

# *That Phanom Stupa: Spiritual Space and Invented Traditions in Present-Day Northeastern Thailand*<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the role of Phrathat Phanom in the creation of traditions related to the way of life of people in modern Isan society, using the invention of traditions and creative folklore as conceptual frameworks. The study found that Phrathat Phanom, a prominent and significant stupa in the mid-Mekong basin region, has long influenced the local way of life and culture. However, several new practices regarding Phrathat Phanom have been implemented in recent years: these include Phrathat Sacha worship in Loei province; Phrathat Phanom devotional dance, praying for luck by worshipping the *phrathat* corresponding to one's birth date, Naga worship, and worship of Shin Upagutta, a Buddhist saint revered in Thailand, Laos and Myanmar, (all in Nakhon Phanom province); the ceremony of welcoming university freshmen by worshipping Phrathat Phanom (Khon Kaen province), and the ritual of *sukhwan* (calling the soul of the stupa) across the Mekong River (Nakhon Phanom province). The invention of tradition is a social practice in which traditions or cultural features from the historic past are borrowed and used as tools to create new meaning. They are reinterpreted, extended, and modified to serve society under current circumstances. There are four conditions that influence and transform religious traditions into social traditions: localism, modernism, internationalism, and tourism. This study illustrates the influence of social changes which have dynamically influenced cultural inventions regarding Phrathat Phanom in present-day northeastern Thailand.

**Keywords:** That Phanom Stupa, spiritual space, invented tradition, Northeastern Thailand

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## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาบทบาทของพระธาตุพนมที่มีความสำคัญต่อการสร้างสรรค์ประเพณีในวิถีชีวิตของผู้คนในสังคมไทยปัจจุบันโดยใช้กรอบแนวคิดเรื่องประเพณีประดิษฐ์และคติชนสร้างสรรค์มาเป็นเครื่องมือในการค้นคว้าวิจัย ผลการศึกษาพบว่า พระธาตุพนมเป็นศูนย์กลางของความเชื่อทางพุทธศาสนาในชุมชนลุ่มแม่น้ำโขงในภาคอีสานที่มีความสำคัญต่อการสร้างสรรค์ประเพณีใหม่โดยการหยิบยืมความคิด ความเชื่อที่เกี่ยวข้องกับพระธาตุพนมในอดีตไปประดิษฐ์สร้างขึ้นมา ทั้งนี้ประเพณีประดิษฐ์ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับพระธาตุพนมในสังคมอีสานปัจจุบัน ได้แก่ ประเพณีบูชาพระธาตุสี่จจะ (จังหวัดเลย) ประเพณีพ่อนบูชาพระธาตุพนม (จังหวัดนครพนม) ประเพณีบูชาพระธาตุประจำวันเกิด (จังหวัดนครพนม) ประเพณีบวงสรวงพญานาคา (จังหวัดนครพนม) ประเพณีแห่พระอุปคุต (จังหวัดนครพนม) ประเพณีรับน้องใหม่ให้ว่าพระธาตุพนม (จังหวัดขอนแก่น) ประเพณีสู้ขวัญพระธาตุข้ามแม่น้ำโขง (จังหวัดนครพนม) และประเพณีสืบชะตาแม่น้ำโขง (จังหวัดนครพนม) พบว่าประเพณีเหล่านี้เป็นประเพณีที่เกิดขึ้นใหม่ ซึ่งต่างได้เลือกใช้รูปแบบการอ้างอิง “พระธาตุพนม” โดยวิธีการสืบทอด ดัดแปลง ประยุกต์ทั้งด้านภาษา แนวคิด พิธีกรรม และการเฉลิมฉลองเพื่อให้เข้ากับบริบทของสังคมในยุคสมัยใหม่ สำหรับเหตุปัจจัยที่มีอิทธิพลต่อการประดิษฐ์สร้างรูปแบบและแนวคิดของประเพณีที่เกี่ยวข้องกับพระธาตุพนมจาก “ประเพณีในทางศาสนา” ไปสู่ “ประเพณีในทางสังคม” มี 4 ประการ คือ อิทธิพลจากกระแสท้องถิ่นนิยม อิทธิพลจากกระแสความทันสมัย อิทธิพลจากกระแสความสัมพันธ์ข้ามชาติ และอิทธิพลจากกระแสการท่องเที่ยว ซึ่งทำให้การประดิษฐ์สร้างประเพณีมีพลวัตและการปรับเปลี่ยนจนส่งผลทำให้ความหมายของพระธาตุพนมในเชิงสัญลักษณ์มีลักษณะโดดเด่นและน่าสนใจ

