

# Performing Water, Negotiating Identity: Cultural Politics of Loy Krathong in Thailand and Malaysia

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## Abstract

This article examines how Loy Krathong in Thailand and Malaysia produces contrasting meanings of water ritual as a site for identity negotiation and cultural power. In Thailand, the festival has been institutionalised as a national soft-power spectacle and tourism brand, while in Malaysia it persists as a quieter community ritual among Siamese minorities, largely absent from formal heritage discourse. The study addresses how the same ritual form can either reinforce dominant national narratives or sustain marginalised minority identities at the edges of the nation-state. The article aims to compare these trajectories to demonstrate how water ritual functions as a performative medium through which presence, history, and identity are negotiated within asymmetrical power relations. Methodologically, it adopts an interpretive qualitative approach combining critical document analysis with mini-ethnographic observations in selected sites in Thailand and Malaysia. Data are drawn from government and tourism reports, media texts, visual materials, and field observations of festival practices, including affective expressions, gestures, and everyday conversations. The analysis is guided by theoretical frameworks including liminality, cultural hegemony, hidden transcripts, and cultural identity to trace how meanings such as purification, pride, marginalisation, and belonging are constructed and contested. Findings indicate that in Thailand, the ritual is reframed as an “immortalised heritage” emphasising aesthetics, unity, and commodification. In contrast, in Malaysia it remains a community-led practice preserving spiritual

depth and diasporic memory under conditions of symbolic invisibility. The article argues for a more critical, decentralised heritage framework that recognises less visible, community-based traditions beyond state-centred narratives.

**Keywords:** Loy Krathong, Malaysia, Thailand, Water, Culture, Asean

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## INTRODUCTION

In the global era where culture appears as an instrument that shapes a nation's image and strengthen soft power, the traditional celebration like Loy Krathong is often put forth as the symbol of cultural harmony and sustainable heritage (Issitt & Main, 2014). However, behind the ethereal beauty of floating candles and flowers, Loy Krathong is heavy with political nuances, power structure and different identity discourse depending on the geopolitical context and the community position of the doer (Lertpi boon, 2025). To the researcher, Loy Krathong is not merely a ritual to appease the water goddess or the symbol of self-cleansing, it functions as the meeting point among the national power, community memory and cultural agency in articulating collective identity.

It is believed that Loy Krathong originates from animistic practice and Brahmanism belief. The latter was later absorbed into the context of Buddhism Theravada. Traditionally, this celebration involves the ritual of floating 'krathong' which is a small raft made of banana trunk and decorated with flowers, candles and incense sticks. These items would be released to float in the river to symbolise the relief of spiritual burden and ask for forgiveness from the water deity (Mae Khongkha) (Segaller, 2005). In Thailand, this celebration has undergone the institutionalise process that became apparent since the 20th century especially after it was mobilised as tourism asset and the symbol of national heritage. Through the intervention from the government and cultural industry, Loy Krathong has been reintroduced as mega festival that is widely promoted to attract tourists as well as to strengthen nationalism narrative of the Thai culture (Dueathong & Chamsuwanwong, 2017; Sthapitanonda, 2020).

On the contrary, in the context of Malaysia, Loy Krathong is quietly celebrated by the minority Siamese community, especially in states such as Kedah, Perlis and Kelantan. Without an official acknowledgement at the federal level or participation in national discourse, this celebration remains as a community ritual which is deeply rooted in oral heritage, spiritual appreciation and support from the local religious body such as the wat. Malaysia Siamese community continues to preserve the original form of this ritual as an effort to sustain their identity which has been neglected in this national mainstream. Such phenomenon exemplifies the way a similar celebration could take an extremely different form and function when it changes from the country's original dominant space to the marginal diasporic community space (Tassanawongwara & Hussin, 2019). The Malaysian context therefore highlights a distinctive cultural geography in which Loy Krathong becomes an instrument of minority resilience rather than national representation. Unlike its Thai counterpart that is embedded in state narratives, the Malaysian version survives through community networks, cross-border kinship ties and religious institutions that operate away from the public eye. This contrast underscores the uniqueness of this study:

it analyses a single ritual performed in two national spaces whose political structures, demographic compositions and cultural policies are fundamentally different.



Figure 1. Poster of the southern ways of life: Loy Krathong Festival in Phuket, Thailand

Source: Tourism authority of Thailand. (2024, November 6). Loi Krathong Festival 2024: Experience Thailand's enchanting festival of lights. TAT News. <https://www.tatnews.org/2024/11/loi-krathong-festival-2024-experience-thailands-enchanting-festival-of-lights/>

From the researcher's perspective, these differences must not be read as cultural variant but also the manifestation of complex power relation between the country and its people, as well as the strategy of minority community to demand a space for their cultural expression (Anheier & Isar (Eds.), 2010). Loy Krathong becomes a significant platform to analyse the way water ritual is used by a majority nation as the tool for unity and promote national identity, while the minority community uses it as a form of symbolic agency in order to sustain their culture and spirituality. In this context, water is an element of nature or a religious symbol as well as the medium to re-define power, memory and identity in the cultural post-nationalism era (Agarwal, 2010).

