

Esania Sector 9: Climate change fosters new Isaan writing

written by Peera Songkunnatham | November 3, 2017

By Peera Songkunnatham

Some of us from Northeastern Thailand might feel secretly avenged when we learn that Bangkok will certainly go underwater as a result of global warming. If not soon, at any rate long before the seas ever rise to touch Isaan. A sense of poetic justice, perhaps, when the Plateau will finally have its day, literally claiming the (moral) high ground.

But once we remind ourselves that climate change doesn't only result in rising sea levels and ocean acidification but also in severe droughts and desertification, we might start to think of it differently.

Imagining Isaan after total ecological collapse, [*Esania Sector 9 The Lost City*](#) is a post-apocalyptic science-fiction online novel packed with nuggets of Isaan culture and language. Published in short installments on the webboard of Chulalongkorn University's Isan Arts and Culture Club since 2010, *Esania* is still not wrapping up. Pinlom, the author's alias, just posted the latest chapter in July this year.

In *Esania*, it's five thousand years in the future. Climate change has made the planet largely hostile to humans, fauna and flora. After carbon emissions in Earth's atmosphere reach a critical level, and after a total war for the Moon's energy, a fraction of today's human population remains. And Isaan has become a desert.



A satellite image of Isaan ravaged by the fossil-fueled capitalist juggernaut, dubbed the car for cat era (a playful variant of 'car for cash'), five thousand years before the post-apocalyptic setting of the online serialized novel Esania Sector 9.

A science-fiction vision of Isaan

Readers follow an oftentimes comedic adventure into the lost civilization of Esania. The main adventurer is a pilot steeped in the knowledge of ancient Esanian culture and language. His name is Pinsak, but being a captain he prefers to be called *pipo*, the future word for 'captain,' but also the household word of a fruit-flavored jelly in Thailand. A young female pilot with less knowledge of ancient Esania accompanies him. Her name is Eve. A Lao-speaking female-voiced software leads the two of them to the deserts of Esania. Its name is Eva. (One can see the 2008 animated movie *WALL•E*'s influence in the novel's Eve-Eva names.)

The protagonists' mission is to find traces of an ancient civilization in Sector Nine of the Esanian desert. Along the way, they will find a DVD of *mo lam* music, a hidden city in an oasis, an unlikely museum of Isaan culture, two robot insects, and a host of hostile creatures from a Euro-American capitalistic cyborg tribe. What the three explorers take back to their people will have the potential to steer the course of history.

Although the main focus is Isaan, the story takes readers to many other places. Our heroes' home is with a communist-ish faction on an oil rig in the ocean, formerly deserted after the depletion of fossil fuel. Their main food source is cyanobacteria. The heroes' quest will also take them close to the North Pole in order to recover lost ecological knowledge stored there.

Written in a mix of Thai and Lao, the story guides the non-Lao reader with the help of Eve, the young woman born *in vitro*, who keeps asking our Pipo Pin what unfamiliar phrases mean. Most of these phrases belong to two categories: old Isaan Lao words; and the author's neologisms based on combining old words, or old people's ways of saying common words, or creating a new meaning out of common words.

Let me give a few examples of the latter categories. The current word for traditional coffee *oliang* means 'okay' in the future world. *Sevensen* refers to two popular chains at once: the convenience store 'Seven-Eleven' and the ice cream shop 'Swensen's.' The meaning of the word *phone* becomes rerouted by an apocryphal and far-fetched etymology through the Lao word *phone* referring to either 'raised area' or '(termite) mounds.'

All these instances of wordplay are very "Isaan," as many Northerners today often code-switch between Thai and Lao, and as a result find many felicitous ways to play with words.

The story's texture is enriched by an eclectic, omnivorous approach to collecting materials. The images accompanying the text are pulled from diverse sources like science-fiction movies, steampunk drawings, and photographs of Isaan forests.

