



Ramayana Retellings in Southeast Asia: Ravana and Hanuman in Popular Culture, Case study in Thailand and Vietnam

Nguyen Thi Tam Anh*, Nguyen Duy Doai**

[Abstract]

The Ramayana is a very popular epic in Southeast Asia. It is the story of King Rama who must save his kidnapped wife, Sita. After Sita was abducted by the Demon King Ravana (Tosakanth) and taken to Lanka, Rama and his brother rescued her with the help of the monkey warriors, especially with the help of the Monkey King Hanuman. Along the way, the epic teaches Hindu life lessons. Today The Ramayana is told and retold through literature, theatre, orally, in movies, and is referenced in many other forms of popular culture. Nowadays, in Thailand, Ravana and Hanuman deconstruct the role of divine and become folk deities that also find their places in calendar art, advertising and stamps, etc. And in Vietnam, Ravana and Hanuman have become the two figures that can't be absent from Southern Vietnam Khmer ceremonies. In this article, our aim is to show how Ravana and Hanuman became symbols of popular culture (case studies in Thailand and Vietnam). The data provided in this article is drawn from field surveys with reliable reference resources.

Keywords: Hanuman, Khmer Vietnam, popular culture, Ravana, Thailand.

* Professor, Ho Chi Minh City Open University, Vietnam, anh.ntt@ou.edu.vn.

** Professor, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, HCMC, Vietnam. nguyenduydoai@gmail.com.

I . Introduction

Southeast Asian cultures have as a key characteristic, a “unity in diversity” - a cultural aspect mixed with national and regional characteristics created through the social and cultural exchanges of natives and migrants.

One of the creations with the widest impact on culture and society across all Southeast Asian countries is the Ramayana epic. This is one of the oldest and most famous epics in the literary marvels of Indian culture. The Ramayana composed by the sage Valmiki is one of the greatest epics of the Sanskrit language and is dated between 500 B.C.E to 300 A.D (Shwetanshu Bhushan 2009: 8). There are many other versions of the epic in many regional languages found in South Asia. It is omnipresent, found in art, culture, literature, ethics, festivals and ceremonies (Dhar, A 2014: 1). Ramayana has had very wide impact upon culture and society across Southeast Asia. Its influence has been expressed in various artistic fields spanning from literature to performing arts, from architecture to sculpture, and even in religion, customs. etc.

It is in Cambodia that the earliest versions of the Ramayana can be found. The Khmer version of the Ramayana is called Reamker. The Angkor Wat temple belong to the 12th or 13th century also has several bas-reliefs which are based on the episodes of the Ramayana (Santosh N. Desai 1970: 10).

In Thailand, although the Ramayanic influence on this country can be traced back as far as the 13th century, it is, nevertheless, not until the beginning of the Rattanakosin Period (about 1781 A.D.) that the glory of Rama took expression into epic poems (Swami Satyananda Puri 1998: (6)).

In this article, we want to mention two of Ramayana's characters, Ravana and Hanuman, representing popular culture in Thai culture and Vietnamese culture.

We apply the analytical - synthesis method together with ethnographic research to collect reliable data sources. However, we spend more time in Southern Vietnam. Here, we did a lot to

research many times in 2005, 2008, 2012, 2016 in areas where Khmer communities live such as Tra Vinh province (Tra Cu district and Chau Thanh district) and Soc Trang province (Soc Trang Commune and My Tu District (observations and interviews were also applied in these field trip)). In Thailand, we visited Bangkok in 2006 and 2015 and conducted observations at the Wat Phra Kaew. Since this article is a first step, there are countless shortcomings. We will continue to improve in future studies.

II. The term “Popular Culture”

Based on the etymology of “popular” as defined by Raymond Williams, we can speak of four corresponding characteristics of popular culture (Storey 2009: 5).

- (1) well-liked by many people;
- (2) actually made by the people for themselves;
- (3) inferior kinds of works;
- (4) work deliberately setting out to win favor with the people.

