UNAKAN: A COMBINATION OF THE IMAGES OF THAI HERO AND HEROINE

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Abstract

Focusing on Unakan, the heroine in male disguise in Bot lakhon nai reung Inao, this paper aims at studying the roles and significance of her character that reflect the outstanding image of a heroine in Thai literature. In the story, Butsaba, the heroine, is disguised by her divine ancestor, Patarakala, as a young man named Unakan. The study reveals that Unakan possesses the characteristics of both hero and heroine. By portraying the roles as parallel to Inao, the hero of the story, Unakan is a great warrior and a dignified hero who has irresistible charm to women. She also searches for the lost lover which is generally the role of a hero. These roles are usually found in many versions of the Panji romances. It reflects that the poet kept these outstanding roles of the Panji romances’ heroines. Still, Unakan preserves the same characteristics as other heroines in the Thai literary convention. Unakan does not only have perfect beauty and conduct like other Thai ideal women, but she also represents an ideal wife. The character of Unakan has significance to literary aesthetics and values, to the criticism of women’s potential, and to Thai literary tradition.

Introduction

The poets of ancient Thai literature from the Ayutthaya and Bangkok periods usually separated hero roles from those of heroines. The heroes take the role of the active character, while the heroines are passive characters. In the late Ayutthaya period, however, there is at least one female character who does not represent the conventional image of heroine. This character is Unakan, Butsaba in male disguise, from Bot lakhon nai reung Inao. Unakan is different from other Thai heroines because she takes the roles which are generally designed for a hero. Since Unakan is more outstanding than other female characters in Thai literature of that period, this paper attempts to study Unakan’s character.

This paper aims at studying Unakan’s roles and characteristics from Bot lakhon nai reung Inao as the combination of the conventional Thai hero and heroine. In the paper, I divide the study into three topics:

1) The background of the tales of Inao and the character of Unakan
2) The roles and characteristics of Unakan as a hero and heroine
3) The significances of the combination of hero and heroine characteristics of Unakan

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The Background of The Tales of Inao and Unakan Character

The Background of The Tales of Inao

The tales of Inao, or the Panji stories, originated in East Java where Hinduism is the main religion (Robson 1971: 11). It was first found in old Javanese manuscripts. The origin of the tales came from the history of Java around the 11-12th centuries in the period of two great kings, namely King Airalangkha and King Kamesuan, who was King Airalangkha's grandchild. The tales might have been recorded after the period of the two kings which would be around the 13th or 14th century. Inao represents King Kamesuan, and Patarakala, the divine ancestor of the four great kings in the story, represents King Airalangkha. It is believed that some of the plot, e.g. the great battle between Inao and other kingdoms, derived from the biographies of King Airalangkha and King Kamesuan.

The tales of Inao became extensively popular in Java, Borneo, Melayu and Thailand. There are many versions of the Panji stories and it is hard to determine the original one. Each version appears to contain a very similar nucleus of plot but different narrative details, therefore there are different titles bestowed on the various works (Robson 1969: 11).

The tales of Inao were introduced to the Thai court around the 18th century in the reign of King Barommakot in the late Ayutthaya period. A female royal servant, who was Melayu, narrated two versions of the Inao tales, which later became the Thai Inao Yai or Dalang and Inao Lek. to King Barommakot's daughters. Based on the tales they listened to, the two princesses composed the first two Thai versions of Inao in dramatic verse - König bot lakhon. The elder princess, Chaofa Kunthon, composed Dalang known as Inao Yai, while the younger princess, Chaofa Mongkut, composed Inao Lek known as Inao.

Later, Inao or the Panji stories became well known. They were popular at the court around the early Rattanakosin period. In the reign of King Rama I, König bot lakhon nai reung Inao was recited by the King. After that, in the reign of King Rama II, the King rewrote König bot lakhon nai reung Inao from the former texts; Inao Kham Chan and König bot lakhon nai reung Inao by King Rama I to be used as the text for Lakhon nai performance. Among the various versions of Inao, König bot lakhon nai reung Inao composed by King Rama II is considered a literary masterpiece.

