

# The Identity of the Hero in Lao Myths

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## บทคัดย่อ

จากการสำรวจตำนานปรัมปราที่ปรากฏในวัฒนธรรมลาว พบว่ามีภาพของตัวละครวีรบุรุษปรากฏอยู่เป็นจำนวนมาก และมีหลากหลายลักษณะ อันสามารถสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงความสำคัญและความหมายในมิติทางวัฒนธรรมที่มีต่อสังคมลาวได้อย่างน่าสนใจ บทความนี้มุ่งศึกษาอัตลักษณ์ (Identity) ของความเป็นวีรบุรุษ (Hero) ในตำนานปรัมปราของลาว โดยเลือกประยุกต์ใช้แนวคิดเรื่อง อนุภาค (Motif) เป็นหลัก เพื่อการทำความเข้าใจลักษณะและตีความของตำนานปรัมปรา จากการศึกษาพบว่าแนวคิดเรื่องอนุภาค ช่วยให้เห็นอัตลักษณ์ของความเป็นวีรบุรุษในวัฒนธรรมของลาว ทั้งนี้ผู้เขียนได้จำแนกอนุภาคออกเป็น 3 ประเภทด้วยกัน คือ อนุภาคที่เป็นวัตถุสิ่งของ, อนุภาคที่เป็นตัวละคร และอนุภาคที่เป็นเหตุการณ์หรือพฤติกรรม บทความนี้ได้แสดงให้เห็นถึงโลกทัศน์และความหมายของความเป็นวีรบุรุษในมิติทางวัฒนธรรมของชาวลาวที่สืบทอดมาตั้งแต่อดีตจนถึงปัจจุบัน

## Abstract

A survey of Lao culture reveals that there are numerous heroic characters with diverse traits that represent significant dimensions of culture in Lao society. This article aims to study the identity of the hero in Lao myths primarily by applying the concept of motif in order to understand and interpret myths. It is based found on a study which found that the concept of motif can help identify heroes and their role in Lao culture. The author organized motifs into three categories: object motifs, character motifs, and event or behavior motifs. This article presents the perception and meaning of heroes in Lao cultural dimensions that have been passed on from generation to generation to the present.

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## Introduction

Ethnic identity is presented through various cultural expressions, including myths, religious beliefs, rituals, local histories, doctrines, and art. These cultural expressions present ethnic identity and meaning for the individual and differentiate ethnic groups from each other (Santasombat, 2008:19). In the case of Laos, the author studied the identity of heroes in Lao mythology since heroic myths are one of the tools that illustrate Lao cultural identity.

Lao culture, compared with that of other countries, has the most in common with Thai culture, especially in terms of language, as both are part of the Tai language family. Both groups of people came from the Mekong River area and the Lanchang kingdom (Thammawat, 1995: 13).

The heroic myths of Laotians and people from Northeast Thailand are not only about men or women famous for their courage and competence in combat or administration. They are also about cultural heroes who might be gods, demi-gods (half-human, half-god), nonhumans, or animals. They include nation builders, such as Khun Boromrajathirat, Thao Hung-Thao Jeung, Phrachao Fa Ngum, and Phrachao Chaichetthathirat. These heroes were also leaders who taught the people principles of living by introducing methods of farming, weaving, family building, showing respect to elders, fire usage, dance, and music, as in the myths of Pu Langserng, Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasi, the Giant Gourd, Thao Siaw Sawat, etc. Heroes also include ritual leaders who inculcated certain beliefs into the people, such as Pu Nhoe and Ya Nhoe, and Phya Khankhaak.

Thus, heroic myths here refer to the stories of people who were greater, braver, or more competent than others in combat and administration. They also include “special people” who have sacred and supernatural powers.

The motifs in the tales were passed on and sustained because they have extraordinary, fascinating ideas, and imaginative ideas (Na Thalang, 2005: 36). Motifs are significant tools to help understand and study the identity of the hero in Lao culture. The author analyzed heroes in Lao myths through the concept of motif by organizing them into three categories: 1) object motifs, 2) character motifs, and 3) event or behavior motifs.

