

CHAPTER III
THE PERCEPTION OF THE NAGA FIREBALLS
IN PHON PISAI

The general background of the Naga belief in Northeastern Thailand is discussed in the previous chapter. The discussion in this chapter will narrow the area of field study and cover the following topics:

- 3.1 The general information of the area of field study
- 3.2 The perception of Naga belief found in the district
- 3.3 The perception in the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs found in the district

The author concentrates her discussion on the Naga belief and the perception in the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs in four communities – Wat Thai, Wat Luang, Nonggung Neu, and Nonggung Tai – because these four areas are the well-known and accepted points to witness the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs.



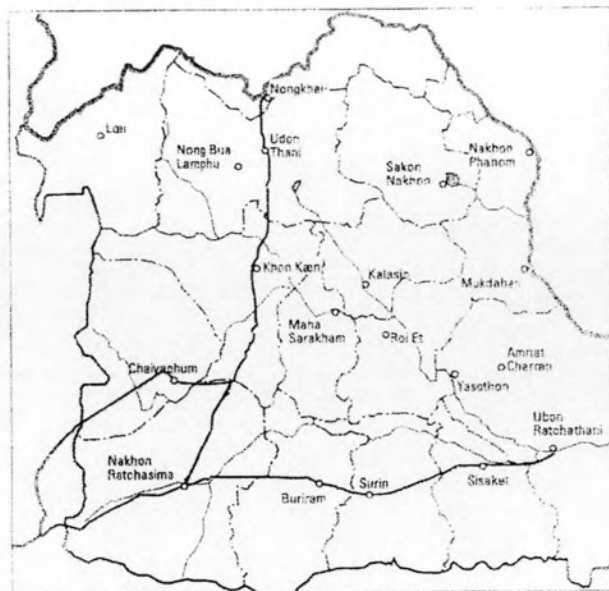


Figure 1
Map of Northeast of Thailand



Figure 2
Nong Khai

3.1 General Information

To understand the traditional belief of the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs (hereafter cited as *NGF*) in Phon Pisai, it is necessary to review some general information about the area of study in order to understand their influences upon the traditional belief of the *NGF* phenomenon.

3.1.1 Location and Geography

Phon Pisai is a district in Changwat Nong Khai. The district is situated 46 kilometers northeast from Muang Nong Khai and 730 kilometers from Bangkok.¹ It has 437 square kilometers. Its north border is the Mekong River which also forms the border between Phon Pisai district and Lao People's Democratic Republic (hereafter cited as Lao PDR). The south borders Pen district and Bandung district of Udonthani province. To the east are Beungkan district and So-phisai district of Nong Khai province and the west of Phon Pisai is attached to Muang district of Nong Khai province.²

3.1.2 Natural resource

The Mekong River and Huay Luang are the two main water resources of the district. However, several inland ponds and swamps which also water resources of the district can be found.

3.1.3 History

¹ www.tat.or.th

² Nong Khai Administration Office, Regional Mahadthai history of changwat Nong Khai, 1986. p. 51.

Phon Pisai was formerly known as Ponepaeng. It was founded as an Amphoe in 1906 by Prince Damrongrachanuphab when he was on his inspection tour of Udon Monthon. The name of Phon Pisai was acknowledged in the report during the French Expedition by Francis Garnier³ in the late 19th century. Unfortunately, the historical documents regarding the area when it was known as Ponepaeng are hardly found.

The overview of the area is that the area used to be among the territories of the Lan Chang kingdom. Then, Nong Khai was established as a town during the reign of King Rama III and it was merged into Nong Khai administration⁴.

3.1.4 Discussion

Considering its physical geography, Phon Pisai is situated in the area called the Mekong River community of the *NE* region of Thailand, commonly known among Thais as Isan. A Thai scholar defines this community as covering the area on the west side of the Mekong River that is the area next to the Phupan Mountain including the sloped area to the north of the mountain. This area is the lower basin, which is called *Sakonnakorn* basin. The *Sakonnakorn* basin comprises Changwat Loei, Changwat Nong Khai, Changwat Udonthani, Changwat Sakonnakorn, and Changwat Nakornphanom.⁵ Moreover, according to a Thai scholar, the northern part of *NE* Thailand can be called a 'mixed tribal region' as this area is situated at the border of many kingdoms and easily fell under multiples influences prior to the 14th century.

