



Getting the Bugs Out in Kampoon Boontawee's *A Child of the Northeast*

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Abstract

This study discusses the wild insects hunted and eaten by the protagonist Koon, the boy in Boontawee's *A Child of the Northeast* and explains how he learns to hunt and eat them. It also presents the states of finding and consuming the tiny insects which reflect human kinship. Theoretical ideas regarding kinship stated by Robin Fox and other researchers are focused on. The qualitative method is employed; the findings are reported in the form of a descriptive analysis. The study finds that mainly three types of wild insects are hunted. The boy learns how to find cicadas from his father. He learns how to find crickets from his mother. Eventually, he learns how to get red ants' eggs from his father and neighbors. All are done under the mode of simplicity with a moderate sense while human kinship can be seen. Edible wild insects, including wild animals and plants, play a part in becoming locals living a traditional lifestyle within nature. The study argues that the wilderness can bring a family and its friends together as a single community.

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1. Introduction

Northeastern Thailand, popularly called *Isan* among the Thais, has been suffering a long drought and very poor harvest for a long time. However, in the novel *A Child of the Northeast* (2005), Kampon Boontawee (1928-2003), a male Isan-born writer, perfectly demonstrates how the villagers' families overcome numerous difficulties and how such hardship drives them to find different food sources for their living. Boontawee sensibly portrays how such food inextricably connects to the survival of the people in a remote and dry land. Because of the difficulties, researchers have studied problems and situations in this region. Suwanmontri and Kawashima (2016) reports the following:

The worst is found in an out-migrating Northeast region, from 4.9 to 16.9 percent. A positive correlation coefficient of 0.61, between average percent out-migration and change in aging agricultural worker percentage, clarified that inter-provincial migration in Thailand has created an aging agricultural society and may cause instability in Thai agriculture. (p. 40)

Like many Isan people, Boontawee did all sorts of jobs to earn a living. He used to work as a construction worker, a worker working at a port, a tricycle rider, and a stable boy—all were in Bangkok. Despite doing the jobs involving hard physical labor, he received more education which led him to get a better job. Boontawee became a teacher in a primary school in the southern part of Thailand, far from Yasothorn, his hometown in the Northeastern Plateau. Changing his job to a prison warden, he still worked in the south. Although finding a better job, Boontawee was unable to make sufficient income to support his family. As a result, he looked for a way to earn more money. In 1970, he wrote a short story, "Nitharn Luk Thung" ["A Story of Country People]," which was accepted by a commercial magazine. From that moment onwards, he became a fiction writer. His first novel is *Manut 100 Kook (100 Prison Men)* (1974). His famous novels include *Luk Isan (A Child of the Northeast)* (2005) and *Nai Hoi Tamin (The Lethal Rancher)* (1977).

Of all his works, *A Child of the Northeast* has enjoyed a lot of success. In 1976, the novel won the Best Thai Novel of the Year. In 1979, it was awarded the S.E.A. Write Award, given annually to the poets and the writers in Southeast Asian countries, and permitted by the Ministry of Education of Thailand to be one of the extracurricular reading materials in schools. The novel was translated into English by Susan Fulop Kepner. It is also translated into French and Japanese. Furthermore, in 1982, the novel was adapted for a Thai film.

The novel portrays the villagers' struggle amidst the drought in the northeastern region of Thailand. An eight-year-old boy named Koon and his father are the two main characters. Others are Koon's younger sisters, Yee-soon and Boonlai, his mother, and his female cousin named Kamgong. Through the eyes of Koon, events and circumstances are depicted. The whole family has to leave home to catch fish in a river. Although the drought leads the family to face difficulties and hardships, they never live apart. Koon and his two sisters are brought up with love, laughter, and warmth of their parents. Kamgong is portrayed as a pleasant character as well. She has a simple life and can start her own family. The novel, Kepner (2005) describes, "has been appreciated for its universal appeal. It is the simplest of tales, celebrating the most essential aspects of human life : survival, hope, loyalty, and love" (p. 8). The reality is that although the majority of the Isan people's incomes have dropped, they "are resilient, optimistic, and they believe that they will survive" (Lao et al., 2019, p. 16).

Some reviews have pointed out hunting wild foods in the novel. Prachakul (2009) suggests, "Even cuisine, hunting, handicraft techniques, local traditions and beliefs, etc.—all appear various and complex" (p. 45). Jaban (2013) notices "the pictures of the environment, local housing, and Koon's father's hunting for food in the woods in the dry season" (p. 3). Like Prachakul and Jaban, Wathasit (2015) notes that "The story reflects how the villagers hunt for food in the forests, prepare the local tools to find food in the dry season, and how they apply their local wisdom to make the living" (p. 4). These reviews make it clear that, for the villagers, natural habitats are the main places to find food and wild animals are the main sources of food. Also, it is apparent that the villagers go into the woods together.

