



CHAPTER II

GENERAL BACKGROUND OF NAGA BELIEF IN NORTHEAST OF THAILAND

This chapter aims to provide the general background of the Naga belief in the Northeast of Thailand (hereafter cited as *NE*). The significance of this chapter is to provide the supportive details of the case study which focuses on Naga belief in Amphoe Phon Pisai located in *NE* Thailand. As a result, the discussion in this chapter is limited to the factors that contribute to the sacred perception of the Naga in *NE* Thailand to point out that the area of study is under the Naga belief, which is the cultural mainstream of the region.

According to the previous chapter, there are two perceptions regarding the *NGF* phenomenon. The first perception is resulted from its unknown origin which is reflecting through its name '*Bungfai Phii*' meaning fireworks of the ghosts. This term is used among Phon Pisai people as they do not know its origin. Another term in calling these fireballs is '*Lukfai Nam*' meaning fireballs from the water. This term is used among Lao people in describing these fireballs for they come out from the Mekong River. However, there are no evidence both in testimonials and written texts showing the relation between these existing terms and the Naga. In addition, the strong belief in the Naga is considered a significant fundamental in Phon Pisai people in inventing the new term and new perception of the '*Bungfai Phii*' to become the Naga fireballs. The belief in the Naga has grown deep into local people and it is a significant factor in contributing the perception of

the Naga fireballs. Therefore, the development of the Naga belief should be discussed in this chapter.

2.1 Indigenous Belief in Naga

In order to further the discussion, an anthropologist, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), made a useful quote to help us understand the perception of the Naga that exists in Thai society at the present time. Before the Naga gained its perception as a sacred animal, it had a more mundane relationship with the Thai people that must be explored to better understand its current role.

Every time that we undertake to explain something human, taken at a given moment in history be it a religious belief, a moral precept, a legal principal, an aesthetic style or an economic system- it is necessary to commence by going back to its most primitive and simple form and then to show how it developed and became complicated little by little and how it became that which it is at the moment.¹

The local belief concerning with snake or giant snake can be found in the region through local language. Prior to the arrival of Buddhism and Hinduism into Northeast Thailand, local people call snake as '*Ng'euak*'. Beside local language showing the belief concerning with snake, the archaeological evidences also show that native people in this region had belief in the snake as shown on the painting of Ban Chiang pottery. The indigenous belief was practiced among the native people dating back to the prehistoric time throughout the world. In Northeast Thailand, Ban Chiang civilization is the earliest civilization that contributes to the fundamental belief of the Naga during the period

¹ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms Of The Religious Life*, (New York, The Free Press - Macmillian Publishing Co., Inc.) 1965. p. 10.

c.3600 BC to AD 300.² According to Durkheim's quote presented above, the indigenous belief should be discussed here in order to understand the development of the sacred perception of Naga at the present time.

Ban Chiang was discovered by archaeologists in the 1970s who documented its early cultivation of rice, production of ceramics and, most surprisingly of all, its metallurgical technology.³ Ban Chiang was the village-level community; its civilization had lasted for four thousands years.

To support this, the archaeological excavation at Nonghan district, Udonthani province, favorably demonstrates the indigenous belief among the native people. It is presented through the designs with figural composition found on Ban Chiang pottery that has similarities with snakes, male and female genital organs⁴. Nevertheless, the shape of snake is easiest to visualize. In addition, the snake is used as a phallic symbol⁵, implying the meaning of fertility in the Northeast of Thailand.

²Sujit Wongthes, Tribes and Ethnic Groups in Suvarnabhumi, Ancestors of the "Thais", (Bangkok: Matichon, 2004), p.54.

³Peter Rogers, The Northeast of Thailand, (Bangkok, Duang Kamol Books, 1996), p.41.

⁴Penny Van Esterick, Cognition and design production in Ban Chiang painted pottery. (Athens, Ohio: Center for International Studies, 1981), p.59.

⁵Chin Yoodi, 1972, p.21, cited in Penny Van Esterick, 1981: 61.



