CHAPTER 2

INHABITANTS OF THE WORLD: TOPPLED MYTHS

Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Plans, the first beginning in 1961 during Sarit Thanarat's premiership, began an official focus on numbers as indicators of national progress that has shaped the country's policies and attention since. The social aspect of its name is all but forgotten. The First Plan (1961-66), as cited in Muscat's study of Thai developmental policies, envisions the new city thus:

> Over the next three years the construction of irrigation works, the building and improvement of roads and other means of transport, the provision of inexpensive electric power, and other physical "infrastructure" projects will claim the bulk of Government expenditure. Agricultural extension and other projects to extend technical knowledge will likewise take a high share of Government investment. The use of resources for these purposes...will provide means and opportunities for increased production and enable the private sector to expand on its own initiative. Government will also undertake to provide for the expansion of social services. (95)

This Plan seems a failure in terms of meeting the goals described above; Muscat concludes that "the policy and planning process remained entirely an internal bureaucratic exercise" (96). As recent as 1999, almost half a century later, there are villages still denied the basics of public services.[11] In other words, the government has learned symbolic development and has not taken seriously people's actual situations. Though other aspects of social life are mentioned in the Plans, they are rarely discussed and evaluated in studies of national progress. Electricity, public water works, roadways, concrete buildings are considered signs of civilization and development, and the government has chosen to invest in them and to spread them

[11] Kwanjai Eamjai, "Small People vs. the State," Feature Magazine Oct. 1999: 67.

universally as a one-size-fits-all miracle cure for poverty. Khamsing Srinawk describes the waste of such culturally illiterate development in Sangkomsatparitat: "the effectiveness of development depends on the crucial point: how accurately the developer understands the local life, living conditions, problems, mental condition, as well as the needs of villagers" (35). He points out that

> some houses had a hygienic toilet as an additional household decoration. If we walk farther we will see a small building with a sign indicating that it is the town building. This is a development village. True, although orderliness, cleanliness, and beauty are symbols of goodness and civilization, they are significantly connected to the foundation and background of individuals. We, who have occupied our attention somewhat with the growth of our nation city, will have seen the image of a bulldozer leveling rock and sand in a cloud of dust along the main village walkway barely missing the wobbly wooden house with a thatch roof, and the caption: village development in process. Though awed by the good intention of the government, one cannot help thinking how meaningful a nice orderly pathway is to the inhabitants of that house [...] and, as time passes, whether those villagers will be able to maintain these mentioned facilities in good condition and make use of them worth the investment. (35)

Philip Hirsch observes that one problem with development is "treatment of communities as undifferentiated entities" (4). Like Khamsing, he insists that "the subjective experience of villagers and other actors is of inherent importance and is not merely an indicator of underlying processes" (5). Modern face-lifting obscures the longer and more complicated process of ideological negotiation, the development of cultural understanding that allows one to navigate effectively within society. Signs of civilization fulfill hollow goals of progress. And analyses which use them as markers of advancement inevitably overlook the human and culture factor as part of the meaning of growth. Read in Khamsing's proposed view, the very symbols of a society's order and development indicate its confusion and destruction.

Like the 1932 revolution and adoption of the constitutional monarchy, industrial capitalist structures and methods are essentially wholesale importation of a

foreign system without effective means of monitoring or a local foundation to support or supervise its implementation locally. This new set of standards for living and the ideology accompanying it have made its way into Thai consciousness, eventually redefining people into what Jerry Harris observes in 1997 as "an economic being with no social existence." Social existence may have escaped the critical and engaged attention of economic instruments but it has been well monitored by literary ones.

As is mentioned earlier, Thai world view is a mix of many traditions some of which date back to before the introduction of Buddhism. This section examines several images in Nikom Rayawa's novels and short stories in their description of the world and the social existence of its inhabitants. The mingling of new and existing symbols in literature is to be expected but the negotiation of old symbols with new meanings is more subtle and offer another perspective into the experience of re-understanding one's world. One of Nikom's predecessors in social realist writing, Khamsing Srinawk, generally explores the former theme in his powerful compilation of short stories Fa Bo Kun (1969). Often, the mix of images creates an almost surreal effect as in "Human Breeder" and "Human Pig." In most, if not all, of the stories, the living condition described is deplorable, but Khamsing dwells on immaterial aspects or effects of that situation rather than on the physical plight. Being hungry, he seems to say, is not as devastating as being unable to hope or to do anything to alleviate it. Within a few years, generations of local wisdom became irrelevant or useless, and human dignity, something everyone took for granted, became a right that increasing numbers of farmers and villagers could not afford (76-77).

But the human condition is only one aspect of the world. In the ideal modern society imagined by the government, a new landscape is also envisioned (Muscat 95). Nikom Rayawa's short stories and novels seem to simulate this world and reveal the

goings on of a new survival process. This first section of the paper looks at the inhabitants of Nikom's world and at how humans' perceptions within it of themselves and of the world undergo agonizing questioning. In a literary and social moment as well as an economic and political one, Nikom probes how some myths about society still hold and how they do not, and shows through several symbols a renegotiation of the meaning of new conditions of living and new environments which include the nation state within economic and political conceptualizations but also beyond. Nikom's is a world, unlike those created by many contemporary writers,[12] populated prominently by plants, animals and non-living things such as dirt, rock, and rain as well as by people. And while all these are "inhabitants" of the world, Nikom shows how they are and are not so in the same way.