³Francis Garnier, Travels in Cambodia and Part of Laos: The Mekong Exploration Commission Report (1866-1868) – Vol.I, (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1996), p. 80.

⁴Toem Wipakpojakij, History of Isan, (Bangkok: Thammasart foundation), p. 65.

⁵Srisak Vallibhotama, A northerneastern site of civilization: new archeological evidence to change the face of Thai history, (Bangkok : Matichon, 1990), p. 93.

The northern and eastern areas are close to Lao, the southern areas have the influence of the Khmer, and the western area is impacted by the northern region of Thailand⁶.

The special feature of a 'mixed tribal region' is the transferring of cultures from nearby regions. Therefore, receiving the cultural influences from nearby kingdoms is possible for this type of region. However, the adopted cultural influences should not contradict the mainstream culture that existed before and the adopted cultural influences should concur with the existing culture.⁷

According to this point of view, the *Sakonnakorn* basin is where the belief in the Naga is recognized as the cultural mainstream and can be found all over the community⁸. Furthermore, in the past, the area of Phon Pisai was under the influence of the Ban Chiang's indigenous belief as mentioned in the previous chapter. Moreover, as it is a 'mixed tribal region', the area is exposed to easily receiving the cultural transfer from its nearby regions. Later on, it fell under the Dvaravati culture that brings Buddhism to the area between the 6th and 11th centuries, the Khmer Empire between the 11th and 15th centuries, and the Lan Chang kingdom since the late 15th century. The area also adopted the cultures brought by the power of these kingdoms. As a result, these factors explain the strong belief in the Naga.

The belief in the Naga found in this area is presented through the belief of 'Chao Mae Song Nang'. Phon Pisai people have a custom to build a shrine for worshipping the two Naga who protect the water resources.

⁶Ibids, p.100.

⁷ Amara Ponsapitch, *Culture Religion and Ethnicity: Anthropological analysis of Thai society*. (Bangkok: Chula publisher, 1994) p. 35.

⁸Supitcha Chindawatanaphum, "Legendary Beliefs in Naga of the Northeastern Thai Communities Along the Mekong River". Master's Thesis, Srinakharinwirot University. p. 45.

In particular, there are many holes and caves along both sides of the Mekong River; for example, at Changwat Nong Khai, the Hin Mak Peng temple is located in a big cave situated at the rim of the river. This geography supports the Naga belief and makes local people wonder that they are dug by the Naga or that they are the passage of the Naga; moreover, local people believe that some of them can link together and lead to the Mekong River. For example, the water source at Kamchanod (Baandung district, Changwat Udonthani), which is situated to the south of Phon Pisai, is believed by local people that it is the gateway to the Aquatic world or the world of the Naga. This place, according to the elder people, also functions as the Naga path link between the inland pond and the Mekong River⁹.

According to Pichet, in order to understand a community one must consider the interrelation of humans and place¹⁰; the first priority to consider is the meaning of place. Place has two dimensional meanings. Geographically, the Mekong River functions as the natural boundary and the water source; however, if we approach it through another dimension, the common river gains value which is created by the humans living in the community along the river. Therefore, the geographical space has a special meaning in the social context. For Phon Pisai people, the Mekong River possesses a special meaning as the World of the Naga.

Furthermore, the Mekong River is the main water source of Phon Pisai people. It provides water to their plantations. This is another layer of the interrelation between humans and nature. Considering their economic system, Phon Pisai is an agricultural society. Their main income is from their plantations; therefore, water is important for them.

⁹Long Thara, *Kamchanode Meung Phyaanak*, (Bangkok: Pailin, 2003), p.78.

¹⁰Pichet Saiphan, *30 years Thai Studies*, (Bangkok: Thammasart University), p.76.

However, the level of the river is inconsistent. Sometimes it decreases until it becomes a sandy beach and sometimes it floods the villages on its banks. As their lifestyle relies on the water, the Phon Pisai people realize its significance and undoubtedly pay respect to the river.

