

Research Article

Exploring Application Modes of Visual Arts: Naga Images of Thailand

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Abstract

Naga, the guardian of Triratna, rules over the waters, and is an important cultural image of Thailand, as well as an auspicious symbol in daily life. In Thailand, there is a large and subtle Naga cultural heritage that includes folk literature and festivals. Whether it is an old tradition or a new cultural creation, many cultural heritages based on the Naga theme merge in contemporary visual art, and spread the images and beliefs of Naga through the Internet, sculptures, murals, emoticons, animations, festivals, amulets, fabrics, and artworks. This article aims to use Naga images for analyzing the application mode of Naga in the visual arts of Thailand. Research results show: (a) the design expressions of Naga arts are diverse in terms of the application mode of Naga in visual arts, including the interaction of technology, art, and the cultural and creative industries; and (b) Naga images have become a part of the cultural industry. According to the ACT model, the transformation of the Naga from a religious image to a work of art, its most important significance lies in its commercialization, which also affects the shape and cultural significance of the Naga. In short, the cultural industry has prompted the cultural connotation of the Naga image to change, making it gradually different from the previous religious connotation.

Keywords: Application mode, Cultural industry, Image, Naga, Visual art

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Introduction

Naga is a form of serpent worship that is widely practiced in Mainland China (Yunnan Province), India, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Burma, and Indonesia. The origin of the Naga is related not only to the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism, but also various folk beliefs. Nagas have a variety of names and images in various regions. For Thais, the image of Naga is a serpent with a crown (Phlainoi, 2009, p. 202); because the Naga is the famous guardian of Buddhism, Naga images are often used in the ordinary lives of Thais to pray for protection. The Naga art is an important element in the Buddhist temples of Thailand, especially in architectural decorations, sculptures, and murals. The position and shape of the Naga works in Buddhist temples have their own meaning and symbolize the coordinated relationship between Naga, the universe, religion, and water culture. In addition, Naga images also appear in the daily lives of Thais, not just in Buddhist temples, and are used in designs on the Internet and in the cultural and creative industries. Since the Naga image is an important element in Thai visual arts, this study uses various Naga images of Thailand, such as sculptures, murals, emoticons, animations, festivals, amulets, fabrics, exhibition and artworks, to analyses and illustrate the application modes of Naga in Thailand's visual arts.

The Naga in Thai Cultural Context

The Naga is one of the most important cultural images in Thailand and even Southeast Asia, the article provides a brief overview of the origin, importance, and visual images of Naga in Thai cultural context.

1. The origin of the Naga of Thailand

The word “Naga” comes from Sanskrit and different dialects led to changes in the pronunciation of the word. For example, the pronunciations Ngan, Ngu, Nam Ngu Ak-ngu, and Namngum can be found in Thailand and Laos (Ngaosrivathana & Ngaosrivathana 2009, p. 6). Nagas are presented in a variety of images, such as the water Naga in Ahom, crocodile in Shan, water snake in White T’ ai, dragon in Pa-yi, and as a serpent in Siamese (Davis, 1984, p.212). Consequently, the names, pronunciations, and images of Nagas vary depending on the region. Since the Naga has diverse images, the important question is: where did the Naga of Thailand originate?

In general, there are two schools of thought about the origin of the Naga: the Indianized School and the Local School. The former suggests that the Naga came from Indian mythology, as argued by Panda (2004), Jumsai (1997), Laomanajarn (2003), and Ngaosrivathana and Ngaosrivathana (2009). Several studies in various disciplines have also noted Thai– Indian cultural linkages through the Naga. Panda (2004) has discussed Naga images in Indian literature and Naga sculptures in Indian temples as examples, and showed how Nagas have been presented in Indian culture through diverse forms, including the snake, half-human half-snake, and human images. From Panda’s study, the images of India’s Nagas have the following characteristics: they rule the oceans, live under the earth, carry a jewel on their heads, and some have odd-numbered serpent hoods above their heads (Panda, 2004, pp. 17–18). The Indian Nagas are similar to those in Thailand. Since the Indian Naga appeared earlier, the Indianized School posits that the prototype of Thailand’s Naga came from India.