The “culture”¹ is a concept studied and debated a lot by scholars. In this article, we adopted the term “culture” according to Ray Brownie's classification (Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause 1992: 16), culture can be classified into the following three types:

Folk Culture *Popular Culture* *Elite Culture*

However, in reality, these three types of culture do not have boundaries, they interfere with and transform one another; and these are the three different cultural types of culture.

- Folk culture (Folklore) refers to the culture of formation, development, it is directly transferred from generation to generation among ordinary people familiar with each other. Folk culture formed and developed, although there developed and without being lead by financial profit. The origins of folk culture are to be found in the unfulfilled needs by the

¹ See Hutnyk (2006: 351-358) for a brief overview of culture.

dominant culture. Folk culture belongs not only to traditional societies (rural, farmers, agriculture) but is also found in modern societies.

- Elite culture refers to the form of culture that requires training for enjoyment, in which “passionate artisans” are cultivated beings who are considered as elite cultural distinctions. However, *elite culture* should not be considered as the peak culture and superior to other cultural types.

- Popular culture (mass culture) strives to erase the boundary between folk culture and elite culture. When mass culture is associated with industry then it is considered as commercialized.

In addition, some other researchers also give their definition of the term “popular culture”, for example, Barry Brummett (1994: 21) considers pop culture as: “*those systems or artifacts that most people share and that most people know about*”.

III. Ravana and Hanuman in popular culture in Thailand

Thailand is often called the “Land of Smiles”, not only because visitors love its natural beauty and historical riches, but also because of the country’s friendly people and fascinating culture. The main feature of Thai religious and cultural life is cultural adaptation. The Thais have mixed elements of animism with Brahmanism and Buddhism. In this regard, we would like to note that two figures of the Ramayana that feature in the life of the Thai people are *Ravana* and *Hanuman*.

Ramakian is the Thai version of the Indian Ramayana epic, also known as Ramakirti. According to the Indian legend, the person who composed Ramayana in its earliest form was Valmiki; the epic consisted of consisting of 24,000 double verses (sloka). However, the Thai version of the Ramakian (Ramakirti) came from the South Indian Ramayana versions rather than the Sanskrit version of Valmiki. Ramakian (Ramakirti) also contains indigenous Thai

religious values. King Rama I of the Chakri Dynasty (1782-1809) was the first to introduce Ramakirti into Thai art (Swami Satyananda Puri 1998: 5-8).

It was also in the Ramakian version of Thailand that the two main characters, Ravana and Hanuman, appeared more prominently. Ravana was renamed as Thotsakan, whereas the name of Hanuman was kept intact. The two figures became the dominant symbols in sculpture, painting and performance in the religious beliefs of the people in the country (Thailand). Furthermore, Ravana and Hanuman have become figures in popular culture more generally.

Thai legends inform us that Thotsakan is a character from the epics, who fell in love with Sida (Sita), wife of Phra Rama. Thotsakan kidnaps Sida, leading to a huge war between demons and humans. Thotsakan is the king of demons with ten heads, and with his 20 arms possesses innumerable weapons and stoutly believes in his invincibility. Further, Phra Rama is revered as an incarnation of Phra Narai (Vishnu), and he is the son of King Tosarot of Ayodhya.

The Ramakian story clearly shows the struggle between Good and Evil. Good and Evil are shown in the images of Phra Rama and Thotsakan. The story also shows the philosophy of dharma (Duty) in the action of Phra Rama - a prince who left the palace in a miserable forest yet still lived a life full of dharma. The issue of Honor and Love was also highlighted at the end of the work, when Phra Rama doubted the fidelity of his wife, Sita. Rama asks his brother - Phra Lak to lead Sita into the forest and kill her, but the sword falls from his hand and turns into a garland around her neck. Therefore, Phra Lak returned to the palace and left Sita to wander in the forest. After that, Sita once again refused to go back to the palace and asked for the help of Thao Virunal, king of the underground world. Only after Phra Rama had overcome all the challenges, she returned with Phra Rama to reign in Ayodhya (Swami Satyananda Puri 1998: 120-123; Pueandek Publishing Co. Ltd.: 92, 102).