Interactive and open-ended

The most interesting aspect of Esania is its interactive nature. Published as comments under a single webboard entry, the serialized novel is interspersed with regular readers' comments and compliments. Unlike most other sites in the Thai websphere where serialized novels are published, the Isan Arts and Culture Club webboard has a very casual vibe. Readers often butt in with puns and humorous digressions in between new installments and chapters. Regular readers' online pseudonyms are even used to inspire names of new characters—nobody seems to take themselves too

seriously.

In this way, the text is open-ended. When I miss a joke in any given chapter, a reaction post by someone else will help me understand what is so funny. When I don't understand some neologisms, someone might ask the author in my stead.



Relevant images accompany the main text of Esania Sector 9 The Lost City. Here, the story's author Pinlom scavenges two pictures of steampunk insects to represent two Isaan insect robot characters, pha-nya bao kham 'The Dung Beetle Lord,' and am-maat cham poi 'The Cockchafer Baron.' Pinlom writes of this particular dung beetle, *Heliocopris bucephalus* Fabricius, in an Isaan encyclopedia entry: "the insect species that is the spiritual identity of children of the Northeast, the king of insects in the fields, is dying out, paving the way for the era of Esania."

The community feedback allowed by this open-ended format makes the text capable of immediately absorbing and repurposing readers' reactions. One instance in particular is notable. In comment #264, the author Pinlom describes the Isaan culture museum, as our protagonists are escorted by the two robot insects:

"The glass elevator goes up slowly, making visible the contents of each floor of the "King Kong Kaew Store." Turns out, this is the museum of Esania. Everything about the ancient civilization is collected here for the sake of posterity. The uppermost floor is a rooftop. There, seven *man pla* (*phayom*) trees are planted, their fragrant flowers blooming."

Less than five hours after Pinlom's post comes comment #265, where regular reader Pa Noi questions why the tree name is explained wrongly. "*Man pla* trees aren't *phayom* trees, are they? It's *kan-krao*, no? Or is this another joke from your part? If that's the case, I can't quite follow." This prompts a response from the author the next morning, at comment #266, artfully explaining the apparent mistake:

Miscellany:

The JURA System searches for the word "*phayom*"

Showing results.....Ding.!Ding...!

[...] On the rooftop of the “King Kong Kaew” tower were planted seven *man pla* trees. They were named “phayom” as a rebuke toward Esania’s descendants who leave behind and forget their cultural ways. The tree’s name *man pla* falls on their ears unrecognized, same as the word *kan-krao*. But they’ve at least heard of the name *phayom*. Names like *HOT POT* or *Sevensen*, on the other hand, are recognized and known to the littlest detail. The only one who still knows about these Esania plants is “the Goddess of Botany,” who has not been introduced in the story yet.

With all due respect, the Author.

The author’s response reveals that the text can be mined for further elaborations, regardless of the original intent. This *man pla (phayom)* is probably deliberate, but so what? The butting-in and the subsequent response have already tampered with the reading experience in such a way that the reader is now imbued with the confidence and freedom to virtually become the work’s editor.

A pessimistic future

The sense of freedom also helps when paragraphs-long lectures about climate change or sufficiency in traditional culture come along. It is crystal clear what Esania represents for the author—a pessimistic future resulting from humanity’s fossil-fueled greed and abandonment of eco-friendly traditional culture. A particular piece of “archaeological evidence” speaks volumes about how Pinlom views today’s Isaan youth:

“I have iPad *na*. I am *khon Isaan*. You know, that Isaan *indy art-tist* just released a new album? *Ngu-ngu ngi-ngi*.”

“Look—what kind of grass got caught there on your shoes?”

“Dunno.” (comment #255)

This Isaan youth who knows so much about the newest developments of the Isaan indie art scene doesn’t even know the name of the kind of grass right under their own feet. This negative perception of youth then informs the author’s conservative pessimism. The word “Esania” appears outside this particular novel too: the author will mention “Esania” whenever he complains about young people’s abandonment of old cultural ways.



