



Pop Culture and Spiritual Hybridity: New Sacred Figures in Thailand

Ruchi Agarwal^{a, *}, Chompunuch Pongjit^b

^a *Social Science Division, Mahidol University International College, Thailand*

^b *Business Administration Division, Mahidol University International College, Thailand*

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Abstract

The contemporary spiritual landscape of Thailand exhibits a trend of hybrid religiosity, wherein traditional beliefs coexist with new spiritual symbols derived from folklore, media, and material culture. This study investigates the emergence of Khru Kai Kaeo as a modern spiritual figure and contrasts it with the grotesque gargoyles of European Gothic architecture to evaluate how these symbols serve as cultural “shock absorbers” during periods of societal instability. The study applies a qualitative comparative methodology, including content analysis of media discourse, academic opinion, and public reactions to three current cultural phenomena: the Khru Kai Kaeo debate, the Buddha-Ultraman artworks, and the Optimus Prime monument. The results indicate that grotesque or hybrid spiritual forms are more prevalent in contexts marked by economic instability, heightened social competition, and the quest for emotional comfort. The study demonstrates that digital media platforms serve as new sacred spaces that facilitate the rapid transmission, commercialization, and recontextualization of spiritual practices. These observations enrich broader discussions on hybrid religiosity and the development of spiritual manifestations in modern Thailand.

Keywords

Buddhism, Khru Kai Kaeo, Thai Spirituality, Hybrid Religiosity, Social Media

Introduction

Thailand's spiritual landscape is a rich and varied mix of religious and cultural influences. Over the years, it has absorbed Theravada Buddhist teachings, Brahmanistic rituals, animistic practices, and native customs into a belief system that can change with the times. Scholars call this kind of religion "hybrid religiosity," and it is a big part of this landscape. People in hybrid religiosity freely combine various religious practices that they find beneficial in their daily lives. This adaptability has allowed Thai spirituality to consistently develop, especially in reaction to social, economic, and cultural influences. Khru Kai Kaeo, a striking and controversial spiritual figure, has recently risen to fame, demonstrating how dynamic this hybrid religious field is. The rise of Khru Kai Kaeo has also sparked a lot of public debate about the limits of belief in modern-day Thailand.

Despite substantial academic research on Thai Buddhism and popular religiosity, the emergence of new and visually striking icons, such as Khru Kai Kaeo, remains under examined. Much of the existing literature focuses on institutional Buddhism or everyday devotional practices, leaving a gap concerning how grotesque or hybrid figures emerge and gain legitimacy. This gap is particularly significant because grotesque religious imagery isn't just unique to Thailand. Similar figures, like the gargoyles in European Gothic architecture, have historically helped people deal with fear, social disorder, and moral tension. Nevertheless, few studies have explored how Thailand's emerging spiritual icons might serve similar cultural purposes. The lack of scholarly attention to such figures limits our understanding of how contemporary Thais interpret, negotiate, and transform spiritual meaning in an age of rapid change.

Khru Kai Kaeo embodies a distinctive blend of mythology, creativity, and contemporary belief. His grotesque figure, a fusion of human, demonic, and supernatural traits, invokes parallels with medieval gargoyles, which similarly represented society worries through monstrous images. The icon simultaneously embodies modern cultural trends, encompassing the impact of popular media, visual culture, and consumerism. Khru Kai Kaeo's various origin myths serve to emphasize this hybridity even further. While one account portrays him as a venerated instructor of Khmer King Jayavarman VII, this assertion has been contested by historians like Professor Thongtong Chandransu, who contends that there is no historical evidence supporting the figure's ancient origins. Alternative narratives involving monks, ghosts, and artistic reinterpretation emphasize that Khru Kai Kaeo is rooted not in verifiable history but in modern folklore influenced by collective imagination. The contested nature of these narratives provides insight into the creation, dissemination, and validation of contemporary spiritual symbols.

In this context, this study investigates the emergence of Khru Kai Kaeo and similar figures, and analyzes the beliefs, cultural influences, and societal fears that support his rise to prominence. It examines the adaptation of spiritual traditions in Thailand to a rapidly changing world, influenced by religion, popular culture, digital media, and local folklore. The primary emphasis is on the motivations that drive individuals to pursue comfort, empowerment, or protection through associations with animistic or hybrid entities. This approach utilizes a comparative paradigm, contrasting Khru Kai Kaeo with the gargoyles of European Gothic architecture to illustrate how monstrous or grotesque shapes function as cultural “shock absorbers” across communities. This study hopes to clarify broader patterns of spiritual adaptation and enhance ongoing discourse on hybrid religiosity and modern Thai spirituality.

