

Phra Lak Phra Lam: The Representation of Cultural Ecology in Lao Society*

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ABSTRACT

This research article aims to study the role of the literary work *Phra Lak Phra Lam* or the Lao version of the *Ramayana*, which represents wisdom in cultural ecology of Lao society in the past through the relations between human and human, human and nature, and human and supernatural things. *Phra Lak Phra Lam* in Lao society represents cultural ecology in three main parts. The first part, “*Physical space*”, shows the topography of the Mekong River Basin as described through the travelling routes of the characters. It shows the state of cities, sceneries, existing distributaries of the Mekong River, the forests, the mountains, the minerals, the plants and the animals in local areas. The second part is the “*Sacred space*” or “*ideal space*”, which represents beliefs such as indigenous and Buddhist beliefs, namely, the belief in Naga, and that humans were born from nature and is a part of nature, and represent cosmologies, traditions and rites. Lastly, is “*Social space*”, representing the relationships between humans. For example, trading exchange, tax levying, husbandry, exchange with other ethnic groups who lived around the river basin, marriage across ethnic groups, and politics. An analysis of the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* will help one to understand local adaptations of a seemingly well-known literature, as it represents the cultural ecology of the Lao society in the past.

Keywords: *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, Ramayana, cultural ecology, Lao society

INTRODUCTION

Literature is one kind of folk wisdom that demonstrates a role to respond to humans’ need in terms of basic factors. It is related not only to the social and mental stabilities but also preserves and strengthens the culture of each individual society (Na Thalang, 2005). The study of literature provides an understanding of the humans and societies that reflect the origins of ones who are literatures’ owners and shows the civilization of people in each society very well.

Literary works of the Mekong Basin community have been considered as an important cultural heritage that is inherited and constantly connected to people’s way of life in the Mekong basin. For example, the legends of *Khun Burom*, *Tao Hung*, and *Tao*

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Chuang, all of whom are considered as heroes to the people in the Mekong basin, have been mentioned in regard to the origin of Laos. The literature of *Sin Sai* is one of the most popular local literatures among the Mekong basin. Some literary works have been taken from other cultures and were adapted to their own culture until they became the identifying literature of the Mekong basin crowd. One of the most remarkable literary works is *Phra Lak Phra Lam* or *Phra Lam Chadok* of Lao.

Phra Lak Phra Lam is the national epic of the Lao people, and is adapted from Valmiki's epic, the *Ramayana*. The original story was composed in Sanskrit around the second century BCE (Leslie, 2003). The *Ramayana* epic is prevalent in South Asia. The Indian civilization has spread into the region of Southeast Asia. Indian traders helped made the *Ramayana* widespread throughout the region. The story was modified in content to reflect the culture of the receiving country to become a national literary work as seen in many Southeast Asian countries, including Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. The *Ramayana* has some literature about a national literature (Iyengar, 2006). Lao legends attribute the introduction of the *Phra Ram Chadok* to the first king of Lane Xang, Chao Fa Ngoum. In the 18th Century, manuscripts were completely adapted to Lao culture and the Theravada Buddhist religion. The versions are completely localized (Richman, 1991).

It was difficult to identify the story of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* as derived from the *Ramayana* because the contents were adapted and improved. Sachidanand Sahai (1973) describes, in his Lao edition, that part one of the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* story illustrates the characters of the *Ramayana*, but it is difficult to argue that the *Ramayana* of India in this edition spread to Laos. However, the second part of the story clearly shows the same as the *Ramayana* of India. H.H. Prince Pitayalabpuettiyakon (1974) has discussed the origin of the story, saying that "Rama Jataka look[s] like Lahiri Garden Dash of Malay Sri Ram Rama fiction more than any other version". Phra Ariyanuwat (1975), who is a philosopher of Thailand, has discussed the origins of the literary work; that a plot of the story is, indeed, derived from the *Ramayana* of India, but has dramatically adapted from the original story. The name of the city and other scenes were created based on the Mekong River basin. *Phra Lak Phra Lam* has storylines from the *Ramayana* versions of Cambodia and Malaysia, which was supported by Kamala Ratanam (1980) and Chadarat Soonthorntham (1985). In addition, Thawat Punnothok (2009) stated that *Phra Lak Phra Lam* derived from the *Ramayana* of India, but was not likely to be directly from India because it is different from the original. It may have developed from neighboring countries, Thailand or Cambodia. The poet had added an additional scene to the original concept. Therefore, we may conclude that the Lao version of the story of the *Ramayana* is dominantly derived from the Cham and Khmer Empire era of Malaysia and Cambodia. The story was modified from the original content to reveal the culture and cultural ecology of the country, and later become a national literature.