Considering its characteristic as a 'region of cultural diversity' the historical and archaeological evidence found in this area imply that Phon Pisai is an old town with a long history and has been in contact with its neighboring regions. The greatest influence on their culture is from the Lan Chang kingdom.

The area of Phon Pisai received Theravada Buddhist influences from many sides. Inland influence was from the Dvaravati culture as mentioned in the previous chapter and another side is from Lan Chang kingdom as supported from the primary materials – stone inscriptions, named Wat Phadungsuk 1 and Wat Phadungsuk 2 found at Phadungsuk temple at tambon Wat Luang, the stone inscription named Wat Daenmeung 1 and wat Daenmeung 2 found in the same area¹¹.

These inscriptions reveal that this area can be dated back to the 15th century. In addition, the contents inscribed in the stone shows that this area had a close relationship with the Lan Chang kingdom and received influence from Theravada Buddhism. The story inscribed in the stone inscriptions also reveals that the inhabitants had a strong believe in Buddhism. The stone inscriptions belonged to the high ranking officials of Lan Chang kingdom who donated their own properties to become the temple grounds.

Besides, the habitants of Phon Pisai community at present are Lao descendants whose ancestors were ethnic Lao who migrated from the Lan Chang Kingdom during

¹¹Board of historical texts for publishes, Office of Prime minister, Name Lists of stone inscriptions in Siam: Prachum Sila jareuk Pak tee 1, (Bangkok: Arts Department, 1986) p. 317-335.

the periods 1352-1362, 1428-1456, 1572-1574 and 1628-1632¹². The major movement of the people – the ethnic Lao of Lan Chang kingdom on the east side of the Mekong River – was in the 15th century.

During this period, Theravada Buddhism was spreading over this upper region of the Mekong River. The Lan Chang people brought Theravada Buddhism to their new home in the upper north of *NE* of Thailand. According to this, several stone inscriptions mentioned earlier are found in Phon Pisai showing the welcoming of the inhabitants towards Buddhism. In general, stone inscriptions found in Phon Pisai were inscribed with the story of the king or the Phya (the high rank official) declaring the land to become the Buddhist sanctuary, or that the king commanded the restoration of the Buddhist temples.

Beside the stone inscriptions, the three revered Buddha images, Phra Suk¹³, Phra Serm, and Phra Sai of Lan Chang which now reside in Nong Khai, show the close relationship between this area and the Lan Chang Kingdom. Their legend is that King Chaiyachettha commanded the artist to caste three golden Buddha images as a memorial to his three beloved daughters. Later on, Phra Suk sank in the Mekong River during the displacement of three Buddha images from Lan Chang to Siam. Local people believe that it is because the Naga would like to have Phra Suk reside in their aquatic world. The Phra Suk legend becomes the name place in Phon Pisai until today. Local people named the spot where Phra Suk sunk down as Woen Phra Suk. The explanation of local people regarding this incident supports that Phon Pisai people have a strong belief in the Naga and that the Naga belief penetrates into their perception.

¹²Chamberlain 1991, p.461 cited in Peter Rogers

¹³There is a local legend about Phra Suk that the Naga King used to ask for this Buddha image to reside under the Mekong River but the King Chaiyachettha refused the Naga's request.

Another historical site that affirms the relationship with the Lan Chang Kingdom and the acceptance of the Buddhism is Phra Dhatu Bung Puan. Its history is interesting as it concerns with the Naga belief as well.

These evidences imply the influences of Theravada Buddhism from the Lan Chang kingdom into the area and that the local people had close relationship with the people of Lan Chang; moreover, it shows that the local people had practiced Theravada Buddhism and had strong belief in it.

It is possible that the spreading of Theravada Buddhism from Lan Chang to the area of Phon Pisai had arrived along with the local cults and practiced alongside Buddhism. Among those local cults was the indigenous belief that both existed in the area and was imported by the Lan Chang people, although in slightly different versions.

The ethnic Lao is another group of local people in the Mekong River community that has stories filled with Naga. For example, in the *Urangkanithan*, Vientiane – the capital city of Lan Chang kingdom – was created by the Naga¹⁴. *Srisattanak* is another name for Vientiane; according to the Ramayana-Lao version, *Sattanak* means 7 Nagas. There is a legend that in the past, when the city needed manpower for a war, the Naga troops would help the king of Lang Chang¹⁵.

