



The Belief of the Nagas and Its Sign Creation in Poo Phayanak Shrine at the 2nd Thai - Lao Friendship Bridge in Mukdahan Province

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Abstract

This article aims to explain the creation of Naga signs in the Poo Phayanak shrine at the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge in Muang District, Mukdahan Province. This qualitative research collected data using in-depth interviews with 17 informants: sign creators and people receiving benefits from the creation at Poo Phayanak shrine. The data collected was analyzed using content analysis. The results showed that the Naga signs are created for denotative meanings or the denotative signified. It is mutually understood that the Naga is a giant serpent with a crest on its head, believed to have supernatural powers to transform into any form. Naga signs are also created to give connotative meanings. For some groups of people, the Nagas represent (1) fear, (2) the protectors of the Mekong River, (3) success, and (4) fortunes. The meanings that are communicated in the area play a major role in increasing faith in the community and among tourists, contributing to a rising number of tourists coming to visit the shrine in Mukdahan Province.

Keywords: *Naga, belief, Naga sign, Poo Phayanak shrine, 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge.*

1. Introduction

Mukdahan is one of the provinces located in northeastern Thailand that share a border with the Lao's People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). Recently, there have been rapid improvements and constant economic growth in the area. The province started to see its growth in 2006 when the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge was officially opened, resulting in the border trade value rising to 100,000 million baht. Industrial investments became the major source of the province's revenue and they have continued to grow to increase GPP.

Later in 2014, the Special Economic Zone Development Policy Committee announced the new Special Economic Zone in Mukdahan to enhance economic development for both transportation and public utilities as complied with the government policy and its potential. As a result, a lot of financial infrastructure support poured into the province to drive its economic development. While several development projects to support the SEZ were initiated, Mukdahan, as a part of the Mekong Tourism Development Zone (including Nongkhai, Nakorn Phanom, Bueng Kan, Mukdahan, and Loei), co-operated with other provinces to create a tourism development plan during 2017-2021 with the vision to create a unique lifestyle and cultural travel experience through the bridge that connects the 2 sides of the Mekong River. The plan focuses on promoting a relationship in the community along the Mekong River to develop lifestyles and cultures that bring about more quality tourist attractions and establish a travel connection with neighboring countries (Royal Thai Government Gazette, 2017). The plan was also written in response to the tourism and sports policies of Sanook Land covering 3 provinces: Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom, and Mukdahan. The aim is to present the identities of these provinces through tourism promotion and create perceptions among Thai and foreign tourists using Mukdahan Province as a hub connecting the EWEC route to the Indo-China countries. However, while the province is working on improving infrastructure to attract investments and grow more international trade, as well as implement the Lifestyles and Cultures Tourism Promotion Plan and establish a

connection to Indo-China countries to serve the SEZ, operational agencies, for example, the Local Administrative Office, temples, and the community resort to the use of the sign of Nagas depicted as mythical creatures in folklore. For example, the first story of the Naga is believed to come from southern India. According to Indian folklore, the Naga is a giant snake with a crest and is very powerful. The Naga is regarded by Indians as one of the deities. Some even say that the Nagas are Himmapan creatures. People in Southeast Asia believe that the Nagas live in the Mekong River or underwater world. Some snake-like tracks were reportedly found at the end of Buddhist Lent, the same day the Naga fireballs rose from the Mekong River. These strange tracks resembling a giant snake are believed to have been caused by the Nagas. Since then, more visitors keep coming to pay respect to the Nagas that represent the greatest power, abundance, and fortunes. They are the gods of water, and they are also compared to the rainbow bridge to the universe. Some say they are gods of the skies. Such beliefs result in different narratives about the Naga (which is basically described as a giant snake with a crest).