We can recognize Hanuman and Ravana in the Ramakian character lines:

- The Prince's line (with Phra Rama as the representative) represents goodness, heroic spirit, talent and virtue. The characters in this line include the prince and princess depicting the beauty and goodness that exists in society as an ideal that people desire. In this line, we also have Monkey (Hanuman as the representative) signifying courage and loyalty, intelligence and strategy. Monkeys are considered brave yet cunning, ready to use tricks if necessary. Within the spirit of Indian religion in the theme of "unity between opposites", the Monkey character line is the bridge to show that: in order to conquer evil, sometimes we need evil, and using evilness to fight for goodness.

- The Demon (Yak) line (Thotsakan as the representative) denotes evil, the baddie that exists in nature and society. These are the characters that demons are demonic, huge and fierce, often causing adversity for others. The battle between the Prince and Yak lineage often represents conflicts, confrontation between the Good and the Evil, between the righteous and the unrighteous. Crucial to the story of the Ramakian, is that it still shows people's will and belief in the victory of truth even though the lives of Good and Evil are always intertwined.

Hanuman is the Hindu mythical Monkey God in the time of Rama, invincible and has much greater power than humans, he has many extraordinary abilities. In Thai culture, Hanuman leads an army of monkeys to destroy evil.

Thotsakan and Hanuman exerted an important influence upon Thai art. The traditional dance theater - Khon in which is depicted the epic Ramakian and excerpts of the war between Rama and Thotsakan - who kidnapped his wife, has always been considered one of the most immortal performances. In this fight, Hanuman is Phra Rama's right-hand man, so the Hanuman character segments are also very impressive and appealing to the audience. Khon theater is considered as a cultural heritage of the Thai people, in which, the art of dance and masks are the two most important factors (Clontz 2014: 5).

In the strategy of developing tourism and promoting the country's art and culture, Thailand has been very successful in choosing the traditional Khon stage. Because in Khon, the mask is a very important part. The characters of the Ramakian epic with the lines of Demons and Monkeys are extremely diverse with different styles, colors, and patterns. Artisans in the process of making Khon masks encounter many taboos and solemn rituals. What should be noted is that the process of tourism promotion has also brought about a spatial transformation in the appearance of Khon masks. The character masks are all stepped from the traditional elite stage to become very meticulously crafted, tourist products with various materials from papier-mâché to wood; sizes are also diverse to meet the needs of travelers. It can be said that the epic characters in this way not only became extremely close to the Thai people but also very impressive to foreign visitors. It seems that a good way to preserve and promote Thai cultural and artistic heritage.



<Figure 1> Thotsakan in Wat Phra Kaew, Thailand
Source: Photo by Nguyen Thi Tam Anh

In Thailand, especially in Wat Phra Kaew (Temple of the Emerald Buddha) located in the Royal Palace in Bangkok, there are also images drawn from the epic Ramakien. At the two sides of the gates are two giant protectors. Those are the demon characters - Yak. These characters are shaped in a very sophisticated way with bright colors, but still show the ferocity and majesty of a *Dharmapala* (Dharma protector, doorkeeper). According to our statistics through fieldwork, there are 12 of them, including Thotsakan <Figure 1>.

Thai culture has harmonized all the indigenous cultural elements into Buddhism, and at the same time, combined elements of Brahmanism, turning Brahman deities into *Dharmapala* (*Dvarapala*) and deities maintain the direction (*Dipalaka*) in the Buddhist temple. The reconciliation and integration of these elements has played an important role for Buddhism to keep its status until today as the state religion in Thailand.



