

Article

Digital Mediation and Cultural Sustainability of Sacred Heritage in Cyprus: Communicative Memory Across a Divided Island

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Abstract

Cultural sustainability represents a crucial pillar of sustainable development, highlighting the need to preserve and transmit cultural values, memories, and practices across generations. Within this broader sustainability framework, this study investigates how digital mediation supports the cultural sustainability of religious heritage in Cyprus, a politically divided island where sacred architecture embodies both spiritual meaning and collective identity. The research focuses on two sacred sites situated on opposite sides of the border, the St. Mamas Monastery in Morphou and the Hala Sultan Tekke in Larnaka, to explore how online representations of faith act as emotional and mnemonic acts of connection. Using a qualitative approach, 480 Facebook posts shared within two online communities ("I Love Morphou" and "Hala Sultan Tekke") were analysed through critical discourse and visual representation analysis. The findings reveal two affective patterns: nostalgic spirituality shaped by loss and remembrance, and ritualistic spirituality grounded in continuity and participation. Through the concept of Ontological Participation (Yılmaz, 2019), the study redefines digital religion as lived experience rather than mere representation. By linking digital heritage to the cultural aspect of sustainability, the research demonstrates that online sacred narratives can preserve emotional heritage and sustain cross-communal cultural bonds in divided societies.

Keywords: Cultural sustainability, Digital religion, Communicative memory, Cyprus, St. Mamas Monastery

Introduction

Cyprus is one of the most intricate geographies of cultural memory in the Eastern Mediterranean. Throughout history, the island has served as a crossroads of faiths, languages, and political powers, creating a multilayered structure that has generated diverse identities both spatially and emotionally. This historical accumulation has left profound traces not only on the divided geography of the island but also on its modes of remembrance, religious representations, and everyday practices. The political division of 1974 reshaped not only territorial boundaries but also how people relate to the sacred and to the past (Anderson, 1983; Assmann, 2011; Yılmaz, 2019a). In the context of what Bauman (2000) calls "liquid modernity," such boundaries of identity and memory have become increasingly fluid, allowing faith and belonging to be reconstructed through new digital spaces.

Within the broader framework of sustainable development, cultural sustainability has emerged as a crucial dimension that emphasises the protection, transmission, and reinterpretation of cultural heritage and memory across generations. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11.4 highlights the importance of strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural

heritage. As Ricoeur (2004) argues, remembering is not merely a neutral recollection but a selective and interpretive act that connects past narratives to present meanings. In this regard, Cyprus provides a valuable case for examining how cultural and religious heritage contribute to sustaining collective identity and intercommunal dialogue in divided societies (de Vries, 2013; Erll, 2011; Hall, 1997).

This study focuses on two sacred sites located on opposite ends of the island: the St. Mamas Monastery (Aziz Mamas) in the north, currently functioning as an icon museum, and the Hala Sultan Tekke in the south. Following Eliade's (1959) conceptualisation of sacred space as the intersection of the sacred and the profane, these sites can be understood as spiritual centres that structure both personal devotion and communal identity. Although these locations belong to different religious traditions – Orthodox Christianity and Islam, respectively – they both hold a strong emotional resonance within the island's collective memory. Boym's (2001) notion of "reflective nostalgia" is particularly relevant here, as these digital memories do not simply seek to restore the past but reimagine it through shared emotion and mediated connection.

In Facebook communities dedicated to these sites, digital representations of both locations not only reproduce nostalgia and spirituality but also reveal how faith, identity, and belonging are re-experienced in digital spaces. Posts related to the St. Mamas Monastery often express themes of loss, longing, and remembrance, whereas those concerning the Hala Sultan Tekke emphasise prayer, spirituality, and ritual continuity (Assmann, 2011; Campbell, 2013; Yilmaz, 2019a). Scholarly works on the art-historical significance, morphological structure, and iconographic features of the St. Mamas Monastery (Holy Bishopric of Morphou, 2002; Jones & Milward Jones, 2010; Sabır, 2002) underscore the site's importance for both religious and cultural identity. Similarly, Gunnis (1973) describes Cyprus's sacred spaces as inseparable elements of the island's history.

