



ENHANCING BUDDHIST EDUCATION THROUGH THE SAN-DONTA TRADITION OF THAI-KHMER COMMUNITIES IN THAILAND

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: Amid rapid social change and cultural transformation in contemporary Thai society, increasing concerns have emerged regarding the weakening transmission of moral values and cultural identity among younger generations. Although Buddhist education remains part of the national curriculum, limited research has examined how local cultural heritage can function as an applied framework for enhancing the learning of Buddhist principles in schools. The San-Donta Tradition represents a significant cultural institution that integrates animistic ancestral belief with Theravāda Buddhist ethical teachings. This study aims to examine the cultural heritage of the San-Donta Tradition among the Thai-Khmer community in Thailand and analyze its embedded Buddhist principles to explore pathways for their integration into school-based moral and ethical education.

Methodology: This study adopted a qualitative documentary research design grounded in rigorous cultural and textual analysis, deliberately delimited to secondary data synthesis. Using a keyword-based purposive strategy focusing on "San-Donta Tradition" "Thai-Khmer Community," "Buddhist Principles" "Moral Education" and "School Instruction" a credible analytical corpus was gathered from academic literature and ethnographic records. Following Klaus Krippendorff's framework, data analysis was executed through a systematic three-stage qualitative content and thematic analysis procedure such as open coding, categorization, and thematic synthesis. This analytical process identified and categorized embedded Buddhist principles into individual-level virtues and social-level ethical reinforcement, ultimately transforming descriptive cultural knowledge into a validated pedagogical framework for formal school-based Buddhist education.

Main Results: The findings revealed that the San-Donta Tradition functioned as an active, culturally embedded moral system operating symbiotically across two operational levels. At the individual level, the ritual naturally cultivated personal virtues of gratitude (Katanyu-katavedi),



filial piety, compassion, and karmic moral accountability through practical ancestral remembrance and merit-making (Puñña). These ritualistic elements served as experiential learning mechanisms that effectively transformed abstract Theravāda Buddhist ethical doctrines into lived personal experiences. At the social level, collective participation across kinship networks reinforced communal harmony and social sympathy (Saṅgaha-vatthu), visibly manifesting as enhanced solidarity, mutual reciprocity, and intergenerational respect. By successfully synthesizing animistic ancestral reverence with Buddhist moral philosophy, the tradition established a holistic ethical framework that bridged spiritual continuity with reciprocal social responsibility. Ultimately, the results demonstrated that the San-Donta Tradition operated not merely as a passive ceremonial heritage, but as a functional informal moral curriculum capable of structurally enhancing Buddhist principle instruction within formal educational settings.

Involvement to Buddhaddhamma: This study demonstrates that the San-Donta Tradition reflects a form of applied Buddhism grounded in cultural practice and aligns with Applied Buddhism in the development of wisdom and morality. Core Buddhist values such as gratitude, compassion (Karūṇā), loving-kindness (Mettā), and ethical conduct (Sīla) are embedded within ritual actions and social norms. The practice of merit transfer reinforces understanding of karma and moral causation, while communal harmony reflects principles aligned with the Noble Eightfold Path, particularly right conduct and right intention. By integrating these culturally embodied teachings into educational contexts, schools can connect doctrinal Buddhist content with students lived cultural experiences. Such integration promotes moral reflection, ethical reasoning, and social responsibility grounded in local identity and spiritual heritage.

Conclusions: The study underscores the significant role of the San-Donta Tradition as a sustainable cultural framework for enhancing the learning of Buddhist principles in Thai-Khmer communities. Functioning as both an individual system of moral cultivation and a communal ethical structure, the tradition supports character development, intergenerational continuity, and social harmony. Integrating cultural heritage into school instruction offers a culturally responsive approach to Buddhist education that strengthens ethical awareness, communal solidarity, and long-term moral development.

