Research and Analysis — No. 60 — October 2026

Yantra warfare

Magic as political technology in the 2025 Thai–Cambodian Border Conflict

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RELIGIOSCOPE
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Summary

In July 2025, a Cambodian ritual specialist publicly cursed Lieutenant General Boonsin Padklang, commander of Thailand's Second Army Region, setting off a remarkable series of ritual responses that included protective yantra shirts, Buddhist blessings, royal ceremonies, and intense discussion on social media. Rather than treating these events as irrational vestiges of a premodern worldview, this article examines what they reveal about the continuing political significance of magic in contemporary Southeast Asia. Drawing on media reports, historical sources, and anthropological scholarship, it argues that occult practices provide a cultural framework through which military danger, national identity, and political legitimacy are interpreted and contested. What gives these rituals political force is not the question of whether they work, but the way they are taken up by the media and woven into broader narratives about fear, authority, and national legitimacy. The article suggests that, in the digital age, magic remains a potent symbolic resource in the conduct of modern conflict.

About the author

Kwan Yuk Sing is a bilingual editor, translator, and researcher whose work explores transnational Chinese identity, diaspora, and political culture. He has co-authored studies on Chineseness and education policy in Malaysia and Taiwan, contributed on religion, law, and sexual violence for The News Lens, and authored a compelling book excerpt examining Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora narratives. As an editor at 1841 Publishing and co-founder of the Cantonese magazine Resonate, he bridges literary and scholarly discourse. His expertise spans Chinese-English translation, rights acquisition, and editorial production, with a sustained commitment to diasporic storytelling and cultural negotiation across East Asia.

Cover picture: Monk tattooing yantra at Wat Bang Phra Temple, Bang Phra, Thailand. (Source: Wikipedia. Accessed on 21 July 2026)

URL: https://religion.info/pdf/2026_10_Sing_Yantra_Warfare.pdf

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Introduction

At the outbreak of the Thai-Cambodian border conflict in July 2025, two news stories captured an aspect of the Thai–Cambodian border escalation that eluded conventional analysis. On the 29th of July, 2025, viral footage of Cambodian shamans performing a "death-dealing" ritual directed at an image of Lt. Gen. Boonsin Padklang, commander of Thailand's 2nd Army area, took over Thai social media.[1] In response, the same general received 500 shirts from Thai villagers adorned with yantra patterns.[2] In addition, 1500 talismanic scarves were presented by a delegation of local villages dressed as ancient Ayutthaya-era warriors (1350–1767 AD), defenders of the Siamese Kingdom, lending the event a layered symbolism: Buddhist blessings, local support, ancient memory, and national unity were fused into a single public scene.

After an initial ceasefire agreed to in late July broke down, fighting resumed on a large scale in December. Roughly twenty days of renewed clashes, including Thai airstrikes as well as artillery and small-arms fire, killed at least 101 people and displaced more than half a million civilians before a new ceasefire was agreed at the end of the year.[3] Yet this conflict is also being fought with esoteric means, elements that should not be dismissed as irrational residues from a premodern past or as abnormalities in modern society. Regardless of their presumed supernatural efficacy, such practices shape how the conflict is understood by its participants, experienced by the wider population, and represented in the public sphere.

This report examines how magic and the occult shaped the 2025 Thai–Cambodian border conflict and argues that these practices were not peripheral to the conflict but formed part of its political and symbolic dynamics. In times of war, magic and knowledge of it are not merely private beliefs. Ritual specialists, monks, soldiers, journalists, and ordinary citizens all contributed to turning curses and protective rituals into public events whose significance extended well beyond questions of supernatural efficacy. The result was a parallel struggle over fear, authority, and national legitimacy that unfolded alongside the military confrontation itself.

Thai–Cambodian relations are marked by a long history of closeness and rivalry. This dynamic reaches back to the Angkorian period (802 to 1431 CE),[4] when Tai polities emerged in a region once dominated by Khmer power. In the same way, the religious histories of Thailand and Cambodia developed through long contact within the mainland Southeast Asian world: Khmer political and cultural influence shaped the region in which early Tai polities emerged, while later Thai kingdoms adapted elements of Brahmanical statecraft and Buddhist authority to their own political order.[5]

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[1] WorkpointNews 23 (ข่าวเวิร์คพอยท์ 23), "A Cambodian Sorcerer Cursed and Burned a Picture of the Commander of the 2nd Army Area (หมอผีเขมร' สาปแช่ง! เผารูปภาพแม่ทัพภาคที่ 2)," YouTube video, July 29, 2025.

[2] The Nation Thailand, "Army Commander Receives Sacred Shirts for Troops, Cites Unity as Key to Defeating World Powers," August 5, 2025.

[3] Reuters, "Thailand Frees 18 Cambodian Soldiers under New Ceasefire Deal," December 31, 2025.

[4] The Angkorian period refers conventionally to the era of the Khmer Empire from the early ninth to the fifteenth century, often dated from Jayavarman II's establishment of royal authority in 802 CE to the decline of Angkor as the principal political centre after 1431. It was marked by the construction of monumental temple complexes, including Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom, and by successive Hindu and Buddhist forms of kingship.