The Background of Unakan's Character

The main plot of Bot lakhon nai reung Inao concerns the relationship between four kings; Kurepan, Daha, Singhatsari, and Kalang. They are brothers and have a divine ancestor named Patarakala. They get married to members of their own group in order to keep the pure blood of the kingdoms. Inao is the crown prince of Kurepan. Butsaba is the princess of Daha. Their fathers engage them to each other when they are young. Nonetheless, Inao himself does not get a chance to meet his fiancée. When Inao meets another girl, he decides to break off his engagement. Butsaba's father, King Daha, is so angry that he offers to give Butsaba to the first person who asks for her. When Inao meets Butsaba, who is already engaged to
another man, he falls in love with her. He decides to abduct her and keep her in a beautiful cave. This causes Patarakala to be very angry with him. Patarakala, therefore, blows away the carrier which Butsaba and her followers are riding in order to punish Inao by separating him and Butsaba. Patarakala also casts a spell so that they cannot recognize each other unless the siblings of the four kingdoms meet together. This leads Inao and Butsaba to start their adventure to search for each other. After the long journey, Inao meets Butsaba and returns to his kingdom to succeed his father as the king of Kurepan.

While they are in search of each other, they disguise themselves. Inao disguises himself as a pirate named Panyi and a monk, and Butsaba disguises herself as a young man named Unakan and a nun named Tila-orasa.

The disguise of Butsaba as Unakan starts after the storm, stirred up by Patarakala, blows her away while she is in a carrier in a garden. After that Unakan starts a journey to search for Inao. The disguise leads Unakan to examine and learn about the world in contrast to her former life as Butsaba who is a victim of destiny and always follows the social norm. After Unakan leaves Kalang, one of the four kingdoms in the story, she disguises herself as Aenang (a nun) named Tila-orasa. Therefore, it ends her male disguise as Unakan.

After disguising Butsaba, Patarakala gives her a divine kris, a Malay dagger with scalloped edges, with her name Unakan carved on it.
Cholada Ruengrulgkit (2003) analyzes that the blessing and the spell of Patarakala can be considered as the short biography of Unakan called ‘Sutsathani’ because the blessing and the spell portray well how the life of Butsaba disguised as Unakan will be until the disguise ends (2003: 213-216). The biography might signify the starting of Butsaba’s new life as a man. The biography thus reflects the significance of Unakan as parallel to Inao, who has his own ‘Sutsathani’ or biography as well.

It is interesting that while Unakan is disguised as a man, the heroine in other Thai versions of Inao such as Dalang or Inao yai and Ari-nakkhara version is transformed by Patarakala.

In Dalang, after Patarakala takes Butsabakalo from Daha into a forest, he transforms her into a man, gives her a divine kris (a Malay dagger) and names her Misapramangkuning (อิศวาพรรามณรงคุณ).

The Roles and Characteristics of Unakan as a Hero and Heroine

In Thai literary convention, heroines have their ‘roles’ -- roles which are generally separated from those of the heroes. The heroines are always protected by the heroes. If they are abducted by the villain or separated from their husband, they have to wait for their husband’s help. Moreover,
they are always faithful to their husbands even after their separation. The heroes always take the role of searching for the lost lover and warriors during the adventure.

There are a few unconventional heroines in Thai literature, for example, the heroine who has more than one lover or husband such as Mora in Chanthakorop, and the heroine who takes the role of hero.

Generally, there are three techniques that Thai poets use to create the unconventional heroines who represent the hero image. First, the poet might transform the heroine into a man and then let the heroine play the hero role, as for example, Misapramangkuning from Dalang. The transformed heroines usually get magic power or a magic weapon from the gods and display their power as the hero. Second, the poet might disguise the heroine as a man, as for example, Unakan. The disguised heroines may get or not get any magic power and weapon. The disguised heroines sometimes act like male characters and sometimes like female characters. Finally, the poet might let the heroine take the hero roles without disguise and transformation, for example, Laweng from Phra Aphaimani.

Regarding the role and characteristics, Unakan could be considered the unconventional Thai heroine who combines the hero roles and characteristics with those of the heroine in male disguise.

1. The Roles and Characteristics of Unakan as a Hero

Unakan’s hero roles and characteristics are so outstanding that she can be considered as one of the heroes of the story. It is found that Unakan exhibits three images of a hero which are: a hero who has an irresistible charm to women, a wanderer, and a great warrior.

