

## DEFAN DOESN'T RECALL: AN INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS

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**ABSTRACT**—This review article examines *Defan, an Oral Telling of the Lineage of Someone Whipping a Tiger, from Saiburi* (แดฟัน เรื่องเล่าของตระกูลคนเขี่ยนเสือจากไทรบุรี), a 2021 SEA Write Award-winning novel by Siriwarn Kaewkan (ศิริวรรณ แก้วกาญจน์; b. 1968). The novel's 65 chapters explore themes of memory, lineage, and historical amnesia through the protagonist, Defan, who metaphorically tames a tiger. For simplicity, this article adopts the shortened title *Defan Doesn't Recall*. It provides a biography of the author, a detailed summary with critical commentary, and an analysis of the novel's complex structure and symbolic elements, complemented by diagrams illustrating the narrative's spatial and kinship dimensions.

**KEYWORDS:** Historical Amnesia; SEA Write Award; Siriwarn Kaewkan; Southern Thai Literature; Symbolism and Lineage

### Preamble

This review article discusses the content and structure of the SEA Write Award winning-novel in 65 chapters by Siriwarn Kaewkan, first published in 2021, with second and third reeditions in 2022 [FIGURE 1]. It has not yet been published in English translation. The rather long title straightforwardly translates as *Defan, an oral telling of the lineage of someone whipping a tiger, from Saiburi* (แดฟัน เรื่องเล่าของตระกูลคนเขี่ยนเสือจากไทรบุรี), that is, the main character, Defan, controls the tiger by a whip while riding on its back. For purposes of simplicity and as an indicator of the historical amnesia which is one theme of the novel, I have shortened the title to *Defan Doesn't Recall*.

The first part of this article is a brief biography of the author. A list of most of his other publications, two of which have been previously translated into English, is in the **APPENDIX** at the end of this article. The second part is a summary of the book, together with my added comments on the actions that take place in it, which can be convoluted and difficult to follow, and on the style of writing. There are two diagrams: one of the physical and symbological location of the village Fon Saen Ha, Downpour Village (ฝนแสนห่า); the other is my construction of Defan's kin relations based on the author's comments in various places in the text. The third part deals with structural aspects of the novel and my interpretation of the author's intentions.

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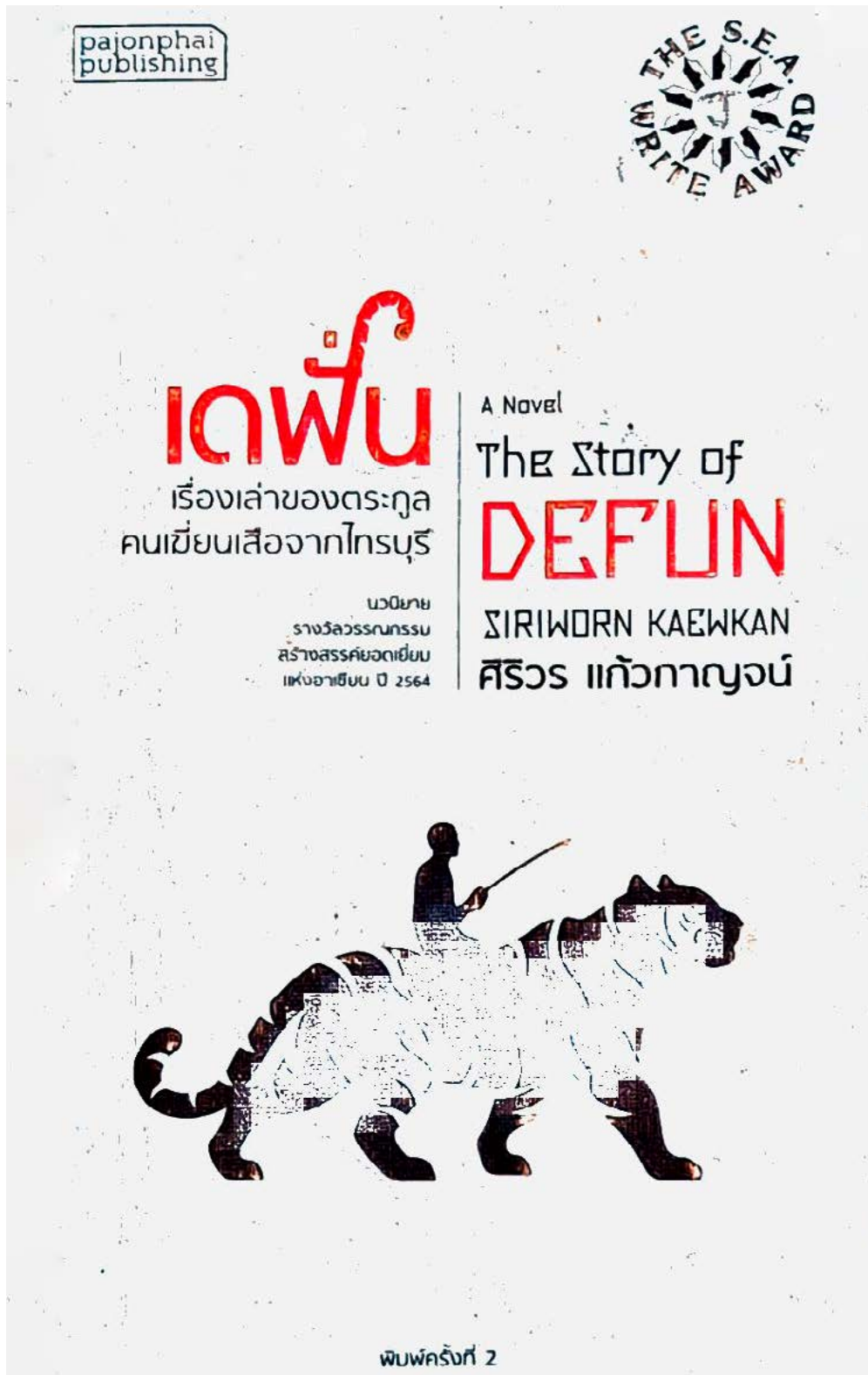


FIGURE 1: Book cover of *Defun*'s second edition, 2022 © Pajonphai Publishing

## The Author

Siriworn Kaewkwan (ศิริวร แก้วกาญจน์) was born in Nakhon Si Thammarat on 8 March 1968. He was the son of a first-generation farmer; his mother was the third generation of those who had originally migrated from Saiburi (ไทรบุรี), today Syburi in the state of Kedah, then under the control of Siam but which is now in Malaysia. They cultivated the rubber and palm oil trees of their Chinese owner. Siriworn's father died when he was in the 4th year of elementary school, aged about ten. Siriworn had only one faded photograph of his father and heard stories about him from relatives. Some people think he looks like his father; Siriworn thinks the relation is the other way round. He hoped that if he knew himself better than his father then one day he would know his father better.

