

The *Naga* Lineage of Kham Chanod Forest and the Creation of Community

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Abstract

This article is based on a study of beliefs surrounding one of the sacred serpent-like guardian beings known as *nagas* that play an important role in Buddhism as practiced among ethnic Lao people in northeast Thailand. Specific beliefs about *nagas* vary according to place and time, but generally they are viewed as protectors of the Buddha and Buddhism that help their believers understand Buddhist teachings known as the Dhamma. For the present study, the specific research question concerned the function of the beliefs brought by the spiritual descendant of the powerful *naga* Ong Pu Srisuttho, the creation of community, and devotees' ability to understand the Buddhist Dhamma because of the *naga* lineage. This research used the qualitative approach, including in-depth interviews and observation. The data collection was divided into two phases; the first phase took place February-July, 2017 and the second January-February, 2020. The results show that the *naga* beliefs brought by the lineage functioned in two ways: 1) through a ceremony that reproduces sacredness for the believers and 2) through religious figures that preserve the sacredness and pass the teachings and beliefs on to others. Because people influenced by the beliefs at Kham Chanod were able to preserve these beliefs, a new community was established for more believers and to allow them to understand the Buddhist Dhamma.

Keywords: *naga* lineage, creation of community, Kham Chanod, Dhamma

Introduction

This article examines the changes in traditions and ceremonies related to Ong Pu Srisutthonaga, the *naga* of Kham Chanod forest in Udon Thani

province, and one of his descendants, Pu Thepnimitnaga. According to Ngaosrivathana and Ngaosrivathana (2009: 58-60), Ong Pu Srisutthonaga was one of two *naga* lords that dug the Mekong River. He was formerly the guardian spirit of Vientiane and currently resides at Wat Kham Chanod in Udon Thani province.

A recent study (Samorna, 2017) reported on changes in society and the economy stemming from beliefs in this *naga*. The 2016 airing of the television series, *Nakee*¹ brought a large number of visitors to Kham Chanod. Consequently, additional changes in meanings, patterns, and social functions have caused traditions and ceremonies to change as well. In addition, those who have strong beliefs in the *naga* have adopted the practices from Kham Chanod and established themselves as his representatives by performing ceremonies, building religious sites, and establishing religious figures who define themselves as part of the *naga* lineage.²

Moreover, the number of *naga* devotees has continued to grow, as can be witnessed in the large crowd that gathers at Kham Chanod every day to pay respect to Ong Pu Srisutthonaga. Among those who revere the *naga* are those who believe that he paid a visit to Kham Chanod. These people have lifestyles, demeanors, and moral practices that are different from those of ordinary people. They include those who pray, as well as a hermit, a spirit communicator, monks, and doctrine leaders who dress in white or green. They claim they are representatives of the Kham Chanod *naga* and they are scattered throughout the Isan region.

This phenomenon shows how belief in the *naga* has reached many people. From an academic perspective, the phenomenon has its own significance and allows us to understand effects on social structure. In some cases, expansion of the *naga* lineage has created a new pattern of beliefs and new practices have been invented that are different from earlier ones. Despite the differences, their practices somehow enable the people to gain an understanding of the Buddhist Dhamma, the teachings of the Buddha.

¹ Many Thai television soap operas are based on *naga* legends, such as *Phut Menam Khong* (Demon of the Mekong River) in 2008, *Manisawat* (an abbreviation of *Mani naga sawat*, *naga*'s love treasure), and most recently *Nakee* (the *naga* goddess) in 2016.

² A person who takes *naga* beliefs into traditional and ceremonial practices. Members of the *naga* lineage are required to follow the precepts strictly, as Pu Thepnimitnaga is a representative of Ong Pu Srisutthonaga.

These phenomena occurred because the traditions and ceremonies related to Ong Pu Srisutthonaga have changed. This research aimed to understand how the *naga* belief from Kham Chanod, which has been brought into social practices by the lineage, remains functional in a sub-unit. The study employed the functional concept proposed by sociologist Herbert Spencer to explain this phenomenon. This article is based on original case-study research of the ashram³ of Pu Thepnimitnaga in Khon Kaen province. Pu Thepnimitnaga sees himself as a spiritual descendant of the Ong Pu Srisutthonaga, the *naga* at Kham Chanod. He performs religious ceremonies and has a number of believers and activities to continually promote the beliefs.