Signs of the Nagas have been widely reported and spread in many tourist attractions in the SEZ since the construction of the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge. At the beginning of the construction, a strange wave was seen around the 2nd pillar of the bridge. Local people believed that it was the place where the Naga cave was located, and the wave was caused when the Naga appeared. When the bridge construction reached the middle of the river, there was an incident that prevented the construction from continuing; a crane collapsed resulting in 2 deaths, 14 injuries, and 2 missing persons. To continue the construction, both locals and related people worked together to fix the problem by following their beliefs about the Mekong River. They received advice from a medium that a shrine should be built on the riverbank near the bridge to serve as a new dwelling place for the Nagas. Then, a religious ceremony was performed to invite them to live in the shrine. After that, the construction miraculously went smoothly, and the bridge was completed as scheduled. (Puekgunsi, 2017). At the shrine, the sculptures of Phaya Anantanakarat and Phaya Srisutto were built to represent the guardians of the Mekong River. The sculpture of Vishnu or the Lord Naria sitting on Phaya Nakarat was also placed nearby for people to come and pay respect (Ampun, 2018). Since then, the shrine has gained popularity until it has become one of the main tourist destinations in Mukdahan Province. At the shrine, there are flowers, incensed sticks, and candles for those who want to pray for the Nagas and other guardian gods. Apart from this, amulets or sacred objects are available to keep as souvenirs as well. As a result, the number of visitors coming to the shrine increases every year generating more revenue for the province. Thus, this article aims to examine the Naga belief and its sign creation at Poo Phayanak shrine by reflecting on a variety of meanings expressed by the Naga signs in the place where the shrine has become one of the top tourist destinations in Mukdahan.

2. Objectives

This article aims to examine the Naga belief at Poo Phayanak shrine near the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge in Muang district, Mukdahan Province. And to examine the Naga sign creation at Poo Phayanak shrine near the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge in Muang district, Mukdahan Province.

2.1 Semiology

The term “Semiology” is derived from the Greek root “Semeion” meaning “sign.” Semiology involves meanings and how they are constructed, communicated, or transferred. It is a study of how “representation” constructs meaning as well as the way it allows us to understand certain things or the process of expressing meanings in which we can consider the relations of semiology with visual images and visual communications that link an identity to culture and society. Semiology, therefore, is a tool that helps us unfold and understand the process of meaning creation towards its application and its results, that is, different signs allow us to see the relations of things methodically (Kaewthep, 2004).

In this study, Roland Barthes’s (1915 -1980) semiotic theory has been adopted. Barthes was the first scholar who applied semiology to analyze things in society. His view is that everything in the current society can be interpreted as signs. Areas of society are full of middle-class mythical codes, whether found in advertisements, or the media. They not only contain literal meanings, but they also act as a channel for non-literal meanings, which can be interpreted using myths. Barthes has divided meanings into 2 categories: 1) denotation or ‘literal meaning,’ which is the signified constructed objectively and is understandable by its

appearance and most people understand and accept it and 2) connotation or “hidden meaning” is the meaning given indirectly upon an agreement made by one group or it is based on one’s personal experience. In other words, it is the meaning constructed subjectively, whether it is on a personal level such as personal experience, feelings, or a social level known as “social value.” These meanings are occasionally viewed as a social/cultural interpretation. They are also called the Second Order of Signification by Barthes (Kaewthep, 2004; Kaewthep, & Hinwiman, 2010).

Barthes has given considerable attention to the Second Order of Signification as he believes that only connotation contains a myth. According to Barthes, it is the conceptualization of people in society towards a certain topic or thought or belief the majority of people accept without questioning and conform to the existing powers in society (Charoensinolarn, 2002) and behind the myth lies the ideological operations. This study adopts the concept of myths to analyze how the creation of the Naga signs hides the ideals of different groups of people and to investigate the process of how the Naga signs function, which is explained by the semiotic theory that every meaning is made of a ‘signifier’ and ‘the signified.’ Signifiers, in this study, can be either concrete ones or abstract ones. Concrete signifiers refer to sculptures, sacred objects, amulets, and offerings while abstract signifiers are prayers and ceremonies, which contain both literal and symbolic meanings. Moreover, this paper also attempts to examine what contributes to the creation of the Naga signs and its process.

