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Exploring Sacred Narratives: A Cross-Cultural Study of the Eleusinian Mysteries and Sa Worship

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ABSTRACT

The Eleusinian Mysteries, a central Greek ritual centers around the myth of Demeter and Persephone's abduction and reconciliation, symbolizing cycles of agriculture, spiritual renewal, and the afterlife. Parallel yet distinct, China's Dong ethnic group worships Sa, an ancestral mother goddess embodying nature's fertility and communal protection. This cross-cultural study explores how both traditions bridge humanity and the sacred through structured ritual practices. Theologically, they all use motherhood as a universal metaphor for creation and cyclical renewal: the Eleusis ritual achieves spiritual rebirth through purification rituals and symbolic journeys, while Sa Worship harmonizes cosmic forces through temple rituals and collective ancestral ceremonies. Ecologically, both systems reflect ancient stewardship ethics—Eleusis links human life to earth's fecundity, and Sa Worship reinforces communal responsibility for natural resources and ancestral lands. Methodologically, the analysis employs Burkert's ritual theory alongside ethnographic studies of Dong oral traditions, revealing shared responses to universal human anxieties—death, ecological uncertainty, and the need for transcendence. Despite differing epistemologies (elitist initiation vs. communal participation), both traditions construct sacred narratives that transform existential fears into frameworks for resilience. Their ritual grammars offer models for sustainable spirituality in the modern era, demonstrating how agrarian societies developed parallel theologies to navigate life-death cycles and human dependence on nature. This comparison emphasizes the adaptability of specific cultures to archetypal themes while highlighting the eternal ecological wisdom embedded in sacred practices.

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1. Introduction

Humanity's earliest attempts to understand the cycle of life—birth, growth, decline, and rebirth—are deeply rooted in agricultural societies, where survival depended on harmonious relations with nature and ancestors. Two distinct yet spiritually connected traditions emerged from these contexts: the ancient Greek Eleusinian Mysteries (sacred rituals centered on the myth of Demeter and Persephone, symbolizing agricultural cycles and spiritual rebirth) and the worship of Sasui (the maternal ancestral goddess of China's Dong people, embodying nature's fertility and ancestral protection).

Although previous academic studies have carefully analyzed the situation of these traditions within their respective cultural spheres—such as Burkert's^[1] pioneering work on Greek religious morphology and Yang's^[2] ethnographic documentation of Dong ritual practices—their shared theological responses to universal human challenges remain surprisingly underexplored. Most prior studies have focused on intracultural analyses^[1–7], but none have systematically compared how agrarian societies in the Mediterranean and East Asia developed parallel theological systems through maternal symbolism. This gap limits our understanding of the universal mechanisms that link ritual practices to ecological resilience. For example, studies of the Eleusinian Mysteries, from Mylonas'^[3] archaeological reconstruction of the Telesterion to Keller's^[4] focus on epopteia as a ritual journey of spiritual rebirth, primarily focus on its Greek context, dissecting how the Demeter-Persephone myth encoded agricultural cycles and eschatological hopes. Similarly, research on Sa Worship in China—whether debating Sa's identity as a sky goddess^[5], deified ancestress^[6], or heroic figure like Xinni^[7]—has largely remained confined to Dong ethnic studies, where scholars examine her role in fostering social cohesion or ecological stewardship without engaging in comparative theological analysis.

This disciplinary segregation is evident even when themes overlap. For example, while Harris^[8] highlights the Eleusinian Mysteries' role in the formation of a Panhellenic identity through a shared ritual experience and Cao^[6] notes

how Sa Worship reinforces communal responsibility for natural resources in Dong villages, no scholars have yet juxtaposed these practices as two expressions of sacred sociality—where ritual becomes a technology for aligning human communities with the cosmic order. Similarly, Keller's^[4] emphasis on the Eleusinian focus on “purification through symbolic death” and Yang's^[2] description of Sa rituals as “harmonizing human and ancestral realms” both touch on life-death cycles; yet, their commonalities as responses to existential anxieties, such as infertility or fear of death, have not been studied.

