

## INFANT SPIRITS IN THAI AND INDONESIAN BELIEFS

### *A Cross-Cultural Study of Kumanthong and Bayi Bajang*

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#### ABSTRACT

This study examines how infant spirits are culturally constructed in Thai and Indonesian belief systems through the figures of Kumanthong and Bayi Bajang. The study asks how these figures are interpreted, how cultural beliefs, myths, and rituals shape their meanings, and why their social interpretations differ across the two contexts. The analysis is framed by cultural-belief theory, supernatural cognition, and myth-and-ritual theory, which together position supernatural figures as culturally meaningful responses to uncertainty, emotion, and social experience. Using a qualitative descriptive design and library research, the study analyzes scholarly books, anthropological and cultural studies, journal articles, and folklore documentation concerning Thai and Indonesian mystical traditions. The materials are organized thematically and examined through interpretive and cross-cultural comparison, with attention to symbolic meanings, ritual functions, religious legitimacy, and social perception. The findings show that Kumanthong is predominantly constructed as a protective and beneficial infant spirit within Thai popular religious practice, where offerings, prayers, consecration, and everyday care establish a reciprocal relationship between humans and the spirit. By contrast, Bayi Bajang is predominantly represented in Indonesian and Javanese mystical narratives as a troubling figure associated with infant death, pesugihan, moral transgression, and spiritual imbalance. The comparison demonstrates that the same broad category of supernatural infant figure can acquire sharply different meanings because religious traditions, cosmological assumptions, ritual structures, and moral boundaries shape interpretation. The study contributes to cross-cultural approaches to folklore and the anthropology of religion by showing that infant-spirit narratives are not merely accounts of the supernatural but symbolic systems through which communities negotiate fear, grief, hope, prosperity, protection, and uncertainty.

#### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana roh bayi dikonstruksi secara kultural dalam sistem kepercayaan Thailand dan Indonesia melalui figur Kumanthong dan Bayi Bajang. Penelitian ini berfokus pada tiga persoalan, yaitu bagaimana kedua figur tersebut dimaknai, bagaimana kepercayaan budaya, mitos, dan ritual membentuk maknanya, serta mengapa penafsirannya berbeda dalam kedua konteks budaya. Analisis menggunakan perspektif kepercayaan budaya, kognisi supranatural, serta teori mitos dan ritual untuk menempatkan figur supranatural sebagai konstruksi budaya yang berkaitan dengan ketidakpastian, pengalaman emosional, dan kehidupan sosial. Penelitian menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif melalui studi pustaka dengan memanfaatkan buku ilmiah, kajian antropologis dan budaya, artikel jurnal, serta dokumentasi folklor mengenai tradisi mistik Thailand dan Indonesia. Data dikategorikan secara tematik dan dianalisis secara interpretatif melalui perbandingan lintas budaya dengan memperhatikan makna simbolik, fungsi ritual, legitimasi keagamaan, dan persepsi sosial. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Kumanthong terutama dikonstruksikan sebagai roh bayi yang bersifat protektif dan menguntungkan dalam praktik keagamaan populer Thailand. Persembahan, doa, proses konsekrasi, dan pemeliharaan sehari-hari membentuk hubungan timbal balik antara manusia dan roh tersebut. Sebaliknya, Bayi Bajang terutama direpresentasikan dalam narasi mistik Indonesia dan Jawa sebagai figur yang mengganggu dan berkaitan dengan kematian bayi, pesugihan, pelanggaran moral, serta ketidakseimbangan spiritual. Perbandingan ini menunjukkan bahwa kategori umum roh bayi dapat memperoleh makna yang sangat berbeda karena tradisi keagamaan, kosmologi, struktur ritual, dan batas-batas moral membentuk cara masyarakat menafsirkannya. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian lintas budaya, folklor, dan antropologi agama dengan menunjukkan bahwa narasi tentang roh bayi bukan sekadar kisah supranatural, melainkan sistem simbolik yang digunakan masyarakat untuk memaknai ketakutan, kehilangan, harapan, kemakmuran, perlindungan, dan ketidakpastian.

