

Isan worldview in the Khon Kaen version of the 'Suriyawong' literature

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Abstract: This study explores the Isan worldview as depicted in the Khon Kaen version of the *Suriyawong* literature, using the structural theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp to analyze its narrative and cultural elements. The Isan worldview encompasses perspectives on social roles, nature, and the supernatural, reflecting the beliefs, values, and social structures of Isan society. The analysis under Lévi-Strauss's framework reveals binary oppositions that underline the values of honor, gender roles, respect for hierarchy, and the relationship between humans and the supernatural. Propp's morphological approach further dissects the narrative roles, where characters embody specific functions such as heroes, villains, and helpers, each reinforcing cultural values through their journeys, trials, and moral decisions.

This research is qualitative, utilizing a combination of literature review and field data from informants knowledgeable in Isan culture. The findings highlight the distinctive characteristics of Isan folk literature, particularly its focus on karmic law, respect for spiritual beliefs, and deep ties to nature. *Suriyawong* not only serves as a medium for entertainment but also conveys moral lessons central to Isan philosophy, emphasizing perseverance, loyalty, and the impact of one's actions on fate. This study enhances the understanding of how traditional Isan narratives function as cultural artifacts, preserving and transmitting essential values across generations.

Keywords: Thai Literature, Isan Literature, Worldview, Khon Kaen, Floklöre

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is a form of art that communicates thoughts and emotions through the medium of language. Literature that is praised by others for its quality is called 'classical literature' (or 'literary classics') and is passed down until it becomes a cultural heritage. This heritage serves as a repository of knowledge and life experiences, accumulated and transmitted by scholars over a long period, eventually becoming part of the cultural legacy of each region. Similarly, the literature of the two banks of the Mekong River is an important cultural asset continuously shared by the Thai and Lao people on both sides of the river." (Boonlue Thepayasuwan, 2013) The Isan region has been a repository of culture for many eras and has maintained close cultural ties with the Lan Xang Kingdom, particularly in the areas of traditional customs, literature, and spoken language, in conjunction with the Lao people of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Notably, they share almost all aspects of local literature, leading to similarities in the literary composition between Lan Xang literature and Isan literature." (Thawat Punnothok, 1997)

Isan literature has a unique form that differs from central Thai literature, as it is considered genuine folk literature. The villagers are the rightful owners, learners, readers, and creators of this literature. Since Isan literature flourished among the common people, it thus has a distinctive form that reflects the beliefs of the local Isan society and mirrors various aspects of Isan life, including traditions, ideologies, linguistic expressions, and diverse perspectives. (Sovit Bamrungphak, 2010) Notable examples of famous Isan literature include 'Sang Sin Chai,' 'Phra Daeng Nang Ai,' 'Khulu Nang Ua,' and 'Suriyawong,' among others." The story of 'Suriyawong' gained widespread popularity on both sides of the Mekong River and is considered a shared cultural heritage between the people of Isan and Laos, descendants of the Lan Xang Kingdom. The poet incorporated elements from Jataka literature and other local stories to weave a new tale and create new characters, with the primary aim of providing enjoyment and moral lessons for readers. The plot emphasizes the law of karma, which leads to separation, and reunion occurs only when karmic debts are settled. It teaches perseverance in facing hardship and diligence in doing good, which ultimately brings happiness.

In terms of literary style, the poet carefully selected words and eloquent expressions that evoke emotional responses and create various literary effects. Socially, the work reflects beliefs, social values, moral lessons, teachings, governance, nature, and art. The 'Suriyawong' literature exists in several versions, including the Udon version, Lom Kao version, Lom Sak version, Nakhon Phanom version, and Khon Kaen version. The Khon Kaen version of the 'Suriyawong' literature is quite similar to the Udon version, which is considered the principal version. The storyline is the same, with only minor differences in the wording used in dialogues or in certain descriptive passages. The Khon Kaen version contains additional expressions scattered throughout the text that are not found in other versions. However, when comparing the length of the narrative, it is evident that both the Khon Kaen

and Udon versions were copied from the same original manuscript. Due to the copying occurring in different locations and times, some discrepancies in wording or expressions may have occurred." (Sureerat Hankham, 1984)

2. OBJECTIVE

2.1 To study the Isan worldview in the Khon Kaen version of the 'Suriyawong' literature.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research study on the Isan worldview in the Khon Kaen version of the 'Suriyawong' literature is a qualitative research. Data were collected from the literature itself and from target groups, which included Key Informants, Casual Informants, and General Informants. The details are as follows.

