

The Reflection Of Environment In The Isan Worldview: A Study Of The Khon Kaen Version Of 'Suriyawong

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Abstract

This study examines the reflection of environment in the Isan worldview through the Khon Kaen version of the Suriyawong literature, employing structural theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp to explore both narrative and cultural elements. The Isan worldview, as represented in the text, encompasses relationships among social roles, nature, and the supernatural—elements closely tied to the region's ecological surroundings and cosmological beliefs.

Under Lévi-Strauss's framework, binary oppositions emerge—such as human vs. spirit, nature vs. culture, and male vs. female—illustrating the value system rooted in harmony with the environment, respect for hierarchy, and karmic justice. Propp's morphological approach reveals narrative roles that reinforce cultural norms, with heroes, villains, and helpers navigating moral trials influenced by both social and ecological conditions.

This qualitative research integrates textual analysis with field data from local informants well-versed in Isan culture. Findings underscore the unique characteristics of Isan folk literature, particularly its integration of environmental ethics, karmic law, and spiritual respect. Suriyawong functions not only as entertainment but as a vehicle for transmitting essential cultural values—perseverance, loyalty, and environmental awareness—across generations. This study highlights how traditional narratives serve as cultural artifacts, reflecting the deep interconnection between environment and worldview in the Isan context.

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

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is a form of art that communicates thoughts, beliefs, and emotions through the medium of language. Literature recognized for its excellence becomes "classical literature" and is passed down across generations, eventually forming part of a region's cultural heritage. This heritage serves as a repository of accumulated knowledge and life experiences, transmitted by scholars and communities over time. The literature of the two banks of the Mekong River—spanning Thailand's Isan region and Laos—is one such valuable cultural legacy. As Boonlue Thepayasuwan (2013) observes, this shared literature reflects the deep historical and cultural interconnectedness of the Thai and Lao peoples.

Isan, the northeastern region of Thailand, has preserved a strong cultural identity through its oral traditions, rituals, language, and literary expressions. It shares close affinities with the Lan Xang Kingdom, especially in terms of traditional customs and literary forms. As Thawat Punnothok (1997) notes, the literary corpus of Isan and Laos is nearly identical in structure and content, evidencing a long-standing cultural bond.

Distinct from the central Thai literary canon, Isan literature is genuine folk literature—shaped, owned, and preserved by local communities. As Sovit Bamrungphak (2010) explains, it reflects the lived experiences, beliefs, linguistic expressions, and social values of Isan villagers. These stories encapsulate a worldview that is rooted not only in karmic law and moral instruction but also in intimate connections with the environment and spiritual forces of nature.

Among the well-known Isan folk narratives, *Suriyawong* stands out as a culturally significant work shared across the Isan-Lao cultural sphere. The narrative, rooted in Jataka tales and local legends, teaches perseverance, moral integrity, and the karmic consequences of one's actions—values that are deeply embedded in the local

worldview. The plot emphasizes separation and reunion driven by karmic forces, set within landscapes that symbolically reflect the characters' inner states and social journeys.

In terms of literary craftsmanship, *Suriyawong* features rich poetic language and stylized expressions intended to stir emotion and convey layered meanings. The work reflects not only social norms and moral teachings but also traditional ecological knowledge and spiritual relationships with the natural world. It is in this way that the story becomes a vessel through which Isan people express their worldview—one where humans, nature, and the supernatural are deeply intertwined.

Several versions of *Suriyawong* exist, including those from Udon Thani, Lom Kao, Lom Sak, Nakhon Phanom, and Khon Kaen. The Khon Kaen version, which forms the basis of this study, closely follows the Udon version but contains unique local expressions and slight variations in narrative style. As Sureerat Hankham (1984) notes, such variations likely emerged through the process of transmission and adaptation in different places and times. These regional nuances further enrich the text as a reflection of local environments, dialects, and cultural practices.

This study focuses on the Khon Kaen version of *Suriyawong* to explore how environment is reflected in the Isan worldview, examining the interplay between cultural values, ecological awareness, and narrative tradition.