**KEYWORDS:** cross-cultural studies; infant spirits; myth and ritual; supernatural beliefs; cultural symbolism

**KATA KUNCI:** kajian lintas budaya; roh bayi; mitos dan ritual; kepercayaan supranatural; simbolisme budaya

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background and Context

Beliefs concerning supernatural entities and mystical practices continue to exist within many Southeast Asian societies, particularly in Indonesia and Thailand. These beliefs are closely connected to local cosmologies, traditional rituals, and cultural understandings of the relationship between humans and the unseen world. Despite the rapid development of modern science and technology, mystical beliefs remain influential because they provide symbolic explanations for uncertainty, fear, economic instability, grief, and emotional experiences that are not always addressed through rational or institutional systems.

One form of supernatural belief found in Southeast Asian cultural traditions concerns infant spirits. In Indonesia, particularly within Javanese mystical traditions, beliefs about infant spirits are frequently connected with *pesugihan* practices involving supernatural agreements intended to obtain wealth, power, or worldly success. Endraswara (2006) describes Javanese mystical traditions as systems in which symbolism, syncretism, and spiritual practice are closely intertwined. Such practices may involve ritual offerings and relationships with spiritual practitioners who are believed to mediate communication with the unseen world. At the same time, these practices can generate ethical and religious tensions because they may conflict with dominant religious values (Mulder, 2005).

In Thailand, a different cultural construction appears in the figure of Kumanthong (Thai: กุญแจทอง), commonly translated as “golden little child.” Kumanthong refers to a child spirit believed to provide protection, prosperity, and good fortune. Within Thai popular religion, Buddhist practices coexist with animistic traditions and local spirit worship, creating a religious landscape in which supernatural practices may remain socially visible and culturally meaningful (Kitiarsa, 2005). Kumanthong may therefore be understood through a reciprocal relationship in which ritual care, offerings, and prayers establish the spirit as a protective presence within domestic or commercial life.

By contrast, *Bayi Bajang* in Indonesian folklore is generally associated with fear, spiritual disturbance, and moral transgression. In the narratives examined in the source literature, *Bayi Bajang* is associated with an infant who dies under circumstances understood as unnatural or incomplete, including miscarriage, abortion, improper burial, or ritual sacrifice, and is connected in some narratives with *pesugihan*. Unlike Kumanthong, which is commonly represented as beneficial and manageable, *Bayi Bajang* is represented as a disturbing supernatural figure whose association with secret ritual practices carries negative moral and spiritual meanings. The contrast illustrates that supernatural entities are culturally constructed and cannot be interpreted independently of the belief systems in which they occur.

## 1.2 Theoretical Framework

This study uses three complementary perspectives: cultural beliefs, supernatural cognition, and myth-and-ritual theory. Cultural beliefs refer to shared systems of values and understandings through which communities interpret realities that transcend empirical explanation, including spirits and mystical forces. Supernatural cognition concerns the human tendency to attribute uncertain or unexplained events to

invisible agents. Boyer (2001) argues that supernatural concepts can persist because they combine violations of ordinary expectations with psychologically accessible representations, while Barrett (2004) discusses the human tendency to interpret unexplained events in terms of intentional supernatural agency. These perspectives are relevant because infant-spirit beliefs are closely connected with experiences of fear, grief, uncertainty, protection, and prosperity.

Myth-and-ritual theory provides a further framework for examining how supernatural meanings are reproduced socially. Bell (2009) emphasizes the role of ritual in constructing and maintaining systems of meaning, while Segal (2004) views myth as a cultural form through which societies organize collective understandings of supernatural realities. From this perspective, Kumanthong and Bayi Bajang are examined not simply as supernatural entities but as symbolic constructions embedded in narratives, ritual practices, moral assumptions, and social relationships.