The Lao version of this literary work is different from versions of other Southeast Asian countries. The writer modified and elaborated upon the traditional form, following the local principles and beliefs. It was intervened by a local identity of Lao's tradition, such as way of life, principles, and beliefs. Moreover, the real scene locations have been described and combined with imaginary scenes as well. Sachchidanand Sahai (1973), who collected all of the original manuscripts of *Phra Lak*

Phra Lam has recompiled and published a critical edition. He describes, in the introduction to his Lao edition, the reason why he chose to publish the literary work *Phra Lak Phra Lam* before other Laos literature. It's not only translated from a foreign country, but is also one of the best literary works. *Phra Lak Phra Lam* thoroughly demonstrates the different aspects of Lao culture. Furthermore, Niyada Laosunthon (2006), who studies the topic of change from written literature to ergodic literature about *Phra Ram* fable in Lao, has observed that the Lao version of the *Phra Ram* fable seems to be more remarkable than other the versions of other countries. It can well describe the combination of the roles and the statuses of important characters in the *Ramayana* with heroes of the nation, which affects the appearance of the important characters in the story. The characteristic of the literature also changed in terms of its praise for Hindu gods to the bravery of Bodhisattvas of the Buddhist pantheon.

The environment is a natural area where people come to settle down and build a city by adjusting themselves to be compatible with the nature. They also create the knowledge by using natural resources, and making specifications of traditional customs on economy, politics, and cultures together. Moreover, the nature of locality is considered at this level of cultural ecology (Wanliphodom, 2008). This article aims to study the representations of Lao society's cultural ecology in the past as seen through the literary work of *Phra Lak Phra Lam*. This article emphasizes the study of the cultural ecology of Lao society of the past through the relations between human and human, human and nature, and human and supernatural things.

Literary Sources

The Lao version of the *Ramayana* was studied from the original of *Phra Lak Pra Lam* published by Sachaidanand Sahai (1973). The *Phra Lak Phra Lam* was recorded as a palm leaf manuscript of Northeast Thailand, held in the National Library of Thailand, which was used to corroborate 43 sections, or *phuks*. One *phuk* is a bundle of palm leaves with engraved Lao script. The end of the story noted that Pra Putta Kosajan is the author of the Thai minor era 1212, which corresponds to 1850 CE.

The plot of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* is divided into two main parts. The first part is about how the cities were settling down, and the history of the discovery of the Inthapattha Nakorn and Muang Chanthaburisrisattanak cities (in present-day Vientiane, Laos). It also mentions the origin of the main characters, the journey of Phra Lak and Phra Lam to find Nang Chantha, who was abducted by Thao Rapphanasuan to live in Inthapattha Nakorn. The story is similar to that of *Sin Sai*, another Lao literary work that illustrates a journey along valleys, woods, and rivers of Mekong's basin. The author attempts to explain the origin of the names of places in the areas of the two banks of the Mekong River. Each description includes an explanation of the richness of the natural resources in Laos, such as the trees, fruits, and animals, both terrestrial and aquatic, and all minerals through frequent comparisons of descriptions as illustrated in the original story. The lifestyles of the Lao society and ethnic groups living in the area of the Mekong river basin were also indicated.