People say his grandmother was a Muslim, but this was not actually correct. Whilst she was a Buddhist, in practice she would not eat pork and if she did her mouth would swell up.<sup>2</sup> It was the generation of his maternal great-grandmother who were Muslims. Yet the area in Kedah from which his great-grandmother came was also Buddhist and Muslim beliefs had declined gradually by the generation of his grandmother. From her he learned many stories; her name was Mae Thao Sang Phromasut (แม่เต๋าสั่ง พรหมสุทธิ) in the southern language and Siriworn dedicated most of his books to her. Such stories included one about a man who nearly became a tiger, another about ancestors of distant

centuries. Another story was about someone who when crossing the ocean was given a ride by a shark. "It was like there was a treaty between us that we were not allowed to eat, or even touch, a shark", a weird story told to him when Siriworn was a child.

Siriworn identifies with the broad cultural and politico-administrative region of southern Thailand where education is in high repute. As a sign of his individualistic and stubborn character he decided, even after pressure from his family, not to apply to become an Army officer, a sure career path for rural intellectuals without a rich family or previous military background.

Highly intelligent in school, Siriworn belongs to the second generation of southern writers from the Klum Nakhon (กลุ่มนคร) literary group centered in city of Nakhon Si Thammarat.<sup>3</sup> The Klum Nakhon group preceded him by around 15 years and, despite its concern regarding rural poverty, was noted for its conservative absorption in rural, regional themes featuring southern lifestyles, language, and landscapes. One of its leading writers, Kanokphong Song-somphan (กนกพงศ์ สงสมพันธุ์), who died in 2006, wrote carefully about relations between Buddhists and Muslims in the short story, "The Cat of Buke Kruea So" (แมวแห่งบูเกะกรือซอ; Maeo Haeng Buke Kruea So), included in his collection,

<sup>2</sup> Much of the material in this section comes from a 2024 interview and email with Siriworn.

<sup>3</sup> The general background to this group is found in ไปขายหนังสือที่งานสัมมนานักเขียนภาคใต้-สำนักพิมพ์คมบาง ["Using books at a seminar for writers from the South"], webpage retrieved at: <https://www.combangweb.com/ไปขายหนังสือที่งานสัมมน/> (accessed 14 December 2024). The Australian Thai Studies scholar Patrick Jory is reported as saying at the seminar that the Klum Nakhon is "characterized by its pre-Modern styles".

*Another Land* (แผ่นดินอื่น, *Phaendin Uen*), that won the SEA Write Award in 1996, two years after Siriorn had begun to publish poems.

Kanokphong is often credited as a stylistic precursor to Siriorn, though Siriorn's works draw on techniques from foreign authors, such as fragmented time and geographical discontinuity, which are absent in Kanokphong's linear narratives. In *Buke Kruea So*, a village in Narathiwat, a military unit protecting a school faces tensions as Buddhist and Muslim soldiers navigate personal conflicts, including a love triangle involving a Muslim teacher, Farida, who mysteriously disappears. In "Goats in the Cemetery" (แพะในกุโบร์, *phae nai kubo*), cultural overlaps and tensions unfold through the bond of two boys raised by the same woman, one Muslim and one Buddhist, as a tragic accident highlights unresolved histories tied to a former Muslim burial ground. Both stories underscore Kanokphong's focus on rural lives and cultural intersections, though his work, marked by linear storytelling, lacks the fragmented style seen in Siriorn.<sup>4</sup> While Kanokphong's sympathies for the rural poor are clear, his works do not fully critique the state's role in fostering nationalism. Despite dying young, he remains a revered figure in Thai literature.

The Klum Nakhon group, led by Kanokphong's brother Jen, later founded a publishing house. While Kanokphong's works show deep sympathy for the rural poor and skillfully depict how ordinary people are affected by conflicts, they

do not fully critique the role of state or military manipulation in fostering nationalism. Kanokphong died of influenza at 40 and has since become a folk cult figure.<sup>5</sup>

Siriorn studied Humanities at the Crafts College of Nakhon Si Thammarat province, where he obtained a diploma in 1989. However, he did not go on to study a full degree at university. He was conscripted for one year's military service, discharged in 1990, and arrived in Bangkok in 1991. After a spell writing as a trainee in a weekly progressive political newspaper, *Motherland* (มาตุภูมิ, *Matuphumi*), he decided to become a full-time independent writer. Siriorn witnessed the Black May 1992 massacres which totalled around 350 victims in Bangkok, but he was surprised when his editor called him back early from the street scene in order to meet his text deadline. The experience disillusioned him about politics, leading him to resolve to remain an observer from then on. He could no longer accept high-minded Marxist interventions to which he felt he had previously been gullible. He published his first collection of poems in 1994 and his first novel in 2001. His other novels, short stories, and poems are mostly about social and political issues [APPENDIX].

After receiving other prizes in 2004 and 2007, in 2021, Siriorn finally won the prestigious SEA Write Award with

<sup>4</sup> Siriorn's first complete novel is *A Scattered World* (โลกที่กระจัดกระจาย) published in 2001 (2544 BE), translated in English by Marcel Barang in 2014.

<sup>5</sup> A large number of such local cults seem to exist in non-metropolitan Thailand. On the amuletic beliefs associated with one policeman, see Reynolds 2019. For a quasi-folkloric celebration of Kanokphong 13 years after his death, see: <https://youtu.be/QC6PAKE5JEE?si=sNipZJP11RXq3hSj> (accessed 22 February 2025).

*Defan Doesn't Recall*.<sup>6</sup> This is the most significant annual writing award in Thailand, for which he had previously been nominated nine times.<sup>7</sup> After twenty years of peripatetic residences, in 2016 Siriwarn Kaewkan moved to the small town of Satun on the Andaman Sea, in the deepest south of Thailand. He is married to Beer Kitaya (เปียร์ คีตญา) with whom he has had one son. Together husband and wife operate a small bookshop in addition to a publishing business.