Analytical Concepts and Theories

The study is not aimed at answering questions about beliefs, because there are quite a number of such studies of *naga* beliefs in Thai society. Therefore, employing the concept of beliefs might not yield significant results different from the previous works. Instead, analytical functionalism of Herbert Spencer was chosen as the framework (Apichatvullop, 1995; Turner, Beeghley and Power, 2002) to investigate and explain the phenomenon in order to understand how the participants in the *naga* belief phenomenon comprise a sub-society of Kham Chanod, and how this sub-society functions socially.

The foundation of Spencer's sociological theories, according to Coser (2005), is the evolutionary doctrine or the law of evolution, which is the supreme law of every becoming. All universal phenomena – inorganic, organic, and super organic – are subject to the natural law of evolution. Of these, it is the last domain, the super organic – the social system or the sociological domain – that is the focus of his attention. Turner et al. (2002) suggested that Spencer's functionalism sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity

³ Ashram (Sanskrit: *ashrama* or *ashramam*) is a spiritual hermitage or a monastery in Indian religions. Thais use this word to mean a spiritual hermitage, a dwelling of a guru with his/her followers, a religious community, and also a non-religious community of artists, writers, people observing alternative living styles, etc.

and stability. When society grows, mainly due to population growth and becomes more complex, it is forced to adapt its internal structure through differentiation, followed by integration or disintegration of the new structure.

The process can be summarized as follows: First, when a society has existed for a long time, things tend to become more complex. As a result, functions change to serve a new society. Second, the new society would have its own functions to survive and also to serve a larger society. Third, the new structure and its functions become integrated to and inter-dependent on the large one. Fourth, the large structure, which has its own functions and system coherence, is influenced by different processes occurring in smaller units.

These concepts would allow us to understand the phenomenon of the *naga* lineage, whose social functions are separate from those of Wat Kham Chanod, as well as the functions of the *naga* lineage in different dimensions. The concept of “community” was also chosen for this study in order to gain insight into the creation of a new community brought by the *naga* lineage.

The review of the community concept indicates that the definition of “community” is extensive. The word “community,” in terms of sociology, does not refer only to space or a certain area that has fixed boundaries or an area limited to a village as defined by a community development administrative officer. Rather, a community is a social unit whose members communicate with other people from other communities. In society, we can witness some movements, adjustments, conflicts and assimilation, continuity and changes, relationships with other communities, government, and markets. Because of these factors, the area of a new community becomes larger and connects with other areas, both within rural areas and cities. Thus, a community changes, adjusts, and has conflicts, and new communities grow rapidly (Ganjanapan, 1999; Santasombat, 1996).

Therefore, to understand a community, the selected framework needs to include concepts, social values, ideals, and beliefs that attract people to be part of the same community. The new meaning of

“community” can be people who occasionally gather at a certain place or a group of people formed because they share the same beliefs or ideals, but do not have to meet each other face to face.

To analyze the creation of a new community, this research used the definition of a community by Ngothamasan and Saengkong (1999), according to which a community is “a group of people that live together and share the same lifestyles and culture. They also do activities that strengthen their unity so that they share the same conscience when facing problems in a certain space which is not only determined by its geography but according to the community flow.”

Methodology

The research was conducted qualitatively by using in-depth interviews and observation. The data collection was divided into two phases. The first phase took place at Wat Pah Kham Chanod (Wat Sirisuttho) and Wang Nakin in Ban Muang sub-district in Ban Dung district of Udon Thani province from February to July in 2017. The data in the second phase was obtained from the spiritual guides who consider themselves members of the *naga* lineage at Kham Chanod. The participants were chosen according to the following requirements: 1) have a connection with the *naga* and believe they are part of the *naga* lineage at Kham Chanod, 2) are religious figures, 3) perform ceremonies, and 4) have followers and activities that continually support their beliefs. “Pu Thepnimitnaga” is a pseudonym for the person who brought the *naga* beliefs into traditional and ceremonial practices and defines himself as a representative of the *naga*. The second phase of data collection took place from January to February, 2020. The analyzed data were then compared by employing Herbert Spencer’s analytical functionalism as a framework to see differences between as well as connections among things, especially to answer the research question regarding the function of the *naga* beliefs, the creation of community, and how people “reach” or access the Dhamma. An ashram in Khon Kaen province was chosen as a case study.