Conversely, the Local School stresses the indigenous serpent worship of Southeast Asia and notes that serpent worship likely existed before Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism came to Southeast Asia. Wongthes (2003, p. 1) referred to snake-wrapped images on archaeological artifacts, such as those at Ban Chiang in Udon Thani Province and Ban Kao in Kanchana Buri Province, as evidence that serpent worship probably existed in prehistoric times in Southeast Asia. “ Indigenous serpent worship existed when Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism came into Southeast Asia. Later, serpent worship combined with Indian religions and was transformed into new beliefs” (Wongthes, 2003, pp. 5-6). Another proponent of the Local School is Phan Anh Tu, who observed that serpent stories are very popular among several ethnic groups in Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, thus implying that indigenous serpent worship has long existed in Southeast Asia. As a result, Phan indicated that Buddhism peacefully fused with indigenous animism, integrated serpent worship, and transformed it into Naga beliefs (Phan, 2016). Chih-hung Yen (2005, PP.17-18) mentioned Dvaravati (ด้วรవัต) is possibly the first region where Buddha appeared in Southeast Asia in the mudra of Pang Nak Prok (ปางนาคปรก); Buddha is seated in meditation on a coiled Naga, whose hood protects him from the rain. This posture could be related to serpent worship at that time.

As demonstrated above, Thailand's Naga developed out of multiple sources, and is not solely influenced by the Indian mythology. It must be noted that although the prototype of the Thai Naga comes from India, indigenous serpent worship has been present in Southeast Asia for a long time. Simply stated, Buddhism integrated serpent worship and transformed it into Naga belief. For example, Virapaksa (พ่อวิรปักษ์), one of the four great kings in Buddhism, is the leader of the Nagas (cf. Ngaosrivathana & Ngaosrivathana, 2009, p. 1; Brahmagunabhorn, 2014, p.199; Laomanajarearn, 2003, p. 152).

The importance of the Naga

The importance of the Naga comes from Thai concepts of sacred animals, which are related to two aspects: sacred animal worship and Buddhist literature. Sacred animal worship is a characteristic of ancient civilizations in Southeast Asia. The following passage by Wongthes is helpful to understand how ancient Southeast Asians viewed sacred animal worship:

Ancient Southeast Asians believed in the sacred animals, amphibians especially, such as frogs, toads, snakes, crocodiles and lizards, etc.. The ancients believed that these animals could have the ability to call for rain and keep the water abundant. When these animals are found, it always happens to be rainy. As a result, amphibian images are used on murals or bronzes, like the frog sculpture decorated on the surface of the ancient bronze drum, which has the purpose of praying for raining. (Wongthes, 2013, p.2)

As discussed previously, Southeast Asian countries generally believed in sacred animals; a frog sculpture on an ancient bronze drum from Indonesia is evidence of this belief (Figure 1). Thai indigenous culture has always been closely related to the element of water. Therefore, Thais believe that amphibians are responsible for maintaining water sources and conquering evil. For that reason, they deified amphibians, carved their images, and placed them at the entrance of Buddhist temples for both religious and decorative purposes. Naga is the king of the water, which is more in line with the values of Thai people's beliefs and is supported by Buddhist stories, such as Mucalinda Sutta. Therefore, Thais like to place Naga statues at the doors of Buddhist temples to protect the Buddha and Buddhist temples.



Figure 1 Frog sculptures in the bronze drum, Paleometallic period, East Nusa Tenggara, collected by the National Museum of Indonesia.
source: Chang, 2018.

In Thailand, the concept of a sacred animal has been linked to Buddhism since ancient times, such as the statue of Dvaravati (6-11 AD), which incorporates the subject "Buddha and the magic animal" (The National Museum Bangkok). Additionally, in modern times, the sacred animal object manifests as an architectural decoration in Buddhist temples, as noted in Nimlek's research. Nimlek compared Thai architectural vocabularies with the names of animals or sacred animals, and summarized the results into 32 categories. These architectural vocabularies are sufficient to show that animals and sacred animals are indeed closely related to the architecture of Buddhist temples in the cultural context of Thailand (Nimlek, 2014).