Figure 1

Ban Chiang Pottery found at Nonghan district, Udonthani province

Ban Chiang was discovered with its early cultivation, showing that Ban Chiang community was an agricultural society. Further evidence is found in the fact that rice husks which were added to the clay mixture of Ban Chiang pottery⁶.

Because they cultivated rice, water sources were a necessity. As mentioned earlier, the Songkram River and the Mekong River were the main water resources in this region.

In addition, water is the source of life and an important element for survival. Water sources are not only essential for human consumption and agriculture, but also for

⁶Peter Rogers, *The Northeast of Thailand*, (Bangkok, Duang Kamol Books, 1996), p. 31.

the animals living nearby, including snakes. Moreover, Thailand is located in the tropical zone which is suitable for all reptiles to live; therefore, snakes are commonly found. To support Ban Chiang's indigenous belief, most anthropologists agree that before the arrival of Buddhism, the native people living in what is now called Thailand were animistic and paid worship to their ancestors and to a variety of evil, nature and guardian spirits⁷, including snakes. In this context, snakes are considered to possess a spirit that is more powerful than humans. When the snake fatally bit a member of a community, humans in the past could not deal with the situation due to their insufficient technology and knowledge. Therefore, humans' perception towards the snake resulted from its superior power. As a result, humans worshiped snakes for protection. Moreover, the snake's habitat is nearby water source. They also live in holes beneath the ground where the underground water can be found. This habitat establishes its involvement with water. This idea later on makes it become a symbol of water. According to Srisak Vallibhotama, the natural environment has influence on human settlement including their way of life. Humans adjust themselves to fit the environment; as a result they create their own culture.⁸ The indigenous belief is an example of how their way of life reacts to the natural environment.

In summary, Ban Chiang village is an agricultural society that has the indigenous belief concerning with snake. Its archaeological evidence presents us that the native people in the region had a cult to worship the snake.

⁷Kanako UENO, "Temple of the Emerald Buddha: Reflections of the complexity of the religious system in Thai society," (Master's thesis, Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1999), p.10.

⁸Srisak Vallibhotama, *Siam Prathed*, (Bangkok: Matichon, 1991), p.11.

Beside the indigenous belief concerning snake found in local area, the belief in snake has been related to Buddhism and Hinduism before their arrival to the Northeast Thailand. Buddhism and Hinduism imported the new perception of snake as the supernatural being into Northeast Thailand and the snake in Buddhism and Hinduism plays an important role in religious contexts. When the belief in the sacred snake came into Northeast Thailand, the local snake was changed its name into 'Naga'. Since then, the word '*Ng'euak*' and 'Naga' used in representing the same being.

The archaeologist and anthropologist interpret that the local belief concerning snake related to the fertility and water which is important to the agriculture of Northeast Thailand.

Beside the archaeological evidences, the indigenous belief concerning the giant snake or Naga can be found in folklores. The Naga serves as the protagonist in explaining the existence of the Rivers and the place name. These roles of the Naga can be found in the following literatures.

- 1) *Suwannakomkam Legend*
- 2) *Phadaeng Nang-Aii*
- 3) *Singhanawat*

The first story is a legend about the fighting between two Nagas over the food. Phya Srisattanaga and Suttanaga fight over their food. Later on Phya Srisattanaga is defeated. He moves down to the south and his mark behind him becomes the Mekong

River. This story explains how the Mekong River was created and it resulted in the local belief that there is the Naga city under the Mekong River.

In addition, there is another story presenting the idea that Naga creates the rivers as follow:

As Pinta-yonak-wati went to the northwest, his enormous body left a mark on the earth. As Thana-moon went to the southeast he too left a mark behind him. The mark made by Pinta-yonak-wati became the Ping River.

The mark made by Thana-moon became the Moon River. Both of these rivers are in Northeast Thailand today⁹.