The second half of the plot presents Thao Rapphanasuan who migrated from Inthapattha Nakorn to build a new city in Langka Island. The story describes the lifestyle of the peoples on the islands along his journey. It is similar to other versions of

the *Ramayana*, but there are some nuances, such as, for example, Phra Lam eating the fruit of a Banyan tree, then becoming a monkey, having a monkey wife named Phaeng Si, and begetting Hunlaman as a child. Another example narrates Phra Lam building cities in Thailand, such as Muang Phit Sanulok, Muang Nakhon Sawan, Muang Krungsri Ayutthiya, Muang Khonrat (in present-day Nakhon Ratchasima province), and Muang Phimai – all governed by his children. Besides this, the literary work of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* also includes local principles and beliefs. It also mentions Lao proverbs, mottos, and in beautiful literary style, which are part of the principles of thought, morality, and the life maintaining patterns of Laos people that have been inherited through to the present day.

The cultural ecology of Lao society presented according to a spatial theory and the field of cultural geography, “Third-Space” is an approach built upon Henri Lefebvre’s theory of specific “modes of production of spaces” (Hongsuwan, 2013) that divides an area into three types: physical space, spiritual space, and the social space.

1. Physical Space is the geological area as it appears in the real world (Hongsuwan, 2013). The literature of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* reveals that the cultural ecology of Lao society is represented by a physical space. It presents the topography of the Mekong River basin through the traveling routes of the characters. The names of towns and the rivers in this story correspond to the names of real towns and anabranches of the Mekong River, as well as those names of forests, mountains, minerals, plant species and the local animal species of the present time.

The names of the anabranches of the Mekong River are found on both the Thai and Lao river banks. Those names corresponding to the Lao side of the river are found in the scenes when Phra Lak and Phra Lam, passing along the Mekong River, went to Inthapattha Nakorn town to bring Nang Chantha back to her city. The various events of this story became river names, such as Nam Nguem River, San River, Sading River (Krating River), Satoen River (Toen River) Se Nam Se Don River, Se Bang Hiang River, and Se Bang Fai River. Nam Nguem River was given its name by a god who walked to Phra Lak and Phra Lam, concealing his face with his hand (“Nguem” in Lao means conceal). The Se River was given its name by two calves butting each other teasingly, and then staggering and falling into the water (“Se” in Lao means stagger).

The river banks on the Thai side are mentioned in the scene of Phraya Thattarattha who came out from Inthapattha Nakorn City to build Muang Chanthaburisrisattanak City. Included are Moon River, Somkham or Songkham River, Huai Luang (Phonphisai District, Nongkhai Province in Northeast Thailand) and Suai Kham River or Suai River (Phonphisai District, Nongkhai Province, Thailand). Somkham River was given its name because Thao Thattarattha’s soldiers were frightened by a tiger that was chasing a deer, and running towards them. They were stampeded and acted as if they were running into a war (“Songkham” in Lao means the war). Huai Luang was given its name because a big pig was soaking itself in that brook, and Phraya Thattarattha was so surprised that he had never before seen such a big pig, and so he gave that name for the river (“Luang” in Lao means big).

There were some reported of the real places’ names in the area of the Mekong River Basin, such as Phan Phrao, Don Chan, Don Koet, Tha Bo Ngoen Bo Kham, Don

Kong, Phu Ba Long, and Li phi. Phan Phrao was the place where Phraya Thattarattha initially intended to build a city before a seven-headed *naka* told him to build along another bank of the Mekong River. The name “Phan Phrao” was given because of a coconut tree bearing a thousand fruits a year. In present-day, this place is Sri Chiangmai District, Nongkhai Province, Thailand. Don Koet and Tha Bo Ngoen Bo Kham are mentioned because Phra Lak and Phra Lam were born there while their mother was touring the park on a highland, so it was called Don Koet (“Koet” means born). When Phra Lak and Phra Lam were born, many silver- and gold pools broke out on the land along Thananathee’s bank (Mekong River) on the west. Therefore, it was called Tha Bo Nguen Bo Kham, or today’s so-called Tha Bo District, Nong Khai Province, Thailand. Li Phi was given the name because warlords, court officials and the king of *garudas* fought with the magic sword of Phra Lak and died desultorily. Because their corpses soared along the river and hung on the cliff that the king of *garudas* used to irrigate the Thananathee River, and because a fish was caught with bait, so it was called Li Phi, as shown in **figure 1**.