The Elephant

What is an elephant doing in an 80s Thai novel? And as a central character no less. Cranes, tractors and trucks have replaced beasts of burden in the logging industry and growing cities leave no room, physical or imaginative, for these animals that have once symbolized the country.[13] Modern lifestyle seems to have erased the elephant out of history and ideology. Nikom's novel, High Banks, Heavy Logs,

[12] During the period between 1959 and 1980, which was when most of Nikom's short stories were published, other social realist writers distinctly focused more on people by comparison. Ravee Domprachand, for example, produced Fighting for the Nation, Independence and Sovereignty, Red Sun and Turn Over the Sky and Earth. Visa Kantab wrote Dansaodoy and Water Floods Sky, Fish Feeds Star. Wat Wanlayangkul published White Dove and Distilled from Blood. Chiranand Pitpreecha wrote We Are Not Flowers (Prairot 204). Although both Visa and Chiranand use an animal (the dove) and plants (flowers) in their work, they are apparently more symbols of abstract qualities rather than the animal or the plant for its own sake. While Nikom does not suppress abstraction in his symbolism, he does emphasize the objects as they are and their natural identity just as powerfully.

[13] The elephant was used on the first Thai national flag during King Mongkut's reign. A white elephant standing on a red rectangular background officially represented the country until King Vajiravudh's time when he replaced it with the current tricolor flag (Thongchai 171).

suggests otherwise. The economic boom and policies as well as government propaganda for industrialization to become Southeast Asia's next NIC (Newly Industrialized Country) would have it that elephants are an out-dated and inefficient machine. Commercial culture may see them as an awkward and burdensome but indispensable exhibit at the zoo or a convenient mascot for sports competitions, but Plai-sut, the tusker in the novel, grows up presumably before all these "virtual" elephants usurped live ones in the public imagination.

Issues of Identification

In earliest childhood, Plai-sut is described as his owner's son Kham-ngai's "playing friend. The two would often chase each other on the beach in the middle of the river and race each other up and down the bank" (29). This is a reciprocal relationship. Kham-ngai spends long periods talking to Plai-sut and Plai-sut, when Kham-ngai tries to hide from his father behind his friend after a mischief, offers his trunk as additional cover.

It is as if Nikom opens a door and takes us inside to see the elephant at home. Classical portrayal of the elephant makes it an animal of wisdom—as one of the longest living animals in the wilderness, it was lord of the jungle. Buddhist jataka tales have the Buddha reincarnated as an elephant in one of his lives. The elephant was also a symbol of dignity and blessing as a royal transport and emblem, a special figure in war or in civil and religious ceremonies (Jakkapan 126). One of the most familiar images associated with Thai freedom is that of King Naresuan on his elephant closing upon the opponent's in the decisive duel of the Battle of Nong Sarai in 1593.

High Banks, Heavy Logs shows the common elephant, not a royal one. Plai-sut embodies a vertical move down the social scale as well as a horizontal one from public space into private. This latter shift takes us not only into the personal, but also deeper, into the mental. Identification between man and beast in the relationship between Kham-ngai and Plai-sut move from the physical into the emotional.

When we first see the elephant, it is a mere bulk without a name, a personality, or emotional depth: "The elephant lifted its front leg for the mahout to step up and sit on its neck" (1). It is even stereotypically portrayed while performing a submissive and servile gesture to man, allowing, even assisting, man to dominate. Syntactically, however, it is the subject of the sentence and active. This ambiguous agency of the animal establishes the complex role and position of the elephant throughout the story.

Of course, the elephant is Plai-sut and the man is Kham-ngai, but we are left to learn gradually of their relationship as they interact with each other rather than immediately through simple statement. As man and elephant begin to work, dragging logs to the water's edge, more complex capabilities of the elephant are revealed. We see more of the elephant's body and more of what it can do. The elephant not only swings its trunk and trumpets, it moves logs of extreme weight, leaves mounds of droppings and wet stains behind. We see that this elephant does not only have a big body, ears and a trunk, but also a tail, skin that gives under pressure, muscle that the breast band sinks into when it pulls hard on a heavy log, and two stumps of white tusk buried under the flesh at the base of its trunk.

These descriptions show the animal to be more life-like, and even more human-like, than previously portrayed. Its skin and muscle display the effort in working; this body has its limits. Its two tusk stumps record a story; there is vulnerability and history in its being. As sweat soaks the man on its back, the

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elephant too walks more slowly. The closeness and similarity between the elephant and man is summarized in the comment that the animal is "bruised" (18). Elephant and man are not only alike in many physical functions, but also in feelings, especially that of pain. The first chapter ends with Kham-ngai's line: "Yes, it's very bruised." The closing of the introductory narrative reveals a complete connection between man and beast. Their interaction, both physically and emotionally, is fully acknowledged by the man.