### Objects and the Formation of the Heroic Nature in Lao Myths

Object motifs include unusual items; examples from various cultures include a magic lantern, magic sword, magic carpet, house made of sweets, golden *pipal* tree, and golden apple. They also include extraordinary traditions and cultural activities, such as the selection of a marriage partner by throwing a garland or sacrificing children to the gods (Hongsuwan, 2006: 130). Object motifs in Lao myths can enable a main character to become a heroic leader, as in the myth of **Pu Nhoe and Ya Nhoe** (Chanthapaiboon, n.d.: 48-51), who used magic axes to cut down the giant creeper, Khua Khao Kad. This motif indicates that axes have been an important and necessary tool in Lao people's way of life since ancient times. Axes were used in cutting trees to build houses and to make agricultural equipment or other household items. The metal used in making axes was a symbol of supernatural power and sacredness since, according to a Lao myth, Pu Nhoe and Ya Nhoe were *thaen* (gods) who came down from heaven with Khun Borom to help build the Lao nation. Pu Nhoe and Ya Nhoe brought axes with them, and axes therefore were a motif of power and sacredness.

Moreover, in the myth of **Pu Langserng** (Jampakaewmanee, 2539:10) certain tools were used by Khun Khak, Khun Khan, and Pu Langserng. These mythic characters were ordered by Phaya Thaen to

come down to the world and show the people who had emerged from the giant gourd how to farm, weave cloth, build families, respect elders, and understand traditions and rituals. The objects that all three *thaen* used were iron rods and chisels. Similarly, the myth of **Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasi** (Phanichakit and Phanichakit, 2009: 13), which explains the birth of humans as crawling out of a giant gourd, also mentioned a pointed iron rod and a chisel, the motif that made Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasi cultural heroes as they used these implements to make the holes that allowed the people to come out. They also taught the people how to live together as married couples, how to farm, weave silk, catch fish, respect parents and elders, make merit, help each other, and value the good traditions that they practiced. Furthermore, the giant gourd accounted for differences in social status because the first group of people who emerged had dark skin, didn't like to bathe, and preferred living and working in the mountains, while the group that followed them had light skin, liked to bathe, and preferred living and working on the open plains. The gourd thus symbolizes a social and cultural reality that divides ways of living into "highlanders" and "lowlanders" (Na Thalang, 2009: 66).

In addition, the myth of **Khun Theung** (Fine Arts Department, 1988: 47) mentions another object motif – a copper pot, which is magical because it has everything inside it. Just by making a wish and tapping the pot three times, one could immediately get anything one wanted. The myth demonstrates that the copper pot was the symbol of a powerful person. People who had this pot usually became chiefs of their tribes in the tribal cultures of Southeast Asia on both the mainland and the islands (Charuworn, 2006: 145). The fact that the Lao used the copper pot as an object that appeared in the myth reflects the culture of copper usage in making utensils only for people who were powerful, prosperous, or noble.

In addition to utensils, another object motif in heroic myths is that of personal weapons. Heroes in Lao myths are usually courageous and intelligent and they possess personal weapons that help form the heroic character and leadership. In the myth of **Thao Si Khod Tabong** (Luangphasi, 2000: 1-22), the hero's personal weapon is a magic baton made of wood from the black semal tree, a magical tree that grows deep in mysterious, inaccessible forests and is guarded by a goddess. Black wood was extremely strong and there was a belief that only one tree with black wood would appear every hundred years. It was considered sacred, and at the appropriate time, the goddess that guarded the tree would leave and the tree would die and wait for a virtuous person to come and use its wood. Accordingly, Thao Si Khod Tabong's black semal wood baton was the symbol of both a person with supernatural power and a symbol of sacredness. In the myth of Khun Theung, the hero's personal weapons were a sword and halberd, the personal weapons of someone who is meritorious, extraordinary, or the son of the king. The sword and halberd were also the symbols of a warrior and a courageous, powerful person. Both weapons help form a clear picture of the heroic nature of Khun Theung.

Another myth of the Lao and northeastern Thai people who live along the Mekong River, "**Thao Jeung Kheung Dang Daeng**" (Fine Arts Department, 1988: 50), explains natural phenomena (Hongsuwan, 2006: 175). In this myth the hero's personal weapon, a bow that can penetrate and shatter mountains, is the symbol of tremendous power and might.

In each of the above-mentioned myths, an object motif causes extraordinary events to occur. Heroes are courageous, have supernatural power, and most importantly, have magical objects as tools with which to perform heroic deeds. Such magical objects include the axes of Pu Nhoe

and Ya Nhoe; the pointed rod and chisel of Khun Khan and Pu Langserng that were made of iron, which was the symbol of supernatural power and sacredness; and the cooper pot of Khun Theung, which was the symbol of power, prosperity, and nobleness. In addition to magical objects, other object motifs are personal weapons, such as Thao Si Khod Tabong's black semal wood baton, which symbolizes sacredness, power and might, and Thao Jeung Kheung Dang Daeng's bow, which is also a symbol of power.