### **1.3 State of the Art and Research Gap**

Previous studies have examined spirit beliefs and mystical practices in Thailand and Indonesia from different disciplinary perspectives. Siraphon Nathalang (2023), for example, discusses the persistence of guardian-spirit beliefs and rituals in contemporary Thai-Tai societies, including child-spirit traditions within popular religious practices. Formoso (2016) examines the relationship between Thai Buddhism and spirit cults, demonstrating how popular religious practices can coexist with formal Buddhist institutions. In the Indonesian context, studies of Javanese mysticism have emphasized the relationship between cosmology, symbolism, morality, and supernatural practice (Endraswara, 2006; Mulder, 2005). Suyuti and Hendrokomoro (2025) further discuss cultural and linguistic dimensions of supernatural figures in Indonesian mythology.

Although these studies provide important accounts of individual traditions, comparative discussion that specifically positions Kumanthong and Bayi Bajang as culturally contrasting constructions of infant spirits remains limited within the source literature. The research gap addressed here is therefore not the absence of scholarship on either tradition, but the limited cross-cultural analysis of how similar supernatural categories acquire different symbolic, ritual, and moral meanings. This study addresses that gap by comparing the two figures through a shared analytical framework.

### **1.4 Research Questions and Objective**

This study addresses three questions: (1) how are infant spirits interpreted within Kumanthong and Bayi Bajang beliefs; (2) how do cultural beliefs, myths, and rituals shape those meanings; and (3) why do interpretations of infant spirits differ between Thai and Indonesian societies? Accordingly, the objective of this research is to identify and interpret the similarities and differences in the symbolic meanings, ritual functions, religious legitimacy, and social perceptions attached to Kumanthong and Bayi Bajang.

### **1.5 Research Method**

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design based on library research and comparative cross-cultural analysis. The primary materials consist of scholarly books, anthropological studies, journal articles, and cultural or folklore documentation concerning Kumanthong, Bayi Bajang, Thai popular religion, Javanese mysticism, supernatural cognition, and myth-and-ritual practices.

The analysis proceeded through thematic categorization and interpretive comparison. First, the literature was organized according to recurring themes, including the origin and representation of infant spirits, ritual practices, human-spirit relationships, religious legitimacy, moral interpretation, and contemporary social visibility. Second, the themes were interpreted through the theoretical perspectives outlined above. Third, the findings for the Thai and Indonesian contexts were compared to identify both shared symbolic functions and culturally specific meanings. Because this study is based on published and documented sources, references to “findings” or “observations” in the analysis refer to patterns identified in the reviewed literature rather than to direct field observation.

## **2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **2.1 Kumanthong in Thai Popular Religious Practice**

Kumanthong in Thai folk belief refers to the spirit of a deceased child believed to possess protective and beneficial spiritual powers. The belief developed within Thailand’s syncretic religious landscape, where Theravada Buddhism coexists with animistic traditions and local spirit worship. Kitiarsa (2005) explains that Thai popular religion incorporates spirit cults and supernatural practices alongside formal Buddhist teachings, allowing mystical beliefs to remain culturally meaningful in everyday life. Within this framework, Kumanthong can be interpreted as a spiritually manageable entity capable of forming a reciprocal relationship with humans through ritual practices.

Rituals associated with Kumanthong commonly involve offerings such as food, sweet drinks, toys, incense, and prayers performed in domestic or commercial spaces. These practices symbolically position the infant spirit as part of the household or establishment and are believed by practitioners to strengthen protection, prosperity, and emotional well-being. From the perspective of cultural belief, such rituals demonstrate how supernatural traditions can become integrated into ordinary social and economic activities. The perceived experiences of safety, fortune, or psychological comfort that accompany ritual maintenance can further reinforce the continuity of the belief.

The consecration of Kumanthong is associated in the source literature with monks or spiritual practitioners who possess recognized religious or ritual authority. Kitiarsa (2005) argues that practitioners such as monks and spirit mediums can function as cultural mediators between formal religious teachings and the spiritual needs of ordinary people. Consequently, Kumanthong practices may occupy an ambiguous but culturally intelligible position rather than being treated uniformly as religious deviation. Within the framework of supernatural cognition, the infant spirit is represented as relatively gentle, dependent, and manageable, characteristics that support a positive interpretation.