Theoretical Framework: Hybrid Religiosity and Daily Belief

To understand the rise of Khru Kai Kaeo in modern Thai spirituality, it is crucial to position the analysis within the existing theoretical frameworks related to syncretism, hybridization, and lived religion. Previous anthropological frameworks, particularly those proposed by Robert Redfield and Clifford Geertz, primarily depicted religion as a cohesive system rooted on lasting tradition. These approaches are effective for examining formal doctrine and ritual; but they are inadequate for analyzing the contemporary spiritual practices in Thailand, which are flexible, spontaneous, and occasionally conflicting.

Kitiarsa (2005) proposed a fundamental reexamination of Thai religion, asserting that Thai religious life is defined more by pragmatic integrations of symbols, rituals, and narratives from other traditions than by adherence to orthodoxy. Kitiarsa argues that this hybridity should not be viewed as a diminution of religion, but as a dynamic cultural adaptation to changing material, emotional, and social conditions.

Orsi's (1997) concept of lived religion enhances this understanding by highlighting how individuals interact with and experience religion in their everyday lives. For numerous Thais, spiritual life includes practices such as carrying amulets, consulting spirit mediums, or seeking guidance from fortune-tellers. Such occurrences frequently transpire beyond established religious institutions. Khru Kai Kaeo is a novel avenue for urban Thais to articulate their spirituality, reflecting their anxieties, aspirations, and ethical uncertainties amid instability and rapid transformation.

Finally, Canclini's (1995) concept of cultural hybridization provides a valuable framework for examining the influence of global media, consumer culture, and digital technology on religious expression. Hybrid religious manifestations, exemplified by Khru Kai Kaeo, serve as platforms for negotiation and creativity, shaped by economic factors, indigenous cosmologies, and advancing

communication technology. The birth of Khru Kai Kaeo exemplifies this dynamic, showcasing how spiritual value is continually redefined by the forces of modernity, capitalism, and digital distribution.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative cultural analysis that focuses primarily on contemporary Thai spiritual phenomena while using historical symbols, specifically European Gothic gargoyles, as an interpretive comparative tool rather than as a subject of historical research. The analysis draws on content analysis of publicly available sources, including news reports, online commentary, academic literature, and visual representations related to three cultural cases: the Buddha-Ultraman artworks, the Optimus Prime statue phenomenon, and the Khru Kai Kaeo controversy. These cases were selected because they exemplify the emergence, reinterpretation, and popularization of spiritual symbols in modern Thailand.

The research integrates theoretical frameworks from hybrid religiosity (Kitiarsa, 2005), lived religion (Orsi, 1997), and cultural hybridization (Canclini, 1995) to interpret how spiritual meaning is produced and circulated. The comparison with gargoyles is used to highlight the broader cultural pattern in which grotesque or hybrid sacred images serve as mediators of social anxiety, protection, and public imagination across different eras. The study does not attempt to reconstruct the historical development of gargoyles; rather, it employs them as a conceptual lens to contextualize the contemporary rise of Khru Kai Kaeo.

Cultural Context and Traditions

Thai spirituality has historically served as a “shock absorber,” assisting individuals in managing the external pressures arising from swift economic, technological, and social transformations. Researchers like Camille (2009) argue that grotesque spiritual imagery often comes back during times of moral or social uncertainty. This is because it helps communities deal with fear, instability, and disorder in creative ways. The resurgence of Khru Kai Kaeo's fame during economic instability and evolving social norms exemplifies this overarching cultural trend. This trend is most obvious among people who live in cities in Thailand. Most of them are middle-class people who move around a lot because of years of economic growth and competition. Many people in this group want to improve their chances by changing traditional ways of making merit and getting immediate, tangible benefits from religious experts, amulets, and lottery rituals. The growth of Khru Kai Kaeo can be seen as a direct response to these conditions. It provides a place where people can find hope, safety, and good luck in a social environment that has grown increasingly competitive and uncertain.

This emergence must also be understood in the context of the significant controversy that unfolded in Bangkok in 2023, which vividly illustrates the tensions between modern spiritual experimentation and traditional religious sensibilities. In August of that year, a five-meter-tall statue of Khru Kai Kaeo, winged, gargoyle-like, and adorned with prominent fangs and red talons was installed in front of The Bazaar Hotel (see Figure 1). Devotees regarded the figure as a deity of wealth and good fortune, yet its intimidating appearance and perceived associations with black magic quickly drew nationwide criticism. Public debate intensified as groups such as the Council of Artists for the Promotion of Buddhism argued that its worship was un-Buddhist and encouraged unorthodox practices. The situation escalated further when social media rumors circulated claiming that worshippers were soliciting puppies and kittens for animal sacrifices. A relative of the sculptor later denied these claims, but the rumors fueled moral panic and amplified public concern.

