere is saturated with gendered labor, generosity, and hospitality.

1.3.2 Restricted Sanctuaries and the Ritual Emergence of the Image

As the Buddha images used in Lak Phra processions are often regarded as ancient and of great significance to devotees, they are typically kept in inner sanctuaries for protection. In some cases, they are also made of valuable materials such as silver or gold, and records of stolen images further underscore the need for such secure storage. The fieldwork at Wat Chantharam in 2025 confirmed that the Buddha images were well kept in a restricted sanctuary: A monk carefully opened the chamber where the valuable images of silver and gold were stored. The act was not simply the retrieval of objects, but the emergence of sacred beings, marking the moment as one of heightened ritual significance.

Communities also maintain a layered history of ornamentation. At Wat Ron Na, Mae Setthi has original bangles and anklets (Ubonphan, 1998), along with the offered ornaments



over generations; This jewelry formed part of her material identity. Even where devotees did not explicitly describe maternal qualities, repeated acts of dressing and naming situated these images within feminine registers. In Mae Setthi's case, oral tradition further asserted that the image visually resembled the daughter for whom it was commissioned.

1.3.3 Procession, Sound, and Collective Mobilization

The processions in many communities shared one significant similarity: Once the images were placed upon the float, they moved through a distinctive soundscape. Drums and gongs coordinated with lay pullers chanting the refrain "Sarapha He Lo He Lo," a sonic marker exclusive to Lak Phra processions. Routes varied from ancient water channels to modern road-based circuits, with floats stopping frequently to receive offerings.

While participation in the Lak Phra procession was broadly communal, the specific engagement with maternalized images revealed deeper relational layers. As seen in the procession of Mae Setthi at Wat Ron Na in 2025, hundreds of men and women pulled the heavy float together, while women sustained the festival's aesthetic preparation and offering economy. Participants often spoke of the image in intimate relational terms, describing their participation as "Going to See Mae" or "Walking with Mae." It is important to note that, while Buddha images are widely treated as living sacred presences in Thai Theravada devotional practice and Buddha images are addressed through the more common paternal or honorific forms, such as father (Luang Pho), in the Lak Phra processions included in this study, the communities referred to their Buddha images as mother. This maternal mode of address signaled a localized reinterpretation of the Buddha image within a kinship idiom of care, protection, and communal belonging.

1.3.4 Ritual Animation and the Formation of Gendered Presence

Through movement, sound, ornamentation, and address, the procession activates a form of local personhood infused with care and memory. In the Lak Phra tradition, gender is not merely iconographic but is constituted through practice, the rhythms of offering, the continuity of naming, and the communal labor of carrying the Buddha through shared space. This ritual ecology ensures the Buddha is encountered as a universal, enlightened being and as a locally grounded, gendered person.

2. Gendered Performativity and the Maternalization of Buddha Images in Lak Phra Tradition

The maternalization of Lak Phra images diverged significantly from canonical Theravada representations. While the Buddha is doctrinally defined in the *Dīghanikāya* as mahāpurisa, and his universal compassion (Mahākaruṇiko Nātho) encompasses benevolent care, this "Paternal" or ungendered framework does not inherently invite a maternal reading. Unlike the iconic transformation of Avalokiteśvara into Guanyin, the emergence of the "Maternal Buddha" in southern Thailand arose not from doctrinal shifts, but from localized ritual formations.

In the communities included in this study, Buddha images became Mother: They were draped in Sabai, adorned with jewelry, and addressed as maternal presences. This transformation occurred only where a specific triad of enabling conditions converged: a) Female Patronage: The inscription of female lineage or agency into the image's origin, b) Narrative Frameworks: The anchoring of the icon



within local legends and moral biographies, and c) Communal Continuity: The annual repetition of Lak Phra processions that sustain the image's gendered identity.

Where this triad coheres, maternalization becomes durable; Where absent, images remain ungendered. The maternal Buddha is therefore not a doctrinal figure but a locally produced sacred subject, constituted through the following interlocking dimensions.