Research Results

Background and the Existence of the Naga Lineage

The case study allows us to understand the function of the *naga* beliefs, how people reach the Dhamma, and how a community is created. The *naga* lineage is comprised of people who firmly believe in traditions and conduct ceremonies involving the *naga*. The fact that Pu Thepnimitnaga is basically the guide of this belief has enabled him to have more followers. As a result of more followers, a new community has been created.

Pu Thepnimitnaga was born into a religious family. His father was a spiritual guide who raised him to have high moral standards. When Pu Thepnimitnaga was an adult, he left home to find a job to feed his family while keeping the Dhamma. He eventually got a job as a taxi driver in Bangkok. Although the work was very demanding, he would always find time to practice the Dhamma. Moreover, whenever he had an opportunity to come back to his hometown, he would use his spare time to pay respect to the *naga* statues in many places, such as Kham Chanod forest in Ban Dung, Udon Thani, Wat Klang Phonsaisai in Phonsaisai of Nong Khai, and other places with *naga* beliefs similar to his in order to receive blessings before returning to work in Bangkok.

When Pu Thepnimitnaga turned 43, he had an extraordinary experience. He dreamed that a *naga* slithered toward him, strangled him with its body, and told him to come home immediately to help those who were suffering. In the dream, the *naga* also revealed to him several numbers that enabled him to win the lottery and have enough money to come back to settle down in his hometown.

This strange incident caused him to have so much faith in the *naga* that he wished to be his descendant. When he returned home during the Songkran holiday in 2017, another strange thing happened to him. He suddenly lost consciousness, lay down on the ground, and slithered like a snake. The incident startled many people passing by. When he regained consciousness and was able to talk, he asked someone to take him to a certain place. It used to be a rice paddy field and there was a pond in the area. When he arrived at the pond, he quickly got out

of the car and marked the area with some sticks so that his ashram or the *naga* palace could be built.

Since then, the place has been transformed into a meditation center. A *naga* statue was later built from the money Pu Thepnimitnaga had saved from work and from his lottery winnings. Not long afterwards, people began to flow into this place to pay respect to the *naga* and request auspicious blessings.

I did this because I have faith in it and I also want to build this place for practicing my Dhamma. Some sick people who know that I live by the precepts would come to me for treatment (Pu Thepnimitnaga [Pseudonym], 2020).

Less than a year later, more and more people came to visit for different reasons. Some came to bathe in holy water, some came hoping to reduce their stinginess, some came for wealth and fortune or lucky lottery numbers, and some came to wish for success. Not long afterwards, the ashram of Pu Thepnimitnaga began to gain popularity among both local people and others who believed in the *naga*. The visitors were not only from Thailand; some also traveled a long way from Malaysia and Singapore. Even Thais working abroad visited this place. They all came to become his followers and apply his teachings to their lives.

Those who come to this place are all the *naga*'s children. This place has caused them to have good conduct and not cause trouble for other people. They must live in the present. That's what I always tell them (Pu Thepnimitnaga [Pseudonym], 2020).

The ashram of Pu Thepnimitnaga has adopted the *naga* beliefs from Kham Chanod. Pu Thepnimitnaga is regarded as part of the *naga* lineage because before the ashram was built, he went to Kham Chanod and prayed to become a member of the lineage of Ong Pu Srisutthonaga. Subsequently, he claimed to be a representative who passes on *naga* beliefs to people and becomes a medium between the *naga* and believers.

The ashram's sacredness has been recognized by villagers who believe in Pu Thepnimitnaga and those who have a strong belief about

the *naga*. With this place in the area, people did not need to travel to Kham Chanod. Many villagers could come to the ashram at their convenience for auspicious blessings and treatment for their illnesses.

Despite the ashram's increasing popularity, Pu Thepnimitnaga regularly visits Ong Pu Srisutthonaga at Kham Chanod in order to increase his spiritual power. Sometimes he takes a group of faithful believers or his students with him to pay respect to the *naga*.