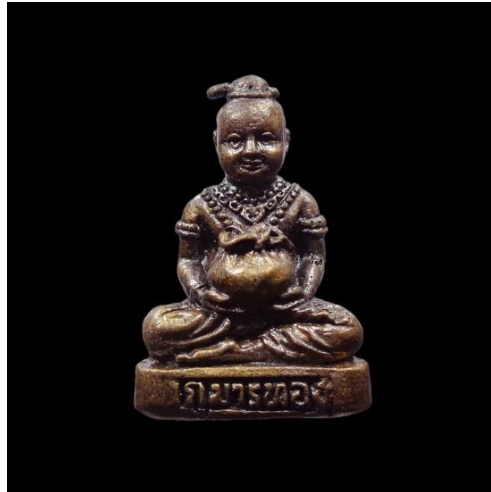


Figure 1. Kumanthong Statue in Thai Folk Belief

Formoso (2016) further shows that Kumanthong has become a commodified cultural artifact in contemporary Thailand. Statues, amulets, and dolls associated with consecration rituals circulate through religious markets, amulet shops, and online platforms. Their visibility demonstrates that the belief is not confined to private or secret practices but can be incorporated into modern economic systems. The placement of Kumanthong objects on household or business altars similarly makes the spirit part of visible domestic and commercial space. In symbolic terms, material objects help stabilize an otherwise invisible relationship by giving the spirit a recognizable form within everyday life.

## 2.2 Emotional Relationships Between Owners and Kumanthong

Qualitative accounts in the reviewed literature also point to emotional attachments between practitioners and Kumanthong. Formoso (2016) notes that owners may use familial terms and treat the spirit as a child. This relationship is therefore not exclusively transactional: prosperity and protection are interpreted as outcomes of a harmonious reciprocal relationship. From the perspective of supernatural cognition, the image of an infant may be especially emotionally accessible because infancy is culturally associated with innocence, dependency, vulnerability, and the need for care.

This emotional framing helps explain why Kumanthong can be incorporated into ordinary domestic life. Rather than representing an unknown or distant supernatural force, the spirit is constructed as a dependent figure that requires attention and responds to care. The ritual relationship consequently provides a culturally organized way of expressing attachment, responsibility, hope, and the desire for protection.

## 2.3 Religious Legitimacy and Ambiguity in Buddhist Teachings

Although Kumanthong is culturally legitimized within Thai popular religion, its relationship with normative Buddhist teachings remains ambiguous. Keyes (2003), as cited in the original discussion, is used to distinguish doctrinal concerns about practices oriented toward worldly gain from everyday religious practices that incorporate local supernatural traditions. In this context, religious practitioners can mediate between formal doctrine and local spiritual expectations. Kumanthong may consequently be framed through ideas of merit, protection, and spiritual relationship rather than solely as the instrumental pursuit of wealth.

This ambiguity is important to the persistence of the tradition. Cultural legitimacy does not necessarily mean that every form of Kumanthong practice is doctrinally endorsed. Instead, the tradition can survive in a space where formal religious norms and popular practices overlap. The result is a form of religious pluralism in everyday life in which Buddhist identity, animistic assumptions, spirit practices, and economic aspirations may coexist.

## 2.4 Bayi Bajang in Javanese Cosmology and Pesugihan Narratives

Within the Indonesian material reviewed in this study, Bayi Bajang is understood as a supernatural figure associated with an infant who dies through circumstances regarded as unnatural or incomplete. The narratives connect the figure with miscarriage, abortion, improper burial, or ritual sacrifice, although these associations vary across accounts. The significance of Bayi Bajang is therefore linked to ideas concerning an incomplete transition between life and death. Geertz (1976) describes Javanese religious life as a complex field in which visible and invisible dimensions of existence are interwoven, while Mulder (2005) emphasizes the importance of mystical balance and moral order in Javanese cultural thought.