Keywords: Buddhist Education, Thai-Khmer Community, San-Donta Tradition, Moral Education

Introduction

Thailand is widely recognized as a pluralistic society characterized by cultural diversity, in which multiple ethnic communities maintain distinctive identities through belief systems, ritual practices, languages, and forms of local knowledge. Among these communities, Thai-Khmer people represent a significant cultural group whose historical roots and worldview have been shaped by long-standing traditions and communal practices. Across provinces where Thai-Khmer populations reside, cultural identity has been sustained through inherited rituals, ancestral veneration, and everyday expressions of collective memory. These practices function not merely



as ceremonial events but as forms of living cultural heritage that connect past generations with present social life. One of the most important expressions of this heritage is the San-Donta Tradition, a ritual complex centered on ancestral remembrance and moral obligations toward forebears. The tradition reflects a historical synthesis of indigenous cosmology, Theravāda Buddhist ethical principles, and Brahmanical elements, forming a distinctive spiritual and cultural identity among Thai-Khmer communities. Through symbolic offerings, communal gatherings, and ritual performances, the San-Donta Tradition functions as a key mechanism for transmitting values, reinforcing kinship bonds, and sustaining intergenerational continuity (Mahamakut Buddhist University, 1984); (Visalo, 2025) As such, it represents an integral component of the cultural heritage of Thai-Khmer people in Thailand and continues to play a vital role in shaping community life.

Beyond its historical and ritual dimensions, the San-Donta Tradition embodies a rich system of moral and ethical teachings embedded within its beliefs and practices. The ritual emphasizes gratitude toward ancestors, filial piety, respect for elders, communal solidarity, compassion, and moral responsibility-values that are closely aligned with fundamental Buddhist doctrines concerning karma, merit-making, and moral discipline. These ethical dimensions operate at both individual and social levels. At the individual level, participants are encouraged to cultivate mindfulness, moral restraint, and a sense of indebtedness to parents and forebears. Socially, the tradition reinforces unity, mutual support, and harmonious coexistence within the community. Such moral foundations are highly relevant to contemporary educational contexts, where schools are entrusted not only with academic instruction but also with character formation and ethical development. Educational institutions have long been recognized as important spaces for transmitting cultural values and shaping moral consciousness among younger generations. Integrating the moral and ethical teachings reflected in the San-Donta Tradition into school-based instruction can therefore contribute to strengthening students' understanding of ethical principles, fostering moral reasoning, and cultivating respect for cultural heritage. In this sense, the tradition offers a culturally grounded resource for enhancing moral education while simultaneously supporting the preservation of local identity and wisdom.

However, in contemporary Thai society, the continuity of traditional rituals such as the San-Donta Tradition faces increasing challenges. Processes of modernization, globalization, migration, and shifting educational priorities have significantly transformed lifestyles and value orientations, particularly among younger generations. Although San-Donta rituals continue to be practiced in many communities, their deeper meanings and philosophical foundations are not always systematically conveyed to youth. As a result, these cultural practices risk becoming symbolic or ceremonial performances detached from their embedded ethical principles (Siriphaprapagon et al., 2023) Moreover, while previous studies have examined the San-Donta Tradition from anthropological, historical, or ritual perspectives, limited research has focused on translating its moral and ethical dimensions into structured educational frameworks. There remains a gap in the development of conceptual models that effectively



connect cultural heritage with formal moral instruction in schools. At the policy level, legal and educational frameworks in Thailand have acknowledged the importance of cultural preservation and the integration of local wisdom into education. (Office of the Council of State, 1999), Nevertheless, practical mechanisms for incorporating community-based cultural traditions into moral education remain underdeveloped and insufficiently explored. From a global perspective, the frameworks such as those proposed by UNESCO for safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) emphasize the importance of living transmission, community participation, and educational engagement in sustaining cultural practices (UNESCO, 2003); (UNESCO, 2018). Similarly, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight inclusive and equitable quality education, as well as cultural sustainability as essential components of long-term social development (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2025). Despite these international frameworks, there is remains insufficient scholarly work that situates the San-Donta Tradition within school-based moral education aligned with principles of sustainability and cultural continuity.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to contribute both conceptually and educationally by examining how the cultural heritage of the San-Donta Tradition can enhance moral and ethical learning in schools among Thai-Khmer communities in Thailand. By analyzing the moral teachings embedded within the tradition and exploring their relevance to formal education, the study proposes a culturally grounded approach to character development that bridges community heritage and institutional learning. This approach not only supports the sustainable preservation of cultural identity but also promotes ethical awareness and social responsibility among students in a rapidly changing society. By situating the discussion within frameworks of UNESCO's ICH safeguarding principles and the SDGs, the study further underscores the broader significance of integrating cultural heritage into educational systems as part of sustainable development efforts (Pruksa et al., 2022); (Wulf, 2025); (Zabulis et al., 2025). Ultimately, the research contributes to expanding academic dialogue on culturally responsive moral education and offers practical implications for educators and schools seeking to strengthen both cultural continuity and students' moral development in contemporary Thai society.

