

CHAPTER IV

CHANGE IN THE PERCEPTION

The traditional perception of local people regarding the *NGF* phenomenon, as presented in the previous chapter, is based on their faith and belief. As they have a strong belief in the sacredness of the Naga, the local people perceive the *NGF* phenomenon as Naga's creation. Some of the villagers believe that the Naga spits the fireballs to pay homage to Lord Buddha; some believe that the Naga performs the fireballs to worship the Phon Chan footprint, and some believe that the Naga would like to join the celebration of the end of Buddhist retreat. Although the explanations of the *NGF* phenomenon are diversified, the local people share the same perception of this phenomenon as a sacred one. This perception has been transcending across generations for over 60 years until the present.

Tourism has internationalized the local *NGF* phenomenon to become well known. As a result, the *NGF* phenomenon is no longer limited to a specific area, group of people or community. Instead, it is exposed nationwide and draws attention from people throughout the country and throughout the world. Not only Thais but also foreigners find this mysterious phenomenon charming and worthwhile to see with their own eyes.

Since tourists visit Amphoe Phon Pisai to witness the *NGF* phenomenon, the phenomenon is automatically put into doubt. People start to question its origin and it is at this point that the traditional perception of the *NGF* phenomenon is challenged. The impact of tourism on the traditional *NGF* perception and its consequences to Phon Pisai community are the main discourse of the chapter. The first issue to be discussed is tourism.

4.1 Tourism and the *NGF* phenomenon

Tourism is defined as a rapid developing sphere of human reality, reflecting the changing economic and social conditions, which underlie the modern world view....¹

In Thailand, the tourist industry acts as an important factor to the national economy. It boosts the national income and receives full support from the government. However, this is not the core of the discourse in this chapter. Rather, this information is brought up to show the significance of tourism in Thai society.

Tourism was first involved with the *NGF* phenomenon in 1988 by the local board administration of Changwat Nong Khai, the same year that they recovered the traditional ceremony of the fireboat. In addition, the *NGF* phenomenon was added into the plan to promote this tradition. It is the first time the *NGF* phenomenon was introduced officially to the public.²

In 1991, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (hereafter cited as TAT) started to survey the locations for witnessing the *NGF* phenomenon and planned to develop this phenomenon to become a tourist attraction. Later on, the Nong Khai provincial administration formed a special committee to be specifically in charge of this event. In 1998, the foreign media were invited to the site to write news about the phenomenon. However, at that time the phenomenon was not yet popular on a nationwide level. The *NGF* phenomenon was promoted nationwide as a major tourist attraction in 2002, which was the same year, that the film 'Mekong full moon party' was launched in the cinema. At that time, the *NGF* phenomenon was more than just the event where people expected to see the fireballs at dusk. The TAT and the administration of Phon Pisai organized it to become a festival with many tourist

¹ Vukonic Boris, *Tourism and Religion*, (Oxford: Pergamon, 1996) p.156.

² Gomen Potawat, *Bungfai Phayanak: Prakotkarn Mahassajan*, (Nong Khai: 2004) p.3.

activities to join before the highlight - the fireballs. The table shown in next page demonstrates the activities organized for tourism purpose. In addition, there is only one program related to the *NGF* phenomenon.

The budget that the TAT spent on the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs campaign increased from 50,000 Bat to 100,000 Bat in 2005³. In addition, the Local Tambon Organization (TAO) also raised funds to support this festival. The number of tourists in the upper *NE* is increasing because the *NGF* phenomenon functions as the magnet to attract tourists⁴. At first, the *NGF* phenomenon happened at the end of Buddhist retreat day; it has since been expanded to a three-day program by tourism campaign. Moreover, several versions of the explanation regarding the phenomenon were published into many types of materials, such as pamphlets, brochures, VCDs, and a light and sound show. Therefore, tourism functions as the main tool for exposing the *NGF* phenomenon to the public and nationwide. People from all over the country visit Phon Pisai during this time of the year to witness the phenomenon. However, their objectives in witnessing the *NGF* differ from that of the local people. They are here to witness the phenomenon, not to admire or perceive it as a sacred event.