### The Story of the Stories

The novel *Defan Doesn't Recall* starts with a writer outside the narrative who is alerted by some children calling out that “someone is whipping a tiger” as he rides it into town. The man whipping the tiger becomes a narrator inside a succession of linked stories that simply represent a man appearing to float on misty clouds that flow in from the sea. That the reader is brought into this “magical” relation to the story testifies to Siriwarn’s skill as a writer. The man, who the reader later learns is Defan (เดฟั่น), walks past the village clock tower in the direction of the public library and thus becomes positioned in an imagined village, not the actual one where the reader supposes the main action of the stories occurs.

The imagined village is where most of the action—which Defan cannot recall—occurs. This is a fundamental literary device of magical realism: things and events exist in an unreal space which yet possesses a compelling reality by the ways these things and events are presented to the reader.<sup>8</sup> It means the author can present events which are not placed in a normal chronological order. The author can examine figures such as ghosts or departed people as if they were actually present, yet not seen by people in the actual world.

The reader learns this village is imagined because the first chapter does not include the key phrase which is repeated in every other chapter except the last, “Defan doesn’t recall”. The phrase can be interpreted in an active sense, as if Defan had decided not to remember. It could also inactively suggest “Defan couldn’t remember”, a description of a vague, ambiguous, and in-between state of mind, shared between the reader and the author. This domain of magical realism is well known to Siriwarn and his generation via translation from foreign languages. His awareness of this technique as a way to use actual events as fantastical simulacra for the real motives of his characters, and for the state which directs them for its own purposes, brackets the book, excepting the first and last chapters. An excursion is thus signaled for the reader by means of

<sup>6</sup> Previous SEA Write Award winners include Kanokphong Songsomphan (1996) who passed away in 2006, Prabda Yoon (ปราปดา ญุ่น; 2002), and Veeraporn Nitiprapha (วีรพร นิธิประภา; 2015, 2018). For my previous articles on the work of Veeraporn, see Clark 2020 and 2022.

<sup>7</sup> As noted by his translator into English and French, Marcel Barang (1945–2020), in his blog for 2016: <https://marcelbarang.wordpress.com/tag/siriwarn-kaewkan/>.

<sup>8</sup> However unfamiliar, there should be no surprise at the liminality of Thai spaces in Siriwarn’s work, one found cross-culturally in many other Magical Realist texts: “The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among those worlds” (Zamor & Faris 1995: 6).

the general notion of magical realism available from Thai translations into a history whose facts Siriworn apparently only randomly cites, but which the Thai state systematically obscures.

The narrative switches into historical mode with the information that Defan's paternal great-grandfather, Pu Thuat (ปู่ทวด),<sup>9</sup> had once moved with his family northwards from Saiburi. This town lay across the border from Siam in Kedah, now in Malaysia, from which he escaped British colonization further south. The family crossed in 1908, the year Siam "gave" Kelantan to Great Britain, nominally in "exchange" for investment in Siam's railways. Great-grandfather Pu Thuat was not afraid of white people, but he did not want to live under their domination. After a week of travel, Pu Thuat and family entered Perlis, now a state in northern Malaysia, and after they had sold off their carts to local Chinese traders, crossed a mountain range into southwestern Siam, then governed as part of the Siamese administrative circle, *monthon* (มณฑล), of Phuket. Great-grandfather Pu Thuat came with 32 people, 12 cows, 5 horses, 3 fighting cocks, 7 hens, and 2 sets of dogs and cats.

They came to a place where a legend told of a hero, spoken of as a rootless gypsy, rode on a tiger's back, controlled

with a whip. The local people were characterized as primitive, eating leaves. Physical descriptions of the landscape are mixed with actual dates, for they arrived in October, the year denoted in the story as the same year the North Amerindian chief Geronimo died, 1909.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps specification of the month implies an association with the Thammasat massacre of students which was to take place on 6 October 1976. By mentioning Geronimo, the story historically alludes to a distant and (Siamese) officially ignored anti-colonial resistance towards an outside power.

Later, the tiger magically remained in the form of a stone statue found on a hill where Pu Suka (ปู่สุกะ), son of Pu Thuat, went into exile. This village came to be called Fon Saen Ha, literally "Rain of the hundreds of thousands", or Downpour Village. The rain swamps the village of "he who whips the tiger". There was only one season, the rainy, which thus "climatically" locates the village between the oral narrative myths and the stories of the real.<sup>11</sup>

As a child, Defan role-played the members of his family, engaging with the refugee experience of his ancestors. In this he imitated figures in oral history.

<sup>9</sup> The name is close to that of the famous southern Thai monk Luang Pu Thuat (หลวงปู่ทวด; 1582–1682) from Sating Phra in Songkhla province, renowned as miracle worker, saint, and latter-day figure on amulets which believers see are endowed with magical powers. The perpetuation of tales about Luang Pu Thuat via oral dissemination could have served Siriworn as an index of popular tales maintaining a non-orthodox and non-state sanctioned history. On later uses and misuses of his legend and amulets dedicated to him, see Jory 2008.

<sup>10</sup> In March 1909, Siam signed the Treaty of Bangkok with Great Britain, ceding Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, and Perlis to Great Britain. In exchange, Great Britain ceded Patani to Siam and Siam received a loan from the Federated Malay States to build a railway line in southern Siam (Paget & Devawongse 1909).

<sup>11</sup> The story notes that the change of the village name from the "Village of he who whips the tiger" (หมู่บ้านคนเขี่ยนเสือ) to Fon Saen Ha coincided with central government concerns that Karl Marx had arrived, but these anxieties were not those of the whole nation. America too sent troops and Thailand became a base for those called, after an earlier colonial term, "the warriors with rice-milk eyes".



His younger sister Kanchaya (กัญชญา) wanted to ride on the tiger, but was not allowed to because she was a woman. Pu Thuat had not yet married her great-grandmother Ya Thuat (ย่าทวด) when he arrived on the tiger's back. However, in the end, Defan let his sister role-play Ya Thuat and Defan (as author) thought that, if we cannot make up stories, they would not be fun: pleasure is lost if the stories were too true. The settlement was established in the rainy season and the journey halted when it had reached an old community called Bukit Yamu in Malay. Pu Thuat—who had arrived on the tiger's back—initially recited the stories as poetic tales with a set rhythm as in a shadow-puppet play (หนังตะลุง, *nang thalung*). He waved his long stick at the heavens to get the rain clouds to cease raining so that his family could pass.