**คำสำคัญ:** พระธาตุพนม พื้นที่จิตวิญญาณ ประเพณีประดิษฐ์ ภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือ ประเทศไทย

## Introduction

Phrathat Phanom (That Phanom Stupa) is one of the most important Buddhist reliquaries for communities in the mid-Mekong River Basin. It is an archaeological site that has been significant for the way of life

and culture of people in northeast Thailand and Laos throughout the centuries (Munnithi Saranukrom Watthanatham Thai, 1999B: 1888). Phrathat Phanom is located within Wat Phrathat Phanom Woramahawiharn, That Phanom district, Nakhon Phanom province, along the Mekong River across from Sikhottabong district of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Although the river demarcates the Thai-Lao border, people along the two banks share beliefs in Phrathat Phanom that have remained unchanged to the present time. In addition, the significance of Phrathat Phanom has meant that it has become an inspiration and a reference for creating new traditions in contemporary northeastern Thai society.

The new traditions and cultural activities inspired by faith and belief in Phrathat Phanom include relic worship dancing by various ethnic groups, including Phu Tai, Isan/Lao, Tai Nyaw, Tai Yuan/Lanna, and people from Luang Prabang. The dancing is held on the occasion of the annual worshipping of the stupa in February, and on that of welcoming Khon Kaen University freshmen and wishing them success in their studies. The image of the stupa is used as the emblem of Khon Kaen University. The dance is also performed for worship and for blessing the people who were born in the Year of the Monkey or on a Sunday because Phrathat Phanom represents the stupa corresponding to this year and day. This belief which is part of a Lan Na tradition linking certain pilgrimage sites to a twelve-year animal cycle known in Thai as the *naksat pi*, the year in which one is born (Keyes, 1975). Nine of the sites in this system are located in northern Thailand, along with one in Bodh Gaya, India; the Shwedagon in Myanmar; and Phrathat Phanom in Isan. The sites are said to have been visited by the Buddha Gotama, or to have his relics enshrined. Phrathat Phanom is said to also contain relics of the three Buddhas prior to Gautama Buddha (Keyes, 1975: 78). While most of these twelve pilgrimage sites are located in northern Thailand, Phrathat Phanom is also included because of the sense of kinship between the northern Thai and the Lao Buddhist traditions.

It is believed that by worshipping the stupa one not only makes merit but also acquires auspiciousness in life. These examples demonstrate that Phrathat Phanom serves not only as a Buddhist monastery, but also as a sacred resting place for the Buddha's relics, and therefore as a spiritual space. Moreover, it has come to play the invented role of a social space (Durkheim, 1969) which has enhanced and influenced the way of life and culture of contemporary northeastern Thai society.



**Figure 1** Phrathat Phanom is an important Buddhist reliquary for the communities living in the mid-Mekong River Basin.

This article examines the role and the significance of Phrathat Phanom as a source of inspiration for the invention of new traditions in the context of contemporary Thai-Isan society. The study also focuses on how the new traditions are processed and how the existing customs and traditions in Thai society have been adapted and applied to the new traditions. In terms of ritual traditions, the study looks at the conditions that influence the reproduction, restoration, and creation of the new traditions related to Phrathat Phanom.

The conceptual framework for analysis in this study is based on Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983: 1) ideas regarding the invention of tradition. They argue that the invention of tradition is a set of practices based on both overtly and tacitly accepted rules with a ritual or symbolic nature. The invention functions as a medium in passing on certain values and norms of behavior and reproduced traditional practices. The reproduction signifies the continuity between the past and the present. Invented traditions are initiated as demanded by emerging circumstances, but they may still maintain some aspects in reference to the former circumstances or may construct a suitable historic past.

This concept corresponds to the ideas of Vallibhotama (2000), who proposes that the survival of a tradition depends on how long the people in its community have valued and treasured it as a symbol of being in unity. If such a sense of belonging is shared among them, the tradition exists - if not, it may be changed or terminated. As a consequence, a more meaningful tradition is invented as a replacement.