Even recent interdisciplinary work, like Woods'^[9] psychological analysis of initiatory transformation in Eleusis or Zhang's^[10] exploration of Sa altars as repositories of matriarchal memory, stops short of connecting these as manifestations of a global generative cosmology that uses maternal symbolism to bridge nature and the sacred. By isolating these traditions, scholars have overlooked how both deploy goddess narratives—Demeter's grief as a metaphor for seasonal loss, and Sa's creation of humans from her own body (as in *The Cotton Mother Hatching Eggs*)—to articulate humanity's dependency on natural cycles, offering parallel theological solutions to the challenge of living with ecological uncertainty.

This study aims to fill this gap by asking the following question: How do these geographically distant traditions converge in their use of rituals and myths to negotiate humanity's place in a world governed by birth, decay, and rebirth—despite each possessing a distinct cultural grammar? By situating Burkert's ritual theory alongside Dong oral traditions and Keller's ecotheological insights, the paper not only discovers differences but also reveals common logics—such as the sacralization of agricultural rhythms or motherhood as a symbol of universal interdependence—that point to a deeper, cross-cultural theology of renewal.

2. Conceptual Framework: Three Dimensions of Inquiry

The core of this study is organized around three interlocking axes. First, it examines how both traditions translate

observations of natural cycles—such as seasonal regeneration and agricultural fertility—into ritualized teachings about the interdependence of humans and the living world. The Eleusinian Mysteries, for example, ritualize Persephone's descent and return as a metaphor for crop cycles, while Sa Worship embodies the Dong people's reverence for nature through maternal deities linked to soil fertility and ancestral stewardship. These practices are not just folklore, but are ecological epistemologies that codify ancient knowledge of biospheric reciprocity.

Second, the goddesses Demeter-Persephone and Sasui are interpreted not as isolated cultural constructs but as regional expressions of female reproductive worship across the Eurasian continent—a symbolic system rooted in agrarian societies, where the productivity of the earth is naturally linked to maternal nurturing. Their common themes—fertility, cyclical rebirth, and community protection—highlight how primitive goddess worship served as both a religious habit and a social technology, stabilizing agricultural communities by aligning human activities with the rhythms of nature.

Third, the study compares how these traditions negotiate the sacred-secular divide. The Eleusinian Mysteries rely on a strictly hierarchical secret initiation ritual (epopteia), revealing transcendental truths through ritualized drama and creating a hierarchy of sacred knowledge. In contrast, Sa Worship embeds the divine in daily life through collective ancestral rituals, communal storytelling, and participatory village ceremonies, where sacred knowledge is accessed through shared practices rather than exclusive revelation. These differing epistemologies—one elitist and idealistic, the other communal and secular—offer distinctly different models for how societies incorporate transcendental knowledge into human experience.

3. Methodological Approach

Methodologically, the study combines textual analysis of classical sources (e.g., Homeric Demeter Hymns, Dong ancestral songs) with ethnographic insights into ritual practices to uncover a shared ethic of reciprocity that transcends the boundaries of time and space. As the following chapters will elaborate, this ethic manifests through four interconnected dimensions:

1. Cultural and Mythical Foundations: Narratives of Life

and Death

2. Ritual Structure and Sacred Practices: Constructing the Sacred and the Social
3. Cosmology and Theology: Nature to Transcendence
4. Social Functions: Cohesion and Ethical Education in the Faith Community

By tracing these threads, the research argues that the Eleusinian Mysteries and Sa Worship offer more than a historical spectacle; they offer a timeless model for reconciling human spiritual and ecological needs—a dialogue that begins in the myths of the past but is directly engaged with the challenges we face now.

4. Theoretical Frameworks and Comparative Analysis

4.1. Cultural and Mythical Foundations: Narratives of Life and Death

The Eleusinian Mysteries and the Sa Worship both emerge from agrarian societies, where dependence on nature shaped religious narratives. The Eleusinian Mysteries originated during the Neolithic Agricultural Revolution. They center on the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Persephone's abduction by Hades causes Demeter's grief. Their story symbolizes seasonal cycles, illustrating how death leads to rebirth. These rituals embodied Greek beliefs in nature's renewal and spiritual hope. Sa Worship arose in Dong matriarchal societies, honoring the goddess Sa as both creator and protector. Oral traditions describe Sa creating humanity through fertility and resilience. These stories highlight the Dong people's respect for nature and ancestors. Though culturally distinct, both traditions explore life, death, and rebirth.