The second story concerning the indigenous belief of the snake is called *Phadaeng Nang Aii* which is the story about the war fought by the Naga army with the human's army. The war was caused by the death of Bhangkii – a white squirrel in disguised -- who falls in love with Nang Aii – a beautiful human woman. Bhangkii is the Naga comes up from the Naga world which is the subterranean world. This story is very well known in the Northeastern part of Thailand. However, it is in various versions. For example, there was a ruler of a city called Muang Naung Haan and his name is Phya Korm. He has an exceeding beautiful daughter named Nang Aii. Phya Korm decided to set the rocket-firing competition in the sixth lunar month, and order his subjects to prepare for the competition in addition the winner also win the hand of his daughter. Pha Daeng lives in another Muang Pong. He falls in love with Nang Aii and decided to be a candidate. The Naga gets involved in the story as the disguised squirrel and is shot to dead later. His meat spares up for the whole citizen of the town. The Naga king realizes his son's death. He sends the troop to fight with human, however; human cannot beat the Naga and the city collapse. This is how Nong Haan became large swamps. This story

⁹Kermit Krueger, *The Serpent Prince: Folktales from Northeastern Thailand*, (New York: The World Publishing Company), 1969. p.16-17.

explains the role of the Naga in destruction power and it shows the supernatural power of the Naga beyond human.

The last story is a story about the Naga who has power in both creation and destruction. *Singhanawat Legend* becomes the legend of Yonok Region situated in the lower part of the Mekong River¹⁰. This legend presents that if the ruler of the city behaves himself in morality, the Naga will grant him benefit. On the contrary, if the ruler of the city misbehaves and conducts bad things, the Naga will destroy the city.

The Naga's role as presented in these literatures has tremendous meaning to the local people of *NE* because these legends become the story in describing the place, the establishment of their land or city. In addition, the legends describe the origin of the Mekong River, the Moon, and the Chii River which are the principal artery of local people in *NE*. These rivers can be a guarantee for their fertility; however, at the same time it can be the major destruction when it floods the land, especially the Mekong River

All of the perceptions presented above reflect through concrete details such as the Naga figure at Buddhist temples, the place name, and their customs. As a result, the Naga is an essential component for Northeastern people in living their way of lives. Based on this fact, it is convincing to introduce a new perception that relates to the Mekong River, the Naga, and the Buddhist together. In consequence, it is not strange to improvise the Naga belief with the mysterious fireballs.

¹⁰Srisak Vallibhotama., cited in Chittrakorn Emphan p.125.

2.2 The external cultural influences

The indigenous belief is not the sole basis in developing the present sacred Naga belief in *NE*. It is also influenced by the external cultures. The main external cultural influences to the development of the sacred Naga are Indian religions which are Buddhism and Hinduism. Northeast of Thailand is the region that has long history and ancient civilization. Not only having its own culture, it also received the cultural influences from other cultures. For example, the region received Buddhism through Dvaravati culture from the Chaophraya valley and the Hinduism from the Khmer.

2.2.1 Buddhist Influence

At present, it is undeniable that the Naga is obviously related to Buddhism. Therefore, in the past, Buddhism should have played an important role in developing the perception of the sacred Naga in *NE*. As a consequence, I consider that Buddhism is worth discussing in this context to find out the original contact between Buddhism and the Naga. The evidence demonstrating the Buddhist influences found in *NE* will also be discussed here.

The original cause of the Naga sacredness is the indigenous belief. Later on, the native indigenous belief was blended with this new religion – Buddhism. As a result, the common snake was lifted up to become the sacred snake and granted the new name as Naga. Nevertheless, a brief introduction on Buddhism in *NE* should be presented here for a better understanding.

2.2.1.1 The arrival of Buddhism to *NE*

Buddhism is introduced by the Dvaravati culture. Between the 6th and 9th centuries, the culture flourished in *NE*. Dvaravati culture dominated the upper *NE* Thailand until the end of the 10th century. Then, the region was submitted to the Khmer in the early 11th century.