Yet he decided not to return home after a conflict with pirates and the group made a house. They were given food by a local Muslim family, an indication of Pu Thuat's cross-cultural flexibility and appeal, clear also from his relationship with minority forest people such as the Sakai (ชาไก). Pu Thuat wanted to go on to Nakhon Si Thammarat (where a relative had built a reliquary stupa for the Buddha), but he would let anyone from the group who wished it to stay where they were now. They were to cross the Nok Yung Ram Phaen (นกยูงรำแพน) mountain range during August, when the southwest Monsoon would make travel difficult.

Animals in the forest avoided Pu Thuat as he whipped and rode on the tiger, thus the journey went smoothly. Even cows were unafraid because the

tiger had been fed leaves since the time he was small. He had become tame in the Cameron Highlands where Pu Thuat served as a tracker for the British. The family eventually came to a valley with two streams which emerged from a spring in the mountains; the water flowed into a swamp. This circuitous travel is difficult to imagine so I have drawn below a diagram showing the routes [FIGURE 2].<sup>12</sup>

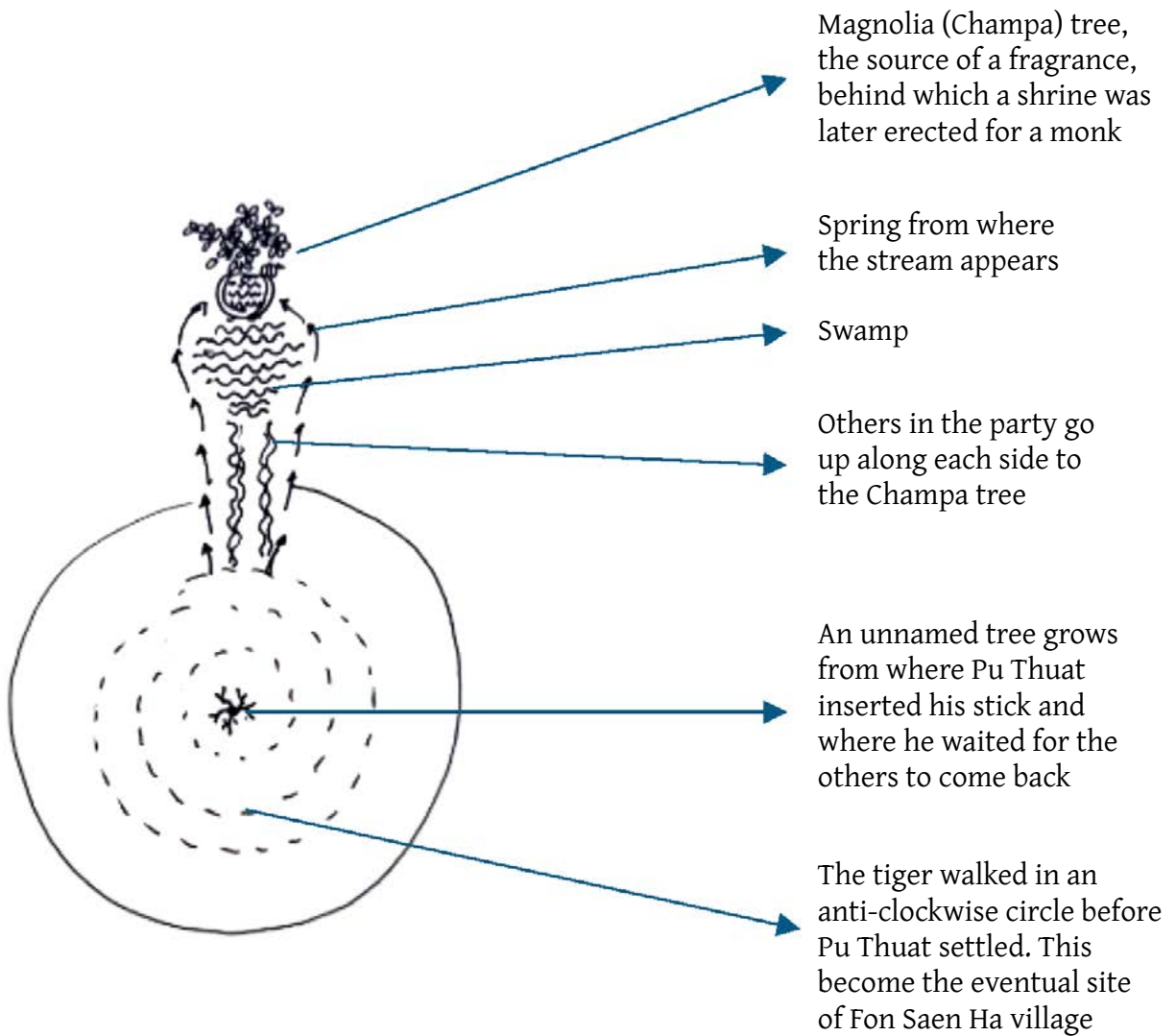
The tiger walked around the eventual site of Fon Saen Ha Village in a counter-clockwise direction, as if he did not want to follow the clock and thus not go with the flow of time.

Pu Thuat did not want to oppose the tiger's will either. For the first time he called the tiger by its real name, Si Fai (สีไฟ). Pu Thuat stuck the stick for taming the tiger into the ground at the center of the circle around which the tiger had walked. They could then see the lake at Songkhla, 50 kilometers away. Pu Thuat earlier used his stick to part the clouds, thus neither rain nor storm had come.

### The Journey of Pu Thuat

The forest was full of different trees all of which Pu Thuat could name. They followed the creek until it disappeared into the ground. The big Magnolia (จำปา, *champa*) tree was the origin for the unusual fragrance emitted by the water. The two sides of the stream joined at the swamp, which was as clear as a mirror. Pu Thuat sent a signal to

<sup>12</sup> In the January 2024 interview, Siriorn mentioned that the shape of the swamp and the two trees was like a *namtao pung* (น้ำเต้าปunga) or gourd, somewhat symbolic of the origin of human life.



**FIGURE 2: The Peregrinations of Pu Thuat**  
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everyone to come together, then they followed the stream which became a well under a large tree. Pu Thuat stuck his stick into the ground and stayed where he was in the center of the circle the tiger had gone around. The stick started to grow into a tree. He decided that was where their village would be.

The tree which grew from the stick became a point where past and future, life and death intersected. It became the origin of the village Fon Saen Ha where “he who whips a tiger” arrived.