Juxtaposed with this intimate view of the elephant and its relationship with a man is another, arguably as intimate, but drastically different one. This latter takes place in the stuffing factory where a sculptor carves away at animal figurines and other workers toil at reproducing life-like animals from stuffed carcasses. The owner of this factory and the shop where products from the factory are sold is also owner of Plai-sut, several other elephants, and the logs in the forest. This man—boss, godfather, stepfather, tycoon—loves his elephants not as a fellow living being but as capital.

A quick narrative pan inside the factory building reveals "figures of deer, tiger, rabbit, beautifully made. Most were figures of elephants only a hand tall. Some were three feet" (10). Among other carvings, wooden elephant figurines, ever greater in size, clearly outnumber other animals. Bun-haam, the sculptor friend, informs Kham-ngai that the boss has ordered another carved elephant; it is to be larger than a live one. The boss himself is nowhere to be found although his influence pervades the place. This man of property is content with an indirect relationship with his possessions. His agency or control does not require his presence. Mediated or long-distance association, for him, is natural and even necessary. He has appreciation for the elephant as an artifact, not as an actual individual animal. In his own words, large

wooden elephants "make one feel the strength, power ...the larger the log, the better for making an elephant" (119-20). Within the first chapter-like section of the book, the symbolic animal is moved from a familiar stereotypical relationship with man as it works with its mahout to another, also familiar, relationship with man as it is "multiplied" in a "factory." Layered within this transition, however, is a rarely seen and unstereotypical relationship between an identified man and an identified elephant, providing a third picture of interacting lives. The novel's witnessing of this transition, therefore, enables another possible identification between man and beast. It is an identification of ourselves as we recognize the commodification of life in a new conceptual system where an elephant's value in the transformation from living trees into lifeless but life-like animal figures, and in the figurines' expansion in size and quantity becomes an indication of our own.

Transformation

Plai-sut's transformation from friend to commodified object is embodied in the ivory robbery episode:

> Kham-ngai thought of the image of Plai-sut when it still had striking white tusks. They were fat and long, curving. But now the beauty, grace, and pride had been drained away. Its pair of tusks was cut by thieves a few months before until its trunk base was bare.
>
> "The thieves took everything. Left nothing at all," people in the crowd that morning said to each other. The elephant, then, was bruised to nothing. It was still groggy with the injected anesthesia. Its trunk hung without strength. The thieves cut too close to the base. The blade sliced into its flesh, creating an ugly wound. Blood dried in a long crusty stream. (15)

This loss, whether viewed as a castration, rape, fall, or other, has significant psychological implications. Before his tusks are cut, Plai-sut has "beauty, grace, and pride." He can play tug-of-war (32) and drink home-made liqueur with the village folk during temple fairs and festivals. This good humor and playfulness gives way to

a long period of cheerless stupor and apathy after the poaching: "It was neither interested in grass nor water. It stood sadly all day, swinging its tail once in a long while. Its trunk hung still. Its ears hardly moving. Its eyes were sleepy and clouded" (16). Even after Kham-ngai nurses the wound until it is reasonably healed, the elephant's old nature does not immediately return. Physical health, although usually corresponding to, is not necessarily an accurate mirror of a mental one.

After the change in Plai-sut, a renaming is required to describe the new identity that emerges: "Grace and magnificence disappeared from the elephant. Actually its name is "Sudsa-nga." People familiarly called him "Plai-sut." But when the tusks were cut, people who see him would say "Play-cut" rather than calling it by the former name" (16). It is only after one particular good day of work and an evening bath in the river that Plai-sut begins to play again. He "sucked in water, lifted [his] trunk around to the side, aiming its end above the neck, and blasted loud and hard" the spray of water into Kham-ngai perched on his neck (24). Creativity and spontaneity returns, and when the elephant moves with "fluttering ears under the tamarind shade" as they reach home, Machan exclaims, "This is Plai-sut?...it's not lonesome anymore," assuring Kham-ngai that the elephant is "almost" back to its old self. Though the narrative uses "Plai-sut" in referring to the elephant, Bun-haam's natural "Plai-cut" in referring to the elephant when it returns to work (14) indicates that the new identity as commodified victim is irreversible and the new language with which to call it continues to be popular.

Kham-ngai, however, consistently sees Plai-sut as friend, and perhaps more than friend: "Every time he is on the elephant's neck he would feel secure, strong, and safe. But after Plai-sut was sold, Kham-ngai was empty and lost" (36). The elephant is so close and familiar to him that he feels incomplete, "empty and lost," without it.

Plai-sut is not merely Kham-ngai's friend but his alter-ego, his other self that makes him complete and whole. This total identification between man and beast is contrasted with the view of the elephant as an exotic artifact, the commodified creature whose value lies in its ability to work as a tireless, faceless and voiceless machine or in its symbolic quality as indicator of wealth or power. At once a slave and a prized possession, a victim and a hero, the elephant in Nikom Rayawa's novel becomes tenuous as a symbol of one or the other ideology, tradition, or myth.

