

Mekong River without the Naga: People without Power

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ABSTRACT

This article is part of a dissertation entitled, "The Social Network of the 'Kha Okasa Phra That Phanom'" in the communities on the Mekong River Basin. It is a study of the cultural life of the Lao Wieng ethnic group in the Phra That Phanom community, which holds a traditional belief about the "Three Chao Huen". The study was conducted by observations and interviews, and it was found that this ethnic group has inherited rituals in worshipping the guardian spirit and the Naga according to Lanchang belief. As this community has experienced a number of changes in administrative power, people have needed to change their roles and create new meanings for this social phenomenon, that is the power relation between the Lao Wieng ethnic group and the monks at Wat Phra That Phanom. The worship of Satta Naga has been revived, resulting in a decrease in the power of the old traditional belief group. However, members of this group have subtly adjusted their roles for their survival.

Keywords: Mekong River, Naga, People, Power

INTRODUCTION

The geographical location of the Phra That communities on the banks of the Mekong River basin are flanked by the Annamite Mountain Range in the East and the Phu Phan Mountain Range in the West. It is the origin of many important rivers that flow into the Mekong River; for example, the Kading, the Toen, the Hin Boon, the XeBangfai, the Kum and the Songkram Rivers (Boonchuay Srisawad, 2004: 18). The diversity of the ecological system of the rivers and their richness in natural resources attract people to come and settle in this area and build towns there; for example, Muang Wang, Muang Khumkerd, Muang Khummuan, Muang Mahaxaykongkaew, and Muang Tha Kaek. Most of the population is of Lao ethnicity. The group that is called the Old Lao (the Lao Song, the Tai Dam, the Tai Khao, and the Phu Tai) established themselves in Muang Thaeng, Muang Lai and other towns in the Sipsongchutai and the Huaphantung Ha Huaphantung Hok Areas. The group that is known as the New Lao, -- namely, the Lao Luang Phrabang, the Lao Phuan, the Lao Wieng, and the Lao Champasak -- settled in Luang Phrabang, Chiang Kwang, Vientiane, and Champasak along the basin on the left bank of the Mekong River before moving to the right bank of the River (Jarowan Thammawat, 1998: 182). Formerly, the Lao ethnic group moved to settle in the Phra That communities on both sides of the Mekong River; the laws of the Ayutthaya Royal Court show evidence of a city-state that was under the sovereignty of Ayutthaya and which presented gold and silver trees as tributes to their ruler. This city-state was Khotrapura (Charas Phayakkharatchsak, 1991: 15). The city-state of Khotrapura was originally located on the estuary of the Xe Bangfai River opposite of Phra That Phanom.

Water erosion caused the banks of the river to collapse and the communities along the river banks thus had to move several times. The place where Phra That Sri Khotrapura or Phra That Mueang Kao was located was known as Marukhanakhon.

