
Research Article

THE ROLE OF BELIEF IN ISAN LITERATURE IN SHAPING SOCIAL NORMS IN NORTHEASTERN THAI SOCIETY

Sanya Kenaphoom¹, Panya Senawiang², and Thanyachanok Pawala³

Rajabhat Maha Sarakham University, Maha Sarakham, 44000, Thailand^{1,2,3}

zumsa_17@hotmail.com (Corresponding Email)¹

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of belief systems in Isan literature in shaping and sustaining acceptable behavior in Northeastern Thai society. This study used a documentary research design and qualitative textual analysis to examine certain Isan literary texts, such as folktales, didactic narratives, and ritual-related literature, to investigate the representation and social function of moral, supernatural, and ritual beliefs. Utilizing social norm theory and informed by sociological literary criticism, the examination examines how these belief-driven narratives encapsulate expectations, validate roles and duties, and reinforce culturally acknowledged forms of endorsement and punishment. The findings indicate that Isan literature serves not just as a cultural artifact but also as a normative resource for communities to convey moral principles, regulate conduct, and maintain collective identity. Concepts of karma, merit-making, gratitude, gender roles, ancestral spirits, holy landscapes, and ceremonial obligations function as symbolic and interpretive frameworks that affirm communal expectations and maintain social cohesiveness. These story patterns persist in contemporary Northeastern Thai society, especially in rural areas where ritual practices and inherited moral frameworks continue to influence daily experiences. This study examines Isan literary traditions through an applied humanities lens, illustrating how narrative belief systems mediate the interplay between cultural memory and social order over generations.

Keywords: Isan Literature, Belief Systems, Social Norms, Cultural Identity, Northeastern Thailand

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1. INTRODUCTION

Isan (Northeastern Thai) literature—comprising folktales, didactic narratives, legendary chronicles, and ritualistic tales—transcends mere entertainment. It functions as a cultural repository that safeguards and disseminates knowledge about morality, merit-making, social hierarchy, familial duties, gender roles, and communal order unique to the region. Scholarly research in Thai humanities has shown that Isan literary traditions contain cosmological imagination and genesis tales that provide culturally rooted interpretations of the world and human life (Sungkhapantanont & Nunphooban, 2017). Furthermore, these narrative traditions are not limited to historical contexts; they are continually reactivated in modern arenas such as cultural management, identity construction, and heritage governance, underscoring their persistent societal significance (Wannakit, 2018).

Simultaneously, belief systems ingrained in Isan literary traditions—including Theravāda Buddhist ethics, karmic causality, spirit beliefs (phii), nāga cosmology, relic narratives, and ritual prescriptions—significantly influence local perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Research on

vernacular religious practices in Northeastern Thailand indicates that these beliefs are perpetually reproduced through quotidian reasoning and lived experiences, offering culturally significant interpretations for misfortune, illness, and moral transgression (Wattanagun, 2018). Ethnographic and historical studies elucidate that ritual practices and spirit cults play a significant role in shaping personality, identity, and social boundaries within Isan communities (Baird, 2014; Pinthongvijayakul, 2018). Moreover, examinations of Thai popular religion underscore how interactions among monks, spirit mediums, and charismatic religious authorities propagate belief into expansive social and political domains, thereby shaping the collective moral imagination (Kitiarsa, 2005).

Theoretically, social norm study provides a valuable framework for comprehending the entrenchment of belief systems in quotidian conduct. Norms function through collective expectations for both individuals' actions (descriptive norms) and their prescribed behaviors (injunctive norms), reinforced by methods of approval, disapproval, and sanctioning (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini et al., 1990; Kallgren et al., 2000; Morris et al., 2015). Cross-cultural research indicates that the robustness of normative systems—characterized as either “tight” or “loose”—influences the level of social control and the acceptance of deviance (Gelfand et al., 2011). Psychological studies reveal that conformity to norms is maintained by internalization, social learning, and the desire to uphold social reputation (Gross & Vostroknutov, 2022). Narratives are crucial in these processes, as they consistently exemplify acceptable behavior, demonstrate the repercussions of violations, and perpetuate collective norms throughout generations (Burke, 1941; Hechter, 2018; Opp, 2001).

Even with these improvements, there is still a big gap in the current research. Previous studies have investigated Isan literature concerning cosmology, cultural function, and heritage application (Sungkhapantanont & Nunphooban, 2017; Wannakit, 2018), while others have examined religious beliefs and ritual practices in Northeastern Thailand (Baird, 2014; Pinthongvijayakul, 2018; Wattanagun, 2018). However, there is a scarcity of studies that systematically integrate these elements to analyze how belief representations in Isan literary texts serve as mechanisms for the formation of social norms. There is a paucity of research regarding how narratives encode behavioral expectations, justify social roles, and establish systems of sanction that govern conduct in daily life.

This study investigates belief in Isan literature not merely as symbolic cultural material, but as a normative resource through which communities establish, communicate, and maintain collective standards concerning social behavior. This study integrates social norm theory with sociological literary criticism to examine the interaction of narrative structures, symbolic representations, and belief systems in shaping moral reasoning, social order, and collective identity in Northeastern Thai society.

2. OBJECTIVE

- 2.1 To analyze belief systems (moral, supernatural, and ritual beliefs) in selected Isan literary texts.
- 2.2 To examine their role in shaping social norms by identifying narrative patterns of expectation-setting, sanctioning, and legitimation.
- 2.3 To interpret their social functions within Northeastern Thai society using social norm theory and sociological literary criticism.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section examines studies on Isan literature and its belief systems. It then puts together a few different ideas about social norms that show how literature may be used to make norms. The section concludes by establishing a conceptual framework that links belief representations in Isan texts to their social significance and moral implications.

