

“Towards the Connection Between Humans and Nature”: A Critique of the Myths of Stone Castles in Ecocritical Contexts

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex relationship between the myths surrounding stone castles and ecological dimensions in Thailand, focusing on Northeastern Thailand. Stone castles are historical and artistic symbols and representations of the deep connection between humans and their natural environment. These myths, rooted in folklore, convey community histories and cultural identities, highlighting the struggles and triumphs of past civilizations. The storytelling related to stone castles emphasizes sustainable practices and respect for natural resources, fostering a sense of unity and pride within communities. Using an ecocritical lens, this study examines the significance of these stone monuments beyond their artistic value, revealing the sustainable practices and environmental awareness of ancient peoples. By analyzing these myths, we gain insight into the values and beliefs that shaped human interactions with nature throughout history. The myths illustrate a legacy of ecological respect and balanced coexistence with the environment, offering crucial lessons for contemporary society on the importance of environmental conservation and cultural preservation. Ultimately, this critique highlights the need to appreciate and understand the ongoing relationship between humans and nature, as reflected in the myths of stone castles.

Keywords: *Stone Castles, Myths, Ecology, Sustainability, Thai Culture.*

Introduction

Stone castle myths are an essential part of the folklore and culture in Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand and its neighboring countries. These myths are rooted not only in belief systems and art but also in each community's unique histories and cultural identities. Stone castles are often seen as symbols of the ancient Khmer civilization, associated with worshiping deities and preserving nature (Groslier, 1962). Each myth has variations, influenced by geography, environmental conditions, and the people's experiences in those areas. For instance, myths surrounding the construction of stone castles recount tales of heroic struggles in the past or the development of ancient cities, highlighting the profound relationship between humans and their environment, including sustainable resource use and the cultivation of a conservation-oriented culture (Panichkit, 2015).

Moreover, stone castle myths pass down knowledge and values from generation to generation. They often educate the younger generation on preserving culture and nature in their local regions. The storytelling and lessons from these myths foster a sense of unity and community connection, enhancing the identity and pride of a culture inherited over time. Consequently, stone castle myths are not merely stories (S. Yuenyaw, 2012) but valuable references for studying and analyzing this region's culture, history, and ecological sciences (Maneechoti & Others., 2022). Exploring and understanding these myths can provide a clearer picture of human life and the relationship with nature from the past to the present.

Stone castles symbolize both history and art, serving as a connection between humans and nature. They showcase the architectural advancements of their time and reflect the ideas and beliefs of the people who built them. The construction of these stone castles required artistic expertise and careful consideration of the natural environment (Chanwattanakun, 2009). For instance, materials were sourced from local stones, demonstrating an understanding of natural resources and the importance of using locally sourced materials in creating artistic works. This emphasizes the enduring relationship between humans and nature. An example of this connection can be found in the Pajit-Arapim myth, which revolves around the Phimai Stone Castle. In this myth, Nang Arapim is portrayed as someone with a sun symbol above her head,

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signifying her great merit. This characteristic interestingly reflects the relationship between nature and humans.

Additionally, research and surveys indicate that stone castles are often constructed in geologically and environmentally suitable locations, allowing for a harmonious coexistence with nature. Furthermore, they are crucial in creating a culture and collective memory for the community, passing knowledge and stories to future generations (Vallipodom, 2019). Using stone castles as places of worship or social gathering reflects respect and reverence for the surrounding environment.

Ecocriticism

Studying and understanding stone monuments goes beyond merely examining history or art; it requires exploring the complex relationships that have continuously existed between humans and nature (Sangkaphanthanon et al., L. (2018)). Stone monuments symbolize a way of life that reflects our efforts to coexist meaningfully with nature through artistic expression or sustainable cultural preservation. This awareness highlights the importance of environmental conservation and the transmission of culture, with stone monuments serving as focal points in this discourse (Temiyaphan, 2016). Furthermore, this study allows us to recognize the roles that strengthen the bond between humanity and the natural world that has surrounded us since ancient times.

Examining myths related to stone monuments through an ecological lens is of considerable importance (Cooley (Ed.), 1994). This perspective enhances our understanding of the historical progression of architecture and art, elucidating the complex interplay between humans and their environment, which holds substantial significance within historical and cultural frameworks. These myths often reflect ancient societies' values, beliefs, and accumulated wisdom (Hongsuwan, 2008; Na 'Thalang, 2019). By analyzing these narratives from an ecological standpoint, we gain deeper insights into the biophysical context and anthropogenic interactions that have shaped human experiences.

J. Hunter's 2020 publication, "Folklore, Landscape, and Ecology: Joining the Dots," delves into the interconnections between landscape, folklore, and ecological dynamics. The study illustrates how folklore serves as a nexus for landscape appreciation and environmental stewardship, showcasing folklore's beneficial and detrimental effects on natural resource management. Furthermore, Hunter advocates for ongoing research to explore the influence of folklore on ecological behavior and conservation practices.

