

# THE SIGNIFICATION OF NAGA IN THAI ARCHITECTURAL AND SCULPTURAL ORNAMENTS

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## **Abstract:**

The Nak (Phaya Nak or Naga) in Thai architectural and sculptural ornaments are an associational achievement between the indigenous serpent cult of the mainland Southeast Asian region and Naga of Indian religions in ancient times. It seems that the remains of indigenous serpent cult being only what told in the Thai folklore. The majority of Thais are predominantly Theravada Buddhist that their serpent worship includes aspects of Buddhism.

## **Introduction**

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

The art historians implicitly confirm that the Naga in Southeast Asian cultures are originated in India. Others, however, have talked briefly about the indigenous serpent cult without proving scientific evidences. Thus, a big question is whether there was a form of indigenous serpent cult existed in Siam<sup>1</sup> peninsular and mainland Southeast Asia. My discourse will be an expectation to answer partially this difficult question.

## **Serpent in indigenous cultures of Thailand and Southeast Asia**

### 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 residents' daily life activities (Michel Freeman and Roger Warner 1987: 124). In Siam peninsular, the

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

The serpent cult of Southeast Asian region has been mainly found among the communities living along the banks of Mekhong River<sup>4</sup> (แม่น้ำโขง), from Yunan (ยูนาน) province of China, to the lower part of its river. 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 the state cities, the citadels and bestowing prosperity and richness. But the serpent can also punish people by releasing an over supply of water, causing flood and destroying the state cities. Most of the imaginative based mystery are truly believed by the indigenous residents, especially the serpent legends related to the state cities, citadels and the kingdoms construction; stories of the serpent being at the origin of the matriarchy lineage and human race are very popular among the ethnicity communities in Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

A Tai Lu (Water Tai) legend called the story of Nang Sa<sup>5</sup> (นางสาว) tells how the Tai<sup>6</sup> race originated from the water serpent. Tai men in Sipsongpanna (สิบสองปันนา, Yunan province), 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” that

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<sup>2</sup> The World Cultural Heritage in Udonthani province, the Northeast of Thailand

<sup>3</sup> An archaeological site of the Metal Age in Kanchanaburi province, the South of Thailand

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> A main character's name in a legend of the Tai Lu groups those living Sipsongpanna. The story tells that in olden times, a young woman, Nang Sa went fishing in Mekhong River near her home in Southern Yunnan, and touched what she believed to be a log floating in the water. Later, she gave a birth to 10 baby boys. A serpent king one day showed up claiming that the boys were his sons. Nang Sa was scared so she took her children to run away but the youngest boy couldn't escape. Thus, Naga King came to lap him, after which brought him to bath in Mekhong River. When 10 baby boys grew up, Nang Sa asked for girls' hand for them. Then, the youngest boy was appointed to be leader of the tribe and this clan multiplied the descendents who became Tai groups. Among those, there were the ancestors of Thai and Laotian people

<sup>6</sup> The same racial name of Thai although it is used to means those living outside Siam

### Serpent as a symbol of water

Water plays a very crucial role in the daily life and agricultural activities of primitive inhabitants in Southeast Asia. Water resource is sometimes so much abundant that it causes floods; at other times, it's really scarce. Thus, belief in a water entity found its way in people's consciousness to help them face the unexplained phenomenon when nature strikes. Primitive inhabitants believed that there must be a beast residing in the water realm, which creates water, controls, and eventually bestowing to the human world; or that was understood as a giant water serpent in the human mind. In his work, *Naga - Origin of Siam and West Pacific Culture*, Dr. Sumet Jumsai also reasoned that “no explanation can account for serpent (Naga) being equated to water except for the genealogy of form” (Sumet Jumsai 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 Laos. From Muang Badan, the underworld river rose, and mythically linked to all the rivers and oceans all over the world. Muang Badan<sup>8</sup> is also considered as a mythical kingdom which provides for the endless water source to keep the Mekhong River (แม่น้ำโขง) and all other rivers from drying out. Its water also contributes to the ecological environment and takes care of residents' life along the riverside regions. In the traditional agricultural understanding, the term “Nak hey nam”<sup>9</sup> (นาคให้น้ำ - serpent giving water) refers to the water amount needed for rice planting, as estimated by a Thai farmer evaluation [Sumet Jumsai 1997: 24]. The Thais, furthermore,