This relational reading between majority and minority contexts demonstrates why theoretical framing is indispensable. The ritual's liminal quality reflects Turner's concept of threshold space, while the differences between Thai and Malaysian practices reveal Scott's hidden transcripts in which minority groups communicate resistance through symbolic acts. Hall's idea of cultural identity assists in unpacking how diaspora communities negotiate belonging, whereas Gramsci's cultural hegemony explains the mechanisms through which dominant groups naturalise their cultural authority. These theoretical intersections enrich the originality of this research by showing how a water ritual becomes a site where power, identity and cultural negotiation unfold simultaneously.

This article utilises a combination of theories namely Liminality by Victor Turner (1995), Hidden Transcript by James C. Scott (1990), Cultural Identity by Stuart Hall (2015) and Cultural hegemony by Antonio Gramsci (1975) to analyse the way the meaning of water in Loy Krathong celebration is discussed in two different national contexts which are determined by the political position of the Siamese community. By comparing Thailand which institutionalises Loy Krathong as national festival with Malaysia that retains it as community ritual, this article contributes to new discourse in cultural heritage as the platform for power, agency and the discussion of meaning in the contemporary Southeast Asian communities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this literature review, interdisciplinary approach which combines cultural ritual, national authority, and community agency in analysing the way Loy Krathong festival functions differently in Thailand and Malaysia. This article is focused on the tradition of ritual studies and heritage as well as their subtleties in the context Southeast Asia that is facing a rapid change due to cultural globalisation, national tourism strategy, and the position of politics among the minority community.

The researcher begins by referring to the framework in ritual liminality that is introduced by Turner (1995), which enables the understanding of ritual such as Loy

Krathong as a symbolic transformation which cuts across social structure and creates the “communitas” moments. This ritual, according to Turner, has the potential to be the basis for the rebirth of social meaning and roles. Nevertheless, in the context of a modern country, this process is often disrupted by institutional power. In Thailand, festivals have been domesticated by the government, and they are in line with the effort to form a national narrative through cultural heritage as discussed by Huang (2024) in a study on the use of traditional ritual in authoritarian country as the symbol of national consensus. In the Thai case, Turner’s liminality is visible in the shift from sacred night-time riverside rituals into state-organised urban spectacles such as the Phadung Krung Kasem Canal event, where the communitas dimension is redirected into a controlled nationalised experience. This demonstrates how liminality is appropriated by the state to generate a unified emotional atmosphere that reinforces national identity rather than producing spontaneous collective bonding.



*Figure 2.* Loy Krathong Festival at Phadung Krung Kasem Canal, Bangkok, 13-16 November 2024

Source: Tourism authority of Thailand. (2024, November 6). Loi Krathong Festival 2024: Experience Thailand’s enchanting festival of lights. TAT News. <https://www.tatnews.org/2024/11/loi-krathong-festival-2024-experience-thailands-enchanting-festival-of-lights/>

On the other hand, in the context of Malaysia, the researcher refers to the subaltern studies approach and minority culture agency as explained by Anad (2024), who show the way the Siamese community in Malaysia retain this ritual as part of religious and social spaces that do not depend on the country’s acknowledgement. Literature pertaining to

the minority community in Malaysia often indicates that cultural forms such as festivals, custom, and spiritual practices are used not only to sustain heritage, but also as a form of survival tactics in the face of marginalised institutions. In Malaysia, Scott's hidden transcript framework can be seen when the Siamese community performs Loy Krathong within temple compounds and village ponds, away from state visibility. These ritual spaces allow subtle expressions of cultural autonomy where the community negotiates belonging without publicly confronting the dominant Malay Muslim cultural order. The ritual thus becomes an everyday site of quiet resistance embedded within spiritual practice.

In order to comprehend a country's process of cultural meaning making, the researcher uses the cultural scripting and representation theory approaches as discussed by Taylor (2018) and Winter (2021), who detailed the way Asian countries uses heritage as a formal narrative for the purpose of cultural geopolitics and tourism economy. In Thailand's case, Loy Krathong is portrayed in a spectacular manner through the mainstream media, and it is promoted internationally. These efforts show that there is a controlled structuring of the cultural narrative. On the contrary, in Malaysia, the absence of institutionalisation provides the space to retain more original and spiritual ritual as discussed by Wong (2019) in his study on the Malaysian Siamese community from the northern peninsular. This contrast reflects Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony, where the Thai state normalises its version of Loy Krathong as the legitimate national tradition while delegitimising regional variations. Meanwhile, the Malaysian Siamese version survives outside hegemonic cultural structures, revealing how non-dominant groups maintain counter-hegemonic cultural forms through ritual preservation.



*Figure 3.* The Loy Krathong Festival at Wat Jitraram, Jitra, Kedah, Malaysia, in 2025.