1) The hero who has an irresistible charm to women

Charming is one of the characteristics of a Thai hero. During the adventure, Unakan uses his mighty power to gain numerous women as his consorts similar to Panyi (Inao). The scene showing Unakan’s image as the hero who is seen as irresistible to women is portrayed when he is in Kalang. Malara, the daughter of a court chief, falls in love with him.

(Phrabatsomdetphraphutthaloetlanaphalai 2000: 616)

(A Upon seeing Unakan, Malara falls in love with him. She is mad for his good looks. She is embarrassed about falling in love with him because she cannot ask for his love.)

Similarly to Unakan, the romantic scene happens to Panyi as well. When he is riding into Malaka, Wanyiwa, a daughter of a court chief, loves him at first sight. Upon first sight, Malara gives Unakan some beautiful flowers signifying her love for him. Unakan knows Malara’s meaning and gives a response to Malara. This is said in the text below.

3 On this topic I would like to use ‘He’, ‘him’, and ‘his’ to represent Unakan because I am trying to explain the male image of Unakan.
Later on Malara comes to see Unakan at his palace. Unakan deceives Malara. He says he cannot sleep with any woman for three years because he has promised to a god. Malara feels upset to hear that. However she swears to be faithful to Unakan. Unakan gives Malara his Sabo (a shawl) and a ring in order to please her.

The circumstance in which Unakan talks to Raden Kusuma, one of his captives, also represents the image of the hero who treats a woman charmingly. By his companions’ suggestion, Unakan has to ask Raden Kusuma to sleep with him to avoid any suspicion. Unakan has to deceive the princess that he cannot make love with any woman for three years as he has vowed to a god. As Unakan learns from the way Inao treated him when he is Butsaba, Unakan knows how to treat a woman and how to impress a woman. As Unakan says to Raden Kusuma, the princess of Lasam, whom he asks to sleep with,

| Unakan | Inao |
|--------|------|
| เมื่อนั้น | เมื่อนั้น |
| ฉันกราบเรียนอย่างตื้นใจ | ยินดีที่จะมีความสุข |
| ฉันจะทำให้เธอรู้ว่า | ฉันจะทำให้เธอรู้ว่า |
| ฉันจะทำให้เธอรู้ว่า | ฉันจะทำให้เธอรู้ว่า |
| ฉันจะทำให้เธอรู้ว่า | ฉันจะทำให้เธอรู้ว่า |

The image of Unakan as a charming hero can be compared to Panyi. During the search, Panyi gains numerous women from his great power to be his captives as well. Raden Kanchana, the princess of Wangkan, impresses him very much because she looks like Butsaba. Panyi, therefore, asks Raden Kanchana, the princess of Wangkan, to sleep with him. The way Panyi treats Raden Kanchana is similar to the way Unakan treats Raden Kusuma.
| Unakan            | Inao                                                                 |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| that he really loves her, so Raden Kusuma should not feel afraid of him. Unakan softly touches Raden Kusuma’s shoulder and enfolds her. Unakan, then, says to her that he has never loved any woman until he meets her. He really loves her as much as his life. | he is only a pirate, so she has not to respect him. Panyi softly holds her in his arms with love. |

Unakan, therefore, has to take part in many love affairs with women. This gives him a good chance to learn a man’s life and also represents one of the characteristics of a hero in Thai literature.

2) The Wanderer

One of the images of a great hero is the wanderer. To be a great hero, one has to ride out to take a journey and confront the unknown in order to mark the beginning of life lived at a new level and find himself. (Pearson 1998: 65) The role is generally designed for traditional Thai heroes who take the journey to search for their lost lovers as we can find in many Thai tales known as *Nitan Chak Chak Wong Wong*.

Similarly to most great heroes, Unakan takes the adventure to search for Inao, her husband. In addition, Unakan’s quest for Inao paralells Inao who disguises himself as a pirate to search for Butsaba as well. It is an interesting plot in Thai literature representing the adventures of a woman who searches for her husband since Thai heroines generally wait for their husbands or heroes to search for them.