3.1 Studies on Isan Literature

Isan literature, influenced by Northeastern Thai and Lao cultural traditions, encompasses oral traditions, written folk epics, didactic poetry, and ritual narratives that encapsulate local cosmologies, moral reasoning, and communal knowledge. Studies in Thai humanities have shown that Isan folk literatures contain unique world-creation and cosmological ideas, suggesting that storytelling traditions maintain “explanatory models” of the universe and humanity’s role within it (Sungkhapantanont & Nunphooban, 2017). Significantly, these literatures do not exist solely as historical materials; it is frequently reactivated in modern cultural contexts (e.g., identity formation and cultural management), indicating that folk narratives persist as functional cultural resources (Wannakit, 2018).

3.1.1 Phadaeng Nang Ai is widely regarded as a seminal Lao–Isan narrative that intertwines themes of romance, struggle, fate, and cosmological/moral causality. Studies that focus on language and text have found that the story’s literary texture shows religious and classical language registers, such as Pali and Sanskrit loanwords. This shows how belief-laden vocabulary is built into the structure and content of the story (Khunarak, 2022). These findings substantiate the perspective that belief systems are not only “themes” but are tangibly embedded in the language and symbolic structure of Isan literature.

3.1.2 Sang Sinxay (Sangsinchai)—a prominent Lao epic circulated in Isan—has been analyzed as a tradition that transmits through performative and visual-cultural mediums (e.g., temple murals, community performance repertoires). Community-based research elucidates how Sang Sinxay serves as a cultural framework for artistic creation and communal dissemination, indicating a persistent normative aspect through exemplars of heroism, duty, and moral conflict (Akkaphrom, 2018).

3.1.3 Ritual systems like Heet Sip Song – Kong Sip Si (twelve-month merit-making practices and customary norms) serve as another vital link between narrative, belief, and social existence. Researchers have looked at Heet Sip Song from several points of view, such as ecological tradition and cultural continuity. They have shown how ritual calendars and their meanings keep community order, intergenerational learning, and local identity alive (Bhatrakavi & Sitthitham, 2023). In summary, these investigations show that Isan narrative traditions combine moral ideas, supernatural cosmologies, and ritual responsibilities into cultural forms that might affect “what people should do” in everyday life.

Nonetheless, notwithstanding considerable research on textual characteristics, cultural roles, and heritage applications, there exists a paucity of studies that explicitly conceptualize Isan literary beliefs as normative frameworks—specifically, as systems that (1) delineate expectations, (2) signify sanctions, and (3) validate social roles and responsibilities through narrative authority (Sungkhapantanont & Nunphooban, 2017; Wannakit, 2018). This gap necessitates a more structured amalgamation of Isan literature studies and social norm theory.

3.2 Population and Samples

To comprehend the transformation of beliefs in literature into social norms, one must employ concepts from social norm theory, classical sociology, anthropology, and sociological literary criticism.

3.2.1 Social Norm Theory.

In modern social theory, norms are typically defined as collective expectations upheld by perceptions of (a) others’ behaviors (descriptive norms) and (b) others’ approval or disapproval (injunctive norms). Bicchieri (2006) defines norms as condition-dependent rules underpinned by empirical and normative expectations. The “focus theory of normative conduct” in social psychology posits that norm-consistent behavior intensifies when environmental cues render norms prominent (Cialdini et al., 1990; Kallgren et al., 2000). Integrative theories assert that norms exist in both objective forms (regularities, sanctions, institutions) and subjective forms (perceived norms and personal norms), and they endure through internalization, identification processes, and rational-choice considerations (Morris et al., 2015). This theoretical framework is directly relevant to narrative analysis, as narratives

can consistently signal anticipated behavior, illustrate approval or disapproval, and exemplify punishments.

3.2.2 Structural Functionalism.

From a structural-functional standpoint, cultural narratives, rituals, and belief systems may be examined as components that enhance social cohesiveness and stability. Parsons (1951) asserted that social order relies on normatively structured expectations; hence, narratives and rituals can be interpreted as cultural mechanisms that assimilate individuals into roles and validate institutional expectations.

3.2.3 Cultural Anthropology.

Interpretive anthropology views cultural artifacts—myths, rituals, narratives—as frameworks of meaning that influence individuals’ perceptions of reality. Geertz (1973) posits that culture is most effectively comprehended through interpretive “thick description,” rendering it valuable for the analysis of how literary symbols and cosmologies generate collective understandings that inform behavior. In the Isan setting, ethnographic research on spiritual practices and beliefs in Northeast Thailand indicates that supernatural beliefs can be rooted in lived experiences and social interpretations, hence maintaining practical moral and causal reasoning within communities (Wattanagun, 2018; Jaruworn, 2005). Ritual enactment has been demonstrated to “manufacture” constructs of personhood and political subjectivity, illustrating the social efficacy of belief-practice complexes (Pinthongvijayakul, 2018). These findings substantiate the notion that belief, when integrated into narrative and ritual, can serve as a foundation for normative standards and community governance.

3.2.4 Sociological Literary Criticism.

Sociological approaches to literature consider books as social instruments that both reflect and influence moral imagination. Burke’s idea of “literature as equipment for living” positions narratives as strategic resources people use to interpret recurring situations and orient action (Burke, 1941). When applied to Isan literature, this perspective advocates for the examination of narratives not solely for representation but also for their capacity to offer normative guidance—such as conduct, judgment, and the interpretation of transgression.

These viewpoints facilitate an analytical transition from “belief as cultural content” to “belief as normative mechanism,” elucidating the ways in which literary traditions can convey, enforce, and govern societal expectations over time.

3.3 Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes belief systems in Isan literature as an active chain connecting narrative structure to normative consequences.

