

Worldviews in Isan-Thai Stories

¹Jaruwan Thammawat, ¹Pathom Hongsuwan and ²Wajuppa Tossa

¹Department of Thai and Oriental Languages,

²Department of Western Languages and Linguistics,

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mahasarakham University, Thailand 44000

Abstract: Problem statement: This study aimed to investigate two-fold: To present worldviews in Isan-Thai Stories and to explain the connections between the worldviews and their societal contexts. **Approach:** Following the methodology of folklore studies, both oral and written versions of Isan-Thai stories were analyzed in order to find out their structures, contents, motifs and contexts. The 76 stories which were chosen fall into five types: Legends, episodes of the Buddha's birth stories, chakchak wongwong (principalities) tales, orphans tales and local heroes stories. The contents of these stories were separated into motifs in order to see the repetitions with other stories. Such repetitions reveal deep structure, appearing in surface structure. Then the repetitive contents were decoded and interpreted to obtain patterns of thoughts and behaviors, in line with Claude Levi-Strauss' conviction that myths try to convey messages of human mind both universal and cultural specific. **Results:** As a result the study found that the worldviews in Isan-Thai Stories are of three kinds: Mythic worldview, alternative worldview and new worldview. The essentials of these worldviews show the relationships between the human and nature, the human and the human and the human and society. The thoughts presented are not unitary; they are pluralistic, even within the same story. Thus the worldviews have transformed in accordance with time, space, gender and modes of production. In the food-gathering mode, the mythic worldview emphasizes acceptance of nature's power which could cause suffering or happiness depending on the attitudes of the humans. In the market or capitalist mode which emphasizes consumerist production, the worldview makes the humans accept money as the highest power on life. **Conclusion:** Thus, stories present social transformation by changing the actors as well as the methods of communication.

Key words: Story/folklore, Thai-Isan, structuralism, transformation, worldview, myths

INTRODUCTION

In Thailand today (2007-2009) there exists such a serious difference in thoughts and worldviews among the people that a political and social crisis prevails. Villagers elect "good" candidates to become members of parliament, only to be branded "bad" politicians by urban academics and intellectuals. Villagers want politicians on whom they can depend for practical purposes while urban intellectuals scorn on the "influential hooligans" whom villagers have elected. This is just one example of the gaps which will probably persist for a long time. Causes of such divide seem to be rooted in the differing worldviews on the one hand and the increased social, political and economic disparities between them on the other^[1]. How can the two sides appreciate each other's worldviews?

In folktales and local literature villagers perceive as good the person with ability, skills and special gifts. However, intellectual literature and Buddhism emphasize principles such as generosity and faithfulness to be characteristics of a good man. For villagers, a hero must be both good and smart, getting done what needs to be done. Such message is among to be done. Such message is among the motifs in Isan-Thai stories. A recent opinion poll among Thai youth revealed the same message. To comprehend social and political meaning of these contradictions is truly interesting^[2].

Stories or folktales worldwide contain two common elements: Intellectual creation and human imagination on the one hand and specific cultural product on the other. Discovery of structures in folktales confirms that they operate under universal

Corresponding Author: Jaruwan Thammawat, Department of Thai and Oriental Languages,
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mahasarakham University, Thailand, 44150
Tel: +66-43-754321-40 Fax: +66-43-754369

human mind and the fact that difference exists among those structures confirms that they are also related to cultures. In the case of Thai society, before the reception of Western influence, fundamental thoughts were grounded on Buddhist beliefs both in terms of moral/ethical principles and in terms of worldviews. King Ruang's Trai Phum (Three Worlds), for example, gives a very vivid picture of the universe. Written nearly 800 years ago, the classic text served as moral and political constitution of the Thai kingdom. Its pervasive influence can be seen in all aspects of Thai ways of life even today. Its main thesis posits three worlds: Heavens, earth and hells. One must do good deeds, following the Buddhist teachings so that, after death, one will find an abode in heaven. On the contrary, one will go to hell for committing sinful or bad deeds while on earth^[3].

But such Buddhist influence has never been monolithic, because the traditional belief in spirits of various kinds and the Brahmanism rituals, both of which existed long before the coming of Buddhism, have always been important, especially among the villagers.