Since the sacred animal is an important feature of Buddhist temples, where does the concept originate? The answer lies in Buddhist literature. In the three worlds of Buddhism, Buddhists believe that the Himmaban Forest is located at the foothills of the Sumi Mountain. A variety of magic animals reside there, including those that are Nagas, half-man, half-lion, elephant-headed animals with fish bodies, and so forth (Figure 2). Due to the mysterious powers of these sacred animals, Thais are used to placing or painting their images in Buddhist temples to protect the Buddha and the locals. The aforementioned two factors, namely, sacred animal

worship and Buddhist literature shaped the concept of the sacred animals of Thais, which are all related to, and underscore the importance of Naga.



Figure 2 Magic animals of the Himmapan Forest, Wat Phra In Plaeng, Nakhon Phanom Province, Thailand.
source: Chang, 2017

2. Local wisdom and the visual image of Naga

In the present millennium, “local wisdom” has started to attract attention in the Thai academic community. Local wisdom refers to an inheritance of life experiences from the ancestors. It is enshrined and protected in Thailand’s Preservation and Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage Act 2559, to support cultural diversity (The Department of Cultural Promotion, 2016). Local wisdom is defined as follows:

Local wisdom of Thailand has cultural inheritance, which is a concept, life attitude and social value, such as ideas, beliefs, knowledge and lifestyle, etc. (cf. Deetes, 2003, pp.36-47; Prajonsant, 2006, p. 127; Thai Youth Encyclopedia Project, 2012, p.1)

The use of the visual image of Naga is the representation of local wisdom; Naga belongs to local wisdom. Many local governments of Thailand regard the Naga as a local feature, and advocate for its inclusion in the Thai Intangible Cultural Heritage List; for example, the Naga folktale “Phadaeng Nang-Aii” was listed as an intangible cultural heritage of Thailand in 2011. Similarly, the Naga “Rocket Festival” was included in 2013. In a nutshell, the reason the Naga image is so deeply embedded in the lives of Thais is closely related to the Thai people’s advocacy of their local wisdom.

Research Methodology

The researcher traveled to Thailand several times and conducted a field investigation in 2017-2020. The research method of this paper is qualitative research, which involved field research and mainly recorded Naga arts in Buddhist temples, museums and artist studios of Thailand, such as sculptures, murals, emoticons, animations, festivals, amulets, fabrics, exhibition and artworks, to analyze and illustrate the application modes of Naga in Thailand’s visual arts.

Naga Visual Arts

One of the concerns of cultural studies relates to cultural phenomena and context. The Naga images in the Naga narratives of Thailand reflect two major cultural systems: Buddhism and serpent worship (Chang, 2017). These also appear in Naga visual arts. The Naga is the guardian in Buddhist stories; thus, much of Naga intangible cultural heritage is embodied in Buddhist temples, as sculptures, murals, festivals, and Bai Sri. In addition, because Naga has the magical power to drive away evil spirits in folktales, Naga images are often used in Thais’ daily practices of praying for peace. Whether the Naga is a guardian of the Buddha or a local protector, these cultural meanings have been constructed from narratives over long periods of time and are reflected in Thais’ intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, the author uses visual arts of the Naga subject to observe the changes produced by them, and discuss the application mode of Naga visual arts. Various Naga arts were collected in this study, as shown in Table 1.

Naga images are widely used in the daily lives of Thais, especially in Thai temples’ architectural ornaments, where they usually appear on gable boards, murals, hanghong (หังหงส์), along the tiers of temple

roofs, and on brackets or stairs leading to the main shrine. Naga's image as a guardian is shaped by the famous story of Naga protecting Buddha in the Mucalinda Sutta about Mucalinda. Because of this, in Buddhist temples, as long as features related to Triratna are common, Nagas always guard them side by side, especially at entrances, such as doors, windows, stairs, and so forth. These Naga decorations are not only beautiful, but also enhance the solemn atmosphere of the temples (Bovornkitti, 2005).

Naga worship has many meanings in the Thai cultural context. Analyzing Naga symbolism in Northeast Thailand, Tambiah found that the Naga is attributed with different cultural meanings and beliefs in various Buddhist rituals and the cult of guardian spirits (Tambiah, 1970, pp. 300-301). This folklore are directly displayed in visual art performances. Besides, Sanboon investigated Buddhist temple works in the Mekong River basin on the border of Thailand and Laos, and found that the Naga was often used to decorate Buddhist temples (Sanboon, 2010). These phenomenon originates in serpent worship; since the Naga forms part of local traditional beliefs, local artists preferred using Naga images as design elements in Buddhist temples, such as Pang Nak Prok (the image of the Buddha in the posture of being protected by the Naga), Naga stairs, sculptures, and so forth. As mentioned above, the Naga symbol has a religious function of protecting Triratna and the followers. This is the traditional impression exuded by Naga visual art.