3.1 Target groups

In this research, the researcher divided the target groups into two categories :

3.1.1 the literary target group (Suriyawong) and the individual target group, as follows. The literary target group (Suriyawong) in this research study was selected using a purposive sampling method. The researcher chose the Khon Kaen version of the 'Suriyawong' literature to study the Isan worldview, focusing on the worldview of people towards other people, the worldview of people towards nature, and the worldview of people towards the supernatural.

3.1.2 The individual target group in this research study was selected from individuals with knowledge and expertise in literature and Isan culture.

The researcher collected data that aligned with the objectives of the study in order to answer the research questions as specified. The data collection methods were as follows:

The data was collected from documents and research related to Suriyawong literature, contemporary music, relevant theories, and related research. The researcher organized the data for analysis according to the objectives, following these steps:

1. Once both document and field data were gathered, the researcher summarized and categorized the data to find answers corresponding to the research objectives.

2. The data was reviewed for accuracy and completeness after collection.

Data Analysis : The researcher used a document analysis method, with the following details:

Document Analysis : The researcher studied information from various sources, including books, theses, journals, lecture materials, articles, and the internet. Once all the document data was gathered, the researcher categorized the data with similar content while considering the source and accuracy of the information to ensure credibility before using it in documents and related research. Once the researcher completed the data analysis, the results were presented to experts for review.

3. METHODOLOGY

4.1 To study the Isan worldview in the Khon Kaen version of the 'Suriyawong' literature. The Isan worldview refers to the fundamental perspective through which the people of Isan view the world, as found in the Khon Kaen version of the 'Suriyawong' literature. This research will use the framework of Associate Professor Apisak Somin. The components are as follows:

1.The worldview of people towards others : this includes the worldview towards men, the worldview towards women, the worldview towards kings, the worldview towards teachers and mentors, and the worldview towards social classes.

2.The worldview of people towards nature : this refers to the relationship between people and nature.

3.The worldview of people towards the supernatural : this includes beliefs in religion and karma, beliefs in spells and magic, beliefs in Indra and deities, beliefs in predestined love (bupphesanniwas), beliefs in amulets and talismans, and beliefs related to dreams.

The research findings revealed that

4.1.1 The worldview of people towards others

4.1.1.1 Worldview towards men

Marriage (taking a wife) : When one is ready for marriage, the ceremony is performed according to local customs, and a household is established thereafter. A man is considered fully mature when he marries. The findings are as follows:

(1) Taow Suriyawong leads his son Tipkasorn on a journey to find his mother, from the part where many able-bodied men gather waiting for Nang Buppha, desiring to take her as their wife.

A man must value honor and dignity, not allowing anyone to insult or belittle him, and he must also know how to build his own dignity. The findings are as follows.

(1) Nang Buppha follows Thao Suriyawong to find Nang Kaisorn. In the scene where Soi Suriyawong is resting and is flown over by Sunthawong, it is considered an insult to his dignity, which eventually leads to a battle."

A man must be courageous, resolute, and steadfast, daring to face challenges. The findings are as follows.

(1) The demon king Thotsakan meets Nang Suwanpimpa and her child in the scene where Suriyawong encounters the chief of the monkey army.

(2) Thao Suriyawong battles the demon king Thotsakan in the scene where Suriyawong wages war against the demon king

(3) Nang Suwanpimpa and Thao Suriyawong enter the city of Pengjan in the scene where Suriyawong wages war against the female demon.

(4) Thao Suriyawong, along with his consorts and all his sons, enters the city in the scene where the eight princes battle the demons and achieve victory.