[5] Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3–4, 7.

Later, Ayutthaya's expansion,[6] the fall of Angkor, Siamese influence over western Cambodia, French colonial intervention, and the demarcation of modern borders all left competing memories of loss and inheritance.[7]

One of the four gopuras at the Preah Vihear temple (Source: Wikimedia. Accessed on 21 July 2026)

With this complex history in mind, the Thai–Cambodian border is more accurately understood as a landscape saturated with sacred monuments, nationalist memories, and competing claims to inheritance. For example, Preah Vihear is an ancient Hindu temple complex built in the twelfth century by the Khmer empire that was later converted into Buddhism. The International Court of Justice awarded the temple to Cambodia in 1962, but the ruling did not dissolve Thai resentment or settle every surrounding territorial question.[8]

In July 2008, UNESCO inscribed Preah Vihear as a Cambodian World Heritage Site. As the temple sits on disputed borders between Thailand and Cambodia, the inscription was seen as international recognition of Cambodia's claim, and vice versa, a major diplomatic setback for the Thais.[9] On the 1st of August, Bun Rany, the wife of then-Prime Minister Hun Sen, led a *krung palii*[10] ceremony at Preah Vihear in the presence of monks, officials, civilians, and soldiers; Cambodian officials described the gathering as a prayer to ancestral souls for peace and for success in defending national territory. While Cambodian officials publicly called it a peace vigil, the presence of

[6] The Ayutthaya Kingdom ruled much of present-day Thailand from its foundation in 1351 until the capital was captured and destroyed by Burmese forces in 1767. Centred on the city of Ayutthaya, the kingdom developed into a major regional power and commercial centre.

[7] For a concise history of Thai-Cambodian relations and their political implications, see Charnvit Kasetsiri, "Thailand and Cambodia: A Love-Hate Relationship," *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, no. 3 (2003).

[8] International Court of Justice, "Temple of Preah Vihear (Cambodia v. Thailand)," 1962.

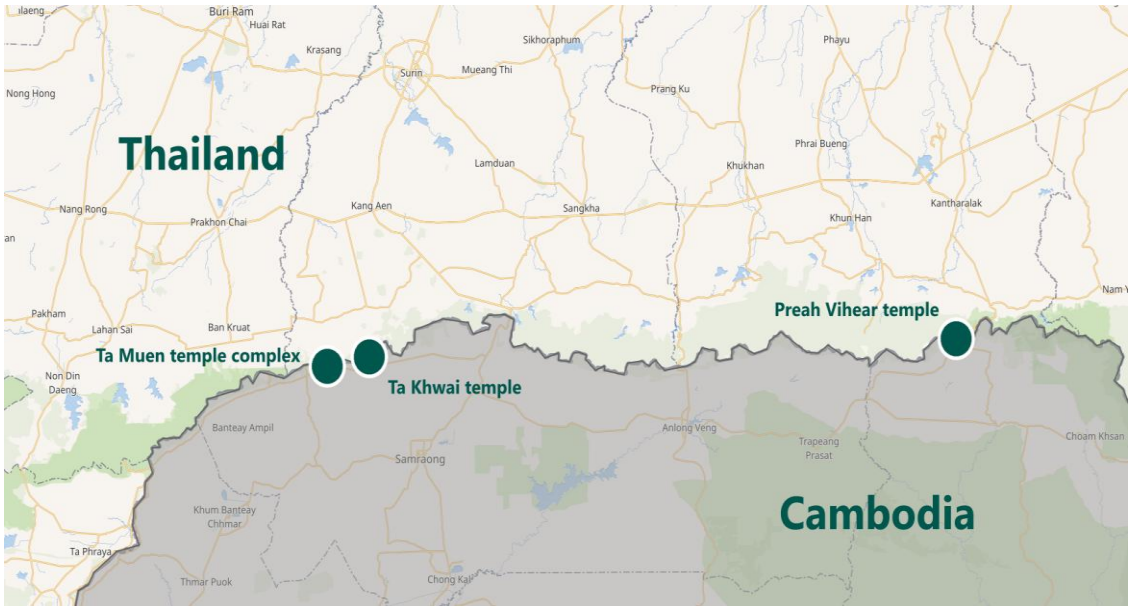
[9] Jonathan Head, "Political Tensions Driving Temple Row," *BBC News*, 2008.