Apart from the reviews, various studies explore the novel. For instance, Chuenpraphanusorn (2014) reports the following:

It is the simplest of tales but fullest in quality, celebrating the most essential aspects of human life: survival, hope, diligence, self-awareness, forbearance, appropriate wisdom to live life with the immune system by moderation with reasonableness and loyalty of the land of birth and conducting themselves in a middle pathway of life... (p. 24)

While Chuenpraphanusorn explores the term *ecological awareness*, different researchers have explored the novel through different aspects. Ryan (2020) reports that “the regional awareness of the Chi River bioregion of Thailand, as exhibited by the traditional knowledge of the characters, shapes the narrative and the ethnobotanical knowledge contained within it” (p. 4). The author’s choice of languages, Prasansak (2020) points out, “indicates not only the dynamics of multiple belongings of Isan subjects but also the author’s concerted effort to use his regional literary repertoire (the Isan dialect) in the dominant Thai literary space” (p. 3).

The terms *culture*, *wisdom*, *hope*, *love*, *loyalty*, and *language* have been explored quite extensively. Nonetheless, it is rare to see catching and eating wild animals and the ways to hunt them related directly to literary studies. Wild insects emerge to be eaten throughout the story. Because wild insects are part of the villagers’ main food, this study focuses on how the locals catch the insects, cook, and eat them. The little insects often turn out to be the main courses of Koon’s family and of the villagers. As a result, the study points out that hunting and consuming wild insects signify something that is much more significant than the insects’ tiny bodies.

In real life, insects have been reported to be consumed by humans. Morris (2004) reports, “Insects have significant nutritional value, and in many communities, as in Malawi, they form an important supplement to the diet” (p. 185). In other places around the world, food with insects is part of healthy home cooking. According to Huis (2013), “Termites are generally consumed fried, sun-dried or smoked, although they are steamed in banana leaves in Uganda” (p. 25). It is reported that “In the Lake Victoria region of East Africa, where the grasshoppers are known as nsenene, they form a major part of food culture” (Kinyuru et al., 2010, as cited in Huis, 2013, p. 27). Dark chocolate crickets

with amaranth seeds and chile-lime crickets with pumpkin seeds are examples of the products of Don Bugito, a San Francisco based company focused on planet-friendly protein snacks. Fried crickets are also found everywhere in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. In Thailand, various insects are fried such as bamboo caterpillars, crickets, and grasshoppers. These insects are consumed as tasty snacks in every region. Spicy traditional cuisines are often served with cooked insects. Especially in the northeastern region, a spicy salad with a mixture of red ants' eggs and some local ingredients is a well-known specialty.

As they have long been associated with humans as food, the wild insects are brought into full play in the novel *A Child of the Northeast*. Kepner (2005), Prachakul (2009), Jaban (2013), and Wathasit (2015) review some similar and distinctive points. Chuenpraphanusorn (2014), Ryan (2020), and Prasansak (2020) study the novel in terms of cultural practices. However, this study focuses on the wild insects: cicadas, crickets, and red ants' eggs hunted and eaten by Koon and his family and the traditional ways they use to catch them. Koon's parents not only hunt insects as food but use them as specific tools to transfer certain local wisdom to Koon. Furthermore, hunting in the woods results in bonding. This leads this study to observe a distinctive motif of *kinship* which is demonstrated throughout the story.

In general, kinship means a family relationship or a strong relationship between people. It involves the family and social relationships which form basic human facts of life. It is said that kinship is "to anthropology what logic is to philosophy or the nude is to art; it is the basic discipline of the subject (Fox, 1967, as cited in Kuper, 2018a, p. 1). Conducting a study among Malays, Carsten (1995) views this close relationship as *relatedness* and reports that "In Langkawi relatedness is derived both from acts of procreation and from living and eating together" (p. 236). Read (2016) explains this bonding, as follows:

However, kinship is not biological kinship, but rather kinship as it is culturally constructed and based on a conceptual system that enables individuals to compute in a simple manner whether they are kin to one another. If A knows his or her kin relationship to B, and B knows

his or her kin relationship to C, then A, B and C can each calculate their respective kin relationships to each other through the logic of their kinship terminology. (p. 30)