As a child, Defan had enjoyed life and eaten leaves from the trees. Pu Thuat travelled further north to a lake, possibly Songkhla, where he saw a Hokkien girl. He married her and she became Ya Thuat, the great-grandmother of Defan and Kanchaya. One day Pu Thuat came back to the village accompanied by a pilgrim monk. The monk settled in the sacred place under the Champa tree by the well before a shrine had been built. The Buddhist monk lived in the shrine and became the first abbot of the Hermitage of He who Whips a Tiger (สำนักสงฆ์คนเขี่ยนเสือ, Samnak Song Khon Khien Suea).

A magical presence came with two twins who appeared in Fon Saen Ha. They were bald and spoke as one person in a question-and-reply format. They were somehow related to Chansaeng (จันทร์แสง), father of Mali (มาลี), mother of Defan. When they met, Pu Suka, father of Anda who subsequently was father of Defan, asked the twins “Who did you escape from?” They replied: “From the one who ordered the hanging of Chansaeng”, at Pak Phanang (ปากพนัง) in Nakhon Si Thammarat. Chansaeng had fought the Japanese and Pu Suka

revealed that in the past he had allied with him, ambushing a Japanese camp.

Pu Suka was born two years after Pu Thuat’s migration. As his first-born child Pu Suka used to ride on horseback between both sides of the mountain range. Pu Suka met Chansaeng on the road; he persuaded Pu Suka to go along with him. Chansaeng had come from Pak Phanang. In the end they split, Chansaeng going to Padang Besar, now in Malaysia on the border. Pu Suka went to Perlis and then went by horse into the water by the mangroves, near Satun. A fisherman told him this was the place of Buaya Bute (บัวบาบูเต๊ะ), the White Crocodile. Pu Suka then went across to Aceh in northern Sumatra. From there he returned with a woman, Chansaeng’s daughter, who became the mother of Rahman (see below). Her second son, Anda (อันดา), was born two years later in an unstated year, during a significant political change, presumably the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932.

Defan’s family relationships are set down discontinuously throughout the book and thus are not easy to grasp at one reading. The reader may find the next diagram useful [FIGURE 3].

In reading to this point, the palimpsest quality of tales-wrapped-by-tales becomes more evident. At the very end of the book, Siri worn inserts a closing sentence that there were stories within stories about Pu Thuat, thus telling the story about itself, the story of Defan. Later the story told by Pu Thuat disappears: did it actually take place, or was it blown away with the wind?

The main narrative then revolves around Uncle Rahman (ลุงรามัญ): the author signifies this is a real person by