The elephant trade between the boss and Kham-ngai is a moment of double defamiliarization that reveals estrangement from either of these perspectives. It is a moment of encounter yet one of distance. It is a connection without contact, a transaction because of difference. Each man possesses something the other does not have and wants, and as the agreement for exchange is being made, each seems to wonder what value the other sees in what he has chosen:

> "Whenever you're done, bring it [the chingchun wood elephant] to sell. I'll give you twice the price of a live one."
> "Trade it for Plai-sut?" Kham-ngai asked.
> They looked into each other's eyes.
> "Yes," the boss said clearly, "and I'll add extra money into the bargain." (43)

This cultural moment symbolizes the division of ideology. Nikom's industrial capitalist model sees the elephant as either capital or commodity, a life shorn of its abstract and emotional qualities in order to function neatly in a materialist production process. It is a defamiliarization of the elephant in literature where traditionally the animal is rarely seen as a machine whose value depends on its productivity. His sentimental view of the elephant is a nostalgic record of the animal as an individual who is valued because of shared history and personal identification, a sentiment he seems to feel is quickly being overpowered by an economic ideology.

Cultural transformation as it occurs in modern Thailand, Nikom seems to say, results in an estrangement of ourselves from ourselves. Social change without contemplation creates confusion despite external order where we begin to misuse life by working it like a machine, and to misuse technology by using it to destroy instead of to facilitate and improve.

Historical Brotherhood, Industrial Root

The split between two ideologies is a simplified way of portraying negotiations between several understandings of the world in modern Thailand. And Nikom's third layer of defamiliarization is a hint that there are always more options- unpopular, unnoticed, undiscussed, unaccounted for. His suggestive use of symbols seem to propose that uncanonized or unpublicized views neither necessarily indicate their non-prevalence nor their insignificance. As will be discussed in a later section, this apparent non-presence may sometimes indicate the opposite: that of omnipresence. In the history of Thai literature there has been several man-beast portrayals of brotherhood. In the well-known Thai folk epic in verse Khun Chang Khun Phaen, the hero, Khun Phaen, has a trustworthy steed who functions beyond the usual role of faithful mount. Simok, the horse, is like a brother to Khun Phaen and the latter readily calls him "Pih" which means older brother or sister in Thai. The animal, talked to and respected as an individual, is also seen in Sunthornpu's famous novel poem Pra Apaimanee. One of the episodes in this lengthy tome is of Sudsakorn, the hero's son, meeting the dragon horse Nil-Mangorn who becomes his protector and transportation. Sudsakorn, like Khun Phaen, calls Nil-Mangorn with the respectful prefix and pronoun indicating the animal's seniority in relation to him.

Again and again, in Thai literature, humans and animals are portrayed side by side as equals and friends. There are Holvichai-Khavi, Kwon and chao Tui in Plae Kao [Old Wound], and many others. These are works of fiction approached as literature and not usually treated or categorized as only fantasy or children's books which often portray humans and animals as communicating and interacting on the same plane. In all these cases the beast is always presented as understandable. When Plai-sut flies into a rage or misbehaves, it is through no unfathomable instinct. A human being would perhaps do the same thing in the situation: "If it were me, I wouldn't sit either," Kham-ngai says of the elephant show that requires Plai-sut to sit on a chair (32). Animals are not a symbol of the irrational, animalistic, barbaric, instinctive or primitive as is often the case in Western literature. King Kong does not have the same status as Nil-Mangorn, nor does Grendel in Beowulf. Even Tarzan or Mowgli are somehow portrayed as being animal-like in order to live in the forest. They are less human in a jungle and to move into man's world they must change. Man's world and animals' world are distinguished and separated. In Kipling's The Jungle Book, for example, when Mowgli chooses to go "home," he "returns" to the city. Home for humans is the city and not the jungle. This does not happen all that frequently in Thai literature. A person is no less a person and an elephant is no less an elephant in order to be able to live in the same world. One would like to believe that this continues to be the case, but Nikom's novel suggests otherwise. The literary landscape is changing in accord with the environmental one.

In 1970 it is estimated that there were 2,600-4,450 elephants living in the wild in Thailand. In the year 2000, three decades later, the number is 1,975 (Jakkapan 126). What do these numbers mean? How much of reality do they describe? Perhaps very little. Wildlife surveys in Thailand are not well funded and not as extensive and

rigorous as they should be. The wide margin of error in the 1970 count leaves us relying upon only the general downward trend in number with respect to the 2000 count rather than trying to gain any other insight about the population of elephants in modernizing Thailand. High Banks, Heavy Logs tells us that the numerical change is not eloquent enough to explain the domestication of elephants that has taken place over the years, how their function and value have evolved in response to the times, and the implications of these changes on the animal as symbol.