Figure 1. Li Phi image. Photo by Smai Wannaudorn.

Besides the aforementioned, the literature of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* also represents the ecosystem of the Mekong basin's plentiful topography, including woods, local plants, animals, and minerals. Sachchidanand Sahai (1996) has reported that the plot of the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* usually describes the traveling paths along the Mekong River. In each traveling period there is a description of the natural richness of Laos. It shows the different kinds of plant species, such as bananas, sugarcanes, coconuts, sugar palm trees, and also mentions the diversity of minerals, including gold, silver, and copper, mentioning them frequently throughout the literature. It coherently demonstrates Laos' geographical characteristics, as well as culture.

Therefore, the author has shown the representatives of a real topography in Lao society, which shares the same border of topography along the northeastern part of Thailand in the past. These topographies are well known in Lao society up to the present time, and are mostly relate to the rivers and highlands. Because of the particular lifestyle of people in Lao society, the water and rivers play an important role in their life maintenance. Beside is value agriculturally, Nam Nguem and Toen Rivers also play an importance role for Lao's economy in terms of using the dams to generate the electric current for domestic use, and also for exporting, to bring income to help develop the country.

The representation of these rivers in the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* is one way to have them, and the highlands, remain in the remembrances of Lao society. It is also a way to consciously acknowledge the local history for the next generation to learn about the origin of all the places' names. Therefore, there is an attempt to make a memory about these rivers and highlands together with their name. The names were based on the influences and behaviors of the supernatural, following local principles and social beliefs, such as Nguem River, the highlands Don Chan and Tha Bo Nguen Bo Kham.

Today, some of these places mentioned in the literary have become tourist attractions that make income, helping the country's economy, such as Don Chan, which has become the location of one of the best hotels in the country. Moreover, there are the monuments of the kings, and a park as a relaxing place, an exercising place and a selling place of souvenirs. The literature of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* has not only represented important places that still remain in the memories of people, but also have an important role to the society and the country as it did in the past.

Furthermore, *Phra Lak Phra Lam* has illustrated the ecosystem of the Mekong basin topography, which was rich in woods, plant species, local animal species and minerals. These records correspond to the present data of Laos, which has been recognized as a country rich in various kinds of natural resources with a perfect ecosystem.

2. Sacred Space is the area that was built or created from imagination to show the ways and beliefs of both tradition and religion (Hongsuwan, 2013). They include the belief in the *naka*, the belief that humans are created from- and become a part of nature. Sacred Space is further divided into three parts: the upper world, earth, and the underworld.

2.1 The Upper World includes the Brahma World, heaven, Thaen city, and the universe.

The Brahma World is mentioned in some part of the *Phra Lak Phra Lam*. They are described only in the Akanittha Brahma World, which tells of the birth of Intapatthanakhon. This story mentions a couple of Brahmas who came to visit the world and could not return to the Brahma World. They built and established the city called Intapatthanakhon. The story of the birth of Tao Lun Lu also refers to Maha Brahma who died in the Akanittha Brahma World and returned to create the human world.

The Heaven Realm in *Phra Lak Phra Lam* is mentioned in its reference to a heaven in the *Daowadueng* level (the highest level) where Phra Indra lives. There it describes a scene where Phra Ya Thaen handed Tao Lun Lu over to Phra Indra to recover his body, but he couldn't do it. Beside the route to Phra Indra's castle, there are decorations of smiling angel sculptures that are glazed with gold foil and glass, white elephant sculpture, two scary black stone elephants that look like they are running to pierce something. At the start of the stairs to the castle, there are two dog sculptures that are made of gold and glass, posing like they are running to fight. On the castle, there are angels playing holy music and beautiful angels surrounding Indra.