[10] Krung Palii, or Krong Pali, is a ritual commonly performed in rural areas to praise the spirits of the earth and of the place (neak ta). It is usually held to bring the spirits' blessing to a wedding, opening of a building or even the shooting of a movie.

hundreds of soldiers at the contested temple was described as a form of sabre rattling.[11] Noting that the event was marked by a partial solar eclipse, some Thai media interpreted the same ritual as an attack by "Khmer wizards" and urged people near the border to wear yellow, the colour associated with King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1927–2016), whose birthday fell on a Monday, traditionally represented by yellow in the Thai colour system to deflect the spell.[12]

If Bun Rany's vigil was one intended to promote peace, then it failed, with both Thai and Cambodian states moving more troops toward the disputed borders. Although the initial talks to de-escalate showed promise in September 2008, the temple descended into sporadic skirmishes a month later, until both sides withdrew in December 2011.[13] In 2025, the conflict widened again after a fatal skirmish in May renewed arguments over disputed zones along the countries' contested frontiers. Cambodia sought to take several border areas to the ICJ in June 2025, while Thailand, on account of a previous defeat in court, preferred bilateral negotiations. By July, clashes had erupted near Ta Muen Thom and other temple zones, with fighting around ancient disputed sites, including Ta Muen Thom and Preah Vihear.[14]

This history matters not only because it explains why these temples remain contested, but also because it helps explain why they could become the setting for a parallel struggle over ritual power, sacred protection, and national legitimacy. The supernatural did not intrude upon the conflict from outside. It drew much of its force from a landscape where history, religion, and politics had long been inseparable.



(Source: Wikimedia map. Accessed and modified on 21 July 2026).

[11] Philip Golingai, "Peace Vigil, Black Magic and Sabre-Rattling over a Temple," *Malaysian Bar*, 2008.

[12] Ibid.

[13] "Thailand, Cambodia Clash Again at Disputed Border," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, February 7, 2011.

[14] Ashley Kirk et al., "A Visual Guide to the Historical Maps and Temples at the Heart of the Thailand-Cambodia Conflict," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2025.

Sacred landscapes alone, however, cannot explain why rituals performed on one side of the border could provoke reactions on the other. That depended upon a shared understanding of what magical action meant.

Khun Phantharak Ratchadet (commonly known as Khun Phan) was a Thai police officer widely revered for his martial and spiritual prowess between the 1940s and 1960s; he purportedly once goaded a murderer into confessing by staging a séance. According to local retelling, the victim's body was placed in a space enclosed with sacred thread and Khun Phan, adorned in white religious attire, leaned over the corpse and whispered for it to identify those who were responsible for its death. The whole scene was a spectacle for curious villagers, among whom the murderer was watching. When Khun Phan suddenly shouted, "I know who it is," the suspect fled the scene and went into police custody for protection.[15]

In this instance, magic worked by inducing fear in an audience already prepared to understand what was being performed. The dead body, sacred thread, Khun Phan in white ritual clothing, and the spectators all reproduced the logic of magic, which, when internalized by the murderer, culminated in their admission. Likewise, during the Thai-Cambodian border conflict, magical warfare operated under the terms that ritual logic was mutually intelligible. A performance on one side could provoke anxiety, ridicule, reassurance, or a counter-performance on the other. In the case of war, the audience for magic consists as much of one's enemies as of one's allies, and this mutual intelligibility gives rituals their political charge. In "A General Theory of Magic," Mauss argues that magical power depends on collective belief: "If the whole community does not believe in the efficacy of a group of actions, they cannot be magical."[16] Here, the word "belief" should not be read too narrowly as a private conviction; it is closer to a social condition of efficacy. Rituals become magical when they are situated inside a world where people interpret such practices as magical and behave accordingly. In other words, they depend upon a shared social logic that makes magical actions intelligible and effective.

In a communal sense, this shared logic of magic is distributed. It is sustained through the reputation of practitioners, shared expectations about ritual efficacy, and a broader cultural understanding of how supernatural forces operate. It does not reside only inside individual minds. Magic becomes effective because these assumptions are widely shared. In the case of Thailand and Cambodia, the idea of "magical warfare" is possible because its logic is distributed among their populace. That shared grammar was not simply the product of geographical proximity. It emerged from centuries in which both societies belonged to a common political, religious, and cultural world. The historical roots of this shared ritual grammar long predate the emergence of the modern Thai and Cambodian states. Before the concept of nation-states bled into the trans-Mekong Delta through French and British colonial efforts,[17] the region was a deeply interconnected political and religious world dotted with dynastic suzerains and their tributary states, one later referred to as the mandala system. Across the Chao Phraya Basin and the Khorat Plateau, Tai-speaking communities entered a landscape long shaped by Mon-Khmer settlement and Angkorian authority. Long before the rise of Ayutthaya, Khmer rulers had adopted South Asian ideas of kingship, sacred architecture,

[15] Craig J. Reynolds, *Power, Protection and Magic in Thailand* (ANU Press, 2019), 8.

[16] Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 19.