In terms of philosophy, kinship can be classified as a system. The kinship system refers to “a pattern of behavior based on experience and appreciation which is integrated in an ideal and physical form of culture” (Rajamarpodang, 1992, as cited in Harianja & Sudrajat, 2021, p. 760). The kinship system, Harianja and Sudrajat (2021) also point out, “has an important meaning in many societies, both simple and advanced societies, and relationships with ancestors and relatives are the key to relationships in social structures” (p. 760). This study defines *kinship* as a strong relationship, reflected through parenthood, socialization, and cultural activities, between families, friends, and communities that ties humans together in a pleasant way. Then, this study hypothesizes that the wild insects are characterized to be caught, cooked, and eaten by the main and supporting characters and that the local wisdom is taught and learned through the mode of kinship. The three objectives are: 1) to identify the insects hunted and eaten by the protagonist Koon, his family, and his neighbors; 2) to explain how the insects are caught and how the boy has learned to catch and eat them; and 3) to point out the conditions of hunting and consuming insects through the concept of kinship.

2. Scope of the Study

The data are from both primary and secondary sources. Theoretical ideas regarding kinship stated by Robin Fox and other researchers are highlighted. The primary source is Boontawee's *A Child of the Northeast*, the English version published by Pouyzian in Bangkok, Thailand in 2005. The dialogues between Koon and his parents, his close relatives, his neighbors, and a close friend named Jundi are examined. Also, the descriptions of events involving Koon from the beginning until the end of the story are considered. Studies, reviews, and books relevant to the three objectives of this study are the secondary sources. Some reports of the insects consumed in different cultures are seen as different useful sources.

3. Methodology

A qualitative method is employed. First, the data were gathered from the academic articles and the reviews about the novel. Relevant data were gathered from the books about the edible insects and foods as well. Meanwhile, the concepts of kinship were studied and considered in terms of anthropology and philosophy. After the term *kinship* had been defined, all data collected were considered to form the research questions. Second, the dialogues between Koon and his parents, including other villagers, and the narration of the events were extracted for in-depth study. There were 15 excerpts selected. Third, the analysis of hunting and eating the wild insects was carried out under the three research questions. The methods of catching and cooking insects as well as the local wisdom involving eating them were studied. Additionally, the states of hunting the insects reflected through such portrayals in the mode of kinship were analyzed. The study also argued that there are some humanistic aspects reflected in catching and consuming the insects. The findings were presented in the form of a descriptive report, followed by the discussion and the conclusion.

4. Findings

The study finds that Koon and his family members eat different kinds of wild insects, and the first ones are cicadas. The father tells the boy to take a primitive tool used for catching cicadas. He tells Koon “to fetch the gum tube” (Boontawee, 2005, p. 30). The gum tube, a bamboo tube filled with gum and bullock’s hair, looks primitive. The tube is not too big for the boy to grasp. Although small and simple, the tool is important for catching cicadas. It is not a mechanical device, so it is easy to use. On the other hand, when the boy grasps the tool, it implies that catching cicadas will be practiced later. The tool taken by the boy also means that, as a hunter going into the woods, the role of the father is overshadowed by his son’s. While this signifies the importance of cicadas as food and the woods as food sources, it indicates the young boy as a new hunter of the woods and breadwinner of the family. At that moment, the gum tube is brought closer by Koon not only to get closer to the woods but also to the bug hunting. In other words, the real sense of hunting the bugs has started. It can be said that Koon’s father makes the boy get closer to cicadas and their habitats although they are still at

home. In the eyes of his father, Koon is old enough to go into the wild to hunt the insects and, perhaps, other animals for food.

After the boy and the father have caught some cicadas in the wilderness, they have a short break for lunch. It is noon when Koon asks, “When do we eat, Papa?” (Boontawee, 2005, p. 31). Although it is just a question showing the boy’s hunger, it reflects something. Koon knows that it is in the woods where he and his father eat their meal, so wild food gathered there becomes the meal. The only living insects hunted are cicadas. As a result, the cicadas will be eaten as a main course, not as a supplement. While the woods become a place for the boy and the father to have lunch, living cicadas turn out to be their lunch. Moreover, without a kitchen or a pot, it is possible that the bugs are eaten raw. Regardless of hygienic conditions, the flesh of raw cicadas is accepted, at that moment, as food. This reflects that hunting in an isolated area intertwined with hunger can lead humans to eat some insects raw. It can be assumed that other wild animals may be eaten raw in the woods as well.