In the past, people showed respect and appreciation for nature by building stone monuments using sustainable materials. Myths associated with these monuments reflect changes in the landscape, the use of natural resources, and how humans adapt to their environment. For example, the Phanom Rung Stone Castle is linked to astronomical phenomena. Myths suggest that its construction involved observing the sun shining through the 15 door frames at specific times. This phenomenon demonstrates the ancestors' understanding of astronomical calculations and their connection to the universe. These elements are crucial for understanding sustainability and the ways humans nurture their relationship with the environment. An ecological analysis of these myths reveals a deep respect for nature and a quest for balance within the ecosystem.



Figure 1. The Sun Rises and Sets Directly Through 15 Doors at Phnom Rung Historical Park, Attracting Thai and Foreign Tourists. Source: Thailand Festival. (2020, March 3)

This analysis can further extend to understanding how humans manage changes in environmental conditions, whether by coping with crises stemming from environmental shifts or unsustainable development. Ecological analysis serves as a tool for restoring community ties to culture and nature.

By understanding these myths, we see that people in the past built stone monuments to assert power and forge connections with their land. This perspective also influences contemporary communities, enabling society to glean lessons from history for the sustainable conservation and development of natural resources, aligning with modern concepts of sustainable development. Applying an ecological framework to analyze the myths of stone monuments opens up diverse discussions about the intricate relationships between humans and nature (Hongsuwan, 2021). It fosters a deeper understanding of the coexistence of culture and the environment, both in the past and present, ultimately leading to improved approaches to caring for our world.

This study analyzes folklore and culture, particularly examining human-nature relationships. It aims to assess how various forms of art and myth convey this relationship while considering the reciprocal impacts between humans and the environment (Na Thalang (2019); Hunter, 2020). By employing ecocriticism to study myths related to stone monuments, we can uncover new perspectives that connect elements of folklore to their environmental contexts.

Mythology

This study delves into nature's profound value, as depicted in various myths and stories, which connect humanity and the natural world (George et al., 2004). A significant part of this examination includes an analysis of the stone monuments that dot the local landscape, representing artistic achievement and a deep-rooted connection to the environment. By exploring these elements, we can gain insights into how ancient societies interacted with nature, showcasing their deep respect by deliberately choosing colors and materials

that harmonize with their surroundings. The reverence for the environment is woven into a tapestry of beliefs and rituals that highlight a profound acceptance of nature's importance. Stone monuments emerge as powerful symbols of the coexistence between humans and the natural world, encapsulating shared meanings and cultural narratives (Sak Kingmani, 2019). Moreover, it is crucial to consider the ecological repercussions of development and resource extraction on these ancient structures. By examining these impacts, we can better understand the environmental transformations brought about by urban expansion and their implications for the future preservation of our natural resources. This comprehensive approach honors the past and informs our responsibilities toward safeguarding the environment for future generations.

This study analyzes the relationship between folklore and culture and their impact on the ecosystem. By examining the myth of the stone castle, the research seeks to raise awareness and foster discussion about contemporary environmental issues. Additionally, this format highlights the evolution of ideas regarding the connection between nature and humanity, especially compared to current social and cultural conditions (Phaetkun, 2000). Thus, ecological analysis serves as a vital tool for reflecting on the past, aiding in the understanding and transferring valuable knowledge that can be applied in everyday life and the ongoing conservation of nature.

This ecological study emphasizes the importance of understanding stone monuments as spaces for reflection, creativity, and collaboration between humans and the environment. This understanding can lead to new perspectives on cultural heritage, sustainable development, and the preservation of future biodiversity. In this article, we will explore myths and beliefs about stone monuments and analyze their meanings from an ecological perspective. This will help us see how the culture and folklore reflected in these myths can guide biodiversity conservation and promote practices that foster sustainable coexistence between humans and nature. The dimension of ecological analysis opens up opportunities for inquiry and discoveries that may influence future education, conservation efforts, and sustainable development in our society.

Research Objectives

The researcher has established two primary objectives for this study:

To examine how the myths surrounding stone monuments reflect the relationship between humans and nature, explicitly concerning respect, utilization, and adaptation to environmental conditions.

To analyze the portrayal of stone monuments in myths within a literary context and their significance to local culture, emphasizing the need to foster connections between cultural heritage and the natural environment.

Theoretical Frameworks

In establishing the theoretical frameworks for the research objectives outlined above, the researcher has considered the application of four theoretical concepts as follows:

Ecological Analysis Framework: This study emphasizes the relationship between humans and nature. Utilizing the ecological analysis framework will enhance the understanding of this relationship by focusing on the content of nature-related myths—addressing themes of respect, utilization, adaptation, and interactions with the environment.