The Eleusinian Mysteries began in the Neolithic period. They grew from agricultural needs tied to the Agricultural Revolution. Central to these rites was "olbos" —wealth associated with fertility, which was considered one of the early aims of the Mysteries^[1]. The myth of Demeter and Persephone, a cornerstone of the Eleusinian Mysteries, is a profound tale of love, loss, and reunion between mother and daughter, rich in symbolic meaning. As recounted in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Persephone is abducted by Hades while gathering flowers, an act orchestrated with Zeus's consent. The hymn narrates this with evocative im-

agery: “Demeter... fair-tressed awesome goddess, herself and her slim-ankled daughter whom Aidoneus seized; Zeus, heavy-thundering and mighty-voiced, gave her...”^[12] This abduction plunges Demeter into despair, and her subsequent wandering in search of Persephone vividly portrays her grief: “For nine days divine Deo roamed over the earth... holding torches ablaze in her hands”^[12] (see **Figure 1**). ”



Figure 1. The Rape of Proserpine, 16th century, Louvre Museum, Paris.

Source: Wikipedia.

The story forms the mythological and spiritual backdrop of the Eleusinian Mysteries, one of the most sacred rites in ancient Greece. The cycle of Persephone’s descent into the underworld and her eventual return symbolizes the changing seasons, with her departure marking the barrenness of winter and her return heralding spring’s renewal. This embodies the Greek belief that death is not an end but a necessary step toward rebirth—a concept reflected in their dependence on, and reverence for, nature.

Demeter’s connection to Eleusis deepens this myth’s spiritual dimensions. Disguised as an old woman, Demeter arrives in Eleusis during her search for Persephone and is received by King Keleos’ daughters. This moment signifies both her integration into human life and her divine power, as she attempts to grant immortality to Demophoon, the mortal child she nurtures: “She would have made him ageless and immortal, if well-girt Metaneira had not, in her folly, kept watch at night from her fragrant chamber and spied”^[12]. ”

Through Demeter’s establishment of sacred rites in Eleusis, the city becomes a focal point for divine-human interaction. The Mysteries symbolized the hope for renewal and the promise of life beyond death, shaping a cornerstone of ancient Greek religion. It is said that “the life of the Greeks

[would be] unlivable, if they were prevented from properly observing the most sacred Mysteries, which hold the whole human race together”^[13]. ”

The Eleusinian Mysteries allowed participants to experience this cycle of life and death through a series of complex initiation rituals. Central to the Mysteries was “epopteia” —the attainment of mystical truths through visual revelation. Participants in the Mysteries gained spiritual insights and explored life’s existential questions through the rituals.

Plato alludes to the far-reaching effects of the Eleusinian Mysteries in the *Phaedrus*, where we find the motifs of sight, bright light, initiation, blessedness, and purification. Plato conceptualizes the dialectical process as a preparatory rite (*muesis*), a cognitive purification enabling aspirants to perceive transcendent Forms. This mirrors the Eleusinian framework, where initiates underwent cathartic rituals to attain the revelatory epopteia—the climactic vision of sacred truths^[14]. In this secret ceremony, participants, through experiencing the sorrows and joys of Demeter and her daughter, gained an understanding of natural cycles and a belief in the resurrection of life. The myths and legends of the Eleusinian Mysteries, along with the philosophical thinking behind them, show how the ancient Greeks used religious rituals to understand the nature of nature and life. Puberty initiation, agrarian magic, and sexuality may unite in the great experience of life overcoming death^[1]. This understanding reflects a worship of the Earth Mother and emphasizes the connection between humanity and nature through symbolic narratives of life, death, and rebirth^[8]. As Cicero puts it, the Eleusinian Mysteries “not only made life more blessed but also provided better hopes regarding death”^[15]. ”

In contrast, the worship of Sa Sui is the most common belief among the Dong people, originating from the worship of the female ancestor Sa. The Dong people regard Sa as the supreme god protecting the nation, and under Sa’s protection, production flourishes, agriculture is plentiful, grains are abundant, and villages are safe and sound^[16]. The origins of this worship can be traced back to the matrilineal society of the Dong people. At that time, Sa Sui, as a god symbolizing motherhood, was not only the creator of life, but also the guardian of peace and harvest in human society.