Before eating the insects, the boy learns how to prepare the cicadas from his father. The father immediately demonstrates how to kill and prepare the insects, as follows:

You pinch the head, like this, to kill it. Then you snap off the wings and the legs, like this. Then squeeze out the insides. You have to squeeze out all the shit. Are you watching? You can’t eat it until you squeeze out all the shit.

(Boontawee, 2005, p. 32)

It is the first time for Koon to kill and eat cicadas in a forest. If he had not watched, Koon would not have known the right way to kill and prepare the insects. The insects would have run or flown away if the boy had not followed his father’s advice. The father’s teaching implies that he is careful about his son’s diet. The continual performance shows that the demonstration goes so well. The word *you* expressed by the father means that it is Koon, but not the father, who kills and prepares the insects.

This expression makes Koon realize that he must listen to his father and follow him. Then, Koon is able to kill and prepare the insects to eat. The first experience of hunting the very small and wild insects appears easy and simple for Koon. In a place where Koon finds the insects, he is ready to consume them. His readiness reveals that he pays attention to what his father teaches. Regardless of the hunting and preparing the bugs to eat, this hunting signifies bonding. It is the bonding that takes place in the wilderness where local wisdom is directly transferred from the father to the son. By consuming the bugs, their close relationship is significantly displayed. In the wild, they can talk, walk, hunt, and eat without interruption and with joy.

Having shown Koon how to kill cicadas, his father also demonstrates how to eat them: "Koon watched as his father wrapped a tender jik leaf around the cicada he had prepared, then dipped the little packet into the jaew, tossed it into his mouth, and began chewing noisily" (Boontawee, 2005, p. 32). The tarf jik leaves and the jaew sauce appear to be instructional materials directly used with the raw cicadas. The practical demonstration of eating the cicadas given by his father is so clear that Koon can follow without difficulty. The phrase *chewing noisily* implies that a raw insect eaten with the wild ingredient and the local sauce has an unusual flavor. The father's performance, stimulated by hunger, leads the boy to kill and eat cicadas raw immediately. According to the definition of kinship defined by this study, the ties of kinship between them is observed. There is a strong relationship arising between the father and the son. It leads the father to take care of his son, be concerned about his hunger, and teach the son how to hunt and eat the insects. When the son carefully listens to the father, he shows that he truly admires his father and really gets pleasure from hunting and consuming the cicadas. Therefore, this hunting symbolizes kinship between the father and the son.

After they have finished eating cicadas, the father tells Koon the suitable time to find them. Then, Koon asks, "How can you see the cicadas at night?" (Boontawee, 2005, p. 32). The boy shows his real interest in hunting cicadas when he asks his father to tell him more about hunting cicadas. This means that the taste of the raw cicadas with flavors of the jik leaves and the jaew sauce not only is good but also encourages the boy's willingness to hunt. For the father, he succeeds in teaching his boy to hunt them. If hunting wild creatures for food is something the father chooses as part of survival, this hunting helps him perfect his purpose. Koon's attention leads the

father to explain the following:

You don't have to see them. It is easy to know a tree that is full of cicadas because when you walk beneath that tree you feel cooler. They are all up in that tree, pissing, and it makes a fine cool mist. When I come to a tree that is cool to walk under, I cut it down.

(Boontawee, 2005, p. 32)

The statements *you don't have to* and *it is easy* show the real sense of simplicity of hunting cicadas. According to the father, it is easy to detect the bugs through their urine at night. The insects can be hunted wherever a cool mist is found in the atmosphere. The simplicity leads Koon to understand that hunting these insects is not difficult and that he can do it by himself. In addition, his father allows him to hunt at night. This gives Koon a strong sense of adventure although his father still accompanies him. Most importantly, when he can hunt by himself, the boy gains his father's trust. In other words, while Koon trusts and respects his father, the father believes in him. It can be said that hunting tiny insects makes the boy proud of himself.

These bugs are taken home, too. When mentioning about the nighttime, the father also says, "When the tree falls, I light my torch and pick them off the leaves, and throw them into the basket" (Boontawee, 2005, p. 32). Sealed in the basket, the cicadas are kept secured enough so that they cannot escape from it. It is obvious that wild insects are eaten in their habitats and at home. The little wild insects appear to be something more significant than their very small bodies because their flesh becomes the main food item of all members of Koon's family. In terms of kinship, the cicadas not only connect the father and the son but also the whole family.

Besides cicadas, Koon's family also eats wild crickets. It is Koon's mother who takes the boy to a forest and teaches him to catch the tiny insects. It reads:

After a rice harvest, it is easy to find them among the stooks and fresh straw. But when the fields are dry, the crickets go into the woods to live beneath bushes. And when even the woods become dry, the crickets stay in their holes underground.

