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The Significance of 'Nila' In Malay Foundation Myths: A Study of Sri Nila Pahlawan

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Abstract. This article examines the true significance of *nila* (blue) in the Malay literature from an ocular point of view. The origins of Malay foundation myths as written in the Malay Annals by Tun Sri Lanang, which contain a detailed description of the ancestry of Raja Iskandar Zulkarnain, Sang Sapurba, his miraculous appearance at Bukit Seguntang and introduces the renowned covenant with Demang Lebar Daun, the ruler of Palembang. This study outlines the appearance of *nila* in ancient texts (Sri Nila Pahlawan, Sang Nila Utama, Tuan Putri Nila Panjadi). A visual and textual approach was employed to investigate the importance of *nila* in ancient Malay myths and the determination of its usage in the narratives. Each description was examined and drawn in detail from the aspects of depictions, compared to other texts on the same point and degrees in the Malay world. The aim of this inquiry was to separate the history part from the mythical part and to determine the meaning of the *nila* designation that occurs in multiple accounts throughout the literature. As a conclusion, according to the usage of *nila* in the Malay Annals it can be seen as a name to represent the divine or supreme status of the ruling royal family.

Keywords: *folklore; foundation myth; Malay Annals; nila; tales.*

1 Introduction

This study was carried out by using a contextual review and visual comparison methods. In Arabic *na'ila* means 'one who is successful'. In Irish Celtic there is the variant of *neiland*, which means 'champion'. In Sanskrit *nila* (नील) (*nilah*) means dark blue (or a color between dark purple and dark blue). It can also relate to lapis lazuli (a metamorphic rock) that is prized in Persian culture since antiquity for its intense blue color. In ancient texts, the color blue represents the sky, the ocean and the heavens. Blue also represents trust, loyalty, wisdom, confidence and intelligence. In contrast, in Figure 1, according to the modern definition of blue it is a specific part of the electromagnetic spectrum of light, which is called the visible spectrum.

In religion and mythology the color blue is related to deities. In Ancient Egypt, the god Amun was often portrayed with a blue face and Buddhist medicinal bodhisattvas are drawn with blue skin (the blue Buddha is also known as the Buddha of medicine or healing) [1]. It was also the color of the Sumerian Great Mother and the Greek god Zeus (Jupiter to the Romans). In Hinduism, Vishnu, the Preserver in the Hindu trinity, is depicted with a blue skin, meaning all-pervasive; the sky-blue skin is visually emblematic of his formless and infinite extent [2]. The application of the color blue in Muslim designs and in mosques symbolizes heaven. In Christianity it is the color of the Virgin Mary, signifying purity and sincerity, similar to the color white.

Sri Nila Pahlawan and his brother appearing at Bukit Siguntang marked the foundation of the Malay royal lineage, a symbol of power and hope for the Malay people [3]. It is mentioned in [3] that Sri Nila Utama also used the Nila title while ruling the island of Singapore. Some of these texts were an attempt to signify something through the use of the symbols of a royal or a deity [4]. The current study investigated if the Nila title is an effort to underline the sacred nature of the king and thus reflects his power as a representation of God on earth as mentioned in the modern royal designation *duli* (dust) of 'yang maha mulia' (God).

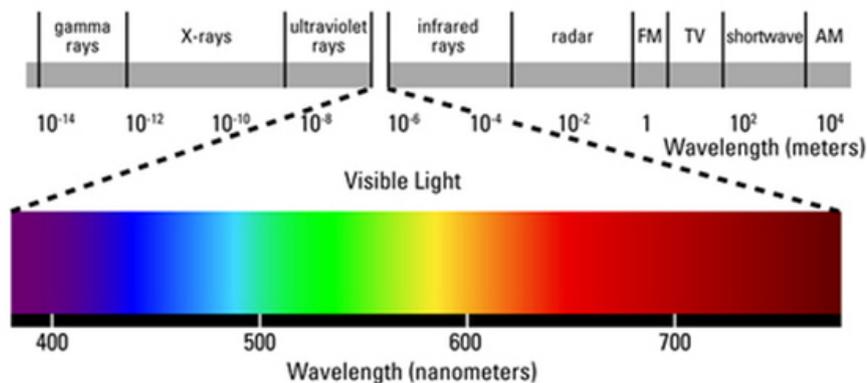


Figure 1 Linear visible color spectrum. Each color has a different wavelength. Red has the longest wavelength and violet has the shortest wavelength [5].