In addition, the Naga is believed to be the ethnic Laos' ancestor¹⁶. The idea brings a great deal of respect and is a deep-rooted belief of the Lao people. Even today, the Lao government applies the Naga as the national emblem. According to the evidence from literature and historical documents presented above, the author

¹⁴hra Dhammarachanuwat, *Urangkanithan (Phra That Phanom Legend)*, 10th edition, (Nakornphanom: 1994) p. 88.

¹⁵ Vientiane, *arts&culture* (Bangkok: Matichon, 1997) p. 62.

¹⁶Thongseub Supamark, *Laos Chronicle* (Bangkok: Kurusapha,) p. 52-55.

assumes that the belief of the Naga was brought to their new home. It is reflected through the ceremony of *Boon Suang Heu Lai Heu Fire*. It is an annual ritual performed by people who live nearby the Mekong River in the 12th month. They use this ritual as the worship to the Naga that has 15 families.

In summary, the general information of Phon Pisai provides a clearer picture of the community which is beneficial in understanding the factors that drive the Naga belief to exist among the local people. From the discussion above, it can be concluded that Phon Pisai district is the culture area of the belief of the Naga based upon the following reasons: 1) it is situated in the area where the Naga belief exists as the cultural mainstream; 2) the physical geography of Phon Pisai on the riverbank of the Mekong River has the wondrous nature because it has never been completely explored; and 3) the cultural transfer from its neighboring country- Laos including its movement to the area. These factors provide the strong belief of the Naga to the Phon Pisai district and its people.

3.2 The perception of Naga belief found in the district

Local people believe that there is an aquatic world of the Naga underneath the Mekong River and that underneath the Phon Pisai terrain exists also the Naga's city.¹⁷ In response to this belief, some customs and taboos are practiced among local people. For example, one should not wash their mosquito net at the shore of the Mekong River because such action will anger the Naga and result in the erosion of the shore. Or one should worship the Naga every year by offering a *krathong*¹⁸ containing fresh

¹⁷ Interview with Boonhome, Nonggung Neu village, December 24, 2005.

¹⁸ A kind of container made of bamboo leaves.

flowers floating into the river on the Buddhist retreat day. Furthermore, local people perceive the Naga as the guardian spirit or the 'spirit of river'.

Isan people believe that there is a guardian spirit at the mouth of the rivers or streams that run into the main river to protect the water resource. They respond to this belief by building a shrine as the residence of the guardian spirit and pay respect to the Naga by giving flowers or dolls as offerings. They usually name the shrine as *Saan Chao Mae Song Nang*. At Phon Pisai, the shrine can be found at the mouth of Huay Luang where it meets the Mekong River. This belief is reflected through a taboo of Phon Pisai people that preventing local people to wash their mosquito's net into the Mekong River.

Another perception of the Naga found is as the protector of Buddhism. Phon Pisai people perceive the Naga as having strong belief in Buddhism as shown on the mural painting on Wat Thai's ordination hall and through the myth about the Naga. As a result, Phon Pisai people associate the three features of the Naga perceptions presented above to explain the unexplainable phenomenon that is associated with Buddhism and the Mekong River.

To investigate the Naga belief from the four communities, I chose the Buddhist temples of the village, as Buddhist temples are the center of community.

3.2.1 Evidences showing the Naga belief in Wat Thai community

Wat Thai is situated at tambon Jumphol. It is said to be the best site to witness the *NGF* phenomenon and is popular among the visitors. Inside the ordination hall of Wat Thai there is a mural painting representing the belief in the Naga which signifies that local people has strong belief in the Naga. Moreover, the Tambon Administration

Office chooses the grounds of this temple to host the festival of the *NGF* phenomenon every year. The altar for worshipping the Naga is also set up at this temple.

The villagers at Wat Thai have an oral literature that tells that the Naga used to disguise himself and come to pay homage to the principal Buddha image of the temple, which is now enshrined at the Vihara at the rim of the Mekong River. One informant told me that at the end of Buddhist retreat local people would gather here for '*tamboon*' and to start the fireboat along the Mekong River. It is the tradition which they have been doing for centuries. The informant also told me that every year after they set the fireboat along the river they would light up the local fireworks called *Talai*; however, the mysterious fireballs always pop up of the Mekong River. Old people describe those fireballs as *Bungfai phii*¹⁹ but at present it is known among us as *bungfai phyanaak*.