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<sup>7</sup> Using solely for the name of the race representing the majority of people in Siam. The adjectives Thai and Siamese are interchangeable because of the pre dominance of Thais in the country

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

<sup>9</sup> Literally “Naga giving water”, this is a Thai system of converse measurement of water

## **Serpent in acculturation with Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism in Thailand and Southeast Asia**

### Serpent and Brahmanism

Brahmanism (ศาสนาพราหมณ์) is considered as the Arians' main religion, founded in the Vedic period, about 3,000 years ago. Buddhism (ศาสนาพุทธ) came later, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Both of them, however, spread to Southeast Asian region 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 king cobra, elephant, mountain and water. It appears that the worship of the Naga as a type of totem originated from the Dravidian culture. Later it became the holy

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<sup>10</sup> Bamboo rockets used in rain propitiation

<sup>11</sup> Literally “*Naga drinking water*”, it is a Thai term to show a rainbow stretching across the sky

In short, Naga is also the preferred term used (by Indian) to imply the indigenous groups of Southeast Asia who practiced the system of serpent worshipped cult or considered the serpent as a form of animal totems. Since accepting Indian culture, the Southeast Asian people have merely taken the term “Naga” from India for the sake of increasing the sacred nature of the mythical indigenous serpent. At first, when Brahmanism appeared in Southeast Asia, it was considered as a new religion, it was confronted to the old belief system of serpent worshipping. The confrontation is represented in Thai legends which tell about Phra Isuan<sup>13</sup> (พระอิศวร - Shiva in Hindu myth) and Phra Narai<sup>14</sup> (พระนารายณ์ - Vishnu in Hindu

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<sup>12</sup> Considered as the symbol of Thailand Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperative. It is also one of six symbols of Kingdom of Thailand including in Naga (Nak), Garuda (Khрут), Lotus (Dokbua), Eravan (Elephant), Nang Wack and Orchid

<sup>13</sup> Shiva, the God of Destroyer in Hindu myth

<sup>14</sup> Vishnu’s avatar in Hindu myth

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<sup>15</sup> Ancient Indianized Kingdom located in the Central of Vietnam was annexed by Vietnamese in the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nowadays, there are still Muslim and Hindu Cham communities living in the Central and the South of Vietnam.

<sup>16</sup> Early Indianized State in Southeast Asia, its central is suggested to be located in Mekong Delta (Southern Vietnam). The French scholars hypothesized Funam Kingdom as pre - Khmer empire.

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

With Brahmanism becoming a dominant religion in the royal courts, the king god (Devaraja) system found its justification of the king having a sacred role. The Naga was an essential symbol of matriarchy related to the kings' noble lineage. In *The Customs of Cambodia*, by Chou Ta Koun, a diplomatic attaché of China Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 AD), visiting the royal court of Angkor in 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, told the story of the Khmer king who each night was expected to mate with a nine headed serpent princess to continue the royal lineage and ensure the prosperity of the kingdom. In the other Thai legend stories, 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 state cities for human beings. On the contrary, if the kings or their subjects are malefic, anti – religious, the Naga will punish them by raising water and sinking the cities, damaging the soil and tearing villages down. Such instances are the stories which occurred to the ancient cities of Nong Han Luong<sup>18</sup> (หนองหานหลวง), Vieng Nong Lom<sup>19</sup> (เวียงหนองโลม) and Yonoknagaphan<sup>20</sup> (โยนกนาคพันธ์) in the North of Thailand, Nakhon Suvankhomkham (นครสุวรรณโคมคำ) in Laos. Phadeng Nang Ay<sup>21</sup> (ผาดองนางไอ่), the E - San Thai poem epic in verses, also tells the story of King Naga Suttho, who rules Muang Badan, and leads his serpent troops to flood the mainland and kill the entire people who ate his son meat, Prince Naga Phangkhi.