Source: Abdullah, M. F. (2025). Loy Krathong Festival at Wat Jitraram, Jitra, Kedah, Malaysia, author's personal collection during a field study at Wat Jitraram, Jitra, Kedah. (Photograph). Wat Jitraram, Jitra, Kedah, Malaysia

Literature that is related to diaspora and identity also provides a significant framework to this study. Hall (2015) stresses that identity among diasporic community is formed through a continuous discussion process among historical experience, power structures, and collective memories. In the context of the Siamese community in Malaysia, ritual such Loy Krathong acts as a mnemonic device that links them to their cultural origin and spiritual belief which has become challenging to sustain as they thrive in the cultural landscape that is dominated by the Muslim-Malay narratives. This perspective is advocated by a study by Tassanawongwara and Hussin

(2019) which proves that the Siamese community in states such as Kedah and Perlis sustain specific form of ritual as distinct personal and spiritual spaces. Hall's theory is evident in how Malaysian Siamese incorporate Thai-language chants, images of Mae Khongkha, and familial memories into the ritual, reinforcing a diasporic identity that remains connected to ancestral heritage while adapting to local multicultural realities. This illustrates how identity is continuously negotiated rather than inherited.

Lastly, the researcher refers to a global study on water festivals and cultural transformation, as discussed by Freitag (2017) which revolves around the water ritual in India and Wood (1984) in his study about the traditional ritual transformation in Southeast Asia which stems from tourism industry pressure. Both studies indicate that when traditional rituals are integrated into the tourism industry framework, their spiritual meaning is diminished, only to be replaced by visual and entertainment elements to fulfil the global market demands. Such phenomenon justifies the need to differentiate between a ritual that is monitored by a country like what happens in Thailand and the form that is retained by a community as found in Malaysia.

These previous studies contribute to the development of analytical framework which enables the researcher to analyse Loy Krathong as water ritual as well as the platform for discussions of meaning among the community, country and market. It opens the opportunity for one to understand the cultural dynamics through the aesthetic and heritage dimensions as well as the survival strategy in asymmetrical power landscape.



*Figure 4.* Commemoration of the Loy Krathong Festival at Wat Jitraram, Jitra, Kedah in 2025, capturing the enduring cultural dialogue between Thai-Buddhist ritual practice and the multi-ethnic social landscape of northern Malaysia.

Source: Abdullah, M. F. (2025). Author's Personal Collection During a Field Study at Wat Jitraram, Jitra, Kedah. (Photograph). Wat Jitraram, Jitra, Kedah, Malaysia

## METHODOLOGY

This study applied the interpretative qualitative approach which centres on critical cultural analysis with the focus on the way Loy Krathong ritual is interpreted, narrated, and discussed in two different social contexts, Thailand and Malaysia. Such approach is chosen in order to analyse the surface form of the festival and its internal meaning, community agency, and the power structure that surrounds it. In this framework, a ritual is not taken as merely cultural actions. Instead, it is taken as a symbolic power base and collective memories that must be analysed through the relationship among narrative, visuality, and lived cultural experiences. Document analysis involves the study of official promotional materials such as media reports, government reports related to cultural tourism, as well as visual documentation that portrays Loy Krathong as a national brand in Thailand and Malaysia. Furthermore, this study also involves selected field observations: Loy Krathong celebrations in Thailand and Malaysia, sourced from electronic and printed materials. Observations are carried out with a mini ethnographic approach without formal participation, but with an active presence as a cultural observer to understand the form, meaning and atmosphere of the celebration from a community perspective. Although it does not involve formal interviews, indirect interaction and daily reflection are used as support for analysis.

All data are analysed thematically using the theoretical framework that has been discussed in the literature review and introduction. Each framework is used to develop a specific analysis dimension; Turner is used to understand ritual structure, Gramsci is used to study the power structure in cultural institutionalisation, Scott is used to identify



*Figure 5.* The Loy Krathong Festival at Wat Jitraram, Jitra, Kedah, Malaysia, in 2025.

Source: Abdullah, M. F. (2025). Loy Krathong Festival at Wat Jitraram, Jitra, Kedah, Malaysia, author's personal collection during a field study at Wat Jitraram, Jitra, Kedah. (Photograph). Wat Jitraram, Jitra, Kedah, Malaysia

minority agency in a hidden space, and Hall is used to explain the development of Siamese community identity in the dominant cultural space of the Muslim-Malay narrative. In all, this methodological approach enables the article to contribute to a broader epistemic debate pertaining to the relationship among rituals, national power, visual representation, and minority culture agency. It also shows the way unobvious cultural studies could be analysed beyond descriptive approach and it is worked on in the framework of power, history, and representation which have seeped into the postcolonial Southeast Asian reality.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### **Water Ritual as Liminal Threshold: between Purification and Power Symbol**

Loy Krathong, basically is a water ritual that manifests the meaning of purification, letting go of spiritual burden, and respecting nature (Agarwal, 2012). However, when analysed through the liminality lens introduced by Victor Turner (1995), this ritual unravels itself as a liminal space, a condition that Turner famously described as “betwixt and between”, where social identity is suspended, norms are temporarily reconfigured, and transformative experiences are made possible. In this framework, releasing krathong into the water is symbolic in nature and it becomes the medium which combines moments of psychology, cosmology and social politics. In addition, in this framework, realising the Krathong into the water is symbolic and it becomes the medium which combines the moments of psychology, cosmology, and socio-politics. The strength of Turner’s liminality becomes clearer when grounded in practical comparison between Thailand and Malaysia. In Thailand, for example, the liminal experience is curated through large-scale state-sponsored events held along major canals and rivers. Participants temporarily leave their everyday social roles as the festival orchestrates a collective emotional atmosphere shaped by music, lighting and choreographed cultural performances. This produces a managed form of *communitas* where transformation is guided by national ideology and the expectations of the tourism industry (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2024).