King Siriboonsan (1751-1779) appointed Phra Boromracha (Ku Kaew) to rule the town of Marukhanakhon and had the town moved to the right bank of the Mekong River. This location is now That Noi Sriboonreung Village on the Bang Huak Stream in That Phanom District (Suwit Therasaswat, 2006: 54). In 1786, Phra Boromracha (Phomma), a son of Phra Boromracha (Ku Kaew), became the ruler of the town succeeding his father. He felt that Marukhanakhon, currently in That Noi Sriboonreung Village, had to face the problem of water erosion so he had the town moved North and re-established in Nong Chan Village, which is three kilometers from Nakhon Phanom Province. In the reign of King Buddhayodfachulalok, the king had the name Marukhanakhon changed to Nakhon Phanom (Surachit Chantharasakha, 1999: 1945-1957). Its history shows that Nakhon Phanom used to be an important town during the LanXhang Period and had authority over a number of subsidiary towns in the lower basin of the Songkram River and on the banks of the Mekong River as well as over the That Phanom communities, which were, for example, Chayaburi, Tha Uthane, Arthamat or Arjsamath, Ramaratch, Raenu Nakhon, and That Phanom. This power also extended to the left bank of the Mekong River in Khumkerd and Khummuan and to the Vietnamese border. As the town expanded to include the communities on both banks of the Mekong River, this area became called the "Lao Wieng Cultural Zone" or Central Lao (Phuriphume Chomphunuch, 2006: 41). It had close ties with the Kingdom of LanXhang, which had Vientiane as its center of power. The above phenomenon demonstrates that one of the causes of the arrival of the Lao Wieng Cultural Group was political conflict, especially after the death of King Suriyawongsathamikaratch. Phra Khru Phonesamek led people from Vientiane to the South, close to the Cambodian border. Yet, they had to face another problem of having to pay a levy to the Cambodian rule so, a number of people moved back to settle near the Phra That communities on the banks of the Mekong River. After the Chao Anuwong episode, people had to move out of their settlements. In 1836, King Rama III ordered the ruler of the town of Thao Pia to urge approximately 4,000 people, who lived in the towns in the North-east of Lakhon or Nakhon Phanom and included Khummuan and Khumkerd on the left bank of the Mekong River, to come and settle on the right bank of the River. In 1846, a war between Siam and Annam broke out and there was a need for men to serve in the army. Siam thus moved about 3,000 Laotians from the towns of Phin, Tapone, Wang, Phabang and Nong to settle in Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon and Mukdahan, causing the left bank of the Mekong River to become deserted (Walter F. Wella, 1971: 179).

This research aims to study the social network of the "Kha Okasa Phra That Phanom" in the communities of the Mekong River basin. It is qualitative research conducted in accordance with folklore principles. The research process consists of the study of written documents in legends and folktales and the compilation of information collected from fieldwork, which was conducted in two ways: participating in the important homage rituals for the "Three Chao Sam Huen," and acting as an outside observer of the traditional merit-making ceremony of Phra That Phanom in That Phanom District, Nakhon Phanom Province Thailand, the Phra That Ing Hung merit-making ceremony, the Phra That Phone merit-making ceremony in Suvannakhet, as

well as the Phra That Tumphawang merit-making ceremony in Khummuan, Lao PDR. Interviews were conducted without a structure. The research is divided into two parts. The first part, relating to space, refers to the areas covered by fieldwork in the location of Wat Phra That Phanom Woramahawiharn in That Phanom District, Nakhon Phanom Province and the Kha Okasa Phra That Phanom communities, recorded in the Urungkhathat legend, in Nakhon Phanom Province and in the Lao PDR. The second part is related to information that has been used as the principle information for this research. This information is classified into two groups: (1) information in writing consisting of legends, stories, chronicles, stone inscriptions, official records of the Ratanakosin Period, records of foreigners, and (2) information gathered from informants and observations of activities. The required characteristics of key informants were that they had to be local scholars, monks or cultural leaders. The researchers employed two important concepts; the first one concerned power and authority, and the second concerned structuration (Giddens, Anthony, 1986). In order to reach a conclusion, the researcher filed the information into groups based on the issues studied, then analyzed the overall image according to the theory used for explaining cultural phenomena and drew conclusions according to the research objectives.

The Lao Wieng Cultural Life

The field works conducted in the Phra That Phanom community shows that the Lao Wieng Cultural Group settled on the banks of the Mekong River in the North from Wat Huawieng Rangsi to the South in the area of Soi Anurak Chedi, Soi Kuson Rasadakorn and Soi Prem Puchani. The people of the Phra That Phanom community have inherited the Mekong River culture from the people of the Kingdom of LanXhang in the past, and so they share social and cultural characteristics (Charuwan Thammawat, 1997: 18). As for the LanXhang social conditions in the old days, prior to the arrival of Buddhism in the reign of King Fa-ngum, most people believed in supernatural powers. The LanXhang Chronicles show that they worshipped the Phi Fa spirit, the Phi Thaen Spirit, and ancestral spirits as well as followed the beliefs of the Chinese since their borders were connected with China and they had had social contact for a long time (Khum Champakaewmanee et al., 1996: 25). The belief in Phi Thaen coincided with the “power and authority” concept. “Thaen” is a symbol of power, having kings, Thaen’s offspring, as representatives of that power. The belief in Thaen was created as a way of building up the acceptance of kings. This power and authority were formed by an awareness of the people in the group that their leaders or rulers were blessed with power and the right to rule. These were the characteristics of those who were superior to common people. The relationship between the ruler and the ruled was power related, and involved fights and negotiations, which were narrated in tales and legends and is concluded below.

