The Signification of Naga in Thai Architectural And Sculptural Ornaments

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Introduction

The Naga is the sacred name of the mythical serpent in Southeast Asian and Indian literature. In Thailand, the figure has deeply influenced aspects of Thai traditional arts, especially architecture and sculpture. The reference materials related to Naga are very scanty however and it seems that there are only a few books written on it by Thai and foreign scholars.

The authors of these implicitly confirm that the Naga in Southeast Asian cultures originate from India. Others have also referred to the indigenous serpent cult but did not provide clear scientific evidence. Thus, the problem now is whether or not there was a form of indigenous serpent cult that existed in Siam peninsula and mainland Southeast Asia.

The Serpent in the indigenous cultures of Thailand and Southeast Asia

The Serpent as a form of animism

The serpent cults were by no means exclusive to India and it seems that the worship of snakes as symbols of fertility and water occurred independently in many parts of the world, especially in Southeast Asia where the water culture played a crucial part in the people’s daily activities (10. Michel Freeman and Roger Warner 1987: 124). In Siam peninsula, painted earthenware pots were discovered at Ban Chiang (บ้านเชียง), Udonthani (อุดรธานี) province and Ban Kao (บ้านกา), Kanchanaburi (กาญจนบุรี) province, which showed many wave-like serpent designs decorated around the pottery body. These findings are evidence that the serpent cult was possibly practised by the primitive society in Siam peninsula in the Metal Age (ยุคโลหะ) about 2000–3000 years ago.

The serpent cult of Southeast Asia has been mainly found among the resident communities living along the banks of the Mekhong River (แม่น้ำโขง), starting from Yunan (ยูนาน), China to the lower section of its river course. Here, the indigenous ethnic groups believe that the serpent is the creator of nature and life and that it nourishes human beings. The serpent, furthermore, is also supposed to have assisted people in establishing cities and citadels and bestowing prosperity on the inhabitants. But the serpent can also punish people by releasing an oversupply of water, causing floods which destroy the cities. Most of the people believe the fantastic legends, especially the serpent legends related to construction of cities, citadels and kingdoms. Particularly interesting are the stories of the origin of the matriarchy lineage
and human race which are very popular among the communities of Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

A Tai Lu (Water Tai) legend called the story of Nang Sa⁵ (นางส้า) tells how the Tai⁶ race originated from the water serpent. Tai men in Sipsongpanna (สิบสองปันนา, Yunan province, China, Sipsong Chu Tai (สิบสองจุไท) the North of Laos and the Northwest of Vietnam and the North of Thailand usually tattoo the water serpent on their back and arm as an obligatory rite when they come of age. Chinese and Vietnamese chronicles called them “Khin-man” which means “great snake” (16. Sumet Jumsai 1997: 138). Hitherto, a few old Thais⁦ residing in the North and Northeast of Thailand still call the mythical water serpent “Tua Luong” (ตัวลวง) that is similar with the “Thuong Luong” in Vietnamese legends. The two names have a similar sound and imply that the belief of the serpent ruler of the water world was created by the human imagination. They could also be ancient names for the mythical water serpent of the Southeast Asian minority groups.

The Serpent as a symbol of water

Water plays a very crucial role in the daily life and agricultural activities of the primitive peoples of Southeast Asia. Water is sometimes so abundant that it causes floods; at other times, it is really scarce. Thus, belief in a water entity found its way into the people’s consciousness to help them face the unexplained when nature strikes. Primitive peoples believed that there must be a beast residing in the water realm which creates water and controls it, eventually bestowing it to the human world. In his work, Naga - Origin of Siam and West Pacific Culture, Dr. Sumet Jumsai reasoned that “no explanation can account for serpent (Naga) being equated to water except for the genealogy of form” (1997: 16). According to traditional beliefs, Thais and Laotians think that the mythical serpent lived in a zone of terrestrial moisture under the human world called Muang Badan (เมืองบาดาล), the sacred citadel located somewhere in the Mekhong river bed, the river course between Nong Khai province, Thailand and Vientiane, capital of the People Republic Democracy of Laos. From Muang Badan, the underworld river rose, and mythically linked itself to all the rivers and oceans all over the world. Muang Badan⁸ is also considered a mythical kingdom which serves as an endless water source that keeps the Mekhong River (แม่น้ำโขง) and all other rivers from drying out. Its water also contributes to the ecological balance and takes care of the inhabitants along the riverside regions. In traditional agricultural understanding, the term “Nak hey nam”⁹ (นาคให้น้ำ - serpent giving water) refers to the water amount needed for rice planting, as estimated by a Thai farmer [Sumet Jumsai 1997: 24]. The Thais furthermore also think that if there’s but one unique serpent in the field with them during the year, they will have enough water for cultivating rice. But if all of seven serpents stay together in the field, there will be a drought because the serpents will compete with each other in supplying water. According to the ancient belief, the Thais and other Southeast Asian peoples thought that the serpent spirits lived only in the water realm. With the influence of Indian culture, they came to believe that the serpent can also live in heaven (Suchit Wongthet 2003: 2). Thus, in the early rainy reason, the Thai farmers would listen carefully for the direction of the thunder because the serpent will give directions regarding the water supply. If it thunders in the North the serpent will release an oversupply of water. Flood will inundate the land. If
it booms from the Southeast, the serpent will release ample rain and rice will be plentiful. In the rain prayer festival, Bun Bang Fai\(^{10}\) (เทศาภิมุขบั้งไฟ), which is held yearly in Yasothon province in the middle of June, village men launch serpent-shaped bamboo rockets into the sky. The rockets send a human message to the God of Thunder, Phra In (พระอินทร์ Indra in Hindu), to ask him to enter his serpent cloud and make rain. When looking at a rainbow stretched across the sky, a Thai would see the “Nak kin nam”\(^{11}\) (运输 - the serpent drinking water). The rainbow symbolizes the giant multi colored serpent rearing its head from the ocean and drinking water (Taylor 1994: 62). These beliefs might have come from Indian culture, after having been assimilated into Thai folklore, especially into those of the E-San region which suffers from lack of water all year round.