From the evidence above, is clear that the characteristics of a *naga* lineage are people who believe in the *naga* and practice morality or the Dhamma. These characteristics play an important role in increasing the number of followers. Pu Thepnimitnaga himself has been keeping the precepts to purify himself. His determination cannot be affected by any incentives such as profits or bribery. The reasons mentioned above have enabled him to gain more followers and they have become the conditions for a community to be formed.

The Social Functions of the Naga Belief

The existence of the *naga* lineage in 2017 through the ashram of Pu Thepnimitnaga is an evidence that the *naga* belief exists. What is more interesting is that the devotees there took the belief from Kham Chanod. Although the context is different from Kham Chanod, there are certain units that treat the belief as a "social function."⁴

The findings of the research reveal two components that enhance the social function of the belief:

The first component is a ritual held at the ashram. There are many rituals influenced by Buddhism such as *Buddhakhun* prayer or the prayer of grace, prayers on special days, the *Pha pah* ceremony, the *Kathin* ceremony. *Kathin* is the ceremony to give robes to monks who have passed the rain retreat. It is mostly held on the 1st day of the waning moon of the 11th month. The rituals influenced by Hinduism include the use of holy water to treat illnesses and increase virtue, and the *naga*

⁴ The research has employed the concept of Malinowski (1963, cited in Santasombat, 1994) who proposed that every society or culture exists to serve people's needs, which are as follows: 1) basic biological and psychological needs, 2) instrumental needs, and 3) symbolic needs.

worship ceremony. These rituals all signify the sacredness with which the *naga* is viewed.

The most frequently performed activity at the ashram is the *Buddhakhun* prayer, which is recited in order to escape from suffering and gain insight into the Buddha's teachings. The ritual takes place regularly. In addition, a grand ceremony like the *Wai Khru* (paying respect to teachers) also takes every year. However, some activities influenced by Hinduism are also held to worship the *naga*. Such activities include worship ceremonies or rituals held to increase believers' virtue since they firmly believe in the existence of the *naga* and also believe that this divine creature would bestow happiness and success upon them.

Superstitious rituals are also found at the ashram. They consist mainly of incantation and exorcism for those who are thought to be possessed by evil spirits. The exorcism is performed using holy water that has been blessed by a religious figure. Those who come to receive treatment are advised to carry the holy water with them everywhere. Sometimes Pu Thepnimitnaga travels to perform rituals outside the ashram as invited by his followers or students.

The second component regards "religious figures" who comprise the lineage of the *naga*. They have played an important role in supporting the beliefs in the society, especially Pu Thepnimitnaga who remains a respected individual with proper conduct. He has a reputation for not accepting money or any benefits collected from others. He also opposes commercial Buddhism by prohibiting the sale of sacred objects. Such factors have enabled him to receive a great deal of respect and trust as a person. Because he is seen as having good conduct, there is no reason for the followers to hesitate to become the *naga*'s disciples.

The concrete evidence of how much respect he receives as a person lies in the *Wai Khru* ceremony which takes place annually in March. During this time, a large number of visitors, from businessmen, and state officers to farmers, all participate in the ceremony. People of every occupation and status are welcome. They come because they believe in Pu Thepnimitnaga, who is respected as a spiritual anchor.

It can be noticed that the components supporting the existence of the beliefs are different from those of Kham Chanod. If we look back, we can see three components have contributed to Kham Chanod becoming “a sacred place.” The first component is a unique tree called Chanod. The tree is believed to resemble the body and the scales of a *naga*. The second is the group of folktales that serve as historical capital. They reproduce the mystery of the human world and the underwater world, which is thought to be the world of the nagas. However, there is no invented story at the ashram of Pu Thepnimitnaga, nor is there anything mysterious as at Kham Chanod. As a result, the reproduction of the beliefs relies heavily on an individual or a religious figure to create such a belief and pass it on to others in order to protect its sacredness.