Belief in spirits: this belief is meaningful to existence at both the family and the community level (Charuwan Thammawat, 1985: 31).

The respect for the Phi Fa and Phi Thaen spirits is evident in Lao folk literature. For example, in the stories of Pheun Khun Borom, Thao Hung or Chueng and Phraya

Khunkhak (King of Toad). Phi Fa and Phi Thaen represent the deities in heaven who gave birth to leaders, human beings, animals and all things in the Universe. They could do good and bad to human beings if these human beings fail to observe social conventions. Therefore, people, town rulers and kings all had to submit themselves to these spirits. The preparations for a feast for the spirits originated from the belief that all natural entities -- the land, water, vegetation, animals, and human beings -- existed in the world because of the power of the Phi Fa or Phi Thaen. They gave, protected and destroyed lives. It was a household practice that, when having a meal or drinks, a small set of food or drink had to be offered to the spirits first. Beliefs in the spirits, particularly the Phi Thaen, played a significant role in the way of life of the LanChang people because they believed that the Thaen played a major role in designing and controlling human fate and human social status would vary according to the wish of the Thaen. This allowed the ruling class to exploit the belief to establish their rights. Kings were believed to be the Thaen's heir, sent by their father to rule human beings. This belief started in the reign of Khun Borom, making it possible for LanXhang rulers to control the people of the kingdom which consisted of a variety of ethnic groups and cultures and to make them co-exist in peace under the one fate that held them together, the Thaen. There was also Phi Mahaesak or Phi Arak, the guardian spirit, believed to maintain the country's peace and normality. Whenever there were uprisings, there would be a ceremony organizing the installation of the community's pillar to ensure it was securely fixed, and then all the turmoil would subside (Kusuma Chaiwinit, 1980: 30).

On May 13th, 2011, during the fieldwork conducted in That Noi Village, That Phanom District, the researcher found that the performers of the ceremony connected their rituals with the legends of Marukhanakhon and of Srikhotraboorn Kingdom; this could be seen in BanThat Phanom Nuea, Ban Laksila and Ban That Noi. They also adapted and combined their beliefs about Phi Mahaesak and the Naga or the mythical serpents. During the ceremony, they referred to the Naga by the name of Chao Tong Kwang and the Three Chao Huen, who protected Phra That Phanom. Each year, villagers organized three rites -- one on the third waxing moon night of the sixth lunar month, another on the eleventh waxing moon of the same lunar month, and the third on the thirteenth waxing moon night. At present only the Nang Thiam (the medium between Phi and people) survives as most of the ritual performers have died. The rituals lacked support from local administration, forcing the number of participants in the rituals to decrease. Nevertheless, the way of life of the communities along the banks of the Mekong River was also related to snake worship. This can be seen in the pottery found from the excavation of the archaeological sites in Baan Chieng in UdonThani Province. The pottery, approximately 3,600 years old, features sketches and colored drawings of reptiles. This shows that the ancient communities in the Mekong River basin in the Upper Northeastern Region had worshipped serpents since the Pre-historic Period, as well as worshipping spirits; this has continued to the present.

Belief in the Naga: Humphan Ladthanawong (2008: 20-25) states that there is evidence of two strands regarding a belief in the Naga.