2.1 Female Patronage

The foundational engine of maternalization is female religious agency. In southern Thailand, where the Sangha does not recognize full bhikkhunī ordination, women cultivate alternative modes of participation within the traditional Fourfold Assembly. By concentrating their religious labor in the lay domain, women use the Lak Phra tradition as a key arena to imprint lineage, memory, and moral authority onto the ritual sphere. Some scholars suggest that the feminized features of certain Buddha images may reflect a symbolic response to the absence of female monastic roles (Ngernthaworn et al., 2025). In this context, patronage functions not only as financial support but as a material inscription of female agency into the form and identity of the icon.

A primary mechanism for this inscription is female patronage or female-lineage dedication, which establishes maternal sacred personhood at the moment of the image's creation. This practice parallels the "Self-specific" Buddha images (Phra Phuttharup Chalong Phra Ong) commissioned in the royal court of Bangkok (Sumchinda, 2007). In southern Thailand, images preserved at Wat Chantharam, Nakhon Si Thammarat, such as Mae Aep (Commissioned in 1948 by Madam Aep Thipphayamongkhon) and Mae Muli (Early Twentieth Century, Satsananon Family), demonstrate how patronage inscribes female biography into the ritual life of the image. As shown in Figure 2, which presents six standing Buddha images associated with the Lak Phra tradition at this temple, these figures embody the integration of personal history and sacred form. The 2022 creation of Mae Yupha, incorporating Madam Yupha Bowonrattanak's crematory relic urn, further signals the continued vitality of this practice and affirms the ritual legitimacy of female-associated images.



Figure 2 Six standing Buddha images associated with the Lak Phra tradition that are preserved at Wat Chantharam, Nakhon Si Thammarat (Photographed by Author, May 2025)



These acts resonate with Butler's (1999) insight that identities emerge through repeated performance. The female patronage initiated a "Performative Trajectory" that is reinforced annually through ornamentation and address. By commissioning images and maintaining their rituals, women occupied roles typically associated with spiritual guardianship, ensuring that maternal sacred personhood remains a durable feature of the communal landscape.

2.2 Narrative Frameworks

Within the analytical model proposed in this study, local legends function as narrative frameworks that stabilize and legitimize the maternal sacred personhood of the Buddha image. These narratives emphasize feminine virtue, maternal compassion, and personal sacrifice, often arising from moments of crisis such as illness, untimely death, or familial loss. Through the logic of Thai Buddhist merit-making, such events are reinterpreted as moral acts in which the commissioning of a Buddha image transforms suffering into enduring religious merit. In this way, local legends provide a sacred biography for the image, embedding it within communal memory and authorizing devotees to address it relationally as Mae, thereby sustaining maternal identity across generations.

This narrative logic resonates with broader Buddhist conceptions of compassion and moral authority. As Reiko Ohnuma (2012) observes, Buddhist discourse presents maternal love as an especially intense form of compassion, comparable to the Buddha's boundless concern for all beings and often exceeding paternal love in moral force. Within this framework, local legends of female sacrifice operate as culturally grounded expressions of Buddhist compassion. By embedding the image within such narratives, the community legitimizes maternal sacred personhood while aligning local practice with doctrinal values.

Among the most prominent female-named Lak Phra images in Nakhon Si Thammarat is Phra Mae Setthi at Wat Ron Na, whose identity is sustained through a cluster of such narratives. Although versions recorded by Praphan Nanthaphong, Chim Mompalat, and Wat Ron Na differ in detail (Ubonphan, 1998), they share a consistent structure centered on female death, parental grief, and the memorial act of image-making. These recurring elements, rather than narrative variation, form the symbolic basis through which Mae Setthi becomes intelligible as a maternalized Buddha image.

Across these versions, Mae Setthi originates in the grief of a wealthy household following the loss of a daughter. Whether she drowned, was swept away by floodwater, or disappeared during a storm, the defining motif is irretrievable loss. The father or household elders responded by commissioning a standing Buddha image, instructing artisans to embody her beauty and virtue so that the image retained her presence. This act establishes the first enabling condition, female patronage or lineage dedication, through which the image carries both filial memory and lineage identity.