The elephants portrayed in High Banks as being used by rather than helping man reinforce an economic image as well as a scientific paradigm. The peer relationship between man and beast seems to have evolved into a hierarchy with man above and beast below. This hierarchy, based on the Darwinian theory of evolution and imbued with other Western perspectives, gives a "scientific" view of the world that aligns old with primitive, and new with advanced. Time becomes a rodstick that measures progress and development. Yet, it turns out that when human beings and other living things, although existing at the same time in the same world, are put on this hierarchy, humans are interpreted as more "advanced" and virtually everything else less so.

Nikom's placement of the elephant in a modern society which is developing a bias for humans, therefore, creates a contrasting and contesting of views. Another short novel, Plai Maliwan, also portrays how an elephant as an individual disrupts the modern world which accommodates more easily a faceless, obedient, and predictable animal. In other words, the modern culture seems not to accommodate the animal as an animal at all, but as another cog in the wheel of mass production. Reading the elephant as a symbol in High Banks, Heavy Logs questions this modern model and the traditional one. Plai-sut's multidimensional role in the story asks whether the

break between modern and traditional views is all that absolute, and whether the death of the human-animal brotherhood in modern literature is all that definite.

The Monitor

Southeast Asian monitor lizards of the species that appear in Thailand have many common names. Variously referred to as *takuad*, *lan*, *hia*, *tua ngoen tua tong*,[14] ranging from the tamest generic noun to the most vulgar and most ridiculous euphemism, the animal as a symbol in Nikom Rayawa's The Lizard and the Rotten Branch embodies a dizzying blend of abstract qualities attached to an entity that have very little, if anything, to do with the object itself.

The entrance of the monitor, the "hero" of the novel, opens the discussion about myth and reality in this novel:

> A monitor, silent and still in the midst of a bush of green grass and dry brown leaves. Only the tongue flicking out was moving. Leaves completely hid its body. The flicking tongue glinted and flashed. It flipped and winked like light from the tip of a pin blinking in the middle of a gigantic green and brown patterned cloth spread out and covering the entire area. (8)

The monitor is found out and described as a distinct identity through mere intermittent appearances of a tongue: "leaves completely hid its body." Ideas are formed about the animal even before we see much of it. Nestled in and camouflaged by nature, it nevertheless falls prey to the imagination and actions of man. A moment after this, we see Somkid, one of the main characters, picking up a thick stick and beginning to give chase with the intention of killing the monitor. Strictly speaking, the monitor lizard is just another kind of animal, occasionally killed for meat by local villagers.

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[14] *Takuad* is the common name in Thai of the monitor lizard. *Lan* is the same but in southern dialect. *Hia* is a very strong derogatory term that can be directed at people, animals, things, or situations. *Tua ngoen tua tong* is glossed as "body silver, body gold" which means something along the lines of "the silver and gold thing" or "the silver and gold animal."

Webster's New World College Dictionary defines it as "any of a family (Varanidae) of usually very large, flesh-eating lizards of Africa, South Asia, and Australia." Indeed it is very large for a lizard, easily three feet long, but its significance in the story has to do with superstitious notions that far exceeds physical size. The monitor is believed to bring extreme bad luck and, therefore, inspires incredible euphemisms in order for people to avoid referring to it directly, one of these indirect coinages being *tua ngoen tua tong* or "silver and gold thing."

The opening passages give this ultimate taboo animal in extreme detail. The animal whose common name could not be mentioned in polite society and whose body is loathed when seen, is now revealed in glorious splendor, languishing in lush description. There is no panic and run, but instead patient, careful and attentive observation, even appreciation and wonder at its features and gestures. It is a moment of tense curiosity. Tense because of the awkwardness of paying so much attention to an animal no one wants to see or to look at. Curious because its semi-illicitness makes it almost unknown. To dare face the forbidden and discover for everybody else its mystery becomes a violent act that is nevertheless welcome. The monitor as a symbol, in this sense, possesses political undertones. Nikom is symbolically trespassing a social boundary. He attacks constructed denigrations of the innocent and critiques this displacement of evil. Like his treatment of Plai-sut which ultimately familiarizes the mythical, royal, and now nearly endangered elephant, this portrayal of the taboo monitor demystifies it.

As the first chapter progresses, the initial unpackaging of human self-imposed blindness reveals an insight. Construction of a taboo figure produces a receptacle for evil that directs blame and punishment away from humans, encouraging a no see no hear no talk mentality about social wrongs as associated with people. The questioning

of this construction forces one to see, hear, and discuss issues that concern different inhabitants of the world, humans being one of them. The lizard's calm existence as part of the landscape and world is contrasted with Somkid's unexplainable hatred for the animal and his violent intentions toward it. The story describes Somkid, following the lizard with a vengeful passion and eventually stumbling upon a human corpse whose lower leg is being chewed by the animal. In effect, the monitor leads Somkid to sight. The despised lizard leads a man to see what he otherwise would not see. The horrifying image of a monitor nibbling a dead man's leg is shocking not only for its unblinking graphicness, but also for its moment of discovery. At the plot level, the corpse found turns out to be the son of Teacher Lumpao, an elderly woman respected by the village people. At the symbolic level, the monitor opens a villager's eyes. Demystification of the animal gives sight, and, by the end of the novel, understanding and life.