With regard to the origins of the worship of Sa, it is widely agreed that Sa is revered as the supreme god in Dong culture. However, since the history and culture of the Dong

people rely primarily on oral tradition, scholars such as Wu Wenzhi have proposed that Sa has the characteristics of the sky god and Nv Wa^[5]. He referenced legends such as *The Cotton Mother Hatching Eggs* and *Songs of the Dong Ethnic Group's Ancestors*, which tell how the goddess Sa created human beings and all things. According to the legends, Sa Tianba tried to create human beings from white clay, but since the clay could not be shaped, she wandered in despair until inspiration struck. Suddenly inspiration came to her, and she peeled off fleshy moles from part of her body to form fleshy eggs and created human ancestors through hatching^[2].

There are also some scholars, such as Cao Duanbo, who advocate that Sa is a female ancestor. They note that in the Dong language, “Sa Sui” refers to a deceased grandmother or elderly woman (see **Figure 2**)^[6]. These scholars believe that Sa is a deified grandmother, with her worship stemming from the spiritual legacy of primitive matriarchy. There are still disagreements among scholars as to the specific identity of Sa—whether she is an ancestress, a heroine, a goddess, or a composite understanding.



Figure 2. The Goddess of Sa in Huangdu Dong Village, Tongdao Dong Autonomous County, Hunan Province, China.

Source: Liu Qiong, March 10, 2023.

However, from the perspective of the Dong people, one thing is agreed upon: Sa is omnipotent and serves as the biggest protector of the Dong village. The existence of Sa must be considered when building the village. The altar where Sa is placed is known as the Sa altar. The Dong people believe in many gods, but the highest-ranking deity is Sa Sui, representing the central belief of the Dong ancestors. This myth not only embodies Sa as a symbol of motherhood, but also shows her supremacy in Dong culture. Sa's feminine identity and creativity symbolize the Dong people's reverence for natural vitality and their dependence on maternal power^[17]. Like the Eleusinian Mysteries, the myth of the Sa worship also reflects the worship of Mother Earth.

Thus, despite their origins in entirely different geographical and cultural backgrounds, both are rooted in the worship of the Earth Mother and convey a shared understanding of the cycle of life. The myths and legends of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Sa worship emphasize motherhood, the cycle of life, and the power of nature. The Eleusinian Mysteries reveal the death and rebirth of life through the story of Demeter and Persephone; at the same time, the cult of Sa shows the origin and continuity of life through the creation and protection of the Sa Goddess. Both myths express reverence for the Earth Mother and, through sacred narratives, help people understand and accept the cycle of life and death, emphasizing the close connection between humanity and nature through symbolic narratives of motherhood.

4.2. Ritual Structure and Sacred Practices: Constructing the Sacred and the Social

Rituals are fundamental expressions of belief, using specific ceremonies to convey this faith. As ritual participants enact these ceremonies, they aim to alter the world by imposing order on supernatural forces. Rituals dramatize myths, translating intangible beliefs into collective actions.

The Eleusinian Mysteries (*ta mysteria*) represent one of antiquity's most enduring ritual traditions. Archaeological and textual evidence confirms their practice spanned nearly two millennia, from approximately 1450 BCE to 392 CE. Central to this tradition were the Greater Mysteries—annual rites conducted during the Greek month of Boedromion (roughly equivalent to September), near the time of the autumnal equinox^[4].

During the ceremonies, participants walked in procession from Athens to Eleusis, reenacting the myth of Demeter and Persephone—their separation and joyous reunion. Before the Eleusinian initiation, the mystai all bathe together in the sea near Athens on a certain day^[1]. On the day before the mysteries, priestesses of Demeter and Persephone carried hiera (sacred ritual objects embodying divine presence) from Demeter's sanctuary at Eleusis to Athens. These ritual vessels were borne aloft along the Hieros Hodos—the path initiates would soon traverse in their approach to the Two Goddesses^[4].