**The Serpent in Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism in Thailand and Southeast Asia**

The Serpent and Brahmanism

Brahmanism (ศาสนาพราหมณ์) is considered as the Arians’ main religion, founded in the Vedic period about 3000 years ago. Buddhism (ศาสนาพุทธ) came later in the 5\(^{th}\) century BC. Both of them however spread to Southeast Asia at the same period, in the first centuries AD. The god serpent was called Naga in Sanskrit and Nag in Pali. These terms are used to designate both the king cobra and the elephant. It appears that the worship of the Naga as a type of totem originated from the Dravidian culture. Later it became the holy beast of Brahmanism in the post-Vedic Era, when the Arians absorbed the Dravidian’s indigenous cults. The Naga\(^{12}\) was called Nak (นาค), Phaya Nak (พญานาค) or Tua Nak (ตัวนาค) in Thai. In my opinion, those words are derived from the Sanskrit or Pali languages but they are pronounced with Thai phonetics. Moreover, the term of Naga is used to refer to the naked people, for instance the Naga tribes living in Naga Hill, Assam state, the Northeast of India. The Tam Nan Urangkathat (ตานานอุรังคธาตุ), a Thai ancient chronicle, states that Naga was the term used to designate the ethnic people originally residing in Nong Sae (หนองแส), south of Yunan province, who emigrated by small groups for settlement along the banks of the Mekhong River (Suchit Wongthet 2003: 4). Thus, Naga undoubtedly referred to the Tai race who emigrated southward during the development process of their ethnic history. In the first chapter of the Tam Nan Urangkhatthath (ตานานอุรังคธาตุ), there is a part quoted from Indian trade men’s narration saying that the “Suvannaphum region is the living quarters of (the) Naga race” (Suthit Wongthet 2003: 5). According to Indian chronicle, Suvannaphum (สุวรรณภูมิ) or Suvarnnabhumi means “the Golden Land” which is believed to be Siam peninsula or mainland Southeast Asia. There, the indigenous residents were naked people as described in Funan Ki by Khang Tai, the ambassador who was sent to the Funan royal court as the Chinese emperor’s envoy in the Three Kingdom period. In other words, the Thai Tam Nan Urangkathath’s designation of the indigenous people as Nagas must have come from Indian influence.

In short, Naga is also the preferred term used (by Indians) to refer to the indigenous groups of Southeast Asia who practised serpent worship or considered the serpent as a form of animal totem. Ever since they accepted Indian culture, the Southeast Asians have merely borrowed the term “Naga” from India for the sake of strengthening the sacred nature of the
mythical indigenous serpent. At first, when Brahmanism appeared in Southeast Asia, it was considered a new religion, it was confronted by the old belief system of serpent worship. The confrontation is represented in Thai legends which tell the story of Phra Isuan (พระอิศวร - Shiva in Hindu) and Phra Narai (พระนารายณ์ - Vishnu in Hindu) who fought fiercely with the Naga kings in a mythical combat. Eventually victory went to the Brahmanist gods, who proclaimed the superiority of the new religion over the old belief system. The old beliefs, however, did not disappear but became part of the new religion with a more sacred role. The Naga cult was assimilated into the indigenous serpent cult and turned the serpent into a god which defends the state, protector of the new religion and the king’s holy lineage. This is illustrated in the legend of a Brahmin, Kaudinya, who married a Soma princess (พระนางโสมา), the daughter of the Naga king, thereafter giving birth to the kings’ descendants. A similar story was carved in the Champa stone inscription in My Son, the holy land in central Vietnam. This was specifically narrated in the legend of the Funan Kingdom (อาณาจักรฟูนัน) established by Ambassador Khang Tai in the 3rd century AD. The Khmer also have a similar story that tells of Prince Preah Thong marrying Princess Nang Neak, daughter of King Naga. This was adapted into the “Phra Ruong” (พระรุ้ง) story by the Thais, in 13th century AD, explaining the serpent princess lineage (Nang Nak - นางนาค in Thai) of the first king of Sukhothai Kingdom (อาณาจักรสุโขทัย). Along with the assimilation of Indian culture into indigenous cultures, all of the stories also bear the stamp of popular stories told in the South or Southeast of India (such as the Indian Kings’ stories in the Manipur and Pavallas dynasties). The Mahabharata (มหาภารตะ), the Indian epic in verse, moreover, told the story of the hero Arjuna marrying Princess Naga Ulupi, the daughter of King Naga Nila who ruled Potala, the water realm. Nevertheless, there are differences in the legend details. The Southeast Asian stories always emphasize the important position of the serpent princess Soma or the empress Lieu Diep in the indigenous societies. She is both a supreme ruler of a powerful kingdom and a military chief but did not care about being clothed until her marriage to a Brahmin husband. These details are good illustrations of the cultural and social conditions of Southeast Asia during the Pre-Indian period. The indigenous residents are nearly naked and lived in a matriarchal society, with the female respected within the family and community circles.

