

*Original Paper*

Similarities and Differences of the Dam Giong Epics (Vietnam)  
and Reamker (Cambodia), Ramakien (Thailand), PhraLakPhra  
Lam (Laos) (Note 1)

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**Abstract**

*There are a lot of similarities and differences in The Dam Giong epics of Bahnar ethnic in Central Highlands-Vietnam and Reamker epic (Cambodia), Ramakien epic (Thailand) and PhraLakPhra Lam epic (Laos). Although there are some similarities in content and themes, these epics differ in capacity, structure, character system and some other artistic elements. Reamker, Ramakien, PhraLakPhra Lam are short independent epics, deriving from Ramayana epic (Indian). Meanwhile, The Dam Giong epics, about a hero named Giong, have a large capacity of hundreds of epics. These epics derive from myths, legends and creeds of Bahnar ethnic in the Central Highlands-Vietnam, especially, they are “living” epics. Nowadays, the epics of Dam Giong are still being circulated and they are developing in the lives of Bahnar ethnic. Currently, in Central Highlands-Vietnam, the epics of Dam Giong are still composed and the number of these epics is constantly increasing.*

**Keywords**

*epic, single epic, Reamker, Ramakien, PhraLakPhra Lam, Dam Giong, “living” epic, hero, Bahnar*

**1. Introduction**

Vietnam is one of the countries in the region Asean. On the way of formation, existence and development, Vietnam-as a member of Asean, there have been receptions, exchanges and acculturation in literature with the countries in the region. Expressed in the similarity between folk-literary works bearing the characteristic cultural values of Asean. That affirms the common ground in the development process of nations. So, the similarity between Vietnamese folk literature and Laos,

Thailand, Cambodia folk literature ..., shows the similarity between Vietnamese culture and culture of the whole region. *Reamker*, *Ramakien* and *PhraLakPhra Lam* are representative epics of Cambodia, Thailand and Laos. These epics and *The Dam Giong epics* of the Bahnar ethnic in the Central Highlands of Vietnam have some similarities. The reasons for these similarities are the fact that Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam with the same geographic, cultural characteristic and histories. However, *The Dam Giong epics* has some differences from *Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam*. *The Dam Giong epics* does not affect by Indian culture, but it has very distinct character of Bahnar ethnic, the owner of the Central Highlands-Vietnam.

With the analytical method and the method of comparison, this article will discover and discover the factors that affect the artistic characteristics of these epics and acculturation of these epics in Southeast Asia culture. The article will deal with the origin, themes, basic content, demonstration methods, characters and motif system of the epics.

## 2. Content

### 2.1 Similarities

To clarify the similarities, the article will study the themes, the expression forms, the characters, the motifs of the epics.

#### 2.1.1 Main Themes

Main themes of *Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLak*, *Phra Lam* and *The Dam Giong epics* is often about the fights against evil to protect the beautiful girls and the fights for revenge. The structure of epic is usually in the form: *the hero-the beautiful girl-the devil*. Although *Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam* originated in India, they have been shown in various ways to fit the Southeast Asian cultural environment and they have the particular art of each nation.

#### 2.1.2 Expression Forms

*Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam* and *The Dam Giong epics* is all performed as folk dance, royal dance, shadow puppetry, drawing, sculpture, singing and worship. These expressions fit with Southeast Asian artistic types. *Ramakien* is shown with *khon* (Note 2). *Reamker* is shown with *lkhonkhol* (Sachchidan & Sahai, 1981), and relief of the Cambodian; *Phra Lam Phra Lam* is performed on stage of Lao royal dance and *lam* folk songs; The epic of *Dam Giong epics* are performed by *h'mon* art of Bahnar ethnic.

#### 2.1.3 Characters

Main characters in *Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam* and *The Dam Giong epics* are Gods or descendants of the Gods. Audiences think that characters in epics as the guardian Gods or their ancestors. The central characters are great talented heroes who have the power defeating devils, beast and villains to protect life and honor of the community. The most quality of the heroes is their morality. He represents for the good, the one who has absolute loyalty to the community and his love.

#### 2.1.4 Motifs

*Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam* and *The Dam Giong epics* have many similar motifs such as couple-character motif, motifs of miraculous weapon, making friends and getting married motif, divine birth and immortality motif and masquerading motif.