Accessing the Dhamma

The word, Dhamma, refers to the teachings of the Buddha. It is regarded as both the principles and the practices of Buddhism. Dhamma involves many levels of understanding and practice. It can be the profound principles, namely, Trilakkhana or the Three Marks of Existence (impermanence, suffering/unsatisfactoriness, and no-self); or it can be the practice guides for lay people or the Five Precepts⁵ (practices to purify one’s mind and body); or it can be Kammathana (mind practices to find peace of mind, and to overcome suffering by reaching various levels of wisdom) (Phanchan, 2008). The profound principles can truly be understood only by Dhamma practices and not by logical thinking or theoretical studies. They can be summarized into Trisikkha or the Threefold Training (precepts, concentration/meditation, and wisdom), which end the suffering created by clinging to the Uppathana⁴ or the Four Types of Clinging (Buddhadasa, 2006). We can see that the meaning of Dhamma is quite extensive. Because of this, in this research,

⁵ Abstain from 1) killing, 2) taking what is not given, 3) sexual misconduct, 4) false speech, 5) intoxicants causing heedlessness.

⁶ The Four Types of Clinging consist of clinging to sensual pleasure (Kamupathana), views (Thithupathana), rules, rituals and vows (Silapphatupathana), a doctrine of self or (Attavatupathana) (Buddhadasa, 2006).

Trisikkha was used as a scope to analyze how people in this study understand and practice Dhamma.

The study of the background and the existence of the *naga* lineage allows us to see that Pu Thepnimitnaga ashram is not only a place for the lineage members, beliefs, and ceremonies, but also a center that connects people with Buddhism. At the ashram, people have been able to gain an understanding of the Dhamma, especially to have good conduct and to observe the precepts in order to understand the cycle of life that consists of birth, pain, old age, death as well as accumulating merit for the next life.

Most of the people visiting the ashram are in great suffering from illnesses and personal problems. They all come here to seek help so they can get through the suffering. Those who come to the ashram will be introduced to the Dhamma, which will help them pass through suffering caused by clinging to something. They will be told to keep the precepts by doing good deeds and refraining from causing trouble for others. Some people who feel pain in parts of the body, like their knees, legs, and waist are sprinkled with holy water and told to keep the precepts and especially to refrain from killing because these actions are believed to be the causes of suffering. They are also taught the Law of Karma, specifically the karma caused by committing adultery or getting intoxicated through alcohol or drugs. They are also encouraged to practice *samadhi* or mediation to escape from suffering and to prepare their minds to handle suffering in the future.

Another way to gain insight into the Dhamma is to have the wisdom to recognize and understand the truth about life. For example, those with serious illnesses will be taught to understand the life cycle and the fact that at some point in time everyone must encounter birth, pain, old age, and death. They are also taught that life is full of uncertainty. These life lessons are passed on and explained in the easiest way in order to make them feel less discouraged.

In addition to helping people access the Dhamma, some wealthy people or those of higher social status, who do not have financial problems, are usually advised to remain in the present, live their lives

carefully, and learn how to donate or share what they have with others. This group of people is also asked to observe the Five Precepts.

We can see that the cases mentioned above are different from those at Wat Kham Chanod as the ashram is a place where people can access the core of Buddhism, unlike Kham Chanod where the followers have limited access because it has no religious figures who act as moral advisors. According to a study on the ritual traditions of the *naga* of Kham Chanod (Samorna, 2017), the temple and its monks lost their religious significance as they have failed to provide a learning atmosphere for the Dhamma that serves as a religious center where ceremonies are performed. This can be seen in the temple's courtyard, which has been turned into a commercial site full of merchants selling souvenir coins and sacred objects. A holy place has been transformed into a commercial one. There are parking lots, toilets, souvenir shops, and tents for the sellers to rest. The monks are also negatively affected by the over 300 shops and stands that popped up in the area and more than 200 hawkers who wander around selling food, souvenirs, and lottery tickets.

The Creation of a New “Community”

Nowadays, the word “community” has quite an extensive meaning. It goes beyond a unit governed by a state or marked by its physical territory (Kemp, 1991). What has been found from this study is that the creation of a new community conforms to the community framework previously reviewed. The new community differs from the community in the past, that is to say, nowadays a community exists because there are people who share the same beliefs about something, in this case, it is beliefs about the *naga*. They are united by the belief to do activities together regardless of their origins or backgrounds. After 2018 the community was formed by a group of people who believed and shared the same sentiments about the *naga* in spite of their differences in occupation, social status, and educational background.