### Serpent and Theravada Buddhism

The conflict between Theravada Buddhism (ศาสนาพุทธนิกายเถรวาท) and serpent worshipped cult is reflected in the legends in Thai folklore. Bang Fai Phya Nak<sup>22</sup> (บั้งไฟ

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<sup>18</sup> Is a district in Udon Ratchathani province. In Thai legend, Nong Han Luong is considered as a Great Lake where Naga living before becoming mainland

<sup>19</sup> An archaeological site is located at Chiang Rai province. Vieng means City, Nong means Lake and Lom means Sink. Vieng Nong Lom means Lake Sunk City. This name reminds more or less to a Thai myth to tell of Naga king who sunk down the city as the human king and his court officials ate a great white eel caught from Mae Khong River

<sup>20</sup> Kingdom of Naga Race, that implies to a certain mythical land in the North of Thailand

<sup>21</sup> The story of Thai E - San and Laotian tells of a Naga Prince, who wishes to marry a Khmer princess. So the Prince, Phangkhi, transforms into a squirrel to be near her. The Princess asks her hunter to get it for her. But, she orders a poison arrow to be used by mistake, and the Prince is killed. she shares his meat with most 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

<sup>22</sup> Each year, at nights in the middle of November, there is so much blame lighted out of the Mekong River, in the current between Nong Khai province and Vientiane of Laos. The legends explain that Phya Nagi (King Naga) vomits the blame to welcome the Lord Buddha who descends to the men world from Tavatimsa heaven after preaching to his mother and Hindu gods

Among the legends relevant to the Buddha and the indigenous animist serpent cult, one can rarely find out any story which describes the Buddha fighting against the Nagas as the legends in Brahmanist mythology. It is significant that Buddhism peacefully chooses an associational path in harmony with the animist serpent cult, rather than imposes its victory on the indigenous belief system. The similar case also has occurred between Buddhism and Naga belief in India before. Thus, the belief of the Nagas and the indigenous serpent cult plays a crucial part in Buddhist culture in Thailand and Southeast Asia. Along with the animist beliefs, Buddhism not only adapted Vedic philosophical elements but also accepted the Brahmanist divinities' presence in its sacred temple.



### **The Signification of Naga in Thai architectural ornaments**

According to Thai mythology, the Nagas had so faithfully served the Buddha's truth that there were given key positions on Buddhist temples under variable forms. The Nagas usually appear on finial, gable board, arch, balustrade, along the tiers of 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*), or Mount Meru<sup>23</sup> in Vedic cosmology, which represents Tavatimsa Heaven where Queen Siri Mahamaya (*พระนางสิริมหามายา*) (Buddha's mother) and Hindu divinities reside. Nagas decorated along the tiers of temple roofs represent the cosmic river of life source which springs from Mount Phra Sumen streaming down to the human world. This emanates from a Vedic belief which tells of a time during the Ice Age when a Naga swallowed all the waters of the world and coiling its serpentine body to hibernate on the top of Mount Meru. The earth suffered from a severe drought and human beings were dying. To restore life to earth, God Indra (Phra In - *พระอินทร์* in Thai) hurled his thunderbolt to the deadly serpent. The bloated Naga busted, causing water to stream down the mountainsides, circulating as rivers throughout the parched world (Pamela York Taylor 1994: 57).