The first strand is related to their ancestral belief before the acceptance of Buddhism as their religion; the other shows the Buddhist influence, which came from India. The first strand believes that the ancestors of the Laotians were descendants of the Naga. It is believed that the Naga were snake-like creatures with a crest on their heads. They were sacred and had miraculous powers. They lived in all types of water sources -- rivers, streams, lakes, bogs and ponds. There are many legends about the birth of the Laotians and many of these legends are related to the Naga. One of the legends says that the Naga were the ancestors of the Tai Lao people; for example, the Laotians in Vientiane are believed to be related to the Naga. It is said that in Vientiane is a burrow of the Naga in a temple. Whenever the country was in trouble, people in Vientiane would strike the Mak Khaeng drum (*solanum torvum* drum) and troops of Naga would emerge from this hole to help chase away their enemies. Later, there was a story about a war between Laos and Siam in the reign of King Taksin. The Siamese army heard about the the Naga's burrow and the Siamese soldiers were sent to close the opening by building the Phra That structure on top of the hole so that the Naga could not emerge. This Phra That was assumed to be Phra That Dam (Black Phra That), located in the centre of Vientiane. So, the Tai Lao people's belief in the Naga was that of the people who lived close to water sources. The Naga were connected with their way of life. The Naga would be able to provide answers and solutions to the problems of their group and has, since then, become the symbol of their communities.

The second strand is a combination of the belief in the Naga in Buddhism with the first strand of belief. The Naga, in the second strand of belief, were believed to be sub-humans who lived in the Underwater World, called Maung Badan. Many literary works related to Buddhism's presence during this belief in the Naga. An example is the Jataka story about the Ten Previous Lives of the Lord Buddha. It was believed that before Prince Sitthatha attained Enlightenment to become the Lord Buddha, he had been born as animals in his many previous lives. In one of these lives, he was born a Naga, named Phraya Phurithat, who had led an austere life in order to make merit that would contribute to his final life when he would be able to achieve Enlightenment. Another legend is related to the ordination of Buddhist monks. The word "Naga" is used in the ordination ceremony to call on the man who is to be ordained. This comes from a story when, during the time of the Lord Buddha, a Naga wished to be ordained as a Buddhist monk but his wish could not be granted as a Naga was not human. So, he asked for permission from the Lord Buddha to make use of the word Naga at the ordination ceremony as an assertion of his strong faith in Buddhism. Therefore, Naga serpents have been closely connected with Buddhism.

Images of the Naga have been presented in Buddhist art and in ordination halls and vihara buildings as a way of warding off threats to Buddhism. Naga images can be seen in architectural decorations; for example, Gabel apex, a decoration on the roof ridge of an ordination hall or a Vihara building, Naga-shaped stairways and bridges as well as wriggling Naga designs. The tie between the Naga and the inhabitants of the Mekong Basin, both those of the LanXhang Kingdom and the people in the Northeast of Thailand, has run deep in their blood, as can be seen in their saying, "the Mekong River without the Naga, and rice lacking rain causes people to die". In literature, the Naga are the Mekong River Basin's cultural symbol, as can be seen in the stories of Pha Daeng and Nang Ai. The story about the origin of a land with large water sources, for example,

Nong Harn Noi Reservoir in Kumphawapi District in Udon Thani Province and Nong Harn Luang Reservoir in Sakon Nakhon Province, reflects the community's culture, its ethnic groups and administration. Its literature responds to the beliefs of local Northeastern society in the way that it combines the belief in spirits, the Naga and Buddhist philosophy.

The belief in the "Naga" shows the condition of pre-historic society when human beings had to depend on one another in order to survive. To ensure strength and security in society or a group of people, there was the need for man power, companions and followers. Most importantly was a sense of trust. Leaders had to establish close ties, starting from ties within the family, which were associated with blood and marriages. The Naga were classified into family groups: seven Naga families, 15 Naga families, and 24 Naga families; they were assigned to protect islands, cataracts, water resources and mountains. This was seen as a way of assigning them to protect the ecological system of an agricultural or farming society that depended on water.