With Brahmanism becoming a dominant religion in the royal courts, the king-god (Devaraja) system found a justification for the king having a sacred role. The Naga was an essential symbol of matriarchy related to the kings’ noble lineage. In his account entitled The Customs of Cambodia, Chou Ta Koun, a diplomatic attaché of the Chinese Yuan dynasty who was visiting the royal court of Angkor in 13th century AD, told the story of the Khmer king who was expected to mate each night with a nine headed serpent princess to continue the royal lineage and ensure the prosperity of the kingdom. In the other Thai legends, the Naga is solemnly narrated as the state protector of devout kings; the Naga assists people to dig rivers for irrigation, protects water dams and constructs cities for human beings. But if the kings or their subjects are evil and anti–religious, the Naga will punish them by sinking the cities, damaging the soil and tearing villages down. Such instances are given as explanations as to what happened to the ancient cities of Nong Han Luong (หนองหานหลวง), Vieng Nong Lom (เวียงหนองลอง) and Yonoknagaphan (โยนกนาคพันธ์) in the North of Thailand, Nakhon Suvankhomkham (นครสุวรรณโคมคำ) in the People Republic Democracy of Laos. The Phadeng Nang Ay (ผาแดงนางไอ้) , the E-San Thai epic in verse also tells the story of
King Naga Suttho who ruled Muang Badan and led his serpent troops to flood the mainland and kill the entire community who ate his son, Prince Naga Phangkhi.

The Serpent and Theravada Buddhism

The conflict between Theravada Buddhism and serpent worship is reflected in Thai folklore. *Bang Fai Phya Nak* (บั้งไฟพญานาค), the E-San Thai legend contains the story of the Naga living in the Mekhong River before the time when the crown prince Sakya-Muni (สักกายมุนี) founded the religion in India. Other legends state that as the Buddha came to preach his religion in the E-San region, he met many powerful Naga kings who ruled the area. These stories show that the serpent worship cult was firmly entrenched and had permeated the people’s spiritual activities in Siam peninsula during the Pre-Buddhist period. Here, the issue needs to be understood in the context of two main aspects of Theravada Buddhism, namely, history and mythology. If the Lord Buddha had preached his religion in the E-San region, this implies that Buddhism has expanded into this area, but it cannot be true historically because the Buddha has never set foot on Southeast Asia. *Urang Kathat* tells many conflicting stories about the Lord Buddha and the Nagas. All of them, however, have the same motif: the Lord Buddha was meditating in a certain sacred peak, located near the Naga kings’ fief. The aureole behind his head shines so dazzingly that it reached the Naga realm, irritating the Naga kings. Thus, the Naga kings led their serpent troops into the Lord Buddha’s meditation seat and planned to attack him by using their magical power. But the Lord Buddha could not be harmed, and the Nagas were finally tired and weak. The Lord Buddha brought out his tenets and calmly explained them to the Nagas. The Nagas, henceforth, were persuaded and accepted Buddhism. When the Lord Buddha journeyed to Laos, the Nagas asked him to set his footprint (Buddhapad) as a relic for the next generations to worship. The Lord Buddha did as the Nagas requested, after which he continued preaching the religion in Laos while the Nagas stayed to protect his relics.

Among the legends related to the Buddha and the indigenous animist serpent cult, there is hardly any that depicts the Buddha fighting the Nagas as in the legends in Brahmanist mythology. It is significant that Buddhism chooses a peaceful relational path in harmony with the animist serpent cult rather than impose its victory on the indigenous belief system. A similar case has occurred between Buddhism and Naga belief in India before. Thus, the beliefs of the Nagas and the indigenous serpent cult are a crucial part of Buddhist culture in Thailand and Southeast Asia. Along with the animist beliefs, Buddhism adopted Vedic philosophical elements and accepted the Brahmanist gods’ presence in its sacred temples.