2 Problem Statement

With regard to descriptions of visual representation and other references related to the characters featured in the literary works under study, there are striking *nila* descriptions in these works. The word 'nila' (Sanskrit for blue) is mentioned repeatedly in the Malay Annals by Sri Nilathanam (Nila Manam) in

the lineage of Raja Suran, the Raja of Bijanegara. The title appears in the first chapter in relation to the founder of the Malay Kingdom, Sri Nila Pahlawan (Sri Maharaja Sang Sapurba) and in the foundation myth of Singapore, Sri Maharaja Sang Nila Utama Parameswara, Batara Sri Tribuwana. The tradition continues with Sri Nila Utama (ancestor of the rulers of Minangkabau) [6]. In ancient myths, blue was associated with deity and royalty, but it could also represent a symbol for a character's origins or traits.

Foundation myths are considered sacred texts and are known to lean towards religious traditions. Mythical stories are written with a grand plot and characters who either have a deity-like status, have mythical weapons and are accompanied by animals that can speak and transform easily. While in modern terms the stories are often fancy and elaborate, members of the cultures associated with the accounts often defend a literal interpretation of these texts. Evidence can be found in all countries that have similar folk tales that explain a culture's origins and myths. There are multiple accounts of blue-skinned characters in religious and mythical stories, as shown in Table 1. This color mostly represents the special origin and/or unique capabilities of the characters. The debate towards this matter must be done in a way that does not infringe others' cultural beliefs and sensitivities.

3 Objective

Foundation myths are commonly written in an elaborate and embroidered fashion. However, the textual content can be deciphered and translated to reach a modern understanding. The core objective of this study was to discover the meaning of the usage of *nila* in the Malay Annals, with regard to descriptions of visual representation and other references related to the characters featured in the literary works under study. There are striking *nila* descriptions in *Sulalatus Salatin*, and it occurs repeatedly in the lineage of the Malay Sultanate [7]. Most importantly, the author chose to examine more than the name and social status of some of the literary characters, listing traits and describing significant appearances in the text. This study also aimed to separate fact from fiction in the text with the use of visual and textual comparisons and to find the connection between the Nila title and blue-clored beings and/or deities that appear in human myths and legends. Doubts about the veracity of the author (Tun Sri Lanang) are usually based on the refusal to accept the mystical elements in the text and how facts are intertwined in the story [8]. However, in a wider scope, literature shares a common writing style when it comes to creation myths (Odin, Zeus) and foundation myths [9].

4 Method

This research was conducted by comparing various versions of *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay History) in Jawi and Rumi (Roman) translations. This 17th-century scripture describes the origins of the Malay Sultanate through both historical events and the mythological form of the story. *Sejarah Melayu* is a crucial source of information for scholars in various fields. In this particular research, it supports the understanding of the foundation of the Malay Kingdom. The oldest version of the text dates from 1612 and was written in classical Malay on traditional paper in old Jawi script. Currently, there are 32 variations of the manuscript. The keyword *nila* appears in the second chapter of the book that describes the children of Raja Suran arriving at Bukit Siguntang in Palembang. Referring to the selected corpus of Malay narratives, the literary characters in the different chapters can be identified.

The research took the latter approach to understand the meaning of *nila* in these historical texts by drawing parallels with other foundation myths, such as Jimmu Tenno from Japan, King Arthur from England and Huangdi Yandi from China. In these myths, the founding father is elevated to a status that is beyond human limits and mixed with supernatural phenomena, mystical weapons and anthropomorphic characters. The similarities between these texts and the belief system associated with them were a crucial cross references for this research. Apart from that, we also put emphasis on visual comparison to find connections between the Malay Annals and other popular foundation myths from around the world.