(Boontawee, 2005, pp. 171-172)

The story suggests the local wisdom of the villagers through Koon's mother and lets the boy learn that wisdom from her. The characterization shows that the mother knows where these bugs live in different places at different times. Like hunting cicadas, the word *easy* is used to inform that hunting crickets is simple. When the wood becomes dry, the crickets move to other habitats, yet the bugs are found easily. Like cicadas, anyone can catch the crickets. It is this unique simplicity that makes the wild insects often appear in the villagers' main meal of the day. The simplicity of catching the insects and the way the mother teaches him also imply that next time in the wood, Koon can catch the crickets without any help from his mother. Later, Koon's mother explains all steps of the crickets' life cycle, as follows:

It is the job of the male cricket to dig a hole for the female, she explained. The female would stay down there until it is time for her to lay her eggs; then she would come up and lay them under a bush. When the eggs hatched, those new crickets would start the whole thing over again, in pairs, digging new crickets' holes.

(Boontawee, 2005, p. 172)

The explanation of all crickets' activity embraces a sense of existence of the insects. As the insects live as a couple, hunters can find both males and females at the same time. Although the parents are caught, there are still eggs hatching to be born. Besides a simple way to find the crickets, the life cycle of the insects enables Koon to understand that he can find them and consume them forever. Through hunting, the crickets tie the mother and the boy together. Like the father, the mother shows her

love and care to the boy. Also, the boy carefully listens to what she says and follows her. According to this study, Koon and his mother present their close relationship or kinship.

Equipped with some information about crickets, Koon learns the skills to catch them. Like the father, the mother demonstrates how to identify the places where the crickets live. She says that Koon has to scratch “energetically at the dirt” (Boontawee, 2005, p. 172). She also says, “If there is a cricket down there, you will soon know, because it will fly out” (Boontawee, 2005, p. 172). The mother gives instructions as she hunts for crickets herself. This makes hunting easier for Koon to understand. The following shows that the boy can grasp the first cricket:

Koon went to another bush and vigorously poked the ground beneath it. Almost at once, a cricket with black wings flew up from the dirt. Koon grabbed it excitedly, and pinched off its head.” “Mama! Look!” His mother smiled and said, “That is good, Koon, but don’t pinch off the heads now. We will do that just before we roast them.

(Boontawee, 2005, p. 172)

The word *vigorously* reflects Koon’s energetic activities. Making the first grab, he successfully performs the task. Koon can see and catch the first cricket before his mother can. Even more, Koon can catch the cricket while it is flying up. This shows he understands what his mother has just told him and he is capable of finding and catching the crickets. Also, the word *excitedly* implies that he enjoys doing this activity. Although the mother tells him that killing it at once is not right, it indicates that Koon is good at doing this. Unlike the father, the mother does not let the boy kill the insects in the woods. It is because the crickets must be roasted before being eaten.

Catching the crickets and cicadas is seen as local wisdom. Both the father and the mother can teach the boy how to find and catch those insects. Like the father, the mother teaches the boy the simplicity of catching small wild insects. As a result,

Koon can catch the insects. From that moment onwards, the story of hunting wild insects has been handed down from generation to generation. Even more, tiny insects represent other wild insects that can be eaten. They also symbolize the bigger animals like birds, frogs, fish, and so on—all can be humans' food. It can be said that both the mother and the father choose tiny insects as the first lessons to teach the boy to gather foods from the forests.

Although the main reason to go into the woods is to hunt wild insects and some other animals, catching the insects promotes a strong relationship in the family. If considered in terms of biological concepts, kinship takes place because Koon is the parents' biological son. In this case, kinship does not start when the insects are hunted. It exists at home before they go into the woods. That is, biological conditions give birth to kinship before it is developed and maintained through steadfast love and relationship shared within the family. Wherever they do activities together in a pleasant way, kinship is presented. For example, local wisdom maintains itself when it is transferred while kinship is also maintained through it. In the excerpts, kinship is promoted well because the parents can choose activities and places that are suitable for the son. The woods, in this regard, promote kinship because they provide some benefits the family needs and no one else interrupts them there. It can be said that kinship at home causes the main characters to present kinship in the forest. Therefore, this study views kinship as the root and master of itself.

Apart from cicadas and crickets, red ants' eggs are eaten as well. The red ants are the green tree ants building their nests on the trees or bushes. The bugs live in large groups up in the tree leaves, forming colonies with multiple nests. Unlike cicadas and crickets, red ants have poisonous stings and are always fierce, especially in defense of their colonies and nests. As a result, hunting their eggs requires more effort, patience, and special skills.