### **Characters and Forming the Heroic Nature in Lao Myths**

The characters appearing in heroic myths in general have unusual physical characteristics or origins. They include gods, beasts, witches, giants, angels, wicked stepmothers, a hunch-backed person, a child born in a conch shell, and a talking cat, among others (Hongsuwan, 2006: 129). Origin is the first important thing that differentiates a hero from an ordinary person, as in the myth of Khun Boromrajathirat (Chanthapaiboon, n.d.: 48-51). Here Khun Borom is the son of Thaen Fa Kheun who was chosen by Thaen Luang to rule humans as he was more "meritorious" than the other gods (Charuworn, 2006: 141). In this myth the hero has an extraordinary origin, that is, he was born from heaven or from Thaen. According to Lao belief, Thaen sent Borom to rule humans. Thaen also taught humans to do rice farming in the rainy season and on the open plains. This is in line with the **Chronicle of Lan Xang** in which Thaen sent water buffalo to a land called Na Noi Oy Nu (Charuworn, 2006: 230) that later became the country of the Lao people. Heroes originated from Thaen, who helped them become sacred persons who had high positions and were greatly admired. No one could show disrespect towards them without being punished by the sky, heaven, or Phaya Thaen.

According to the myth of **Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasi**, Thaen sent Pu and Ya to the world with a magic gourd. When the gourd was smashed, its seeds were thrown up in the sky and fell onto the ground, where they grew into various plants and crops. Pu and Ya also showed humans how to grow rice and forage for food (Charuworn, 2006: 231). This myth presented these heroes in the form of the spirits of grandfather and grandmother, and consequently, they were ancestral spirits who were respected and sacred as they were heavenly spirits that created the world and all things just as did Thaen. However, they were not regarded as the supreme god of the Lao people.

In addition, heroes may originate from supernatural things, as just like in the myth of **Thao Khanthanam or Thao Katchanam** (Archaeology Division, Fine Arts Department, 1988: 57) in which the hero's stated that Thao Khanthanam's mother drank water from the footprint of an the incarnate elephant that was the incarnation of the god Indra, which caused her to and become pregnant. When the baby, "Thao Khanthanam," was later born and he was born he was very courageous and. He was able to conquer a giant when he was only seven years old. This motif indicates reflected that the elephant was not just an animal that was used in battle and transportation, but was considered sacred according to Lao belief. The elephant was also the symbol of greatness, power, intelligence, stability, and elegance.

It is apparent that the naming of heroes came from the idea that they were from the sky and heaven. According to Phra Dharmachirajmuni, writing in the monthly *Yonok* newspaper, the term "Lao" comes from the word "star," suggesting something high or in the sky. In the past, Lao people lived in the highlands of China and descended from the sky, which was the realm of Phaya Thaen (Viravong, 1996:12). This was in line with the myth of

Khum Borom, who was a meritorious *thaen* who was selected to rule humans and who became the ancestor of all Lao people. This belief accordingly influenced the naming of heroes as many of them had the term “Fa” (sky) in their names, such as Chao Fa Ngum and Phraya Falathorani. In addition, hero’s names were derived from religious beliefs.

Charuworn (2006:245) notes that the characters of the Lord Buddha and the Bodhisattva were leaders in the sphere of Buddhism, while the emperor was the ruler of an empire. According to Buddhist belief, there is a relationship between Buddhism’s founder and the emperor in that if there is no enlightened Lord Buddha in any era, there will be an emperor who comes to teach the people. Therefore, when Buddhism came to Laos, this concept influenced the belief and faith of the Lao people as they assumed that their lords were in the position of emperor. As time passed by, the stories of these lords became legends that were remembered for their bravery. These lords were leaders and founders of certain cultures. Consequently, Lao heroes had the term “Phrachao” which means Lord Buddha or emperor in front of their names such as Phrachao Fa Ngum, Phrachao Wichulraj, Phrachao Bhodhisalraj, Phrachao Chethathiraj, and Phrachao Anuwong.