However, due to the popularity of social media and speed of the Internet, applications of Naga in visual art are no longer limited to religious purposes. Thais believe that the Naga, in addition to protecting Buddha, is also the Lord of the Land and can bring wealth. Hence, the guardian images of the Naga are more widely used in festival performances and on the Internet, such as in emoticons and animations, to demonstrate different cultural contexts and meanings.

As noted in Table 1, compared with early images of the Naga, the important change in the visual expressions shows the transformation of Naga art from having a religious function to a cultural function. This indicates that Naga has become an art form. According to Table 1, although early Naga sculptures are depicted in two styles, namely Khmer style (see No. 1) and Thai style (see No. 2, No. 3, and No. 11), the kind of Naga's art form is still based on Buddhist doctrines and myths. It's just that there are some differences in the craftsmanship of the two art's style, such as, Thai style pays more attention to the creation of expressions, lines, and colours compared with Khmer style.

It should be noted in Table 1 that Naga has become an art form and in the process, the religious function of Naga and the mode of transmission has changed. The Naga symbol has become a part of the cultural industry besides the above-mentioned religious function, which is widely used in fields outside Buddhist temples, as well as on the Internet as emoticons (see No. 8), animations (see No. 9), costumes (see No. 12), and in the performance of contemporary art (see No. 13). Simply put, in terms of cultural context, once Naga became embedded in the cultural industry, it became connected to the Internet. In this way, the cultural meaning of Naga changed and began to differ from its previous religious connotations.

Table 1 Naga Visual Art

No.	Category	Naga Visual Art	Title of Work	Cultural Context	Source of Figure
1	Sculpture		Pang Nak Prok	Buddhism	Photo by the author, Wat Pho Si, Nakhon Phanom Province

No.	Category	Naga Visual Art	Title of Work	Cultural Context	Source of Figure
2	Sculpture		Pang Nak Prok	Buddhism	Photo by the author, Wat Pa Sala Wan, Nakhon Ratchasima Province
3	Sculpture		Pang Nak Prok	Buddhism	Photo by the author, Sala Keoku Park, Nongkai Province
4	Sculpture		Half-human half-Naga stair	Buddhism	Photo by the author, Wat Thai, Nongkai Province
5	Sculpture		Naga	Buddhism	Photo by the author, Wat Luang, Ubon Ratchathani Province
6	Sculpture		Naga gable	Buddhism	Photo by the author, Wat Thung Sawang, Nongkai Province
7	Mural		Oral literature	Buddhism, Serpent worship	Photo by the author, Wat Pho Chai, Nongkai Province
8	Emoticon		Vishnu and Naga	Hinduism	Drawing by Worawit Nu, ©Worawit Nu
9	Animation		Bhuridatta Jataka	Buddhism	https://www.youtube.com/c/iDream945/videos
10	Festival		Naga Bai Sri	Buddhism	Photo by the author, Nakhon Phanom Province
11	Amulet		Naga	Serpent worship	Photo by the author, Cha studio, Nongkai Province

No.	Category	Naga Visual Art	Title of Work	Cultural Context	Source of Figure
12	Fabric		Naga	Serpent worship	Photo by the author, Nakhon Phanom Province
13	Exhibition Artwork		Painting with history in a room filled with people with funny names	Serpent worship	Photo by the author, Korakrit Arunanondchai, created in 2015, exhibited in Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts in 2019

Reference source: collated by the author.

Discussion and Results

1. An analysis of Naga visual arts

The aesthetic styles and types of images of Naga's contemporary visual art, such as visual designs, structures, and cultural significance, can be understood by analysing Naga images. This section explained Naga visual art by the two styles and two images of Naga, the following points are made.