The most important concept that was derived from the social background of the communities on the banks of the Mekong River is connected with the major concept related to the spirit of the household or the spirit of the community, which was the most valuable entity or power in a community. It was the centre of a unified spirit that contributed to the mutual thinking, the same way of life and the same way of behavior, no matter if it were in a village or in a town (Jaruwat Thammawat, 1998: 206-208). The major components of each town community were Kong Din (the earth) and Kong Nam (water territories), houses, temples and palaces. A town community grew from settlements that were supported by these factors -- the land and water blessed with fertility and animal food, together with high quality, wise and virtuous human beings. The land and water territories thus became symbols of the economic way in both eking out a living (cultivating) and earning a living (gathering products from nature). Houses and palaces were symbols of man power, consisting of people and leader, town rulers and kings. Temples were a symbol of invisible power, intelligence and religious teachings that were developed into social ideology and laws to regulate towns and communities. The Naga were thus a symbol that was related to the spirit of a house or the spirit of a town, which was developed into ideology and customs. There were many rites that were related to the Naga, for example, the belief that the Lai Heua Fai ceremony or an illuminated boat process along the river would make it rain appropriately to the season. This is because the illuminated boats that floated along the river would cause the Naga in the river to become hot so they would escape to the sky carrying the water with them. In the sixth month, the water on the earth would dry up. People would thus fire Bung Fai rockets during a ceremony in request of rainwater, asking Phraya Thaen to order the Naga to return the water to the earth. When Buddhism arrived in the Mekong River basin, the meaning of the illuminated boat procession was changed to paying homage to the Lord Buddha's footprint, which the Lord Buddha had pressed on the riverbank at the request of the Naga.

The belief related to the Naga is thus related to the water in the rivers and rains in the sky, which were major elements for living in an agricultural society. The Naga symbolizes abundance, and were a part of Buddhist rites; they were protectors of Buddhism and administrators of social order. They served as a medium of the power relations between receivers and givers, between those deprived of power and

opportunity and those who had more chance or were more powerful. They played a role in traditional belief and in a new religion, Brahmanism, which believed that the Naga was the King of the Underwater World. A Naga, Ananthanagaratch, served as the throne of the God Narai from which originated the legend of the God Narai Reclining on the Ocean. Wasukri Naga was used as the sash of the God Shiva. In Buddhism, the word Naga was used at the ordination ceremony. The Naga were like the rainbows that connected the way of life of people on both banks of the Mekong River. The river was therefore not a geographical or political boundary; socially, people in these communities held onto their clanship or family relationships, which had been created by their ideology about the “Naga”.

Their continued rituals and rites and their sacred places were all filled with stories that reflected their beliefs and a way of life that was tied to the Mekong River, for example, the illuminated boat procession. The beliefs related to this ceremony are divided into two groups. The first group is about the story of a white crow. Before the white crow returned to heaven, his five children asked him to impress his footprint on a stone slab for them to pay respect to. The white crow told his children to light candles in cups or plates and let them float along the river on the full Moon night in the eleventh month every year. The candlewicks were made in the shape of a crow’s foot as a way of paying respect to the white crow. The second group connected the belief in Brahmanism with that of Buddhism, believing that the illuminated boat process was for paying homage to the Lord Buddha’s footprint, to the Brahma God, to Phra That Chulamanee and to Ganga the Goddess of rivers. It also included a belief in paying respect to the Naga which was the giver of water for life, agriculture and fishery, and which was based on their respect for nature. Evidence shows that the first illuminated boat procession along the Mekong River was organized in Vientiane during the reign of King Suriyawongsathamikaratch.