The red ants' eggs are hunted when Koon's family, accompanied by his neighbors, travels. Leaving their oxcart caravan, the villagers go into nearby woods to find food. Koon and his friend Jundi are allowed to go with the adults. Koon sees the red ants' nests and tells his father, "Papa, look! There are red ants' nests up in those trees" (Boontawee, 2005, p. 395). As the red ants are dangerous, skills and tools are required. Skills needed are climbing up the tall trees and using the mouth to hold a big knife.

Three of the adults, Koon's father, a man called Tid¹-joon, and another young man named Gad, take the nests up there. The three men are strong and not too old to climb the trees with big knives in their mouths. Uncle Kem, the senior member, stands on the ground with the two boys Koon and Jundi. Uncle Kem has to do something to help the team, but the boys just watch the event. It reads:

Then Koon's father, Tid-joon, and Gad climbed the trees, holding their knives in their teeth. Koon watched his father chop a nest out of the tree, drop it to Uncle Kem, then grip the trunk with his legs and beat at himself with both arms, trying to brush off the ants. Uncle Kem ran with the nest to the water hole. Koon and Jundi stared down at it, fascinated to see the eggs sink to the bottom.

(Boontawee, 2005, p. 396)

The details in the description show that every step is watched by the boy Koon and his friend Jundi. On the one hand, Koon pays attention to the edible ants. It is an instinct that influences the boy to watch the insects that will soon become his food. Like cicadas and crickets, the tiny ants hold the significance of being the day's meal for these villagers. On the other hand, the description of Koon watching his father can be interpreted as Koon being worried if the ants sting his father. Even worse, his father may slip and fall down the tree because of some pains. Sons generally see fathers as their heroes, so the description also implies that the boy is proud of his father. According to the excerpt, his father is one of the three men selected. When watching the hunting, Koon sees that only his father performs the actions like chopping a nest out of the tree, dropping it, gripping the trunk with legs, and so on. This can be interpreted that Koon sees his father as the bravest and the strongest. Apparently, the boy not only is concerned for his father's safety but also really admires him. As a result, a special relationship is observed through the eyes of Koon watching his father hunting the ants'

¹ The word **Tid** is used to call a man who used to be a monk.

eggs. Among the neighborhood, kinship is still portrayed through parenthood.

After getting enough ants' eggs, the hunters go back to their carts. Then, the traditional and simple way for cooking and eating the red ants' eggs is displayed, as follows:

The two kratongs² are filled with the eggs and the queen ants. Koon's mother sprinkled them with salt and Kamgong carefully poured water over them until it nearly reached the top. Then they placed them over the fire, and soon tiny bubbles began to rise. For a brief moment, the queen ants, which had been floating about, beat their wings rapidly, then are still. Koon's mother spooned a bit of pla ra into each kratong.

(Boontawee, 2005, p. 398)

In that fishing caravan, cooking the red ants' eggs is done. The cooking is simple. Just salt, water, and pla ra, a kind of salty and smelly fermented fish, are added. Pla ra is a basic ingredient for typical dishes in the northeastern region of Thailand. It can be kept for months or more than a year. The Thais say that any northeastern dish is incomplete without pla ra. The fluent movement of Koon's mother reflects her expertise in the dish. The carefulness of Kamgong reflects how important the dish is. When the red ants' eggs turn to be their main dishes, the forest maintains its status as the villagers' main source of food. Meanwhile, the area in the forests becomes a dining place in a pleasant afternoon. As several kinds of wild animals and plants can be eaten, the ants' eggs, like cicadas and crickets, symbolize typical wild foods of the villagers. On the other hand, the relationship between Koon's family and close friends is demonstrated. As a result, the sphere of hunting and consuming red ants' eggs indicates kinship. In terms of a family, this scene presents family bonding. In terms of friends, hunting and consuming the red ants' eggs tie villagers together. It

² A **kratong** is a small container, made from banana leaves, used to hold a portion of a traditional Thai dish

can be said that having wild insects for dinner indicates that kinship is displayed not only through parenthood but also through socialization. In other words, kinship between families, friends, and communities is encapsulated in this scene.

This study notices that the practices of finding and eating cicadas, crickets, and red ants' eggs involve important matters of life. Hunting wild bugs is a life lesson of survival in the wild transferred from ancestors as local wisdom. It is also a lesson of living as a local or a villager who does not want to leave home to work or live in other places. The characters stay in this place, so they gain the real benefits of catching wild insects. Also, from the practices, we can infer that the villagers consume other wild animals and plants. That is, the villagers can teach and, on the other hand, learn to survive in natural environment.