Laab thao (right), a lesser known Isaan dish made of algae that grows twice a year in ponds and waterways. Esania's author writes an article on laab thao, lamenting the fact that younger Isaan generations now shun the dish in favor of unhealthy instant noodles and East Asian seaweed products. On the left is an image of a hypothetical prepackaged, instant laab thao. "I was speechless. It was unbelievable that the intention to preserve culture of Isaan people was erased by waves of foreign cultures. No more foodways, codes of conduct, ideas of sufficiency and simplicity. Arts and culture are retreating day by day. 'Disgusted by one's own culture.' I could see Esania at a distance."

Yet, as readers, we are under no obligation to read it as lectures. We may read them as superfluous parts of the text, which may be cut down in later drafts. Or, we may enjoy them as an encyclopedic entry of ecological effervescence, which may even lead us to do more research if a plant name sounds familiar:

My team and I would like to propose a plan of land reform in order for humanity to live in prosperity and peace, as in the following: [...]

Plant ancient local bushes and trees, for example, *chik, hang, yang na, sat, kung, hiang, kabok, kabak, phok, miat, wa, nam kiang, bak duea, bak kua, bak ko, siak, hat, huat, kheng, ko, khaow, pao, nat, san, muang pa, phi phuan, kluay noy, nom maew, som siaow, som kob, sai kai, sai tan, bak khom, bak mai, talai, buk, poem, man nok, man tian, man saeng, i lok, tubmub, kachai, kachiaow, . . .* [the list goes on for 50 more plant names, before it gets interrupted]

"Huay! Huay! Stop, stop. You don't have to list all the varieties in the forest. Just this much is already making the President's stomach turn already."

Tuansri-245R raises her hand in protest as she experiences a condition of *win hua* ('dizziness').

"What I've listed so far isn't even half the forest," says Pipo Pin with an emphatic voice.

A hubbub of shock and excitement rises among the parliamentarians, who never expected such a diversity, for all their lives they've only encountered cyanobacteria. (comment #339)

At first glance, the didactic parts of the text might be read as a romanticization of local wisdom, or even read like an advocacy for pre-industrial sufficiency economy with a total rejection of modern technology.

Upon a closer look, however, the story does acknowledge the crucial role of technologies devised to preserve such a wisdom-like the robot insects who deliver the lost knowledge of Esania to Pipo Pin and Eve. Furthermore, the story goes beyond the desire to go back to the past, into moving forward equipped with the ecological knowledge and resources from the past. An elder from Pipo Pin's faction puts it explicitly:

"I hope that you, Pipo Pin, will understand that this exploration of Esania does not have as its aim the revival and restoration of the lost Culture. For the Federation has already deliberated and come to the conclusion that each human culture is fit for each period in time, and it shifts and transforms along the currents of ideas, beliefs, and the environment of each epoch. But one thing we should recover and not abandon, is that this life-affirming worldview and virtuous wisdom should lead us toward prosperity and happiness alongside a balanced natural world." (comment #347)

It is a science-fiction series, after all. How can it merely invest in reconstructing the past?

New Isaan writing

Esania locates the future world's solution in a synthesis of modern technology and traditional wisdom. This way, the story elevates to a whole new level the conservative worry about young Isaan people's loss of cultural authenticity in the ravages of capitalist modernity. It manages to vindicate the stereotypes of Isaan culture, like "we used to live sufficiently in harmony with nature," or like "we can eat anything, even pond algae," without characterizing them as belonging to the bygone past-see, we can learn from the ancients' ecological wisdom!-look, cyanobacteria is the food of the future!

In a way, poetic justice in *Esania* goes much deeper than us feeling avenged that Bangkok will one day sink underwater. As Pipo Pin's tribe edges closer and closer to recovering arts and culture and find a sustainable way forward, the Euro-American cyborg tribe collapses under its own contradictions, potentially making way for the emancipation of its non-cyborg human underclass. Vengeance is the most satisfying when there is hope for an afterwards.

As didactic as the intent may be, the story makes for a thoroughly exciting and exhilarating read. As silly as the tone and the neologisms may be, the references contained within have seriously taught me a number of things about Isaan culture and language. If there is one work I could hold up as a model of what "new Isaan writing" can be, it would be *Esania Sector 9*, hands down.