Somkid's epiphanic moment toward the end of the novel is described in this scene when his hatred for the lizard reaches its most extreme level as he follows it up a tree:

> Somkid's legs shook. He strained his wrist to pull himself up onto the branch and stretched out his hand toward the lizard. The moment he touched its tail, the branch on which he was standing broke.
>
> The hand that seized the tail jerked hard and held fast to it like they would become the same flesh. His body hung, swinging on the tall tree. The wind, blowing until the branches and leaves bent, made loud rustling throughout the forest. The lizard sunk its four toenails into the wood. Its forelegs strained until it was bent. Its back arched in a deep curve. It shook. The long hind legs, large with muscle, braced to hold up the body and the additional weight hanging below. Its thick solid tail stretched taut. The sound of bone joints moving passed from tail to hand. Every muscle in its body strained, rippling.
>
> Somkid was shocked and forgot himself for a moment. His hand instinctively held onto the monitor's tail. His heartbeat's boom overwhelmed the sound of the wind racking all around. His hanging body spun round in the air. Both feet swung about, fumbling for a foothold that has disappeared.

> He was in the middle between the monitor and the rotten branch that was no more. Except for the lizard tail he was holding, there was nothing else for him to choose at all. The decayed rotten base could not hold his weight. He tried several times to reach out the other hand toward the trunk of the tree. His body spun back and forth. His eyes clouded, seeing the trunk dimly like an illusion so far away it will never meet. The ground swayed and rocked as if it would turn over. Everything moved, unstable. As he hung there swinging, there was only that thing he was holding onto so tightly that was real, that was stable and strong and connected with him all the time. He felt one and the same with the lizard like they had been so close for so long. They had the same goal, they walked the same road, they faced the same fate. Every feeling was conveyed, from tail to hand, from hand to tail, and each could perceive the fear and fright of the other. (342)

As the two lives struggle to stay alive, Somkid is faced with a "more real" reality. The world, pared down at this moment to man, animal, and tree, forces several social constructions to fall away into irrelevance. And Somkid begins to see what is real and what is not in a new way. His sudden identification with an animal he has so hated before (perhaps for no apparent reason except common belief that it brings bad luck) levels the world and destroys a hierarchy previously held. Both forms hanging from the tree are animals with no inherent goodness or badness except the desire to live and to go on with life as usual. There is no higher or baser fear. The instinct is the same and can therefore be shared and appreciated.

Identification with the lizard and understanding save Somkid's life, but does not save the animal's. Another man, Prawing, comes up to the tree, lifts a pistol, and shoots: "Somkid panicked. His chest lifted and let out a loud cry "Don't, don't shoot!" about the same time the shot rang out, shaking in echoes to the high hills" (346). From active unreasonable attack to active reasonable protection, Somkid changes drastically within a moment. The monitor's death, like Plai-sut's in <u>High Banks</u>, becomes not only that of a victim, but also that of a scapegoat. Fear and fright are sharable between living beings yet their cause has been displaced to the animal. A

mere armadillo-like creature, thus, becomes loaded with meaning, a focus of evil and of ideological contention.

In Nikom's mini secular cosmology, the figure of the monitor's mythic identity is a center of stories of failures. Somkid's moment of recognition in the air, on the tree is a moment of self-recognition. Suspended in an intense connection in a symbolically essentialized world of man, animal, and plant, he is forced to reevaluate meanings and to reorient his position within them. The monitor lizard's evil spell for him is broken and he realizes the ridiculousness and futility of alienation, of imaginatively separating a part of oneself and one's society from an interconnected whole.

The Farmer[15]

Charles Murray states in his study of rural modernization:

> Most of our strategies for promoting modernization in peasant societies assume that quality of life in traditional villages goes up as villagers increase their income and have greater accessibility to the institutions and services of a modern outside world. A main obstacle to achieving these changes is often taken to be the peasant himself, who, it is felt, is too conservative, too poor, or too confused to adopt the required innovations.
>
> ...while economic modernization can bring with it significant advantages to the individual, it also tends to degrade the quality of community life on equally significant dimensions. The dimensions in question are not quaint, or romantic, or even inherently "traditional" as opposed to "modern." They are norms of social and political interaction that comprise the rules for getting along with neighbors, settling disputes, solving problems, and protecting the family.
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> That modernization acts against these norms is the first half of the argument. The other half is that they are worth protecting. (1)

[15] This section will explore Thai farmers in many other identities as well, such as peasants, villagers, Thais living in provinces other than Bangkok, or people living in rural areas. In the Thai language there is also the term "chao baan" which refers to common people or the general public. Since these common people are also often farmers, they are included in my highly generalized usage of the term "farmer" in English.

Murray's comment points out the farmer as a key player in the modernization myth. A figure used during nationalism phases, the Thai farmer, like the elephant, is woven into imagination as part of the country's identity.[16] They were the noble peasants, the backbone of the country, the people of the land, close to nature and therefore appreciative of it. In the latter half of the 20th century, noble peasants are increasingly challenged by another narrative of desire and identity. Romantic farmers are increasingly portrayed as victims of a capitalist economy, exploited by a more materialistic culture.