5 Concept

5.1 Nila (Sanskrit: blue) in Malay Classical Text Sulalatus Salatin

There are four accounts of the Nila title in the text of the Malay Annals, in the 400-year lineage of Sang Sapurba, who ruled the ancient Malay Kingdom. The earliest use of the Nila title was related to Sri Nilathanam (Nila Manam), the Raja of Bijanegara in the 11th century, followed by Sri Nila Pahlawan, Sri Maharaja Sang Sapurba, who paved the way for the Malay Sultanate at Bukit Siguntang. This tradition goes beyond Palembang to the island of Temasek, where Sri Maharaja Sang Nila Utama Parameswara and Batara Sri Tribuwana traveled to and were crowned as rulers of Singapura [10]. The last royal to hold the Nila title was Sri Nila Utama (ancestor of the rulers of Minangkabau). Throughout the literature, the Nila title is associated with nobility and claims to the Malay kingship [10].

5.2 Blue-Color Depictions of Figures in Religious Texts

In ancient times a specific blue color was used for the clothes of deities to indicate their divinity and unique abilities. Colors play an important symbolic role in religion and culture. They have a very profound significance, transcending purely decorative values. The color blue is a symbol of the infinite and the perdurable as manifested in deities. The application of the same colors for deities from different origins and descriptions is shown in Table 1. Any value that is immeasurable can appear to the mortal eye only as blue, just like the sky appears blue to the physical eye. Most of these characters are described as being beyond our perception.

5.2.1 Ancient Egypt

In ancient Egypt, blue was related to fertility, rebirth and the power of creation. Blue symbolized the river Nile and the creator god Amun, who was often depicted with a blue face. Another Egyptian god was Toth, whose dominant symbol was the Ibis bird with its blue feathers.

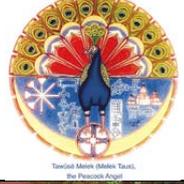
5.2.2 Islam

Although green is the dominant color in Islam, in the Middle East blue is a protective color and it is evidently found in some of the most famous mosques. Such blue mosques can be found in Afghanistan, Malaysia and Egypt.

5.2.3 Buddhism

In Chinese Buddhism one of the four world guardians, (Si Dà Tiānwáng, the Four Great Heavenly Kings) is the South King Virūḍhaka, who also ruled the ancient Kumbhāṇḍas. He is characterized by a blue skin tone. Dorje Jigje (Yamantaka) is the protector of the Yellow Hat faction, also known as the destroyer of Yama and the Lord of Death. He is a blue, beastly-looking creature with eight heads, one of which is the head of a bull, and with strings of skulls around his waist and neck. Yamantaka Nagpo Chenpo (Mahakala) is a wrathful Tantric god and a manifestation of Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara), blue-skinned and with fanged teeth, a crown made of skulls, and holding a trident and a skull cup. Mahakala Chan Dorje (Vajrapani) is the enraged bodhisattva of energy. He is displayed in blue with a tiger skin around his waist and a serpent around his neck. Demchok (Chakrasamvara) is a meditational blue deity with 12 arms, four faces, and with a crescent moon in his topknot.

Table 1 Similarities in Applications of Blue to Deities in Major Religions and Mythological Idols Worldwide [2].

Deities	Classification by Deities	Origins	Descriptions
	Hapi	Ancient Egypt	Hapi represents the annual flooding god of the Nile in ancient Egyptian religion.
	Akshobhya	Buddhism	Akshobhya signifies consciousness.
	Tlaloc	Ancient Aztecs	God of rain, water and fertility
	Melek Ta'us/ Malik Tous	Yazidi	Peacock angel
	Krisna/Shiva	Hinduism	Major deity in Hindusim. Avatar of Vishnu, the god of compassion, tenderness and love
	Oni	Japanese folklore tales derived from Hinduism/Buddhism	Ogre, troll, devil in red or blue, man-eating in Hinduism, Yaksha and Rakshasa

5.2.4 Tibetan

The guardian of Lhasa, Palden Lhamo (Shri Devi) is part of the Dalai Lama's Yellow Hat faction. Tara, an angry manifestation of the female colleague of Nagpo Chenpo (Mahakala), has blue skin, wears tiger and human skin clothes, with earrings fashioned from a snake and a lion. Tara is typically depicted holding a skull cup of blood in her left hand and a huge club in her right hand.