Thaen City in *Phra Lak Phra Lam* context means the place where seven of Phra Ya Thaens have lived. Phra Ya Thaen Teuk is the chief. The role of Phra Ya Thaen is to cast a new complete body to Brahma and angel before they are born in the world; without his work they would be born with deformities.

Universe in *Phra Lak Phra Lam* is mentioned in the scene where Phra Lam travels the universe by a horse named Maneekab. The literary work describes the location and environment of the universe, which is extensive. There is a mountain at the east edge. The northern mountains are dark. At the edge of the southern mountain is full of fog. There is a Chomphu tree at the southern edge of the universe that is surrounded by the sky. The western edge of the universe is covered with fog that looks like the city walls. At the center of the universe is Meru Mountain; the Autrkuru continent is at its north; the Buphaviteha continent is in the east; the Indian subcontinent and the Amornkoyanna is in the south and west, respectively. Next to this, there is the Himaphan forest and Langka continent where people live along the Mekong River.

Within the upper world space both traditional belief about Thaen and religion exist. The author tried to illustrate the upper world space, that the Brahma world is the highest and heaven beneath it, especially regarding cosmic nirvana where the second heaven plays an important role because it is the place where the god Phra Indra lives. The *Phra Lak Phra Lam* literature also shows the traditional beliefs about Phra Ya Thaen who lives in the lowest level of the heavens called Cātummahārājika, where his duty is to cast the perfect body of Brahma and angel that will be born in the world. Regarding the religious beliefs, there are four gods who live in Cātummahārājika heaven, but in *Phra Lak Phra Lam* literature, the Cātummahārājika four gods were born as humans. They include the father of Phra Lak Phra Lam, Tao Rappaoksuan's father, and two brothers who live on the opposite side, on top of Yukhanthara Mountain. Phra Ya Aiyasuan (Phra Lak Phra Lam's grandfather and Tao Rappanasuan) is the leader and

governs the spirits and giants. It shows the great combination between traditional and religious beliefs.

In addition, the author tries to present the universe as a combination of local and religious beliefs. The universe consists of four continents: Autrakuru, Buphaviteha, Amarakotayan, and Chomphu, but in Lao society it is believed that the universe consists of five continents, Himaphan forest is next to the four continents, and then Lanka is a continent where the people of the Mekong live. It shows that the author believed in five universes, including the Lanka continent.

2.2 The sacred space on “the earth” is referring to the trees, mountains, river and islands. The sacred places mentioned in *Phra Lak Phra Lam* are now still remarkable places of Laos, such as Don Chan, and Don Khong. The legend of this folktale played an important role for Laotian belief. For example, Laotian people believed that the Maneekhot tree is the only one in this world. Nikhot or Maneekhot tree is the one that stood in the middle of the Khonprapeng water fall in the past (**figure 2**). A head of the branch from this tree points to death and the end points to life, which is said in the Lao language as “*Kok chee tai pai chee pen*”. Laotian people also believe that this tree has major tree branches. If someone eats the fruits from the branch that points to Laos, that person would get older, and if they eat the fruits from the Cambodian direction, they would become a monkey. But if someone eats the fruits that point toward Thailand, they would look younger. In addition, they believe that this tree provides a magic cure for sickness or disease, which is similar to the story in *Phra Lak Phra Lam*. The Nikhot tree or Maneekhot in the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* literature is a magic tree (**figure 2**).



Figure 2. Nikhot or Maneekhot tree, which is a magic tree in *Phra Lak Phra Lam* (left, from www.seasite.niu.edu). A real image of the Maneekhot tree in Champasak Province, Laos (right, from www.magnoliathailand.com).