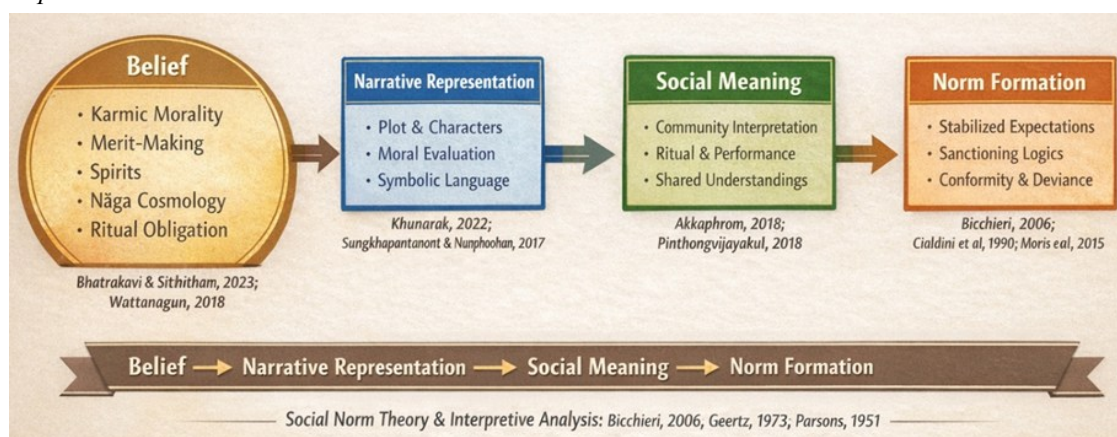
- **Belief** refers to worldview elements encoded in Isan texts (e.g., karmic morality, merit-making, spirits, nāga cosmology, ritual obligation) (Bhatrakavi & Sitthitham, 2023; Wattanagun, 2018).
- **Narrative representation** refers to how beliefs are articulated through plot structures, character types, moral evaluations, and symbolic language (Khunarak, 2022; Sungkhapantanont & Nunphooban, 2017).
- **Social meaning** emerges when communities interpret and circulate narratives through performance, ritual, and everyday discourse, turning textual belief into shared understandings and expectations (Akkaphrom, 2018; Pinthongvijayakul, 2018).
- **Norm formation** is the outcome: stabilized expectations and sanctioning logics that guide conformity and define deviance (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini et al., 1990; Morris et al., 2015).

This framework elucidates the functioning of Isan literary belief systems as normative resources that link narrative tradition to lived social reality by integrating social norm theory (Bicchieri, 2006;

Cialdini et al., 1990; Kallgren et al., 2000; Morris et al., 2015) with interpretive and functional perspectives (Burke, 1941; Geertz, 1973; Parsons, 1951).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This research employs a qualitative documentary methodology alongside qualitative textual analysis. Documentary research is suitable for analyzing culturally embedded belief systems since it allows the researcher to explore the preservation and transmission of values, moral assumptions, and social expectations through written and transcribed cultural artifacts. This study examines literary works not merely as aesthetic artifacts but as sociocultural documents through which communities encode and disseminate normative values.

Qualitative textual analysis is utilized to elucidate the representation of belief systems in selected Isan literary writings. The approach concentrates on the narrative formulation of moral, supernatural, and ritual beliefs, emphasizing symbolic patterns, character roles, moral causation, legitimacy, and sanctioning. This methodology is appropriate for the current study as it facilitates the analysis of literary narratives as cultural constructs that bridge symbolic meaning and actual social order. In this regard, the technique underpins the article's overarching objective of elucidating how belief entrenched in narrative tradition influences the establishment and perpetuation of social norms within Northeastern Thai society.

4.2 Data Sources

The study draws upon both primary and secondary sources.

4.2.1 Primary Sources

The main contents are well-known and culturally important works of Isan folk literature, such as Phadaeng Nang Ai, Sangsinchai, Heet Sip Song–Kong Sip Si, and stories about nāga traditions. We chose these passages on purpose based on three things: (1) They are well-known in Northeastern Thai culture and still have social relevance; (2) they clearly show moral, cosmological, or ritual beliefs; and (3) they are strongly related to issues of social behavior, obligation, hierarchy, reciprocity, and community order. These texts were selected from various Isan literary sources because they collectively embody the three principal characteristics of belief analyzed in this study: moral belief, supernatural belief, and ceremonial belief. Phadaeng Nang Ai and Sangsinchai have extensive narrative content with moral causality, familial duty, valor, and cosmological symbolism. Heet Sip Song–Kong Sip Si emphasizes ritual order, calendrical duty, and social practice, whereas nāga-related traditions elucidate

holy geography, spiritual validity, and the moralization of landscape. This collection provides a balanced and analytically logical foundation for examining how belief systems in Isan literature influence societal normative expectations.

4.2.2 Secondary Sources

Secondary sources encompass peer-reviewed academic publications, historical analyses, anthropological investigations, and theoretical discourses regarding social norms, literary interpretation, ritual practices, Thai popular religion, and cultural identity. These sources furnish the intellectual and contextual underpinnings for the investigation in two distinct ways. First, they facilitate the analysis of the chosen literary texts within the context of broader discourses on Isan cosmology, ritual practices, and ethical reasoning. Second, they furnish the theoretical lexicon—especially from social norm theory and sociological literary criticism—utilized to elucidate how belief systems embedded in narratives attain social significance and normative efficacy.

4.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in three interrelated stages: content analysis, thematic analysis, and theoretical interpretation.

4.3.1 Content Analysis

The initial phase entailed meticulous reading and qualitative content analysis of the chosen texts to discern both overt and covert representations of belief systems. Recurrent story components such as moral precepts, depictions of merit and karma, spirits and supernatural agency, ritual requirements, gendered expectations, familial duties, reward, punishment, and forms of social approval or disapproval were given attention.