A second recurring structure involves the image's disappearance and rediscovery. The newly cast image was placed in water, either to test karmic destiny or to allow the daughter's spirit to guide its movement. It later resurfaced at Nong Takhian and was recognized as a miraculous return. This rediscovery was interpreted as evidence that Mae Setthi "Chose" her place, authorizing the community to recognize the image as a specific maternal sacred presence.



A third narrative element concerns the movement of the image across temples before its settlement at Wat Ron Na. This trajectory reflects broader historical shifts and highlights the role of communal continuity in sustaining identity. Accounts of its return through dreams or ritual signs further emphasize its relational character. Together, these elements: Female death, memorial commissioning, rediscovery, and self-directed return, form a coherent structure through which maternalization becomes intelligible within the Lak Phra tradition.

The Mae Setthi narrative thus demonstrates how personal crisis is transformed through merit-making into a sacred biography that legitimizes maternal sacred personhood. In this process, suffering becomes the basis for enduring religious meaning. Local legends anchor the image within communal memory and authorize devotees to address it as Mother, sustaining maternal identity within the Lak Phra tradition.

2.3 Communal Continuity

The final enabling condition for maternalization is communal continuity, realized through sustained ritual practice. If female patronage establishes the origin (2.1) and local legends provide the narrative framework (2.2), the annual Lak Phra procession functions as the performative mechanism that prevents maternal sacred personhood from receding into historical memory. Instead, it ensures the continued presence and social reality of the image in the present. This process aligns with Judith Butler's notion that identity is constituted through repeated, stylized acts.

The Lak Phra procession is therefore not merely commemorative but re-enacts the narrative biography articulated in oral history. Every year, the ritual publicly asserts the image's status as a mobile and active presence rather than a static temple object by moving the image on the community-constructed float. Through this repeated enactment, the image's identity is remembered and continually reconstituted within communal life.

2.3.1 The Power of Relational Address: Sustaining Kinship

A central mechanism of continuity lies in the repeated relational address of the images as mothers during the procession. In 2025, devotees spoke of "Going to See Mother" or "Pulling Mother's Float," invoking an intimate and kinship-based relationship. This consistent mode of address extended the image's identity from a universal Buddhist figure to a locally situated relational presence. Through this annual act of naming, the community reaffirms the maternal identity established in narrative frameworks, sustaining it within collective consciousness. In this way, relational address produces a durable bond between the sacred figure and the social body.

2.3.2 Sensory Activation and Embodiment

The procession also functions as a site of sensory activation, through which maternal sacred personhood becomes embodied and perceptible.

Ornamentation: The preparation of the image, often undertaken by women, involved dressing it in Sabai, adorning it with jewelry, and sometimes applying cosmetic elements. These acts were not merely decorative but constitutive: They inscribed a feminine register onto the image, making maternal identity visible and tangible. Over time, offered



ornaments accumulate as a material archive of devotion, reinforcing the image's maternal appearance. As Swearer (2004) notes in his discussion of consecration rites, the ritual "Opening of the Eyes" (Boek Phra Net), which is an act conducted directly to the body of Buddha images, marks the transformation of an image into a sentient sacred presence. In the Lak Phra context, ongoing ornamentation extends this process by continually reinscribing gendered and relational qualities onto the image.

Touch and Offering: Devotees engaged the image through direct interaction and acts of offering. Participants touched the float as it passed, presented sweets such as *khanom tom*, or contributed bodily labor by pulling the float. These actions are understood as forms of merit-making, through which the Buddha's presence is extended across the community. Through touch, offering, and shared labor, the image's sacred presence is sustained through embodied participation.