If someone ate their fruits, depending on which direction would result in birth as different kinds of animal. If the tree branch points to the east, the fruit will give birth to a monkey, the southern and the northern branches would become the Klayang or Chao

bird and the Ngueog or Kok bird, respectively. Lastly, the upward, pointing-to-the-sky branch would become human. Phra Lam and Pangsi lady become monkies because they ate the fruits from the eastern branch. In addition, Nikhot tree or Maneekhot has magic to turn an animal into a human. This refers to the belief that humans originated from nature and evolved from the origin of nature. For example, the history of Don Chan derived from the merit of Phra Lak Phra Lam. Today, there is a statue of Anuwong Prince located on this Don Chan beach. Later this area was re-named by Lao's government as "Suan Anuwong-Anuwong garden" (Hongsuwan, 2012).

The Balong Mountain is a well-known mountain in the southern part of Laos. There are many different traditional stories about this mountain. In *Phra Lak Phra Lam* literature, the author tried to illustrate the great power of Buddha. Balong Mountain originated, according to the literature, as a snake that was looking for food and so wanted to eat Phra Lam. It was killed and buried by Maneekab horse. Therefore, this mountain erected from the very soil where Maneekab horse covered the body of the snake, shaped like a giant coffin. Currently, there are many temples that have been built on this sacred mountain. People of Bakse, Phonthong, Champasak and other groups come to this place to pay homage to these temples.

Don Chan is the highland that was created by the seven-headed naga to bring two children from a boat. People give it the name Don Chan because they had never seen the miraculous highland before. Don Khong, another highland, was created as a result of Phra Lam gunning his arrow into the bank of the river. The river bank was ruined and become a highland in the middle of the river where Phra Lak and Phra Lam stayed.

2.3 The sacred place is an underworld space. There is Badan or the naga city. The author has presented a vision of the underworld space according to the traditional belief that the underworld has a naga city where naga people live, following the naga folklore. This town in *Phra Lak Phra Lam* literature mentions the two big towns, including Takasila Noi, and Pattalum. The naga in this belief has different manners and characteristic. Some naga are good and always provide good deeds for good people. For example, the naga from Takasila Noi City, when the naga knew that Phra Lak and Phra Lam were good people, he brought his daughter and sister to be Phra Lak and Phra Lam's wives, respectively. The route of descent to the Takasila Noi City is at Kaeng-Ahong, which local people believe was a center of the Mekong River and is the road to the naga city (**figure 3**).



Figure 3. Kaeng-Ahong in Buengkan Province, Thailand (from www.bungkan.com).

Pattalum is Phraya Pattalum's town. He believes that Phra Lam was the cause of war; therefore Phraya Pattalum kidnapped Phralam and took him to the underworld in order to kill him for peace. His four daughters destroyed the stone bridge that was created by Thao Hunlaman and his three brothers in order to cross Lanka. Later, these two couples were married and begot four children.

3. Social space refers to a way of life and the common practices of people. It represents the relationship between human and human such as the relationships of different ethnic groups along the Mekong River that were a result of intermarriage, family clan, trade and exchange, taxation, plantation, and politics.

The relationship with the Kha ethnic group and the intermarriages with them is not a story only of Laos' communities but also that of the Kha ethnic group, which is mentioned in this literature. There is a mention of the journey of Phra Lak and Phra Lam passing through the Tamila village, asking the way to Inthapatta town. There are several kinds of Kha ethnic groups including the Kha Phu Kao, Kha Phu Nak, Kha Chalai, Kha Phisoon, Kha Saloei, Kha Yang Dam, and Kha Yang Daeng who settling down along the mountain cliff. There were intermarriages without separation of the social classes for instance. There was an arranged marriage of Phra Lam and Nang Khamphao, the daughter of the headman of the Kha village. Later, Phra Lak and Phra Lam were married again to the daughter of Khunghom City's governor, and become the new rulers of that town.