This article focuses on new traditions related to Phrathat Phanom in present-day Thai society, and the conditions that have influenced the invention of these new traditions. In addition to Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) framework, the concept of "creative folklore" is applied. This concept refers to folklore that is created or reproduced by being passed on in a new context. It also includes applied folklore, extended folklore, reinterpretation and redefinition of the existing folklore, application of folklore for the purpose of "establishing its added value" (Na Thalang, 2015: 368) and constructing local identities or ethnic identities in the present-day Thai social context.

Invention of tradition, thus, is a social practice by which traditions or cultures from the historic past are borrowed and used as tools to create new meaning. They are reinterpreted, extended, and modified (Hongsuwan, 2013: 176). The goal is to serve society under current circumstances.

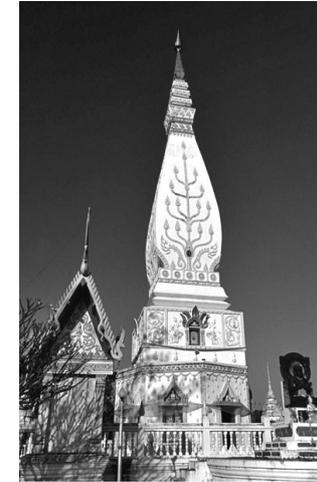
Five main topics responding to the objectives of this study are the following: 1) the construction of Phrathat Phanom replicas, 2) the performance of worship-offering processions and the Phrathat Phanom

worship dance, 3) the *sukhwan* ritual (calling the *khwan* or vital essence) to welcome Khon Kaen university freshmen in worshipping Phrathat Phanom, 4) worshipping Phrathat in the birth Year of the Monkey and on birthdays, and 5) worshipping the *Sattanaga* (the Seven Great Nagas who protect the stupa).

### The Tradition of Constructing Phrathat Phanom Replicas

Phrathat Phanom is considered the center of faith among the people of northeastern Thailand and Laos. The stupa is not only a religious place for people in general, it is also significant in terms of Lao-Isan architecture, as it is an original stupa design (Saysing, 2012: 89). Several other stupas have been constructed using Phrathat Phanom architecture as a prototype: these are Phrathat Bua Bok in Udon Thani province, Phrathat Tha U-Then in Nakhon Phanom province, and Phrathat Renu in Renu Nakhon district, Nakhon Phanom province. It is believed that these stupas are “descendants” of Phrathat Phanom since they are modeled after it. Replicas are also found in several other communities in northeast Thailand, including Wat Pa Sakdaram in Ban Tha Muang, Tha Muang sub-district, Selaphum district, Roi-et province (Muengluang, 2011); Wat Thampithak, Huaymek sub-district, Huaymek district, Kalasin province; and Phrathat Satcha at Wat Lad Pu Song Tham, Tha Li district, Loei province. These replicas are treated as Buddhist reliquaries in the communities.

These stupas are modeled after Phrathat Phanom because it is the historic center of faith and belief among Isan and Lao people. There is evidence for this in the term “*ngan wai phrathat*” (relic-worshipping festival). Elderly people often mention “*Ngan Wai Phrathat Phanom.*” In the Isan people’s point of view, this long passed-along festival has become a major symbol of Buddhism for them from the past to the present.



**Figure 2** The replica of Phrathat Phanom Stupa at Phrathat Satcha, Wat Lad Pu Song Tham temple, Tha Li district, Loei province

The replica of Phrathat Phanom at Wat Pa Sakdaram temple in Ban Thamuang, Roi-et province was built in 1992 under the abbot, Phra Kru Siwasaraporn. Because of the people’s faith and belief in the original Phrathat Phanom in Nakhon Phanom, the replica stupa became a Buddhist monastery in the village of Ban Thamuang. After its completion, a ceremony called “festival of worshipping the Phrathat Phanom replica” was organized in the third lunar month. This later became an auspicious time and the festival has been held annually ever since. A ritual of adding pure gold on the top of the replica stupa is held every three years.

Apart from the northeastern communities, there are also some communities in other parts of Thailand where a replica of Phrathat Phanom has been constructed for the Buddhists in the surrounding areas to have an opportunity to worship and express their faith in Phrathat Phanom through the replica. An example is at Wat Pa Doi Kham Nirun, Ban Pa Ko Dam, Mae Lao district, Chiang Rai.