<Figure 2>Thotsakan on stamp
Source: Collected by Nguyen Thi Tam Anh

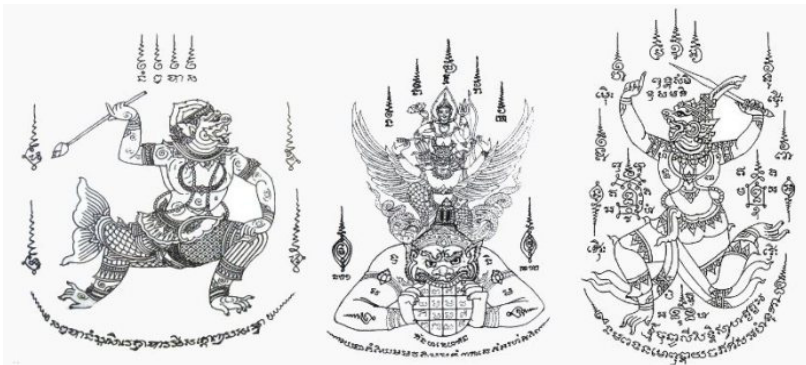


<Figure 3> Thotsakan on T-shirt
Source: <https://fineartamerica.com/shop/kids+tshirts/ravana>



<Figure 4> Thotsakan on watch
Source: <https://www.businessraveller.com/features/tradition-in-a-timepiece/>

Furthermore, the characters of Thotsakan and Hanuman in Khon have become extremely popular and familiar when commercialized as souvenirs available in various shops and supermarkets, souvenir shops across the country and in diverse forms of products such as stamps <Figure 2>, T-shirts <Figure 3>, watches <Figure 4>, paintings, skincare masks, oils, key chains, etc. All of these have made Thai art become even more popular. In this way, Thai artisans will find an output for commercialized products, whereby they are still able to maintain and preserve their traditional occupations.



<Figure 5> Hanuman Thai Tattoo
Source: <http://sakyantmagicalthaitattoo.com/sak-yant-magical-thai-tattoo-history-5/>

In Suvarnabhumi airport, there is also a huge golden statue with red and green patterned borders (the caption below the statue is Tosakanth - another name for Thotsakan). The presence of the enormous guardians here means that you can be assured of a safe journey. In particular, Hanuman became a sacred symbol in Thai tattoo art (Sak Yants). There are many variants of Sak Yants with Hanuman <Figure 5>. Hanuman's image has been used to give people a sense of protection from danger as well as becoming fearless in the face of adversity. A Hanuman tattoo on the body is believed by Thai people to increase confidence and help people to focus and boost their determination when doing something.



<Figure 6> Hanuman in Khon masks
Source: Photo by Nguyen Thi Tam Anh



<Figure 7> Thotsakan in Khon masks
Source: Photo by Nguyen Thi Tam Anh

In general, the Thai tourism industry can promote and introduce images like Thotsakan and Hanuman (or any Khon mask) through handmade products <Figure 6><Figure 7>. During our field trips in Thailand, we found that there are many small and convenient handicraft products such as Thotsakan and Hanuman masks made of silver, paper, etc... being sold as souvenirs. These are motifs representing a unique art form, and tourists often prefer these motifs. We think this is a very effective way to introduce national culture. Tourists may not know whether it is a good character or a devil or a god or a person but will be fascinated by the popularity, which will gradually increase their interest and attention towards the local culture.

IV. Ravana and Hanuman in popular culture in Vietnam

In Vietnam, Ravana and Hanuman characters are known primarily in the cultural life of the Khmer community in the Southern region. As mentioned above, Reamker is the Khmer version of the Ramayana epic. In this version of Reamker, the character Ravana changed its name to Krong Reap while the monkey character Hanuman was still known as Hanuman or Haknuman. In Cambodia, Krong Reap and Hanuman are two important figures in the epic Reamker performed on the Royal stage of elite culture. On the other hand, in South Vietnam, these two characters became popular when associated with community activities. The images of Krong Reap and Hanuman were portrayed by the Khmer community through two main types of performances: *Robam show* and *Rom Yak group*.