Within this context, the primary aim of the present study is to explore how digital media transform experiences of religious memory, identity, and belonging. The study approaches the digital realm not merely as a representational surface but as a lived experiential domain. This perspective aligns with the growing discourse in digital-religion studies concerning the existential dimension of mediation (Hjarvard, 2011; Hoover, 2006; Silverstone, 2007). Digital space is therefore understood not only as a medium that transmits belief but also as a plane of existence where belief is lived, felt, and shared. The theoretical foundation of this research is based on Yilmaz's (2019a) model of Imagined Proximities, which expands Anderson's (1983) Imagined Communities into an emotional and ontological framework.

By integrating theories of cultural memory with digital-religion studies, this research approaches faith practices in digital environments as a form of living memory. It aims to demonstrate how online religious representations are reproduced not only communicatively but also on existential and emotional levels.

Hence, digital religion is understood not as the transmission of faith but as the digital embodiment of belief itself (Yilmaz, 2019a).

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon an interdisciplinary theoretical foundation that combines cultural memory theory, visual ideology, and ontological participation to examine how religious heritage is mediated and sustained through digital platforms. The framework builds on the works of Anderson (1983), Assmann (2011), Hall (1997), and Yilmaz (2019, 2025), integrating concepts of collective remembrance, digital representation, and existential participation.

Cultural Memory and Digital Continuity

Cultural memory is not only a way for a society to remember its past but also a process through which it continually reconstructs itself. Jan Assmann (2011, pp. 25–27) defines cultural memory as an institutionalised form of remembrance transmitted across generations through rituals, symbols, and narratives. This form of remembering is collective rather than individual; people learn about the past not from their own experiences but through shared cultural carriers.

According to Assmann, cultural memory functions as a means of transcending time through material spaces, symbolic actions, and sacred narratives. A tomb, church, or shrine is therefore not merely a site of worship but a space in which collective memory is embodied. In the contemporary era, however, this memory continues not only in physical spaces but also within digital ones. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have become digital extensions of sacred places, transforming into memory spaces where faith and identity bonds are reconstructed (Erll, 2011, pp. 12–14; de Vries, 2013, pp. 87–89).

Paul Connerton (1989, pp. 41–43) emphasises that cultural memory is experienced through bodily habits and rituals. Acts such as visiting, praying, or lighting candles are embodied forms of remembrance. Today, these acts have been transposed into digital environments: writing “amen” under a post, sharing sacred images, or participating in online prayer chains have become new ritualised forms of remembering. This shows that digital memory operates not only symbolically but also as an embodied and emotional experience (Yilmaz, 2019a, p. 142).

Edward Casey (2000, pp. 184–186) highlights the relationship between memory and place, noting that remembering a location depends as much on emotional associations as on physical engagement with it. Sacred sites such as the Hala Sultan Tekke and the St. Mamas Monastery appear in Facebook posts not merely as photographs but as emotional presences. Even when individuals cannot physically access these sites, they re-experience them through digital representations. At this point, digital media create a mnemonic topography that virtually reconstructs place (Assmann, 2011, pp. 26–27; Casey, 2000, p. 185; Yilmaz and Bektaş, 2019b, p. 63).

Astrid Erll (2011, pp. 36–38) argues that cultural memory is continuously rewritten over time as each representation adapts the past to the present. From this

perspective, digital sharing is not only an act of remembering but also a reconfiguration of the past itself. In the case of Cyprus, online narratives generate new forms of memory that unite past and present, longing and hope. Remembering St. Mamas or sharing a prayer about the Hala Sultan Tekke becomes not only a religious act but also a digital way of declaring “we are still here” (Yılmaz, 2019a, p. 144).

In this context, the concept of Ontological Participation provides a valuable framework for explaining how cultural memory takes new forms in digital environments. Yılmaz (2025, pp. 1458–1460) emphasises that faith in digital spaces is not merely represented but emotionally lived. Digital memory does more than recall the past; it feels and reanimates it. Online communities thus extend Assmann’s idea of cultural continuity into a new dimension: digital continuity.

Ultimately, digital platforms create a new kind of ritual space that prevents the past from being forgotten. This space compensates for the absence of physical sites and sustains remembrance, sharing, and belonging. These digitally mediated acts of remembering allow individuals to preserve and rearticulate their identities (Yılmaz, 2019a, p. 145).