The ceremony began on the Day of Gathering (Agyrmos), when initiates were required to swear oaths of silence,

pledging never to reveal their experiences in the ritual. This “silence” calms people’s thinking and penetrates their hearts and spiritual centers. At the same time, the initiates fasted from dawn to sunset to imitate Demeter’s behavior of not eating or drinking while searching for his missing daughter.

The second day involved purification at the Bay of Phaleron, south of Athens. The third day was called Heireia Deur, which means “Bringing the Sacred Sacrifice”^[4]. The newcomers sacrificed a suckling pig, and the officials offered other animals as sacrifices. Delegations from each city-state also brought a tenth of the grain harvest as a gift. On the fourth day, the participants returned from Athens to Eleusis, staging a procession during which torches were lit throughout the night, mimicking Demeter’s anxious search for her daughter (see **Figure 3**).



Figure 3. The night view of the Acropolis of Athens.

Source: Photo by Jannisch, from Wikimedia Commons.

Afterward, the marchers held extinguished torches, waiting in the darkness and extreme silence outside the Temple of Rhexuphus for admission until its gates opened to unveil a dazzling light and usher them into a mystical world. In this profound moment, initiates witnessed powerful visions and participated in sacred rituals. The climax of the ritual was the joyful reunion of mother and daughter after the daughter’s stay and suffering in the underworld, symbolizing the rebirth of life. To conclude the Eleusinian Mysteries, two vessels of a unique form were filled with water and then overturned—one towards the west and one towards the east. To the heavens, one cried ‘rain!’ and to the earth ‘conceive!’—in Greek a play on words: *hye-kye*^[1]. This emphasis on familial love made the Eleusinian Mysteries profoundly influential and spiritually resonant.

Then on the other side of the world, the Dong people’s

worship of Sasui is sometimes a sacred ritual and sometimes a joyful gathering. Generally, the sacrificial ceremonies occur on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month, and the Dong villagers “kill pigs and chickens, set up incense boxes, offer incense and meat, burn paper, blow reed-sheng, light firecrackers, and ask the priest to recite the words of worship to Sasui”^[18]. The sacred rituals strongly connect sacred practice and community welfare. From this sacred ceremony evolved the Festival of the Goddess Sa, a central element of the Dong people’s cultural identity and an important representation of China’s intangible cultural heritage.

For example, in Sanbao Dong Village, Rongjiang County, Guizhou Province, the Festival of Sa is a gathering of the entire ethnic group, usually held in the first or second month of the lunar calendar. During the festival, nearby villagers are invited to celebrate collectively, demonstrating solidarity among the Dong people. People hold hands—either hand in hand or hands on shoulders—around the stone lawn in front of the altar while singing and dancing, praying for Sa to bring blessings, eliminate disasters in the new year, and ensure favorable winds and rain—echoing a similar desire expressed by the Eleusinian participants. Following the main ritual, participants surround the village, concluding by dancing in praise of the Goddess Sa while singing Yege, a song dedicated to the deity.

Individual Dong people may also visit the altar when experiencing specific hardships, such as children’s illness or the loss of livestock. Each Dong village worships the same “Sasui” and has a dedicated manager called “dens sax” . In some villages, the position of “dens sax” is hereditary, while in others, the elders select someone after consulting the oracle, who is responsible for managing the altar and presiding over the sacrificial ceremonies^[6]. The management of the Sasui is usually strict. After discussion with the village elders, a loyal and responsible person is selected to take charge of the management and offer incense and tea. Some aristocratic families are in charge of the altar, and they continue to manage it from generation to generation. The altar’s strict upkeep rules, such as prohibiting children from playing or livestock from approaching, are believed to keep Sasui pleased and maintain peace in the village (see **Figure 4**).

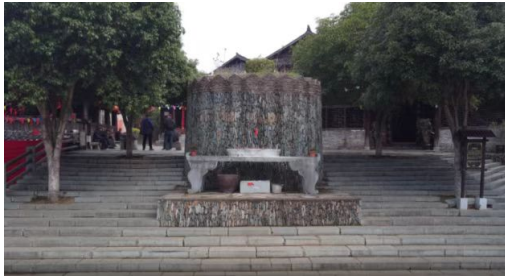


Figure 4. This photograph depicts the Sa altar in Pingtan Village. The village lies within Tongdao Dong Autonomous County, Hunan Province.