Robam is a form of classical theater. Its plots are inspired by the subjects of Buddhism and Brahmanism, and most significantly, Ramayana. In Robam, dance is the main performing language, therefore, Robam is also called “dance drama”. We speculate that Robam has originates from an ancient type of classical-palace theater of Cambodia. The classical form of Cambodian theater is called Lakhol. According to the author Pich Tum Kravel, as noted in his book *Khmer Mask Theater* (2000: 22-26) and in *Khmer Dances* (2001: 29), there are 3 forms of Lakhol:

- *Lakhol Kbach Boran*: the ancient form, with all female actors play the role of “rom”- dance. For example, the role of Preah Ream, Preah Leak are male roles but are performed by females. These actors can play the Reamker drama and also other dramas such as Preah Chinavong, Tupsangwa, Preah Waysandor, etc.

- *Lakhol S'romonl*: this is a form of Spek Thom (shadow puppet) - only used to perform the story of Reamker.

- *Lakhol Khol*: this is Lakhol wearing masks but the actors are all male (Lakhol Bros) and only play the story of Reamker.

Among the above forms of theater, only Lakhol Khol is fairly close to Robam because this is the only form of performance in which masks are used. The type of Lakhol Khol that Khmer people still performed today is called Lakhol Reamker by some people in Battambang, whereas the Khmer people in Kampuchea Krom (Southern Vietnam) call it as Lakhol Yak Rom or Robam. If Lakhol Khol was the only Reamker, Robam has expanded to many other ancient topics and stories such as Preah Chinnavong, Tupsangva, etc. Besides, in Robam, the role of Preah Ream, Preah Leak, and King are male roles but are performed by females. In this respect, Robam is like Lakhol Kbach Boran.

Also, according to author Pich Tum Kravel, these documents agree on the characteristics of Lakhol Khol as follows: (2000: 38)

- Drama dialogue is expressed through poetry, rhyming literature;

- Actors are all male, even female roles are played by males;

- All roles, from humans such as Preah Ream and Preah Leak to Monkey (svar), Demon (yak) require masks. Only one role performed by female does not require wearing a mask but the actor has to put on heavy makeup, implicating to the audience that she is wearing a mask;

- All roles are not allowed to speak or sing, but allowed to

act according to the narratives read aloud from backstage. Except for two roles, Eysay and the clown are permitted to speak when acting to trigger laughs from the audience;

- Reamker should only be performed at certain times, and the best time to perform in a year is during the New Year ceremony (Chol Chnam Thmay) to lure away evil spirits, bad omens of the past year and to welcome goodness and fortune in the coming year. Besides this, Reamker is also performed in the Rainmaking ceremony (Pithi sum tuk plia) when the country suffers from long draughts, or it may be performed at big events such as the King's birthday;

- Before performing performers must carry out a formal prayer for the Ancestors.

Remarkably, the Robam stage also bears quite a lot of these characteristics. According to ancient regulations, Lakhol Khol only has male actors (also known as Lakhol Bros) but in Robam stage, we find both male and female actors. Significantly, in Robam most of the roles are played by women, except the masked roles and that of clown. Perhaps, this is also developed and altered over a long period, but the general form of the Robam is still officially coming from the Royal dance (Lakhol Loung).

Through many ups and downs, the Royal dance artists scattered all over the region to continue performing and passing on the classic art forms. The Robam theater, which is a part of the art, has been "localized" by artisans in Southern Vietnam as a public art form preserved until today.

In most cases, the Robam Kru in Southern Vietnam does not dare to claim that they know the Reamker story well. Therefore, this leads to countless variations in the storyline. The Khmer has the phrase "*as long as the Reamker*" to indicate the massiveness and the length of this story. Later, the Robam Kru say they do not remember all the episodes in the Reamker, so they accidentally attached this episode to the tail of another episode, yet thanks to the talents of Khmer artisans, the audiences still find it very interesting and reasonable.