Cultural Symbolism of Stone Monuments: This framework explores the role of stone monuments in folklore and cultural expression. It considers how these monuments serve as significant cultural symbols, their meanings within local society, and their role in transmitting cultural heritage.

Human Interaction with Nature: This study will analyze how humans interact with nature within cultural contexts, helping us understand the ideologies and values that influence development and conservation efforts in local areas.

Folklore and Environmental Awareness: This framework seeks to understand how folklore and myths communicate the relationship between humans and nature and foster societal environmental awareness.

Literature Review

The examination of ecological consciousness within literary studies has gained significant scholarly attention, reflecting a variety of cultural contexts and methodological approaches. This folklore review synthesizes vital contributions to the evolving field of ecocriticism and ecological awareness in folklore. A pivotal resource in this discourse is "Nawawithi: Contemporary Methodology in Literary Studies," edited by S. Chotiudomphan (2019), which includes an essential article on ecocriticism. This work emphasizes the intricate relationship between folklore, nature, and environmental issues.

Sangkaphanthanon, T. (2013) contributes to this volume with a focus on "Green Folklore" within the realm of Thai literature, exploring various dimensions of ecological consciousness. Her study examines traditional ecological perspectives of ancient communities and the Buddhist ecological frameworks that shape them. Additionally, she investigates the interplay between nature, power, and class dynamics. Through these analyses, Sangkaphanthanon illuminates the evolving paradigms surrounding nature and the environment in Thai folklore, particularly about the imaginative engagements of individual poets and the transformative trends emerging in early Rattanakosin folklore.

Furthering this dialogue, Nualsiri (2006) examines the ecological themes in John Steinbeck's novels, specifically "To a God Unknown" (1933), "The Grapes of Wrath" (1939), and "East of Eden" (1952). Nualsiri argues that Steinbeck's ecological perspective articulates a holistic understanding of the interconnectedness between human and natural systems. His analysis highlights how a lack of environmental consciousness leads to exploitation and associated social challenges, advocating for a dual focus on environmental and societal solutions.

Additionally, Nualsiri explores familial dynamics in "East of Eden," suggesting that solid family relationships foster more profound compassion for individuals and their environment.

In a practical context, Murakami (1995) provides valuable insights in "Towards a Natural Consciousness: A Handbook of Tropical Ecological Agriculture," where he contrasts ecological agriculture with traditional chemical farming practices. Murakami examines critical concepts such as biodiversity, soil health, and sustainable practices, emphasizing the relationship between agricultural methods and ecological integrity. His findings contribute to a broader dialogue about the interactions between folklore, environmental practices, and socio-environmental issues.

Tunpattrakul (2016) studied eco-feminism in the works of native women writers Joy Harjo (Creek Nation), Linda Hogan (Chickasaw Nation), and Kath Walker (Aboriginal Australian). The research highlights how their literature connects the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women and indigenous peoples due to Western capitalist patriarchy. Harjo's poetry portrays women's strength as "mothers," while Walker critiques Western culture and honors Aboriginal traditions. Hogan's semi-historical novels amplify marginalized voices and incorporate critical and post-colonial eco-feminism. Overall, the study emphasizes these writers' significant contributions to eco-feminism and their challenge to social structures regarding nature and gender.

In addition, Hunter (2020) wrote an article titled "Folklore, Landscape, and Ecology: Joining the Dots," published in *Time and Mind*. This article explores the connections between landscape, folklore, and ecology, emphasizing the role of folklore in shaping our interaction with the landscape and its influence on environmental conservation and social movements. Given the ongoing climate crisis, the article suggests that storytelling and myths can significantly affect people's behavior regarding conserving culturally critical

natural sites and landscapes. For instance, tales about elves in Iceland and fairies in Ireland can impact planning decisions for construction projects. Conversely, stories about St. Melangel in Wales highlight the tension between conservation efforts and the expansion of hunting rights in culturally significant areas. The article also underscores the need for further research into the effects of folklore on the environment. It proposes that folklore can be a valuable tool for changing attitudes and behaviors toward nature, with the hope that these studies will enhance our understanding of the complex relationships among landscape, folklore, and people.

A review of the literature on ecological consciousness reveals that this topic has garnered significant attention from researchers within the field of literature. Notable studies relevant to investigating the stone castle legend include "Nawawithi" by S. Chotiudomphan, which highlights the connection between folk literature and environmental issues. Additionally, Sangkhaphanthanon's work analyzes "Green Folklore" in Thai literature, while Nualsiri explores ecological themes in John Steinbeck's novels. Furthermore, Murakami's contributions propose sustainable agriculture, and Tunpattrakul examines eco-feminist concepts in indigenous women's literature. Hunter's research emphasizes the relationship between literature, space, and ecology. These studies underscore literature's vital role in fostering ecological consciousness, which the researcher has adapted for analysis and interpretation in this work.