³Interview with Thepnarong Phol-ngam, TAT marketing officer

⁴ Academic Center, Khon kaen University, A complete report on tourist attractions development in Khon kaen Kalasin Udonthani and Nong Khai, (Khon kaen: Khon kaen university, 2002), p. 3-35.

Schedule for Phon Pisai's Naga fireballs festival

17th Monday, October 2005	
9.00-18.00	The annual Boat racing; selective round. Wat Po Chai to Wat Sirimahagatjaya pier.
14.00	Worshipping ceremony for Phra Dhatu Klang Nam at Wat Sirimahagatjaya pier
18.00-23.00	The performances on the <i>NGF</i> phenomenon.
19.30	Light and Sound display on 'The <i>Bungfire Phayanak</i> Legend' at Wat Lamduan
18th Tuesday, October 2005	
08.00-18.00	Traditional wax castle competition, as the offering to Chao Mae Song Nang.
09.00-18.00	The annual Boat racing; selective round. Start from Wat Po Chai to Wat Sirimahagatjaya pier
18.00-23.00	The performances on the <i>NGF</i> phenomenon
19.00	Perform the ceremony of Loy Reu Fire Bucha Phayanak, the giant krathong competition Witness the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs

At this point, tourism internationalizes the *NGF* phenomenon and drives it into a questionable situation. The *NGF* phenomenon is criticized and questioned by the visitors in order to find the answer to the phenomenon. There are three groups of people who have different perceptions regarding the phenomenon: 1) the scientific group, 2) the non-believer, and 3) the believer. The first two groups come up with explanations based on their beliefs whilst the faithful who are mostly the local people who retain their traditional perception. Each group has different method to find the explanation to the mysterious fireballs.

Tourism plays an important role in the public opinion in the *NGF* phenomenon and contributes a new series of perceptions in the *NGF* phenomenon in Phon Pisai people.

To sum up, tourism acts like the door opening up for the *NGF* phenomenon to the public. Following tourism is other external factors play their role in changing the perception of the *NGF* phenomenon.

4.2 The *NGF* phenomenon becomes commercial

This is the consequence of internationalization by tourism. The *NGF* phenomenon becomes the tourist attraction. Therefore, local people start to realize that it can be sold. As a result, Naga photos, VCD presenting Naga belief, the legend of the *NGF* phenomenon are widely sold during the *NGF* phenomenon festival day.

This is the new perception of the *NGF* phenomenon. We cannot refuse that the phenomenon that the local people have lived with for over 80 years with the sacred perception becomes the cultural capital – the new source of earning money.

In 2001, the local village starts to have the home stay⁵ in response to the local government of Nong Khai for welcoming tourists at the end of Buddhist retreat. Follow with several projects in improving the infrastructures of Amphoe Pon Pisai to be ready to welcome tourists. For instances, reconstruct the road, improve the sites for witnessing the *NGF* phenomenon, and building the dams at the Mekong chore specially to support tourists.⁶

If we approach from the economic point of view, it cannot be refused that the villagers can earn more annual income for their family. The main occupation of Nong Khai populace is farming and focuses on plantations which are the main income of the local people. Tourism creates the new opportunity for their occupation. When the seasonal rain is finished the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs becomes their new source of income since the phenomenon has attracted tourists to spend their money in Nong Khai. An informant from Nonggung Neu village affirms this information⁷. The affect on their traditional lifestyles is that local people pay attention to welcome tourists in order to make money more than prepare them to participate in the traditional celebration or religious ceremony.

As a result, the commercialization of culture process has been occurred with the *NGF* phenomenon. The sacred perception -though it is not obviously recognized- has been gradually altered because of the involvement of utilitarian.

⁵ Interview with Praphan, Nonggung Neu, December 22, 2003.

⁶ Academic Center, Khon kaen University, A complete report on tourist attractions development in Khon kaen Kalasin Udonthani and Nong Khai, (Khon kaen: Khon kaen university, 2002), p. 3-38.