According to earlier research (Nguyễn Thị Tâm Anh 2015) on the traditional arts of the Khmer, Robam is also divided into two main protagonists who represent the two types of people in society: the protagonist (representing the good side as the king, the prince, Hanuman and his soldiers) and the antagonist (representing the demon side that is typical of the Yak and the soldiers of the Yak). There are always Yaks playing the role of antagonists in most dramas. They represent the dark and ambitious forces. "*Killing Yak*" became the main motif in the Khmer stage as well as in the cultural life of the Southern Khmer people.

Moreover, the Robam show is also a ceremonial stage. Robam performance reflects the dreams and beliefs of the Khmer people and to expel the evil spirits as well. The story tells that in the past a disturbing event happened in their village, they invited the Robam group to perform and after the main Yak in the play passed away, it was considered that ghosts and evils were destroyed. From then on, the village was peaceful once again. Or as another story says, "*Robam performance is to pray for rain, against drought and disease*"² because the Robam performance usually took place in the dry season, during which there will often be drought and disease. Khmer people believes that Robam can bring peace to their village.

In the faith of the Khmer, Yak (representing the demon that is typically Krong Reap and Krong Reap's soldiers) is the soul of Robam. Therefore, the Khmer community created a more popular performance type of Robam, the Rom Yak group <Figure 8>. This dance group can perform whenever the community has important festivals and ceremonies. Khmer festivals are often associated with ancient wet-rice agriculture. Since the majority of Khmer people are farmers, the festival is usually held at the end of the season, or when harvesting and waiting for the next season.

² This is a motif in Ramayana: Ravana sent his brother, Kumbhakar, across the river of the Milky Way in the sky, not pouring water on the ground. Monkey troopers must face drought and die a lot.



<Figure 8> Monks and The Yak group dance, Tra Cu district, Tra Vinh province, Vietnam
Source: Photo by Nguyen Thi Tam Anh

The festival plays a very important role in the life of the Khmer, dominating the spiritual and material activities and occupying a great amount of time. The festival is an occasion for Khmer people to praying God for blessings.

Khmer festivals entail the following characteristics:

- Deeply influenced by religion (heavily imprinted by Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism). Festivals are often organized according to Buddhist rituals, expressed through participation, and place importance on the role of the monks. The festival is usually held at the temple with rituals such as chanting prayers, blessings, offering rice to monks, presenting offerings to the temple.

- Solemn spirituality. It is not only an opportunity for Khmer people to play but also an opportunity for them to bless their loved ones, and for themselves. Though poor, the Khmer are still prepared offerings for the Buddha through monks or

come to the temple to cook rice or to help with the festivals.

- The rituals in festivals are often associated with the legends of Buddhism, so they are preserved and passed on to their descendants by the Khmer, such as the ceremony of building sandy mountains, boat racing ceremonies, rice-laying ceremony, etc.

- Offerings also play an important role, in expressing the meaning and content of the ceremonies. For example, the ceremony of worshipping the moon (Ok Om Bok) must have flat nuggets, the ceremony of offering monk's clothes (Kathan Nah Tean) must have clothes, the Retreat ceremony (Vassāvāsa) should have towels, candles, rainwater, etc. In addition, the Khmer people also have special offerings such as sla-thor, which is an offering made of banana trees, flowers and betel nuts to bring to the temple.

- The festival usually lasts all night, for many days at the temple yard. During this period, the temple is very busy, crowded with Buddhists.

In the great festivals of the Khmer people, the role of the Yak figure is to some extent expressed through performing. Through the field survey and interviews with Khmer residents in Tra Vinh province, we acknowledge the presence of the Yak in Chol Chnam Thmay (New Year) and Ok Om Bok festival, two of the largest and most important festivals of the year in the Khmer calendar. In addition to the above mundane festivals, we also observe the religious rituals of the year in Tra Vinh province and recognize that in the Kathan Nah Tean there is also a dance performance of *Rom Yak group*.