Religious authorities ultimately resolved the conflict through legal and administrative action. Because the hotel operator had violated the Building Control Act and its lease agreement with the State Railway of Thailand (SRT), the SRT ordered the statue's removal. In late December 2023, the statue was relocated to a less prominent position at the rear of the hotel and covered with a sheet while awaiting collection by its owner. This incident highlights how spiritual expression, commercial interests, legal structures, and public morality intersect and compete within contemporary Thailand. It also reinforces the idea that hybrid and grotesque spiritual symbols are not merely devotional objects but are embedded in wider social, legal, and cultural tensions.

These dynamics reflect the broader phenomenon of hybrid religiosity in Thailand, in which spiritual practices, symbols, and narratives are selectively combined to meet personal needs. As Kitiarsa (2005) argues, such hybridization does not dilute religious meaning but instead reflects flexible strategies through which lay individuals navigate contemporary pressures. Khru Kai Kaeo exemplifies this hybridity: he is simultaneously rooted in regional folklore, shaped by artistic imagination, and deployed as a modern spiritual tool. His grotesque appearance, partly human, partly monstrous, mirrors the gargoyles of European Gothic architecture, which historically mediated societal fears by symbolically confronting or warding off evil. Both figures, arising in different eras and cultural landscapes, illustrate how grotesque religious imagery serves as a cultural mechanism for absorbing anxiety and making visible the invisible tensions within society.

A critical factor in the rise and rapid spread of Khru Kai Kaeo is the role of digital and popular media in shaping religious meaning. As Agarwal and Jones (2022) argue, social media now functions as a “new sacral space” in which religious images circulate, gain legitimacy, and become embedded in everyday life. This insight aligns with broader scholarship in digital religion, such as Campbell & Tsuria (2021) and Helland (2000), who note that online environments increasingly serve as sites for religious negotiation and identity formation. In the case of Khru Kai Kaeo, viral images, sensational news coverage, livestreamed rituals, and online discourse not only amplified his visibility but also intensified public reactions, ranging from fascination and devotion to ridicule, anxiety, and moral condemnation. The digital environment thus facilitated both the icon’s sacralization and the public controversy that surrounded it, transforming Khru Kai Kaeo from a local belief into a national cultural phenomenon.

The media-fueled sacralization of Khru Kai Kaeo also intersects with the logic of Thailand’s religious marketplace. As Jackson (1989, 1999) observes, contemporary Thai religiosity, especially in urban contexts, is deeply entangled with consumer capitalism, producing what he terms “prosperity religion.” Khru Kai Kaeo’s rapid commodification through amulets, offerings, and merchandise reflects this trend. The marketplace responds quickly to spiritual demand, enabling new figures to rise or fall in prominence depending on their symbolic resonance, aesthetic appeal, and digital visibility. In this sense, the proliferation of Khru Kai Kaeo products and rituals demonstrates the merging of spiritual needs with commercial opportunity.

Taken together, these dynamics underscore the fluidity, contestation, and adaptability of contemporary Thai spirituality. The public debates, moral anxieties, and legal interventions surrounding Khru Kai Kaeo reveal the extent to which spiritual symbols can become arenas of negotiation over cultural identity, social order, and moral boundaries. The figure’s rise, alongside other hybrid icons such as Buddha-as-Ultraman and the Optimus Prime “deity,” illustrates how spiritual meaning today is shaped by a complicated relationship between belief, media, economics, and cultural imagination. Through this lens, Khru Kai Kaeo is not merely a controversial statue but a crystallization of deeper societal tensions and aspirations within a rapidly changing spiritual landscape.



Figure 1 Khru Kai Kaeo, a 4m-tall statue, and worshippers in front of the Bazaar Hotel in Bangkok. Photo courtesy of Khaosod English, posted 16 August 2023.

Source: Khaosod English (2023), "The Worship of 'Kru Guy Kaeo' Reflects Thai Society's Mental Insecurity."



Figure 2 The Khru Kai Kaeo statue stuck under a bridge. Photo courtesy of FM91 Trafficpro Facebook.

Source: FM91 Trafficpro Facebook page.

Pop Culture and Thai Spirituality

The integration of global pop culture into Thailand's spiritual domain further illustrates the fluid and adaptive character of hybrid religiosity. In recent years, Thailand has witnessed a series of incidents in which modern entertainment icons have been reinterpreted through spiritual and moral frameworks. Two notable examples, the Buddha-as-Ultraman artworks and the emergence of the "Optimus God", demonstrate how contemporary imagery becomes embedded within local systems of belief.