2.2 Relevant Studies

Hongsuwan (2011) conducted the research “Sacralization of Mekong River through Folk Narratives,” intending to explore the sacralization of the Mekong River through folk narratives of the Mekong communities in Tibet, China, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The research describes sacralization made through 4 types of folk narratives. The first type describes the origin and geographical features of the Mekong as well as the belief about the river that it was created by the Lord Buddha. It is believed that the Lord Buddha had buried two footprints on the bank of the river. The second type narrates the sacred objects and places, for example, the Lord Buddha’s relics, the Buddha image found under the Mekong, and the sacred rock. The third type is concerned with the sacred animals and trees, for instance, the white skin of giant catfish signifies “purity” and “cleanliness,” and its eyes resemble the Lord Buddha images. Moreover, in some narratives, the tree named “Manee Kot” was brought from Heaven to Earth by Indra. The last type of narrative includes rituals and traditions such as the Lai Rue Fai Festival. At the festival, boats decorated with bright lights are floated along the Mekong to pay respect to the Lord Buddha. The Mekong is believed to connect humans with the Lord Buddha, showing how Buddhism and its integration have influenced the perceptions and beliefs of the Mekong community.

There are numerous research studies in which the meaning of Naga has been interpreted differently. Saipan (1996) studied the meanings of Naga signs observed at the Naga worship ceremony at Wat Phra That Phanom in Nakhon Phanom Province. It was found that the Naga signs have been circulated in the Mekong community in form of culture, local literature, ceremony, architecture, handicraft, and painting. The use of Naga signs and their meanings are perceived and adjusted under various circumstances. People coming from specific groups in society have different perceptions of the meaning of Naga. Social conditions also play a major role in the continuation of the ceremony, and conditions prescribed by certain groups of people are also important in preserving the ceremony as shown in the Sattanaka ceremony organized by a group of monks and a Chinese ceremonial leader, which the Naga was used as a symbol of the ceremony. The purpose was to maintain the status of an administrative group of Phra That Phanom and to respond to previous groups who had the same duties. Therefore, this reflects that ceremony is a stage for each group of power to express their identity towards others.

Chang (2017) explained that Nagas are considered the cultural symbols of Thailand and the symbols of auspiciousness for many Thais. The study results revealed that Naga worship might have already existed in Southeast Asia before the rise of Hinduism and Buddhism. Therefore, the folk narratives of Southeast Asia have been passed from generation to generation that Nagas have supernatural powers and can appear in any form, they protect humans from danger and give good fortune to the protected. However, if some people behave aggressively or show disrespect to the Nagas, they will be avenged and misfortune will be their fate.

Studies regarding the Nagas above were adopted in this research to analyze the beliefs relating to the Naga signs in the area.

The Naga belief had clearly been circulated in the society from time to time until it played a major part in many ceremonial and festive events, bringing economic benefits to the local community. According to the study by Cohen (2007), it was shown that the Naga Rocket Festival has become an important event to the economy of Nong Khai Province since the festival draws more and more tourists every year. As a result, more income has been widely generated for the locals. It is reported that tourists' spending on the local economy is around 50-100 million baht, mainly small-size hotels and even hospitals. The main income generated in the community is from food and beverages sold in restaurants, local stalls, souvenirs, products sold at annual fairs, and parking fees. Therefore, income is generated throughout the community and can be accessible to the locals. The researchers applied the abovementioned study's concept to analyze the use of Naga signs in the area, which helps explain the history of Naga, the development of the belief in the area as well as the creation of Naga signs. The research framework is shown in Figure 1.