Objectives

This study aims to examine the cultural heritage of the San-Donta Tradition among the Thai-Khmer community in Thailand and analyze its embedded Buddhist principles to explore pathways for their integration into school-based moral and ethical education.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative documentary research design, deliberately delimited to a theoretical and conceptual contribution. It aimed to propose a structured integration model by synthesizing existing knowledge rather than engaging in primary fieldwork (Creswell, 1998).



A qualitative approach was considered appropriate for interpreting culturally embedded meanings, symbolic expressions, and value systems conveyed through ritual practices and community traditions. By focusing on secondary data, this research maintained a high level of methodological transparency while specifically addressing the ethical dimensions of data collection.

1. Research design and ethical delimitation, to ensure strict ethical compliance, the study relied exclusively on publicly available and published secondary sources. Consequently, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required, as the research did not involve direct intervention, interviews, or observation of human subjects (Bailey, 2018); (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This strategic delimitation allowed for a rigorous synthesis of established cultural, historical, and pedagogical frameworks without infringing upon the privacy or ethical sensitivities of ethnic groups, thereby strengthening the objectivity and conceptual credibility of the study.

2. Data collection and search strategy, Data were collected through a systematic review of secondary sources using a purposive selection strategy to guarantee research rigor. The analytical corpus included academic journal articles, specialized books, theses, cultural studies, and policy documents from credible databases (e.g., ThaiJO and International Repositories). The selection of documents was guided by a keyword-based relevance strategy to ensure the inclusion of pertinent literature. The specific search terms utilized included: "San-Donta" "Thai-Khmer Community" "Buddhist Principles" "Moral Education" and "School Instruction" Sources were explicitly evaluated for their authenticity, relevance, academic rigor, and conceptual contribution to the research objectives, with an emphasis on both classical foundational works and recent studies (Bowen, 2009). Priority was given to texts addressing the relationship between cultural heritage and value transmission, as well as the integration of religious knowledge into school-based learning.

3. Data analysis and research rigor, to address the need for procedural detail and analytical rigor, data analysis was conducted using qualitative Content Analysis (CA) and thematic analysis following the principles proposed by Krippendorff (2019). The analytical process followed a systematic three-stage procedure; 1) Open Coding: This involved an initial careful reading and scanning of the textual data to identify recurring terms, concepts, and meaningful units related to cultural heritage, ritual practices, and moral teachings. 2) Categorization: Grouping the generated codes into broader thematic categories, focusing explicitly on. 2.1) Elements of cultural heritage embedded in the San-Donta Tradition, and 2.2) Buddhist principles and ethical values reflected in ritual beliefs, and 3) Thematic Synthesis: Summarizing and synthesizing these categories to establish a conceptual linkage between Thai-Khmer cultural heritage and moral-ethical learning in school contexts.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework illustrates in Figure 1, presents the relationship between the Thai-Khmer community, the cultural heritage of the San-Donta Tradition, and the integration of Buddhist principles and moral teachings into schools' education to enhance moral and ethical

learning. The framework is grounded in the perspective that cultural heritage function as foundational source of value formation moral development within formal educational systems. Within this framework the Thai-Khmer community represents the sociocultural context in which the San-Donta Tradition has been historically practiced and transmitted across generations. Embedded within this context, the cultural heritage of the San-Donta Tradition encompasses two primary dimensions; 1) The historical background of the Thai-Khmer people and 2) Cultural identity expressed through beliefs systems, symbolic practices, and doctrinal foundations embedded in ritual practices. These elements collectively reflect shared memory, spiritual worldview, and community norms that sustain cultural continuity. Furthermore, the framework identifies that the San-Donta Tradition embodies moral and ethical teachings operating at both individual and social levels. At the individual level, the tradition promotes the virtues such as gratitude, filial piety, moral responsibility, and ethical discipline. At the social level, it reinforces values including unity, mutual support, compassion, and respect for communal harmony. These value dimensions are closely aligned with core Buddhist principles and moral teachings, thereby providing a culturally grounded ethical system. The framework posits that systematic analysis of cultural heritage and its embedded moral teachings can serve as a foundation for integrating Buddhist principles into formal school instruction. This integration is expected to enhance moral reasoning, ethical awareness, and character development among students, while simultaneously supporting the preservation of cultural identity and local wisdom within educational contexts.



Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Results and Discussion

1. The cultural heritage of the San-Donta Tradition among Thai-Khmer community

1.1 Background of the Thai-Khmer ethnic group

The Thai-Khmer ethnic group represented one of the long-established indigenous communities in Thailand, whose cultural identity was historically shaped through centuries of



interaction among ethnicity, belief systems, geography, and socio-political transformations. Classified within the Austroasiatic language family, specifically the Mon-Khmer linguistic branch, the Thai-Khmer people were regarded by researchers as descendants of the ancient Mon-Khmer civilization that once flourished across mainland Southeast Asia (Sornyai, 2019). Linguistically and anthropologically, this group maintained a distinct ethnic identity rooted in shared ancestry, collective memory, and cultural continuity. The Mon-Khmer language family was widely acknowledged as one of the most ancient linguistic traditions in the region, characterized by relatively simple phonological structures and vocabulary deeply embedded in everyday life (Sornyai, 2019). Language, therefore, served not merely as a means of communication but also as an anchor of ethnic consciousness and historical continuity.

In Thailand, the Thai-Khmer population was found to be concentrated primarily in the southern part of the Isan region, particularly in Surin province. In this area, community members frequently identified themselves as "Khmer Sa-ren" to distinguish their identity from that of present-day Cambodians. This distinction reflected not only political and geographic boundaries but also localized socio-cultural adaptations shaped by Thailand's historical and administrative development. Despite national integration, Thai-Khmer communities continued to maintain and express their ethnic distinctiveness through ritual practices, traditional attire, silk weaving, craftsmanship, and communal ceremonies. Historically, the Thai-Khmer ethnic group shared profound connections with the Khmer Empire, which once dominated large areas of Southeast Asia. Archaeological evidence and historical documentation, including accounts by the Chinese envoy Zhou Daguan and analyses by later scholars, described the Khmer civilization as highly sophisticated in terms of political organization, architectural achievement, religious institutions, and artistic expression (Schrock et al., 1970). These historical foundations effectively functioned as the baseline that shaped contemporary Thai-Khmer identity through symbolic expressions embedded in ritual practices, aesthetic forms, and sacred traditions.

From the perspective of cultural diffusion theory, the endurance of these Thai-Khmer cultural characteristics is understood as the transmission and adaptation of core civilizational traits through migration, trade, and interregional contact (Muenjanchoei, 1999). As the ancient Khmer civilization expanded and interacted with neighboring regions, its spiritual beliefs, ceremonial systems, and social structures gradually diffused into areas that are now part of northeastern Thailand. Over time, these elements are localized and adapted to suit the specific environmental and social contexts of Thai-Khmer communities, resulting in a distinctive yet historically rooted cultural system. At the center of this cultural system lies an animistic worldview a belief structure emphasizing the existence, power, and continuity of spiritual entities, particularly ancestral spirits (Schrock et al., 1970). In Thai-Khmer society, spiritual forces are perceived as active agents capable of influencing human fortune, health, prosperity, and social harmony.



This worldview shapes not only ritual practices but also moral behavior, social organization, and intergenerational relationships. Within this belief framework, the San-Donta Tradition emerges as one of the most significant and enduring sacred rituals of the Thai-Khmer community. San-Donta is fundamentally an ancestral worship ceremony that expresses reverence, gratitude, and moral obligation toward deceased forebears. It represents a ritualized form of communication between the living and the spiritual realm, reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between generations. Although Thai-Khmer communities experience modernization, migration, and social transformation, the San-Donta remains a highly respected and sacred cultural institution. It is not merely a ceremonial event but also a distinctive cultural identity marker that differentiates Thai-Khmer people from other ethnic groups in Thailand. Thus, within the broader context of the Thai-Khmer ethnic group, the San-Donta Tradition stands as a prominent and inherited cultural expression. It embodies the sacred dimension of belief, spiritual continuity, and ancestral reverence that is transmitted across generations. Its persistence demonstrates the resilience of belief-based cultural systems and the central role of ritual in maintaining ethnic identity.