The coding categories were established by a hybrid deductive–inductive methodology. In the preliminary phase, sensitizing concepts were derived deductively from pertinent literature on social norm theory and Isan belief systems, encompassing categories such as moral causality, ritual obligation, sanctioning, social hierarchy, gender roles, and communal cohesion (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini et al., 1990; Morris et al., 2015; Bowen, 2009). These initial categories served as an analytical foundation rather than a strict coding framework. As the texts were read over and over again, the categories were further refined inductively based on recurring themes, symbolic structures, and patterns that were distinctive to each work. This combined technique made sure that the analysis stayed based on theory while being able to adapt to the specific features of the chosen Isan literary works.

4.3.2 Thematic Analysis

In the second stage, coded data were organized into larger interpretive themes. The principal themes that surfaced encompassed moral causality, gratitude and intergenerational obligation, gendered moral expectations, spiritual surveillance, holy geography, ritual participation, community cohesion, and methods of sanctioning and legitimation. The goal of this stage was to go beyond isolated information in the text and find repeating narrative patterns that show how belief systems set expectations for how people should act and what happens when they don't (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.3.3 Interpretation through Social Norm Theory and Sociological Literary Criticism

In the concluding phase, the thematic results were analyzed using social norm theory, bolstered by sociological literary criticism. Descriptive norms, injunctive norms, internalization, sanctioning, and legitimacy were employed to elucidate the role of literary views as normative resources within society (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini et al., 1990; Kallgren et al., 2000; Gross & Vostroknutov, 2022). Simultaneously, sociological literary criticism elucidated how narrative structure, symbolic representation, and moral assessment facilitate works to operate as cultural devices that guide behavior and reinforce socially acknowledged ideals (Burke, 1941). This integrated interpretative approach

facilitated the transition from descriptive literary analysis to a comprehensive examination of how belief systems in Isan literature contribute to the perpetuation of social order across generations.

3.4 Scope and Limitations

This study is confined to certain traditions of Isan folk literature and excludes current literary works, mass media adaptations, or popular cultural reinterpretations. The examination concentrates on texts typically seen as integral to the region's cultural history, evaluating them as narrative sources of belief and normativity. Furthermore, the study excludes ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, or direct observation of contemporary populations. As a documentary and textual analysis, its conclusions derive from literary representation rather than direct measurement of contemporary behavior. The findings indicate a continuity between literary belief systems and contemporary social life in Northeastern Thailand; nevertheless, the study does not assert the ability to measure the current social influence of those ideas. Additional empirical research is required to investigate the interpretation, negotiation, or transformation of these literary norms across many current contexts, including rural, urban, and digital environments.

5. RESULT

5.1 Moral Beliefs and Ethical Norms

An examination of the chosen Isan literary corpus indicates that moral belief systems function as fundamental processes for the formulation and reinforcement of ethical norms within Northeastern Thai society. Three interconnected moral realms are regularly depicted: (1) karmic causality and merit-making, (2) thankfulness as an intergenerational obligation, and (3) gendered moral demands. These clusters of beliefs are not only story themes; they are also normative frameworks that set the rules for acceptable behavior, strengthen systems of punishment, and show what it is to be a good person.

5.1.1 Karma, Merit, and Moral Causality (กรรม-บุญ-บาป)

The notion of karma (กรรม) and merit (บุญ) is a major part of Isan stories' moral structure. This is shown through narrative causality, which connects intention, action, and result. Characters who gain merit by being generous, taking part in rituals, or being devoted to their parents are rewarded. Characters who break moral rules, on the other hand, suffer, have bad luck, or are punished by supernatural means. This kind of story patterning is a reflection of the larger Theravāda Buddhist moral cosmology that is a part of Thai religious life.

Academic research indicates that merit-making in Thai society serves as both a religious ritual and a framework of social reciprocity and moral hierarchy (Bowie, 1998). Merit serves as a symbolic resource that legitimizes disparities in status, strengthens communal obligations, and offers culturally comprehensible rationales for inequality and wealth. Kitiarsa (2005) contends that prevalent religious practices in Thailand incorporate karmic cosmology into quotidian political and moral deliberation, therefore perpetuating collective anticipations of moral responsibility.

Karmic language is still an important part of modern Thai moral debate. Kumhaeng (2025) demonstrates the semantic transformation of the Buddhist idea of *pr̥et* (hungry ghost) into a moral metaphor employed to denounce avarice and social misbehavior, exemplifying the enduring social applicability of cosmological categories. In Isan literary traditions, the recurrent portrayal of karmic consequence serves as an injunctive norm, indicating not only what individuals do but also what they ought to do, thereby sustaining internalized moral standards throughout generations.

5.1.2 Gratitude and Intergenerational Obligation (ความกตัญญู)

Another important moral value in Isan stories is gratitude (katanyu), especially toward parents and anyone who has helped you. Gratitude is characterized as a moral obligation (bun khun) that compels youngsters to engage in perpetual reciprocity and care. Characters who embody gratitude are depicted as noble and socially acceptable, whereas those who ignore familial duties are portrayed unfavorably.

An empirical study substantiates that katanyu katavedi serves as a fundamental moral construct within Thai family systems. Kespichawatana (1999) elucidates that thankfulness in Thai society is organized through the acknowledgment of parental sacrifice, internalized moral obligation, and behavioral restitution. This moral reasoning transcends personal sentiment; it structures societal norms related to caregiving, respect, and intergenerational continuity.

From a normative standpoint, gratitude in Isan literary texts functions as a stabilizing social norm by delineating ideal kinship behavior and legitimizing sanctions—be it societal disapproval or narrative misfortune—against individuals who breach filial duties. The moral elevation of gratitude fortifies family-centered hierarchy and maintains communal cohesion.