The Signification of the Naga in Thai architectural ornaments

According to Thai mythology, the Nagas had so faithfully served the Buddhist truth that their symbols were given key positions in Buddhist temples in various forms. Naga symbols usually appear on the finial, gable board, arch, balustrade, along the tiers of the temple roof, and especially on skillfully carved stairs leading to the main shrine (Viharn in Thai). Most of the Naga significations in Thai architecture, however, possibly find their origin in
Brahmanism which Theravada Buddhism had assimilated. In accordance with Thai Buddhist conception, Buddhist temples symbolize the holy mount, Phra Sumen (พระสุเมรุ), also called Mount Meru in Vedic cosmology, which represents Tavatimsa Heaven where Queen Siri Mahamaya (พระนางสิริมหามายา) (Buddha’s mother) and the Hindu Gods reside. Naga decoration along the tiers of temple roofs represents the cosmic river of life which springs from Mount Phra Sumen and streams down to the human world. This emanates from a Vedic belief which narrates a story set during the Ice Age when a Naga swallowed all the waters of the world and then coiled its serpentine body to hibernate on top of Mount Meru. The earth suffered from a severe drought; living beings were dying. To restore life to earth, God Indra (Phra In in Thai) hurled his thunderbolt at the deadly serpent. The bloated Naga burst, causing water to stream down the mountainside, circulating as rivers throughout the parched world (Taylor 1994: 57).

In Theravada Buddhist architecture, the Naga-shaped carved stairs always hold a very important position in the temples; they symbolize the three ladders mythically linking earth to heaven. The pious believers’ souls are said to be led up to Nirvana (นิพพาน - heaven in Buddhism) on the magic ladder by the Naga. The gods, in turn, use them to descend on earth. Theravada Buddhist mythology also says that the Buddha uses the Naga ladder yearly to descend to earth on a sacred day, sometime in the middle of November (วันออกพรรษา), after having preached to his mother and the gods in Tavatimsa Heaven. Besides the signification in Buddhist mythology, a Thai folk legend also tells of Nagas bringing earth from the bottom of rivers to build the base of temples. Thus, the Naga-shaped carved stairs are ubiquitously present in Buddhist temples in Thailand. The most beautiful ones are found in Wat Phumin (วัดภูมินทร์) in Nan (น่าน) province, Wat Supat Thanaram (วัดสุปัฏธนาราม) in Ubon Ratchathani (อุบลราชธานี) province, Wat Doi Suthep (วัดดอยสุเทพ) in Chieng Mai (เชียงใหม่) province, Chedi Phra That Chomkitti (เจดียพระธาตุจอมกิตติ) in Chieng Saen (เชียงแสน) district, Chieng Rai province. Wat วัด means temple in Thai, Chedi เจดีย์ means stupa) where the wave-like long serpentine stairs called Nak Sadung in Thai are skillfully carved. It symbolizes primarily the cosmic water source streaming down to the parched world as in the description in Vedic mythology.

Moreover, the Naga is also identified with the rainbow shaped lintels. In the folkloric thought of the Thais and other Southeast Asians, the rainbow symbolizes both the bridge from earth to heaven and the giant water serpent rearing its head from the ocean to drink water. Freeman and Warner reasoned that “a rainbow is the bridge to heaven, and the rainbow is linked to the image of a water serpent, the mythical Naga. This serpent, though known throughout South and Southeast Asia, was used so much at Angkor and other sites that it became identified with Thai architecture...”(1987: 117). On another note, the mythical Naga is considered as a guardian (Dravapala - ทวารบาล) in Theravada Buddhist temples. It frightens monsters away; therefore it may appear on Buddhist constructions as nothing more than this. There are, to sum up, various forms of the Naga found in Thai architectural art but all of them are presented in harmonious relationships with cosmology, religion and the water culture.

The Meaning of Naga in Thai sculptural ornaments
In Buddhist mythology, the Naga figures have faithfully accompanied the Buddha from the
time of his birth up to his attainment of Nirvana. Nagas even stay in the world of men to
serve the Buddhist Trinity or the Triple Gem, which comprise of the Buddha, Dharma (Law),
and Sangha (religious community). They guard the Buddhist relics for future generations.
Buddhist mythology also states that when crown prince Siddhartha (เจ้าชายสิทธัตถะ) was
newly born in Lumpini (ลุมพินี), a royal garden (in Nepal), the multi–headed Naga caused
warm waters to gush forth for the baby prince’s first bath. The Jataka25 (called Chadok (ขดอด) in Thai), a Buddhist literary work created by the Ceylonese (Sri Lanka) in 5th century
AD telling of the Buddha’s 547 reincarnations, mentions in the Bhuridatta Jataka (ภูริทัตชาดก) episode how the Buddha was once born in a Naga form before being reincarnated into the
crown prince Siddhartha. The Naga theme is represented in Thai Buddhist sculpture in the
following ways:

Naga-protected Buddha

The theme called Pang Nak Prok (ปางนาคโปรก) in Thai depicts the Buddha seated on top of
the serpentine coils. Behind the Buddha, the Naga is rears up its multiple heads as a canopy
to protect him. This theme was very popular in the Mon and Khmer stone sculptural arts in
Pre-Thai era in the 7th - 13th centuries AD. In 1238, the Sukhothai kingdom was established
as the first Thai state. The Thais later inherited the Khmer theme of the Naga-protected
Buddha which they transformed into their own styles. The most distinguished statue was
found at Chedi Jet Theo (เจดีย์เจ็ดแถว), Si Satchanalai (ศรีสะเกษ) province. Many
statues using this theme are also exhibited in the National Museum Bangkok. They are the
most popular statues worshipped in Thai temples, especially in temples in the North and the
Northeast of Thailand where the belief in the Naga is predominant.

The Naga-protected Buddha has a classic reference to Buddhist mythology, which tells how
the Buddha meditated for the first seven weeks in different positions. At the sixth week, he
was seated under the Mucalinda tree, home of a serpent god called Muca-Linda26 (มุคลินด). When a strong rainstorm suddenly came, the Mucalinda crept out of its lair. The Naga coiled
its body into seven circles and lifted the meditating Buddha above the powerful stream. In
my opinion, the Naga-protected Buddha image was possibly borrowed from the Brahmanist
legend of Vishnu (วิษณุ) reclining on the coils of the cosmic serpent Shesha-Ananta27 (endless serpent). He gives birth to Brahma28 (Pr Phrom - พระพรหม in Thai) the God Creator
from a lotus blossoming out of his navel as recounted in the Bhagavad Gita, a part of the
Mahabharata epic. Before the Naga-protected Buddha image was known in Indian
sculptural art, people had already come across the statue of a Naga coiled around the
Jainists’ naked body with its seven heads spreading as a canopy. There are, however, some
differences: Vishnu is seen reclining on the serpentine coils whereas the Jainists represent
the Naga coiled around their bodies, while the Buddha is shown to meditate on the Naga.
The Buddha and the Muca–Linda might have been Indian traditional images which were
formed in the Pre-Buddhist era and later transformed during the Buddhist Era.
Naga and Garuda

Garuda, the sun eagle (Khrut - ครุฑ in Thai), is the relentless enemy of the Naga, according to the original description of these two holy beasts in Vedic mythology. In Indian iconography, people usually carve the Garuda image standing on the Naga, the two talons of the bird grasping the tail of the Naga; but the Naga cannot be killed as it is also immortal like its enemy, the Garuda, according to the mythology.

Thai sculpture borrows the image from both the Indian and the Khmer arts but the Thais think that even though Garuda is standing on Naga, it is not destroying Naga. Together Naga and Garuda constitute a balance between sky, earth, rain and sunlight. The light from the Garuda illuminates the earth and the water source of the Naga makes crops grow, allowing for continuous life. Differing with the Indian thought, the Thais consider the relationship of Garuda and Naga as a symbiotic association, resulting in plentiful harvest. In the traditional iconography, the Thai artists carved Garuda riding on Naga along the walls of Wat Si Sawai (วัดศรีสวาย) in the ancient citadel of Sukhothai (สุโขทัย); the image appears on the facade of Wat Na Phra Men (พระนครวรมราช), Ayuthaya (อยุธยา) province. The wooden instrument carved in the Mon style in the National Museum Bangkok shows Garuda clutching two flower strings in his talon instead of the real Naga figure. In the Hindu temples located at Phimai (พิมาย) plateau, the Khmer artists created long queues of Garuda-riding on Naga like two hands lifting the temple roofs. The motif was enthusiastically adopted by the Thai artists when they made a string of Garudas clasping the tails of Nagas, symbolically lifting up Wat Phra Keo (พระแก้ว) in Bangkok. The image represents the symbiotic relationship of Garuda with Naga rather than its destruction.

In some Thai temples, one sometime sees Garuda riding on Naga with God Phra Narai (Vishnu’s reincarnation) on his back. This illustrates the association between the two holy beasts, both of them being Phra Narai’s holy rides. Although the theme has taken its inspiration from Hindu myth, its signification leans toward Buddhism and only became popular when Theravada Buddhism flourished in Thailand. They are rarely seen in the Khmer Hindu temples whereas they often appear in mural paintings in Thai temples, especially on the walls of Wat Phra Keo (in the Grand Palace). The motif, Vishnu on Garuda clasping Naga in its talons, moreover, is present in a variety of artifacts in Thai art. On the black and gold lacquered cabinet exhibited in the National Museum Bangkok, thick swirling carved designs show Garuda carrying Phra Narai on its back with two legs stepping on Naga and its talons tightly clasping the serpentine tails.