1.2 Cultural identity of San-Donta Tradition

The San-Donta Tradition represented a significant dimension of Thai-Khmer cultural heritage, deeply embedded in animistic belief systems and ancestral veneration. As an inherited ritual practice, it was transmitted across generations, functioning as both a sacred ceremony and a moral institution within the community, while symbolizing continuity, identity, and spiritual interconnectedness between the past and the present (Muenjanchoei, 1999). At its core, the San-Donta tradition reflected the animistic worldview that ancestral spirits continued to exist beyond physical death and maintained influence over the living. This belief emphasized that ancestors possessed spiritual power capable of granting blessings or misfortune depending on the conduct of their descendants; Consequently, ritual practices during San-Donta involved offerings of food, symbolic items, prayers, and communal gatherings designed to honor and appease ancestral spirits (Schrock et al., 1970). Beyond its ritual structure, the San-Donta tradition embodied philosophical teachings that functioned as moral guidance for younger generations, embedding values such as gratitude, filial piety, humility, reciprocity, and moral accountability.

By participating in ancestral rites, children and youth internalized respect for parents and elders, the preservation of family lineage, and the maintenance of moral discipline, operating as an informal educational system through which ethical teachings were transmitted without formal instruction. Moreover, the San-Donta tradition promoted social cohesion by bringing extended families and community members together in collective worship, which strengthened intergenerational relationships and enforced social bonds through shared participation in ritual activities, food preparation, and sacred offerings. Closely related practices, such as Jol Mamot a shamanistic ceremony involving communication with spirits further highlighted the broader spiritual framework within which the San-Donta Tradition operated (Chunhabunyatip et al., 2018);



(Lertpiboon, 2025). These rituals reflected the Thai-Khmer integration of animism, sacred power, mysticism, and spiritual mediation into everyday life, forming a cohesive cultural identity grounded in reverence for the unseen realm. Importantly, the San-Donta Tradition remained a living tradition that adapted to contemporary contexts, serving as a meaningful cultural symbol preserved in both rural and semi-urban communities, demonstrating the adaptive resilience of indigenous cultural heritage. From an anthropological perspective, the San-Donta Tradition encoded philosophical reflections on life, death, continuity, and moral responsibility, teaching that human existence was relational and individual identity was inseparable from ancestral lineage within a cosmological order encompassing both the living and the spiritual worlds.

Building upon these findings, the San-Donta Tradition functions as a powerful social norm within Thai-Khmer society, operating as an informal system of moral education embedded in animistic beliefs and Buddhist ethical values. Through ancestral worship, it cultivates gratitude, filial piety, and communal responsibility, while active participation in the ritual reinforces ethical behavior and intergenerational respect. As a belief-based institution, it shapes moral values through symbolic practice and embodies an enduring worldview centered on spiritual continuity and reciprocity. Therefore, the discussion suggests that the San-Donta Tradition functions as a deeply rooted social norm within Thai-Khmer society, operating as an informal system of moral education embedded in ancestral belief and Buddhist ethics.

It cultivates gratitude, filial piety, and moral responsibility through symbolic acts of ancestral veneration and merit-making. According to Phra Nat Caruvanno (Yiram) et al. (2021), the tradition reinforces ethical consciousness by sustaining values grounded in local cosmology and communal practice. Phra Somphong Janseeda (2021) further explains that beliefs concerning pretas (Hungry Ghosts) strengthen moral awareness by emphasizing gratitude and warning against ingratitude, thereby shaping intergenerational respect and connecting directly with Buddhist principles of karmic accountability. Participation in the ritual thus becomes a sacred symbolic practice that forms character and reinforces communal responsibility. Moreover, Sripattanet (2019) demonstrates that structured engagement with the San-Donta tradition in educational settings enhances student's cultural identity and ethical understanding. Collectively, these perspectives affirm that the San-Donta tradition represents an enduring worldview centered on spiritual continuity and reciprocity, sustaining virtue and Thai-Khmer identity across generations.

2. The Buddhist principles and teachings reflected in the San-Donta Tradition for integration into schools' instruction

The San-Donta Tradition of the Thai-Khmer community in southern Isan, particularly in Surin province, represented more than a ritual of ancestral veneration; It embodied a complex system of beliefs integrating animism and Theravāda Buddhist teachings, functioning as a repository of moral instruction and ethical cultivation (Siriphaprapagon, 2018). While



San-Donta was widely recognized as an intangible cultural heritage rooted in ancestral worship, its deeper significance lay in the Buddhist principles embedded within its ritual structure and symbolic meanings. These principles operated at both the individual and social levels, offering valuable moral foundations that could be integrated into formal educational instruction.