In Isan or Northeast Thailand, a process of basic transformation of Isan-Thai worldviews started 50 years ago. Charles Keyes^[4] wrote, in his *Isan: Regionalism in North Eastern Thailand*, that Isan's intellectual foundation traced back to Lao's cultural heritage; yet Isan people are more strongly bound with Thainess. Among other things, that means Isan people have partaken in Thailand's overall fate, particularly the national development onslaught since 1957. What has happened to Isan worldviews and behavior patterns since then? This also is a key question of our study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Seventy-Six stories were chosen as materials for this study---oral as well as written versions. They were the main stories which circulated within Isan between B.E. 2516-2542 (1973-1999). As mentioned earlier, the 76 stories fall into five types: Legends, episodes of Buddha's birth stories, principalities stories, orphans stories and local heroes stories. Methodologically the contents of each story and of each type, were classified into small units of thoughts in order to examine which components repeatedly appear in other version, for such repetitions indicate deep structures which appear in surface structures. Then the repetitions contents were logically connected, thus revealing a semblance of thought, behavior and culture behind the story. According to Claude Levi-Strauss, myths or legends of various population groups convey messages of conflicts

in polarized thoughts, believing that all humans, whoever and which is universal. The worldviews in Isan-Thai stories presented below are products of this method.

RESULTS

From this study of five types of 76 Isan-Thai stories, three worldviews have been found: Mythic worldview, alternative worldview and new worldview.

Mythic worldview reveals fundamental thoughts of tribal age or initial human settlement. A thought model of the distant past, the core elements involve the relationships between the humans with nature and the humans with society. Here the myths or legends present abstract and concrete dimensions of the universe. The abstract components refer to the power which creates all things. Such power appears in Isan stories as Thae spirit (in heaven), the ancestor spirit or the Naga spirit (under water). In concrete forms, that power appears as the wins, the soil, the water, the earth, the ocean, the mountain, the first King Khun Borom Rachathirat, Grand Father Sangkasa and Grand Mother Sangkasa, Grand Father Yer and Grand Mother Yer, the buffalo, rice and the humans. The power of nature could create abundance or famine depending on attitudes of the humans-whether they revere the power and the grace of nature or not.

The Isan stories also describe the relationships between the humans in the following texts: Legends of Khun Borom Rachathirat, Epic of Thao Hung-Thao Jeung, Legends of Urangkhatat and Legends of Fadaed Songyang City. The core elements involve the expansion of families and relatives, leading to needs for new settlements. At all levels of community, there must be leaders with moral eminence and special ability to produce food abundance to feed people and maintain religion. On the contrary, if a leader lacks such qualities, the communities would deteriorate. As such, society came into existence and prosper on the power of nature and leaders, characteristic of society which gathers food from nature and farm their lands with water from the sky^[5].

Alternative worldview reveals thoughts of the age when cities became states or kingdoms. Here Isan stories present class and gender relationships with clear distinctions of functions and status. Leaders were from a class of high birth; but often times there was need to change the unrighteous leader, to be replaced by a commoner blessed with merit and ability. Similarly, Isan stones, which in the main portray patriarch type, also contain components which reveal non-submission and struggle on the past of women, such as Nang

Prommajari, Nang Kutawong, Nang Loon and Nang Orapim. These women were gifted and able to struggle and prosper without dependence on men^[6].

Alternative worldview presents a plurality of thoughts, showing the value of special knowledge and skills such as excellence in the use of weapon, mighty labor, special skills in music, farming, hunting and so on.

Alternative worldview has often been overlooked by scholars at the expense of a full account of Isan stories.

New worldview has emerged in the thoughts of Isan stories recently composed for popular performance lamruang tawkon, a new and popular performing genre since B.E. 2500^[7]. Most story patterns tell the story of Isan village migrant workers who leave home for jobs in Bangkok or other big cities. The main behavior involves conflictual love affairs between employers and employees due to differential status. For example, rich mother-in-law dislike poor son-in-law or wife sunning away from poor husband. The new thinking has to do with the presence of both good and bad components in the character of the main actors, unlike the purer character in stories of the long past. Besides, the characters do not pay much attention to moral mores. Both men and women are willing to do almost anything, including selling their body or beauty, for money. The sole purpose in life is to get out of poverty no matter what. Thus Isan villagers end up in the labor market of capitalist society. Incidentally, similar message in the wider context at the national level can be seen from the strategy of economic and social development of Thailand, which started officially in BE 2504 (1961).

The new Isan worldview clearly shows the connections with the outside world.

Regarding the connection between the worldviews and their societal contests in Isan-Thai stories, basic thoughts are expressed through the motifs of events, actors and miraculous objects, which constitute basic components of structures of the stories.

As for meanings of each motif, the story contents reveal surface meanings while the societal contexts provide deep meanings. The deep meanings reveal beliefs, family conflicts, social ideals and social transformation.

DISCUSSION

Worldviews in Isan-Thai stories contain both universal and cultural specific components. Mythic and legendary stories reveal spiritualism rather than materialism. Their motifs emphasize submissive

acceptance of supra-natural powers. Both their creative and blessing manifestations in creating the earth and all things and their punitive acts in causing draught and famine are to be acknowledged and respected with proper altitudes and behavior on the part of the humans. But the influence of this worldview has been successively reduced, more rapidly so since BE 2500 (1957), by the ascendancy of scientific rationalism and technological advancement, leading to rapid depletion of natural resources, greedy destruction of the forest, poisonous pollution of the air and water and the widened gap between the rich and the poor. It seems not too far-fetched to say that the present global crises such as earth warming is at least in part consequential of such transformation of worldview, not only in Isan but also in other levels of Thai society and throughout the world.