In conclusion, the folklore on ecological consciousness in both Thai and Western contexts emphasizes the critical role of folklore in shaping environmental awareness and discourse. These works collectively advocate for a comprehensive understanding of the human-nature relationship, stressing the necessity for heightened ecological consciousness within literary frameworks and practical applications while engaging diverse narratives, methodologies, and communication strategies.

Research Methods

Study the information collected in detail and analyze it according to the principles of analysis grounded in the theoretical concepts related to the discipline of folklore.

Compile and present a report on the research findings.

Summarize the research findings. The results from the study titled "The Connection Between Humans and Nature: The Myth of Stone Castles in the Dimension of Ecological Analysis" reveal the following aspects:

The relationship between humans and nature within the context of the myth of stone castles and the role of these castles in folklore and culture. There is a profound connection between humans and nature in areas where stone castles are found. Stone castles symbolize human power and reflect the efforts to adapt to and coexist with the surrounding natural environment.

Results

I aim to systematically present the findings from prior research studies in a logical and structured sequence.

The connection between landscape, myth, and ecology: When nature and culture merge

These three elements are different but are deeply connected, especially in the context of human culture and society. The landscape is the backdrop of stories, whether the physical landscape, such as mountains, rivers, forests, and seas, which are the main elements that create the landscape, the backdrop of human life, and the inspiration for stories, myths, and beliefs. The cultural landscape, such as buildings, infrastructure, and land use patterns, are part of the landscape that reflects the culture and history of the community. In addition, myths must rely on the interpretation of nature to explain natural phenomena (Descola, 2013). For example, myths often explain natural phenomena humans do not yet understand, such as lightning, earthquakes, or seasonal changes. Alternatively, creating beliefs and values, such as myths, helps develop beliefs and values about nature, the environment, and the relationship between humans and nature. Alternatively, teaching lessons, for example, many myths have morals and lessons that teach people to live

sustainably with nature. As for ecology, it is the relationship between living things and the environment, which will be studied because ecology is a science that studies the relationship between living things and the environment, including changes in ecosystems and the conservation of natural resources. We will see the connection because ecology emphasizes preserving natural resources and biodiversity. In other words, landscapes inspire myths; beautiful or unusual landscapes are often used as the backdrop for myths and stories. Including myths reflecting a human understanding of ecology: Many myths reflect human knowledge in the past about the relationship between living things and the environment; including ecology helps explain the origin of myths because the study of ecology can help explain the origin of some myths, such as myths related to climate change or animal migration, and landscape conservation to preserve myths because landscape conservation related to myths is the conservation of cultural heritage and community beliefs. There are examples of connections, such as the Mekong River myth: the Mekong River myth tells of the importance of the river to the way of life of people in the region and reflects the connection between humans and nature, or the volcano myth says that volcano myths are often associated with gods or sacred things and explain awe-inspiring natural phenomena, or the forest myth, which is a forest myth often associated with forest spirits (Hongsuwan (2011), wild animals and plants, reflecting humans' beliefs in the mysteries of nature. Therefore, the connection between landscape, myths, and ecology is exciting and complex. Studying this connection helps us better understand the relationship between humans and nature and helps to conserve both cultural heritage and natural resources.

The Interconnection of Humans and Nature Through Stone Castles in Folklore and Culture

The relationship between humans and nature is vividly illustrated through stone castles, often built in environments conducive to their creation, such as near water sources or on hills. A well-known example is the Phnom Rung Stone Castle in Buriram Province. According to local myths, one narrative suggests that Phnom Rung was built to worship the gods, particularly Shiva, the highest deity in Hinduism. The ancient Khmer people believed that by constructing such a grand castle, they could please the gods and receive blessings for themselves and their community. Another myth tells of the castle being intended as a residence for the gods. It was believed that the gods would descend upon its completion to dwell in the castle and protect the local people.

Additionally, a local story features a giantess who inhabited the Phnom Rung area. She is said to have helped the castle's construction by using magical spells to move large rocks into place. These myths reflect a strong belief in the strategic positioning of the castle, demonstrating how humans can harness nature's resources. The construction of these castles relied upon natural materials like rocks and sand, highlighting the importance of understanding and communicating with nature. Many myths associated with stone castles emphasize the interaction between humans and nature, often exploring themes of worship or guidance from deities, ultimately fostering a deeper connection with the natural world.