There is also a similar story of intermarriages between the commoners and the royalty -- an official's child who escaped and established a new town. There are some of the origins of the new town in Laos such as Puan Chiangkwang, Khamkoed, Srikhottabun, and Attapoe town. Also, the Khunghom ruler and his people brought his daughters to Phra Lak and Phra Lam at Chanthaburi-Srisattanak town.

Chiangkwang town was established by Thao Chiangkwang. He is a son of a royal officer from Vientiane, Lanchang, who had fallen in love with Khampuan, a daughter of Uparat San in Khunghom town. They went to ask for permission to marry, but were denied. Therefore, they decided to escape to another town in the eastern part and build their own community. Later, it became a new town named Puan Chiangkwang.

Moreover, there was also mention of cross-tribal marriages, as shown in the scene where Thao Rapphanasuan told Chieftain Jong to bring his people back to Chanthaburi-Srisattanak after having sent him and Nang Chantha to Inthapattha Nakhon. Half way along the journey, they were reluctant to leave each other. They decided to run away together and established the new cities on the right side of the Mekong River and in the areas of Thailand and Cambodia, such as Pasak (Champasak), Surin, Srisaket, Roi Et, Khu Khan, Pha Khao Phan Na town (Phannanikhom District, Thailand), Nong Bua Lum Phu (Nong Bua Lam Phu Province, Thailand), Phra Ta Bong, and Bodhisattawa City.

Family relationships also illustrate the importance of the family system in Lao society, presenting the love and relationships of relatives and the characters of people in the family through the three characters. First, twins, such as Phra Lak and Phra Lam, Thao Sangkhib and Thao Phaleechan, and Thao Chataphraya and Thao Kanlahaphraya, Thao Wirupakkha and Thao Kuwera, and Phra Buttara and Phra Hoob. Second, the siblings, such as Nang Khamsao and Nang Aed Khai, Nang Phimmasonkhonlad, Nang Thippha-adchanmon, Nang Sakonchaocho and Nang Thipphalolao, Thao Hunlaman and Thao Khuanthaofa, Nang Buasri and Nang Khammee. And the third characters illustrate the relationship between aunt and niece, such as Nang Chanthamukkhee, the king of Nakas's sister, and Nang Uchulika, the king of Nakas's daughter.

Furthermore, it also presents the unity of the family system in terms of siblings from the same parents, and half siblings. This is represented through the child of Phra Lak and Phra Lam who were sent in pairs to govern all the cities in order to help each other without any contradiction. And also the love of half siblings, which is represented by Thao Hunlaman and Thao Khuanthaofa, the sons of Phra Lam and Nang Phaeng Sri and Nang Kottarat. They went to inquire about Nang Sida in Langka town. They helped each other to build a bridge and were commander-in-chiefs together. These representations of the twins or relatives demonstrate that Lao society emphasizes the family system and family unity. Thus, they were concerned over creating the characters of the twins and relatives to work together or in groups.

Regarding trade and exchange, there were often representations of the markets, especially during the journeys of the characters passing through different places. They also mention goods being sold, such as trading along the way, as demonstrated in the scene where the people of Khun Khom passed through the markets in Chanthaburi-Srisattanak, which sold jewels and jewelry, sweets, meat, foods, and clothes. In addition, in the scene where Chieftain Jong sent the people of Chanthaburi Srisattanak back to

their city, the state of trading materials in markets were also mentioned. Moreover, the trading of their own stuffs for another one's was mentioned in Phaya (a type of Lao poetry) over a conversation between the native people and Phra Lak and Phra Lam, or between the native people and royal officials who were travelling to another country. Regarding taxation, there was only one scene mentioned. That is the scene where Nang Sida brought Phra Buttara and Phra Hoob to find their father in Chanthaburi-Srisattanak and stayed with a cucumber peddler. One day, the two siblings were carrying cucumbers to sell in the downtown market. Thao Hunlaman told his followers to collect taxes along the market until they came to a cucumber shop and asked to take a cucumber. However, Phra Buttara did not give way, so the followers went back and told Thao Hunlaman. After that, he came to collect the tax himself, and again, Phra Buttara refused, so they quarrelled to the point where they fought with each other. Thao Hunlaman could not fight Phra Buttara, so Phra Lak and Phra Lam came to help him. However, there was no winner or loser. Finally, Phra Lam realized that Phra Buttara was his son, and he brought him back with him to live in the town.