The inspiration for constructing Phrathat Phanom replicas in northern Thailand may have been driven by the belief in worshipping

Phrathat Phanom by people who were born in the Buddhist Year of the Monkey. Because of the inconvenience of travelling to the distant northeast to worship, the northern people and those who live nearby established a Phrathat Phanom replica in their area. In this way, an Isan tradition and aspects of its culture are borrowed and used as a tool for fulfilling their religious needs under present conditions. This use of Phrathat Phanom in the form of replicas, in which each is treated as a sacred symbol and used to construct important Buddhist monasteries, is also found in areas outside of Thailand. For example, the Phrathat Phanom replica at Ban Dong Tha Ban Dong Nai in Outhoumphone district, Savannakhet province in Laos is the center of faith and belief for Lao people. The annual festival of worshipping the Phrathat Phanom replica in this town occurs at the same time as the festival in Thailand. In addition, in the American city of Los Angeles, a project of constructing a replica of Phrathat Phanom in the actual size of the original was proposed in order to celebrate the auspicious occasion of His Majesty the King's 87th birthday (Wat Prathat Phanom of America, 2015). The construction commenced in December of 2014.

Such examples demonstrate that Phrathat Phanom has such a deep cultural meaning that not only the northeastern people, but also those in other areas have re-constructed it to serve their social needs at present. Consequently, faith and belief in Phrathat Phanom, which historically have their roots in Lao-Isan ethnicity, have become aspects of local sacredness.

The worship is arranged not only for commemorating the Lord Buddha, but also for "reuniting the family members or a "welcome home day." The people who have faith and hold belief in making merit for their next life will join the traditional activities held on that day. Apart from the purpose of making merit, Phrathat Phanom has been promoted as a tourist attraction in the communities. This reflects the idea of creating a sense and a memory of the faith and belief in Phrathat Phanom among community members, even though they are away from their hometown.

### **The Tradition of the Worship-Offering Procession and Phrathat Phanom Worship Dance**

In the past, the tradition of the Phrathat Phanom worship dance was only performed by the Phu Tai people. It is a traditional dance displaying their ethnic identity (Karlson, 2012: 61) and its purpose is to celebrate and worship Phrathat Phanom Stupa. In 1955, King Rama IX and Queen Sirikit went to visit the Northeast and took part in a merit-making ceremony at Wat Phrathat Phanom (Munnithi Saranukrom Watthanatham Thai, 1999B: 3245).

On this occasion, various ethnic groups living in Nakhon Phanom and Sakon Nakhon provinces were invited to present their indigenous arts before the King and the Queen. Among them were the Phu Tai of Renu Nakhon. Since then, this traditional dance involving young women wearing Phu Tai traditional dress has been passed along among later generations.



**Figure 3** The traditional folk dances of the Phu Tai

However, for over six decades the Phu Tai were the only ethnic group that performed worship dances for Phrathat Phanom. Now, however, traditional dances which represent the art and culture of other ethnic groups in Nakhon Phanom province are also being performed to worship the stupa. These include traditional dances from the Tai Nyaw,

Tai Dam, Tai Saek, Thai-Vietnamese, Tai Yuan Lanna from northern Thailand, and people from nearby countries.

At present, a prominent folk dance for worshipping the stupa consists of seven ethnic groups living in Nakhon Phanom. Together in the same performance, the dancers from all of these ethnic groups wear their own traditional garments and perform their traditional dance. This event is held on the first day of the annual Phrathat Phanom festival on the lawn in front of the wat. Buddhist monks and laypeople participate in the ceremony. The Phrathat Phanom dance is considered a precious tradition of the Nakhon Phanom people and includes a procession to present offerings of worship to Phrathat Phanom. During the procession, the participants will say words of reverence to the relic. After the procession, the following seven dances are performed: telling the history of Phrathat Phanom, offering worship, the peacock dance, and dances of the Sikhottabong, Phu Tai, Tai Nyawand Isan peoples.

The procession of Phrathat Phanom worship offerings is organized with a light-and-sound performance telling the history of the Lan Na and LanXang kingdoms. Other events include a Lao dance drama in traditional Lao arts paying respect to Phrathat Phanom, a traditional dance of Nang Kaeo, a procession of offerings in traditional Lan Chang-Lan Na practices, a ritual of paying respect to Phrathat Phanom, a ritual presenting rice ears, and a traditional dance to worship Phrathat Phanom.