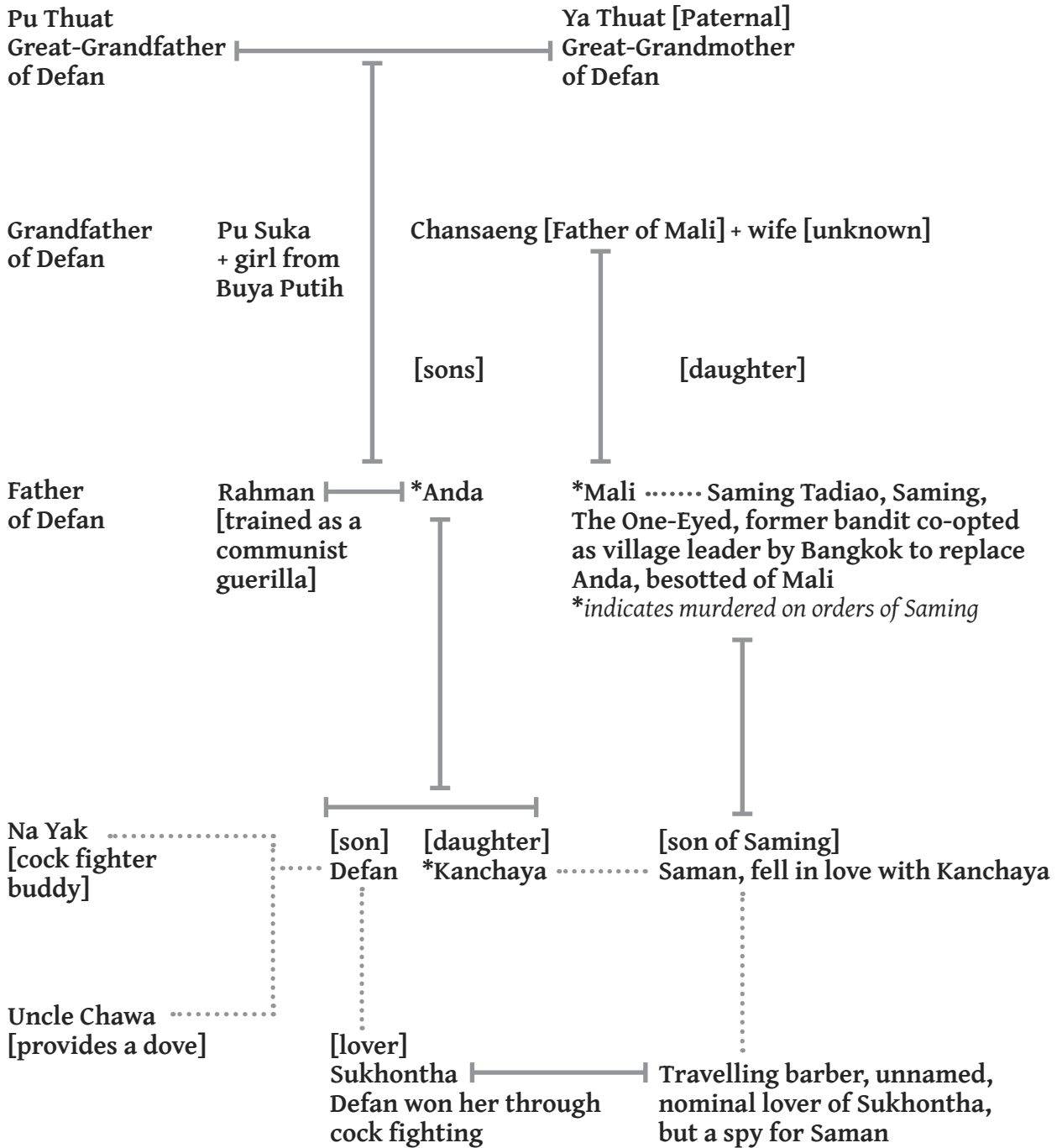


FIGURE 3: Genealogical relationships of Defan  
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the use of “Uncle” and thus the brother of Defan’s father, Anda. Pu Suka (son of Pu Thuat, father of Rahman and Anda) had first sent Rahman to learn Chinese at a school in Penang in the colony of the Straits Settlements, where his relative had helped the communist Chin Peng (จีนเป้ง; Chen Ping in Mandarin) in the anti-Japanese underground. Rahman was five to six years younger than Chin Peng who was to become Secretary of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in 1947. The relative took Rahman to the Sankhalakiri (สันกาลาคีรี) mountains to learn guerilla tactics with the MCP. Rahman was then accepted by the Party and sent for further training to China. He waited in Bangkok for members from other regions to join in the slum area near the Phra Pradaeng port, downstream from central Bangkok and Si Phaya, the quay for leaving for the Gulf of Siam. Rahman went to Hong Kong, Macao, then on to Beijing by railway. After some months he moved to Sichuan for his training and then to Vietnam after the Battle of Dien Bien Phu (1954). He came back to Fon Saen Ha via Laos at the time of the Sarit Thanarat coup in Thailand (1957). The task assigned to Uncle Rahman by the Party was to collect Chin Peng from Betong (เบตง) on the Thai–Malay border. Both had to hide their identities and pretend to be plantation workers. They then proceeded by motorbike along Highway 410 via Phattalung and then clandestinely to Trang, Ranong, across to Chumphon, Phrachuap Khiri Khan, and, finally, to a safe house in Bangkok.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The level of geographical detail about clandestine movements may suggest Siriorn had access to

Meanwhile, problems had arisen on rubber plantations due to a fall in the global price of rubber. Rahman led the farmers to adjust the tax on rubber crop earnings. He got rid of the influence of local gangs and deposed the district chief who was under their sway. Rahman then left to join the communist guerillas which his brother Anda could not join because he had a family. Anda and Mali had a son, Defan, and a daughter, Kanchaya. Defan is identified as born in 1951 by reference to a coup one year earlier in 2493 BE (1950 CE), the year of the revival of the Anti-Communism Law.<sup>14</sup>

Mali’s father was Chansaeng, a shadowy presence and enigmatic local hero. Another figure, Uncle Chawa (ลุงชา), who had fled from the Japanese invaders in the Dutch Indies, turned up one day with a singing bird, a dove. Also, Uncle Giant or Na Yak (น้ายักษ์) brought a fighting cock to the village supposedly sent from Chansaeng. Defan travelled around Malaysia and Indonesia with Uncle Giant, who became a surrogate uncle, and even went with him as far as New Guinea. Defan looked for fighting cockerels which he could then breed and wager on in competitions.

Defan’s prize in one cockfight was the girl Sukhontha (สุคนธา); she asked Defan to be kept under a roof resem-

communist materials. Chin Peng or Chen Ping 陈平 (1924–2013) died in Bangkok and was refused burial in his native village by the Malaysian government. This information may also have come indirectly from Thai government sources. Among many biographies is Chin Peng 2003. The most details about Chin Peng are in Chin & Hack 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Writer Kulap Saipradit (กุลาบ สายประดิษฐ์; 1906–1974) was arrested in 1952. He went into exile in China in 1958 where he died in 1974. He also spent two years in Australia, 1947–1949 (Barmé 1995).

bling a fighting-cock cage. Then Defan became her lover. She later left and returned only briefly to hand over to Defan a baby who was called Suea (เสือ) or Tiger. There is a change in the narrative when Sukhontha arrives: Defan's sister Kanchaya finds his story no longer entertaining because Defan's world is no longer that of their childhood imagining.

Defan won a bet on fighting cockerels, leading him to connect with a former buddy of his father, Anda, the one-eyed bandit Saming Tadio (สมิงตาเดียว). "Saming" identifies a tiger spirit, somewhat akin to a were-wolf (เสือสมิง, *suea saming*); its amulet, endowed with great power, is given to animist adepts. Saming was an outsider; no one knew where he came from. Anda said Saming wanted to capture the White Crocodile with his bare hands, so they went off together to catch it. The two became friends until both of them fell in love with Anda's wife, Mali. Saming became Anda's enemy because of his jealous love for her.

A change takes place in the story at the same time as the central government intervenes at the village level. With the establishment of a new central government and due to Cold War fears, the Army was brought into the village. It established a camp in the jungle at which the Army tortured suspected communists, the sound of their cries being concealed by a diesel generator. Saming Tadio was forced on the people as head of the village by the government as Kamnan (กำนัน) in place of Anda. Saming wanted to get back at Anda who had won over Mali, mother of Defan. He was jealous of Mali and became the killer of Anda.

A travelling barber, the secret lover of Sukhontha, came to the village fair and courted Kanchaya to lure her to Saman (สมาน), Saming Tadio's son. At the fair, a magician performed, who would cut a piece of wood with a sharp blade and then cut his own hand, yet no blood appeared. These semi-public events had an occult atmosphere. Saming had lost his eye after a fight where he challenged Anda to grab a tiger with his bare hands. Saming refused his help and thrust the eye back in its socket by himself. Saming then went to learn magic skills with a magician. He also collected the eyes of the enemies he had murdered. Animism is a domain of belief and action which could protect an adept from danger; this protection was embodied in an amulet.<sup>15</sup>

The barber was actually a spy for the authorities. Saming's son Saman was in love with Kanchaya; Saman negotiated with the barber to get him to abandon Kanchaya. But the day Kanchaya disappeared provided evidence that Saming controlled the village. She was later murdered and her corpse was seen floating among hundreds of bodies in the canal. She had been killed, the reader must suppose, during the Army's anti-communist actions.

The story ends with Defan buried alive on top of his mother's body. She died in a hole below which is the corpse of his father, Anda, murdered earlier by Saming Tadio. As mother and son are forced to dig their grave, the sound of a

<sup>15</sup> On this, see in general Reynolds' section "Amulets and Protection" (2019: 119–128). See also the last Special Edition of JSS on the "The Amulet Culture of Thailand" (Vol. 112, Part 2, December 2024).

machine gun comes from the other side of a canal. An ethereal voice utters the word “Chansaeng” from the bottom of the pit, as could the unidentified sound of Rahman. These portents point to the heroic isolation of Chansaeng and Rahman from the rest of the suffering family.