Symbols of Power and Sustainability in Folklore and Culture: Stone castles often serve as powerful symbols in folklore, representing the greatness of empires and the significance of individuals within society. For instance, the myth of Phimai Stone Castle in Nakhon Ratchasima Province narrates its construction as an Indra residence, reflecting the Khmer Empire's central role. These stone castles have inspired various stories, myths, and folktales representing the community's culture, beliefs, values, and artistic expressions. Artwork related to stone castles can be seen in carvings and paintings, which demonstrate respect for nature and celebrate the beauty of the surrounding landscape.

Transmission of Folklore and Knowledge: Myth concerning stone castles is crucial in passing down knowledge about nature and the interconnectedness of humans and their environment. This transmission from generation to generation fosters an understanding and appreciation of preserving nature and conserving local folklore and culture.

In summary, the relationship between humans and nature, as seen through the lens of stone castles, is profound and complex. These structures are not merely habitable edifices; they symbolize a sustainable spiritual and cultural relationship between humanity and nature across time (Slovic, 2013). Studies of

folklore and culture in regions with stone castles reveal a deep connection between humans and the natural world, portraying these castles as symbols of human power and reflecting efforts to adapt and coexist with the surrounding environment. Thus, stone castles embody energy and sustainability symbols in folklore and culture.

The Greatness of Stone Castles

Stone castles are magnificent symbols of an empire's grandeur and the importance of individuals within society. They inspire countless stories, myths, and local tales that reflect the community's culture, beliefs, and values. Sculptures and paintings depict artistic expressions related to stone castles, which honor the gifts of nature and represent the beauty of the surrounding landscapes (Sak Kingmani, 2019). Additionally, stone castles play a vital role in transmitting folklore and knowledge to future generations. Literary works associated with these castles help convey essential lessons about nature, coexistence, and the interdependence between humans and the environment. This knowledge passed down through generations fosters an understanding and appreciation of the need to preserve nature and conserve folklore and culture.

In summary, the relationship between humans and nature within stone castles is profound and complex. These structures are more than mere buildings; they symbolize the spiritual and cultural connections that sustain humanity's bond with nature throughout the ages (Jenkins et al., editors. 2009).

The Role of Stone Castles in Folklore and Culture

This study reveals that stone castles are important in folklore, supporting many myths and folktales. These castles are often associated with stories of heroes, protectors, and gods, which convey essential values to the community and help promote a sense of identity and pride among the people. For example, the Myth of Thao Pajit and Nang Araphim: The love story of Thao Pajit and Nang Araphim is related to Phimai Stone Castle, which has led to various traditional ceremonies and festivals commemorating the myth. Alternatively, the Myth of Phanom Rung Castle: The myth of Phanom Rung Castle is linked to the story of Lord Shiva, making Phanom Rung Castle the center of the religion and culture of the Khmer people (Grim & Tucker, 2014). Stone castles are also viewed spiritually, whether as places of worship for gods or as residences of important historical figures. Communities often perform rituals at stone castles to show respect or ask for blessings, which helps to strengthen their relationship with these sacred places.

Stone castles are often portrayed as symbols of grandeur and magnificence in folktales, particularly in stories and myths. These narratives typically revolve around kingdoms, love, struggle, and life ambitions. In many Thai folktales and ancient myths featuring stone castles, the backdrop enhances the connection between readers and the stories by focusing on the characters and symbols. As Sutthitham (2001) noted, Southeast Asians frequently share myths about the founding of cities and the origins of various elements. These myths serve as valuable sources for studying the regions' thoughts, beliefs, values, and social ideologies, often developing into local idioms that differ from those recorded in historical chronicles. These stories can sometimes be linked to historical data, seamlessly intertwining chronicles and tales into a single continuous narrative.

Characters in folklore adapted from Thai myths or folktales are often associated with stone castles, whether heroes who protect the castle or people who seek the truth behind its origins. For example, in many myths about the Naga, the Naga are said to be the builders and protectors of the castle, such as the Phanom Rung myth, which is believed to have a Naga living under the castle's foundation. These stories reflect the social values of each era.

Furthermore, preserving and passing on culture through stories and myths related to stone castles is also a valuable source of knowledge. Studying these castles allows the younger generation to understand the roots and significance of ancient cultures, covering architecture, art, and social life.

In addition, stone castles also play an essential role in promoting tourism. Stone castles attract domestic and international tourists, helping disseminate and preserve local culture. Creative activities related

to stone castles, such as festivals and regional performances, help to maintain the cultural identity, such as the Phnom Rung mountain climbing tradition (Sangkhakun, 2016). As for the influence of stone castles on modern art and folklore, contemporary artists often draw inspiration from these large structures. Their works may express emotions and ideas about the past and present, opening space for reflection on ideas in today's society.

Thoughts and Perspectives on Different Aspects of Stone Castles

Stone castles are symbols in modern folklore, interpreted from various perspectives, including identity exploration, folkloristic significance, and discussions about social changes affecting landscapes and cultures across different eras. These castles are not only essential historical sites but also carry multiple meanings that enrich narratives in myth and folklore. They help build and transmit culture, forming a fundamental basis for creating and passing on human values throughout folklore.