In Theravada Buddhist architecture, the Naga shape carved stairs always hold a very important position in the temples, symbolizing the three ladders mythically linking earth to heaven. The pious believers' souls are said to be lead up to Nirvana (*นิพพาน* - heaven in Buddhism) on the magic ladder by the Naga. The gods use them to descend on earth. Theravada Buddhist mythology also says that the Buddha yearly uses the Naga ladder to descend to earth on a sacred day, middle of November (*วันออกพรรษา*) after having preached to his mother and the divinities in Tavatimsa Heaven. Besides the signification of Buddhist mythology, a Thai folk legend also tells of Nagas bring earth from the bottom of rivers to built base of temples. Thus, the Naga shape carved stairs are present everywhere in Buddhist temples in Thailand. The most beautiful ones are found in Wat Phumin (*วัดภูมินทร์*) in Nan (น่าน) province, Wat Supat Thanaram (*วัดสุปถนาราม*) in Ubon Ratchathani (อุบลราชธานี)

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<sup>23</sup> Called Phra Sumen in Thai, pyre usually shapes in receding tiers to represent Mount Meru

Moreover, the Naga is also identified with the rainbow shaped lintels. In the superstitious thought of the Thais and the Southeast Asian nations, the rainbow symbolizes both the bridge from earth to heaven and the giant water serpent rearing its head to the ocean for drinking water. Freeman and Roger 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...*” (Freeman and Roger Warner 1987: 117). On another note, the mythical Naga is considered as a guardian (Dravapala - ทวารบาล) in the Theravada Buddhist temples, which frighten monsters away; therefore they may appear on Buddhist constructions as nothing more than in this capacity. There are, to sum up, variable forms of the Nagas found in Thai architectural art but all of them are present in harmonized relationships within cosmology, religions and the water culture.

### **The Meaning of Naga in Thai sculptural ornaments**

In Buddhist mythology, the Naga figures have faithfully accompanied the Buddha since he was about to be born up to his reclining in Nirvana. Nagas even stay in the world of men to protect the Buddhist Trinity or the Triple Gems, which are the Buddha, Dharma (Law), and Sangha (religious community) and to guard the Buddhist vestiges for the future generations. Buddhist mythology also states that when crown prince Siddhartha (เจ้าชายสิทธัตถะ) was newly born in Lumpini (ลุมพินี) royal garden (today, in the South of Nepal), the multi-headed *Naga* caused warm waters to gush forth for the baby prince’s first bath. The Jataka<sup>25</sup> (called Chadok (ชาดก) in Thai), a Buddhist literature work, created by the Ceylonese (Sri Lanka) in

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<sup>24</sup> Naga in wave - like motion, used in several parts of the monastery including balustrades and compound walls

<sup>25</sup> The Buddhist literature that tells about the Lord Buddha’s 547 previous incarnations. Based on Jataka, the Thais adapted into the new one, called Panasa Jataka or Chadot

## Naga - protecting - Buddha

The theme called Pang Nak Prok (*ปางนาคปรก*) in Thai, which depicts the Buddha seated on top of the serpentine coils. Behind the Buddha, the Naga in its multiheaded form rising to form a shelter for Buddha. This image was very popular in the Mon and Khmer stone sculptural arts in Pre - Thai Era, dated 7<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. In 1238, Sukhothai kingdom was established as the first Thai state; the Thais later inherited the Khmer theme of Naga - protected Buddha which they transformed into their own styles. The most distinguished statue was found at Chedi Jet Theo (*เจดีย์เจ็ดแถว*), Si Satchanalai (*ศรีสัชชนาลัย*) province. Many statues in this theme are also exhibited in the National Museum Bangkok. They are the most popular statues to be worshipped in Thai temples, especially in temples in the North and the Northeast of Thailand where the belief of the Naga is predominant.

The meaning of the Naga-protecting Buddha found is 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 – Linda<sup>26</sup> (*มูจลินท์*). When a strong rainstorm suddenly poured down, the Mucalinda crept out of its lair. The Naga coiled its body into seven circles and lifted the meditating Buddha up above the powerful stream. In my opinion, the Naga - protected Buddha image was possibly transformed from the Brahmanist legend of Vishnu (*วิษณุ*) reclining on the coils of the cosmic serpent Shesha - Ananta<sup>27</sup> (endless serpent) and giving birth to Brahma<sup>28</sup> (Phra Phrom - *พระพรหม* in Thai) the God Creator from a lotus blossoming out from his navel as recounted in the Bhagavad Gita bible, a part of the Mahabharata epic. Before the Naga - protected Buddha image was known in Indian sculptural art; it appeared that people had come across the statue of Naga coiling around the Jainists' naked body with