Another important point is that Lao heroes usually have physical features that are different from those of ordinary people. For example, in the myth of **Phrachao Fa Ngum** (Luangphasi, 2000: 5-41), the hero was born with 33 teeth, and although all royal the councilors thought that he would bring misfortune to the country, Phramaha Pasaman Bhikhu, a Cambodian monk, saw that he was a meritorious baby. Moreover, while he was sleeping, Phrachao Fa Ngum’s snoring sounded like music, which indicated that he was a supremely favored person who would become the first king to unite all the cities together. In addition, the myth of **Phraya Si Khod Tabong**

(Luangphasi, 2000: 1-22), tells of how the hero ate black sticky rice upon which the sap of a black semal tree had spilled. It made his body so huge and powerful that he could conquer a herd of elephants that had invaded Vientiane. He was later appointed as city ruler of Si Khod Tabong. Huge, strong bodies of heroes represent supernatural power and therefore heroes in Lao perception sometimes had such physiques.

Another myth, **Ma Yui** (Archaeology Division, Fine Arts Department, 1988: 67), tells of Thao Ma Yui, who was born in the body of a dog that could travel either on the ground or in the air and could also conquer giants. The myth illustrates how dogs were sacred animals in Lao culture as Lao people still respect them up until now. This idea can also be seen in the story of **Sing Kaew and Sing Jor** (dog), four-legged creatures with body hair, long tails, and bodies similar to those of dogs. These creatures were human pets and were the first creatures during the period of the earth's creation. In the myths of several ethnic groups the dog was the original animal that stayed with humans from the period of a worldwide flood. For this reason, it could be assumed that Sing Kaew Sing Kham were dogs that had been transformed from "dogs of ethnic groups" to dogs of the Lao people (Sing Kaew Sing Kham). They appear in rituals of royal persons or the administrative class which interestingly reflects the integration of religious beliefs of certain ethnic groups and people in the administrative class in the context of Lao culture (Hongsuwan, 2008).

Heroes can also have still other unusual physical features, as in the myth of **Phya Khankhaak** (Archaeology Division, Fine Arts Department, 1988: 77), where the texture of the hero's skin was like that of a toad but a golden yellow in color. One time Phraya Thaen was displeased with Phya Khankhaak so he stopped the rain from falling during the rainy season. Phya Khankhaak then battled with Phraya Thaen and was victorious.

Phya Thaen subsequently caused the rain to fall during the rainy season as usual. As a result, Lao people believe Phya Khankhaak to be a sacred animal and the symbol of abundance, water, and rain. Lao people consider toads or frogs to have supernatural powers and to be sacred animals that were used during rain-calling ceremonies. Figures of four frogs facing each direction can be seen on the top of ancient ceremonial bronze kettledrums found at various sites in Southeast Asia. These drums were used in rain-calling ceremonies of various ethnic groups and were also the symbol of power which displayed the status of their owner.

The final point is that heroes in Lao mythology generally appear as characters with extraordinary ability beyond that of people in general, as in the myth of **Thao Khanthanam** (Encyclopedia of Thai Culture: Northeast Region, Volume 11, 1998: 3681-3682). In this myth Thao Khanthanam displayed his power by subduing a female giant and instructing her to stop killing and to observe religious precepts. This myth symbolizes humans' desire to conquer supernatural power such as giants which are depicted as cruel creatures that like to devour humans. Therefore, the fact that the Lao people created mythic heroes with supernatural power could be interpreted as their desire to conquer supernatural power, as is seen in other cultures. Another example is the myth of **Sinsai** (Phanichakit and Phanichakit, 2009: 94-101), which tells of a hero who was a very powerful person even as a child. He fought with a snake, an elephant, and a giant that were extremely strong and cruel but since Sinsai had great power, he was able to conquer and kill them. These two myths illustrate how heroes in Lao myths had supernatural power because they had to be different from others. Thus, Lao mythic heroes have significant identities.

From all of the above mentioned myths, it can be concluded that heroic characters who appear in Lao myths often have strange or special characteristics including a lofty origin, such as from the sky, heaven or Thaen. Examples are Khun Boromrajathirat, who originated from the sky or heaven; Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasi, who were heavenly spirits in the form of humans, and Thao Khanthanam who was born after his mother drank water from an elephant's footprint. As for the naming of heroes in Lao myths, it was found that they came from the belief in supernatural powers, or in beings that came from the sky or heaven, as well as from religious beliefs. Another feature is that heroes often have bodies that were different from other people, as in the myth of Phrachao Fa Ngum who was born with 33 teeth or the myth of Phraya Si Khod Tabong at first was very thin, but after eating black sticky rice, became huge and robust. Heroes sometimes had unusual bodies, as in the myth of Thao Ma Yui, who was born in the body of a dog, and the myth of Phya Khankhaak, who had skin like a toad's. Finally, heroes must have supernatural power, as in the myths of Thao Khanthanam and Sinsai. All of these features illustrate the identity of heroes in Lao myths as having supernatural power, the ability to perform miracles, and the position of a sacred person.