4.1.1.2 The worldview towards women

After marriage, a woman should have only one husband, be a good wife, remain faithful, and serve her husband without fail. The findings are as follows.

(1) The demon king Thotsakan meets Nang Suwanpimpa and her child in the scene where Thotsakan is unable to touch or approach Nang Suwanpimpa because she remains faithful to her husband alone.

(2) Phaya Thon abducts Nang Kaisorn in the scene where Phaya Thon is unable to touch Nang Kaisorn because she remains devoted to her husband alone.

4.1.1.3 Worldview towards kings

A king should govern the kingdom with virtue, known as 'Dhamma Raja,' adhering to the principles of righteousness for kings, including customary ethics, the Ten Virtues of the King, imperial culture, and royal support. The king should protect the people from all dangers and bring peace and happiness. A king should show love and compassion to all subjects equally, whether they are nobles or common citizens.

(1) The episode of Nakhon Pengjan mentions the majesty of the king.

(2) The episode where Thao Suriyawong, along with his consorts and sons, enters the city mentions the peace and happiness that the king brings by governing the city and its people.

4.1.1.4 Worldview towards teachers and mentors

Teachers are considered second parents. They must be respected and obeyed, and one must be a person who is regarded as a 'disciple with a teacher.' Disrespecting teachers is a sin, and karmic retribution will follow.

(1) The episode where the demon king Thotsakan meets Nang Suwanpimpa and her child mentions the hermit who raised Nang Kaisorn as his adopted daughter and taught magic to Thao Suriyawong.

(2) In the episode where the hermit goes to steal Nang Kaisorn's body, Suriyawong breaks the promise he made to the hermit and is punished by being stripped of his magic spells, including the magical horse, Manikab.

4.1.1.5 worldview towards social classes

Lords or those with noble titles are considered to be people with great merit and virtue. Wherever they go, they bring peace, happiness, and good fortune to the people and places around them. Whenever high-ranking nobles visit a place, crowds of subjects gather to admire their prestige. These individuals are wealthy, prosperous, and are seen as protectors of the common people, providing

them with shelter and support. The people should show respect, reverence, and humility, recognizing their lower status and not behaving as equals to the nobility. The findings are as follows.

(1) In the episode where Phaya Thon abducts Nang Kaisorn, it is mentioned that Thao Suriyawong tells Grandmother Chamsuan that he is of royal descent.

4.1.2 The worldview of people towards nature

4.1.2.1 People and nature

The Isan people hold the view that humans must live with nature forever. People often choose to settle in areas surrounded by nature. Nature plays a significant role in shaping the worldview of the Isan people because their lives have always been closely connected to nature. This can be observed from the past, where the Isan people would choose to settle based on natural conditions rather than other factors, such as choosing to live along rivers, in high areas, or near forests. The findings are as follows.

(1) In the episode of Nakhon Pengjan, when Nang Suwanpimpa and her sons travel until they reach the forest.

(2) In the episode where the demon Thotsakan meets Nang Suwanpimpa and her child, the abundance of the forest is mentioned.

(3) In the episode where the hermit dies and leaves Nang Kaisorn, it is found that a kinnaree takes Nang Kaisorn to live in a cave.

(4) In the episode where Thao Suriyawong sees Nang Kaisorn, Suriyawong takes Nang Kaisorn back to the city of Pengjan and stops to rest in the forest.

(5) In the episode where Nang Buppha follows Thao Suriyawong to find Nang Kaisorn, Tipkasorn and Nang Buppha journey through the forest.

4.1.3 The worldview of people towards the supernatural

4.1.3.1 Belief in religion and karma

The Isan people view Buddhism as the most influential factor shaping their behavior and thoughts. It is a pillar that supports their minds, serving as a foundation for their beliefs and faith. The Buddhist principle that has the greatest influence on the Isan worldview is the concept of merit and karma. "Merit" refers to the results of good deeds, and "karma" refers to the consequences of bad deeds. In the narrative of the 'Suriyawong' literature, the law of karma is emphasized as the cause of separation. Once karmic debts are settled, reunions occur. The findings are as follows.