Stone castles hold great importance in folklore and culture and can be categorized in several key aspects:

A Symbol of Power and Prosperity. Stone castles stand as magnificent testaments to the power and prosperity of bygone kingdoms. With their towering walls and intricate designs, these imposing structures often serve as symbolic backdrops for epic tales that weave together the threads of history, politics, and cultural advancement. In many myths, stone castles are featured prominently, often narrating stories steeped in battles, power struggles, and the relentless pursuit of independence. One such tale is that of the giantess, a formidable figure who, in defiance of the gods, constructed a grand castle to serve as her residence. However, her reign ended dramatically when she was ultimately vanquished by the mighty god Narayana. Additionally, the saga of building these formidable fortresses is steeped in mystique; one myth suggests that the construction of a stone castle was not merely a feat of engineering but rather a task imbued with arcane magic, demanding both the skill of sorcerers and the sacrifice of countless lives (Sustainable Tourism Area Development Administration Organization (Public Organization)), (2021). These tales highlight the architectural grandeur of stone castles and their deep and often tumultuous history, rich with themes of sacrifice, valor, and love.

Sources of artistic inspiration: Stone castles inspire various works of art, such as writing, painting, and narrative craft. Artists generally demonstrate the grandeur of these structures in their creations, conveying their beauty and influence. Nature is the inspiration for creation, such as mountains and hills, as can be seen from many stone castles built on tops of mountains or high hills to be closer to heaven and gods, according to the beliefs of the Khmer people. Mountains and hills are, therefore, considered the center of the universe and the abode of great natural forces. Alternatively, the image of a river means that rivers are an essential source of water that sustains life and civilization. Many vital rivers in the Indochina region were used as inspiration for the design of ponds and moats within the castle to represent abundance and the connection with the cycles of nature, stars, and the universe. Because the Khmer people strongly believed in stars and the universe, the layout of the castle and its elements were related to the positions of stars and constellations to be consistent with cosmological beliefs, including various plants. For example, patterns and statues on stone castles often incorporate natural plants, such as lotus flowers, leaves, and trees, representing the connection between humans and nature.

Cultural Conservation: Stone castles are vital to cultural conservation, particularly in communities that hold their history and spiritual beliefs in high regard. These majestic structures are often intricately woven into Thai myths and local tales, serving as enduring symbols that embody values and narrate past stories. Stone castles reflect ancient beliefs and rituals associated with the worship of deities, conveying the essence of traditions and spiritual practices that define the community's identity. They evoke memories of the past and provide a crucial connection to the ancestral heritage that continues to shape the cultural landscape. One notable example is Muang Tam Castle, an important historical and cultural site in Thailand, especially in the Isan region. While there is no apparent written myth about the castle, local myths, and beliefs have been passed down through generations, reflecting the imagination and beliefs of the people connected to this place.

Exciting myths surround Muang Tam Castle, including tales of an underground city. According to local lore, a secret tunnel lies beneath the castle, connecting it to an underground city inhabited by the Naga, along with many valuable treasures. This story exemplifies the belief in the Naga, a sacred creature revered in various regions of Thailand. Like many ancient sites, Prasat Muang Tam is associated with ghost stories. According to local beliefs, some ghosts guard the treasure and protect the site. Some people believe that anyone who disturbs the castle may encounter mysterious occurrences. Furthermore, as Prasat Muang Tam is a religious site established for the worship of deities according to Hindu beliefs, it is thought that the gods still reside within the castle, and those who come to worship will receive blessings.

Transmission of Knowledge and Values: The fascinating myths surrounding stone castles are essential for passing down cultural knowledge and values through generations. These enchanting tales often include folklore events and the remarkable lives of individuals who cherished these magnificent structures. Consequently, they play a significant role in fostering a sense of cultural identity and instilling pride in the community's heritage. For example, the myths associated with stone castles frequently intertwine with the natural landscape, illustrating the deep connection between human endeavor and the environment. A prime example is Phanom Rung Castle; its construction is closely linked to the stunning surroundings, reflecting the harmonious relationship that local cultures strive to maintain with nature. Moreover, these stories often emphasize the importance of environmental stewardship and coexistence with the natural world, enriching local traditions and reinforcing community bonds (Sangkhakul, 2016).

The center of myths and stories: Stone castles often serve as the focal point for myths and narratives that shape the beliefs and cultures of local communities. These stories, featuring heroes or gods associated with significant places or events, create deep connections between people and their surroundings, acting as historical records that promote cultural understanding. For example, Phanom Rung Castle in Buriram Province is linked to a myth about Narendratit, a Khmer hero who was defeated by his enemies and became a hermit at the top of Phanom Rung Mountain. It is believed that Narendratit constructed this castle. Meanwhile, Phimai Stone Castle in Nakhon Ratchasima Province, although less focused on individual heroes, showcases depictions on the lintels and pediments related to mythary tales, such as the Ramayana, also considered a story of heroism.