Two Styles of Naga Art

The visual designs of the Naga sign are the easiest way to understand Naga art. There are primarily two styles of Naga: Thai style and Khmer style, as shown in the Naga sculptures in Table 1 (No. 1 to No. 6). Both styles are distinct, as shown in the statues of Pang Nak Prok. These statues have been popular since the Dvaravati period; for example, the Buddha image in the Angkor Temple belongs to the Khmer style. Northeast Thailand was once ruled by the Angkor Empire, and therefore, the influence of the Khmer style of the Naga can still be seen in Thailand. The Thai style developed later and gradually replaced the Khmer-shaped Naga to become the mainstream design in Thailand.

The main difference between the two styles of the Pang Nak Prok statues lies in the shape of the Nagas. The heads of the Khmer style Nagas are shaped as a bodhi leaf, while in the Thai style, the bodhi leaf shape changes into a radiating light (Figure 3-4). Thai Naga, a serpent with a crest (ຫຼອນ) on its head, created a new look, distinct from the Khmer style. Furthermore, Thai craftsmen imbue Naga with vivid expressions, and thus, they do not look as fierce as the Khmer Naga. These design changes evolved into the new Thai Naga style.



Figure 3 Khmer style of the Pang Nak Prok, 11th-12th AD, Phimai Historical Park, Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Thailand.
source: Chang, 2017.



Figure 4 Thai style of the Pang Nak Prok, Wat Phra That Phanom, Nakhon Phanom Province, Thailand.
source: Chang, 2018.

Two Types of Naga Images

In ancient Naga art forms in India, Khmer, and Thailand, the Naga image has always appeared with other deities, such as Buddha or Vishnu, as shown in Table 1 (No. 7, No. 8). However, the Naga images of Thailand are influenced by serpent worship; consequently, the Naga images in Thailand's narratives can be divided into two types: images from Buddhist stories, and those from indigenous stories. The main difference between the two types is the Naga's behavior after conversion to Buddhism (Chang, 2017, p. 19). For the locals, Naga is not only a sacred animal, but also a local protector; hence, the Naga could be made into an independent statue for worship in Thailand.

For example, the structure of the large seven-headed King Naga statue in Nakhon Phanom (Figure 5), built in 2016, is based on the image of Naga spraying water and is not associated with any Buddha statues. For the locals the mythical serpent is their guardian, who lives in the Mekong River; thus, the Naga statue is situated at the riverfront, facing the Mekong River. The Naga's shape of spraying water is the sign for fertile land, symbolizing that the Naga protects the local community and allows it to develop smoothly (Karnjanatawe, 2016). It is a revision of the structure of Naga art, changing the visual shape of Naga through art.

As far as the above is concerned, Naga has become the theme of artistic creation, and is endowed with "humanism," having feelings, much like humans, which is similar to the Naga images in indigenous stories. In recent years, Naga dramas have become popular in Thailand. The Naga has not only become the protagonist of TV shows and movies, but has also been included in popular songs, which are constantly viewed and listened to on the Internet. These creations are inspired by indigenous Naga stories that emphasize the humanity of Nagas. One of the most famous Thai dramas is "Nakii", a story about the Naga Queen, produced in 2016 (Figure 6). In this interpretation of the iconology, the Nakii drama displays an interactive relationship with the human world, representing Naga's humanism, which is different from the traditional religious characteristics attributed to Naga, the images of Buddhist stories.



Figure 5 Seven-headed Naga King, 2016, made by brass, about 4.49 m(w) x 15m (h), Indochina Nakhon Phanom market, Nakhon Phanom Province, Thailand.
source: Chang, 2018



Figure 6 Nakii still, 2016, Bangkok, Thailand.
source: <https://www.sanook.com/news/>, 2020.

2. A mode analysis of Naga visual arts

The modes of Naga visual arts can be concluded based on the opinions and information above (Figure 7). According to Figure 7, the Naga visual images change with the factors of space and time. Regarding the space factor, the Naga image originated in Indian mythology; however, when the Naga spread to Southeast Asia along with Buddhism, the Naga image merged with local serpent worship. As a result, two types of Naga images-Buddhism and local images-developed over time, each with its own cultural connotations. Similarly, in terms of the time factor, the styles of Naga can be divided into Khmer and Thai, which are aesthetically distinct. Therefore, two images and two styles constitute the basic elements for creating visual Naga images in Thailand.