5.1.3 Gender Roles and Moral Evaluation (บทบาทชาย-หญิง)

Isan literary depictions also include gendered moral standards, frequently corresponding with Theravāda Buddhist cosmology and indigenous cultural traditions. Men are often linked to ordination, religious leadership, or public ritual responsibilities, while women are portrayed as upholding religious life through merit-making, textile manufacture, and domestic ritual support.

Research on Thai-Lao manuscript culture illustrates that women have historically made substantial contributions to religious institutions through material and ritual labor, despite the persistence of male dominance in formal ecclesiastical authority (Sukrak & Jaengsaewang, 2025). This separation exemplifies a prevalent structural phenomenon in Theravāda Buddhist cultures, characterized by differentiated yet symbolically interconnected gendered access to merit and status (Bowie, 1998).

In story situations, such representations serve as moral frameworks. Gender roles are not only delineated but also normatively constructed as appropriate, commendable, and cosmologically endorsed. These depictions assist in solidifying norms on acceptable femininity and masculinity in rural Isan communities. Literary works strengthen culturally established standards of moral appraisal by tying gendered conduct to karmic consequence and community recognition.

5.2. Supernatural Beliefs and Social Regulation

In addition to moral teachings on karma and gratitude, Isan literature includes a complex cosmology of supernatural creatures and sacred landscapes that serve as tools for social control. Three recurring clusters are especially important: (1) beliefs about spirits (phii), (2) nāga cosmology (phaya nāk), and (3) the moralized interaction between people and the natural world. These supernatural frames don't just serve as decorative elements; they also encode ideas about how to behave, how to set community borders, and how to be responsible for the environment.

5.2.1 Spirit Beliefs (Phii) and Moral Surveillance

Belief in spirits (phii) is a key part of Northeastern Thai cosmology. In literary fiction, ghosts are sometimes depicted as protectors, enforcers of punishment, or harbingers of catastrophe in response to the transgression of social or ceremonial standards. These depictions establish a type of symbolic moral oversight: inappropriate behavior—be it ethical violation, ritual neglect, or disrespect towards elders—invokes supernatural repercussions.

Ethnographic research shows that many communities in Northeast Thailand still believe in spirits and use that belief to explain disease, bad luck, and societal problems (Wattanagun, 2018). Spirit cosmologies do not reject Buddhism; instead, they coexist and engage with Buddhist moral thinking.

Kitiarsa (2005) contends that spirit mediums and prevalent religious professionals alleviate moral worries and social tensions, hence promoting culturally accepted perceptions of cause and accountability.

From a social norm standpoint, spirit narratives function as mechanisms of sanction. The potential for supernatural punishment bolsters injunctive norms (prescriptive behaviors) by linking tangible repercussions to imperceptible moral transgressions. Literary representations of spiritual retribution thereby expand moral power beyond human institutions into a cosmic framework, so enhancing conformity even in situations where formal state processes are lacking or ineffective.

5.2.2 *Nāga Cosmology (Phaya Nāk) and Sacred Legitimacy*

The nāga (phaya nāk), serpent-like beings linked to rivers, fertility, and protection, are another important supernatural figure in Isan stories. Nāga tales often associate local terrains, particularly the Mekong River basin, with sacred cosmology, infusing geography with moral significance. Scholarly examinations of Tai and Lao relic myths and nāga traditions illustrate the historical integration of Buddhist tales with indigenous snake cosmologies to validate sacred locations and regional identities (Hongsuwan, 2005). Likewise, Baird (2014) illustrates that spirit cults and holy narratives in Northeast Thailand influence sociocultural boundaries and political identities, suggesting that supernatural traditions contribute to the delineation of belonging and moral authority.

In literary contexts, nāga narratives frequently reward fidelity, ceremonial adherence, and communal concord, while penalizing avarice or treachery. These patterns set descriptive norms (how people in the community act around sacred locations and ceremonies) and injunctive norms (how they should act). By linking sacred beings to specific locations, nāga cosmology enhances communal stewardship of rivers, temples, and ritual spaces. Supernatural validity thus fortifies local identity and communal unity.

5.2.3 *Human–Nature Relations and Ecological Morality*

A third aspect of supernatural belief pertains to the ethical interaction between humanity and the natural environment. Isan narratives frequently portray forests, rivers, mountains, and water bodies as inhabited or protected by spiritual entities. These depictions portray nature not as a passive resource but as a morally engaged world.

Nimmanahaeminda (2005) asserts that Thai-Tai water lore and folk cosmology include ethical ideas in environmental narratives, indicating that ecological areas are connected to moral order. In these cosmologies, environmental damage can lead to spiritual repercussions, hence enhancing reverence for natural cycles and the practice of rituals.

From a normative perspective, this moral ecology serves as an indirect kind of societal governance. When environmental harm is symbolically associated with spiritual discontent, communities assimilate norms of restraint, ritual decorum, and collective deliberation. Literary reiteration of these topics facilitates enduring norm stability by integrating ecological ethics into religious tale structures.

In conclusion, in Isan literature, supernatural ideas function as principles that align with Buddhist moral precepts. Spiritual punishment establishes moral boundaries, nāga cosmology provides sacred geography and a sense of group identity, and environmental cosmology delineates constraints on environmental utilization. These narrative systems extend societal control beyond physical institutions into a cosmologically structured domain where spiritual forces govern morality. Rather than representing outdated superstition, supernatural motifs serve as culturally comprehensible mechanisms for reinforcing societal standards. They shape expectations, define deviations, and strengthen communal identity, especially in rural areas where ritual activities and oral traditions maintain social importance.