Although the myths present the heroes as having coming from heaven, they actually were from the families of kings. Structurally, it was found that the language in the myth emphasized that heroes were special and different from humans. As Charuworn (2006: 143) writes, family background was one of the various ways of identifying a hero. In addition to family background, various special physical characteristics separated ordinary people from heroes

## Events or Behavior and Formation of the Heroic Nature in Lao Myths

Event or behavior motifs consist of unusual or extraordinary characteristics such as changing shapes, casting a spell on the inhabitants of a town causing all of them to fall asleep at the same time, worldwide flooding, and strange birds that eat people, (Nimmanhemmin, 2000: 79). In forming the heroic nature in Lao myths, event or behavior motifs play an important role. An example is the creation of the earth, the universe, human beings, and nature as in the myth of **Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasi** (Somchitsripanya, 1986: 2-3). In this myth significant events caused Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasi to become heroes, which were the creation of Phra Sumen Mountain as the center of the universe from which all four continents originated, and the creation of Sattapanthakhiri Mountain, collectively called the “earth.” The creation of the earth by Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasi indicates that they were not just ordinary people. Without these two people, there might not be an earth for all creatures including human beings to live on until now. Therefore, Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasi were culture heroes in the perception of Lao people as creators of the earth. Similarly, in the myth of **Pu Langserng**, the creator of humans, the pointed iron rod and chisel pierced the gourd and allowed great numbers of humans to emerge. Pu Langserng also taught people how to earn their living along with ethical and moral principles about life.

Another myth that mentions the creation of a natural phenomenon, in this case a river is that of the Giant Saluekhue Dang Daeng Giant (Torayatha, 2009: 118). In this myth a giant had a gigantic sexual organ. When he walked in search of food, his sexual organ would drag, destroying the land, rocks, and woods beneath, and create a deep trench in the ground.

As time passed by, this trench became a wide river and people all knew that this river was created by the dragging of “Khong” which means Saluekhue Dang Daeng’s sexual organ; consequently, the river has been called “Nam Khong” until present. The formation of a river from a giant’s sexual organ is related to another belief about abundance in which people believed that the “lingam” or phallus was the origin of creatures in the universe. This belief is also in line with the worship of the Shiva Lingam in India, where the god Shiva is widely worshipped.

Another point concerns heroes and the establishment of the [Lao?] nation, in which significant events helped transform heroes into the cultural leaders of the Lao people. The myth of **Khun Boromrajathirat** (Chanthapaiboon, n.d.: 48-51), concerns a *thaen* who came down to the earth and built the nation at Na Noi Oy Nu or Thaen city. According to this myth, the city built by Khun Borom was extraordinary since the *thaen* created it. Therefore, the city was sacred and could not be invaded or destroyed by anyone. Another myth concerns **Thao Si Khod Tabong**, in which the hero volunteered to subdue a herd of elephants that attempted to destroy Vientiane. Because he was able to conquer the herd of elephants, the ruler of Vientiane appointed him to rule Si Khod city. Thus, it can be seen that there are several myths which a Lao person becomes a hero by establishing a city. This characteristic reflects the Lao people’s idea that those who are able to establish, unite, and restore peace to the Lao nation would be revered and respected.

The last event through which heroes are formed in Lao myths is marriage, as in the myth of **Phrachao Fa Ngum** (Luangphasi, 2000: 5-41) which tells of the marriage of Phrachao Fa Ngum and Phranag Kaew Keng Ya, the daughter of a Cambodian King who asked her husband to bring

Buddhism to Laos. As a country where people worshiped spirits, Laos then changed as most people believe in Buddhism instead. This is one of the most significant events associated with Phrachao Fa Ngum, who is famous as the king who brought Buddhism to the country. Another myth, that of **Thao Ba Jiang** (Phanichakit and Phanichakit, 2010: 61-69), tells of how Thao Ba Jiang and Nang Marong were lovers but Nang Marong's father did not want to have Thao Ba Jiang as his son-in-law. He then made up a story that Nang Marong was dead. Thao Ba Jiang heard the story while he was on his way to make the marriage proposal. He was so grieved by the news that he decided to kill himself with a knife on one of the mountains. When Nang Marong heard about his death, she went up to another mountain and held her breath until she died. These two mountains can still be seen in Champasak Province and Lao people consider them sacred as they are the dwelling places of the spirits of Thao Ba Jiang and Nang Marong. Lao people therefore have great respect for mountains and do not destroy or cause damage to them. The young lovers are remembered even though they no longer live in this world.