3.2.2 Evidences showing the Naga belief in Wat Luang community

Wat Luang is another popular site for witnessing the *NGF* phenomenon. When talking about the topic of the Naga or the *NGF*, most of local people suggested that the author should talk with the abbot of Wat Luang.

His story about the Naga is presented in a VCD produced by Yensabai Production. He tells the story of the Naga and the mystery of the Buddha image named Phra Sook which is located in the Vihara at Wat Luang. The story is about the legend of Phra Sook which is now lying at the bed of the Mekong River. There were several attempts to dive for the image and bring him up; however, it never succeeded. The abbot of Wat Luang had another image rebuilt as the replica of the original one.

¹⁹Interview with Pao, Wat Thai, Nong Khai, 24 Dec.2005.

In 1995, the roof of the Vihara in which Phra Sook is enshrined appears to have water dropping throughout the year even during the hot season in April. At first, the maintenance people checked the roof to find the leak; however, the roof is in a good condition and they cannot explain scientifically where the water comes from.

Local people perceive this situation as the power of the Naga. As the original Phra Sook image is located under the Mekong River, the local people explain the mysterious water drop at the Vihara as the power of the two Nagas that provide water.

The story provides us with further evidence of the strong belief of the Naga among the local people. In addition, it has been in localizing process to the community and creates the sense of identity for them. This is a fine example showing us that the local people apply their belief of the Naga that grows deep in local people's perception to explain the normal situation concerning with water and Buddhism. Finally, it can become important and gain psychological value contributed by the belief of people.

3.2.3. Evidences showing the Naga belief in Nonggung Neu community

Nonggung Neu village is situated opposite the Menam Ngeum (Ngeum River) of Lao PRD. It is another famous site for the *NGF* phenomenon watchers. This village has home stay to support the influx of tourists into the district during the end of the Buddhist retreat.

Wat Jompetch is the Buddhist temple of the village and acts as the community center. The present temple was rebuilt on the ancient site of the original temple built in 1465. The architectural style of art found in the temple was influenced by Lao

artisans; for example, the ordination hall or known as *Sim* among the local people, and the principal Buddha image enshrined in the ordination hall²⁰.

From the empirical studies, the author found that the villagers have a strong belief in the Naga, the same as with other local people from other sites. The abbot of the temple moved from Lao PRD to Thailand when he was a young novice. He informed the author that in the old days, no villagers looked forward to witnessing the fireballs yet they saw them every year. In addition, no one felt excited about the *NGF*; they simply acknowledged its occurrence and perceived it as the product of the Naga. So, they always performed a 'wai' gesture when they saw it pop up out of the river.

Moreover, a lady who runs her residence as a home stay informed me that sometimes the fisherman saw the *NGF* at the Menam Ngeum of Lao PRD. And another old villager told me the story of the two mysterious women who dressed differently from them came to the village market to buy woven cloth and then disappeared when they reached the shore of the Mekong River. She believed that those two women were the Naga in disguise²¹.

The villagers of Nonggung Neu do believe in the *NGF* phenomenon because their village faces the river and they have seen the phenomenon dated back to the time of their great grandparents. The *NGF* phenomenon has been told from generation to generation. One young girl in the village also believes in the *NGF* phenomenon because she has witnessed it with her own eyes every year.

²⁰ *Prawat Wat Tua Ratcha-anajak* Vol. 10 cited in Nong Khai archeology, p.501.

²¹ Interview with Grandma Plub, Nonggung Neu village, 24 Dec. 2005.

3.2.4. Evidences showing the Naga belief in Nonggung Tai

community

Nonggung Tai village situated to the west of Nonggung Neu. The village faces the Mekong River. There is a big grocery shop and several small plantations of dragon fruit within the village. Wat Singha Thong is the village temple. It also faces the Mekong River. This temple was established in 1721 by the villagers. They named the temple as golden singha because the statute made of bronze was found when they dug up the land to construct the temple.