The familiarity with the Dvaravati culture is largely obtained from the discovery of outstanding ancient objects. According to Srisak Vallibhotama, the carved ornament on Phra That Phanom (presumably prior to its collapse in a rainstorm in 1975) is Dvaravati art. This is the same type of art found on carved stone boundary markers at Kalasin province. This information shows that Dvaravati culture extended eastward as far as the Mekong River.¹¹ The arrival of Buddhism to the region produced considerable changes; for example, cremations replaced the burial tradition.¹² Regarding the indigenous belief, the native people who practiced it gradually adopted the influences from Buddhism including some ritual ceremonies. Because the new religion would like native people to embrace their teachings, they transformed the ordinary snake to become the Naga and made the Naga to be perceived with a higher level of supernatural power. As a result, the Naga is perceived as a demon with powerful forces that practices Buddhism. As a consequence, the Naga finally becomes a sacred Buddhist savior. However, the changing of the word 'snake' to become 'Naga' has no definite

¹¹ Srisak Vallibhotama, *A Northeastern Site of Civilization*, 4th edition, (Bangkok, Matichon, 2005), p.26.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.88.

explanation. One Thai scholar stated that Naga is the Sanskrit word for snake, adopted by the native people because the Sanskrit language was considered the sacred language¹³.

Furthermore, the Dvaravati art, the earliest known Buddhist art in Thailand, stimulated the local production of wood, bronze and stone sculpture for the temples and other religious edifices such as the *sema* or the stone boundary markers. In addition, Buddha images under the protection of Naga and votive tablets depicting the same gesture were found throughout this region¹⁴.

The above discussion reveals the Buddhist influence in the indigenous belief as expressed in the art objects. Beside the art objects, the Buddhist influence in the indigenous belief can be found in the local literature. The most outstanding local literature contains this particular feature is *The Chronicle of The That Phanom Relic*¹⁵ (hereafter cited as *CTP*). This is the only historical documentation that existed to inform the establishment of Phra That Phanom Shrine.

The *CTP* is worth discussing here for the reason that it is a legend with the complete story about Naga, as presented below:

The Buddha then proceeded from Nong Khan Thae Sua Nam to Phon Chik Viang Ngua. Brahya Pabbharanaga was transformed into a white-robed elder [tap ha khao] who came to present alms to the Buddha in the shade of a Bo tree at Phu Khao Luang....¹⁶

At that moment, the Buddha was seated in meditation [on top of Phu Ku Wien]. The Naga exerted their magic powers and hurled flames toward him. These flames, however, shot back to burn the

¹³ Sujit Wongted, *Nak "Naked people" ancient tribe of Southeast Asia* (Silpakorn University, Bangkok, 2005), p. 8.

¹⁴ Wiriya Utthisane, *The Study of religious of Dvaravati communities in the middle Chi Valley: case study of clay votive tablets*, Master of Arts, Graduate School, Silpakorn University, 2003, pp.49-50.

¹⁵ James B. Preuss, *The That Phanom Chronicle – A Shrine History and its interpretation*, (Cornell University, New York, November 1976), p.1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.19.

Naga and then were transformed into a lotus which worshiped the Buddha...When this happened, the nagas were much afraid of the Buddha's supernatural powers.¹⁷

The story presented above shows the contact between Lord Buddha and the Naga in the past. In addition, Naga express himself as both a friendly and hostile character and yet Naga possesses supernatural power; eventually, Naga would be tamed and submitted by the power of Lord Buddha.

There is another story cited in *CTP* that shows the role of the Naga as the protector of Buddhism. The Naga is appointed to be the guardian deity to protect the That Phanom Shrine as presented below:

...And there were three territorial guardian deities: one, named Dakkhinarattha (*or cao muang khwa*), resided at the southeast side of the [present-day] temple-monastery; one, named Sahassarattha (*or cao saen muang*), lived at the northeast edge of the marsh; the third, named Nagakutthavitthara (*or cao thong kwang*), lived to the south of the Se Bang Fai River, where it empties into the Mekong...These three territorial guardian deities possessed great supernatural powers. They cared for and protected the Relic and the attendants [of the shrine]...¹⁸

CTP shows us that the Naga belief existed in the *NE* society long into the past and that the Naga belief is so meaningful to the local people that it grows deep roots into the local community.