Unakan’s great journey begins after Patarakala disguises her in the forest of Pramotan. As Unakan says to his two companions,

*เจ้าปรารถนาพิทักษ์เจ้าเอง ควรจะอยู่ที่ไหนไม่ได้ จึงจะหาพวกหลอกที่สัญจรไป จะได้เห็นพระนครที่เนื่องกับจักรินี (Phrabatsomdetphraphutthaloetlanaphalai 2000: 536)*

(Unakan tells his companions that all of them have to take a journey in order to find some kingdom to stay in.)

The journey leads Unakan to experience a new world he has never met before. As Unakan says,

*ขอท่านไม่นำผิดไป เกาะราชามาได้ในพระบรม (Phrabatsomdetphraphutthaloetlanaphalai 2000: 536)*

(Unakan has never travelled in a forest. Unakan is used to living happily in the palace.)

While taking a journey in the forest, Unakan meets King Pramotan and his followers. Unakan extremely impresses him, so he asks Unakan to be his adopted son and the crown prince. Unakan, however, stays in the kingdom briefly because he would like to search for Inao again. Unakan gives King Pramotan his reason for leaving the kingdom that he would like to find his wife, which is also an aspect of the conventional Thai hero. At the same time, Patarakala appears to point out to Unakan that at that time Inao is staying in the east. Unakan thus starts
his adventure of searching for Inao again. He says in the text:

(Phrabatsomdetphrathathaloetlanaphalai 2000: 591)

(Unakan takes a journey to search for Inao and has to stay in a forest for many days. He does not know exactly where he should go.)

The journey gives Unakan (and also Panyi) a chance to present his prowess and establish his power as I will discuss in the next section.

3) The Warrior

Another important archetype of a hero seen in Unakan is a great warrior. This image might connect to the meaning of his name, Unakan. The word Unakan might come from the Javanese word Undakan (Robson 1969: 19) or Oendakan (Plaek Sinlapakamphiset 1976: 193) which means a horse or a knight. The use of animal-names is typical of Javanese Panji literature and Middle Javanese literature in general (Robson 1969: 19). The meaning of this name might signify the ability and the great duty of the owner.

Unakan plays an important role as the outstanding military leader who can subdue all his foes similar to Inao or Panyi, during his adventure in the world of conquest.

Unakan has learned military strategy at Pramotan where Unakan lived as the adopted son of the king. This is the first step of Unakan’s becoming a warrior.

Unakan is extolled by every kingdom even Panyi as a great warrior. As Panyi says about Unakan,

(Phrabatsomdetphrathathaloetlanaphalai 2000: 597)

(Panyi has heard that Unakan is a great warrior who is able to defeat every kingdom.)

By his great power, Unakan gains numerous captives and many kingdoms surrender to him. His mighty authority can be compared to Panyi, as the table shows:

| Unakan | Inao |
|--------|------|
| มหาราชานุภาพ | เฉลิมศักดิ์ |
| เจ้าที่มาเพราะเป็นข้าศึก | พระราชทานวิทยา |
| ก้าวกระฉ่อนข้าศึก | คงพระเจ้าล้านทวีป |
| กระเทาเดินข้าศึก | พระเจ้าล้านทวีป |
| และกล้าข้าศึก | ย่ามาทั้งยี่สิบประเทศ |
| รับ贡献力量 | มีข้าศึกทุกแห่ง |
| นับแห่งที่มา | แต่ละพื้นที่ที่ได้รวมเป็น |
| ได้รับการบรรจุ | ซ้ำๆกันไปลง |

(Phrabatsomdetphrathathaloetlanaphalai 2000: 553-554)
The great war that leads Unakan to prove his potential as a great warrior is the war between Kalang and Chamara. Since King Kalang refuses to marry his daughter, Raden Sakaraneungrat, to King Chamara, the war happens. King Chamara takes his army with his elder brother, King Kapalan, to fight against King Kalang. This war enables Unakan to play the important role as a warrior parallel to Panyi. Panyi asks Unakan to fight against King Chamara, while he fights with King Kapalan. The situation signifies the equal importance of the two heroes, Unakan and Panyi, since their enemies, King Chamara and King Kapalan, have the same great power. As the poem describes,

(Phrabatsomdetphraphutthaloetlanaphalai 2000: 659)

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(The two kings, King Chamara and King Kapalan, have the same wealth and power.)