**Figure 4** The traditional dance of Nang Kaeo from Luang Prabang

The dances are organized according to the two kingdoms of Sikhottabong (an ancient site located in Ban Muangsoum village, Thakhek district, Khammouane province, Lao PDR) and Luang Prabang. The dance performers who have been trained in the dance arts from the royal court of Luang Prabang were invited to join the Phrathat Phanom festival. According to the Phrathat Phanom legend, the construction of the monument was a joint effort of the governors of different towns located along both sides of the Mekong River. These towns later became major cities in Thailand and Laos. This was the first time that the traditional dance of Nang Kaeo from Luang Prabang was performed in the Phrathat Phanom worshipping ceremony. Cultural activities like this have been supported by the Ministry of Tourism of Thailand in cooperation with Lao PDR in order to promote tourism between the two countries. The traditional dance of Nang Kaeo is a tourism activity of Luang Prabang. Such cooperation indicates the influence of tourism on the creation of the tradition of Phrathat Phanom dance to make the festival more attractive for tourists.

### **The Recent Tradition of *Sukhwan* to Welcome Khon Kaen University Freshmen**

Khon Kaen University, in Khon Kaen province, was founded in 1966 and is the oldest regional university in the Northeast. The image of Phrathat Phanom serves as the university emblem because the stupa is such an important place of worship in the northeast. In the emblem, the stupa is placed on a wooden block, and there are two *thewada* inviting the spirit of the virtues from Phrathat Phanom into the university (Khon Kaen University, 2016). The background is divided into three sections representing knowledge, virtue, and wisdom.

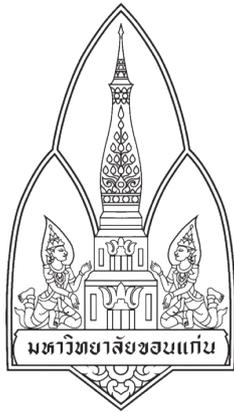


Figure 5 Khon Kaen University emblem

Phrathat Phanom is treated as an important religious monastery of the university. As a result, a new traditional university activity has been created, called “Phrathat Phanom worship to welcome the freshmen.”



Figure 6 Phrathat Phanom worship to welcome the freshmen

The practice of this tradition brings all the Khon Kaen University freshmen to Phrathat Phanom for night and day activities. The main

activities include a procession of bringing cloth to wrap around the stupa, a procession of offering robes to monks, a light-and-sound show telling the history of Phrathat Phanom, a traditional dance performance for worshipping the relic by KKU students dressed in the traditional clothing of different ethnic groups, listening to sermons, and a candle light procession around the stupa.

The purpose of the ceremony is to express gratitude that the university has invited Phrathat Phanom’s image to be their emblem and to provide the freshmen with Dhamma teachings. It is said among university people, “to be a good child of Phrathat Phanom is to behave with high degree of morality, dignity, and respectability like Phrathat Phanom.” This shows that Phrathat Phanom is used for creating the identity of the students of the university.

In the past, the people who dedicated themselves to serving Phrathat Phanom were locally called “*kha okad Phrathat Phanom*,” which means the people dedicated to serving the relic. At present, the image of the ‘descendants of Phrathat Phanom’ has changed from the ‘group of local people with faith in the stupa,’ meaning local farmers, to the ‘group of university students with gratitude to the stupa,’ meaning educated people and city people. The descendants of the stupa include a broad range of people of all classes, occupations, and races sharing the same faith and belief in the stupa. This phenomenon shows us that the faith and belief in Phrathat Phanom now involves a sense of localism and nationalism.

Moreover, Nakhon Phanom University, established in 2005, also uses the image of Phrathat Phanom as its emblem. In 2013, like Khon Kaen University, Nakhon Phanom University organized a new tradition of welcoming freshmen by including the worshipping of Phrathat Phanom. The main activities consisted of bringing the freshmen in procession from the entrance to the lawn of Wat Phrathat Phanom Woramahawiharn temple. This was then followed by meditation, listening to sermons, a worship dance, *bai si sukhwan* dance, wrapping the stupa with cloth and making vows as well as singing the university anthem.

Phrathat Phanom is the only *phrathat* in the northeast representing a Buddhist year of birth (Munnithi Saranukrom Watthanatham Thai, 1999A: 1883). Moreover, it is the oldest stupa in Isan and it is respected among Lao and Isan people. Therefore, the Lan Na community in the North shared a belief in the Buddhist year of birth with the Lan Xang community to build a social network to negotiate with Siamese power.