In summary, stone castles are prominent in folklore and culture, enriching our understanding of history, the fundamental characteristics of diverse societies, and the legacies of various empires. Works of folklore that center on these imposing structures illuminate the intricacies of medieval life and the architectural prowess of their builders. They act as sources of historical knowledge and wellsprings of creativity, igniting imaginative thought and showcasing cultural values that resonate within today's society. Through vivid descriptions and intricate narratives, these stories invite us to explore the grandeur and mystery of stone castles, bridging the gap between the past and our present.

Myths of Stone Castles in Ecocritical Perspectives: Seeking Connections Between Humans, Nature, and Ancient Architecture

Ecocriticism: Ecocriticism studies how ecological concepts can be applied to analyze myth, art, and culture. It explores the relationship between humans and nature and the impacts of this interaction. Several intriguing new perspectives emerge when this concept is applied to myths surrounding stone castles. **Stone Castles Are More Than Just Stones:** Stone castles are not merely physical structures; they also represent beliefs, faith, and the belief relationship between humans and nature. Studying the myths associated with these castles allows us to understand how people in ancient times perceived nature and constructed magnificent architecture to connect with it.

Many myths in the northeastern region of Thailand depict stone castles as being formed from mountains. These myths often describe how the castles emerged from mountains that have broken apart or were created by gods, giants, or an elephant considered a Bodhisattva. This reflects the belief that nature itself is responsible for these wonders. For instance, the myth of Prasat Si Khoraphum in Surin Province tells the story of an elephant king who built a stone castle for his daughter, Nang Phom Hom (Yuenyaw, 2014). Additionally, stone castles are frequently associated with water; some myths state that these castles are

constructed near lakes or rivers to honor water gods or to provide protection against floods. This connection highlights the significance of water in daily life and religious practices. Moreover, many myths suggest that stone castles serve as the residences of gods or spirits, particularly those connected to nature, such as the gods of the forest and the gods of the sky and rain. This illustrates the belief that nature is seen as a sacred dwelling place.

Nature as Inspiration: Natural elements often influence the design and construction of stone castles. This includes mimicking the shapes of mountains, using locally sourced stones, and aligning the castles with the positions of the sun and the moon. This survey reveals the clever ways our ancestors observed and interacted with nature. For example, Phanom Rung Castle in Thailand is a notable stone castle closely associated with the sun and the moon. According to the myth, the arrangement of the castle's 15 doorways was designed to allow sunlight to stream through during religious holidays. This aligns with astronomical observations indicating that this phenomenon occurs around the same time as significant Hindu holidays. Furthermore, studies have suggested that Phu Pek Castle is linked to observing a solar eclipse.

Stone Castles as Symbols of Balance: Throughout history, stone castles have functioned as fortifications and essential community hubs, embodying a delicate equilibrium between humanity and the natural world. These majestic structures, with their towering walls and sturdy foundations, harmonize with the landscape around them. By exploring the myths associated with these castles, we can gain deeper insights into the ecological balance in earlier eras, highlighting how these communities adapted to and revered their environment.

A notable example is the name "Phanom Rung," or "Wang Rung" in Khmer, which translates to "high mountain." This term is referenced in a Khmer inscription at Phanom Rung Stone Castle. The inscription also mentions its builder, "Narentharathit," a descendant of the Mahidharapura dynasty and a relative of King Suryavarman II, the builder of Angkor Wat. Phanom Rung Stone Castle was constructed as a dedication to Shiva, the supreme god of Hinduism, and it symbolizes the center of the universe. Both the mountaintop castles and Phanom Rung Stone Castle represent Mount Kailash, the abode of Shiva (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2024).

Stone Castles and Environmental Changes: Viewing stone castles through the lens of ecology allows us to explore the intricate relationships between these architectural marvels and the shifting environments they inhabit. As we examine their historical context, we gain a richer understanding of the environmental transformations over time and how they have profoundly influenced the communities and cultures that thrived within their walls. This exploration highlights the resilience of these societies in the face of ecological challenges, showcasing their ability to evolve alongside the natural world.

Ecocritical Analysis of Stone Castle Myths: A Comparative Study of Stone Castles and Mountains

In various cultural narratives, mountains are often perceived as sacred realms, serving as the abodes of deities. Stone castles, constructed to mimic these mountainous forms, function as sites of veneration, highlighting the intricate relationship between human constructs, natural landscapes, and the transcendent.