2. OBJECTIVE

2.1 To study the reflection of environment in the Isan worldview as portrayed in the Khon Kaen version of the *Suriyawong* literature.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research study on the reflection of environment in the Isan worldview as portrayed 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.

4. RESULTS

4.1 This study explores how the environment is reflected in the Isan worldview as represented in the Khon Kaen version of the *Suriyawong* literature. The findings reveal that the worldview of Isan people is multifaceted, encompassing the relationships between humans and other individuals, between humans and nature, and between humans and the supernatural. Each of these dimensions reveals significant connections to the natural environment, either directly or symbolically, thereby reinforcing the cultural role of nature as a foundation for beliefs, social norms, and literary motifs.

1. Worldview of People Toward Others

The Isan worldview toward others includes perceptions of gender roles, authority, moral duties, and social hierarchies. Although these social perspectives may appear unrelated to the environment at first glance, in Isan literature, such interactions are frequently framed within or shaped by natural settings, indicating that the environment forms a silent but integral backdrop that mirrors social realities.

1.1 Worldview Toward Men

Men are portrayed as protectors, leaders, and figures of moral strength. Maturity is often defined by readiness for marriage and the ability to journey into unfamiliar, often wild, spaces to fulfill a purpose or demonstrate courage. For example, Thao Suriyawong leads his son Tipkasorn on a journey to find his mother, encountering vast forests and natural challenges that symbolize personal and spiritual growth. The environment functions as a testing ground for male honor, bravery, and dignity.

1.2 Worldview Toward Women

Women in *Suriyawong* are expected to be loyal, virtuous, and devoted to their spouses. Their moral strength is tested within nature-bound narratives—such as resisting temptation while isolated in a forest or remaining faithful during periods of exile. Characters like Nang Suwanpimpa are depicted as paragons of virtue who interact closely with natural spaces, reinforcing the cultural view that women possess an intrinsic connection to purity and resilience shaped by their interaction with nature.

1.3 Worldview Toward Kings

Kings are expected to uphold the principles of Dharma, governing justly and harmoniously. A virtuous king ensures that not only society but also nature remains in balance. Peace, prosperity, and natural abundance often follow good governance, as shown in scenes where Thao Suriyawong reclaims and governs cities, resulting in both social order and environmental harmony. The king's role is deeply entwined with maintaining the natural and cosmic order.

1.4 Worldview Toward Teachers and Mentors

Teachers, hermits, and sages are revered as figures who mediate between humans and spiritual knowledge, often residing in forest hermitages or mountains. These natural settings signify wisdom and spiritual power. For instance, the hermit who raises Nang Kaisorn and teaches Thao Suriyawong magic dwells in the forest, emphasizing the belief that true wisdom comes from immersion in nature.

1.5 Worldview Toward Social Classes

Nobility and commoners are depicted as existing within a karmically determined hierarchy. The prestige of lords is portrayed through natural symbolism: lush landscapes flourish around noble characters, while wilderness often surrounds the less fortunate or morally ambiguous. This environmental coding reinforces the idea that natural order reflects social and moral order.

2. Worldview of People Toward Nature

This dimension of the Isan worldview is the most explicit in terms of environmental reflection. Nature is not only a setting but an active participant in the lives of characters. The close relationship between humans and their surroundings underscores a philosophy of environmental interdependence.

2.1 Human-Nature Relationship

Isan people view nature as a life-sustaining force. Communities are often described as establishing settlements near rivers, forests, and highlands—landscapes that provide protection, resources, and spiritual grounding. In *Suriyawong*, many pivotal events occur in or because of the natural environment:

- Nang Suwanpimpa and her sons navigate dense forests in search of safety.
- Hermits and magical beings reside in caves, symbolizing knowledge hidden within nature.
- Forests act as sanctuaries, battlefields, or sites of transformation.

These examples reflect a worldview that treats nature not as passive scenery but as a dynamic realm of agency, wisdom, and sacredness.