(1) Episode Thao Suriyawong disguises himself as a Brahmin and goes begging for alms in the city of Kandan.

(2) Episode The hermit goes to steal Nang Kaisorn's body.

(3) In the episode where Nang Buppha follows Thao Suriyawong to find Nang Kaisorn, the belief

in merit and karma held by Suriyawong is mentioned.

(4) In the episode where Thao Suriyawong, along with his consorts and all his sons, enters the city, it mentions Thao Promthat and Nang Suwanpimpa, who engaged in meditation and merit-making to dedicate their good deeds to support their sons.

4.1.3.2 Beliefs in spells and magic

This influence comes from Brahmanism, which holds the Vedas as sacred scriptures. Magic can be either good or evil, and in cases of conflict between those who possess magic and those without, the battle is not as intense as when two magic-wielders fight each other. The findings are as follows.

(1) In the episode of Nakhon Pengjan, the widow demon transforms into a golden deer, then reverts to her demon form, and finally transforms into a beautiful woman.

(2) In the episode where Thotsakan meets Nang Suwanpimpa and her child, the demon king casts a spell to bewitch her before abducting Nang Suwanpimpa.

(3) In the episode where Thao Suriyawong battles the demon king Thotsakan, they fight using various weapons and magical spells.

(4) Nang Suwanpimpa and Thao Suriyawong enter the city of Pengjan in the episode where the demon transforms into a four-faced Brahma to fight Suriyawong.

(5) In the episode where Phaya Thon (Vidhyadhara) abducts Nang Kaisorn, Vidhyadhara casts a spell to bewitch Nang Kaisorn.

(6) Nang Kaisorn dies in the episode where, after the executioner beheads the Brahmin Kaisorn, her body immediately transforms back into a woman.

(7) The hermit goes to steal Nang Kaisorn's body in the episode where the hermit descends to revive Nang Kaisorn, creating an ashram, food, and servant attendants for her.

4.1.3.3 Belief in Indra and deities.

The Isan people believe that Indra and other deities are guardian spirits who help protect and ensure peace and safety, shielding them from various dangers. The findings are as follows.

(1) In the episode of Nakhon Pengjan, when Thao Promthat orders the execution of both the queen and the prince, Indra descends to intervene, causing the executioner to hesitate and refrain from carrying out the execution.

(2) The demon king Thotsakan meets Nang Suwanpimpa and her child in the episode where a deity inspires Suriyawong to travel until he reaches the hermit's ashram.

(3) Thao Suriyawong disguises himself as a Brahmin and goes begging for alms in the city of Kandan in the episode where Suriyawong meets the deity guarding the cave, who takes care of food supplies and helps plan the battle strategy.

(4) The hermit dies and leaves Nang Kaisorn in the episode where a deity inspires a kinnaree to

come and care for Nang Kaisorn.

(5) Thao Suriyawong goes to find Nang Kaisorn in the episode where Indra transforms into a myna bird to inform Suriyawong.

(6) Nang Kaisorn changes gender to become a Brahmin in the episode where the forest deity assists by transforming Nang Kaisorn's body into that of a man.

(7) In the episode where the hermit goes to steal Nang Kaisorn's body, after the hermit dies, he is reborn as a celestial being.

4.1.3.4 Belief in predestined love.

This is the belief in destined partners, that those who come together as a couple are fated to be so by destiny or were partners in a previous life, leading to their reunion as soulmates in the present life. The findings are as follows.

(1) Phaya Thon abducts Nang Kaisorn in the episode where Nang Yisun and Suriyawong gaze into each other's eyes, resulting in love at first sight.

(2) Thao Suriyawong takes Tipkasorn on a journey to find his mother in the episode where Nang Buppha's garland floats onto Suriyawong's boat.

4.1.3.5 Belief in amulets and talismans.

This belief is a blend of Buddhism, Brahmanism, and occultism. The Isan people hold considerable faith in this belief, as they believe that amulets and talismans provide invincibility.