Source: Qiong Liu took the image on March 10, 2022.

These rituals link sacred practices to social cohesion. This connection spans from ancient Eleusis to the Dong villages in China. Rituals shape both sacred and social order. Through these processes, cultural values become embedded in collective consciousness. In the Eleusinian mysteries, the reenactment of the myths of Demeter and Persephone establishes bonds among participants that transcend individual experiences, fostering a shared spiritual journey. Similarly, the Dong people's Sa rituals showcase communal identity. These practices emphasize cooperation, shared care, and collective devotion. Rituals invoke divine forces and strengthen human bonds. By merging sacred and social purposes, rituals forge meanings that transcend time. These meanings unite communities across spiritual and earthly realms.

4.3. Cosmology and Theology: Nature to Transcendence

Ancient Greeks viewed the Mysteries as divine teachings. They believed the gods imparted sacred knowledge through these rituals. Eleusinian rites were seen as vital to human survival. These practices merged purification, immortality, and communion with the divine. Core themes included death, rebirth, and eternal life. Rebirth and eternity have long anchored humanity's spiritual quest. The Mysteries addressed this by framing death as a threshold to transcendence. Rituals transformed existential fears into hope. They offered symbolic pathways to spiritual liberation. In essence, the Eleusinian tradition linked natural cycles to cosmic truths. It affirmed that mortal life connects to a timeless divine order. The Eleusian Mysteries constructed a complex structure of death, rebirth, and eternal life in the afterlife, presenting the Greeks with a beautiful and fulfilling vision of the afterlife. The pursuit of a joyful afterlife

and eternal life became the relentless focus of religious and mystical rituals for thousands of years thereafter.

For the Greeks, the Eleusinian Mysteries made life and death less frightening, diminishing the specter of wandering around Tartarus. In this regard, all sources, from the *Hymn to Demeter to Aristophanes*, share a common view of the afterlife that initiates will enjoy, thereby distinguishing them from the uninitiated. This eschatological aspect of the Mysteries seems to have appealed to candidates who came to Eleusis to gain some kind of knowledge and to ensure a better fate after death^[11]. The ancient Greeks believed that participating in the worship of Demeter granted them divine protection.

Plato's *Symposium* posits that transcendent devotion to the Forms emerges through an ascent from corporeal desire—a process that mirrors the Eleusinian initiatory framework. Just as initiates first underwent preparatory rites (muesis) and pragmatic Lesser Mysteries to access the revelatory Greater Mysteries, philosophical enlightenment requires transmuting earthly eros into noetic awakening^[14]. Plato frames the philosophical aspirant as burdened by intellectual naivety and epistemic contamination, necessitating a cathartic process. This is dramatized in *Symposium* 199b-201c, where Socrates' elenctic interrogation of Agathon exposes conceptual frailties—a dialectical purgation paralleling the cathartic protocols of Mystery rites^[14]. Plato's allegorical narrative structures philosophy as a ritualized progression. By framing the pursuit of wisdom as an intellectual pilgrimage from ignorance to revelation—imbued with sacralized metaphors of sight—he elevates dialectic into a hierophantic act. The text's rhetorical architecture mirrors Eleusinian initiation: readers traverse layered paradoxes, their cognitive dissonance (anxiety, awe, doubt) gradually resolving into the luminous certainty of Form-contemplation. This textual choreography transforms philosophical inquiry into a ritualized spiritual endeavor, paralleling Mystery rites where sacred visions (*autopsia*) catalyzed existential reorientation^[14].

For the Dong people, the Goddess Sa is all-powerful; therefore, due to the matter's significance, they are accustomed to first offering sacrifices to Sa to obtain her protection. They also fear committing bad deeds, as it may anger Sa and cause her to depart, which means they would no longer receive her blessings.