In contrast, field observations interviews in Malaysian Siamese communities, particularly in Kedah and Kelantan, show a more intimate form of liminality. The ritual often takes place in temple grounds, village ponds or small riverbanks, where participants gather in smaller groups without state intervention. Here, the suspension of social identity is experienced through prayer, chanting and interpersonal connection rather than national spectacle. The liminal moment is quieter and more spiritually driven, and the transformation experienced is tied to personal renewal, community memory and the reinforcement of cultural continuity. This practical contrast illustrates how the same ritual produces different forms of *communitas* depending on political context, scale and the degree of institutional control (Abdullah, 2025; Angelin Eh Mon, 2025).

In Thailand, the researcher finds that the liminal space in Loy Krathong has been institutionalized and controlled by the country in the context of developing national narrative. The Thai government structures Loy Krathong as cultural heritage as well as the “shared treasure” which fortifies Thai-Buddhist symbolism as the dominant national identity. This process is not neutral; it involves legal strategies on other versions whether they are minorities, or any form that is not suitable with the national narrative. Liminality, which was originally open and diverse, has become normalised to become standard and commercialized (Agarwal, 2012).

This festival is portrayed through big scale visual presentation: giant Krathong, light festival, beautiful parades, and stage performances which are aired on national television and promoted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Original meditation and spirituality such as being quiet, spiritual confession, or nature appreciation have now become a symbolic background and not the main experience (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2024; Grassmann, 2019). In Turner's term, structure has replaced the antistructure: liminality does no longer become the space for self-discovery. Instead, it becomes the platform that is manipulated by a dominant structure to direct the people's experience (Turner, 1995).

More critically, the researcher looks at the way a country uses symbolic power and cultural institution to determine the one who deserves to represent the ritual. In various formal promotional materials, faces of fair-skinned women in traditional Thai costume grace the pages, together with sparkling clean rivers and a perfect calm environment, a type of cultural fetish which does not necessarily represent the reality in the society that has several ethnicities from different districts in Thailand. This festival becomes the means for the government to re-build an image of a unified nation that is peaceful and rich in values. In reality, the country is utilizing the liminal ritual as a strategy to divert people's attention on the actual conflict such as the tensions at southern Thai border, ethnic imbalance, and continuous political crisis (Gift Joe, 2024).



*Figure 6.* Women in traditional Thai costume in Loy Krathong festival in Thailand  
Source: Joe, G. (2024). Loy Krathong Festival – all you need to know about the Thai festival of lights. FunTimes Magazines. <https://funtimesmagazine.com/loy-krathong-festival-all-you-need-to-know-about-the-thai-festival-of-lights/>

On the other hand, in the context of Malaysia, the researcher found that Loy Krathong still retains its community-led ritual which does not bow down to national representation pressure. Carried out in small scale at several wats, riverbanks or rural ponds, this ritual still has a slow ritualistic elements, contemplative and it touches a personal dimension. The Siamese community in Kedah, Kelantan and Perlis, for instance, participate in the preparation of Krathong together (*gotong-royong*), and they use natural materials such as banana leaf, local flowers, and handmade candles, they do not use plastic materials or luxurious items as commonly practiced in Thailand (Anad, 2024: Tassanawongwara & Hussin, 2019: Angelin Eh Mon, 2025).

Nevertheless, this does not mean their festival is free from pressure. Thai's spectacular version of Loy Krathong has become the hegemonic standard. This causes the Malaysian version to be deemed as less authentic, dull, or fails to meet the tourist and media expectation. Such situation creates a symbolic gap between what Loy Krathong "should" become, and the "actual" festival that is practiced among the community (Hassan, 2024). The researcher believes that this situation is a form of liminality without power where minority community remains between the space of no access to determine meaning or to influence the dominant narrative. This symbolic gap directly shapes the cultural meaning and identity of the Malaysian Siamese community, as they negotiate their place between an inherited ritual tradition and a dominant regional model that defines authenticity through spectacle. As they continue performing Loy Krathong in modest community spaces, the ritual becomes a marker of minority resilience and a cultural identity anchored in spiritual continuity rather than state recognition. This process reinforces a sense of distinctiveness, where the community attributes meaning not through external validation but through internal memories, religious values and shared historical experiences. In this way, the pressure created by the hegemonic Thai version inadvertently strengthens the Malaysian Siamese attachment to a more intimate, spiritually centred identity that resists assimilation into dominant cultural narratives.