(1) The demon king Thotsakan meets Nang Suwanpimpa and her child in the episode where the hermit bestows a magical sword and a magical bow.

(2) In the episode where Nang Buppha follows Thao Suriyawong to find Nang Kaisorn, all the princes shoot arrows at each other, and the arrows transform into flowers and sweets.

4.1.3.6 Belief in dreams

The Isan people have a strong belief in Buddhist prophecies. When events occur in the country that align with these prophecies, they hold particular significance for the Isan people. The interpretation of each person's dreams varies, depending on factors such as experience, environment, mental state, physical condition, or omens.

(1) In the episode where Thao Suriyawong disguises himself as a Brahmin and goes begging for alms in the city of Kandan, the demon king has a bad dream.

(2) In the episode where Nang Suwanpimpa and her child enter the city of Pengjan, the demoness has a bad dream.

5. DISCUSSION

To discuss the research findings on the Isan worldview in the Khon Kaen version of the

Suriyawong literature using Claude Lévi-Strauss's and Vladimir Propp's theories, the following points could be explored :

5.1 Structural Analysis through Claude Lévi-Strauss's Theory

Lévi-Strauss's structuralism posits that myths and literature reflect the underlying structures of human thought, particularly binary oppositions. In *Suriyawong*, the Isan worldview reflects key oppositions central to the cultural values of the Isan people:

1. Men vs. Women : The roles of men and women are distinctly structured, with men expected to be honorable, brave, and providers, while women embody fidelity and support within marriage. These oppositions reflect traditional gender norms and societal expectations within Isan culture.

2. Nature vs. Supernatural : The worldview of the Isan people sees humans in a harmonious relationship with nature, while supernatural beliefs signify forces beyond human control. This dichotomy signifies the reverence for nature and acknowledgment of unseen spiritual forces.

3. Social Classes : The distinction between nobility and commoners is another binary in the Isan worldview, where those of higher status are revered and expected to embody virtues. This respect for hierarchy mirrors social structures within the culture.

4. Good vs. Evil : The characters and their actions, especially in scenes involving magic and karma, reflect this moral binary, where actions are judged based on merit or karma, emphasizing the Isan belief in moral causality.

By identifying these structures, Lévi-Strauss's theory reveals how the Isan worldview categorizes experience into oppositional structures, providing insight into Isan values.

5.2 Functional Analysis through Vladimir Propp's Theory

Propp's morphology of the folktale identifies recurring character functions and narrative sequences that structure traditional stories. Applying this framework to *Suriyawong*, key functions can be mapped as follows

1. Hero's Journey (*Suriyawong*) : *Suriyawong*'s journey to find his mother and to protect family honor fits Propp's hero function. His actions are guided by cultural values, demonstrating the traits of an ideal man in Isan culture.

2. The Villain (Thotsakan and Other Demons) : Thotsakan and other adversaries fulfill the villain function, creating conflict and obstacles for the hero. These characters embody cultural fears of dishonor or societal disruption.

3. The Helper (Hermits and Deities) : Helpers, such as hermits and deities, provide magical items or guidance, reflecting the Isan belief in supernatural intervention. Their support emphasizes the cultural reliance on spiritual protection.

4. Tests of Strength and Morality : Scenes where *Suriyawong* faces trials, both moral (honoring

promises) and physical (battles with demons), align with Propp's functions of tests that heroes must undergo. These trials are moral lessons on honor, resilience, and karma.

5. The Return and Reward : The culmination of Suriyawong's journey, where he restores peace, reflects Propp's concept of the hero's return, symbolizing the reestablishment of cultural order.

By examining *Suriyawong* through Propp's framework, the Isan worldview is shown to emphasize virtues like honor, loyalty, and respect for spiritual beliefs, with cultural values reinforced through each narrative function. These analyses, using Lévi-Strauss's structuralism and Propp's morphology, reveal how the Khon Kaen version of *Suriyawong* literature is structured around the Isan worldview, where values are preserved and transmitted through oppositional structures and narrative functions.

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