The creation of community reflects mental and physical problems the spiritual guide and visitors have encountered. The ashram

is a place they can come to share what they have gone through and find solutions for each other. An example can be seen when the visitors exchanged experiences about treatments and results after becoming disciples of the *naga*. Because there is room for sharing personal experiences, a community is automatically formed. Since their relationship has been cemented, they become family. Thus, the community at Pu Thepnimitnaga ashram is perceived as a horizontal community. In other words, there is equality of thought. It is a community in which people respect each other and listen closely to others. Therefore, people rely on the belief which has become a common ground for binding people together.

The community can also be observed on social media through Line and Facebook groups. Such groups are platforms of people who hold the same beliefs to exchange ideas, mainly about Pu Thepnimitnaga and Ong Pu Srisutthonaga at Kham Chanod. Other stories discussed in the groups include those based on personal experiences and miracles that happened to them after they began to worship the *naga*. Communities like these two allow everyone to keep up with other people's lives and successes. Some charitable activities are also created in these groups such as money solicitation, fund raising, donations, and scholarships offered to needy students. There are also other activities, for instance, renovation of the ashram that has been done from the money collected from those working in other countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and others. Large crowds also gather at the *Pha Pah*, *Kathin*, and *Wai Khru* ceremonies.

However, the new community was loosely formed without fixed rules. It was formed among relatives and it was a place for those with problems to gather to do something together. This is considered a spiritual community. It took less than three years for Pu Thepnimitnaga to draw many visitors to come to pay respect and do activities together. They all feel that the only way to solve their problem is to talk about it in a place like this because everyone is like family and there is no judgment here.

Conclusion and Discussion

The study found that there are two major components contributing to the existence of the *naga* beliefs at Kham Chanod: 1) the ceremony that signifies sacredness of the *naga*, making people believe that the creature exists; and 2) a religious figure, who is a member of the *naga* lineage and represents the *naga*. He also guides people to the Buddha's lessons and purifies their minds while they are following *naga* beliefs and Buddhist practices.

The conclusions above conform to the social concept proposed by Herbert Spencer (Apichatvullop, 1995; Turner, Beeghley and Power, 2002) that explains how small units function as a system to support the society and respond to social needs. In this case, Kham Chanod is home to the *naga* beliefs which are complicated in terms of beliefs, traditions, and ceremonies. Thus, a new social unit called the Ashram of Pu Thepnimitnaga was founded. This social unit reproduces sacredness through ceremonies and its religious figure, a member of the *naga* lineage, who can communicate, give moral lessons, and propagate ideals, *naga* beliefs, and Buddhist principles to believers.

The reproduction of sacredness and communication of teachings, ideals, and belief sharing have become new functions performed under "ceremony" and "religious figure." These functions have played a significant role in planting and protecting the beliefs about the *naga* and the Buddha's ideals.

Protecting the social function of the *naga* belief (the response to social needs) not only relies on small units like ceremonies and individuals or religious figures who have morals and ethics, these are also need to be combined. The example is that the ceremonies are performed primarily by religious figures who respect them and practice the Dhamma. Once these small parts are gathered and integrated, the social function continues.

Moreover, if we look at the conclusions based on Spencer's social theory, the study reflects that a society that is separate from Kham Chanod has played a vital role in protecting the beliefs and the ideas about the *naga* and Buddhism. What is most apparent here is the effort to protect the *naga* beliefs by performing the *naga* worship ceremony

as well as keeping the precepts and following the Buddha's teachings and moral lessons or Dhamma.

Apart from the discussion above, this study also conformed to the research of Phutthanathanapa, Narongchai and Chumnanmak (2020) who investigated the use of the *naga* signs in the Special Economic Zone in Mukdahan province. Their results reveal that the *naga* signs play a significant role in shaping people's good behavior in practicing the precepts or Dhamma, which are considered the essence of the Buddha's teachings. The research also shares some similarities with Tanabe's work (2012) on the ceremonies and social practices of the farmers' community in northern Thailand. Both studies demonstrate how a practical religion has been incorporated to create a new community in order for members to remain hopeful in difficult situations. The tool used to draw people to the belief has combined Buddhism with aspects of Hinduism. In the Kham Chanod case, the *naga* ceremony has been used as a tool to create a new community. This ceremony also allows people in the community to understand the Dhamma, the ideals of the religion.

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