However, this temple has a story about the Naga as told by the former abbot who passed away many years ago. The present young abbot mentioned that the former abbot had learned that the Naga appeared in the Buddhist contexts though he has never witnessed the real one. He said that as the former abbot told him the story that the Naga always protects Buddhism and punishes sinful people; he believes this perception as well. He remembers the story about the mysterious fireballs that pop up from the pond inside the temple as told by the former abbot. They believe that the Naga created the fireballs.

The present abbot, 32 years-old monk, also commented that at the present time people do not pay attention to traditional activities such as *tamboon* or making merit and *lai heu fai* or floating the fire boat because they need to welcome the tourists.

Another site of Nonggung Tai showing the Naga belief is Wern Phra Sook or the area where Phra Sook sank in the Mekong. The local people believe that it has a subterranean cave that leads to Kwai Mountain located in Lao PDR. They also witness the *NGF* phenomenon from this area.

3.2.5 Discussion

The four communities presented above are the popular sites for witnessing the *NGF* phenomenon. Although each community has its own version about the Naga belief, they perceive the *NGF* phenomenon as a sacred phenomenon.

An important fact the author found regarding the perception of the *NGF* phenomenon is that they perceive it as sacred because they see the *NGF* every year. The *NGF* phenomenon is a perceptive response to the Naga belief of Phon Pisai people. In addition, socialization is another factor in transmitting the sacred perception of the *NGF* phenomenon from one generation to the next.

The Naga belief is rooted deeply in the Phon Pisai people's world view wherein the *NGF* phenomenon functions as concrete evidence to support their belief. Moreover, the *NGF* phenomenon unifies Phon Pisai people and provides a sense of belonging to the local people as well.

3.3 The perception in the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs

The name of 'the phenomenon of the Naga fireballs' has been used to call the mysterious small fireballs with the size of orange or egg that pop up out from the Mekong River at the end of Buddhist retreat every year. These fireballs come in pinkish shade of colors. Each fireball takes 3-7 seconds to run into the air then rises up high as 20-50 meters and disappears. The time that these fireballs can be seen starts from 7 pm. to 10 pm. The number of fireballs is variable; there are 20-30 fireballs in some place or 30-40 fireballs in another place²²....

Although the official record of the fireballs cannot be found, the information from the informant and the published booklet found at Phon Pisai library reveals that the fireballs had been seen for over 80 years²³. Formerly, they were not known as the *bungfai phayanaak*. Some local people called them *bungfire phii* because they did not know their origin. These fireballs can be seen at the end of Buddhist retreat every year

²²Gomen Potawat, *Bungfai Phayanaak: Prakotkarn Mahussachan*, (Nong Khai: n.d.)

²³ *Ibid*, p.1.

during the fireboat celebration of Phon Pisai people. In 1940, this tradition was canceled due to the Indochina war yet the mysterious fireballs were still seen²⁴. The fireboat tradition was recovered in 1988 and the public relations about the mysterious fireballs were made for the first time. Since then, the mysterious fireballs are known as the *NGF* phenomenon or *Bungfai Phayanaak*.

The legend about the Naga fireballs is mentioned in the ancient script of a revered Buddhist monk of the Mekong valley called *Yakoo Sii Tad* who lived long prior to the period of venerated Phra Ajarn Man Bhuridhatto²⁵.

According to the ancient script, the Naga creates fireballs to worship the Pone Chan footprint which was made by Lord Buddha during his pilgrimage to the Mekong River²⁶. At present, the Pone Chan footprint is located in a village in Lao PRD.

Nonetheless, the explanations regarding the phenomenon are diversified. Many people believe that the Naga creates fireballs to worship and admire Lord Buddha, for his gratitude to Buddha's mother. Other local people believe that the Naga creates fireballs to worship the Phra Dhatu Bang Puan, and some informants believe that the Naga creates fireballs to mark the celebration and to join the '*tham boon ook pansa*' with humans²⁷. Besides, an explanation presented in a website talks about the conflict between Phaya Tan on one side, and Phaya Kan Kark (a past life of Lord Buddha) and Phaya Nagi on the other.