More interestingly, the researcher found that the Malaysian Siamese community liminality is resistive and regenerative in nature. In the absence of formal acknowledgement, this ritual provides the room to improve social network, sustain cultural memory and educate the new generation about their heritage. Liminality in this context is not limited to the spiritual space. It is the foundation for community agency where identity, history and hope are interwoven in an intimate ritual as it is not bound by the national narrative (Johnson, 2004). In political terms, this liminal space operates as a quiet arena where the community asserts cultural presence without entering formal structures of power, reflecting Scott's notion of hidden transcripts in which marginalised groups cultivate alternative narratives beneath dominant state discourses. The Malaysian Siamese version of the ritual becomes a strategic cultural practice that protects identity by maintaining a

sphere outside hegemonic expectations shaped by the Thai state and the Malay Muslim majority. At the same time, the regenerative character of liminality aligns with Turner's argument that transitional spaces enable the reworking of social bonds and symbolic meanings. In this case, liminality does not simply suspend identity but actively produces it through collective remembrance, religious symbolism and shared vulnerability. The ritual becomes a subtle form of counter-politics where cultural continuity itself functions as resistance, and where identity formation is negotiated through the interplay of marginalisation, memory and community solidarity.

In conclusion, the comparison made between Thailand and Malaysia reveals two directions in the movement of meaning behind the Loy Krathong ritual: one of them is heading towards national standardization and commodification. The other is moving towards community sustainability and preservation of spiritual meaning. Both utilizes water as a symbol but in Thailand, the flow of water has become a symbol that is controlled and commercialized. In Malaysia, on the other hand, water still flows as the medium of cleansing and collective reminder. In this framework, water ritual is a form of purification and the competitive medium for power, interpretation and cultural survival.



Figure 7. Loy Krathong Festival 2024 in Yala, Thailand.

Source: Abdullah, M. F. (2024). author's personal collection during a field study at Yala, Thailand. (Photograph). Yala, Thailand.

## **The Country, Cultural Nationalism and Loy Krathong Institutionalisation in Thailand**

Festivals are often considered as spontaneous expression of culture but in the modern setting, the form and meaning of a festival is not free from the national strategy (Panich et al., 2014). In the context of Thailand, the researcher has observed the way Loy Krathong has undergone the process of intensive cultural institutionalisation which makes it part of the cultural nationalism project that is created and controlled by the country. This festival is not only celebrated but it is re-determined in its social form, meaning and function so that it is in line with the local Thai-Buddhist ideology and national branding agenda. In this matter, the Thai government determined the structure for Loy Krathong external form and the ones who have the right to portray the culture, the way it must be understood by the local public at home or abroad (Chamniyom & Sawanglap, 2023).

Institutionalisation began in the post-second world war era, when the Thai government realized the need to unite districts and multi-ethnic communities in one national cultural frame (Winichakul, 1997). Loy Krathong, which was originally a spiritual event and practiced among the community, was chosen as a symbolic ritual that is easy to be rebranded due to its beauty, link to water as the source of life as well as its potential to be promoted in the context of cultural tourism (Thadaniti, 2014). The researcher finds that institutions such as TAT play a significant role in the rebranding of this event as “The Festival of Light and Water” that indicates grace, calmness and peace in Thai culture (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2024). Such narrative is consistently conveyed through mainstream media, tourism promotion videos, and big-scale events which showcase the festivals’ aesthetics and visual uniqueness.

However, the underlying issue in this process is the eradication of spiritual and contemplative elements which were once the main aspect of Loy Krathong (Montironi & Eleveld, 2009). Elements such as internal reflection, moral cleansing, and respect towards nature are replaced by a focus on the aspect of performance such as giant-sized Krathong, neon lights, stage performances, and the presence of local celebrities as well as the arrival of foreign tourists to Thailand (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2024). In fact, the actual location of the ritual which were small rivers in the rural areas and community wat were replaced by iconic location such as the Chao Phraya River which becomes the main background for the national narrative. This process is a form of systematic secularisation of ritual in which the ritual becomes the national visual (Sutthiyano et al., 2024). In Gramsci framework, such situation is a classic example of cultural hegemony where the government instil meaning that appears “natural” and “collective” but in truth, it is created to combine dominant ideologies (Bates, 1975).



*Figure 8.* Loy Krathong Festival 2025 in Juru, Seberang Perai, Penang, Malaysia

Source: Anad, M. (2025). author's personal collection during a field study at Juru, Seberang Perai, Penang, Malaysia (Photograph). Juru, Seberang Perai, Penang, Malaysia

More than just mere cultural promotion, the researcher realizes that Loy Krathong is used as a soft power tool in the geopolitical framework of Thai culture. Emphasis on the visual elements and harmony in this festival affects the international perception towards Thailand as a stable, beautiful country that is rich in culture (Srichan et al., 2024). However, this narrative often hides internal political tensions including ethnic conflict in the Southern Thailand involving the Isan community that is marginalised, as well as the pro-democracy political movement in big cities (Saari, 2023). In this context, Loy Krathong functions as the country's platform for pedagogy, or a place where the public is 'taught' to perceive and experience culture as it is in line with the Thai-centric ideology (Johnson, 2004).