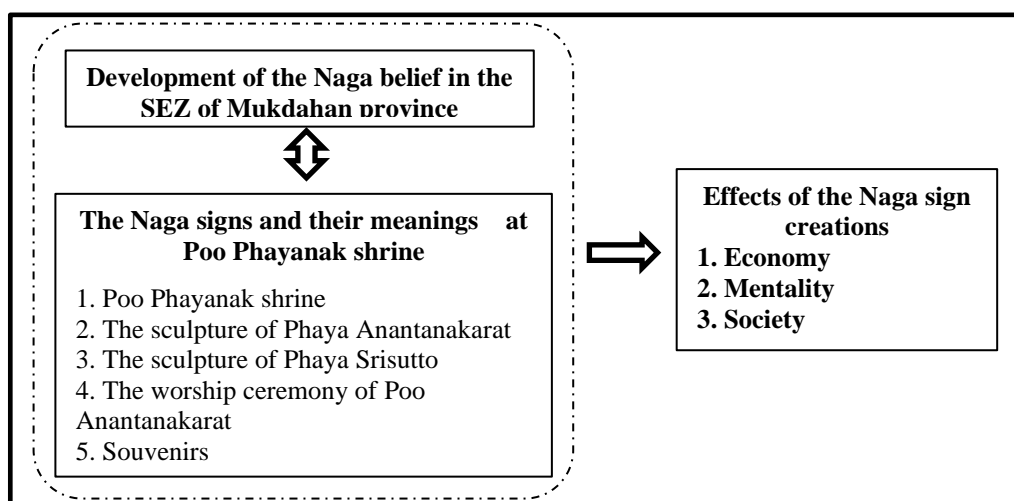


Figure 1 Research Framework

3. Materials and Methods

This article uses qualitative research methodology. Data were obtained from the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) of Mukdahan Province where Naga signs are present at the Poo Phayanak shrine located next to the Second Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge in the Muang district. Data collection tools included in-depth interviews with the Naga sign creators in the community and the people affected using such signs. The number of participants was 26 in total: 1. 15 participants consisting of community leaders and staff who manage the shrine and live in the community were chosen to identify the social and cultural context, the origin of Naga sign creation, and the guideline to the shrine management 2. Two state officials from the Department of Strategies of Mukdahan Provincial Office who assist in the shrine's activities, 3. Five locals in the community who believe in Naga and participate in the annual ceremony at the shrine 4. Four local entrepreneurs. Observation, both participant and non-participant, was also carried out along with the interviews to gain complete research results according to its objectives. For participant observation, the researchers participated in the ceremony and other activities at Poo Phayanak Shrine to understand the process of Naga sign creation, while non-participant observation was conducted to examine if the data obtained from the interviews were accurate and reliable. Observation Guideline was also implemented as a tool to collect data in which the scope was the selected area and its surrounding context, appearances of the Naga sculptures, the officials' practices towards tourists as well as how Nagas are worshipped by visitors. The data collected were brought for analysis using Content Analysis (Miles, & Huberman, 1994).

4. Results

4.1 The development of the Naga belief in the Special Economic Zone of Mukdahan Province

Mukdahan is a border province extending to the bank of the Mekong River. Therefore, people are quite influenced by the Naga belief in their way of life and Buddhism, which is widely practiced in the area. The sculptures to represent sacredness are created in the buildings influenced by Buddhist architecture such as temples, chapels, monasteries, tourist attractions as well as the government center in Mukdahan Province. This research aims to show the development of the Naga belief in Poo Phayanak shrine in Muang district, Mukdahan Province, and the economic and social effects found in the area. The development is divided into 4 phases as follows:

Phase 1 the Naga belief according to Buddhism: As Mukdahan is a province located alongside the Mekong River, the beliefs about the Nagas greatly influence the way people live in the province. On top of that, since the majority are Buddhists, the Naga belief is exclusively passed on through religious events and festivals as well as architecture found in most religious places in the province, such as temples and chapels. As the community where the Poo Phayanak shrine is located is near the Mekong River, the local people believe in the Naga, which is exclusively mentioned in Buddhism. However, there were not really strong folklore beliefs, especially about the Nagas, until the construction of the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge began. One local said, “...*At that time, there was a temple and the Chao Poo shrine in the area. When we were about to go somewhere, we would pray and wish for a safe journey, we would do something like that. The story of the Nagas was just invented after that. But for the Naga legend, I heard parents talk about that, but no one ever claimed to see one after the bridge was built...*” Bandan (personal communication, June 7, 2019)