5.2.5 Hinduism

According to Hinduism, the creator has given the maximum of blue to nature: the sky, the oceans, the rivers and the lakes. It is symbolic of the peacefulness of nature. The Hindus perceive blue as a representation of serenity and insight. Several Hindu gods, Vishnu, Krishna and Shiva, can be found in Table 1 as having blue skin. Therefore, the color blue represents godly characteristics such as bravery, kindness, fortitude and protectiveness. Lord Rama and Krishna dedicated their life to protecting humanity and destroying evil; hence they are portrayed in blue.

5.2.6 Christianity

Blue is associated with Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular, particularly the image of the Virgin Mary. In the Christian perspective it represents hope, generosity and the triumph of life over death. It is a dominant color closely related to Christmas and the prolonged summer season of the Trinity.

5.2.7 The Color Blue in Human History

There is evidence in medical science related to blue-skinned humans in the modern world. This medical condition is known as methemoglobinemia, a blood disorder caused by the production of an abnormally high amount of methemoglobin (a form of hemoglobin). Humans require hemoglobin molecules in their red blood cells to distribute oxygen throughout the body. The most popularly known case with a similar condition were the Fugates, a family who resided in isolation in the hills of Kentucky from 1800 to 1960. They were also known as the Blue Fugates or the Blue People of Kentucky [11].

6 Origins

Sri Nila Pahlawan (full name: Sri Maharaja Sang Sapurba Paduka Sri Trimurti Tri Buana), also known as Sang Sapurba, is a significant figure in the Malay Annals. He was highly respected as the legendary great ancestor of a number of major dynasties in the Malay world: Palembang (Srivijaya), Siak Sri Indrapura,

Pahang, Johor, Malacca, Singapore, Kelantan and Terengganu. He first appeared with his younger brothers, Kama Pandita and Sri Nila Utama, on the sacred hill of Seguntang [12].

It is claimed that they were descendants from the King Iskandar Dzulkarnain, where the family lineage branched out from Raja Suran. There have always been differences of opinion on this family's origins. The text clearly states that they are descendants of King Iskandar Dzulkarnain (not connected to Alexander the Great, but to Cyrus the Great). This, however, contradicts the name and visual description in the text, which describes the characters more towards Hinduism characteristics.

6.1 Genealogical Discrepancies

6.2 Case 1

Sang Sapurba is similar to Shapur, a common name in the Persian lineage. Furthermore, in a classical text he was a descendant of Raja Nusirwan 'Adil bin Kibad Syahriar.

"We are descendant from King Iskandar Dzulkarnain, our lineage from King Nusirwan, King of Masyrik and Maghrib and our origins come from Sulaiman 'alaihi salam." [13]

The text mentions Sulaiman, a great prophet in the three major religions, Islam, Christian and Judaism, who is believed to be identical to Sang Sapurba.

6.3 Case 2

Due to the heavy mystical elements in the text where it resembles an Indian text, the usage of the name bears resemblance to an Indian genealogy. It is believed that the ruling house came from India, but descendants from Iskandar Dzulkarnain reigned in the region.

"Like Iskandar, who during his invasion of India conquered two realms, Hind and Sind, having overwhelmed their kings Kinda Hindi and Puz (Porus) in single combat, Raja Suran during his march to China captured two kingdoms, Gangga Negara and Ganggayu inon the Malay Peninsula, having defeated their kings in the same manner. Incidentally, after his victory over Kida Hindi and Puz, Iskandar wandered to South India and reached Ceylon, a mysterious island to the east that was roughly in the same area as Raja Suran." [14]

Throughout the text, the Nila title is not associated with Hinduism but with the Sanskrit origin of the word *nila* (blue), which is a classical title in the Malay language. In history, Sri Nila Utama (Sang Purba) married Wan Sendari, the daughter of the native leader Demang Lebar Daun. This resulted in the establishment of the Malay royal genealogy with Sri Nila Utama as the founding father, thus creating the Malay nation. The Nila title was used as a symbol of kingship and authority [15].