All of the perceptions presented above reflect through concrete details such as the Naga figure at Buddhist temples, and local customs. As a result, the Naga is an essential component for Northeastern people in living their way of lives. Based on this fact, it is convincing to introduce a new perception that relates to the Mekong River, the Naga, and

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.43.

the Buddhist together. In consequence, it is not strange to improvise the Naga belief with the mysterious fireballs.

2.2.2 Hinduism Influence

The affect of Hinduism as discussed here is limited to the influence from the Khmer culture because the Khmer Empire was an important civilization affecting the growth of *NE* culture. As with the discussion of Buddhist influences, an overview of history is needed to be presented for a better understanding.

2.2.2.1 The Influence of Hinduism in NE

Thailand has been described as the Hinduised States of Southeast Asia¹⁹. In *NE*, the influence of Hinduism was brought into the region by the Khmer. The Hindu influences in the region are characterized by Hindu symbols and monuments.

The area we call *Isan* or *NE* at present submitted to the Khmer Empire between the 9th and 13th centuries. The first movement of the Khmer would have been in the beginning of the 9th century. King Jayavarman II began to expand the Khmer power to the west and north. It can be assumed that by the end of the 9th century, the Khmer replaced the Dvaravati culture which had existed earlier in much of *NE* area. By the end of the 10th century, the movement of the Khmer civilization into the Moon and the Mekong River basins introduced a new period of socio-cultural change into the northeast²⁰.

¹⁹ Santosh N. Desai, Hinduism In Thai Life, 1st published (Bombay: Popular Prakashan Private Ltd., 1980), p.1.

²⁰ Srisak Vallibhotama, A Northeastern Site of Civilization, 4th edition, (Bangkok, Matichon, 2005), p. 59.

Although the Khmer controlled the lower part of Isan (most areas south of the Mun River), there is some evidence revealing that the Khmer culture had reached the upper *NE* as well; for example, in present-day Sakornnakorn province two cities mentioned in *CTP* – Nonghan Luang and Nonghan Noi- were found to have had a rectangular plan which is the Khmer style in planning the city²¹.

Early in the 13th century, the death of Jayavarman VII resulted in the decline of the Khmer Empire. Thereafter, Theravada Buddhism spread eastwards from the central plain into the region and the movement of small groups of Lao people into the vicinity of Udon Thani and Nong Khai province was the beginning of the new face of *NE*.

2.2.2.2 Naga perception found in the Khmer cultural context

According to Hindu mythology, the Naga, with multiple flaring and crowned heads, is a celestial denizen which is frequently found in Hindu texts; for example, the Naga appears as the bed for Vishnu while He was sleeping at the Milk Ocean²².

The Naga was adopted by local people of Southeast Asia and the belief in the Naga was practiced among the Khmer. They perceived the Naga as the symbol of water and respected the Naga as their ancestors according to the Phra Thong and Nang Naga myth.

The Khmer practiced religious syncretism. They observed Saivism, Vaisnavism, and Mahayana Buddhism. This explains the reason that we witness the complexity of religions and beliefs of the Khmer as shown in their arts and architecture.

²¹Ibid., p. 150.

²² Sumet Jumxai Na Ayutthaya, *Water symbol*, (Bangkok, White Lotus, 2000), p.26.

The Khmer themselves had been influenced by the Indian culture through the Funan Empire, the earliest civilization of Southeast Asia. They adopted the cult of Naga princess from²³ Funan Empire. The Funan owns the legend of the marriage between the Naga princess and a Brahman named Kaundinya. As a gift, the Naga king drank up the water that covered the country so that his new son-in-law could cultivate the soil. From this story, the Naga functions as the power in establishing the Funan Empire. The Khmer territory was once a vassal state of the Funan Empire. As a result, after the fall of Funan, the Khmer adopted this idea and created their own myth named Phra Thong - Nang Naga or Prince Thong and the Naga princess. This Khmer myth is from the Cambodia Chronicle²⁴.