Discourse, Visual Ideology, and Representation

Social identities are shaped not only by individual forms of belonging but also through practices of representation. Stuart Hall (1997, pp. 44–46) defines cultural representation as the process through which meaning is produced, circulated, and fixed. Representation does not simply reflect reality; it constructs it. Media images, therefore, do not merely depict something; they determine how that thing is seen.

From this perspective, visual materials such as photographs, symbols, flags, and icons act as carriers of ideological discourse. Roland Barthes (1977, pp. 36–38) argues that images generate myths, meanings that appear natural and universal but are in fact culturally constructed. This is especially evident in representations of sacred sites. An image of the St. Mamas Monastery conveys not only an architectural structure but also the notion of a lost homeland. Similarly, posts featuring the Hala Sultan Tekke do more than display a place of worship; they construct a narrative implying spiritual continuity (Yılmaz and Bektaş, 2019b, pp. 63–64).

Norman Fairclough (1995, pp. 77–79) views language within critical discourse analysis as a domain where social power is established and reproduced. His triadic model of text, discourse, and social practice reveals the ideological nature of media representations. Likewise, Wodak’s (2009, pp. 38–39) Discourse-Historical Approach situates discourse within its historical context, showing how distinctions between us and the other are constructed. This framework is particularly important in divided societies like Cyprus, where the media play a central role in maintaining identity boundaries.

On digital platforms, discourse takes shape not only through textual elements but also through images and user interactions. Nicholas Mirzoeff (2015, pp. 44–46) defines digital visibility as a field of power and visibility in which what can be shown and what remains unseen reflect the ideological dynamics of representation. A Facebook post beneath a church photograph reading “Morphou is ours,” or a comment under a Hala Sultan image saying “I prayed,” constructs two distinct yet parallel discursive worlds: one reproduces national belonging, while the other affirms religious continuity.

At this point, representation ceases to be a mere reflection and becomes a form of participation. As Yilmaz (2019a, pp. 143–145; 2025, pp. 1458–1460) emphasises, digital images do not only make the ideological field visible; they also invite users into it emotionally. Visual discourse, therefore, transforms the viewer from a passive observer into an active and feeling participant. This dynamic represents the visual-ideological dimension of Yilmaz’s concept of Ontological Participation, in which the user becomes not only a spectator but an engaged and emotional being.

Ultimately, visual representation in digital faith communities performs both ideological and emotional functions. When Hall’s theory of representation, Barthes’s semiotics, Wodak’s discourse analysis, and Yilmaz’s concept of ontological participation intersect, it becomes clear that digital sacred images are not mere symbols but emotional spaces of interaction. This affective engagement not only reproduces collective memory but also strengthens the individual’s connection to faith (Yilmaz and Bektaş, 2019b, p. 64; Silverstone, 2007, p. 14).

Ontological Participation and the Experience of Being in Digital Religiosity

The concept of Ontological Participation in this study is based on the premise that digital religious practices are experienced not merely at a representational level but on an existential plane. This concept derives from Yilmaz’s (2019a, pp. 143–145) model of Imagined Proximities, which extends Anderson’s (1983, pp. 6–7) idea of imagined communities into an emotional and cultural framework. In examining identity construction through ideological media representations, Yilmaz emphasises that communication is not only the transmission of information but also a form of emotional and ontological connection. This connection defines a kind of participation in which individuals engage not only with mediated images but also through a sense of existential belonging.

In this research, ontological participation refers to the idea that sacred experience in digital environments occurs not solely through images or representations but as a form of spiritual engagement felt within one’s being. Thus, digital acts of prayer, sharing, or remembrance are not representations but performances. Silverstone (2007, p. 14) states that media constitute a moral and ontological space in which individuals do not simply consume content but also constitute themselves. In this respect, Yilmaz’s (2019a, pp. 143–145) approach situates media within the concept of affective co-being, while her later work (Yilmaz, 2025, pp. 1458–1460) expands this framework by connecting it to the ideological and representational dimensions

of the culture industry. Consequently, forms of online faith emerge not only as representations but also as manifestations of ideological and emotional participation.