The outstanding warrior of the war is Unakan. Panyi asks her to fight against King Chamara first while he fights after that. The war seems to be a competition between Unakan and Panyi.

Before going to battle, Unakan feels very worried and afraid because Unakan has never gone into battle. It is reasonable for a woman who has never experienced any fighting. Patarakala, therefore, comes from heaven to soothe Unakan. As the poem says,

(Phrabatsomdetphraphutthaloetlanaphalai 2000: 675)

(Patarakala knows how worried Unakan is about the battle which would be compared with Panyi, so he comes to soothe her.)

When Patarakala appears to Unakan, he tells him:

(Phrabatsomdetphraphutthaloetlanaphalai 2000: 675)

(Patarakala soothes away Unakan’s anxiety. He blesses Unakan to have a victory over the enemies and reminds Unakan to pretend to be a man as well.)

After meeting Patarakala, Unakan feels better. As the poem says:
After seeing Patarakala and hearing his blessing, Unakan regains the courage to fight.

(Prabatsomdetphraphutthaloetlanaphalai 2000: 676)

(Phrabatsomdetphraphutthaloetlanaphalai 2000: 687)

Patarakala can symbolize his inner warrior spirit and his own ability. The effect of the magic is not to change Unakan’s ability, but rather to cause the true nature to be revealed. Then, Unakan bravely kills Ratu Chamara. As the poem describes:

(Prabatsomdetphraphutthaloetlanaphalai 2000: 723)

(Phrabatsomdetphraphutthaloetlanaphalai 2000: 690)

(When Unakan sees Ratu Chamara coming to him, Unakan is suddenly frightened. Unakan hopes Panyi (Inao) will help him but Panyi does not, so Unakan prays to Patarakala.)

Patarakala, then, appears on the battlefield only to Unakan. Patarakala soothes him again.

(Patarakala soothes Unakan’s anxiety away and blesses that he will defeat Ratu Chamara.)

In this scene, we clearly see the inner conflict of Unakan between fear and courage during the battle. When Unakan triumphs over fear, he gains the courage to fight. The victory over Ratu Chamara can signify the victory of Unakan’s courage over his fear. It really proves Unakan’s ability and spirit as a military woman.

While Unakan tries to use the ability that he learns at Pramotan to fight, Misapramangkuning in Dalang defeats his enemies by the powerful kris or dagger and the magic of Patarakala as cited below:
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Semirang. The heroines in the versions of Panji romance mentioned above are transformed or disguised as men and take adventures in order to search for the hero and also take the role of the warrior similarly to Unakan. It can be considered that *Klon bot lakhon nai reung Inao* preserves the outstanding aspect of the heroine of the Panji romances. However, in the Thai version, Unakan also represents the characteristics of conventional Thai heroines, which makes the character reasonable and different from the heroines in other versions of *Panji*.

2. The Roles and Characteristics of Unakan as a Heroine

While playing the significant roles as the hero, Unakan preserves the same characteristics as other heroines in Thai literary convention as well. Unakan does not only have perfect beauty and conduct like other Thai ideal women, but she also represents an ideal wife who remains faithful to her husband after their separation.

A heroine in Thai literary convention always has a perfect beauty which signifies her virtue and high status. The poet describes Unakan’s ideal beauty which is a sign of her high status as a lineage of god or *Wong deva*.

While Panyi is riding a horse into Kalang, people come to see him and compare his perfect beauty to Unakan’s. The description reveals the tradition of praising the beauty of the hero and heroine in Thai literature which usually compares the beauty of the hero to that of the sun and the beauty of the heroine to that of the moon. As they say:
Moreover, Unakan has feminine conduct like other Thai heroines. For example, she feels shy when she is stared at by a man especially Panyi.

She first meets Panyi who disguises himself as a monk in a temple on a mountain while she is taking a journey to search for Inao. When Unakan is stared at by Panyi who wonders whether she is a man or not, she feels shy.

Unakan feels very shy of Panyi as if she will be melted by his eyes.

The next feminine behavior of Unakan is to feel frightened of blood. When she sees King Chamara’ s blood after defeating him, she suddenly feels frightened and seems to faint. It is reasonable for a woman who has never experienced the battlefield.