- Couple-character motif

In epics, there are usually two characters appearing together including who is a main character who plays central role of the epic and an extra character often adds more details make the main character's perfect. Couple-character is usually two brothers; Such as Preah Ream and Praeh Leak in *Reamker*, Ram and Lak in *Ramakien*, PhraLak and Phra Lam in *PhraLakPhra Lam*, Giong and Gio in *The Dam Giong epics*. The couple-character can be compared to the ones in the Kavkaz epics and the *PopolVuh* epic of Maya ethnic, a typical feature of the ancient Latin American culture; They always complement to each other into the best.

- Motifs of miraculous weapon

Motifs of miraculous weapon often appear in epics. These are perilous compelling authority weapons which helped the hero to overcome all the fiendish enemies. For example, the miraculous rope in *Phra Lam Phra Lam* and *The Dam Giong epics* can tether enemies from afar. Boat in *PhraLakPhra Lam* can surf on the sea and fly on the sky. Shield in *The Dam Giong epics* can carry people flying on the sky. The magic arrow in *PhraLakPhra Lam* epic can burn everything, destroy rocks, etc.

- Making friends and getting married motif

In epics, there are some rites of relationship for making friend and getting married. Sometimes, it is making friends as brother or dad, sometimes is marriage. Among that, marriage contracts occur most often. In *The Dam Giong epics*, the hero Dam Giong often goes to the neighboring villages to make friends and find beautiful girls as wives. This motif reflects the contract customs of Southeast Asian nations.

- Divine birth and immortality motif

Heroes in epics often have divine birth. They can be Gods under human cover or descendants of God or being born very miraculously. Nang Soudtho (in *PhraLakPhra Lam*) has nine sons, monthly birth, and these sons are immortal; Arrows, poison or wildlife can not kill them. Giong and Gio (*The Dam Giong epics*) are spiritually taking the elixir so they are very healthy and immortal.

- Masquerading motif

Characters in epics often change in the ugly form or shape of an animal to test loyalty to a loved one or dress up to lurk for the enemies. In *Phra Lam Phra Lam*, Phra Lam turns into a monkey while looking for her Sida. In *The Dam Giong epics*, hero Dam Giong transforms into Koi Kong (an ugly and dirty person) to test the beautiful girls. In *Reamker*, King Monkey Hanuman can change into any shape; Preah En transforms himself into a water buffalo and leads NeangSeda to shelter while distressed, ... In addition, epics also have other motifs such as holy water in the wedding ceremony, eternal water.

Some characteristics of these epics are the same for the following reasons:

Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam are relatively in geography, in that Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia sharing same border and the Annamite Mountains. Therefore, they have same or near mountainous cultural area, plateau culture, culture of mountain field. In there, a tribe can live scattered in many countries, one can intertwine with other ethnic groups and share same culture of Southeast Asia.

Many ethnic groups in Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam share same language as Malaya Polynesian, Khmer, Lao-Thai, H'mong-Myanmar, Tibetan-Burmese, ...

Among the ethnic groups, the people have been engaged in marriage, family, economic, culture, military and political exchanges for hundreds of years in historically.

Similarities of genre of epic. The similarity of the characteristics of these epics is due to the process of self-development in the culture, literature and history of the peoples. Similar genres are historically similar.

## 2.2 Differences

There are differences in the origin, the historical context, the expression forms and methods, the language, the capacity and structure, the characters and the contents between *Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam* and *The Dam Giong epics*.

### 2.2.1 About the Origin

*Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam* are all derived from *Ramayana* epic (India) and influenced by *Jataka* (India). Most of these epics are about the precursor of the Buddha, like *Jatakar*. Preah Ream in *Reamker* after winning the devil has become a Buddha. Pra Ram in *Ramakien*, the reincarnation of Vishnu (one of the principal deities of Hinduism), is also the reincarnation of the Buddha.

Contrary to the epics, *The Dam Giong epics* is deeply influenced by Indian and Chinese culture. The epics evolved from fairy tale, legend and belief of the Bahnar ethnic. It can be said that the epics is the only and unique creation of the Bahnar ethnic not influenced by epics of other cultures. Due to genre characteristics, the epics have the same characteristics of the world epics as Kavkaz epics, the Mongol epic, the Mayan epic.