The 1950s and 60s boom in large scale agriculture is a heightened situation of mass production in agriculture with the 1910s as its historical pretext. In the 1910s the majority of rice farmers were in debt as the rice frontier expanded, commercial farming grew, and land-ownership changed hands (Pasuk and Baker 32). A group of people acted as middlemen in connecting farmers to their market and became richer by lending money to farmers for crop expansion and other utilities. When return for crops did not cover their loan paybacks, farmers' debts grew and money lenders began to threaten seizing land. Yet 50 or 60 years later in the 1950s and 60s, farmers were still working off impossible debts on their land although an increasing amount of it became the property of money lenders. Farmers, therefore, for half a century and more were living and working under conditions of perpetual threat, insecurity, and hopelessness. This ideology of identity and relationship was ingrained all these years and Nikom writes about its effects and changes in the latter half of the century.

When the rice frontiers came to an end, farmers' options to begin anew on his own terms became limited. The situation is not only a loss of independent

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[16] The catchy refrain of a well-known song publicized by the Public Relations Department of Thailand runs:

Agriculturers, diligent, are the backbones of the nation.
Thailand will be powerful, as a nation of agricultural cultivation.

livelihood, but also of a consciousness. In the short story "Man in the Tree," the protagonist

> was a farmer like his neighbors in this village. He had a small plot of rice farmland. It was his everything, armor against danger, a place to live, a place to eat. Before, he had never been worried about anything. But in later periods, his confidence gradually decreased. Several things happened that he had never imagined. Some years it flooded, in others there was drought. Rice which used to be enough to eat became scarce. At first it was strange. But it happened often. Later he was used to it. When there was sickness in the family, his debts accumulated. He and his wife worked hard. (Man in the Tree 9-10)

This unnamed farmer, faceless and presented as typical of people in the provincial countryside, seems to embody the traditional life and livelihood of rural Thailand. His introduction places him in a convenient category of the fallen peasant, the helpless victim of the modern era of urbanization. This view of the farmer seems based on the same scale the elephant and lizard are placed. It is a Western scale of primatology, an order of existence that has epistemological and political implications (Haraway 10-11). The man in the tree is a man defined by his "lost," past, or inherited occupation and its consequences rather than by his name, individuality, and physical features. Nikom's farmer is probably one in the 1950s and 60s, and one among many million.

Nikom's account looks at a similar group of people and during the same period of time but it does something that economic statistics does not. It calls attention to psychological impact and ideological negotiations as well as a narrative that does not always correspond with the universalist Western one popularized in postwar Thailand. The debt situation of farmers were similar in that although most were in debt (usually to the local merchant) by the 1910s, they continued to work the fields and their debtors continued to prolong the obligatory labor. However, when desperate, the way out in the face of economic hardship for the central plain farmers

was to "[retreat] towards subsistence production, devoting more time to other forms of production (craft, gathering) for local consumption, and sharing both assets and poverty (Pasuk and Baker 32). Others "disappeared in the middle of the night and sought out new land."

Farmers living in constant fear—fear of hunger, fear of facing the moneylender, fear of dispossession—are forced to compromise their emotions and pride. These daily fears also affected views of the future. There is lost dignity where parents feel they cannot provide adequately for their children on a daily basis as well as unable to offer a better prospect for the future, and where children grow up learning that this was the way it was. Inherited fear, guilt, and crushed dignity are part of the Thai modernization package, as Khamsing points out in his Fa Bo Kun and Murray indicates in his study.

Nikom Rayawa offers an additional viewpoint. In the images discussed above, both the noble farmers and the exploited ones, the peasants are idealized and victimized. Nikom's fiction suggests that such neat conceptualizations are either too optimistic or too pessimistic. Farmers, peasants and villagers, in Nikom's fiction, often can be destroyers and exploiters of nature. They can be unappreciative, not seeing or understanding nature (both philosophically and scientifically), or understanding but do not have a choice. The farmer in "Man in the Tree" who hires himself out to cut wood in the forest to sell (10), burns coal wood (10), collects baby birds (13) is one example. It is he who reaches anxiously into the nest to seize three tiny baby birds as their mother and father fly furiously around the tree in a heart-breaking rage. The irony of the episode is in our desire to see the absolutes in the community's characters rather than their mixed and flexible nature. How to reconcile the helpless farmer with the heartless bird snatcher? How to understand his self-pity

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at his plight and his insensitivity of the birds' situation? The web of interconnections that Nikom offers as symbols of Thai modernity comprises of neither incontestable images nor ideal ones. The modern situation he portrays is not a simple replacement of old images with the new, but often also includes reorientations of traditional or familiar ones. Social transition involves questioning and rethinking of existing myths and such ideological negotiations defy easy transcription.