In 2019, a nationwide controversy erupted when a university student painted the Buddha as Ultraman, portraying him as a superhero capable of saving the world. Although the artist intended to communicate themes of protection and moral virtue, conservative Buddhist groups condemned the images as disrespectful and inappropriate (Nation Thailand, 2019). The intense public reaction reflected not only the deep reverence for Buddhist iconography but also the anxieties surrounding modern reinterpretations of sacred symbols. As Malaysiakini (2019) reported, the incident sparked widespread debate over the boundaries between artistic freedom, religious sensitivity, and cultural identity. The Ultraman controversy thus highlights the negotiation required when contemporary aesthetics intersect with established religious traditions.

A different but equally revealing phenomenon emerged around a scrap metal statue of Optimus Prime in Bangkok's Talat Noi district. Originally installed as a creative landmark, the sculpture unexpectedly became a spiritual site after a local business owner attributed financial improvement to making a wish before it (Laotian Times, 2025). As others reported similar experiences, offerings and traditional dances (see Figure 3) were made in gratitude, and the statue quickly gained viral attention as the "Optimus God" (The Star, 2025). This case represents a more playful, commercially inflected, and media-driven integration of global pop culture into Thai spiritual practices (ACU Pay, 2025). It demonstrates how spiritual meaning can emerge through chance, creativity, and communal storytelling in ways that resonate with everyday concerns.



Figure 3 Traditional dance offering to an Optimus Prime statue in the Talat Noi district in Bangkok. Photo courtesy of The Laotian Times, posted February 24, 2025.

Source: Traditional Thai dancers performing an offering ritual before an Optimus Prime statue in Bangkok's Talat Noi district. Source: Photograph reproduced from The Star, adapted from The Laotian Times (February 24, 2025).

These events, though distinct in tone and outcome, underscore the same underlying dynamic observed in the rise of Khru Kai Kaeo: the recontextualization of symbols, whether ancient, folkloric, or modern, within Thailand's rich spiritual landscape. They reveal a society actively negotiating the relationship between tradition and global entertainment, between religious heritage and contemporary artistic expression. Pop culture figures such as Ultraman and Optimus Prime become vessels through which individuals express aspirations, anxieties, and desires for protection or good fortune. Their adoption as spiritual symbols parallels the historical function of gargoyles in medieval Europe and the recent cult surrounding Khru Kai Kaeo: each represents a visual and imaginative medium through which societies grapple with uncertainty and moral complexity.

Moreover, the circulation of these figures through social media and digital platforms further demonstrates how spiritual meanings are produced, diffused, and transformed in the contemporary moment. Viral images, online debates, and user-generated narratives not only elevate these objects to spiritual prominence but also embed them in wider conversations about legitimacy, morality, and cultural value. In this sense, the Ultraman and Optimus Prime episodes reinforce the argument that the Thai spiritual field is increasingly shaped by digital sacralization, consumer capitalism, and cultural hybridity. Together, they illustrate how modern icons can be seamlessly integrated into spiritual practices, functioning as accessible mediators of hope, protection, and cultural identity within an ever-evolving religious landscape.

Conclusion

The comparison of Khru Kai Kaeo and the gargoyles of Notre-Dame shows that, even though they come from locations and times that are distinct, they are both on a comparable path. They act as cultural “shock absorbers” for people who are dealing with outside stress, anxiety, and social uncertainty. In Thailand, this trend is becoming more and more clear in the public prominence of popular culture icons that have been given new meanings in the spiritual world. The controversial Buddha-as-Ultraman paintings, for example, were meant to show the Buddha as a modern protector who directly addresses modern fears and hopes. The unexpected use of the Optimus Prime statue in Bangkok as a spiritual figure of good luck shows how global cultural symbols can be changed to fit local spiritual needs.

Khru Kai Kaeo is a good example of this trend of mixing different cultures. His debated origins and grotesque, composite form show how folklore, artistic imagination, and modern influences have come together. His rise is not an isolated event, but rather part of a longer cultural process in which spiritual traditions change to include and reinterpret new symbols that people connect with. The arguments about his scary look, the rumors of animal sacrifice, and the legal action that forced him to move all show how fluid and contested Thai religiosity is today. These debates show that spiritual meaning today is shaped by more than just traditional beliefs. It is also shaped by social anxieties, media amplification, and economic pressures.

The rise of Khru Kai Kaeo shows that new hybrid spiritual figures are still appearing in response to changes in material and emotional conditions. People look for hope, safety, and a sense of belonging in the midst of rapid change, and their presence shows this. This study compares Khru Kai Kaeo to the gargoyles of European Gothic architecture to show that grotesque or liminal sacred imagery has historically served similar roles as mediators of uncertainty and symbols of collective resilience. These kinds of icons change over time to meet the needs of their times, connecting art, faith, and the imagination of culture. This analysis adds to bigger talks about hybrid religiosity, digital sacralization, and how spiritual expression changes and will keep changing to fit the demands of modern life.

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