7 Findings

The Malay Royal House was established after Raja Aftab ul-Ardl Sri Nila Pahlawan, Sri Maharaja Sang Sapurba (full name: Nila Pahlawan Sang Sri Prabhu Dharma Sena Tribuwana) appeared in the ancient land of Palembang accompanied by mystical phenomena. After being adopted by Wan Empuk and Wan Malini, the siblings were accepted as part of the local community, however, this was not the reason for them to secure their position as rulers of the land.

At a later date, Sang Sapurba traversed the great central range of Sumatra into the Minangkabau highlands, where great serpent-snake Saktimuna was killed by one of his warriors, Permasku Mambang, using the mythical sword, Cura Si Manjakini [16]. As shown in Table 2, a serpent in mythical scriptures can represent evil elements, such as pirates or barbarians.

Table 2 Interpretation of data.

Explicature	Sang Sapurba discovered and crossed the central mountain range of Sumatra into the Minangkabau highlands. There one of his warriors, Permasku Mambang, killed the great serpent Saktimuna using Cura Si Manjakini, his renowned and sacred sword.
Logical Form	SNAKE = the serpent or snake is one of the oldest and most widespread mythological symbols. The word 'serpent' is derived from the Latin <i>serpens</i> , meaning snake. Snakes are affiliated with numerous old rituals.
Implicit Assumption	Slaying a serpent symbolises the display of power of a leader to overcome a threat.
Implicit Conclusion	The battle won against evil elements in the region, such as pirates or barbarians.
Type of ad hoc	Broadening

Thus, Sang Sapurba was installed as king by the grateful people, becoming the first Prince of Minangkabau [17]. The true establishment of the royal Malay bloodline was secured by the covenant with chief Demang Lebar Daun as stated in the classical text:

“Demang Lebar Daun said, ‘Your Highness, the descendants of your humble servant shall be the subjects of your Majesty’s throne, but the servants ought to be well treated by your heirs. If they were to transgress, they shall not, nevertheless grave be their offence, be humiliated or hated with evil words: if their wrongdoing is severe, let them be placed to death, if that is in accordance with the divine law.’ And the Ruler replied, ‘I therefore coincide the undertaking for which you ask: but I in my turn require an undertaking from you, my servant.’ And when Demang Lebar Daun inquired on the information of the undertakings, the king replied, ‘that your descendants shall not once for rest of time be unfaithful to my heir, even if my descendants coerced them and acted wickedly.’ Thus Demang Lebar Daun answered, ‘Very well, your Highness. But if your descendants leave and break the terms of the contract, then so will I.’ therefore Sang Sapurba replied, ‘Very well, I agree to that pledge.’” [18]

After this event, ‘Nila Pahlawan’ (Blue Warrior) was used in association with Sang Sapurba, who bore the ancient sword of Cura Si Manjakini. This event marked the treaty between the royal bloodline and the local tribe of Palembang, thus embedding the Nila title in the Malay Annals [19]. In the establishment of Singapore, the Nila title again appears when Sang Nila Utama claimed the throne of the new land and became the leader of the nation. This tradition proves that the Nila title is associated with kingship and can be only used in relation to that particular bloodline.

7.1 Heroism

Heroism and the idea of the hero’s quest are vital elements in building the basis for a belief. In numerous foundation myths, the hero’s quest has a periodic structure and usually involves a hero with an impossible mission that requires him to leave home, with climaxes of challenges, and once successful, the champion is offered the hand of a princess as a reward. Storylines related to heroism from different cultures with a similar content structure can be seen in Table 3.

This structure is repeated in the tales of Sri Nila Utama when he leaves home with his brother, Sri Nila Pahlawan, and defeats Saktimuna and Sang Nila Utama. An adventure takes him from his homeland to newly found Singapore. The color blue reflects the universality of government. As a symbol of sovereignty, calmness, kindness of heart and connection with the heavens it is the most common color to convey goodness. In this case, the Nila title refers to a hero who saved from a community from a calamity. This act of heroism is romanticized further by the god-like power of the sword bearer.