5.3. Ritual Beliefs and Community Cohesion

Isan literary traditions incorporate ceremonial systems alongside moral philosophy and supernatural cosmology, serving as vehicles for community integration. Ritual beliefs—especially those linked to Heet Sip Song (ฮีตสิบสอง), merit-making festivals (bun traditions), and the institutional function of Buddhism—act as persistent narrative frameworks that reinforce communal identity, temporal organization, and moral hierarchy. In Isan literature, ritual transcends mere ceremony; it functions as a normative structure that organizes social engagement and fosters communal identity.

5.3.1 Heet Sip Song (ฮีตสิบสอง) and Cyclical Moral Order

Heet Sip Song (the “Twelve Customs”) denotes the annual sequence of ceremonial practices that organize communal life in Northeastern Thailand and Lao ethnic areas. Literary allusions to these twelve monthly customs depict time as morally governed, integrating social responsibilities within the rhythm of the calendar. Every month is linked to designated practices—such as merit-making ceremonies, agricultural rites, and communal festivals—that reinforce collective ideals.

Anthropological and historical research indicates that ceremonial calendars in Tai communities serve as mechanisms for moral coordination, connecting agricultural cycles, Buddhist practices, and local cosmology (Bowie, 1998; Tambiah, 1970). Repetitive performance in rituals strengthens descriptive norms (the actions of community members annually) and injunctive norms (the expectations placed upon them). The literary encoding of Heet Sip Song reflects and strengthens collective temporal discipline, guaranteeing that moral existence progresses within a regulated communal framework.

Isan literature supports ritual compliance as a criterion for genuine community membership by depicting people who fulfill ritual tasks as virtuous and socially integrated, while characterizing neglect of these duties as morally questionable.

5.3.2 Merit-Making Festivals (Bun) and Collective Solidarity

Bun (บุญ) customs, which encompass merit-making events like Bun Bang Fai (rocket festival), Bun Phra Wet, and Bun Khao Phansa, are intricately linked to Heet Sip Song. In literary contexts, these ceremonial activities are shown as instances of intensified communal solidarity, mutual exchange, and symbolic rejuvenation.

Tambiah (1970) contends that Buddhist merit-making in Thai communities functions as both a kind of religious devotion and a mechanism of social exchange, facilitating resource redistribution and reinforcing social connections. Kitiarsa (2005) observes that public religious rites cultivate a collective moral imagination, linking local practices to the wider Buddhist cosmology. In Isan literary narratives, bun festivals are frequently portrayed as occasions where moral standing is manifested by acts of kindness, involvement, and patronage. The communal aspect of these ceremonies converts individual conviction into shared validation. Participation establishes a descriptive norm—anticipated among community members—while abstinence poses a risk of symbolic marginalization. Consequently, ritualized merit-making serves as a strategy for communal cohesion, diminishing conflict, and reinforcing group identity.

5.3.3 The Institutional Role of Religion in Norm Stabilization

Theravāda Buddhism establishes the comprehensive institutional framework that governs Isan ceremonial practices. Monasteries (wat) function as religious institutions as well as educational, cultural, and social hubs. Literary portrayals often show monks as paragons of virtue and ritual leaders, sustaining hierarchical yet reciprocal dynamics between the laity and the clergy. Research on Thai popular religion indicates that religious institutions serve as intermediaries between doctrinal Buddhism and local cosmology, amalgamating spirit beliefs and ceremonial activities within a comprehensive moral framework (Kitiarsa, 2005). This institutional mediation enhances normative coherence by

unifying many belief systems—karma, spirits, nāga cosmology—within a common religious framework.

Furthermore, engagement in rituals within Buddhist institutions cultivates what Durkheim (1912/1995) termed “collective effervescence,” in which communal assemblies produce emotional cohesion and reinforce common values. In Isan environments, ceremonial assemblies linked to monasteries strengthen social boundaries, facilitate intergenerational value transmission, and uphold moral authority. Literary depictions of monastic environments enhance the metaphorical status of religion as the protector of social order.

In conclusion, Ritual beliefs in Isan literature function as cohesive mechanisms by synchronizing moral imperatives, temporal patterns, and social interactions. Heet Sip Song facilitates communal recreation; bun festivals encourage reciprocity and collaboration; and Buddhist institutions cultivate hierarchical yet cooperative social dynamics. From a sociocultural perspective, ritual repetition facilitates internalization. Regular engagement reduces ambiguity concerning expected conduct, while public execution increases transparency and accountability. Ritual beliefs embedded in narrative traditions surpass simple symbolic representation; they serve as lasting systems of social coordination, linking individuals in a shared identity throughout generations.

6. DISCUSSION

This study’s findings reveal that belief systems within Isan literature—comprising moral, supernatural, and ceremonial aspects—serve not only as symbolic tales but also as active instruments of social regulation, identity formation, and intergenerational continuity. This discourse integrates the findings concerning three primary analytical issues: (1) belief as a means of social regulation, (2) belief and the establishment of Isan identity, and (3) the persistence and evolution of belief in modern society.

6.1 Belief as a Mechanism of Social Regulation

The investigation shows that belief systems in Isan literary traditions work as culturally ingrained ways to control society. Narrative structures consistently transmit expectations for ethical action, delineate moral limits, and illustrate consequences for transgression. These patterns closely correspond with social norm theory, which defines norms as systems of collective expectations reinforced by perceived approbation and sanctioning (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini et al., 1990).

Karmic causation offers a notably robust framework for moral accountability. Actions are depicted as generating effects that are both ethically significant and socially interpretable. In this way, karmic logic strengthens injunctive rules by putting moral duty in the context of a larger cosmological order. Supernatural beliefs, particularly those concerning spirits (phii) and nāga cosmology, expand this regulatory framework beyond human institutions. They establish what might be characterized as a “cosmological extension” of social control, wherein moral violations incur not only social condemnation but also spiritual repercussions (Wattanagun, 2018; Baird, 2014).