In the village of Dutong, located in the Dong Au-

tonomous County of Sanjiang, Guangxi, the Sa altar features a thousand-year-old statue carved from submerged wood, accompanied by a tripod, fire tongs, cooking pots, hoes, silver ornaments, a shimmering white stone streaked with swallow excrement, fire pit ashes, and items such as water from a river whirlpool, a double lotus, a nine-tiered ant nest, tiger dung from a remote mountain, floating plants from an ancient tree hollow, a snail, and a grapevine hanging across a stream. These sacred objects reflect the social activities of gathering, fishing, hunting, and human reproduction within the matriarchal clan society, expressing collective emotions and beliefs and emphasizing an experience of the “waters of life” and the veneration of sexual vitality and fertility^[10]. Sa Worship embodies a cosmological view of spiritual reverence for stones, mountains, and other natural elements^[2].

Sa worship among the Dong people emphasizes the sacredness of nature and its vital life force. They regard nature as an essential part of human existence, venerating elements such as mountains, rivers, and trees—believing in the presence of divine spirits and mystical powers within nature. This understanding reveals how they grasped natural cycles, life’s rhythms, and universal laws. Sa Worship emphasizes balance and harmony, teaching that humans must nurture ties with nature, ancestors, and the spiritual realm. This triad—nature, ancestry, and life—anchors their belief system.

Both traditions emphasize natural and cosmic cycles, linking the physical world to sacred forces. The Eleusinian Mysteries used Persephone’s journey to symbolize rebirth and eternal life, offering participants hope for spiritual immortality and a blessed afterlife. Plato interpreted these rites as purification processes framing them as philosophical tools to approaching the divine beyond myth. In contrast, Sa Worship views nature itself as inherently divine, with spiritual power flowing directly from the earth in Dong cosmology. Sa’s role as life-giver and protector underscored a sacred balance. Nature and humanity coexisted through this equilibrium. Both systems pursue spiritual transcendence through interaction with the divine—celebrating the earth’s cyclical rebirth. For the Dong, it involved ancestral spirits guarding the natural order.

4.4. Social Functions: Cohesion and Ethical Education in the Faith Community

Etymologically, “Eleusis” means “the place of happy

arrival” and is connected to the blissful realm “Elysion.” The initiation ceremony, unique to the Eleusian Rite, is highly mystical, as if it could communicate with the gods and the congregation, and establish a one-to-one channel between them. Thus, in the Greek-speaking world, the secret rites of Eleusis, emphasizing purification, union with the divine, and the promise of happiness in the afterlife, attracted increasing numbers of followers. Participants underwent an experience in conditions of secrecy, which was associated with the deities of the ritual and believed to convey special benefits, often of an eschatological nature. The experience was often intense and might generate a strong affective bond between worshipper and divinity^[19]. This form of religion is based on salvation, capable of transforming and regenerating the individual, allowing them to transcend their ordinary identity and enter a higher level of existence. Isocrates, a prominent Athenian orator and rhetorician, believed that the Eleusinian Mysteries offered initiates both spiritual fulfillment and the hope of a blessed afterlife. In *Panegyricus*, he states that “The mysteries give the faithful the pleasant promise of the fulfillment of life and the afterlife^[20].” As *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (480-482) declares, “Blessed is the mortal on earth who has seen these rites, but the uninitiate who has no share in them never has the same lot once dead in the dreary darkness^[12].”

The worship of Demeter was fundamentally tied to agricultural abundance, originating in the Neolithic era when women primarily cultivated the land and actively participated in related rituals. In the Eleusinian Mysteries, the hope of the Eleusinians lay in the vision of holy objects shown to initiates, rather than in a mystical union with the god of salvation. In ancient Greece, the earth goddess, the serpent goddess, and the underworld were deeply interconnected, and this relationship was primarily maintained by the Eleusinian mysteries, through which the initiate was given a ticket to a place of bliss in the afterlife. Unlike many other religions, the Eleusinian Mysteries were open to all types of people, including men and women of all ages, foreigners, and slaves. According to Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book 8, chapter 65, section 4, “All Athenians and other Greeks who have the desire to do so may be admitted. The only ones excluded are those who do not speak Greek, those guilty of murder, and the Persians after the Persian Wars”^[21]. These initiates came from all directions, representing people from various walks

of life. The sacrificial rituals were originally local, but due to the widespread growth of the congregation, they became popular throughout Greece.