[17] Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, 60–62.

and religious learning to local conditions, eventually forming the royal cult that divinized the king as *devaraja*, a God King.[18]

A statue of Khun Phantharak Ratchadet at the Nakhon Si Thammarat Provincial Police Headquarters. (Source: Thailand Tourism Directory. Accessed on 10 July 2026)

Angkor's prestige extended westward into the territories from which later Siamese states emerged. Khmer and Burmese influences helped shape Ayutthaya's conception of the king as a *dhammaraja*, a morally superior ruler guided by Buddhist wisdom and righteousness. Khmer influence also persists in the language of royal and religious authority. The Thai royal register, Rachasap, still used today, draws directly on Khmer. For example, the honorific "phra", used for the Buddha, monks, sacred objects, and royalty, derives from the Khmer "preah".[19]

In a way, the *devaraja* cult has persisted in modern Thailand. One of the many examples is the prosperity cult of King Chulalongkorn (1853-1910): aside from offerings of cognac and cigars to his statue at the centre of the royal plaza in Bangkok, images of him are on every altar in most small- to medium-sized shops in Thailand, believed to bring wealth to their businesses. In most Buddhist monasteries, portraits of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) and the King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1927-2016) (Rama IX) are displayed alongside images of the Buddha. While the worship of Thai kings sits uneasily with doctrinal Buddhism, the cult nonetheless receives state approval to the point that criticism of it in the media must be anonymized.[20]

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[18] Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), 98–99.

[19] Frédéric Pain, "'Brāhmaṇa' as an Honorific in 'Indianized' Mainland Southeast Asia: A Linguistic Approach", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 82, no. 1 (2019): 111–41.

[20] Peter A. Jackson, "Royal Spirits, Chinese Gods, and Magic Monks: Thailand's Boom-Time Religions of Prosperity," *South East Asia Research* 7, no. 3 (1999): 266.

Royal courts and religious institutions were only one avenue through which these traditions spread. Centuries of warfare, forced migration, and population displacement carried them far beyond elite circles. Rice farming in permanent fields required substantive manpower before the introduction of fertilizer. As such, in the mandala state, in which authority was organized around competing centres of power with overlapping spheres of influence rather than fixed international borders, the confinement and capture of manpower, for labour and statecraft became such a paramount concern that war and captive slavery became a constant.[21] One of the unintended effects of this practice was a religious and cultural osmosis between the captors, captives, and a multitude of common people displaced by the war.

A portrait of Norodom, the eldest son of Ang Duong in royal attire. (Source: Wikimedia. Accessed on 10 July 2026)

In 1833, during his war against Vietnam, King Rama III of Bangkok ordered his forces either to take Cambodia or reduce it to empty land, leaving only "the land, the mountains, the rivers and the canals".[22] This campaign of depopulation drove Khmers living in Vietnamese-influenced areas into Thai territories. While the peasants were scattered into frontier townships set up as buffer zones by

[21] James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 2009), 43.

[22] Ben Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 283.

the Thais,[23] local elites, artisans and literati were taken to Bangkok for possible future use as tributary rulers, clerks and court performers.[24] The Cambodian King Ang Duong, for instance, spent 27 years in Bangkok from the age of 16 until aged 43. At his crowning in 1854, he restored Buddhist institutions with the assistance of Thai court traditions, while his sons Norodom (who succeeded his father as the King of Cambodia) and Sisowath were ordained at Wat Bowonniwet in Bangkok.[25]

These centuries of political rivalry, religious exchange, and population movements left Thailand and Cambodia with far more in common than their modern borders might suggest. Both societies inherited overlapping traditions of kingship, Buddhism, Brahmanical rituals, and spirit beliefs. It is against this background that the language of magical warfare becomes intelligible and its cross-border efficacy possible. A Cambodian curse directed at a Thai commander can travel across the border because Thai audiences already understand the logic of it. A blessed yantra shirt can answer that curse because Cambodian and Thai publics alike recognize that yantra, blessings, and bodily protection belong to a set of rituals. The act does not need to be believed in exactly the same way by everyone. The rituals only need to be legible enough to provoke a response.

Shared ritual assumptions, however, are only part of the explanation. To understand why magical warfare could emerge so naturally in both countries, one must also consider the place occupied by magic within Thai and Cambodian religious life. Magic and the occult are not as sharply separated from institutional religion as they have often been in modern Western Christianity.[26] Ellen observes that what outsiders identify as sorcery in Southeast Asia may be understood locally as one manifestation of a more general cosmic power, making sorcery less conspicuous as a separate institution while placing it close to the core of religious and cosmological thought.[27] Although there has been pushback against the profusion of magic within institutional monkhood,[28] it is still widely practised in both Thai and Cambodian society.[29] From curing illness to mending misfortunes, from protection to romantic endeavours, even in mass protests,[30] magic is often invoked for supernatural aid and, as the following chapter demonstrates, as a political technology.

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[23] Puangthong Rungswasdisab, “War and Trade: Siamese Interventions in Cambodia, 1767–1851” (PhD diss., 1995), 98–105.

[24] Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, 27–28.

[25] Santi Pakdeekham, “Court Buddhism in Thai-Khmer Relations during the Reign of King Rama IV (King Mongkut),” in *Buddhist Dynamics in Premodern and Early Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. D. Christian Lammerts (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017).

[26] Angela Puca, “Magic as a Contested Concept in the Study of Religion,” in *Contested Concepts in the Study of Religion* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023).