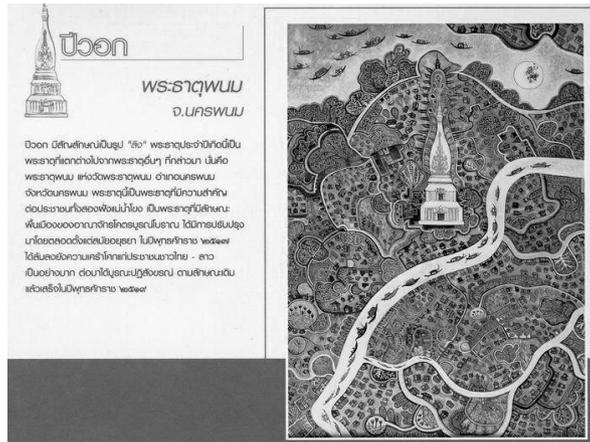


Figure 7 Phrathat Phanom is the *phrathat* for the Buddhist Year of the Monkey

In addition, at present in Nakhon Phanom there are *phrathat* for each day of the week that represent the day of birth. They are important in the pilgrimage route in Nakhon Phanom province (Papanwong, 2005: 34), which can be explained as follows:

1. Phrathat Phanom, Nakhon Phanom district is for people born on Sunday.
2. Phrathat Renu, Renu Nakhon district is for Monday.
3. Phrathat Sri Khun, Na Kae district is for Tuesday.
4. Phrathat Mahachai, Pla Pak district is for Wednesday.
5. Phrathat Prasit, Na Wa district is for Thursday.
6. Phrathat Tha Uthen is for Friday.
7. Phrathat Nakhon, Muang district is for Saturday.

The idea of having a *phrathat* for each of day of birth was recently created by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, Nakhon Phanom office which also deals with public relations for the project. The creation of this new idea has helped in promoting cultural tourism for the province. There has been an effort to integrate this activity into other important traditional activities, such as the tradition of sprinkling water over the *phrathat* for days of birth during the Songkran festival. It has been suggested that people should follow a merit-making pilgrimage consisting of the seven *phrathat* and sprinkle water over them.

Some other new traditions related to the Songkran festival and Phrathat Phanom exist as well. An example is bringing clean water to sprinkle over the top of Phrathat Phanom which is called “*Song Yod That*.” The pulley which is provided for this activity is called “*Rok Pha ya Nak*” (Naga pulley), and a large bowl of water is tied on and then decorated with garlands. The bowl is pulled to the top of the stupa and the water in the bowl is poured over the top of the stupa. This newly invented tradition, borrowed from northern Thailand, is considered very important since there is only one time per year-during the Songkran festival-when people have the opportunity to take part in this sacred activity.



Figure 8 “*Rok Pha ya Nak*” (Naga pulley) is attached to a big bowl of water decorated with garlands

### The Tradition of Worshipping Sattanaga

At Wat Phrathat Phanom Woramahawiharn, during the period before the end of the annual Buddhist lent season, the sacred ritual of worshipping Sattanaga, the Seven Great Nagas, takes place. It is held on the fifth day of the waxing moon in the eleventh lunar month under the cooperation of the government sector, the Nakhon Phanom provincial Buddhist monks' committee, the private sector, and Buddhists in general. This traditional activity is conducted to pay respect to the Seven Great Nagas who protect the stupa and the town's sacred objects from dangers. In the ritual each of the seven Nagas takes possession of a medium in order to deliver Dhamma teachings to the participating Buddhists.

This ritual begins with presenting seven trays filled with offerings on seven pedestals symbolizing the places of the Seven Great Nagas. The offerings include fruit, flowers, candles and incense sticks. The participants pray and meditate from early evening until two a.m. the next day. It is believed that the Seven Great Nagas will come to take possession of the mediums and deliver Dhamma instructions or make forecasts and use healing magic to improve the physical condition of the participating people. In some years, people have witnessed a miracle in the form of light radiating out from the stupa. It is also believed that a shadow of the stupa appears in the sky every year. The rays of light that appear during worship are believed to be the Seven Great Nagas and whoever has an opportunity to participate in this sacred ritual will be blessed with happiness, respect, prosperity and virtue.