This concept establishes a structural dialogue with both Assmann's (2011, pp. 25–27) notion of cultural memory and Hall's (1997, pp. 44–46) theory of representation. Cultural memory is a mode through which communities construct identity via acts of remembering; yet in the digital age, remembrance has become intertwined with embodied and visual interaction. Ontological participation, in this sense, suggests that memory is reproduced not only cognitively but also emotionally and performatively. Therefore, a prayer shared in a Facebook post or a comment saying "May God accept" under an old photograph does not function merely as a representation but as an act of being, a manifestation of faith embodied in digital form.

In this regard, ontological participation constitutes an experience-centred theoretical framework that transcends both Anderson's concept of imagination and Silverstone's ethics of mediation. Here, faith is not merely an internal emotion but a shared lived experience expressed through digital gestures such as comments, emojis, shares, and visual prayers. This extends beyond what Yilmaz (2019a, p. 62) previously described as the reproduction of identity discourse through media, revealing how individuals construct digital communities to which they feel ontologically connected.

Ultimately, ontological participation represents a new conceptual threshold for explaining digital forms of faith and belonging. It demonstrates that digital religiosity creates a realm of experience beyond representation, where individuals inhabit media not simply as a communicative tool but as a mode of being. In this sense, digital sacredness should be understood not as representation but as the digitalisation of presence; faith no longer resides in the image, but in participation itself.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design structured around digital ethnography (Pink, 2016; Kozinets, 2020) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Wodak, 2009). The aim was to examine digital memory and faith discourses within Facebook communities associated with two sacred sites in Cyprus: the St. Mamas Monastery (Aziz Mamas) and the Hala Sultan Tekke.

Data Sources and Collection

Data were gathered from two public Facebook communities: (1) I Love Morphou, a group operated by members of the Greek Cypriot diaspora displaced from Morphou after 1974, dedicated to commemorating the St. Mamas Monastery; and (2) Hala Sultan Tekke, a community sharing pilgrimage experiences, prayers, and expressions of devotion related to the Hala Sultan in Larnaka.

A total of 480 posts, including text, images, and comment interactions, were collected between October 2023 and September 2024. Only publicly available content directly related to religious heritage, memory, and cultural identity was analysed. All data were archived, anonymised, and organised for qualitative interpretation in accordance with ethical research standards (Yılmaz, 2019a, pp. 122–125).

Analytical Framework

The dataset was analysed through a triangulated approach combining Critical Discourse Analysis and visual representation analysis. Three interpretive dimensions guided the analysis: (a) Memory and identity discourses, exploring narratives of loss, nostalgia, and belonging; (b) Digital ritual and affective participation, focusing on prayers, gestures, and comment-based interactions; (c) Visual ideology and representation, interpreting sacred imagery as ideological and emotional symbols.

This integrated framework provided a comprehensive understanding of how sacred memory and communal identity are emotionally and symbolically sustained within digital environments.

Ethical and Practical Considerations

All materials were collected from open-access Facebook pages; no human subjects were directly involved. Any identifiable information was anonymised to ensure privacy. The study complies with international ethical standards for digital research and adheres to GDPR and open-data principles. The anonymised dataset and analytical coding framework are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author. No proprietary, confidential, or restricted data was used.

Results and Discussion

St. Mamas Monastery (Aziz Mamas): Posts shared within the “I Love Morphou” Facebook community primarily revolve around themes of longing, loss, and emotional attachment. Black-and-white photographs, old church images, and comments such as “Morphou is never forgotten” reflect Assmann’s (2011, p. 27) concept of ritualised remembrance. In these posts, faith operates not only as a religious bond but also as a political act of memory.

The us–them discourse described by Yılmaz (2019a, p. 63) is clearly visible in the group’s digital reproduction of identity. Users combine religious imagery, such as saint icons and church interiors, with national symbols like flags, maps, and captions including “our homeland,” illustrating Wodak’s (2009, p. 90) historical legitimisation topoi. This establishes a symbiotic relationship between digital faith and political memory.

According to Hall’s (1997, p. 47) theory of representation, these images can be read as recoded national symbols. The sacred functions as both a sign of faith and a

discursive ground for the claim of rights and belonging. Yılmaz (2025, p. 1460) defines this dynamic as the political form of ontological participation, transforming emotional attachment into an existential declaration of identity.