More critical is the way the country determine the individual who could represent this ritual at the international and local arena. The researcher also finds that Loy Krathong features almost entirely female participants such as young, fair Thai ladies in classical costume: it also showcases perfect krathongs that float on clam water as well as a peaceful environment that is free from social tensions (Sthapitanonda, 2020: Gift Joe, 2024). Portraying these images is akin to a deliberate neglect of other communities such as the Shan, Lao-Isan, or other minority ethnic communities which have their own version of

the same rituals. These communities are not only sidelined from the media coverage, but they are also not given the space to present alternative interpretation of the ritual. Hence, the researcher believes that national institutionalisation of ritual is not a neutral process, but it is heavy with selective and exceptional politics (Draper & Kamnuansilpa, 2018: Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2024).

Effects from this strategy could be seen in Thailand, and they are also affecting the region, especially Malaysia. Siamese communities celebrate a more traditional Loy Krathong in states such as Kedah and Perlis, and the event is considered as not “festive” or “less authentic” by the public who has been influenced by the Thai media narrative. Such perception leads to confusion in cultural perception and limits the recognition on the form of this festival among the minority community in Malaysia since it is not in line with the “cultural template” that is shaped by the neighbouring country (Chayuti, 2018). The researcher views this as a form of transnational “hegemonisation” where Thailand controls the culture at its borders and determines the cultural expectation among the related diaspora and community abroad.



*Figure 9.* Ratu Loy Krathong pageant contest 2025 in Juru, Seberang Perai, Penang, Malaysia  
Source: Anad, M. (2025). author’s personal collection during a field study at Juru, Seberang Perai, Penang, Malaysia (Photograph). Juru, Seberang Perai, Penang, Malaysia

Finally, the researcher believes that the institutionalisation of Loy Krathong by Thai government must be taken as a strategic cultural engineering, which aims to secure heritage as well as unite the people under a cultural symbol which has been strategically created (Santiveerakarn & Chuenjit, 2025). In this process, different types of alternative culture that are more spiritual, localized, or belongs to the minority community are pushed aside or made to stand at the back of a more dominant narrative. A country does not only present culture, but it also programs the way the masses and the international community must understand that particular culture. Therefore, an analysis on Loy Krathong as a soft power instrument touches the aspect of tourism or heritage and the root of the issue of power, representation and the control over cultural narrative among people of modern countries.

### Minority Community and Cultural Agency: Loy Krathong as the Neglected Heritage in Malaysia

Celebrations are often considered as the space of cultural openness but in the reality of multicultural and multiracial community in modern countries, the form of a festival could be an indicator of the political stand and representational power of a community (Pinxten, Verstraete & Longman, (Eds.), 2004). In the context of Malaysia, the researcher is aware of the way the Siamese community as an ethnocultural minority retains the Loy Krathong ritual in the form that is community-led, non-institutional, and full of spiritual symbolism. However, in the absence of formal recognition this ritual operates on the edges of the country's structure, making it a type of neglected heritage with a hidden cultural agency (Anad, 2024, Hilmy, 2024).



Figure 10. The Loy Krathong celebration in Seberang Perai, Penang, Malaysia in 2024.

Source: Hilmy, I. (2024). thousands throng Loy Krathong fest in Perai. The Star.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/metro-news/2024/11/22/thousands-throng-loy-krathong-fest-in-perai>

Unlike in Thailand, where Loy Krathong is given the national symbol and soft power instrument, in Malaysia this festival does not receive any state or national recognition. Despite that, the Siamese communities in Kedah, Perlis, and Kelantan have retained this

ritual for a long time through traditional platforms such as the wat, oral history, and family institutions (Tassanawongwara & Hussin, 2019). The researcher realizes that the wat (local Buddha temple) plays the main role as the space for religion and the cultural institution as well as the keeper of community memory. Through wat, the younger generation is introduced to the real meaning behind Loy Krathong, it is not just the ritual to release candles into the river: it is a symbol of freedom for one's inner burden and rejuvenation of one's connection with nature (Anad, 2024, Winichakul, 1997).



*Figure 11.* The Loy Krathong celebration in Sukhothai, Thailand.

Source: Thailand Foundation. (n.d.). Loy Krathong Festival – All you need to know. <https://thailandfoundation.or.th/loy-krathong-festival-all-you-need-to-know/>

Nevertheless, due to the lack of formal recognition, the form of this festival often does not go in tangent with the public perception which is influenced by the images portrayed by the Thai media. For many Malaysians, Loy Krathong is associated with dramatic lighting and exotic aesthetics. On the contrary, the local Siamese communities celebrate Loy Krathong moderately without big spotlight such as stage performances, tourism promotion, and the media. Such differences create what the researcher identifies as the ritual gap between the seen (performed) and the ritual that is experienced (lived) (Hilmy, 2024). The concept of “hidden transcript” by James Scott (1990) provides an important framework to understand the way festivals are practiced by the Siamese community in Malaysia. Their methods act as a form of silent resistance towards cultural invisibility.

In the situation where recognition is not given by the government, this ritual becomes a sustainability strategy. It is not carried out through an open protest: in fact, the strategy is to informally sustain the cultural practice, language, and symbols. In each *krathong* that is released to the water, there is a collective memory, marginalisation trauma, and the determination to protect their identity. In this context, Loy Krathong is not only ritual; it is a tactic to sustain the culture.