Figure 9 The trays are symbols of the Seven Great Nagas

According to the Phrathat Phanom legend, the stupa is a shrine that houses a chest bone relic of the Lord Buddha. The relic was invited from India to be placed in the stupa by Phra Mahakassapa, one of the Buddha's disciples (Jantawan, 2011: 43). Originally, the stupa was built in a square shape with a room inside and doors to enter the stupa on each side of the square. Later the stupa was modified to be a square lotus shape. It was restored several times until the year 1975, when there were many consecutive days of rain and heavy storms, which destroyed the entire stupa. It was in urgent need of restoration. The restored stupa was completed in 1979 and remains until the present. The chest bone relic of the Lord Buddha is a precious and sacred object, and is believed to be protected by guardian *thewada*, or heavenly beings. The duty is performed by the Seven Great Nagas who were instructed by the god Indra, because great Nagas are *thewada* who are very close to humans.

This tradition of worshipping the Seven Great Nagas is another example of a new tradition. Those who conduct the rituals are from other communities. The participants are middle-class people who mainly ask for wealth and success in business. Among them are some government officials, but most of them are business people from Bangkok and the central region. Local people or farmers are not often found participating in the ritual.

This new tradition was created by borrowing minor symbols that appear in the legend surrounding Phrathat Phanom. It is believed that the stupa is protected by the Nagas living in the Mekong River. This belief has passed from local people to outsiders and it brings other elements, including investment and business into the tradition. Moreover, a seven-headed naga *baisri* has been introduced as a new feature in the invented tradition.

### Conclusion

This article examined the role of Phrathat Phanom in creating traditions related to the way of life of people in modern Thai society. It also studied the symbolic meaning of the new traditions in terms of the influence of

beliefs in Phrathat Phanom, using the invention of traditions and creative folklore as a conceptual framework.

The main points were the following: 1) the history and significance of Phrathat Phanom for the communities in the Mekong Basin; 2) the traditions and rituals related to Phrathat Phanom in Thai society at present; 3) Phrathat Phanom as a reference for the invention of traditions in contemporary Isan society; 4) the meaning and significance of the newly created traditions related to Phrathat Phanom; 5) a model of reference to Phrathat Phanom demonstrated in the newly invented traditions in contemporary Isan society; and 6) social factors and conditions that have played a role in the invention of traditions related to Phrathat Phanom.

### **Phrathat Phanom and its Becoming a Symbol of Other Communities**

Phrathat Phanom replicas have been built in different communities, not only in the Isan region, but also in the North, and even abroad in Laos and the United States. The building of these replicas is founded on a significant concept, that is, the same faith and belief in the relic. Localism and cultural tourism have had strong influences on building the stupa in different communities. For example, the project of building a Phrathat Phanom model in Chiang Rai for convenience, serving people's need to travel annually to worship a replica of Phrathat Phanom in a nearby community than to have travel to Nakhon Phanom province. Its concept arises from the ideas of the northern people.

### **Phrathat Phanom and the Establishment of a Cultural Network in the Mekong Basin Communities**

In the Phrathat Phanom festival in the past year, there were several groups of people who believe in the sacredness of newly invented activities and rituals that have emerged. For example, the processions of worship offerings in the forms of both Lan Na and Lan Xang

traditions, Nang Kaeo traditional dance, traditional dance from the Luang Prabang royal court, and Lao performance of *Ramayana* or *Phra Lak Phra Lam*. The Luang Prabang performances function as publicity for Lao and Luang Prabang tourism.

### **Conditions Influencing the Invention of Traditions related to Phrathat Phanom**

Thai society has changed its view point towards traditions. It has moved away from the sacred to the more profane, and is now connected to the promotion of tourism which is also a part of capitalism. The image of Phrathat Phanom has become a symbol created in both traditional agricultural society and in the society of industrialism. It has also influenced daily lives, social memory, and cross-border relations.

Changes in traditions may be caused by conditions of a changing culture. Society has changed from one of tradition to one of modernity. However, although the traditions invented in Isan communities along the Mekong River have been promoted as 'products' for tourism, local traditions are still maintained in their own ways.

Bringing in Lao art and dance forms from Luang Prabang, a World Heritage City, to the annual festival of worshipping Phrathat Phanom helps establish cross-border relationships between Thailand and Laos in the mutual reciprocity context of collaborative tourism and economic promotion. The invention of tradition in such creative ways demonstrates its objective in establishing a symbolic meaning for Phrathat Phanom as a sacred reliquary in the context of new economic community development.

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