Figure 2 San-Donta as a school learning activity (Siripaphapagon, 2018)



Figure 3 San-Donta as a local community learning curriculum (Siripaphapagon, 2018)



Figure 4 Students participate in San-Donta ritual training (Siripaphapagon, 2018)



Figure 5 Students Learning on the history, significance, and values of the San-Donta ritual (Siripaphapagon, 2018)

As illustrated in **Figures 2 and 3**, San-Donta was integrated into educational practice both as a participatory learning activity involving community scholars and ritual practitioners and as a local curriculum for Thai-Khmer students. Contemporary pedagogical innovations demonstrated how San-Donta functioned as an effective learning base that connected classroom knowledge with real-world contexts; In **Figures 4 and 5**, students engaged in hands-on activities such as preparing traditional desserts used in the San-Donta ritual and learned from teachers and local scholars about its history, significance, and values.

2.1 Individual level

The San-Donta Tradition reflected core Buddhist virtues that guided personal conduct and moral consciousness. The ritual centered on the belief that ancestral spirits continued



to exist and maintained a relationship with their descendants (Chaiyachartkittyos et al., 2025). This belief cultivated a heightened awareness of intergenerational connectedness, encouraging individuals to act with responsibility, gratitude, and mindfulness toward those who nurtured and supported them in life. One of the most prominent virtues embedded in San-Donta was *katanyu-katavedi* (Gratitude and Reciprocity), recognized in Buddhist teachings as a defining characteristic of virtuous individuals. During the ritual, descendants prepared offerings, dedicated merit, and performed acts of reverence to honor deceased parents and ancestors. This ritualized remembrance reinforced the moral obligation to acknowledge the sacrifices, care, and compassion of one's parents, nurturing filial piety, which was deeply aligned with Buddhist moral philosophy emphasizing gratitude toward benefactors, particularly mother and father (Siriphaprapagon et al., 2023).

Furthermore, San-Donta ceremonies often included merit-making activities such as inviting monks to chant, offering alms, and transferring merit to the deceased, reflecting the Theravāda Buddhist belief that wholesome deeds (*Puñña*) alleviated suffering in the afterlife and generated spiritual benefit. Through participation in merit-making, individuals internalized the law of karma and the principle of moral causation that intentional actions yielded consequences, which fostered moral restraint, ethical awareness, and personal responsibility. In addition to gratitude, the tradition encouraged *mettā* (Loving-kindness) and compassion; The symbolic act of preparing food for ancestral spirits expressed concern for the well-being of others beyond oneself, extending empathy even to the spiritual realm. This outward-directed concern cultivated a generous mindset and reduced self-centeredness, allowing individuals to develop qualities consistent with the Buddhist *Brahmavihāra* (Loving-kindness, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy, and Equanimity). Furthermore, the preparation of ritual offerings such as *Bay ben* (Rice Balls Derived from The Pāli Word *Pinḍa*) symbolized nourishment and care for departed spirits (Phumiphol Bhikkhu Foundation, 1988); (Rattanapanawong, 2006).

This symbolic dimension reinforced mindfulness of life's impermanence (*Anicca*) and the continuity between existence and death, encouraging moral diligence and purposeful living. The animistic dimension of San-Donta, especially the belief in protective ancestral spirits capable of blessing or admonishing descendants, also reinforced ethical conduct (Worachat, 1987). The understanding that moral behavior influenced spiritual harmony strengthened self-regulation and respect for ethical norms, where fear of causing harm or dishonor to ancestors became a cultural reinforcement mechanism encouraging virtuous behavior. Therefore, at the individual level, San-Donta functioned as an informal moral curriculum, teaching gratitude toward parents, remembrance of benefactors, compassion, generosity, and moral accountability through lived ritual participation, experiential learning, and emotional engagement. For educational integration, the San-Donta Tradition provided culturally grounded examples through which Buddhist moral principles were taught in ways that resonated with students' community heritage and lived experiences.



From an analytical perspective, the individual dimensions of the San-Donta Tradition function as an active framework for applied Buddhist ethics, showing that abstract theological concepts can be translated into concrete pedagogical practices. The ritual acts of preparing Bay ben and transferring puñña operate as experiential learning mechanisms that anchor the psychological development of youth in the core virtues of katanyu-katavedi and anicca. This aligns with Theravāda Buddhist moral philosophy, which posits that ethical self-regulation is most effective when driven by an internal realization of interconnectedness and moral causation (Karma). By transforming ancestral reverence into a vehicle for classroom instruction, schools utilize local ethnic heritage to fulfill macro-level educational goals, establishing that cultural practices are vital resources for nurturing personal virtue, civic accountability, and spiritual resilience in contemporary society.