[27] Roy Ellen, “Introduction: Witchcraft and Sorcery as an Object of Academic Study in Southeast Asia,” in *Understanding Witchcraft and Sorcery in Southeast Asia*, ed. C. W. Watson and Roy Ellen (University of Hawai’i Press, 1993), 1, 8–9.

[28] Peter A. Jackson, *Capitalism Magic Thailand* (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021), 22.

[29] For an ethnography on how Thai Buddhists resolve the doctrinal discrepancy between magic and karma, see Kanya Wattanagun, “Karma Versus Magic: Dissonance and Syncretism in Vernacular Thai Buddhism,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2017): 115–37. See also Louis Golomb, “The Relativity of Magical Malevolence in Urban Thailand,” in *Understanding Witchcraft and Sorcery in Southeast Asia*, ed. C. W. Watson and Roy Ellen (University of Hawai’i Press, 1993), 27–46.

[30] Ivy Senna, “Political Witchcraft: A Brief Overview of Occult Activism in Thailand,” *Upon the Altar*, January 16, 2023.

The episode surrounding the cursing of Thailand's Lt. Gen. Boonsin Padklang offers a useful illustration of how magic functions as a military and political technology. It all began on the 29th of July, 2025, when a Cambodian Facebook page named Damnak Asrom Ang Ta Nom (ដំណាក់អាស្រមអង្គតាណម), a social media account held by one of the dozen participating shamans (or Kru), uploaded a video of them performing a ritual against the general.[31] Hung across a branch, next to an altar with burning incense, was a screenshot of Boonsin during a televised interview printed on a plastic tarp. Shamans adorned with yantra cloth, rosaries, and amulets sat on the side and took turns in their performance, culminating in a spectacle of breathing fire that burned the tarp with the general's face on it. A follow-up video was uploaded by the same channel a week later. Apparently, in response to Thai counter-rituals, the second video is titled "War on both the physical and spiritual fronts," adding a portrait of the current Thai King Maha Vajiralongkorn next to Boonsin, with the same individual burning the pictures via fire breathing as its climax.[32]

Fire breathing against the image of Boonsin in the ritual on 29 July 2025. (Source: ANG TA NORM, 2025, screenshot from YouTube, 07:35. Accessed on 21 July 2026)

[31] ANG TA NORM, "The Father Performs a Ritual to Invoke the Sacred Power of the Great Khmer Kingdom, in Order to Drive out the Wicked Siamese Invaders and Enemies. #Heir to the Supreme Sacred Power of Phnom Kulen" (លោកឪធ្វើពិធីកិច្ចយាងបារមីមហានគរKHកម្ចា/ឥអាចោ.រខ្មាំងសៀមឈ្លាន.ពានចង្រៃរ #ស្នងមហាកំពូលពិភពភ្នំគូលេន), YouTube video, 2025.

[32] ANG TA NORM, "The War Has Already Begun, on Both the Spiritual and Physical Fronts. #Heir to the Supreme Sacred Power of Phnom Kulen" (សង្គ្រៀ/មចាប់ផ្តើមហើយទាំងផ្លូវក្តងផ្លូវក្រៅ #ស្នងមហាកំពូលពិភពភ្នំគូលេន), YouTube video, 2025. Of note is the slash mark in the word "សង្គ្រៀ/ម" (war), likely inserted to avoid social-media moderation.

The ceremony was an invocation of the *barami*, a well of spiritual forces wielded in accordance with cosmic laws,[33] as the title suggested, of the "Great Angkor Kingdom" to drive away the "invading Siamese enemy". The ritual is also hosted in Phnom Kulen, a sacred mountain in Cambodia and the birthplace of the Khmer kingdom, where King Jayavarman II declared independence from Java in 802 CE.[34] This appeal to ancient glory placed the ritual within the politically orthodox language of Khmer patriotism. The shamans claimed to act as inheritors of Angkorian power, defending Khmer territory against a historically familiar Siamese invader.

Rather than an anomaly, the cursing of Boonsin was therefore a ritual politically intelligible and ideologically compatible with established narratives of the Cambodia state, one that resonated with the spiritual politics cultivated under former Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen. Like the royal cult in Thailand, Hun Sen repeatedly sought to supplement political authority with spiritual legitimacy, presenting himself as the rightful successor to the Cambodian kingship and associating his rule with Sdech Kan, the sixteenth-century commoner who seized the throne.[35] Much like a Victorian gentleman combing through ancestral records, Hun Sen deployed a regime of state-sponsored historical research, films and public rituals that cemented this connection into a political narrative. Spirit mediums interviewed by Christensen even represented Hun Sen as spiritually invulnerable and therefore resistant to magical attacks.[36]

Yet the state's reliance on spiritual authority also involves controlling where that authority starts and ends. Two months before the cursing of Boonsin, Thong Sokhom, one of the participating shamans, was visited in person by staff from the Ministry of Cults and Religions with direct orders to remove videos that were "harmful to Cambodian traditions, customs, and Buddhism" from social media.[37] Although it remains unknown exactly what triggered the authorities, it was implied that the offending videos showed the shaman taking alms in a manner similar to that of a Buddhist monk, despite not being ordained. The message was quite simple: hierarchy must be observed. Magical practice may be celebrated when presented in its own right but, when it crossed over into institutional Buddhism, it became a problem for the state to address.