### 2.2.2 About Historical Context

Historical context of *Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam* associated with feudal dynasty in Cambodia, Thailand, Laos. *Reamker* is a product of the Angkor era. *Ramakien* was associated with the Thai feudal dynasties from the kingdom of Sukhothai, the kingdom of Ayutthaya to the reigns of Rama I (1726-1809), Rama II (1766-1824).

The social context in *The Dam Giong epics* is primitive social of the Bahnar ethnic in the Central Highlands-Vietnam. The social has no social class, no private ownership. In there, tribes in the Central Highlands are in the trend of forming tribal alliances (Dang Nghiem Van, Cam Trong, Tran Manh Cat, Le Duy Dai, & Ngo Vinh Binh, 1981).

The differences in the historical context make a significant difference in the content, the way of building characters, the artistic elements of *The Dam Giong epics* compared to *Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam*.

### 2.2.3 About Form and Expression Method

*Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam* are shown in various forms and modes such as poetry, dance, court stage, painting, sculpture, shadow puppetry. These epics have oral or rewritten scripts over time. When the epics were performed on stage, there are many actors, orchestra accompaniment and director. *Ramakien* is shown with *khon* in court and folk type. King Rama I directly supervised and participated in writing a part of *Ramakien*; Later, King Rama II continued to adjust *Ramakien*. In the *khon*, *Ramakien* is performed mainly by choreography, the actor does not have a dialogue, only the narration from the stage. *Reamker* is also performed mainly by folk dances by Robam Sovann Maccha with the old orchestra “*pinpeat*”. The *Phra Lam Phra Lam* is also theatrical form of Royal Lao Ballet.

*The Dam Giong epics* is performed by *h'mon*, the epic performance art of the Bahnar ethnic. They are completely folk-style. There is no actor and orchestra accompaniment. There is only one person who narrates the story, sings folk songs and performs rituals. *The Dam Giong epics* is often narrated every night or during the festival of the village. In particular, at present, *The Dam Giong epics* is passed on by oral, performed and composed new. These epics not only exists in the community, but also have to add or change the content, character, art details to increase capacity, the number of epic. They can capture new elements of modern social life but still admit the characteristics of the epic. Therefore, they are called “living epic”. Currently, *The Dam Giong epics* is still being performed in villages in Kon Tum province-Vietnam.

### 2.2.4 About Language

The language of *Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam* is refined. The language is the words of poetry that reached the pinnacle of verbal art. These epics have been written and supplemented over centuries. Many people (monk, king, folk artist) participate in the correction of the narrative, the dialogue of the characters. In addition, they are selected events, details to be staged to suit the court conditions or the folk scene.

Language in *The Dam Giong epics* is common language; It is close to the everyday language of populars and is not polished. The folk artists are extemporized very freely on performance. Depending on the mood, health and inspiration of the folk artist, the language of the epic is good or bad. In my experience, when you give artisans good food and good performance space (many listeners, the audience's concentration, in the festive atmosphere). Then, the narrator of the artist is very good (smooth lyrics, melodious music, fluency, many rhymes, idioms, proverbs).

### 2.2.5 About Capacity and Structure

Capacity of *Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam* is usually short, about 50,000 to 70,000 verses (Note 3). The structure of these epics is a single epic which has a distinct structure. All the details of the story are told in an epic. In just one epic, all the qualities of the hero are fully manifested in

character, action and virtue.

Different from the epics, *The Dam Giong epics* is serial epic, composed of hundreds of single epics that linked together to tell a hero named Dam Giong. Each single epic has its own structure that describes one or two actions of the hero. It links with other epics through the content, the theme, the way of character building. The quality of hero Dam Giong is only fully expressed through many epics. The capacity of each single epic is calculated by the time of performance, about 8 to 10 hours.

*The Dam Giong epics* have two structure types: the concentric structure (all events, characters pointing to hero Dam Giong) and the narrative frame structure (small stories are connected to each other through motifs, reappear characters). Structural style of *The Dam Giong epics* is considered to be an open structure, this epic end will start another epic. So, many epics are told in succession. The structure of *The Dam Giong epics* resembles *cyclical epics* type of the world's folklore (Note 4).