At deep surface level religions legendary texts reveal compromise between former beliefs in supra-natural powers, such as the naga gods of water and the reception of Buddhism as the main religion but only after a series of symbolic fighting as shown in various motifs present in the legends. Furthermore, beliefs in the powers symbolic of the spirits and Brahmanism have remained and continued to play important roles in real life of Isan communities until today. For instance the motif of reverence for enlightened Buddhist holy monks in Buddha's time has found expression in the worship of widely accepted holy powers of such Isan elder monks (luangpoo) as Mann, Chaa, Fann, Sri and Tesk over the past 50 years.

With regard to the motifs in the stories of principalities and local heroes, their worldviews have persisted and innovatively presented by lights and sounds technology at major festivities for entertainment purpose attracting locals as well as tourists. It should be noted that the former concern for moral implications in communicating this type of stories has been absent, replaced by entertainment and business motivation.

Three worldviews have been found in this study of Isan-Thai stories: Mythic, alternative and new worldviews. Their common universal component centers around conflicts of powers, while their cultural specific component displays the basic difference in time, space and circumstance. For instance, the ascendancy of globalization, consumerist capitalism and ICT has brought about a new worldview among Isan people, embodied in the stories composed for lamruang tawkon popular performance during the last 50 years. In these stories the characters pay more attention to money than traditional moral precepts, believing that money is the most important factor in life. Yet, in real life of everyday existence, mythic

elements are not entirely missing. For example, paying homage to spirits and holy objects as well as consulting fortune tellers in time of crisis are still prevalent among Isan villagers today.

CONCLUSION

The common theme among the three worldviews found in Isan-Thai stories revolves around the conflictual struggles between the powers of the good and the bad actors. While in both the mythic and alternative worldviews, the good and the bad were clearly distinguished, in the new Isan worldview the good and the bad components are meshed together in the character and behavior of the main actors. The deep contextual structure has to do with capitalist globalization, resulting in conflictual struggles for economic justice, peaceful co-existence and sustainable development. At surface, Isan-Thai stories during the last 50 years present the plight of Isan villagers migrating to Bangkok and other big cities, or even abroad, trying to overcome poverty, only to end up with their exploitation by their rich employers.

On the political arena Isan villages elect their “good” candidates to parliament, who are branded “bad” politicians by urban high class people. Among other things, this is due to the fundamental difference in the worldviews held by the two parties. On one side, Isan villagers view as good leaders those who are dependable to solve their problems; their abilities and skills count more than their moral goodness. But ability and good are the ideal. On the other side, urban high class people prefer political leaders who are morally principled. Although the divide is not pure and simple this gap has led Thailand into a serious social and political crisis. What is needed to solve this current crisis? Contemporary Isan worldview would say: People who are at once really able and truly good are the answer.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researchers express their sincere appreciation for all of support provided and the referees for their helpful comments.

REFERENCES

1. Suthep Soonthornpasuch, 2005. *Esan Village during the Cold War Sociology on the Northeast*. 4th Edn., Matichon, Bangkok, Thailand, ISBN: 974-323-457-8, pp: 20-21.
2. Sati, P., J. Dhamawat, P. Pratepha and S. Rittidech, 2005. Changes in the conscious mind in applying technology for growing rice at the Chee River Basin in Northeastern of Thailand. *J. Soc. Sci.*, 1: 172-177.
<http://www.scipub.org/fulltext/jss/jss13172-177.pdf>
3. Nartsupha, C., 2003. The Thai village economy in the past. *J. Econ. History*, 63: 265-266.
http://ideas.repec.org/a/cup/jechis/v63y2003i01p265-266_33.html
4. Charles F. Keyes, 1967. *Isan: Regionalism in North Eastern Department of Asian Studies*. Cornell University, Thailand. Ithaca, New York, pp: 80-86.
5. Pikulsri, C., 2008. *Loa Classical Music Following Political Change in 1975*. 1st Edn., Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region, Khonkaen, ISBN: 978-974-06-6242-6, pp: 46-51.
6. Saentaweek, B., 2006. *Isan Folk Music*. 1st Edn., Aphichat Press, Mahasarakham, ISBN: 974-9655-88-5, pp: 87-249.
7. Kittisak, S., P. Souneth and C. Jarernchai, 2009. Potential development of “lam reung taw glawn” Performance (Northeastern Thai or Isan Musical folk drama) in Northeast Thailand. *Pak. J. Soc. Sci.*, 6: 164-167.
<http://www.medwelljournals.com/fulltext/pjss/2009/164-167.pdf>