The last chapter identifies actual places, including Wat Chanathip (วัดชนาธิป) in Satun—not the fictitious Fon Saen Ha—, but Defan floats away across these, like the wraith he was at the very beginning of the story. Defan was rescued, just in time, by the Sakai (ซาไก) or Maniq (มะนิก) ethnic group. “Sakai” is a pejorative term meaning “barbarian”, to denote a forest minority which Defan befriended when he was in the jungle. They thought he was actually Rahman brought back to life, and this may be why they dug Defan up and saved him from death with his mother. He came back to life in their village of Fon Saen Ha, “unable to recall” what he had endured.

### The Structure of the Story

The following is largely my interpretation. Author Siriwarn suggests that history belongs to those who lived through events which are not written down in the official histories as taught in school. These events are carried on in oral tales, in one form as Nang Thalung, the folk shadow-play, passed around between different communities and generations. They are passed on in other kinds of oral transmissions, such as those that Siriwarn received from his grandmother, the daughter of a southern Muslim.

I propose that Siriwarn shows resistance to the “official” written texts of Thai public history, which still are largely those approved by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943), a son of King Mongkut (Rama IV) and a half-brother of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). Because of their royal progenitor, these texts cannot be altered. Siamese and Thai history is a royally approved chronicle, not a debated or contested discourse. In its official form, such history occludes many events the details of which are nonetheless still recalled in speech and local stories. Because these tales were not written down,<sup>16</sup> these events cannot easily contest the views of the state which chooses to ignore much that is still buried in popular memory. Yet oral transmission does allow the tale to survive occlusion by the state.

<sup>16</sup> Whilst some scholars such as Phraya Anuman Rajadhon (พระยาอนุนามราชธน; 1888–1969) have studied Thai oral tales, no overall or systematic compendium of Thai folktales from all the different regions—i.e., northern/Myanmar borders, Lanna, Isan, eastern and western central Thai, upper southern in Nakhon Si Thammarat, lower southern in Narathiwat and Phattalung—exists according to Siriwarn in 2024 interview. Unwritten oral folktales can become performed, written, and/or later printed court literature over time, with additions and variations. This evolution may occur even though the link with any putative original or set of supposed original events becomes increasingly tentative the more distant the court recension or its later printed version is from the oral tales. See Warunee 2017. See also “Prince Damrong’s Prefaces”, around 1917, in Baker & Pasuk 2010: 881–912, especially 892–897, and 1339–1392. In France, François Rabelais (fl. 1483?–1553) collected folktales in various forms after 1532 and Charles Perrault (1628–1703) around 1697. In Germany, folktales were compiled by the Grimm brothers—Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859)—in 1812–1857 and, in Italy in 1956, by Italo Calvino (1923–1985) from largely 19th century compilations.

Some of Siriwarn's earlier chapters begin and almost every chapter ends with the phrase "Defan doesn't recall". Thus, the text functions as a membrane carrying the congealed knowledge of past events omitted from the official record, to which his text is a form of silent resistance. Instead of directly taking to task the self-seeking deceptions of the state by parading known facts which have been passed on orally, a writing strategy which might be politically and personally dangerous, Siriwarn indirectly circumvents these untruths and punctures the membrane, saying orally what has been lost to history and implicates the self-interest of the state which has obscured these events.

The tales are structured as one story which is, in turn, a palimpsest of separate stories linked by common characters who recurrently appear in the same geographical locations in southern Thailand and its near neighbors in Malaysia and Indonesia. This wide range of locations and individuals who move around Southeast Asia without constraint serves as a physical metaphor for the variety of people and places not under the control of the central government or of other nations such as Malaysia or Indonesia.<sup>17</sup> This zone begins where there is no central state and ends when the extent of the control by the central state remains in question. The indiscriminate or haphazard way in which the various figures are linked is beyond the domain of the rational state. The local has nothing to

do with the world beyond even though it may map parts of a nascent history via reference to world events. It depends, perhaps evanescently, on moments when the central government intervenes locally due to the necessities of its own business, or sometimes when local presences mediate the Cold War. Defan lived a life without memory. This may well be due to the links between three generations of the same quasi-family possibly severed by the unevenness of central state interests. These links, perhaps, would have maintained a real historical presence for that quasi-family, if they could have remembered them.

Siriwarn is neither a theoretician of literature nor does he want to make ideological points from a given position. But he broadly reads world literature translations into Thai and the range of his references can be surprising, from Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) to Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), from William Blake (1757–1827) to Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), not to mention, as we have seen, Latin American magic realism. He also has mentioned that he has read William Faulkner (1897–1962) in translation. Traces of other non-canonical modern writers are surprisingly eclectic. For example, Siriwarn believes he read Ambrose Bierce's *The Moonlit Road* (1907), before he saw the film *Rashōmon* (1950) by Kurosawa Akira, based on an Akutagawa story (1915) that closely follows Bierce.<sup>18</sup>

Of the meta-story of Defan, much is told by the dedications to many of Siriwarn's books, particularly to the

<sup>17</sup> Resistance to central governments by the *orang asli* and other mobile populations such as the *orang laut* is systematically discussed in Scott 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Siriwarn briefly mentioned his knowledge of non-Thai literature via Thai translation in my 2024 interview with him at Songkhla.



grandmother who was the daughter of a Muslim and who did not eat pork.<sup>19</sup> The author figure just tells stories and becomes a spokesperson for those who do not, or cannot, speak. At the end of the story, Defan must call out to his mother, not to Anda, his absent and earlier murdered father.

The metaphor of coming back to life is implied here and, significantly, Defan is buried on top of his mother. It turns out Defan is still alive and is discovered by the local tribe of the Sakai people who assist his recovery. Anda, Defan's father, had stopped Defan from going to school. After Defan became obsessed with cock fighting he ended attending school. Anda said Defan might as well eat grass and leaves like a buffalo. Defan did not care; Pu Thuat was known to eat leaves too. Marginalization is presented as a character device: only those characters exist who have been cut off, or partially cut off, from a full existence.<sup>20</sup>

Some other artists refuse this marginalization as a device for positioning others. There is the example of the peregrinations by textile artist Jakkai Siributr (จักกาย ศิริบุตร; b. 1969) via Patani, Myanmar, and Phayao, to discover marginal or non-standard Thai lives. Siriorn himself spent six months in 2012 on the Thai–Myanmar border trying to see what the conditions of

marginalized refugees between the two cultures might be.