In addition to that, it is the father who leads the family to live life and keeps everyone in his family in this place. In one scene, Koon's mother persuades the father to leave the land, but he refuses. The father also asks Koon, "Tell me a very good reason why we should go, Koon" (Boontawee, 2005, p. 28). Instead of telling everyone that the family will not go anywhere, the father asks Koon the question. The little boy cannot give any suitable answers to the question. The mother cannot give any reasons, too. The question makes it clear that Koon's father does not want to leave the land in which he can handle his main responsibility—finding food for the family. He keeps on doing it and persuades Koon to do it because he wants to keep the family well-fed without leaving their homeland. Therefore, under the atmosphere of the simplicity reflected in the primitive tools, the varieties of wild food, and the simple ways of cooking and living, the father is characterized as a leader of the family who aims to live life in the same place.

So, does the local wisdom transferred by his father support his life when the boy becomes an adult? Also, when Koon is a fully-grown man, is he still happy to go into the woods, hunt the wild insects, and eat them? People realize that life is always changing and growing, and humans' conditions are developed under the surrounding circumstances. As a result, the only answer for both the former and the latter is 'no.' However, the study indicates that Koon's parents can afford to give him good and pleasant time and attention as well as local wisdom. The local wisdom is one of the benefits gained and transferred by parents who live in natural and rural settings. The

portrayals of hunting the insects in the wild reflect that Koon's parents have plenty of time to give the benefit to their son. According to this study, hunting the bugs in the wild signifies kinship, the strong relationship between families which ties all family members together in a pleasant way. While most parents with demanding jobs in cities have limited time, Koon's parents are free. Moreover, the perfect sphere of a happy family in which no one is apart can be seen. If the questions are considered again, the benefits from the local wisdom and the happiness gained from the various actions possibly support not only life but also the understanding of well-being when the boy is grown-up.

In many cultures, when people think of food, several kinds of them, including their nutrients, spring to people's minds like beef, fish, pork, and chicken. Vegetables, milk, and some sweet ones like desserts follow. Some think of fresh, frozen, or fast food. Others think about health and organic foods. A pack of food taken home from street food shops appears to be a typical food for people. Often, good food is eaten in a food center or a restaurant. However, home-cooked food often refers to delicious meals prepared by a mother or a grandmother, eaten together at home. They can mean fresh fish, shrimp, and crabs caught from nearby canals, rivers, and the sea. Moreover, edible plants grown in a garden are referred as good food. Food in the story refers to insects and animals gathered together in the wild. Most of all, the food in this novel is meant for the villagers who insist on staying in their homeland under the special bond they share. Therefore, this study affirms that kinship is reflected through parenthood, socialization, and cultural activities throughout the story.

Based on the findings, the study argues that edible wild insects, including wild animals and plants, play an important part among the local villagers of northeastern Thailand's traditional lifestyle. Also, one can argue that the wilderness can bring a family and friends together as a single entity. Apparently, wild insects represent simple food that is gathered and prepared in simple ways. Therefore, consuming insects signifies simplicity. While these insects turn out to be the main courses, they indicate strong relationships or kinship between people arising from the process of hunting, preserving food, cooking, and eating. That is, the strong family ties and the close ties between the neighbors are shown through eating the bugs. The wild insects, caught and consumed under the spheres of simplicity, close relationships, and happiness,

reflect moderate amounts of food that lead to good health and perhaps, longevity.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study agrees with the reviews by Prachakul (2009), Jaban (2013), and Wathasit (2015) that the novel portrays country food and various methods to find food in different areas. Wild food is part of the cultural practices that have been passed on from generation to generation in the dry area of Isan. The main characters demonstrate daily practices around their food such as sprinkling pla ra when cooking, finding food in the woods, and sharing food with neighbors. The village, Prachakul defines, “is Koon’s real school having the father as a headmaster” (2009, p. 35). This study views the father as not only a headmaster but also a teacher teaching his son to understand something about life. To make sure that the boy can learn to hunt the insects, the father teaches Koon through words and practices. The study also supports Chuenpraphanusorn (2014) and Ryan (2020) that ecological concepts including plants in terms of ethnobotany are portrayed in this story.