Naga and Makara

Makara, the mythical sea monster, is the holy mount of Varuna, God of the Ocean, in Vedic mythology. The Indian describes Makara as having the shape of a fish, crocodile, and even lion or dragon. When the Makara impacted on Thai culture, it was eventually made to resemble a Naga or a crocodile. The Makara has a unique head, it has two ears on the sides, an elephantine nose and a wide mouth with sharp teeth. Especially in the Sukhothai period,
the Sawankhalok potters made the ceramic Makara statues by adding two horns, their mouths holding “a pearl” similar to that of the Chinese dragon. The statues can be seen in the National Museum Bangkok.

In Thai culture, the relationship between Makara and Naga is clearly recognized in sculptural art. Thai artists usually use Makara–spouting-Naga images on the roofs and stairs of Theravada Buddhist temples. There is no such theme, of Makara spouting Naga, in either Indian mythology or its sculpture. This theme only appears in Thailand and some Southeast Asian countries such as Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam (Funan and Champa Kingdoms). Besides this signification, they also act as holy beasts which frighten monsters away; they may carry a fertility meaning because both of them symbolize water and fertile soil. In Makara-spouting-Naga from its mouth, people can see Makara spouting vegetables or plants on wood or stone carving sceneries in Thai temples. On a field trip to Wat Chom Chang (วัดชมชาง) and Chedi Phra That Chomkitti in Chieng Saen district, Chieng Saen province, I once witnessed many Makaras-spouting-Nagas on roofs and stairs. But here, Makaras’ claws and fangs were broken and their eyes blinded by two cement pieces. The villagers considered Makaras as monsters which could be evil. If their fangs and claws are left intact, the Makaras could go out into the fields and kill cattle. As we can see, Nagas symbolize the good deeds but Makaras personify evil. The Makara-spouting-Naga implies that the Makara has no ability to harm other animals. And the villagers think that if they blind the Makaras and take away their fangs, they will be rendered harmless. When I traveled to the other regions afterwards, I also saw many statues of Makara-spouting-Naga but the Makaras are till intact. It proves that there are different perceptions of Makara in Thai culture and these depend on the culture of each region.

Naga and Dragon

In China, the dragon (龙 - Long) is believed to be a sacred and beneficent animal. Legend has it that it hibernates in the ocean in the autumn but ascends to the sky in the spring, bringing beneficial rains onto the dry earth. Similar to the Naga in Thailand, the Long is considered an auspicious creature because it brings forth blessings, festivity, and happiness, benefiting everything on earth. The importance of the dragon to the Chinese people is indisputable.

There are many Chinese legends and much classical literature on the origins and shapes of the dragon. Its appearance in cosmology dates back to the creation of the Universe. The legend describes Nuwa, (女娲) the first female "human being" on earth who had a human head and a serpent's body, and Fuxi, (伏羲) the first male "human being" who had a human head and a scaly dragon's body. The couple gave birth to human beings. This legend was engraved on a stone wall built during the Eastern Han Dynasty (AD 24 - 220) by an artist who carved a picture of the intercourse of Nuwa and Fuxi, depicting them as a union of the bodies of a dragon and a snake with human faces. To the primitive people in ancient China, the dragon and serpent were interchangeable.
During the 15th-16th centuries AD, the Thais adopted so many Chinese cultural elements, among which is the dragon theme. However I have not formally seen any dragon images in the Sukhothai period or saw its influence on Naga as a few scholars have hypothesized. After surveying the Sawankhalok ceramic statues of Makara in National Museum Bangkok, I might say that the dragon's image partly assimilated Makara rather than Naga. One can say that the Naga is a fully done combination of indigenous and Indian serpent cults when it influenced Thai art. In the Shang dynasty (16th–11th century BC) of China, an engraving on a musical instrument shows the shape of the dragon. This engraving has brought about the theory that the dragon's image came from the crocodile. Furthermore, all the Makaras in Vedic myth are crocodiled in simple form. Thus, the dragon and Makara are possibly derived from the same root although they appear in two different cultures. They crossed paths in Thailand and became important elements in the sculpture of the Sukhothai period.

The artifacts of National Museum Bangkok show that most of the dragon carvings were officially created by Thai artists in the early 19th century AD although the dragon image had been present in Thai sculpture even before. The dragon was possibly spread to Thailand by Chinese immigrants and the Thais, being very flexible, accepted it and combined it with Naga to create Hera (เหรา). In my opinion, the Hera is a Thai invention that cannot be found in any other Asian country. The Hera is imagined as an aquatic beast born from a dragon father and a Naga mother. Thus, it has the face and body of Naga but the feet of a dragon. This motif appeared as stylized decoration on some Thai traditional architecture and sculpture. The wooden carvings of National Museum Bangkok indicate that Hera are represented with Chinese dragon styles and themes, for instance, “Two Dragons Playing with a Diamond,” “Two Dragons Flanking a Sun” or “Two Dragon Flanking a Moon” with the two dragon images replaced by Heras. Sometimes, Hera resembles a reptile. Among nine divinities guarding the solar system in the Theravada Buddhist cosmology, the Neptune is described as a human god riding on Naga. But since Hera appeared in Thai culture, many bas-reliefs dating back to the Rattanakosin period show that Naga image has been replaced by Hera. It means that the Neptune rides on Hera instead of Naga.