The practice of agriculture was mentioned most frequently, both directly and indirectly. A direct mention includes the scene of the origin of Thao Lunlu before he was born as Thao Rapphanasuan. The author presented a representation of plowing the field of Kuan Na Luang, the father of Thao Lunlu who described how to cultivate land.

There is also mention of a representation of local wisdom about chasing away with a tool those birds that eat rice in the fields. It was made by splitting the wood into two pieces, drilling holes, stringing it with wicker and then pulling them to touch each other to make a noise. The birds were frightened and flew away. It's called Hurb Lai Nok, which is the origin of today's Ban Hurb.

Besides the aforementioned, there is also a mention of farming indirectly. It mentions farming or plowing the land in Phaya, which is used to make fun in several places mentioned frequently, as well as fields is mentioned frequently.

Politics and governance, in the literature of *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, are also represented, based on ancient Lao tradition. This includes a governor, a viceroy, and a royal official called Saen Muang. Moreover, there are other royal officials mentioned, namely, Chieftain Muen Na, Chieftain Muang Chan, Chieftain Muang Klang, Chieftain Muang Sai, Chieftain Muang Khua, and Chieftain Kaeo Moon Muang. For example, in Chanthaburi Srisattanak, Phra Lam is the governor and Phra Lak is the viceroy. In Inthapattha Nakhon, Thao Rapphanasuan is the governor, Thao Phikphi (Thao Rapphanasuan's younger brother) is the viceroy, and Thao Inthachee (Thao Rapphanasuan's other brother) is the Saen Muang.

In the scene where Phra Lak and Phra Lam have established the cities in the area of Thailand, which are governed by their sons and daughters, the words Wang Na or Fai Na are used instead of Upparat. For example, Muang Sriyutthiya was governed by Thao Aongkhot, and Thao Worayot is the Wang Na. In Muang Phimai, Thao Chanthapatchot is the governor, and Thao Thipphasotsaisaeng is the Fai Na. In Muang Khonlad (present-day Nakhorn Ratchasima Province, Thailand) Thao Thotsakan is the governor and Phan Look Thao is the Fai Na.

This study suggests that the social space in the literature of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* illustrates the representations of cultural ecology, the relations of ethnic groups,

families, and life maintenances according to the culture of Lao society. It's comprised of trade, exchange and tax levying. In addition, it has presented a representation of government following the traditional ways of Lao society that focuses on the family system whereby the older brother is the governor and the younger brother is the viceroy, supporting each other, and subsequently people in Lao society can earn their livelihoods together peacefully.

CONCLUSION

Although the Lao literary work of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* originated from another culture, the author adapted local characteristics following the local principles, beliefs, values and cultural traditions. The way of life that relies on nature was mentioned in the literature. The locations of real local places correspond to the imaginary places as well. There were the descriptions of the local geography, making the local history a collective memory and helps us to see the representations of the cultural ecology within old Lao society. The relationships between humans and nature is a way to understand the behaviors of people toward their natural surroundings. And it also reflects the relations between humans and the supernatural. The Buddhist principles and local beliefs were interesting; they all refer to local wisdom in terms of the cultural ecology of Lao ancestors according to eastern philosophy. People could perceive nature's significance. They believed that humans originated from nature, are part of nature, are well mannered to nature, and live resourcefully with nature. This is the base of ecosystem management, to get equilibrium for the permanence of the ecosystem and the survival of people in Lao society forever.

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