During the festival, initiates do various activities such as roaming, seeking, mourning, or laughing, mimicking the actions of the goddess. This allows participants to develop an intimate relationship with Demeter. From this perspective, the experience of the Mysteries cannot be provided by a “standard sacrificial ritual.” Through the ritual experience and the acquisition of sacred knowledge, participants internalize ethical concepts such as perseverance, sacrifice, and hope. This kind of ethical education not only purifies and uplifts the individual but also reinforces shared values and moral norms at the social level.

The Dong people’s worship of Sa Sui is widely accepted among them. Although the details of the belief in Sa Sui vary from place to place, the core content remains consistent: Sa is regarded as the common grandmother, Sa is omnipotent, and Sa worship is reflected in all aspects of Dong life.

When the Dong people face significant events or disasters, they invite the goddess Sa and pray for her protection. With Sa’s blessings, the village becomes peaceful and harmonious, and the people devote themselves to good deeds, fearing that wrongdoing will anger the Sa and bring misfortune. Through sacrificial rituals, myths and legends, the worship of the Goddess Sa teaches the Dong people to respect nature and revere their ancestors. During the ceremony, elders pass on traditional moral standards and codes of conduct to the younger generation, emphasizing respect for the elderly, love for the young, unity and mutual assistance. These ethical teachings strengthen harmony within families and communities, while preserving cultural traditions across generations.

The Eleusinian Mysteries and Sa Worship each played an important role in their respective societies. These rituals enhanced their community in different ways. For the Greeks, the Mysteries united different groups—men, women, slaves, and foreigners all participated equally. This inclusiveness established a common identity centered on redemption and sacred connection. The rites teach ethics like perseverance and hope. Such lessons help people cope with life’s uncertainties. In Dong communities, Sa Worship promotes harmony through shared values, with respect for nature and ancestors. Rituals serve to pass down moral codes, emphasizing

respect for elders, community unity, and ethical behavior. Participants seek the blessings of Sa through precise rituals, reinforcing the norms that ensure survival and prosperity.

5. Conclusion

The Eleusinian Mysteries and Sa Worship are culturally and geographically distinct, yet both share core themes: spiritual transcendence, reverence for nature, and the cycle of life and death. These rituals meet the universal human needs, seeking harmony with nature and a deeper understanding of life’s cycles. This study explores their myths and rituals, revealing the connection between spiritual pursuit and ecological truth. The Eleusinian Mysteries use symbols of light and darkness alongside seasonal changes to portray death as a gateway to eternal life, offering hope beyond death. Sa worship celebrates the earth’s fertility, linking cultural identity with community harmony and ancestor worship. Both traditions contain ethical and ecological wisdom. Rituals promote interconnection within the universe and social unity. The Eleusinian Mysteries teach self-discipline, and the illusion of an afterlife to alleviate fears of survival. Meanwhile, the cult of Sa is based on the ethical foundation of environmental reciprocity, emphasizing respect for the connection between nature and ancestors.

Today, both traditions inform debates on ecology and spirituality. Their insights help modern people strive to address environmental crises and cultural dissonance. Mysticism focuses on cyclical renewal, which coincides with the current concept of sustainable development. The “earth-centered ethos” of Sa worship is a model of overall management. This comparison shows how the two traditions transcend cultural boundaries. They offer models for sustainable living, integrating myth, ritual, and ecology to promote harmony with the mysteries of life.

However, this study has certain limitations, particularly regarding the depth and breadth of cross-cultural comparison. Future research could expand the research object and include more cultural cases to verify the universality of the findings. Additionally, fieldwork and participant observation can be added to the methodology to deepen the understanding of ritual practices. It is hoped that this study offers fresh perspectives for cross-cultural religious research and contributes valuable academic insights toward addressing contemporary

ecological and spiritual challenges.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, N.C. and Q.L.; methodology, N.C.; formal analysis, N.C.; investigation, N.C.; resources, Q.L.; writing—original draft preparation, N.C.; writing—review and editing, Q.L.; visualization, Q.L.; supervision, Q.L.; project administration, Q.L.. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study does not involve human or animal research. The research is focused on a comparative analysis of ancient mythological and religious rituals, and no human or animal subjects were involved. Therefore, ethical approval and consent were not required for this study.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. All supporting evidence is derived from existing scholarly sources cited throughout the article and listed in the references.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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