Similar to the Funan story, Phra Thong and Nang Naga get married and the Naga king drank up the water so that his son-in-law can cultivate the soil. In addition, the Naga king also creates the city for them to rule. This story explains how the Khmer kingdom was built and why the Khmer believe that Phra Thong - Nang Naga are their ancestors.

In the Khmer cultural context, the myth presented above implies the power of the Naga in creation and Naga acting as a symbol of fertility; moreover, it is always connected with the water.

To sustain the above presentation, the Khmer built several Khmer sanctuaries in the *NE* area which still can be seen at present to remind the influence of the Khmer in the past. Among several Khmer sanctuaries situated in the *NE*, the three most outstanding

²³Peter Rogers, History of Northeast :The Northeast of Thailand, (Bangkok, Duang Kamol Books, 1996), p.128.

²⁴ Cambodian chronicle, (Phrae pitaya, Phranakorn, 1970) p.16

representing the Naga belief are Prasart Pimai, Prasart Phanom Rung, and Prasart Muang Tam.

At Prasart Phimai, the Naga Bridge is symbolically a path leading from human world to that of the Gods. The bridge is also compared to a rainbow which symbolically connects the earth to the heaven. At the Prasart Panom Rung, three Naga bridges are traversed on the way to the upper platform leading to the main sanctuary. Furthermore, traditionally, the Naga is regarded as a source of water that explains the reason we see the Naga at the pond within the compound area of the temples, too.

Moreover, the Naga functions as the guardian spirit of the religious sanctuaries. This perception is in accordance with the perception of the Naga found in Buddhism as mentioned earlier. In addition, the protective nature of the Naga in the story of Phra Thong-Nang Naga is fundamentally similar to its role of providing the Buddha with shelter in the story of Lord Buddha's life which is shown in the art objects.

The arrival of the Khmer influences in NE shows that the Naga belief or the story about the giant serpent is a universal cult among local people living in the Mekong community. It also shows that the perception of the Naga of Khmers is similar to local people in NE. The Naga is a symbol of water and a sacred figure that protect the religious places.

In summary, the snake is considered the symbol of water and the symbol of fertility in the indigenous belief, which existed in the Ban Chiang culture. This is the fundamental factor of the sacred Naga. Humans worshiped the snake for the protection purpose. However, the cult had been modified by the influences from Buddhism and

Hinduism imported from India and brought into the region by the Dvaravati culture and the Khmer Empire respectively. The Buddhist influence adapted the common snake to a higher status in order to persuade the native people to adopt the new religion. By doing this, the snake had been promoted to play a new role in protecting the Buddha which can be seen from the art objects in Dvaravati style - Buddha images and the votive tablets.

Concerning the Hinduism from the Khmer, the Naga symbolizes the path connecting earth and heaven; moreover, the Naga gives the sense of creation. The mutual meaning of Naga found in Buddhism and Hinduism is as the guardian deity of the sacred places. In addition, the Naga is the symbol of water and the power of creation. As a result, in the human mind, the Naga is a creature with powerful supernatural forces.

This process of interrelation took place over a long period of time. All of these factors are significant in generating the present-day perception of the sacred Naga, having grown deep into the culture until it became the mainstream culture of the Mekong community today.

In addition, although there is no direct connection in explaining the development of '*Bungfai Phii*' to become the *NGF*, the fact that the strong Naga belief among Northeastern people and the legend presenting that the Naga is the creator of the Mekong River convince local people to accept the perception that the mysterious fireballs rising from the Mekong River on the night of the end of the Buddhist Retreat which is known as '*Bungfai Phii*' are created by the Naga – the Creator of the River, the one who lives underworld, and the Buddhist protector.