Soundscape: The auditory dimension of the procession further intensified communal engagement. Rhythmic drumming, chanting, and vocal expressions such as "Saraphaa He Lo He Lo" created a coordinated sonic environment that amplifies ritual charisma (Tambiah, 1984). In some locations, this soundscape developed into distinct musical traditions. At Laem Pho, for example, the procession is accompanied by *Phleng Ruea Laem Pho* (Cape Pho's Boat Songs), a repertoire of more than forty orally transmitted songs (Bunyarit, 1989). These performances celebrate the ritual while reinforcing communal identity and the interethnic histories of the lakeshore region. Through this sonic field, the procession binds participants and spectators into a shared ritual atmosphere.

2.3.3 *Communitas* and Collective Affirmation

The collective labor of float-pulling constitutes an act of communal affirmation. Drawing on Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*, this shared effort temporarily suspends social hierarchies and produces a sense of collective unity grounded in the sacred presence. The collaboration of men and women in carrying and moving a maternal Buddha image publicly affirms its gendered personhood across the community. Through this coordinated participation, the image's identity is not only recognized but socially stabilized.

Collectively, these processes: Relational address, sensory activation, and collective participation, demonstrate how communal continuity sustains maternal sacred personhood over time. By integrating origin (Patronage), narrative (Local Legends), and repeated ritual enactment, the Lak Phra procession ensures that the maternal Buddha image remains a locally grounded, active, and relational sacred presence within southern Thai Buddhist life.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

This study proposes an analytical model explaining how certain Buddha images acquire forms of maternal sacred personhood within the Lak Phra ritual practice. The model is grounded in Thai Theravada traditions of merit-making through female patronage, the narrative transmission of local legends, and the communal ritual continuity of the Lak Phra procession.