Notwithstanding similarities, there are some differences between the findings of this study and of the previous ones. The works of Prachakul (2009), Jaban (2013), and Wathasit (2015) report the story in broader contexts; some involve gathering food from the forests, rice fields, and rivers. Chuenpraphanusorn (2014), Ryan (2020), and Prasansak (2020) focus on some key points of nature and culture. On the contrary, this study focuses on wild insects, which are mainly hunted and eaten by the protagonist Koon, his father, and the secondary characters. While Prachakul (2009) focuses on the aspects of identity and anthropology, this study considers only three kinds of bugs which are edible : cicadas, crickets, and red ants. It views the habitats where wild insects live as Koon’s real places of learning. It notices that all life lessons, transferred to Koon, originate from the natural environment. Although very small, the insects represent other large, edible wild animals and plants. They can become part of the main course of the characters’ daily diet. Most importantly, hunting these insects indicates kinship happening both in the sphere of Koon’s family members and in the instances where the family’s close friends and relatives spend time together.

The study suggests that hunting wild animals for food promotes a strong connection between people. The strong link arising from loving, caring, and sharing portrayed by the boy Koon, his parents, his neighbors, and his relatives sends an important message to readers living a lonely life in big and modern cities. This could mark the importance of extended family and the warmth of the local neighborhood before a new generation decides to leave their land and families.

The study argues that the wilderness promotes kinship. According to the findings, the forests serve as the food sources for the villagers. When they go into the woods, the villagers never go alone. Therefore, the existence of a strong relationship is usually presented through their activities. However, in reality, not everyone goes into the woods to find food. Tylor insists, "All peoples have some degree of culture. Some are more primitive and others more advanced, but all cultures everywhere develop along the same progressive trajectory" (1871, as cited in Kuper, 2018b, p. 4). Consuming foods is part of culture. According to Tylor, the activities related to it have been developed among cultures while they solidify social bonds. In addition, while people's lives are being changed by the technology, the food industry has really grown. As a result, food is not difficult to find now. Particularly, Thailand has been called *the kitchen of the world* for years because of abundant natural resources, a skilled workforce, and other factors. This implies that a little boy like Koon rarely finds wild food in the forests of Thailand today. However, the forests in the novel represent the natural conditions that serve the needs of families and friends and eventually bring about close relationships. This study suggests that people can develop relationships by going into places like gardens and parks where they can do some activities together. As it is demonstrated in the findings, this study confirms the concept of kinship affirmed by Fox that 'it is the basic discipline of the subject' (1967, as cited in Kuper, 2018a, p. 1). According to Fox, the study agrees that kinship should be regarded as a very basic requirement of life. It also supports the reports and the ideas about kinship given by Carsten (1995), Read (2016), Rajamarpodang (1992) as cited in Harianja and Sudrajat (2021), and Harianja and Sudrajat (2021).

The study concludes that three insects are eaten: cicadas, crickets, and red ants. Cicadas are hunted first. At home, Koon's father lets his son take a bamboo tube filled with gum and bullock's hair used for catching cicadas. The lesson of life about finding food is demonstrated for the first time in the woods through catching the bugs.

Hunger leads Koon's father to teach the boy how to eat them raw. A traditional sauce and some leaves are added to make the raw insects delicious. Similarly, Koon learns how and where to find the crickets in the woods from his mother. The mother knows a lot about the crickets' life. Unlike his father, she does not let Koon eat or have a taste of any cricket there. Hunting the red ants' eggs appears different. Koon learns how to get the red ants' eggs from his father and his neighbors. When taking the ants' nests, the villagers must climb up the trees with big knives in their teeth. Koon's mother and his cousin, Kamgong, demonstrate the simple and unique way of cooking the ants' eggs.

Although catching wild insects seems simple, it reflects something complex. For instance, the father is meant to find food in the natural environment for the family and lead all members to survive amidst the adversity without leaving the land. He keeps on gathering wild food and teaching his son to do so. The tiny insects represent the larger wild animals that the villagers can catch and consume without buying. Also, the insects mean kinds of food because they are served as the main courses. The very tiny bodies, the small quantity of their flesh, and the number of them in each hunting signify eating within sensible limits. This means that consuming insects does not seem excessive but moderate. As a result, it reflects good health. Most importantly, the process of hunting wild insects signifies a profound sense of common humanity. Hunting, cooking, and eating these tiny insects brings about the time spent with the warmth of family and a hint of wildness in natural circumstances. That is, the kinship between locals and the natural environment as well as the harmonious relationship between family and neighbors can be sensed throughout the story.

6. Recommendation for Further Studies

Further research may be conducted to demonstrate how the villagers can live harmoniously with nature. Also, some knowledge transferred in the wilderness can arouse researchers' interest to find out what it is and how it helps the villagers live their lives.

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