During these occasions, a group of people wearing masks of Yak (Ravana), Monkey (Hanuman), Mother Ping pouy (an elderly woman who acts as an intermediary between the two characters, Yak and Monkey), and the general riding a horse, are seen to be dancing and screaming to express the faith of Khmer people in Buddhism. They believe that goodness always wins and overcomes evil.



<Figure 9> The Yak dance in Maha Sangkran, Tra Vinh province, Vietnam
Source: Photo by Nguyen Thi Tam Anh

On the first day of Chol Chnam Thmay, after washing, Khmer residents go to the temple with incense sticks and gifts to join in the new Maha Sangkran procession. Under the direction of an Acha, people stand in line and go around the Great Hall three times to celebrate the New Year. After the ceremony at the temple, the Sangkran procession leaves the temple and head to every house in the hamlet and commune. Heading the procession is an orchestra, playing along the group of people wearing masks of the Yak, the Monkey, Mother Ping pouy, and the general riding on a horse <Figure 9>. They just walk and dance. Yak perform fierce and ruthless movements. He scares children and people and destroys their house. Then, the Monkey comes to stop the Yak. They fight each other until the situation became critical, when the mother Ping pouy comes, dissuades, and mediates between them. The general following her has a minor role, mainly to create a joyful and lively atmosphere during the festival. Then, the monks come to each house and recite the sutra to bless all the families in the hamlet and drive away from the Yak. After the Maha Sangkran procession, people gather at the temple to listen to the monk's sermon.



<Figure 10> The Yak vs. Haknuman, Tra Vinh province, Vietnam
Source: Photo by Nguyen Thi Tam Anh

The Yak figure here means a symbol of evil or bad luck. The way that the Yak comes to a family and then destroys or teases people symbolizes the unlucky and unwanted things that happened to the family in the previous year. The motif of the Monkey who comes and drives away the Yak in a symbolic welcoming of righteousness and good things, and of chasing away bad and evil things from the past year so as to celebrate a new, peaceful and happy year. The two characters of Yak and the Monkey in the New Year's Celebration performance represent the “*ring out the old, ring in the new*” of the Southern Khmer people. <Figure 10>

Kathan Nah Tean is conducted during the month that runs from September 16th to October 15th of the lunar calendar. Buddhists will choose one of those 29 days to celebrate the “*giving monk's clothes*” for the temple monks in their area. However, each pagoda can only celebrate this ceremony once a year.

Rom Yak groups are also often present on this day. The dancers escort the plants that people brought from the house to the temple. They also wear masks, costumes and weapons. The Yak image here represents the demon who tries to obstruct the followers from coming to the temple to give offerings, but cannot hinder the sincerity of everybody. <Figure 11>



<Figure 11> The Yak soldiers is fighting in the Kathina, Tra Vinh province, Vietnam
Source: Photo by Nguyen Thi Tam Anh

In addition, in the past, when a family member left home to become a monk, on their way heading to the temple for the ceremony there would be many relatives and family members following and bringing offerings. At that time, leading the group and playing music would be the the Phlêng Pinpeat orchestra, followed by the group of people wearing masks of the Yak, the Monkey, and Mother Ping pouy who walk and dance. The Yak holds a stick to fight the Monkey and blocks the way to the pagoda for the ceremony. However, the Yak finally often failed. It is an image that symbolizes the group of Mara's troops when they obstructed Buddha Shakyamuni.

Thus, in this case, the image of the Yak symbolizes the demonic force that is destructive and obstructs people from doing good things. In other words, Yak is a symbol of evil. But in the end, these bad things are annihilated by righteousness and subjected to the tolerance of Buddhism. The Yak figure wore the yellow mask and thus symbolizes that the bad and evil succumbed to the

Buddha to become an army to protect the Dharma. The artisans use yellow - the ochre color of the robes, to make masks, which shows the transformation of Yak's character. His face still bears fierce features such as slanted eyes, big mouth and sharp fangs but the color yellow on the mask helps us to distinguish good from the evil. This is a factor that we are very interested in when observing the ritual. Thereby, it shows the creativity and tolerance of Khmer residents. Moreover, it also affirms the faith and influence of Buddhism on the Southern Khmer community in Vietnam.