Figure 12. Watermelon krathong

Source: Thailand Foundation. (n.d.). Loy Krathong Festival – All you need to know. <https://thailandfoundation.or.th/loy-krathong-festival-all-you-need-to-know/>

The researcher also finds that this ritual functions as the platform for identity regeneration, especially among the younger generation in the Siamese community who has been separated from the root culture caused by the assimilation process and pressure from the national education system (Angelin Eh Mon, 2025). Loy Krathong, the only celebration that is practiced exclusively by the community, becomes the medium to re-connect the new generation with the culture narrative that is on the verge of neglect (Sano & Sanoh, 2015). However, without policy

recognition, the potential of cultural education through this ritual remain limited. It is confined to the community internal space and does not receive any curriculum support or involvement by any institution.

In addition, the researcher observes that the form of ritual that is practiced in Malaysia rejects the commodification element which is a stark contrast when compared with the version practiced in Thailand. Locally, krathong is still made of natural items. It is not given a commercial touch or the market aesthetic intervention. There is no “culture package” to be offered to tourists. Neither does the community have a national narrative that attempts to restructure its meaning. In other words, the spiritual and symbolic elements remain intact, and they are not affected by visual discourse or pressured by cultural industry. However, the ritual’s “authentic” stance is threatened not by internal change. Its essence faces challenges from the cultural visual control in the form of external hegemonic form.

From a critical perspective, there is a cultural ambiguity that spreads in deep traditional ritual and continues to operate in an unrecognized space. The community loses its voice in the national cultural discourse and bears the consequences of Thai’s cultural hegemony that shapes the external expectation of “the right way” Loy Krathong should be celebrated. Hence, the Siamese community in Malaysia become the community

that celebrates deeply but judged externally. Such circumstances put the members of the community in a symbolic strain (Chanthira, 1991).



Figure 13. Loy Krathong Festival 2025 in Juru, Seberang Perai, Penang, Malaysia

Source: Anad, M. (2025). author's personal collection during a field study at Juru, Seberang Perai, Penang, Malaysia (Photograph). Juru, Seberang Perai, Penang, Malaysia

process of reconstruction as it is influenced by the colonial history, post-independent nationalism policy, as well as dominant representation powers (Nah, 2003). In this context, the researcher realizes that the Siamese community in Malaysia shapes their identity in an unstable space that is often negotiated. This space is negotiated with national structure and other communities in a multicultural space (Sano & Sanoh, 2015). Here, a celebration like Loy Krathong becomes significant, it is not just an annual celebration but also the platform to negotiate and sustain an identity in a landscape that tends to sideline the minority voices.

By applying Stuart Hall (2015) theory, the researcher understands diasporic identity is not something that is permanent: it is often constant, layered, and formed through the link between power and historical experience. Malaysian Siamese Community is a classic

In summary, the researcher believes that the Siamese community in Malaysia preserves Loy Krathong as tradition and a form of minority culture that refuses invisibility through non-confrontational ways. Through the rituals which are observed quietly but firmly, the community develops a type of symbolical power which is rooted in spirituality and collective memory (Bourdieu, 1979). In the world where culture has become a saleable form, the Malaysian Siamese community protects a type of culture that does not need to be sold in order to be understood. Loy Krathong in this country is a heritage and a manifestation of a silent agency in the world that is bustling with hegemonic representation

### **Identity Negotiation and Heritage in Minority Culture Space**

In postcolonial country like Malaysia, cultural identity does not exist in a permanent and single form (Barlocco, 2013). Instead, it often finds itself in the

example of culture diaspora: it has its root from Thai-Buddhism, and assimilates in the Malay-Islamic space, and faces the pressure to quietly adapt itself so that it does not appear too “alien” (Ismail, 1987). In this situation, Loy Krathong becomes the medium to reminisce and reconnect the cultural memory that is blocked by the process of cultural nationalism (Anad, 2024). This ritual acts as the mnemonic ground, which is a symbolic space that activate the collective community memory pertaining to matters such as origin, connection to nature, spiritual tradition and previous social structure. In a society that is dominated by the Malay-Islamic discourse, the narrative of Siamese community cultural heritage often is not given enough space in mainstream media, national historical documents, or in the state cultural policy (Rashid, Salam & Muhamad Shukri, 2025). Hence, Loy Krathong becomes the “live archive”, a type of cultural preservation that is not kept in official files but kept alive in memory, action and annual repetitive ritual (Abdullah, 2025).



*Figure 14.* Loy Krathong Festival 2025 in at Wat Chitram, Kedah  
 Source: Mukhtar, A. M. (2025). Kedah river glows with lanterns as Siamese community celebrates Loy Krathong. *New Straits Times*. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2025/11/1309086/kedah-river-glows-lanterns-siamese-community-celebrates-loy-krathong?source=widget>

Nevertheless, this celebration also places the Siamese community in a difficult situation. On one side, they would like to sustain their cultural identity which is deeply rooted in Thai-Buddhism values and on another, they thrive in an environment that stresses on Malay-Islamic values as the basis of nationality. The researcher finds that

there is a need to subtly negotiate in this cultural space, and it can be done by adapting the form of celebration to ensure that it does not challenge the dominant cultural norms. This includes reducing the scale of celebration, avoiding widespread promotion and giving the focus on internal community rituals.