Within these narratives, Bayi Bajang is frequently connected with pesugihan, understood as a supernatural pursuit of wealth or power. The practice is portrayed as secretive because it conflicts with dominant religious and social norms. Unlike Kumanthong, which is often represented as a relational figure that receives care, Bayi Bajang is more frequently constructed as an instrumentalized supernatural resource. Narratives may associate the figure with ritual obligations, taboos, misfortune, spiritual disturbance, and consequences for practitioners who violate supernatural agreements.

The negative construction of Bayi Bajang can therefore be interpreted as a moral and cosmological narrative. The figure represents not only fear of the supernatural but also the consequences of violating accepted boundaries concerning death, family, religion, and wealth. In this sense, the myth operates as a form of social discourse: it warns against attempts to obtain material gain through practices perceived as morally transgressive.

## 2.5 Visual Representation and Cultural Visibility

A significant contrast appears in the visual treatment of the two figures. Kumanthong is commonly materialized through statues, amulets, and dolls, including neatly presented infant figures associated with purity, prosperity, and protection. These objects may be displayed openly in homes and businesses, reflecting the relative visibility and social acceptability of the practice (Formoso, 2016). Material representation makes the supernatural relationship tangible and supports the incorporation of the figure into everyday space.

Bayi Bajang, by contrast, does not have a standardized material representation comparable to Kumanthong statues. Its image is more commonly circulated through horror illustrations, online narratives, blogs, and popular media. These representations tend to emphasize darkness, hidden spaces, disturbance, and fear. Such imagery should not be treated as empirical evidence for the existence of the supernatural

figure; rather, it functions as a symbolic resource through which communities visualize cultural anxieties surrounding infant death, secret ritual practices, and moral transgression.

The difference in visibility is itself culturally significant. Openly displayed Kumanthong objects can normalize the spirit as part of social and economic life, whereas the hidden or frightening representation of Bayi Bajang reinforces secrecy and stigma. Myth and ritual therefore operate not only through beliefs and actions but also through the visual forms by which communities distinguish what is acceptable, ambiguous, or forbidden.

## 2.6 Comparative Meaning of Infant Spirits

Kumanthong and Bayi Bajang both represent infant spirits, yet their meanings are shaped by different cultural frameworks. Kumanthong is constructed as a spirit that can be cared for, maintained, and incorporated into a reciprocal relationship with humans. Its symbolic functions include protection, fortune, emotional companionship, and the management of uncertainty. Bayi Bajang, in contrast, is associated with incomplete death, disturbance, and supernatural practices aimed at obtaining worldly gain. Its symbolic functions are therefore more closely connected to fear, moral warning, and the consequences of violating social or cosmological boundaries.

The contrast can be understood through the different ritual relationships attached to the figures. Kumanthong practices emphasize invocation, maintenance, offerings, and care. Bayi Bajang narratives emphasize secrecy, taboo, purification, expulsion, or spiritual release. The difference does not simply reflect two opposite supernatural beings; it demonstrates how ritual action assigns social meaning to supernatural categories. A spirit that is ritually cared for can be understood as protective, while a spirit associated with taboo and violation can become a symbol of danger.

## 2.7 The Role of Cultural Beliefs, Myths, and Rituals

Cultural beliefs provide the cognitive and moral frameworks through which communities interpret infant death and supernatural agency. In Thailand, the coexistence of Buddhism, animistic traditions, and spirit worship allows infant spirits to be interpreted as entities that can interact positively with humans. This context contributes to the construction of Kumanthong as functional and potentially benevolent. In Indonesian and Javanese narratives, by contrast, ideas of harmony between visible and invisible dimensions of existence make improper death or disrupted spiritual transition a source of concern. Bayi Bajang consequently becomes associated with disharmony and danger.

Myths provide narrative foundations for these interpretations, while rituals translate the narratives into repeated social practice. Kumanthong rituals establish a continuing relationship through offerings, prayers, and care. Narratives concerning Bayi Bajang instead emphasize taboo, secrecy, and the consequences of supernatural agreements. Thus, belief supplies a framework of interpretation, myth supplies narrative structure, and ritual reproduces the relationship between supernatural concepts and everyday social life.