⁷ Interview with Boonhome, Nonggung neu, March 27, 2004. Bungfai Phayanaak : 8 days with 8 methods to create the fireballs, Daily news (November 16, 2004), p.2.

4.3 Scientific explanation in questioning in sacredness

As soon as the *NGF* phenomenon is internationalized, it is exposed to the public. The traditional perception of the *NGF* phenomenon and the phenomenon itself has been in questioned. This is when the scientific researches play their important roles.

The traditional perception of local people regarding the phenomenon in the previous chapter show that the local people perceive it as a sacred phenomenon and that it appears to be the supernatural for them. Moreover, they persevere this perception by based on their faith. However, the attempt to explain the phenomenon with science has been made. It is obviously that the latter is against the traditional perception.

There are several scientific attempting to solve this puzzle from both domestic and abroad. A scientist suggests that he has 8 methods to invent the fireballs rise up from the river. The ministry of science and technology of Thailand launched a robot to survey the bed of the Mekong River to find any clues that are possible to solve the problem such as the researcher team from Japan. Above all, the most famous theory of the *NGF* phenomenon belongs to Dr. Manus Kanoksilp.

His research suggests that the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs involves several forces of nature. He has an assumption that organic deposits lie on the bed of the Mekong River. As the sun warms the surface of clay or sand bed, organic matters decompose within 3-6 hours and begin to emit methane gas. Pressures build up and the gas rises to the surface of the water where the gas reacts with the oxygen in the air and abruptly lights. In general, Manus comments that the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs is a natural phenomenon.⁸

⁸Manus Kanoksilp, Mahassajan Bungfai Phyanaak, (Khonkaen : Ratchatan), p.93.

Nonetheless, his theory is disputed by another geologist from Khonkaen University – Montri Boonsaneu who claim that the *NGF* phenomenon is nothing but human made⁹. He reasons his assumption that the current of the Mekong River is turbulent flow. As a result, it has less possibility of decay at the bed of the river.

Originally, the phenomenon itself raises controversial issue among the public and the phenomenon watchers. The degree of curiosity and the question in the phenomenon has been increasing when the two scientific theories are contradicted. Especially, in the modern time when the science is likely to be the answers to every questions bear upon human's mind.

Besides, the articles and critical essays have been published in many journals and newspaper to express the query towards the *NGF* phenomenon. Especially, the television documentary broadcasted on iTV channel on November 1, 2002 hints the idea that Thais misunderstands the gunfire of Laotian soldier to be the *NGF* fireballs. The iTV team had visited Ban Don Village of Lao PDR in the night of ook phansa and they shot the scene that Lao soldiers shot the gunfire into the sky while at the same time the bravo sound can be heard from Phon Pisai's chore soon after the gunfire was shot out into the sky. This presentation provokes rage to both Thais and Laotians. It is too severe that the iTV station needed to submit the apology letter to Lao embassy and to local people of Phon Pisai.

4.4 Movies and Documentary on the *NGF* phenomenon

The tool acts as a challenger at this place is a film – '*Mekong Full Moon party*'. This film brings the *NGF* phenomenon and its controversial to the peak. It resulted in the unprecedented traffic jam on the local road of Phon Pisai – Nong Khai

⁹ Montri Boonsaneu, *The Scientific Dimension on the Naga fireballs*, (Khonkaen: Khon Kaen University). 2000.

at the night of the end of Buddhist retreat in 2002. Almost hundred thousands of people head to Phon Pisai to witness the *NGF* phenomenon.

Although the film is fiction, it creates controversial and it implies that the phenomenon is human made. This presentation rouses the local people to have a rally against the film and announce that the film is not welcomed in Phon Pisai which we can interpret the situation into two perspectives; the local people is angry because this film look down on their local belief that has been existed for several years or the local people feel that the film is against their benefits from the phenomenon. If the phenomenon is man-made, visitors will not come to Phon Pisai to witness the *NGF* phenomenon.

Nonetheless, this film reflects the conflict of the modern world view represented by Doctor and a protagonist named Kan with the traditional world view represented by a Buddhist monk and elderly people who cling on their traditional beliefs and lifestyles.