<sup>26</sup> A mythical serpent protected Buddha for his meditation

<sup>27</sup> Endless Serpent carries Vishnu on the Milky Ocean

<sup>28</sup> God of Universal Creation, who was born on a lotus base blossoming out from Vishnu's navel in Bhagavad-Gita

### Naga and Garuda

Garuda<sup>29</sup>, the sun eagle (Khрут - *ครุฑ* in Thai), is the relentless enemy of the Naga, accordingly 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 hands of the bird clasping the tails of the Naga but the Naga cannot be killed as it is also immortal as its enemy, the Garuda, according to the mythology.

The Thai sculpture depicts the image from both the Indian and the Khmer arts but the Thais think that event 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 gives growth to the cereals, allowing for continuous life. Differing with the Indian thought, the Thais consider the relationship of Garuda and Naga as a symbiotic association, leading to good 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*) or Garuda riding on Naga appears on the front of Wat Na Phra Men (*พรหน้าพระเมรุ*), Ayuthaya (*อยุธยา*) province and etc. The wooden instrument carved in the Mon style, in the National Museum Bangkok, shows Garuda clutching two flower strings in his talon, Naga, 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 with two hands lifting the temple roofs. The motif was enthusiastically adapted by the Thai artist when they made a string of Garuda clasping the tails of Nagas, symbolically lifting up Wat Phra Keo (*วัดพระแก้ว*), Bangkok. The image represents the symbiotic association of Garuda with Nagas rather than their 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

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<sup>29</sup> Khрут in Thai, mythical bird – man, a carrier of God Vishnu

beats, both of them being Phra Narai's holy rides. Although the theme is taken its inspiration from Hindu myth, its signification leans toward Buddhism and is only popular when Theravada Buddhism flourishes in Thailand. It is rarely to be found on the Khmer's Hindu temples whereas they appear everywhere 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 on its talons, moreover, is present on 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 (mythical sea monster) is Varuna's holy mount, 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<sup>30</sup> impacted on Thai culture, it was eventually made to resemble a Naga or a crocodile. The Makara has a unique head with two ears on the sides, an elephantine nose and a wide mouth with sharp teeth. Especially, in Sukhothai period, the Sawankhalok potters made the ceramic Makara statues by adding two horns, their mouths holding "a pearl" as 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 make Makara – spouting - Naga on roofs, stairs of Theravada Buddhist temples. There is no such theme, of Makara spouting Naga in neither Indian mythology nor its sculpture. This theme only appears some Southeast Asian countries for instance Thailand, 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 at Wat Chom Chang (วัดชอมช้าง) and Chedi Phra That Chomkitti in Chieng Saen district, Chieng Saen province, I once

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<sup>30</sup> Sea monster resembles to crocodilian shape that is considered as holy ride of Varuna God of Ocean in Vedic myth

### Naga and Dragon

In China, the dragon (มังกร - Long - 龍) is believed to be a sacred and beneficent animal. Legend has it that it hibernates in the ocean in the autumn but it ascends to the sky in the spring, bringing beneficial rains onto the dry earth. Similar to 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 about the origins and shapes of the dragon. Its appearance in the cosmology dates back to a legend of the formation of the Universe. The legend describes Nuwa, (女媧) 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. After consummation, they gave birth to human beings on earth. This legend was engraved on a stone wall 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 15<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, the Thais adapted so much element of Chinese culture among which the dragon theme. I however haven't seen any dragon images in Sukhothai period or saw its influence on Naga as a few scholars' hypotheses. 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 state that the Naga is

fully done combination of indigenous and Indian serpent cults whereby it impacts on Thai arts. In the Shang dynasty (16<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> 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 of Vedic myth are simply a crocodile in simple form. Thus, the dragon and Makara possible derive from the same root although they appear in two different cultures. Thailand is place they crossed, becoming an important element in the sculpture of Sukhothai period.