The geographical margin functions as an inverse way of questioning the idea of “Thainess” which becomes more authentic the more it is subject to marginalization by the non-Thai, or, put more relationally, the “other-than-Thai”.<sup>21</sup>

It is quite difficult to accept how enlightened members of the elite can subscribe to marginalization of the other. The apparently casual comments by members of this elite indicate how empty it would be for art theory, including the theoretical description of literature and music, to make interpretations along the lines of a left/right, yellow/red, or even Royalist/Thaksinite-populist opposition. Such comments hint at how widely shared among the court-focused educational elite is the simplistic assessment of those looking down on the provincial farmers or the uneducated as ignorant. It calls them *kwai* (ควาย), “buffaloes”.

Thus “Red Shirt” opposition to the status quo in 2010, the year the Thai military were deployed to put down “Red” opponents under the direct orders of Prime Minister Abhisit Thejavira (in office 2008–2011), may simply have been against norms of public order, however they were defined. In this novel, published some ten years later, Defan resists a system which does not easily permit critical thinking about figures in authority. The reader cannot tell how far Siriorn himself—as

<sup>19</sup> For some biographical details given here, I am grateful also particularly to Siriorn's email of 16 March 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Character has hitherto been conceived in an analysis of early modern Thai literature as a function of othering from a higher or lower status position, not as here, from marginalization at or beyond the “Thai” geographical periphery; this dissolves in most cases for Defan. See Suvanna 1995.

<sup>21</sup> Edward van Roy (2017) has shown how varied and geographically heterogeneous the earlier ethnic components of the modern Thai population were and still are.

differentiated from his various writing personae—actually thinks like this, despite his known past resistance to Prime Minister Thaksin in 2006.

In this novel the metaphor of Thai in the South surrounded by “primitive tribes” while allowing Siriwarn to represent animist beliefs and follow non-text based oral transmission of historically occluded events, is perhaps less important than the shifting consciousness of the protagonists. The movement of characters both within and between stories allows for the reader’s simple perplexity at forgotten or obscured events. In this context, obscurity is not a function of simple truth-telling but is, as in literary cultures elsewhere, dependent on the shifting viewpoints of the author and reader. In the southern Thai world of Defan there is no social constancy, no geographical continuity of the state’s territory. There is—to this reader—the bewildering facility of major characters to freely travel all over Southeast Asia, where there is no regular and unimpeded control from the center, no dominance of one religion, and,

probably, no solid and unbending formation of the personalities of particular characters.

This may be because familism—functional, informal, and inclusive links to a genealogical bloodline, marked by an over-lapping string-bag of stories—works as a universe builder both for the state and for the intimate structures of individual personalities. Familism also works paradoxically to exclude. Siriwarn binds his characters into a set of practices which is bound to become circular, in a repeating double bind. It is the drive of social practice not to hurt friends which is made semantically equivalent to not hurting family. Structurally disparate or geographically fragmented, family must come first. It is unclear how far Siriwarn recognizes the limitations of ego conformity to this repeating structure, but he does seem to be unhappy with the functioning social idea that this world is “our” choice, that this is what “we” want.

At base, within the mental frame of familism, anything apart from the family does not matter. Anything else is an imposition.

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## APPENDIX: SIRIWORN KAEWKAN'S WRITINGS

- 2537 BE (1994 CE) ถามข่าวถึงแสงตะเกียง [*Inquiring About the Lantern Light*]
- 2539 BE (1996 CE) เพลงปีกผีเสื้อ [*Melody of Butterfly Wings*]; by pen name Bunga Yawi (บุหงา ยาวี)
- 2542 BE (1999 CE) ห้วงน้ำภายใน [*The Inner Abyss*]
- 2544 BE (2001 CE) โลกที่กระจัดกระจาย ปกรณัม-ตำนาน-นิทาน-ประวัติศาสตร์ในหีบกลของเรื่องเล่าหลังสมัยใหม่; *A Scattered World, Myth, Legend, Folktale, History [Inside the Puzzle Box of our Postmodern Story]*, trans. by Marcel Barang (2014)
- 2547 BE (2004 CE) ประเทศที่สาบสูญ [*The Lost Country*]; in final round for SEA Write Award
- 2548 BE (2005 CE) เรื่องเล่าของคนบันทึกเรื่องเล่าที่นักเล่าคนหนึ่งเล่าให้เขาฟัง [*The Tale of a Story Keeper, as Told by a Storyteller*]; in final round for SEA Write Award
- 2549 BE (2006 CE) กรณีฆาตกรรมโต๊ะอิหม่ามสะตอปา การ์เด; *The Murder Case of Imam Storpa Karde*, trans. by Marcel Barang (2010)
- 2550 BE (2007 CE) เก็บความเศร้าไว้ให้พ้นมือเด็กเด็ก [*Keep Sadness Out of Children's Reach*]; in final round for SEA Write Award
- 2550 BE (2007 CE) ลงเรือมาเมื่อวาน [*Set Sail Yesterday*]; in final round for SEA Write Award
- 2551 BE (2008 CE) เมื่อฉันหายไปจากโลกใบหนึ่ง [*When I Disappear from One World*]; in final round for SEA Write Award
- 2551 BE (2008 CE) บันทึก(ไม่)ปะติดปะต่อ [*A (Dis)Connected Journal*]
- 2552 BE (2009 CE) มาลีฮานน่า ฮองกง เซินเจิ้น [*Marijuana, Hong Kong, Shenzhen*]
- 2553 BE (2010 CE) ฉันอยากร้องเพลงสักเพลง [*I Want to Sing a Song*]; in final round for SEA Write Award
- 2553 BE (2010 CE) ช่างซ่อมตุ๊กตาจากอาเคเซีย [*The Puppet Repairer from Acacia*]
- 2555 BE (2012 CE) โลกประหลาดในประวัติศาสตร์ความเศร้า [*A Weird World in the History of Sadness*]; in final round for SEA Write Award
- 2555 BE (2012 CE) ความว้าเหวแห่งเอเชีย [*The Loneliness of Asia*]
- 2564 BE (2021 CE) เดฟัน เรื่องเล่าของตระกูลคนเขี่ยนเสื่อจากไทรบุรี [*Defan, an Oral Telling of the Lineage of Someone Whipping a Tiger, from Saiburi*]; SEA Write Award
- 2566 BE (2023 CE) ท้าวกัปตันและเรื่องเล่าของคนอื่นๆ [*Captain and the Tales of Others*]