Ritual practices reinforce normative frameworks by repetition and communal engagement. Participating in merit-making activities and calendrical rituals regularly makes anticipated behavior more visible and important, which makes it clearer what is suitable behavior (Cialdini et al., 1990). In this regard, Isan ritual systems exemplify what Gelfand et al. (2011) characterize as “tight” cultural contexts, wherein norms are distinctly specified, and deviations are socially perceptible. It is important to note that these mechanisms work not only through force, but also through internalization. People change their conduct to fit in with what society expects of them since such behavior is linked to moral identity, social recognition, and a sense of belonging to a group (Gross & Vostroknutov, 2022). Isan literary narratives aid this process by showcasing exemplary people and moral repercussions that direct interpretation and action over generations.

6.2 Belief and the Construction of Isan Identity

In Isan literature, belief systems are a big part of how regional identity is built and passed down. In this context, identity is delineated not solely by language or geography, but by collective cosmological frameworks, ritual practices, and ethical values. Narrative traditions facilitate this process by integrating cultural significance into symbolic structures that link individuals, locations, and beliefs.

Nāga cosmology, for instance, associates sacred narratives with particular locations, especially the Mekong River region. Through these kinds of stories, geography takes on moral and spiritual meaning. This link strengthens a sense of belonging that comes from both the place and the universe. The ritual calendar of Heet Sip Song also organizes community life by creating common rhythms of time that bring together farming cycles, religious rites, and social duties.

Academic research on ritual and spiritual practices in Northeastern Thailand corroborates this interpretation. Ritual performance and spiritual beliefs play a significant role in shaping individual identity and political consciousness, while also establishing community borders (Baird, 2014; Pinthongvijayakul, 2018). In this context, belief systems serve as symbolic resources that uphold collective identity by delineating what is deemed morally acceptable, culturally significant, and socially legitimate (Morris et al., 2015).

Moreover, characteristics such as merit-making, respect for elders, and involvement in communal rituals strengthen the kinship-based social structure typical of rural Isan communities. These behaviors are not only ways to show faith, but they are also ways to keep identity alive and strong.

6.3 Continuity and Transformation in Contemporary Society

Despite modernization, urbanization, and the digital revolution, belief systems rooted in Isan literary and ritual traditions continue to influence contemporary lifestyles. This continuity is not static; it necessitates ongoing reinterpretation and transformation.

Merit-making celebrations such as Bun Bang Fai and Bun Phra Wet remain highly popular in numerous Isan communities. These activities remain prominent means for individuals to unite, demonstrate kindness, reinforce social connections, and navigate their moral identity within society. Attending such events remains a socially sanctioned requirement, reflecting both descriptive norms (common behaviors) and injunctive norms (prescribed behaviors).

Another example is evident in everyday moral discussions, where karmic terminology (e.g., bun, bap, kam) continues to be utilized for interpreting life events, success, and hardship. This language endures in urban and digital contexts, evident in dialogues, media discourse, and social critique, so illustrating that traditional moral frameworks remain culturally intelligible and socially relevant. Similarly, supernatural concepts such as *phii* or *prèet* have undergone semantic change, often functioning as metaphorical denunciations of greed, corruption, or immoral behavior (Kumhaeng, 2025).

These observations correspond with theoretical frameworks suggesting that social norms persist as long as they continue to provide functional advantages for coordination, meaning-making, and identity preservation (Hechter, 2018; Opp, 2001). In the Isan context, belief systems endure as interpretive frameworks that enable individuals to understand moral causality, social responsibility, and communal affiliation.

Continuity does not equate to uniformity. The interpretations and manifestations of belief vary between situations, particularly between rural and urban settings. In rural regions, rituals and communal activities remain integral components of daily existence. In urban environments, belief systems may be expressed more symbolically or discursively than through direct ritual engagement. This variance signifies that belief systems in Isan literature are not static cultural artifacts, but rather dynamic normative resources capable of adapting to changing social settings.

7. CONCLUSION

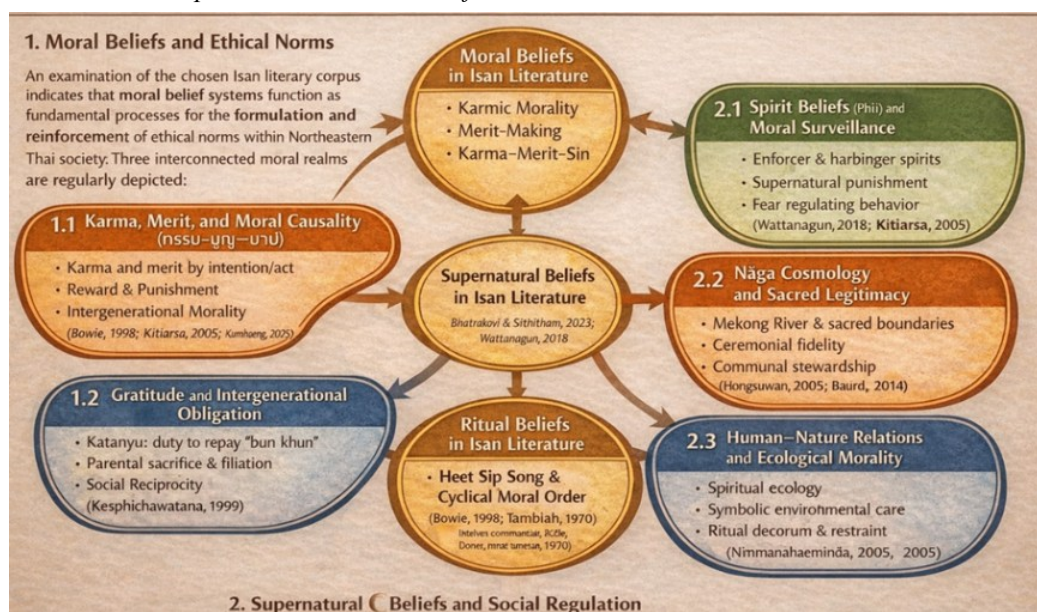
This study enhances understanding by reconceptualizing belief systems in Isan literature as normative infrastructure—functions that actively influence and reinforce social norms in Northeastern Thai culture, rather than only serving as cultural iconography. It enhances academic inquiry in three distinct ways.