There was a war in heaven because Phaya Tan did not create seasonal rainfall. Phaya Nagi volunteered to fight with him at first. However, he was defeated by Phaya Tan and seriously injured. Later on, Phaya Kan Kark blessed the wounds of Phaya Nagi and his followers with the words: "May your wounds become beautiful pattern as if crystal scales. Your crest shall become beautiful silvery crystal. Your pain shall be wholly eliminated. You shall be happy and become a truly representative of such a happy place.

²⁴ Ibid, p.2.

²⁵ Ibid, p.31.

²⁶ Phra Dhammarachanuwat, *Urakhanithan (Phra That Phanom Legend)*, 10th edition, (Nakornphanom: 1994) p. 88.

²⁷ Interview with the abbot of Singha Thong temple, December 23, 2005.

In addition, another version presented by Poo Isan Neu tells that in the past there used to be a young novice who devoted himself in serving the Arahants. The young novice poured out the spittoons of Arahants for 7 days and 7 nights. Finally, he achieved power and pure precepts. He was reborn as the Naga, taking care of the golden tray. This Naga is waiting for Sriariyamettrai – the Future Buddha – to be born and he worships the Triple gems by spitting pure fire every year at the end of Buddhist retreat²⁸.

Although there are various versions describing the *NGF* phenomenon, the local people perceive the phenomenon as a sacred one. Local people react to the phenomenon in a modest way. They pay homage or *wai* when they see the fireballs emerge out of the river and consider themselves as fortunate people to have had the chance to witness this sacred phenomenon. This is the pattern of behavior of the local people in *NE* when they witness the natural phenomenon or the supernatural²⁹.

3.3.1 The perception of the young generation towards the phenomenon of the *NGF*

To investigate the change in the perception among young people regarding the *NGF* phenomenon, I conducted a survey of 70 high school students to find out their perceptions and compared their responses with the information from the adults.

²⁸Poo Isan Neu, Tamnan bungfai Phayanaak, (n.p.:n.d)

²⁹ Sorachet Worakamwichai, Thai Lives: Series Bucha Phya Thaen. (Bangkok:2540), p. 98.

Questions	M	F
1. Do you have a belief that the <i>NGF</i> performed by the Naga living under the Mekong River?	35	35
Yes, I do.	8	10
I guess so.	17	23
I don't know.	9	1
No, I don't believe.	1	1
2. Do you believe that the <i>NGF</i> phenomenon is human-made?		
Yes, I do.	0	0
I guess so.	1	0
I don't know.	3	1
I don't think so.	12	13
I disagree with this idea.	19	21
3. What's your opinion towards the scientific research presenting that the <i>NGF</i> phenomenon is a natural phenomenon?		
(1) It is possible.	31	31
(2) The research is unreliable.	4	4
4. As you are a Pon Pisai people, how do you perceive the <i>NGF</i> phenomenon?		
I believe that the fireballs are created by the Naga.	24	29
I don't believe but I don't disrespect. I perceive it as a good co-incidence to everyone.	11	6

The above table shows the perception and opinions of the young generation regarding the *NGF* phenomenon. We can see that they retain their traditional perception regarding the *NGF* phenomenon; however, they do not reject the scientific theory that attempts to find the answer for the *NGF* phenomenon. This information is

different from the elderly people's perceptions who believe undoubtedly that the *NGF* phenomenon is concerned with the Naga.

The traditional perception in the *NGF* phenomenon has been inherited through socialization and the most important factor is that all of them witness the phenomenon with their own eyes.

However, this information hints that the perception of young people in Amphoe Phon Pisai regarding the *NGF* phenomenon is starting to change in the past 4-5 years since the *NGF* phenomenon has been internationalized. This change is shown in the questionnaire presented above. Prior to the investigation, I presumed that young people would perceive the *NGF* phenomenon differently than the elderly. The result demonstrates that my presumption is true in the sense of the sacred perception, young people retain this perception yet they do not reject the proposed idea of the scientific possibility in explaining the *NGF* phenomenon. This issue will be further discussed in the next chapter.

In conclusion, Amphoe Phon Pisai is a culture area of the Naga belief. The belief has been rooted among local people for a long time. The *NGF* phenomenon functions as the perceptive evidence to reassure their belief in the sacredness of the Naga and its supernatural forces. However, the results of questionnaire reveal that a change in perception has started; its causes and effects will be further discussed in the next chapter.