The creation of Naga in the visual arts is not only affected by different images and styles of the Naga, but also by technology, art, and the cultural and creative industries, which are referred to below simply as the “ACT mode.” In light of the interpretation of the ACT mode, Naga images are created over time and have different shapes; they are also created in different media. As mentioned earlier, Naga in visual arts are made for individual purposes and needs.

The Naga was originally a religious animal with magic powers; however, not only the factors of time and space but also social changes caused a transformation of the Naga image through, for instance, lines, colors, expressions, personalities, shapes, styles, media, and cultural meaning; this is clearly seen in the ACT mode. The Naga has gradually become a work of art under the influence of the cultural industry and the Internet, which makes its cultural significance richer than before. At the same time, the way people perceive it is no longer defined by religion and the world. Instead, people create and imagine the Naga through drama, animation, contemporary art, and fictional plots in a virtual world, endowing it with a new cultural meaning. The ACT mode is one kind of the application modes of Naga in the visual arts, including the interaction of the technology, art, and the cultural and creative industries. It shows that the design of Naga arts has diversified.

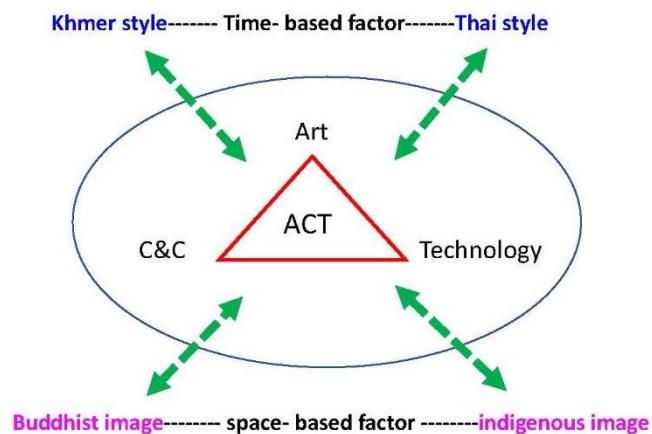


Figure 7 ACT Naga visual art mode analysis.
source: Chang, 2022.

Conclusion

Naga is a cultural image of Thailand, as well as an auspicious symbol in daily life. Naga visual art is an important element in the Buddhist temples of Thailand and also often features in the ordinary lives of Thais. This study used a variety of Naga visual arts as texts to analyze and illustrate the application modes of Naga in the visual arts of Thailand. The author compared the changes in various Naga images and concluded that the "ACT Naga visual art mode" has two important features: 1) Due to the interaction of the technology, art, and the cultural and creative industries, the design of Naga in art has tended to diversify; 2) Naga images have become a part of the cultural industry. The cultural meaning of Naga images has changed and is different from its previous religious connotations.

According to the ACT mode, the Naga has transformed from a religious image to a work of art. It's the most important significance lies in its commercialization, strengthening the human and market factors, which affect the shape and cultural meanings of the Naga. What's more, it challenges the original Naga image in Buddhism. For example, the Naga image is described in Buddhist scriptures as a serpent, however the created image of Naga in Thailand has developed a "crest" on the Nag head, which is different from the traditional Khmer design. Due to the support of the market, this new image gradually replaced the traditional "serpent shape," and became the mainstream of Naga style in North Southeast Asia. This phenomenon is due to the influence of commercialization, and it also impacts the connotation of religion. As a result, Naga art became part of the cultural industry, not only changing its old image, but also challenging the way the religious meaning was interpreted.

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Suggestion

In creating important dramatic arts, the researcher must be knowledgeable about dance and music, costumes. Knowledge of emotions of the show is aesthetic and always realize that The creation of dramatic arts can be modified and changed. not considered as fixed The creator of the work must have clear and understandable objectives in order to design the work perfectly. It also requires a systematic creative process, and can be considered as a work in the form of creative research that combines qualitative research and creative research in the process of working, the researcher must be able to create works along with the research work, that is, be able to explain the origin, way of thinking, cause and effect of the work at every step. This requires evidence from reliable reference sources and should be primary information. The researcher therefore prepares for the study. as well as being able to create works of quality both academically and aesthetically, which can be used to develop creative potential for those interested in studying dramatic arts and other fields.

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