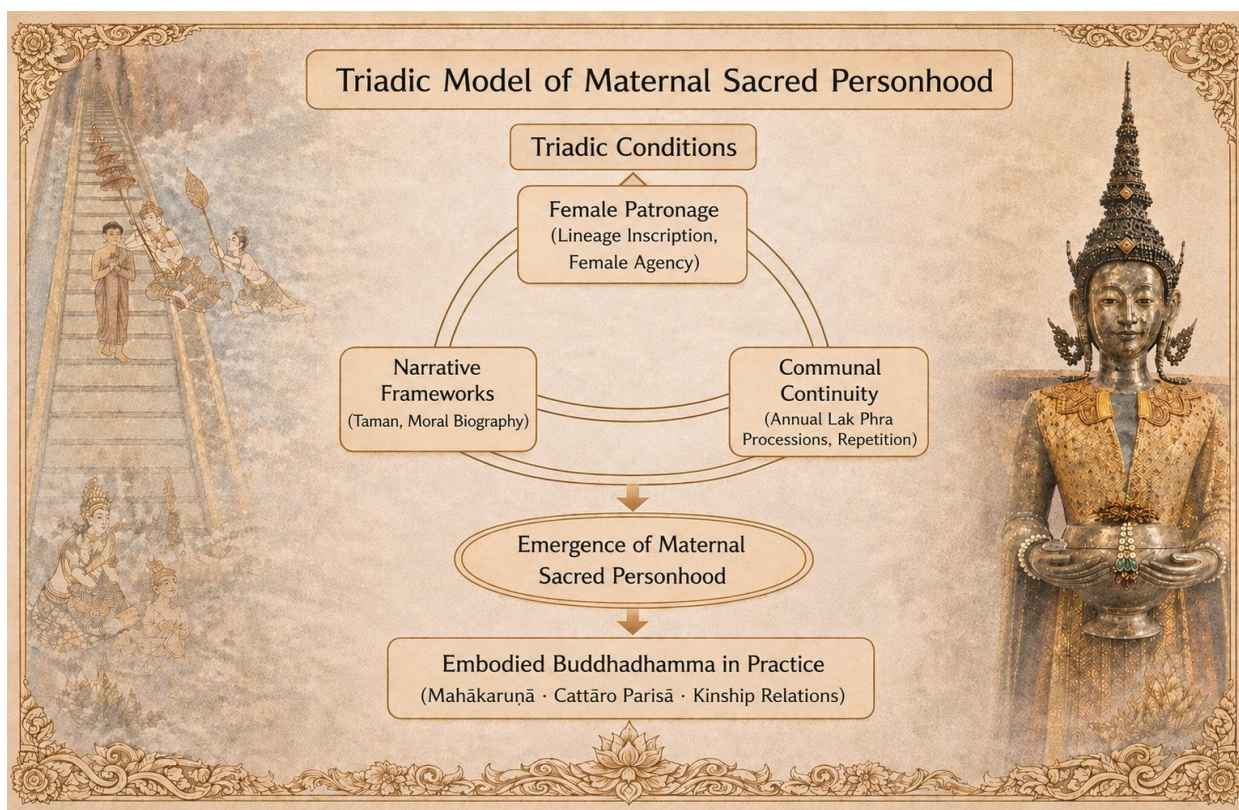


Figure 3 Triadic Model of Maternal Sacred Personhood through which maternal Buddha images emerge in the Lak Phra tradition of southern Thailand.

Figure 3 visualizes this analytical model by illustrating how three key forces interact to produce maternal sacred identity. Female patronage establishes the initial commemorative relationship between women and the Buddha image; Narrative frameworks provide the moral biography that sustains the image within communal memory; And communal ritual continuity repeatedly reaffirms the image's maternal sacred personhood through the Lak Phra procession. Through this interaction, maternalization appears not as an isolated symbolic feature but as a culturally patterned process embedded in lived ritual practice.

Specifically, the model identifies three conditioning forces that operate through ritual repetition and communal recognition: Female patronage, which embeds women's lineage and aspirations into the Buddha image; Narrative frameworks, which root the image in communal moral memory; And communal continuity, through which annual Lak Phra processions and repeated acts of naming, dressing, and ornamentation stabilize maternal personhood across generations. Together, these conditions explain how maternal sacred personhood emerges and why certain Buddha images become maternalized, while others remain within more conventional masculine or neutral devotional idioms. The case of Mae Setthi at Wat Ron Na in Nakhon Si Thammarat illustrates this interaction clearly, where patronage, narrative memory, and annual ritual practice sustain the image's maternal identity within the community.



The model further shows how these dimensions constitute a culturally grounded enactment of Buddhadhamma. By linking maternalization to the Buddha's mahākaruṇā, the relational structure of the Fourfold Assembly, and the ethical principle expressed in the saying "A Mother is A Friend at Home," the study demonstrates that maternal sacred identity is not a doctrinal deviation but an extension of Buddhist relational and moral thought. In this way, Buddhadhamma is embodied through kinship ethics, communal merit-making, and lay forms of female religious agency, expanding our understanding of how Buddhist images function as moral agents in lived practice.

While previous scholarship has examined Thai Buddhist images through charisma, consecration ritual, or amulet traditions, these findings extend the discussion by showing how local ritual practice can also produce gendered sacred personhood through the interaction of patronage, narrative memory, and communal performance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study demonstrated that the emergence of maternal sacred personhood within the Lak Phra tradition depended on the dynamic interaction of female patronage, narrative memory, and communal ritual continuity. Through these dimensions, the Buddha image transformed from a canonical representation into a relational presence addressed through the kinship idiom of Mae. The Lak Phra procession thus revealed how Buddhist icons become socially meaningful persons; During these rituals, devotees addressed images directly as Mother when seeking protection or family well-being, while parents reproduced this maternal identity by teaching children to honor the image for its nurturing blessings. Furthermore, the incorporation of motherhood themes in processional songs reinforced the communal experience of the image as a compassionate, lived presence. While the case of Mae Setthi at Wat Ron Na illustrated this pattern, similar relational devotions across southern Thailand indicated that maternalization was not an isolated phenomenon but a regional cultural logic. Ultimately, these findings show that maternal sacred identity does not represent a deviation from Buddhist doctrine, but rather a culturally grounded expression of Buddhadhamma that translates ethical ideals into forms of relational care. Consequently, future scholarship should examine regional variations in gendered sacred forms and the roles of ritual specialists in sustaining them, while institutions must support the documentation of local image histories to ensure this living dimension of Buddhist practice remains accessible to future generations.

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