Table 3 Foundation myth characters and their attributes (a darker shade corresponds to the level of characteristics in the narrative text).

	ROYALTY/DEITY/ FATHER	UNDERWATER REALM/ORIGIN	JOURNEY	WARRIOR	MYTHICAL WEAPON	MYSTIC ANIMAL	SERPENT SLAYING	MARRY PRINCESS	ELEVATED TO KING	KINGDOM FOUNDER	
SRI NILA PAHLAWAN	Dark Red	Orange	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	MALAY
SANG NILA UTAMA	Dark Red	Yellow	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Red	MALAY
HERACLES	Orange	Yellow	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	GREEK
MARDUK	Dark Red	Yellow	Orange	Red	Red	Red	Red	Orange	Red	Red	PERSIAN
KING ARTHUR	Dark Red	Yellow	Orange	Red	Red	Yellow	Red	Orange	Red	Red	ENGLISH
PERSEUS	Orange	Yellow	Red	Orange	Red	Red	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	GREEK
LAQ LONG QUAN	Dark Red	Red	Orange	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	ASEAN
BEOWOLF	Dark Red	Yellow	Orange	Red	Orange	Red	Red	Yellow	Orange	Yellow	ENGLISH

8 Discussion

Although the literature is punctuated with real dates and events, the accounts are intertwined with fiction. Therefore, mythology was profoundly believed, a crucial and embedded part of people’s lives. There has been debate about the true meanings behind the shrouded myths and legends in the text. In modern days, the color blue is part of the national symbols of a number of countries, such as the royal insignia from the United Kingdom in Figure 2.



Figure 2 Application of the royal blue insignia from the United Kingdom [20].

However, if we interpret the texts as symbolic, real events are mixed with figurative elements in stories about rulers and deities. Light and silver vehicles are visual representatives of divinity and a celestial origin. An underwater kingdom represents a society that is far more advanced than what the locals can imagine.

Sang Nila Utama throwing a crown into the sea symbolizes human insignificance compared to mother nature. Incidents like a major assault by swordfish are a symbol of rage over a king's ruthlessness [10]. The Nila title is the highest status associated with leadership and royalty: 'King of Kings'. Nila as title is a vindication of a ruler's sovereignty and the nobility of his name. All historical figures, including Sulalatus Salatin, have exaggerations connected to them and it is hard to disentangle myth from fact [21].

9 Conclusions

Nila in the Malay Annals is a royal title. Historically, blue is a color that has long been associated with royalty, art and the military and in modern society with business. The Malay Annals date back to the 12th century, around the same time as Salehhudin Al-Ayubi and Merah Silu (Hikayat Raja Pasai). Their contents have similarities, including mystic elements and supernatural events. The stories in the Malay Annals also have similarity to the tales about Olympus (Greek) and Valhalla (Norse). However, these mystic elements do not align with other texts, such as *Trebuchet* (Richard The Lion), *Greek Fire* (Salehudin al Ayubi), and advanced civilization (Hikayat Samudera Pasai). The text by Tun Sri Lanang has the form of a foundation myth. The narration seems to exaggerate every aspect of the arrival of Sang Sapurba at Bukit Siguntang in Palembang. The usage of romance and special events in the scripture closely resembles foundation myths from all over the world. Similar stories can be found in China, Japan and Britain. Sang Sapurba (Sri Nila Utama) is described as a supreme being who descended from above in a silver bull vehicle. Such exaggerations were designed to portray the nobility of the main figures in the tales.

The usage of *nila* in the Malay Annals is a designation to represent the divine or supreme status of a royal family. In the foundation myths, the entities are often described in an explanatory manner and are considered sacred. A man attributed with a supernatural entry, celestial origins and heroic traits is considered to be entitled to the highest regard as royalty. Sang Nila Utama has a larger-than-life history behind him, confirmed by the title *Nila*. Cultures around the world use the same colors to symbolize mythical gods and heroes as role models, upholding their heroic deeds and customs they established as positive examples.

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