Social media gag orders are one of the many ways the Cambodian authorities exercise control over spiritual specialists. In 2024, at a national meeting with approximately 1,000 *achar* and *acharini*,[38] Prime Minister Hun Manet praised them for "preserving Khmer traditions" but also called for training and codes of conduct coordinated through the Ministry of Cults and Religions. Explicitly

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[33] Daena Funahashi, "In the Name of the People: Magic and the Enigma of Health Governance in Thailand" *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, no. 22 (2017).

[34] Charles Higham, *Civilizations of Angkor* (University of California Press, 2002), 54.

[35] Paul Christensen, "Spirits in Cambodian Politics," *Global Modernities and the (Re-)Emergence of Ghosts*, no. 2 (Global South Studies Center Cologne, 2016), 2.

[36] Christensen, "Spirits in Cambodian Politics," 3.

[37] Koh Santepheap Daily, "The Ministry of Cults and Religions Ordered Mr Thong Sokhom, Known as 'Teacher Phnom Kulen,' to Stop Posting and to Delete Various Videos from Social Media" (ក្រសួងធម្មការឱ្យលោកថោង សុខុម ហៅលោកគ្រូភ្នំគូលេន បញ្ឈប់បង្ហោះនិងលុបវីដេអូនានាចេញពីបណ្តាញសង្គម), 2025.

[38] Literally meaning teacher in male and female forms and sometimes translated as wiseman or wise-woman, *achar* and *acharini* are spiritual leaders and magic practitioners in Cambodia. The same word and meaning are used in Thailand.

connecting their work to "morality, peace, and social order",[39] he stressed the importance of their cooperation with the state on spiritual matters:

> The Cambodian society observes hierarchy, whereby, in religion, monks and abbots have respect from the people […] therefore, the role of wiseman-woman is not only to uphold unity in each ceremonial protocol, but to take part in training about virtues and morals and to maintain peace and stability, because that will make people have peace of mind, non-violence, and cause no harm to social order […] physical education, morality, virtue is a direct social education.[40]

Thong Sokhom at the curse ritual against Boonsin on 29 July 2025. (Source: ANG TA NORM, 2026, screenshot from YouTube, 00:19. Accessed on 21 July 2026)

[39] Hun Manet, "Selected Comments of Samdech Thipadei Hun Manet, at the Ninth Meeting with Some 1,000 Wiseman-Woman across the Country," Press and Quick Reaction Unit, Office of the Council of Ministers, August 15, 2024.

[40] Hun Manet, "Selected Comments."

Thong Sokhom receiving donations in a similar fashion to monks receiving alms. (Source: Karpit, 2025, Telegram channel. Accessed on 21 July 2026.)

Thong Sokhom visited by staff of the Ministry of Cults and Religions, as well as an officer from the national police. No charges were levelled against him, except for an administrative warning and a direct order from the Ministry. (Source: Popular Kh, 2025. Accessed on 21 July 2026)

Within a day of the video being uploaded, Thong Sokhom's curse ritual against Boonsin went viral: not in Cambodia, but in Thailand, with the reposting and reporting of the video quadrupling the number of views of the original upload. The video's circulation may have been amplified by rumours of Boonsin's death. On 28 July, one day before the upload, the general had to publicly deny reports of his death, describing them as fake news created to damage the morale of Thai soldiers and civilians.[41] In this way, the Cambodian performance was a form of magical warfare that Thai audiences recognized as an attack and responded to accordingly. The curse acquired its full political force when it elicited a response, spilling from beyond the altars into news and social media, and even onto the international stage.

On the 5th of August, shortly after the second video of curses against him was uploaded, Boonsin received 500 yantra shirts and 1,500 talismanic scarves intended for troops at the border. The objects had been blessed by Phra Kru Wichit Wutthikun, abbot of Wat Pho Kao Ton, and were presented by more than twenty villagers dressed as warriors from the Ayutthaya period. The same delegation brought rice, dried food, clothing, and other supplies for frontline and wounded soldiers. By receiving the objects publicly at a military camp, Boonsin and the army incorporated the donation into the state's symbolic response to the Cambodian curses, with the donations demonstrating support from monks and civilians behind the military effort. In this sense, the Thais managed to spin the curse into a political drive for civilian mobilization across social hierarchy. Boonsin made this apparent in his speech shortly after the ceremony:

> I urge all Thai people not to quarrel. We must unite and stand together. History shows that when Ayutthaya was divided, it fell. If we are united, even the greatest superpower in the world cannot defeat us. One day, we may have to rise up and fight together.[42]