In festivals, the form of *Rom Yak group* is heavily influenced by religion. The agricultural Khmer residents, in their festivals, often use the image of Yak through dance to express their desire to chase away evil and darkness; and welcome good luck and peace. Many secular and religious ceremonies in Khmer Buddhism also have an image of Yak, almost all of which imply the hidden meaning of goodness beating evil and justice beating cruelty.

In terms of sacredness, it can be said that Yak-Hanuman are religious figures, but the way it is expressed in folk beliefs and festivals is very intimate and simple in order to express the belief of the rule of *cause – effect* and *good – evil*.

V. Conclusion

Ravana and Hanuman are symbols that show that Thai and Khmer are influenced by Indian culture but localized with indigenous beliefs. The art of Southeast Asia is mainly taken from Brahman mythology and Buddhism.

In fine arts, Ravana and Hanuman are motifs to express the endless creativity of artisans across Southeast Asia. In terms of sacredness, Ravana and Hanuman can be recognized as religious figures. But these characters show amazing vitality when going from legend to popular culture. It shows a transition of faith in the religious and mystical lands of Southeast Asia.

References

- Bhushan, Shwetanshu. 2009. Samskaras in the Sutras and the Ramayana: A comparative study. PhD Thesis. Jawaharlal Nehru University, India.
- Brummett, Barry. 1994. *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Clontz, Jack M. 2014. *Khon Mask - Thailand's Heritage*. Bangkok. Thailand: Museum of Contemporary Art.
- Dhar, A. 2014. The Ramayana and Sita in Films and Popular Media: The Repositioning of a Globalised Version. *The Return of the Epic Film: Genre, Aesthetics and History in the 21st Century*. A. Elliot, ed. 201-215. UK: Edinburgh University Press.
- Đỗ, Thu Hà. 2002. *Vấn đề bản địa hoá sử thi Ramayana Ấn Độ tại một số nước Đông Nam Á (Localization of Indian epic Ramayana in some Southeast Asian countries)*. Hanoi: Văn hóa Thông tin publisher.
- Hutnyk, John. 2006. Culture. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23(2-3): 351-358.
- Lucas, David M. and Jarrett, Charles W. 2014. The Yak of Thailand: Folk Icons Transcending Culture, Religion, and Media. *International Journal of Social, Behavioral, Educational, Economic, Business and Industrial Engineering*, 8(11): 35-63.
- Nachbar, Jack and Kevin Laue. 1992. *Popular Culture - an introductory text*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- Nguyễn, Thị Tâm Anh. 2015. *Hình tượng Chấn (Yak) trong văn hóa Khmer Nam Bộ (Yak symbol in Khmer culture in Southern Vietnam)*. Vietnam: Văn hóa Dân tộc Publisher.
- Puri, Swami Satyananda (narrated). 1998. *The Ramakirti (Ramakien) The Thai version of the Ramayana*. Bangkok: Printed by Printing House of Thammasat University.
- Rama 1. 2003. *The Story of Ramakien - From the Mural Paintings along the Galleries of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha*. (Illustrated Book for Teaching Aid Manual). Thailand: Pueandek Publishing Co., Ltd.
- Santosh N. Desai. 1970. *Ramayana - An Instrument of Historical Contact and Cultural Transmission between India and Asia*.

The Journal of Asian Studies,30(1): 5-20.

Schechner, Richard. 2004. *Performance Theory*. London and New York: Published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library.

Storey, John. 2009. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture - An Introduction (Fifth Edition)*. New York: Routledge.

Tum Krael, Pich. 2000. *Khmer Mask Theater*. Phnom Penh: Toyota Foundation.

_____. 2001. *Khmer Dances*. Phnom Penh: Toyota Foundation.

Received: Aug. 14, 2020; Reviewed: Dec. 10, 2020; Accepted: Jan 10, 2021