The artifacts of National Museum Bangkok show most of the dragon carvings were officially created by the Thai artist in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century AD although the dragon image had impacted in Thai sculpture before. The dragon was possibly spread to Thailand by the Chinese emigrant and the Thais were very flexible in accepting and combining it to Naga for creating Hera<sup>31</sup> (เฮอร์). In my opinion, the Hera is a Thai invention that can't be found in any other Asian countries. The Hera is imagined as an aquatic beast born by father dragon and mother Naga. 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 a Diamond”, “Two Dragons Flanking a Sun” or “Two Dragon Flanking a Moon”, with the two dragon images on both of sides replaced by Heras. Sometime, Hera is resembled as a reptile. Among nine divinities guarding the solar system in the Theravada Buddhist cosmology, the Neptune is described as a human god ridding on Naga. But since Hera appeared in Thai culture, many bas – relieves dating back Rattanakosin period show that Naga image has been relayed by Hera. It means that the Neptune ride on Hera instead of Naga.

#### Tua Nak and Tua Luong

“Tua” (ตั่ว) means a beast or only an additional word without clear meaning in Thai. The Thais use “Tua Nak” (ตั่วนาค) to mention the Naga which is popularly represented in Thai art and literature. Unlike the Tua Nak, “Tua Luong” (ตั่วหลวง) 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

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<sup>31</sup> Aquatic beast is born by father dragon and mother Naga. Hera possible appeared in Thai culture in early 19<sup>th</sup> century



On another side, The Tua Luong has never been considered as a holy beast in mythical Himaphan<sup>32</sup> forest (หิมพานต์). Furthermore, the Tua Luong is an independent beast which doesn't accompany or mix with any creatures or gods. In iconography, Thai artists usually carve Tua Luong on the roofs of Viharn (วิหาร) and in Buddhist ritual tools. The particular trait to distinguish Tua Luong is that it's always decorated with two bird wings in both its sides, 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, so called the Lan Na<sup>33</sup> (ล้านนา- Kingdom of Million Rice Fields) and Lan Chang<sup>34</sup> (ล้านช้าง- Kingdom of Million Elephants) styles, especially 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 the Northeast of Thailand.

### Conclusion

The animist serpent cult of Siam peninsular, Southeast Asia and the Southern China was found in the Metal Age where water played a preponderant role in human activities. Archaeological sites show that primitive people naturally inhabited along basins of rivers, streams and around lakes. Water was regarded as crucial highways, living means and it has affected their cultural activities during this ancient period. Because of their shape and living environment, snakes were then considered as the symbol of water, fertility of the soil, of living beings, men and a totem. The oldest remnants of serpent cult were also discovered in some places in Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia and Southern China.

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<sup>32</sup> Mythical forest is located at some where on the slopes of mount Himalaya, according to the Buddhist legend

<sup>33</sup> Kingdom of Million Rice Fields includes in contemporary provinces in the North of Thailand

<sup>34</sup> Kingdom of Million Elephants includes in contemporary provinces in the Northeast of Thailand and Laos



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

The signification of Naga in Thai architectural and sculptural ornaments is a representation of the association of the water culture, indigenous legends and philosophical influence of Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism. Furthermore, the architectural and sculptural images are inherited from different cultures such as India, Sri Lanka, Mon, Khmer, Java and China resulting into a specific 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.

I hope that this monograph has shown that there was an indigenous cultural existence before the Indian culture impacted in Southeast Asia. It contributes in weaving an overall background of Southeast Asian society, the matriarchy reign, the naked residents, and the serpent animism cult as a type of the water belief, in the Metal Age. On the other hand, the monograph has provided for a data source as for the role of the exogenesis cultural elements, proving the faulty views that consider Southeast Asian culture as an Indian replica. People can only see the outside shape and mythical name of *Naga* as it's called in India and few know about its origin. We've tried to unveil an entire treasure of indigenous cultural values which needs researches.

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