His remarks on national unity, stretching back to the Ayutthayans may seem odd in 2025, but they appear to underscore the costumes worn by the civilian representatives, which closely resembled modern recreations of the villagers who fought at Bang Rachan. The battle of Bang Rachan is famed in popular Thai history for villagers' resistance against the invading Burmese army during the Burmese–Siamese War of 1765-1767, a war that ultimately spelled the end of the Ayutthaya Kingdom. Films have romanticized their last stand as a patriotic story promoting national unity.[43] A foreign observer once quipped that in public discourse, "The story of Bang Rajan has become to the Thais what the siege of the Alamo is to Texans."[44]

More importantly, the Thai government did not answer the Cambodian curse with an equivalent death-dealing ritual. Instead, the threat was neutralized by protection via institutional Buddhism, playing into the Thai popular imagination that Khmer magical practices are wilder and more malevolent.[45] This established a moral demarcation between the two forms of magical warfare, with

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[41] The Nation Thailand, "Lt Gen Boonsin Denies Death Rumour, Vows to Defend Thai Sovereignty," July 28, 2025.

[42] The Nation Thailand, "Army Commander Receives Sacred Shirts."

[43] Atree Wanitchatrakun, "The Heroism of the Bang Rachan Villagers: History, Literature, and Ideology" (วีรกรรมชาวบ้านบางระจัน: ประวัติศาสตร์ วรรณกรรม และอุดมการณ์), *Music and Performing Arts* 1, no. 1 (2015): 127–41.

[44] Duncan Stearn, "A Slice of Thai History: The Thai 'Alamo': Defence of Bang Rajan, 1766," *Pattaya Mail*, 2003.

[45] Benjamin Baumann, "The Khmer Witch Project: Demonizing the Khmer by Khmerizing a Demon," in *Ghost Movies in Southeast Asia and Beyond*, ed. Peter J. Bräunlein and Andrea Lauser (Brill, 2016), 141–83.

Cambodia shown to attack through curses, while Thailand defended itself through institutional religion and unity.

Reception ceremony of the yantra shirts, scarves and supplies, presented by monks and civilians in Ayutthayan warrior costumes. (Source: PPTV, screenshot of video, 02:00)

Beyond the state, civilian ritualists also answered the Cambodian performance with the occult. On 30 July, a practitioner known as Than Phi Nong Ying appeared in Thai media while performing an archery rite intended to transmit "waves of meritorious power" to neutralize any Cambodian black magic directed at Boonsin and protect Thai soldiers along the border.[46] A more elaborate counter-magic followed in Udon Thani on 31 July. Two practitioners, Pu Mi Thanjai and Pu Dueanchai, constructed figures and a vessel from banana stems, inscribing them with the names of Hun Sen, Hun Manet, Cambodian defence spokesperson Maly Socheata, Cambodian soldiers, and the ritualists believed to have attacked Thailand.[47] Cremation charcoal, ashes from cemeteries, chillies, salt, black sticky rice, and ritual herbs were placed inside the banana-stem vessel, which was then burned facing west toward Cambodia. Despite the use of necromantic ingredients and similar cursing rituals, practitioners insisted that they were not initiating an attack but rather carrying out a form of cleansing and reflecting any malevolent magic back to the sender in Cambodia.

Not everyone shared this sense of sombreness. In Chon Buri, a Thai influencer and a "lottery predictor" performed a ritual in a graveyard against Hun Sen and other Cambodian figures, with fried chicken and pizza as offerings to the dead. Known for sensationalism, the online creator also searched the gravestones for lottery numbers, which drew the ire of netizens for disrespecting the dead with fast food.[48]

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[46] Thairath News, "Thai 'Ministry of Magic' Representative Conducts Counter-Ritual against Cambodian Black Magic to Protect Border Troops" (ตัวแทนกระทรวงเวทย์มนต์ไทย ทำพิธีล้างมนต์ดำเขมร ช่วยทหารชายแดน), 2025.

[47] Kom Chad Luek, "Pu Mi Thanjai and Pu Dueanchai Perform a Counter-Ritual against Cambodian Sorcery, Chanting to Send the Spell Back toward Hun Sen, Hun Manet, and "Sister Mali" ("'ปู่มีทันใจ-ปู่เดือนชัย' ล้างอาถรรพ์หมอผีเขมร พร้อมสวดส่ง 2 พ่อลูก-เจ๊มาลี"), July 31, 2025.

[48] Puntid Tantivangphaisal, "Graveyard Curse on Hun Sen Sparks Thai Lottery Frenzy," *Thaiger*, August 2025.

A Cameroonian influencer known as Diamond also appeared in Thai coverage performing "Cameroonian witchcraft" to "drive out Khmer ghosts".[49] Kneeling on dirt, he painted the colours of the Thai flag on his cheeks, turning his body into an overt declaration of political allegiance. The performance accompanied a broader public persona in which he described himself as a "Cameroonian with a Thai heart," professed his love for Thailand, and claimed that he was prepared to sacrifice his life for the country. He also composed a song titled "I Love Thailand," presenting it directly to a Thai audience.[50] In this way, it is as if Boonsin's cursing led to a carnival of publicized cursing and counter-cursing on live television and social media. While one might fault the preceding influencer's use of the moment to promote a lottery prediction YouTube channel, the creative potential of magic is apparent nonetheless. The ritual significance of Diamond's performance lay less in the prowess of Cameroonian magic, as the Thai press jested, than in his display of "Thainess." By volunteering his own spiritual tradition, painting the national colours upon his face, and publicly declaring loyalty to Thailand, Diamond claimed a place within the national community through service rather than ancestry. His foreignness was foregrounded rather than concealed.