Flora and Fauna Representations in Artistic Carvings: A thorough examination of the iconography present in the stone carvings of castles can provide valuable insights into historical biodiversity, illuminating the roles that different species—both botanical and zoological—played in the lives of past civilizations. Such analysis enriches our comprehension of ecological contexts and the cultural significance of various organisms.

Architectural Orientation and Layout of Stone Castles: Investigating the spatial organization and orientation of stone castles, especially their alignments with celestial bodies such as the sun and moon, can unravel the astronomical acumen possessed by ancient societies (Vallipodom, 2019). This examination sheds light on how past cultures integrated their architectural practices with ecological and celestial rhythms, reflecting a deep-seated connection between their livelihoods and the natural world.

The benefits of ecological analysis in the stories of stone castles, such as recognizing the connection between humans and nature reflected in the stories of stone castles, can promote awareness of the importance of preserving cultural and environmental heritages, including presenting stories of stone castles from an ecological perspective can attract tourists interested in culture and nature, thus promoting ecotourism. In addition, studying stories of stone castles from an environmental perspective will increase our understanding of history, ideas, beliefs, and art, which are cultural heritages (Suksawat, S. (1997).

Summary and Discussion

The article “Towards a Connection between Humans and Nature” delves deeply into the rich tapestry of myths surrounding stone castles in Thai culture, particularly in the northeastern region of Thailand. These narratives are not merely tales of the past but vibrant reflections of the region's ecological wisdom and sustainable practices that have evolved over centuries. Beyond their historical significance, stone castles are potent emblems of ancient civilizations intricately woven into the community's fabric. They encapsulate many stories emphasizing the critical importance of nurturing and respecting the natural world, revealing how cultural beliefs and artistic expressions have shaped a profound connection between humanity and the environment.

This research employs an ecocritical perspective to explore the myths of stone castles. It demonstrates how these stories reveal sustainable practices deeply ingrained in past societies' lives and their complex relationships with the environment. These myths impart valuable lessons that can be applied to current environmental challenges by preserving cultural history and nurturing community pride. The study emphasizes the importance of ongoing discussions reflecting human and nature's interconnectedness. An example is the Nang Phom Hom myth, which relates to the origin of Prasat Si Khoraphum (Phumriew, P. (2007, May 17). This myth illustrates the close relationship between elephants and humans and the mountains that provide habitats and shelter for people, all of which are reflected in these traditional narratives.

Exploring the myths of the stone castles provides a gateway to understanding how cultural narratives shape and reflect ecological values. These stories commemorate the achievements of folklore and convey important lessons about environmental care that are important for future generations. Ecocriticism, viewed through the stone castle myths, is an essential response to ecological research, especially regarding the relationship between humans and nature and the lingering qualities in the diversity of mythological data. This article, therefore, attempts to present the sustainable practices of ancient civilizations to encourage a rethinking of current attitudes toward the natural world and the careful management of its resources.

Examining the geographical features related to the construction of these temples reveals how communities have adapted and thrived in their natural environments over time. This observation highlights the effectiveness of a folkloristic approach in capturing a deep respect for the environment, seamlessly blending cultural identity with environmental consciousness. In light of global environmental challenges, this study suggests that revisiting these enduring myths can offer valuable insights into fostering a culture prioritizing sustainability and conservation. It advocates for an interdisciplinary approach that combines cultural studies with environmental awareness, demonstrating how history and folklore can inform and enhance current practices.

Overall, this critique encourages readers to appreciate the complex relationship between culture and ecosystems, promoting the integration of traditional knowledge into modern environmental discussions. A deeper understanding of the myths surrounding stone temples in Thai society will provide a multidimensional perspective on the human experience, emphasizing the essential and timeless need for harmony with nature.

The research revealed that the enchanting myth of the stone castle serves as a profound link between humans and the surrounding landscape. This rich folklore is pivotal in weaving together the fabric of human experience with nature, as it facilitates sharing knowledge and personal stories related to the environment. Such storytelling enhances the connection to the natural world and inspires individuals to engage in various

nature-related activities, fostering a sense of stewardship for the earth. Moreover, the myth promotes a deeper understanding and appreciation of the landscape's intrinsic value. It highlights the significance of conservation and environmental protection, urging people to recognize the need to safeguard these precious natural resources. As individuals explore and interact with the environment, the myth creates memorable experiences that resonate personally.

In addition, the tale of the stone castle plays a vital role in raising awareness about pressing conservation issues. It significantly contributes to the shaping of environmental policies and informed decision-making processes. In essence, the myth of the stone castle in northeast Thailand is not just a story; it is a vital force that nurtures a strong bond between humans and their environment, ultimately guiding collective efforts toward the conservation and sustainable management of natural resources.

Acknowledgements

This research project received financial support from Mahasarakham University, Thailand.

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