2.2 Social level

Beyond personal ethics, San-Donta reflected Buddhist principles that operated collectively at the social and communal levels. The ritual was conducted across household, kinship, and community settings, bringing together extended families and village members in shared participation (Siriphaprapagon, 2018). This collective dimension embodied the Buddhist emphasis on harmonious coexistence, unity, and mutual interdependence. The annual performance of San-Donta, typically during the tenth lunar month when ancestral spirits were believed to return (Ngo & Nguyen, 2021); (Office of Cultural Affairs, Buriram Province, 2010), acted as a communal gathering point. Family members who migrated for work frequently returned home, which strengthened kinship networks and renewed social bonds, thereby reinforcing solidarity and unity while creating a sense of shared belonging among members of the same ethnic and spiritual community. Buddhist teachings emphasized social harmony (Saṅgaha-vatthu) through generosity (Dāna), kind speech (Piya-vācā), beneficial conduct (Attha-cariyā), and equality (Samānattatā), and these principles were visibly enacted during San-Donta ceremonies. Community members shared resources, prepared communal meals, and cooperated in organizing rituals, where hospitality extended to relatives and guests reflected generosity and inclusiveness (Siriphaprapagon et al., 2023); (Meethaisong, 2021).

Through these practices, Buddhist social ethics were not merely taught but were enacted collectively. San-Donta also strengthened communal identity by reinforcing a shared worldview grounded in an animistic-Buddhist synthesis; Recognition of village guardian spirits (Ta-Sa-Rok), household spirits (Phra Phum), and ancestral spirits (Worachat, 1987) established a collective cosmology uniting community member under common symbolic structures, which promoted a sense of cultural coherence and reinforced commitment to communal norms. Moreover, the ritual's reliance on locally sourced agricultural products demonstrated interdependence between social life and ecological knowledge, where the use of seasonal foods and locally produced items for offerings reflected sustainable living practices and shared economic cooperation (Siriphaprapagon et al., 2023). Participation in ritual exchange networks



strengthened extended kinship relations, even across distant relatives, enhancing ethnic cohesion. The festive and communal atmosphere of San-Donta, characterized by mutual assistance, joyful interaction, and collective remembrance, created positive social reinforcement for ethical behavior. By publicly affirming shared values such as gratitude, unity, and respect for elders, the tradition became a moral performance that reaffirmed communal expectations, allowing youth observing and participating in these ceremonies to absorb social norms regarding cooperation and respectful coexistence. Thus, at the social level, San-Donta functioned as a community-based ethical system that fostered solidarity, strengthened networks of reciprocity, and maintained ethnic cohesion through shared belief and ritual practice. These dimensions aligned closely with Buddhist social teachings emphasizing harmony, interdependence, and compassion within the Sangha-like community structure, suggesting that integrating these communal virtues into school instruction could promote civic responsibility, multicultural respect, and social unity grounded in local cultural heritage.

Building upon these social observations, the San-Donta Tradition functions as a powerful social norm and structural mechanism within Thai-Khmer society, strengthening solidarity, unity, and communal harmony through collective ritual participation. As an intangible cultural heritage, it serves not merely as a ceremonial practice but as a living system for transmitting ethical values across generations within families and communities (Siriphaprapagon, 2018). The ritual process grounded in ancestral veneration cultivates gratitude, filial piety, and moral responsibility, thereby strengthening communal bonds and a shared moral consciousness. This directly embodies the practical application of *saṅgha-vatthu* (The Bases of Social Sympathy), where communal cooking, resource sharing, and inclusive hospitality translate doctrinal Buddhism into everyday social ethics. Phra Nat Caruvanno (Yiram) et al. (2021) emphasize that preservation efforts must reinforce these ethical dimensions embedded in San-Donta in accordance with Buddhist teachings, highlighting its role in sustaining moral discipline at multiple social levels. Furthermore, Sri Pattanet (2019) demonstrates that when systematically integrated into educational contexts, San-Donta enhances cultural literacy, community engagement, and ethical awareness among youth, confirming that the tradition successfully synthesizes animistic belief and Buddhist ethical philosophy in lived practice. Consequently, San-Donta remains an enduring, contextually grounded cultural framework for nurturing virtue at societal levels within the Thai-Khmer community in Thailand.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