Visual materials from the “I Love Morphou” group (Figures 1–6) illustrate how nostalgia and sacred memory are digitally reproduced. Images of the St. Mamas Monastery, now functioning as an icon museum, evoke a sacred yet lost space, reinforcing emotional belonging and collective remembrance. Similarly, visual representations from the “Hala Sultan Tekke” group (Figures 7–12) demonstrate a continuity of ritual shaped by compassion, prayer, and collective participation. These visuals show that digital environments have become spaces where religious practices and emotional experiences are sustained beyond physical boundaries.

Hala Sultan Tekke: The Digital Continuity of Ritual

In the “Hala Sultan Tekke” Facebook community, visual and textual posts focus mainly on prayer, visitation, and spiritual experience. Unlike the nostalgic melancholy found in “I Love Morphou,” participation here expresses continuity and gratitude. Photographs of raised hands in prayer, selfies under the shrine’s dome, and comments such as “May God bless you” correspond to Silverstone’s (2007, p. 14) notion of moral space, where faith is enacted through digital means.

Hall’s (1997, p. 52) theory of representation is reaffirmed in these visuals: faith is not simply shown but performed. Yılmaz (2025, p. 1459) describes this as the embodied performance of digital faith. Comments and emojis reflect Ahmed’s (2014, p. 9) concept of the stickiness of emotions, as each “amen” generates affective circulation.

Overall, the representations on the Hala Sultan Tekke page reveal the ritual dimension of ontological participation. This extends Assmann’s (2011) concept of cultural memory into the digital era, demonstrating how faith continues through mediated rituals and digital participation.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has shown how the sacred sites of St. Mamas Monastery and Hala Sultan Tekke in Cyprus are represented within digital environments and how these representations reshape experiences of faith, belonging, and identity. The findings reveal that digital religiosity is not merely symbolic but a participatory field in which individuals are existentially engaged. The study expands Yılmaz’s (2019a, pp. 143–145) concept of ontological participation, originally derived from the Imagined Proximities model, offering new insights into digital memory and faith.

The nostalgic discourse within the “I Love Morphou” community demonstrates, in line with Assmann’s (2011, p. 25) notion of cultural memory, that the past is not simply remembered but re-lived. The “Hala Sultan Tekke” community, by contrast, emphasises the continuity of faith through digital rituals. Prayers, photographs, and expressions of gratitude embody Silverstone’s (2007, p. 14) definition of media as a moral space. Digital acts thus become effective forms of participation that complement and recreate physical worship.

In both communities, the emotional circulation observed through posts can be interpreted via Ahmed's (2014, p. 9) idea of the stickiness of emotions. In St. Mamas' content, feelings of longing and loss intertwine with national belonging, while in Hala Sultan's posts, peace and gratitude reinforce collective spirituality. This contrast shows that ontological participation functions not only as representation but also as an emotional and existential differentiation between communities.

These visual narratives reveal that digital platforms function as emotional and ontological extensions of sacred spaces. Through mediated rituals and collective participation, sacred places such as the St. Mamas Monastery and the Hala Sultan Tekke sustain religious identity and memory beyond physical borders. Thus, digital religion operates both as representation and as lived experience.

Ultimately, digital religiosity should be understood as a practice of faith that shifts from representation to experience. Yılmaz's (2025, pp. 1458–1460) concept of ontological participation allows us to interpret digital interactions not merely as communicative practices but as modes of being. Media, therefore, emerge as an ontological realm where faith is lived, memory is reconstructed, and belonging is emotionally and spiritually felt.

The digital sphere functions simultaneously as an archive and a sanctuary. Individuals engage with the past and re-enact their faith within it. The concept of ontological participation provides a new framework for understanding this process, showing that faith practices in the digital realm are no longer representational but existential experiences.