#### 2.2.6 About the Characters

Main characters in *Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam* are virtuous and talented as the Gods. They usually are the forerunner of the Buddha. Heroes' victories are defeating evil monsters and enemies to win back the beautiful girls, the honor of themselves or the community. Preah Ream (in *Reamker*) defeats the demon King to become Buddha. PhraLak and Phra Lam (in *PhraLakPhra Lam*) fight to destroy Demon Hapkhanasouane. They are heroes on the battlefield. The main character in *The Dam Giong epics* is both heroic in battle and heroic in everyday life (cultural hero). Hero Dam Giong has many spells and powers, he can defeat devils, monsters and powerful enemies. After the hero after defeating the enemy, he returns to the village and together with the villagers cultivate, hunt, and making a happy life.

In particular, *The Dam Giong epics* has many re-appearing characters. These are characters with the same name, origin, personality appear many times, in many epics. These characters link the epics together to form a *cycles epic*.

#### 2.2.7 About Content

The main content of *Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam* epics is the fight between good and evil, the conflict of faith, loyalty in love. In there, the conflict between good and evil is emphasized in the moral conception of Buddhist culture. The battle in these epics are the protection of love, truth and morals. The philosophy in these epics is Buddhist philosophy.

The main content of *The Dam Giong epics* is fighting to protect truth, honor and to build a happy life for the villagers. In their lack of food, ethnic groups in the Central Highlands claim that hunger is also an enemy. Thus, *The Dam Giong epics* not only praised hero Dam Giong's courage and bravery but also praised his hard work and skills in planting, hunting, building the village, ... Philosophy in *The Dam Giong epics* is the simple philosophy of the primordial time, such as animism, totem, ... However, today, philosophy of *The Dam Giong epics* is influenced by the Christian philosophy. Some motifs in *The Dam Giong epics* show this character very clearly; for example, a Christian engagement motif.

The difference between *Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *Phra Lam Phra Lam* and *The Dam Giong epics* the difference are due to the following reasons:

-*Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam* are works adapted from *Ramayana* (India). These epics deeply influenced by *Ramayana* content, structure of art, characters, philosophy (Hindu religions and Theravada Buddhism). In addition, the history of the three countries of Cambodia, Thailand, Laos have many close relationships and they are influenced by the feudal of Southeast Asia.

-*The Dam Giongepics* is a pure product of Bahnar ethnic. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the Bahnar people maintained the routine of the primitive society. They operate in narrow spaces and have little contact with the outside world. So, *The Dam Giong epics* is different from *Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam*.

### 3. Conclusion

There are a lot of similarities and differences in *The Dam Giong epics* and *Reamker*, *Ramakien* and *PhraLakPhra Lam*. They have a basic similarity about the theme, the expression forms, the characters and some motifs. The proximity of geography, history and ethnic exchanges has created similarities. However, in the epics there are differences in the origin, the historical context, the expression forms and methods, the language, the capacity and structure, the characters and the contents.

In particular, the most different is the demonstration mode. *Reamker*, *Ramakien*, *PhraLakPhra Lam* can be called the imperial palace, as they are performed and developed in court. *The Dam Giongepics* is the product of popular people; It is composed, performed and enjoyed by popular people. It is a "living epic" genre. In particular, the original performance of *The Dam Giong epics* still exist in today's life. It captures a lot of new and modern content but still captures the epic genre. The volume and number of epics are constantly increasing. Understanding the similarities and differences between the Vietnamese, Lao, Thai, Cambodian epics, etc., will show the identity of each nation and affirm the common ground of culture and literature Asean study. This also shows the cultural similarities among countries in the Asean area. It will be very necessary for those who want to learn about culture and literature of Asian countries in general, Asean area in particular.

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### Notes

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Note 2. Khon is a kind of traditional Thai dance. It is usually performed in court. Khon's script is mainly from Ramakien (Hung, 2018).

Note 3. *Ramakien* has about 70,000 verses.

Note 4. Twelve ancient Greek epics revolve around two great epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. These epics tell of the return of heroes during the Trojan War.