This study contributes distinct empirical and theoretical insights to Buddhist education by demonstrating how the San-Donta Tradition of the Thai-Khmer community in Thailand functions as an active, culturally embedded framework for enhancing ethical learning in formal education. While previous literature predominantly restricts San-Donta to anthropological descriptions or passive cultural preservation, this research offers a critical paradigm shift, reinterpreting the

tradition as an applied moral and pedagogical curriculum by uncovering two primary dimensions of new knowledge that extend existing models of Buddhist education. First, regarding conceptual redefinition through a dual-level moral cultivation framework, the study moves beyond abstract doctrinal teaching by grounding Theravāda Buddhist moral philosophy in dynamic ethnic ritual practices, explicitly differentiating moral cultivation into an individual level of personal virtue where experiential learning mechanisms like ancestral remembrance and merit transfer actively cultivate internal wisdom, gratitude (Katanyu-katavedi), filial piety, compassion, and karmic moral accountability and a social level of communal harmony, which conceptualizes the collective participation of kinship groups as a structural social norm that fosters external social virtues, including solidarity, communal unity, mutual reciprocity, and unified ethical visions. Second, in terms of pedagogical innovation, the study establishes a validated pathway for institutionalizing culturally responsive integration, demonstrating that animistic ancestral reverence and Buddhist ethical instruction form a symbiotic, lived ethical system. By framing the San-Donta tradition as an informal moral curriculum, this research provides educational institutions in multicultural and ethnic settings with a concrete strategy to align formal classroom settings with community ritual practices, an educational management approach that transforms students from passive learners into active cultural and moral bearers. Ultimately, this study expands the body of knowledge in Buddhist education, cultural studies, and educational management by positioning the San-Donta tradition of the Thai-Khmer people in Thailand not merely as a spiritual relic of the past, but as a sustainable pedagogical resource and a contextually grounded framework for nurturing holistic ethical development in contemporary society.



Figure 1 Pathway of Integration of Buddhist Principles Based on the San-Don-Ta Tradition for Students at School



Conclusions and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that the San-Donta Tradition functions as a culturally embedded framework for supporting Buddhist principle learning in Thai-Khmer school contexts in Thailand. The findings show that San-Donta is not only an ancestral ritual but also a lived moral system embedded in everyday community life. At the individual level, the tradition nurtures Buddhist values such as gratitude (Katanyu-katavedi), compassion, filial responsibility, and moral awareness through participation in remembrance and merit-making practices. At the social level, it strengthens community solidarity, intergenerational respect, and collective identity through shared participation among families, temples, and local networks. These two dimensions illustrate how Buddhist ethics are not merely taught as abstract concepts but are expressed through lived cultural practice. In classroom practice, this integration becomes visible when students learn the meaning of San-Donta through storytelling by elders, take part in community remembrance events, and reflect on lessons of gratitude and responsibility after participation. Such activities allow students to connect Buddhist principles directly with their own cultural experiences, making learning more meaningful and relatable. This study conceptualizes San-Donta as an informal moral curriculum that bridges cultural heritage and Buddhist education. It contributes to culturally responsive pedagogy by showing that local traditions can function as active learning resources rather than being viewed only as ceremonial heritage. Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is limited to Thai-Khmer communities in southern Isan, which may restrict its applicability to other cultural or regional contexts. In addition, the analysis is primarily conceptual and ethnographic, with limited direct classroom-based or experimental evaluation of learning outcomes. Future research should examine the pedagogical effectiveness of integrating San-Donta into structured teaching environments. For recommendations, schools in culturally diverse regions should consider incorporating local traditions such as San-Donta into Buddhist education through participatory and community-based approaches. This may include guided discussions with community elders, reflective learning after ritual participation, and project-based activities linking cultural practice with Buddhist ethical values such as gratitude and responsibility. Effective implementation requires collaboration among schools, families, temples, and community leaders. Rather than treating San-Donta as a religious obligation, it should be understood as a cultural resource that supports universal ethical values such as compassion, respect, and social harmony. This approach helps make Buddhist education more contextualized, meaningful, and connected to student's lived experiences.

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