Tua Nak and Tua Luong

“Tua” (ตัว) means a beast or only an additional word without clear meaning in Thai. The Thais use “Tua Nak” (ตัวนาค) to mention the Naga which is popularly represented in Thai art and literature. Unlike the Tua Nak, “Tua Luong” (ตัวลวง) is not a common name for the Naga. It seems that this folk term relates to the mythical water serpent as used by a few old men in Northern Thailand and the E-San. It is believed that the term “Tua Luong” possibly derives from the Chinese “Long” (龙 - dragon) but I personally do not think so. If Tua Luong is a variant of “Long” it would have been acknowledged in many parts of Thailand, particularly in Bangkok where a strong Chinese community is present.

In another light, the Tua Luong has never been considered as a holy beast in mythical Himaphan forest (หิมพานต์). Furthermore, the Tua Luong is an independent beast which does not accompany or mix with any creature or god. In iconography, Thai artists usually carve Tua Luong on the roofs of Viharn and in Buddhist ritual tools. The Tua Luong’s
distinguishing trait is that it is always decorated with two bird wings, Tua Nak comes without wings. Moreover, Tua Luong never emanates from Makara’s mouth. These styles are only widespread in the North and the Northeast of Thailand, the so-called Lan Na \(^{33}\) (ล้านนา - Kingdom of Million Rice Fields) and Lan Chang \(^{34}\) (ล้านช้าง - Kingdom of Million Elephants) styles; they are mostly seen in temple roofs. Ubon Ratchathani National Museum has exhibited Tua Luong shaped artifacts, especially two large wooden pipes which are used to contain holy water at Maca–Bucha, the sacred day of Theravada Buddhism, originating from Wat Luong, a well-known temple in Northeastern Thailand.

Conclusion

The animist serpent cult of Siam peninsula, Southeast Asia and Southern China was found in the Metal Age where water played a preponderant role in human activities. Archaeological sites show that primitive people naturally lived along basins of rivers, streams and around lakes. Water was regarded as crucial highways and means of livelihood and it has shaped the cultures of this ancient period. Because of their shape and habitat, snakes were then considered as a symbol of water, fertility, life, and has become a totem. The oldest remnants of the serpent cult were also discovered in some places in Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia and Southern China.

When Brahmanism and Buddhism expanded to Southeast Asia and Thailand, these new religions clashed with the old system of the serpent cult. The vestiges of this clash can be easily traced in Thai folk literature. If Brahmanism imposed its victory on the old beliefs, Buddhism peacefully fused with indigenous animism. It is said that Buddhism has played an important role in the preservation of the indigenous serpent legends which exist up to now. Thus, in Thailand, the Naga images are abundantly represented in Buddhist architectural and sculptural ornaments.

The signification of Naga in Thai architectural and sculptural ornaments is a representation of the conflation of the water culture with indigenous legends and the philosophical influences of Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism. Furthermore, the architectural and sculptural images are inherited from different cultural sources such as India, Sri Lanka, Mon, Khmer, Java and China, resulting in a distinct Thai cultural identity, a sum of diverse influences. The serpent cult however did not last in Thailand and Southeast Asia as it did in Southern India. The reason was the widespread adoption of Buddhism, and the fact that Naga stories had permeated Buddhism to such a degree it became impossible to worship Nagas independently of the Buddha.

This study has tried to show that there was an indigenous cultural existence before the Indian culture impacted in Southeast Asia. It has also contributed to a general knowledge of Southeast Asian societies especially the serpent animism cult as a type of the water belief in the Metal Age. Also, the study serves as a data source for the role of exogenesis cultural elements, disproving the faulty view that consider Southeast Asian culture as an Indian replica. People can only see the external shape and mythical name of the Indian Naga but few know about its origin.
If further research be allowed, I shall conduct investigations in the significations of Naga (or serpent) in the cultures of Tai groups, those living in Sipsongpanna district, Yunan province, China or Sipsong Chu Tai, the North of Laos and the Northwest of Vietnam. There, groups such as Tai Lu (Water Tai), Tai Yuan, Tai Dam, Tai Khao have the same cultural origin as the Thais of Thailand. Living in a self-contained social environment, they would have preserved many indigenous serpent legends and cults. These will prove the existence of an indigenous serpent cult among the Tai groups, in particular, among the Southern Chinese and Southeast Asians, in general.

1 The country name was instituted in the Law of the Three Seals by king Rama I in 1787. The name was changed to Thailand in 1939, reverted to Siam in 1946, and again changed to Thailand soon afterwards. Today both names officially apply although Siam is used mainly for auspicious occasions and in royal titles. Siam has geographical, multi-racial, and multi cultural connotations.