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Supplementary Materials

The following supporting information can be downloaded at:

Facebook Group: Hala Sultan Tekke. (2025, October 10).
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/576494099098223>

Facebook Group: I Love Morphou. (2025, October 10).
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1636398426682992>

Appendix A

"I Love Morphou" Facebook Group

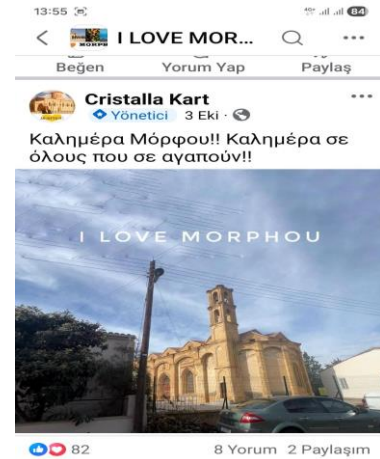
(Memory, Nostalgia, and Digital Identity Representations)



F.1



F.2



F.3

Figure 1. Cover image of the "I Love Morphou" group – a landscape from the Morphou region and a citrus symbol, emphasising digital nostalgia and collective identity. (Facebook, 2025)

Figure 2. St. Mamas Church – a digital practice where faith merges with collective memory.

Figure 3. St. Mamas Church – a digitized form of space and cultural continuity



F.4



F.5



F.6

Figure 4. Nostalgic post – a ritual of remembrance after migration

Figure 5. St. Mamas Church – the digital representation of spatial

Figure 6. Visiting activity – community participation and the transmission of digital ritual

Appendix B

“Hala Sultan Tekke” Facebook Group (Ritual, Digital Religiosity, and Community Participation)



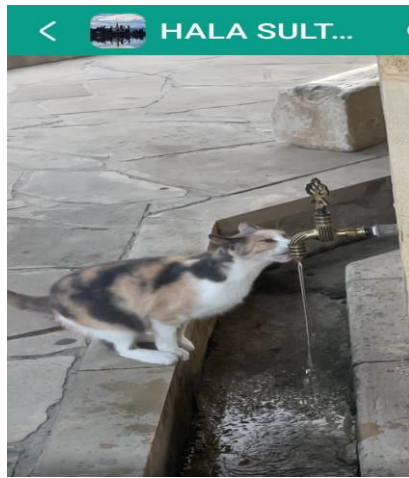
HALA SULTAN TEKKE >

Üyelere Özel grup · 1.024 üye

Katıldın ▼

Davet Et

F.7



F.8



F.9

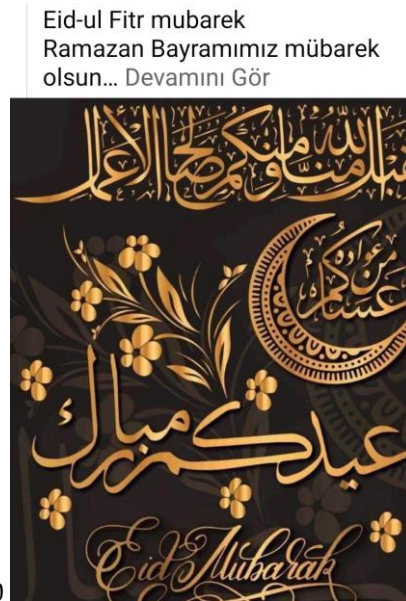
Figure 7. Hala Sultan Tekke

Figure 8. A cat drinking water at the Tekke – associating the sacred place with compassion and life. (Facebook, 2025)

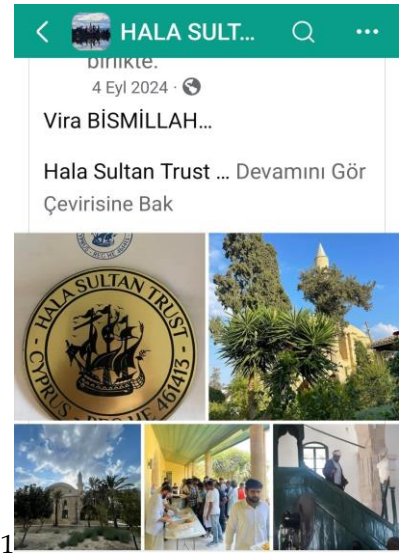
Figure 9. General view of the Hala Sultan Tekke – digital representation of spatial sacredness



F.10



F.11



F.12

Figure 10. Post about the pilgrimage process – digital religious education and awareness.

Figure 11. Eid greeting post – an expression of online religious emotionality.

Figure 12. Visiting activity – community participation and the transmission of digital ritual

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