4.5 The sacred phenomenon becoming profane

Durkheim describes that the religious belief occurs in the society that has divided the world into two modes. The world of sacred and the world of profane¹⁰. The belief in the Naga and the traditional perception of local people regarding the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs is beyond the realm of every-day world of work. As they perceive the phenomenon with reverence, the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs for them is sacred.

¹⁰ Emile Durkhiem. *The Elementary Forms Of The Religious Life*, (New York, The Free Press, 1915), pp.13-33.

Before presenting the scientific explanations regarding the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs, the patterns of the change in the perception are displayed.

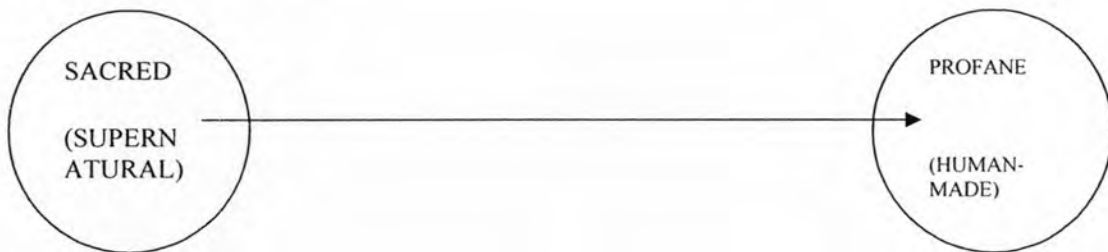
There are two patterns of impact of the perception changes as follow:

Pattern I: Sacred - Profane



This pattern shows the impact of science which alters the perception of sacred to become profane because it is natural phenomenon and science can explain it.

Pattern II: Sacred – Profane



This pattern shows the impact of science which alters the perception of sacred to become profane because it is the invention of humans.

The first scientific explanation was presented by a physician named Manus. He presents that the phenomenon is a natural phenomenon not the supernatural one. He has recorded the phenomenon himself every year and has applied the scientific method to solve the question of its origin. Finally, he theorizes that the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs is natural phenomena and can be proved by the scientific method. His theory is that there is humus at the riverbed of the Mekong River in the

sufficient amount to create Methane gas. In addition, the Methane gas is pressured then floats up to the surface with the rising and lowering river tide and the influence of the moon at the end of the Buddhist retreat. Then the gas is ignited because of oxidization. His idea also has been adopted by the director of the film - *the Mekong Full moon party*.

From the questionnaires and interview, I have found out that most of the young people welcome his theory and at the same time remaining the traditional belief cultivated by the old people regarding the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs. On the other hand, the old villagers who are the informants reside at the four main area of study do not believe in the theory. They assure in their perception. However, they do not despise the doctor for presenting this theory.

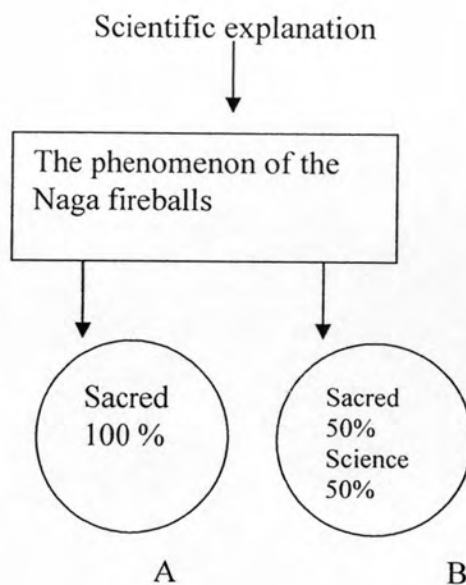
We can see that there is the difference between the old informants and the young ones when the scientific explanation gets involved. As the culture is not the human basic instinct, it needs to be cultivated from generation to the next one. One may assume that the old informants achieve their goal in retaining the belief of the Naga and the perception regarding the Naga fireballs to the young people.

Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that the pure traditional belief in the role and power of the Naga as the creator of the fireballs that is based on faith and signifies the sacredness of the phenomenon has been shaken as by the skepticism among the young informants.

Pattern I. can be applied to describe the consequence of Manus's theory to the traditional perception held by the local people. To the young informants' perception, there exist now two possibilities regarding the creation of the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs.

Another scientific explanation presented is both opposite to Manus' theory and the traditional perception of local people. The owner of the idea is professor Montri from Khonkaen University. His theory shocks the local people and other partners as he proposes that the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs has been made by humans. His main reason to support his presumption is the turbulent flow of the Mekong River that should prevent the decay at the river bed which Manus claims as the significant factor in producing the methane gas. In response to this idea, local people disagree with the theory. One of my informants told me that this idea is unbelievable from the local people's point of view. No one would do that as it is not an easy task to dive into the River as every one realizes its rapid current. Above all, the phenomenon has been witnessed for over sixty years; not just to be seen at present. Phon Pisai people have lived with the Mekong River for generations and the story of the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs has been passed on from generation to generation. If it is created by humans, who does it and for what reason are the questions raised by my interviewee. The response to this theory is it disrespectful to the Naga to conclude that human creates the fireballs. Unexpectedly, some of the young informants accept that this theory may be possible.

The scientific explanation brings the traditional worldview with the modern process. Although most of local people reject the human-made theory, the phenomenon has already been challenged by the external factor –science. To the scientific explanation issue, the interview and question surveys reveals two groups of local people as follow:



A represents the group of old age informants including the Buddhist monks and some of young informants.

B represents the group of local people starting to accept the scientific approach to explain the phenomenon.

4.6 Discussion

The consequences of tourism presented above have impacted Phon Pisai community both direct and indirect ways and both advantage and disadvantage.

It is true that tourism helps increasing the annual income of villagers but it also generate the new series of perceptions among the local people by inviting other external factors to raise question on the *NGF* phenomenon such as the scientific explanations.

Question	M	F
5. In your opinion, what is the perception of young people regarding the <i>NGF</i> ?		
They believe in the supernatural power of Naga	7	7
They retain their belief but tend to accept the scientific theory	27	28
They do not believe at all.	1	0
6. Does Amphoe Phon Pisai become well known because of the <i>NGF</i> phenomenon?		
Definitely agree	21	20
Agree	14	16
Not sure	0	0
Not at all	0	0
7. What is the impact of the <i>NGF</i> phenomenon to local people?		
It boosts up the local economics.	28	30
It increases the belief of Naga.	7	6

The table of questionnaire presented above shows that the local people accept that tourism helps their financial status because the local economics is improving.

This is considered the direct effect from tourism and its consequences. However, the indirect effect towards the local community is the young people start to accept the scientific theories in explaining the phenomenon. An important fact I found from the survey is that local people who are true believers inform me that they do believe and perceive the phenomenon because they have seen it every year. It implies that if the *NGF* phenomenon is no longer seen from the Mekong River, the perception of young people regarding the phenomenon will be totally changed. If their perception change,

the following is that they are no longer perceive the *NGF* phenomenon or the Naga belief as the sacred figure¹¹.

The belief in Naga is traditionally perceived as a spirit of river, a guardian spirit of water resources especially the Mekong River. In addition, it is perceived as the protector of Buddhism as well. This system of perception preserved and survived until the present days because local people perceive it as the sacredness. Now, the new perception of the *NGF* phenomenon is introduced. It can generate income to local people. Whenever it reaches this stage fully, the traditional sacred perception will become the profane.

In conclusion, the traditional sacred perception of the *NGF* phenomenon which interrelate human and nature is gradually meaningless because of commercialism. Money is perceived as more important and people will value it above all things. It is also a tool to change the sacred to become profane. The problem is when the sacred thing changes to become profane-in this context- when Naga perception and the *NGF* phenomenon perception are changed and perceived as a profane. What will function as the interrelation between human and nature and what is to unify the community?

¹¹ Manus Kanoksilp, "the decreasing numbers of the Naga fireballs", Bangkok Post Online.