The above myths contain event or behavior motifs that are significant factors in the transformation of main characters into heroes in Lao culture. As we have seen, they include the myth of Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasi who created human beings as well as the earth as a dwelling place for all creatures. Another example is the myth of Pu Nhoe and Ya Nhoe and Pu Lang Pu Langserng who taught human beings how to peacefully, make a living, and maintain their lineage. Another example is the creation of natural phenomenon as in the myth of Saluekhue Dang Daeng, the giant who was the creator of the Mekong River, which can be compared to a blood vessel that nourishes the Lao people throughout the country. Other event

motifs are the establishment of nations by heroes, as in the myth of Khun Boromrajathirat, the *thaen* who built the nation for the Lao people and that of Thao Si Khod Tabong whose tremendous power brought prosperity and peace to Si Khod city. Finally, there two examples of the event motif of marriage which helped transform the main characters into heroes: the myth of Phrachao Fa Ngum, a cultural leader who brought Buddhism into Laos, and the myth of Thao Ba Jiang and Nang Marong, who had great faith in love and are still recognized as sacred spirits.

Above all, the situations and behaviors of heroes in Lao myths can be analyzed as comprising two groups, which are related to the ideas of Campbell (2008: 254-350, cited in Suwannapratase, 2009: 128). The hero's behavior, according to Campbell, involves two characteristics: physical deeds and spiritual deeds. Physical deeds refer to the heroes who were competent in battle, while spiritual deeds refer to heroes who had to learn about life throughout spiritual means, and in which the hero's actions helped people. Moreover, heroes played important roles in human faith and culture and taught people about the codes of daily life. Therefore, through these behaviors they demonstrated that they were sacred people.

## **Conclusion**

The study of the formation of the hero's identity in Lao myths found that motifs which appear in these myths were key in forming the heroic nature of these myths and reflecting certain aspects of Lao culture. Motifs can be organized into three categories: object motifs, character motifs, and event or behavior motifs. The characteristics and significance of the motifs studied here present concepts related to the formation of heroes in Lao myth. Object

motifs include implements and personal weapons of heroes, reflecting how heroes were people who had extraordinary implements or weapons. These objects include items used for cutting down giant trees or providing anything one wished for, as well as those that were so powerful that they could destroy anything or penetrate things that were huge, strong, and solid. These objects were usually made of gold, copper, iron, or bronze, all of which symbolized supernatural power and sacredness. The use of various types of metal often indicated social status. Although personal weapons of heroes were generally made of metals, Lao heroes sometimes carried personal weapons made of wood.

As for character motifs, the characters appearing in Lao myths usually have extraordinary origins such as being born from the sky, or from *thaen*, or from spirits, while one was conceived after his mother drank water from an elephant's footprint. Even hero's names were also influenced by the belief that they should come from supernatural powers which were the sky, heaven, and Buddhist beliefs. In addition, heroes often had strange or unusual physical characteristics, such as being born with 33 teeth, having a huge and strong body, being born in a dog's body, and having rough skin like a toad's. These features demonstrate that it was not necessary for Lao heroes to be just humans or *thaen* who normally had graceful bodies, but that heroes could also be animals. Animals appearing as Lao heroes normally had a connection with certain Lao beliefs and heroes were those who had supernatural power or tools to create power and might.

Finally, event or behavior motifs include several events in Lao myths that helped heroes to perform brave acts, including being a cultural leader, creating the earth, universe and humans, creating natural phenomena, building nations, or even entering into marriage. All of these events illustrate

that the formation of heroes in Lao myths usually required various events to extend or enhance the stories of heroes.

The above-mentioned contexts present the identity of the hero in Lao myths as follows: (1) a hero may appear in forms of *thaen* (gods), human beings, or sacred animals, with names that are derived from supernatural power including the sky or heaven; (2) a hero must be a person who has supernatural power, courage, and intelligence; (3) a hero is sometimes a meritorious person who carries an object or personal weapon that helps in creating his power, might, and sacredness; (4) a hero normally has an extraordinary or unusual body unlike that of ordinary people in general and can appear as a male, female or elder; (5) there must be certain events that helped the hero to become a leader or creator of culture or certain beliefs for Lao society. All of these features demonstrate that the identity of the hero in Lao myths is diverse, variable, and complex.

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