## 2.8 Differences in Thai and Indonesian Interpretations

The differences between Kumanthong and Bayi Bajang can be summarized through four dimensions: ritual function, religious legitimacy, social visibility, and moral interpretation. First, Kumanthong rituals are oriented toward protection, prosperity, and reciprocal care, whereas Bayi Bajang narratives are associated with secret practices and spiritual disturbance. Second, Kumanthong occupies an ambiguous but visible position within Thai popular religion, while Bayi Bajang is represented as conflicting with dominant religious and social norms in Indonesia. Third, Kumanthong is materialized through publicly visible statues and amulets, whereas Bayi Bajang is largely transmitted through narrative and frightening visual imagery. Fourth, Kumanthong is generally given a positive or manageable moral status, while Bayi Bajang functions as a warning against transgression.

These differences demonstrate that supernatural categories do not carry fixed meanings across cultures. The infant figure is emotionally powerful in both traditions, but the cultural system determines whether vulnerability is transformed into a symbol of protection or into a symbol of disturbance. Cross-cultural analysis is therefore useful because it prevents a single cultural interpretation from being treated as universal.

## 2.9 Persistence of Mystical Beliefs in Contemporary Society

Kumanthong and Bayi Bajang continue to be culturally meaningful because mystical practices can address emotional and symbolic needs that are not always satisfied by rational or institutional systems. In situations involving uncertainty, economic pressure, grief, or trauma associated with infant loss, supernatural narratives may offer explanations and forms of action that feel immediate, personal, and emotionally controllable. This does not establish the empirical effectiveness of supernatural practices; rather, it helps explain their psychological and social persistence.

From a cognitive perspective, infant spirits may be especially compelling because infants are represented as emotionally intimate, dependent, and vulnerable. These characteristics make them relatively accessible as imagined protectors, companions, or sources of fear. When individuals interpret positive or negative experiences through an existing belief system, those interpretations can be shared within communities and thereby reinforce collective narratives.

Religious context also shapes persistence. In Thailand, popular religious practices provide a visible cultural environment in which Kumanthong can be maintained and commodified. In Indonesia, the moral and religious rejection associated with Bayi Bajang pushes the belief toward secrecy. Paradoxically, secrecy can also strengthen a myth because hidden practices are easily associated with mystery, danger, and forbidden knowledge. The persistence of these traditions should therefore be understood not simply as a consequence of irrationality but as the result of interactions among emotion, cognition, social relationships, economic aspiration, ritual practice, and cultural memory.

## 3. CONCLUSIONS

This cross-cultural study demonstrates that infant-spirit beliefs are culturally produced interpretations rather than universally fixed supernatural categories. Although Kumanthong and Bayi Bajang are both

associated with infant spirits, the two figures acquire different meanings because they are embedded in distinct religious traditions, cosmologies, ritual practices, and moral systems.

The analysis shows that Kumanthong is predominantly constructed within Thai popular religion as a protective and beneficial figure that can be incorporated into domestic and economic life through offerings, prayers, consecration, and reciprocal care. Its cultural visibility is supported by the coexistence of Buddhist, animistic, and local spirit traditions. Bayi Bajang, in contrast, is predominantly constructed in Indonesian and Javanese mystical narratives as a disturbing figure associated with incomplete death, pesugihan, moral transgression, secrecy, and spiritual imbalance.

These differences answer the research questions by showing that cultural beliefs establish interpretive frameworks, myths provide narratives that organize fear and expectation, and rituals reinforce the social meanings attached to supernatural figures. The comparison also shows that religious legitimacy and social visibility are crucial in determining whether an infant spirit becomes a publicly maintained protective figure or a hidden cautionary symbol.

More broadly, infant-spirit narratives reveal how communities negotiate uncertainty, grief, hope, protection, prosperity, and moral boundaries. Their persistence in contemporary society should therefore be examined as a cultural and human phenomenon rather than judged only through a binary distinction between belief and disbelief. Future research could strengthen this comparative framework through ethnographic fieldwork, interviews with practitioners, and analysis of contemporary digital representations of Kumanthong and Bayi Bajang.

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