3. Worldview of People Toward the Supernatural

The supernatural is deeply embedded in Isan beliefs and often closely connected to nature. In *Suriyawong*, religious principles, magic, deities, and dreams frequently manifest through natural phenomena or are facilitated by the environment.

3.1 Belief in Religion and Karma

Buddhism informs the ethical foundation of the Isan worldview. The law of karma determines fate and is frequently depicted through environmental trials. Good actions are rewarded with blessings symbolized by nature (e.g., rain, blooming forests), while bad karma leads to suffering in desolate landscapes or during treacherous natural journeys.

3.2 Beliefs in Spells and Magic

Magic in *Suriyawong* is rooted in the natural world. Magical transformations often involve natural elements (e.g., turning into animals or plants). Characters with magical powers usually dwell in or derive their abilities from forests, rivers, or mountains. This indicates that the supernatural draws strength from the environment.

3.3 Belief in Deities and Indra

Deities often manifest through nature: Indra appears as a bird, spirits protect forests, and divine interventions take place in natural spaces. These interactions suggest that divinity resides in and protects the natural world, reinforcing the belief that humans must live in harmony with their surroundings.

3.4 Belief in Predestined Love

Destiny and love are often signaled by nature, such as floating garlands or encounters in the forest. The belief in soulmates extends to a cosmology in which nature orchestrates human fate.

3.5 Belief in Amulets and Talismans

Amulets are crafted from sacred natural materials and believed to offer protection. Their power is tied to nature's inherent spiritual energy, and they symbolize the confluence of Buddhism, Brahmanism, and folk belief.

3.6 Belief in Dreams

Dreams are seen as omens, often interpreted using environmental signs. Bad dreams precede natural disasters or changes, reinforcing the belief that both physical and metaphysical worlds are interconnected.

CONCLUSION

Through the lens of the *Suriyawong* literature, particularly the Khon Kaen version, it becomes evident that the Isan worldview is profoundly shaped by its environment. Nature is not only a source of livelihood and beauty but also a spiritual, moral, and narrative force. This literature serves as a cultural artifact that preserves the Isan people's understanding of their place in the universe—a place shared with ancestors, spirits, forests, rivers, and the ever-present law of karma. The study affirms that traditional Isan literature is an invaluable medium for exploring the intertwined nature of culture, belief, and environment in Southeast Asian worldviews.

5. DISCUSSION

This study explores how the environment is reflected in the Isan worldview as represented in the Khon Kaen version of the *Suriyawong* literature. By applying Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism and Vladimir Propp's narrative morphology, the findings reveal that the Isan worldview is deeply intertwined with social, spiritual, and ecological systems, forming a holistic vision of existence in which nature plays a central symbolic and functional role.

1. Worldview of People Toward Others

According to Lévi-Strauss's concept of binary oppositions, the relationships between individuals in Isan literature are defined by contrasts—such as man/woman, noble/commoner, and teacher/disciple. These oppositions are not merely social but are enacted through environmental settings that signify moral and cultural boundaries.

1.1 Men and Women

The masculine is associated with agency and public action, often manifesting in journeys through forests, mountains, or hostile territories, which signify external trials and inner development. For instance, Thao Suriyawong's search for Nang Kaisorn and Tipkasorn's forest travels highlight nature as a crucible of masculine virtue—echoing Propp's function of the hero's departure and trial. Women, on the other hand, are linked to internal strength, loyalty, and spiritual resilience, with their moral purity reinforced through their contact with nature. In scenes where Nang Suwanpimpa resists Thotsakan's temptations in the forest, the natural world becomes a space of both challenge and protection.

1.2 Kings and Mentors

Kings in the Isan worldview are upholders of Dharma, whose righteous rule is evidenced by the peace and environmental harmony of their domains. This reflects the structural function of order vs. chaos in Lévi-Strauss's system. Hermits and teachers, meanwhile, reside in sacred natural settings, such as caves or hermitages, symbolizing the forest as a domain of spiritual authority. These characters serve Proppian roles such as the donor or magical helper, offering knowledge and tools essential for the hero's journey.