As Murray points out in his introduction, villagers are often singled out as the scapegoats of the failures of modernization. Similar to the elephant and the monitor lizard previously discussed, Thai peasants in Nikom's stories can be seen as victims of social transition in that they are convenient receptacles of its ills. However, the fiction does not treat them as mere passive figures awaiting various symbolic deaths that will mean the end of an era. Jom, Bao and Kai in "Pass Out" who hire themselves out clearing the forest with a tractor (130, 137) year round (132) make their living as active participants in reshaping the cultural and physical landscapes of the modern country which in turn shape them. Their roles as creator and victim of a changing society cannot be distinguished easily. They too take part in the tearing down of forested areas, and "opening up" space for other possibilities to appear: "The sound of the [tractor] motor rumbling, the sound of large trees falling. Bamboo groves uprooted lay about, termite hills smoothed to the ground. Dense jungle slowly leveled and cleared. Shades gone, creek streams covered with tumbled dirt, sunlight hit the ground" (Man in the Tree 130).

Similarly, the bird seller in "Freeing Birds," though perhaps a farmer during crop seasons, discourages any easy alignment of peasants with nature and the countryside as he appears in the city with his daily record of nature's products: "the bird seller stood hawking at customers, behind him were many different kinds of

birdcages, piled high on top of each other. They were quaintly painted in various colors. He sold both birds to free and the cages" (Man in the Tree 59). Like the man in the tree, being a farmer for this current vendor of religious merit is a temporary job but a permanent label. Kham-ngai also has this versatility and fixed identity. Throughout his youth to adulthood, he has been blacksmith, rafter, log-nose tier, taxidermist, sculptor, and mahout, but he is most associated with being a mahout. Contrary to the belief in farmers' conservatism mentioned in Murray's introduction, these portrayals of villagers show how they adapt to changing demands of society, how they adopt new trades and explore new options. These creative, resilient, and enterprising qualities of the Thai farmer reveal a flexible and innovative nature that disputes notions of conservative and closed-minded ignorant peasants.

Si-teum in "War" has been a thief (Man in the Tree 35), has been in jail (40), and is capable of crime and violence—robbing, wounding and perhaps even killing members of his own family (40-41). Instead of dwelling on farmers as scapegoats for blame or as conservative, poor or confused people of nature, Nikom's fiction focuses on the threat of peasants becoming brutal destroyers of nature ("Man in the Tree", "Pass Out", "Freeing Birds," "War"). Nikom's examination of when people who most depend on nature lack the understanding or power to protect it effectively proclaims the death of the noble peasant. The imported Western myth of origins and order through frameworks of binary opposition inevitably fails to describe identities and conditions which are fluctuating and combinative whose meanings lie in a culturally specific context as well as a more general and global one.

Nature itself refuses the Romantic ideal of peace, tranquility, or the sublime in Nikom Rayawa's fiction. The u-mang or hermit crab in "U-mang" is not a beautiful object to look at with wonder and fascination; it is not passive. The

following conversation about the hermit crab between a young nurse in the city and an elderly villager reveals negotiations of ideology and an un-neat nature that refuses idealized status:

> "Don't see how it's pretty," the old woman said, "it's also a thief."
> "What does it steal?"
> "Steals shells."
> "It doesn't steal, grandma," she said. "The shells are dead and the u-mang goes in and lives in the empty shell."
> "Sometimes the shell isn't dead. It kills the animal and eats it, then takes over the shell."
> "Really? It couldn't!" (Man in the Tree 145)

Different views of nature are presented here along with generational, geographical, and occupational issues that come with them. This exchange shows that perceptions of aesthetics and understanding of oneself and aspects of the world are cultural constructions that communication does not automatically set straight. Communication is not perfect and involves much more than speech. It requires a cultural literacy that extends beyond numbers and letters to experience, attitude, and personal inclinations.

Inhabitants in the world that Nikom Rayawa constructs address this process of understanding. The elephant, the monitor, and the farmer mark ways of seeing the world that are contested as new ideologies are introduced. Against a binary paradigm that justifies modernization where primitive is the antithesis of civilized, the country of the city, and the local of the international, Nikom offers a triumvirate that stands for a multiplicity of dynamic relationship. His alternative is not two, and not static. In "U-mang" there are two women, a hermit crab, and the sea. In The Lizard and the Rotten Branch there are a man, a lizard, and a tree. In High Banks, Heavy Logs there are a man, an elephant, and a log. The human, animal, and plant representatives symbolize a host of physical components of the world, all of which describe a

concrete landscape and reflects a mental one, and do not define the world as belonging to only human beings.

The ideological mapping of the existence of farmers, monitors, and elephants that inevitably involve the role of trees, wind, dew and others does not describe the world in a framework of duality. Whether seen as a nostalgic backdrop, a realistic setting, or yet another character in a variously populated world, elements like grass, rivers, rocks, and rain are treated in Nikom's narratives with an attitude perhaps akin to the view that "every animal, human, thing, or presence was to be treated as equal in being, in principle, to everything else" mentioned in Brenda Cooper's book on West African contemporary literature (198). Viewed from this less human centric position, westernization is no longer a self-justified phenomenon and universal formulaic process but one of complex and unique ideological negotiations that involve and affect not only humans, but all living and non-living things.