The researcher believes that this type of adaptation does not necessarily indicates the loss of identity. Instead, it exemplifies the Siamese community cultural intelligence in preserving their heritage meaning in a limited social space. They neither rebel nor give up they are hidden but not lost. In this context, the community agency is not about being seen but it is all about their ability to sustain meaning through ritual in the situation where their type of heritage is not part of the national narrative (Tassanawongwara & Hussin, 2019). In this dimension, the researcher believe that a celebration is not merely about showcasing a foreign culture. It is an epistemic medium that draws internal feeling of repentance. In the Muslim-Malay community, the principles of fairness and courtesy towards other communities have always been emphasized (Mahmidov, 2025). Hence the existence of a celebration like Loy Krathong must be taken as a significant element in social contract that appreciates cultural right and expression of a non-dominant community beliefs. As one of the principles of justice, Islam recognizes minority rights as long as the celebration does not challenge the Aqidah structure and common *akhlaq* (manners). This means, recognition of minority celebration is not limited to the matter of tolerance: it involves the issue of national moral responsibilities to appreciate the sustainability of meaning in plural society (Ahmed & Asmad, 2020; Abdullah et al., 2025).



Figure 15. Thousands of lotus lanterns drifted along Sungai Besar, Kedah, as the Siamese community marked the Loy Krathong Festival 2025 at Wat Chitraram, Kedah.

Source: Mukhtar, A. M. (2025). Kedah river glows with lanterns as Siamese community celebrates Loy Krathong. *New Straits Times*. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2025/11/1309086/kedah-river-glows-lanterns-siamese-community-celebrates-loy-krathong?source=widget>

To summarize, Loy Krathong celebration for the Siamese community in Malaysia is the space for them to strengthen their identity, restore their memory, and articulate power at a micro scale. It is the best example of a minority culture that is able to sustain in a system that does not give them a complete voice and yet, they persevere. Through this celebration, the Siamese community negotiates their presence by practicing repetitive symbolic celebration that is rooted and natural without the need to loudly go against the system.

## CONCLUSION

This research has critically analysed the way Loy Krathong, particularly in the context of Thailand and Malaysia, shows the clash of national power, community agency and cultural meaning that is often negotiated. The researcher suggests that this ritual must not be given a shallow perspective that it is just an annual activity. Loy Krathong must be seen as a dynamic negotiation ground for meaning as it indicates the way identity, heritage and power are leveraged in different social and political spaces.

In Thailand, institutionalisation of Loy Krathong as part of the national soft power strategy shows that a modern country could use culture to shape nationalism narrative that is homogenic and controlled. This process leads to the eradication of spiritual element, replacement of spiritual meaning with commercial visual and the centralisation of representation power to the Thai-centric visual which excludes other minority communities. In Gramsci cultural hegemony framework, this form becomes the only valid version: the one that makes rituals as national pedagogical instrument to unite people in one collective image that has been structured.

On the contrary, In Malaysia, the Siamese community sustains the ritual form that is close to the spiritual root and original community value. However, the absence of formal recognition, pressure from Malay-Islamic dominant narrative, as well as Thailand's hegemonic representation through mediascape, has driven this celebration away from its national cultural space. In these circumstances, the Siamese community uses Loy Krathong as a mnemonic ground, that is a live archive that sustains their diasporic identity with a fading cultural memory. By holding on to community led celebration that is not commodified, they retain their ritual meaning without openly rebelling against the system. Instead, they do it by applying silent resistance tactic known as a hidden transcript and using the original cultural agency.

Theoretically, this study constructively combines liminality theory to form a more complex understanding on the way a ritual functions as the medium of struggle between power structure and cultural agency. In this process, the research has shown the way ritual forms could change from spiritual to visual representation, collective action to aesthetic performance and the space of sincerity to national strategy. Epistemically, this study contributes to a new discourse pertaining to less visible heritage in Southeast Asia, especially by highlighting the way minority community like the Malaysian Siamese sustain their heritage in structured marginalisation situation. A celebration in this context must not be considered as a form of "foreign" culture. It is in fact part of the many different layers of Malaysian identities that must be given the space to grow, preserve and be given fair recognition.

In terms of policy, this study urges for more inclusive and progressive approach for a less visible heritage. In a multireligious and multicultural society like Malaysia, a fair policy is needed to go beyond symbolic tolerance framework. The nation must shift to substantive recognition towards different forms of minority cultural expressions including the small ones that are not commercial but rich in meaning. The researcher realizes that this research is limited to an analysis of two geographical contexts, and it has not covered the dimensions of economic power, gender or urbanisation in the form of rituals. Hence, it is suggested that further studies could explore the perception of the younger generation in the Siamese community towards rituals, the effect of digitalisation on cultural transmission as well as the possibility of rearranging national narrative that is more plural and fairer. Lastly, the researcher emphasizes that Loy Krathong is more than just lights and water. It is a floating memory, negotiated identity, and an agency symbol in the world controlled by hegemonic visual and narrative. In preserving this culture, the community is able to save culture and themselves from being forgotten.

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