According to the travel record of Van Wusthof, a Dutch trade envoy, the ceremony was organized on the fifteenth waxing moon night or the first waning moon night of the twelfth lunar month when two hundred boats floated along the Mekong River. They were illuminated by candlelight. Three boats were made into the square That structure decorated with well lit candles (Sila Veravong, 1996: 39). From this evidence, Nakhon Phanom, as a major city in the Kingdom of LanXhang, is assumed to have organized the illuminated boat procession to follow the tradition of the LanXhang Kingdom. It is evident in the Heet 12 or jaa reet 12 (traditions) that, at the end of the Buddhist Lent, people came to make merit and present wax castles to the temples, organized a boat race and an illuminated boat procession, which were the tradition of the communities close to the river (Preeya Saenthaweesuk, 1996: 76-79). Besides, the Heet 12, Kong 14 also states that it was a tradition for kings in ancient times to make their vassals, in large and small towns, organize and illuminate a boat procession along the river in the twelfth month to pay homage to the fifteen families of the Naga in the Mekong River (Jaruwat Thammawat, 1986: 162). The geographical location of the communities along the banks of the river and people’s dependence on the river for their livelihoods contributed to the beliefs and the continuation of the ceremony.

Revival and Change

The Kingdom of LanXhang declined in the reign of King Thonburi, or King Thaksin the great. This resulted in changes in the power of the communities on the banks of the Mekong River. In the reign of King Rama V, the power relations, cultural differences and political conflicts all emphasized an awareness of separation -- people living in the Mekong River basin being classified as the “Lao”. With the influx of Western Imperialism, the Siamese court tried to centralize its power and promoted nationalism. The monarchy and religious institutions revived the relationship with the Mekong basin through a “duality of structure” by spreading the Dhammayutika Buddhist Sect to the Northeast, where most of the monks followed the conventions of the LanXhang Kingdom. This social phenomenon affected the Loa Wieng group, which held strong beliefs in Phi Arak or the Three Phi Chao Heun. The Dhammyuttika monks thus tried to establish a relationship with the new ethnic groups that had just arrived, for example, the Chinese, and revived a ceremony organized to pay respect to Satta Naga as a way of decreasing the power of the Lao Wieng group that worshipped the Three Chao Huen. This can be seen in the change in the rite organized to pay respect to Phra That Phanom; it was a way of moving the worshippers of the Three Chao Heun or the Lao Wieng ethnic group to organize such a rite in the communities on the banks of the Mekong River, far away from Wat Phra That Phanom.

The researcher consider that the cultural life of the Loa Wieng communities was attached to the river, therefore, the people had a tendency to adopt and employ superstition to control invisible and unpredictable powers. As Kirsch (1967) states, the religious system of Northeastern society does have Theravada Buddhism as the only major component but it is a religious system that has been derived from the syncretism of old religious components, which believes in animism, and new religious components that had come from India to the Suvarnabhumi Peninsular. These new religious components are Theravada Buddhism and Folk Brahmanism. There are overlapping components of the old beliefs about ghosts and the supernatural; there are changes and a mixture between Buddhism, Brahmanism and the spirits like the Three Chao Heun, which was originally Phi Arak or the guardian spirit, being changed into the Naga, the spirit of the river, to protect Phra That Phanom. Beliefs and religions are the cultural life that has an overlapping “power” in the cultural dimension. The Naga provided a tie that connected the communities on the banks of the Mekong River, so it can be said that the Mekong without the Naga is like a human being without power.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research would not have been possible without the valuable advice of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Jarawan Thammawat and Asst. Prof. Dr. Arth Nanthajakra. I truly appreciate the kind and valuable suggestions offered by Prof. Suwit Theerasasawat, Asst. Prof. Dr. Choopug Suttisa, and Asst. Prof. Somcharti Maneechot. The author has learned how to conduct research for public benefit thanks to them. Furthermore, for their sincere support and assistance, my thanks goes to the informants from the networks of the Phra That Phanom community; the Phra That Tum Phawang community; the Phra That Sikhottabong community in Khammouane Province, Lao PDR; and the Phra That Phon community, and the Phra That Ing Hang community in Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR.

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