Unakan, in addition, is the ideal wife similar to other heroines in Thai literary convention. The aim of her journey is to search for Inao, her husband. It reveals how she loves him and how she remains faithful to him even after their separation. She always recalls Inao and expresses how much she loves him. As she says:

The fragrance of flowers reminds her of the smell of Inao’s Sabo (shawl). She becomes sad and starts crying.

It can be concluded that Unakan is an active character who represents both masculinity and femininity.

The Combination of Hero and Heroine Characteristics of Unakan: The Significance

From the study, it can be concluded that the character of Unakan has three significances, which are: the significance to literary aesthetics and values, the significance as the criticism of women’ s potential, and the significance to literary tradition.
1. The Significance to Literary Aesthetics

The character of Unakan creates the literary aesthetics of the story. The combination of hero and heroine characteristics makes the plot reasonable and impressive for Thai people. The way Unakan tries to hide her femininity and reveal masculinity to the society might attract the audience.

In addition, the mixture of masculinity and femininity of Unakan that causes Inao to be doubtful whether Unakan is a man or a woman relates to the sub-theme of the story which comes from the spell of Patarakala. Patarakala casts the spell on Inao and Butsaba that they will not recognize each other unless the siblings of the four kingdoms meet together. The story thus has a sub-theme about the search for the lost lover, and the doubt and recognition of each other. If Unakan is transformed and clearly maintains masculine characteristics without preserving her feminine characteristics, it is not reasonable to cause doubt in Inao and the sub-theme will not be clear as well.

2. The Significance as a Criticism of Women’s Potential

The life of Unakan, who combines the images of the Thai hero and heroine, might be considered as a criticism of women’s potential.

The disguise and the adventure give Unakan the opportunity to demonstrate her ability. She takes part in the adventure and the battle as a warrior. Although Unakan feels nervous or worried in some conditions such as in the battle, the reason is that she has never experienced them, not because she is a woman. Since she proves her heroism by fighting against her nature, she is presented not as sufferer but as saviour. The adventure thus reflects that femininity is not an obstacle to taking male roles or duties. It is interesting that the first poet who composed Klon bot lakhon nai reung Inao was a woman, Chaofa Mongkut. She composed Klon bot lakhon nai reung Inao after she listened to a Panji tale from a female royal servant who was Melayu. One of the reasons why the potential of the heroine is well portrayed might be that one of the poets of the story was a woman.

However, under the social constraints, it seems that a woman, only disguised as a man, can prove her potential and intelligence. The disguise thus could be considered as a literary technique to reveal a woman’s ability.

3. The Significance to Literary Tradition

The character of Unakan signifies a new aspect of heroines in Thai literary tradition that a heroine does not only play the limited roles in the family as a mother or a perfect wife, but she also performs the great role of an intelligent leader and a warrior of a state.

Moreover, the character of Unakan might influence some female characters in later Thai literary works. In Phra Aphaimani, the masterpiece of Sunthonphu, Laweng and Suwannamali, the heroines of the story, reveal their intelligence and abilities by acting as state leaders and warriors similar to Unakan but they do not disguise themselves. These characters can be considered as the lineage and the development of Unakan’s characteristics.
In modern literature, there is at least one work interpreting the character of Unakan. This work is *Butsaba-Unakan*, a modern Thai drama, by *Matthani Mochadara Rattanin*. The play presents Unakan as not only the disguised figure of Butsaba but also as an inner self of Butsaba or one side of Butsaba’s personality which is vigorous, courageous, and self-confident.

**Conclusion**

From the study, Unakan is one of the Thai female characters who is extraordinary and outstanding in Thai literature because her characteristics combines images of the Thai hero and heroine. We can also see why she should be considered as the heroine as well as the hero of the story who plays the role with convincing and believable action. The heroic images of Unakan are similar to those of the Panji romances’ heroines. It can be considered that the poet kept the characteristics of the Panji romances’ heroines and combined them with the characteristics of the Thai heroines, thus making Unakan outstanding and different from other Panji romances’ heroines.

The character might also mirror the ideal concept of woman in the late Ayutthaya to the early Rattanakosin period and has attracted Thai audiences since that time. The ability of Unakan, in addition, might have inspired the imagination of the ladies of the court who were the audience of the story.

It can be concluded that Unakan plays an important role not only in the story, but also in Thai literary tradition and Thai society.

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