2 The World Cultural Heritage in Udonthani province, the Northeast of Thailand

3 An archaeological site of the Metal Age in Kanchantaburi province, the South of Thailand

4 Called Mae Nam Khong in Thai; Mae means mother, Nam means water; Mae Nam refers to the river; Khong means things; Mekhong River means the river full of things.

5 A main character’s name in a legend of the Tai Lu groups living in Sipsongpanna. The story revolves around a young woman named Nang Sa who went fishing in the Mekhong River near her home in Southern Yunnan, and touched what she believed to be a log floating in the water. Later, she gave birth to 10 baby boys. A serpent king showed up one day claiming that the boys were his sons. Nang Sa was scared so she tried to escape with children but the youngest boy could not escape. Thus, the Naga King came and bathed him the Mekhong River. When the 10 boys grew up, Nang Sa asked for the hand of 10 girls for them. The youngest boy was appointed leader of the tribe and this clan multiplied and their descendents became what is now known as the Tais. From among them came the ancestors of the Thai and Laotian people.

6 The same racial name as Thai although it is used to refer to those living outside Siam.

7 It is used solely for the name of the race representing the majority of people in Siam. The adjectives Thai and Siamese are interchangeable because of the predominance of Thais in the country.

8 A sacred city under the Mekhong river course, which is the water realm of Nagas in Thai and Laotian legends.

9 Literally “Naga giving water”, this is a Thai system of converse measurement of water.

10 Bamboo rockets used in rain propitiation.

11 Literally “Naga drinking water”, it is a Thai term to show a rainbow stretching across the sky.

12 Considered as the symbol of the Thai Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperative. It is also one of the six symbols of the Kingdom of Thailand which include Naga (Nak), Garuda (Khret), Lotus (Dokbua), Eravan (Elephant), Nang Wack and Orchid.

13 Shiva, the Destroyer God in Hindu myth.

14 Vishnu’s avatar in Hindu myth.

15 Ancient Indianized Kingdom located in Central Vietnam, was destroyed by the Vietnamese in the 17th century. Nowadays, there are still Muslim and Hindu Cham communities living in Central and South Vietnam.

16 Early Indianized State in Southeast Asia, its center is supposed to be located in the Mekhong Delta (Southern Vietnam). The French scholars hypothesized that the Funam Kingdom is a Pre-Khmer empire.

17 Means the Dawn of Happiness in Thai. Sukhothai is considered as the first independent state of the Thai nation.

18 Is a district in Udon Ratchathani province. In Thai legend, Nong Han Luong is considered as a Great Lake where the Naga lived before coming to the mainland.
An archaeological site located at Chieng Rai province. Vieng means City, Nong means Lake and Lom means Sink. Vieng Nong Lom means Lake Sunk City. This name recalls a Thai myth which tells of a Naga king who sank the city where the human king and his court officials ate a great white eel caught from Mae Khong River.

Kingdom of the Naga Race, this refers to a certain mythical land in the North of Thailand.

The Thai E-San and Laotian stories tell of a Naga Prince who wished to marry a Khmer princess. The Prince, Phangkhi, transforms into a squirrel to be near her. The Princess asks her hunter to get it for her. But, she erroneously orders a poison arrow to be used and the Prince is killed. She shares his meat with everyone in the city. When the Naga King finds out, he marches his army to the city and kills everyone who dared to eat the meat of his son.

Each year, on mid-November nights, fire is lighted along the Mekhong River, between Nong Khai province and Vientiane of Laos. The legend explains that Phya Nagi (King Naga) vomits the flames to welcome the Lord Buddha who descends to the world of men from Tavatimsa heaven after preaching to his mother and the Hindu gods.

Called Phra Sumen in Thai, a pyre that is usually shaped in receding tiers to represent Mount Meru.

Naga in wave-like motion, used in several parts of the monastery including balustrades and compound walls.

Buddhist literary that narrates the Lord Buddha’s 547 previous incarnations. The Thais adapted it and created their own version, the Panasa Jataka or Chadot.

A mythical serpent protected Buddha during his meditation.

Endless Serpent carries Vishnu on the Milky Ocean.

God of Universal Creation, who was born on a lotus blossoming out of Vishnu’s navel in Bhagavad Gita.

Khut in Thai, mythical bird–man, a carrier of God Vishnu.

Sea monster resembling a crocodile that is considered as the holy ride of Varuna God of Ocean in Vedic myth.

Aquatic beast is born from dragon father and Naga mother. Hera possibly appeared in Thai culture in early 19th century.

Mythical forest is located somewhere in the slopes of the Himalayas, according to Buddhist legend.

Kingdom of Million Rice Fields, includes the contemporary provinces in the North of Thailand.

Kingdom of Million Elephants, includes the contemporary provinces in the Northeast of Thailand and Laos.

References