Initially, it amalgamates social norm theory with Isan literary analysis to elucidate how narratives establish collective expectations, legitimacy, and sanctioning mechanisms, rather than merely conveying cultural significances. Secondly, it presents a definitive explanatory framework—Belief → Narrative Representation → Social Meaning → Norm Formation—demonstrating how karmic morality, spirits, nāga cosmology, and ceremonial obligations are rendered socially actionable via plot structures, moral assessment, and communal dissemination. Third, it underscores the unique regional normative framework of Isan society by illustrating how sacred geography (e.g., nāga–Mekong imaginaries) and ritual cycles (e.g., Heet Sip Song) synchronize communal time, engagement, and identity.

The paper reframes the central inquiry from “What do Isan beliefs signify?” to “How do Isan beliefs govern and perpetuate social order across generations, including in modern contexts?”

Figure 2

Isan literature: moral, spiritual, and ritual beliefs



8. RECOMMENDATION

This study’s findings indicate that belief systems in Isan literature serve as mechanisms for social regulation, identity formation, and intergenerational continuity. Consequently, the following recommendations are suggested at the policy, practical, and research levels.

8.1. Policy Recommendations

8.1.1. Cultural Heritage Policy Integration: Government institutions tasked with cultural preservation, education, and regional development should officially acknowledge Isan literary traditions as normative cultural resources rather than merely as artistic or folklore relics. Policies concerning cultural heritage management may incorporate literary narratives—such as nāga tales, Heet Sip Song, and merit-making traditions—into sustainable cultural programming, museum curation, and local curriculum development. This acknowledgment would correspond with extensive cultural policy

frameworks that prioritize the protection of intangible cultural heritage and the enhancement of social cohesion. By recognizing the normative roles of belief systems, officials might enhance cultural continuity without diminishing tradition to mere symbolic representation.

8.1.2. Education Policy Enhancement: Educational authorities at both regional and national levels may integrate Isan literary texts into the curriculum for moral education, civic education, and local studies. The use of tales that highlight appreciation, societal duty, ecological care, and ritual participation might enhance culturally rooted ethical education. This method does not suggest religious imposition but rather a contextualized moral instruction grounded in local cultural understanding. Incorporating local literary history into formal schooling may enhance identity awareness and facilitate the intergenerational transmission of social values.

8.1.3. Community-Based Cultural Governance: Local administrative bodies and cultural councils ought to endorse community-driven initiatives for the preservation of rituals and literature. Financial and structural assistance for festivals, storytelling events, manuscript conservation, and temple-centric cultural activities can uphold the social roles of rituals and belief systems. Such strategies would enhance community cohesion and mitigate cultural fragmentation in swiftly modernizing environments.

8.2. Practical Recommendations

8.2.1. Revitalization of Storytelling Practices: Community leaders, monks, educators, and cultural practitioners ought to promote intergenerational storytelling initiatives that safeguard and reinterpret Isan literary traditions. Public readings, temple-centered cultural activities, and digital storytelling projects can modify classic narratives for modern audiences while preserving their essential meaning. Digital platforms can be employed to record oral traditions and render them available to newer generations who predominantly interact through online media.

8.2.2. Ritual Participation as Social Integration: Community stakeholders ought to acknowledge ritual participation not only as religious practice, but as a means of fostering social cohesion. Promoting inclusive engagement in bun festivals and Heet Sip Song celebrations helps cultivate unity, diminish generational gaps, and strengthen collective identity. It is essential to ensure that ritual practices are inclusive, especially for youth and marginalized groups, to promote adaptive rather than exclusionary cultural continuity.

8.2.3. Ecological and Cultural Awareness Programs: Considering the ethical connection between humans and nature inherent in Isan cosmology, community organizations can establish environmental initiatives based on local belief systems. Integrating ecological conservation efforts with nāga mythology and sacred landscape tales may bolster environmental stewardship by presenting conservation as culturally significant rather than externally mandated.

8.3. Recommendations for Further Research

8.3.1. Empirical Field Studies: Subsequent studies ought to augment this documentary and textual analysis with ethnographic fieldwork. Examining how modern communities understand and enact belief systems would offer empirical confirmation of the normative mechanisms found in literary works. Comparative analyses of rural and urban populations in Isan would be very beneficial.

8.3.2. Comparative Regional Assessment: Researchers may do comparative studies of Isan literary belief systems and other Thai regional traditions (e.g., Northern Lanna or Southern Thai cultures) to analyze similarities and variations in normative frameworks. This research would enhance the larger studies of belief and social regulation in Southeast Asia.

8.3.3. Digital Transformation and Adaptation of Beliefs: Additional inquiry is required about the transformation of Isan belief systems inside digital environments, encompassing social media discourse, online ritual engagement, and digital narrative creation. Investigating the semantic alterations of supernatural or karmic terminology in modern communication might clarify how belief evolves with modernization.

8.3.4. Gender and Normative Transformation: Future research may investigate the interplay between shifting gender roles and conventional merit-making and ritual frameworks. Analyzing the interplay between contemporary gender equality narratives and traditional literary conventions might enhance comprehension of the continuity and transformation within Isan moral frameworks.

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