Red Shirt protest rally in Bangkok, 2010. (Source: Bikepacking Adventure CC0. Accessed on 29 July 2026)

In Thailand, magic has also been common within civil protests. In 2010, tens of thousands of red shirt supporters[51] donated blood that was subsequently poured outside centres of government

[49] Thairath News, "'Diamond,' the Cameroonian Witch Doctor, Has Arrived! He Eats Candles to Drive Out the Khmer Ghost," YouTube video, 2025.

[50] Thairath, "'Diamond,' the Cameroonian Sorcerer, Has Arrived! He Eats a Candle and Performs a Rite to Drive the Cambodians Away" ("'ไดมอนด์' หมอผีแคเมอรูนมาแล้ว! กินเทียน ขับไล่เขมร"), 2025.

[51] The Red Shirt movement, formally organized as the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), emerged after the 2006 military coup that removed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Although closely associated with Thaksin-aligned parties, it was a socially and ideologically diverse movement whose supporters included rural voters, urban workers, activists, and intellectuals demanding electoral sovereignty, political inclusion, and an end to military and

authority. Protest leaders framed it as a ritual that symbolizes both collective sacrifice and a curse upon the administration, while government officials lambasted it as flooding the streets with contaminated biological waste.[52] Curses against politicians and officials are not uncommon in Thailand, and have been dubbed "political assassination by other means".[53] The dramatic performances direct attention to targeted officials, making the moral judgement apparent when legal institutions fail to fight corruption.

Spiritual practices historically associated with courts and rulers can therefore also be redirected "from below" to challenge the legitimacy of those in power. Magic is not inherently conservative or confined to the protection of the state, with young Thai protestors co-opting astrological and yantric numerology into their pro-democratic language of protest.[54] Instead, it constitutes a contested political language through which rulers claim cosmic alignment, while citizens declare that corrupt authority has violated the moral order and has become liable to both supernatural and popular judgement.

judicial intervention in elected government. The movement's mass demonstrations culminated in the 2010 Bangkok protests, and their violent suppression in May of that year.

[52] Erik Cohen, "Contesting Discourses of Blood in the 'Red Shirts' Protests in Bangkok," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 43, no. 2 (2012): 216–33.

[53] Ananda Rajah, "Political Assassination by Other Means: Public Protest, Sorcery and Morality in Thailand " *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 1 (2005): 111–29. See also Sanya Kenaphoom, Panya Senawiang, and Thanyachanok Pawala, "Thai Cursing Rituals and Anti-Corruption: Symbolic Strength and Social Function," *Nakhon Ratchasima Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, no. 1 (2026): 123–60.

[54] Edoardo Siani, "Co-Opting the Stars: Divination and the Politics of Resistance in Buddhist Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 54, no. 2 (2023): 200–19.

Conclusion

The cursing of Lieutenant General Boonsin reveals more than an isolated episode of wartime superstition. Magic functioned as a political space in which war, religious belief, cultural memory, and claims to legitimate authority could be brought into relation to one another. The Cambodian videos did not need to kill Boonsin to produce political effects. Once recorded and circulated through social media, they commanded attention and compelled responses. In a sociological sense, their efficacy lay partly in this capacity to elicit a field of response. What might be dismissed as an episode of occult spectacle instead exposed how magic enters modern political life.

At the upper levels of society, this infrastructure appears in royal cults and sacred histories, and claims spiritual legitimacy. Political authority is represented not only as administrative or military power, but as spiritual continuity with a storied past. Magic thus buttresses statecraft by placing the "powers that be" within a larger sacred order of "powers that have always been". In the Thai-Cambodian border conflict, when two magical powers clashed, it was not only shamans cursing and counter-cursing but also a war over spiritual and moral legitimacy.

At a grassroots level, however, magic remains a comparatively open arena of political expression. The occult becomes a gateway for people to enter a conflict from which they were otherwise institutionally excluded. Through the performance of magic, individuals and groups can express allegiance, hostility, fear, solidarity, and commercial ambition. Moreover, these performances do not necessarily require uniform or literal belief. Social media has instead expanded this space by turning ritual expertise into content, visibility into authority, and political participation into an activity that could be performed before an audience.

Magic therefore becomes part of the conflict not because it displaces military force, but because it connects domains that weapons and military institutions alone cannot fully govern. It links battlefield danger to karmic morality, national sovereignty to sacred history, leadership to spiritual legitimacy, and civilian spectatorship to political participation. In the 2025 Thai-Cambodian conflict, magic was neither simply belief nor propaganda: it was a political technology through which authority was legitimized from above, identity and enterprise were performed from below, and the cultural terms of the conflict were read and written.