1.3 Social Classes

Class distinctions are tied to karmic merit, with natural abundance often surrounding noble characters, while wilderness or desolation accompanies figures in moral crisis or lower status. This natural coding reinforces the view that the environment reflects moral structure and social order.

2. Worldview Toward Nature

Nature in the Isan worldview is not merely a setting but a force that interacts with and shapes human fate. This aligns with Propp's notion of environment as the space where narrative functions occur and with Lévi-Strauss's idea of myth as a mediation between nature and culture.

2.1 Environment as Moral Space

Key events in *Suriyawong* unfold in nature: forests host transformations, caves conceal or protect royal characters, and rivers symbolize boundaries. These elements are imbued with symbolic significance—forests as trials, mountains as isolation and elevation, and water as both danger and cleansing. Such representations reinforce that harmony with nature reflects virtue, while transgression against it mirrors moral failure.

2.2 Human Settlement and Ecology

Isan characters establish lives in natural areas, choosing locations near rivers, forests, and hills. These environmental choices mirror historical Isan life and emphasize environmental adaptation. Characters often succeed or fail based on their alignment with nature, illustrating an ethic of environmental mindfulness.

3. Worldview Toward the Supernatural

The supernatural realm in *Suriyawong* is deeply embedded in nature. According to Propp, supernatural agents often serve narrative functions as helpers, testers, or punishers, and these agents often emerge from environmental phenomena in the Isan tradition.

3.1 Karma and Buddhist Cosmology

Karma operates as a regulating force throughout the narrative. Reunions occur only when karmic debts are repaid—often through journeys that lead characters into nature. The environment is a site for karmic testing: forests, mountains, and rivers become metaphysical thresholds.

3.2 Magic and Sacred Geography

Magic is inseparable from nature. Hermits and magical beings derive their powers from secluded natural spaces. Transformations involving flora, fauna, or elemental forces indicate that power resides in the landscape. Such motifs align with Propp's functions of magical intervention and transformation.

3.3 Deities and Indra

Divine interventions often occur through environmental symbols. Indra appears in the form of birds or wind, and forest spirits protect the virtuous. These moments underscore Lévi-Strauss's view that myth uses nature to express culture—here, that cosmic justice is mediated through natural agents.

3.4 Destiny and Dreams

Love and destiny unfold through natural omens, such as floating garlands or prophetic dreams tied to celestial and terrestrial signs. Such devices structure the narrative, guiding the hero's choices, and reflect cultural beliefs about fate being encoded in nature.

The Khon Kaen version of *Suriyawong* reveals that the Isan worldview, as expressed through traditional literature, is a complex interweaving of myth, moral order, and environmental consciousness. Nature is not simply a backdrop but a participant in the unfolding of karmic justice, heroic quests, and social instruction. From Lévi-Strauss's structuralist perspective, the *Suriyawong* narrative exhibits clear binary oppositions—human/supernatural, male/female, noble/commoner—that are often resolved or mediated through environmental interactions. These structures are not arbitrary but culturally significant, reflecting the symbolic role of nature in organizing social thought.

Propp's narrative morphology further elucidates the functional roles of characters and settings. Forests become the domains of trial, hermits the providers of magical assistance, and natural symbols the indicators of fate. These recurring narrative functions anchor the environment as a central structuring device in the tale. Importantly, the environment in *Suriyawong* is imbued with moral and spiritual meaning. It reflects the state of society and the soul. When characters live in harmony with natural and moral laws, they prosper; when they transgress, nature withdraws or becomes hostile. This reciprocity reflects traditional Isan ecological wisdom—nature as both a sustainer and a mirror of moral life.

By applying structuralist and narrative theoretical frameworks, this study demonstrates how Isan literature encodes environmental ethics within its stories. The Khon Kaen version of *Suriyawong* thus serves not only as entertainment or moral instruction but as a literary expression of the interdependence between humans, culture, and the environment. As such, it provides valuable insight into how traditional narratives preserve and transmit environmental values across generations.

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