Phase 2 Modernization and the Naga belief: Exponential growth in the economy has been clearly seen in Mukdahan Province since 2006 when the Second Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge was opened. It was recorded that the total value of border trade dramatically increased (Mukdahan Provincial Industry Office, 2016) up to 100,000 million baht in 2012, causing economic activities to continually expand positively affecting the Gross Provincial Product (GPP) of the province. Thus, the economic growth rate has significantly increased since the bridge was officially opened. Also, as preparation for economic expansion, infrastructure was also improved. For transportation, Mukdahan Customs has installed x-ray machines for goods and improved the customs standards and regulations to meet global standards so it can become a Single Window Inspection (SWI). Besides, the customs also agreed to sign the Common Control Area (CCA) with a neighboring country, which, consequently, has become Thailand’s first standardized border checkpoint to serve both goods and the public (Mukdahan Provincial Industry Office, 2016). During 2004-2010, the Naga phenomenon was circulating in the community due to the incident that occurred during the construction of the Second Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge that connects Bang Sai Yai subdistrict in Muang district of Mukdahan Province, Thailand with Savannakhet Province in Lao PDR. There were attempts from the locals to relate the Naga belief with the bridge incident. They believe that the obstacles were due to the curse of the furious Nagas as the bridge was built over their cave in the middle of the Mekong River. For example, the incident of a crane that collapsed and caused 2 deaths, 14 injuries, and 2 missing people caused the construction to be temporarily halted. The incident went viral along with the rumor saying that before the incident there was a strange wave around the 2nd pillar of the bridge assumed to be the location of the Naga’s cave. The rumor was then confirmed by a medium invited to perform a forgiveness ceremony for the Nagas. He suggested that, in order to complete the construction, a shrine must be built under the bridge to resemble the place they live underwater (Puakkansi, 2017). The first phase of the shrine construction was funded by the Mukdahan Office of Highways and the Department of Public Works and Town Planning. They co-created the shrine and created the sculpture of Phaya Anantanakarat, a shining black serpent curling itself around the golden pillar and lifting its neck gracefully toward the bridge. They also placed the sculpture of Phaya Srisutto, an emerald-green serpent curling around the black pillar. Locals hold the belief that these two mighty serpents are the guardians of the Mekong River. To pay respect to the Nagas and other sacred spirits in the shrine, flowers, incense sticks, and candles are available for visitors and there are sacred objects for purchase. It is worth noticing that even though there have been attempts from the local state-run organizations to transform themselves to be more modern and convenient to serve the economic growth, the locals still use the traditional belief as a tool to promote their own community,

Phase 3 Benefits: During 2012-2018, people from government agencies, the community, and temples benefitting from the creation of the Naga signs saw the opportunity to boost their economic status and increase their income from tourism. Consequently, more signs have been created through the renovation of religious places, architecture, and sculptures related to the Nagas: (1) the sculptures of Phaya Sisattanakarat and Phaya Petcharapatnagakararat at Wat Dan Phra-in in Nikhom Khamsoi district, (2) the sculptures of Ong Poo and Ong Ya Nakarat, Nagi and Naga courtyard at Wat Pa Phuhang and (3) the sculpture of Phaya Nagathibodi Srisutto at Wat Woenchai in Dontan district. In the SEZ, there are attempts to create the Naga signs for tourism purposes, especially in the Pu Phayanak shrine. Apart from the architecture and sculptures of Phaya Anantanakarat and Phaya Srisutto, there is also the famous Naga worship ceremony. The 2-day-1-night ceremony annually takes place on 8-9 June and is organized by government agencies, which are the Department of Highways, the Tourism Authority of Thailand office (northeastern region), and Mukdahan Provincial Office as well as the private sector who co-host the ceremony. The worship ceremony begins with the evening chanting of the Buddha's mantra following the Baisi opening ceremony in which people bring in tributes, offerings, 9 types of sacred fruits, and Naga-shaped Baisi trays. It can be said that the ceremony is influenced by both Buddhism and Hinduism as, the next morning (June 9), merit is made, and food is offered to the monks at the site. To complete the ceremony, people will gather to float lotuses on the river to pay respect to the Nagas and Mother River. As the ceremony has enhanced economic growth in the area and generated tourism revenue, the government agencies, temples, the local community, and entrepreneurs have all benefited from it; as one of the entrepreneurs said:

“...There're lots of visitors on Saturday whether they come as group tours or sightseeing trips. They like to come here. They would buy a coffee and stuff. Our income is from selling coffee and souvenirs like glasses, beads, and bracelets which many female customers really like to buy...” Aurawan (personal communication, April 11, 2019)

The area where the Naga belief exists in the SEZ of Mukdahan Province is being developed to serve the vision of establishing “the city of trade, agriculture, Mekong tourism, and ASEAN connectivity” to encourage economic growth focusing on increasing value in the agricultural sector and supporting border trade industries and tourism as well as stimulating tourism in the places where the Naga signs have been created by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (northeastern region) and government agencies in Mukdahan Province. Such support has resulted in the increasing number of both Thais and tourists from neighboring countries (Mukdahan Provincial Office, 2018). Exponential growth is also seen in service businesses such as hotels and restaurants. A significant number of investments from foreign investors such as Chinese, Malaysians, and Icelanders (Top 3 investors) have flowed into small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), of which, 99.4% are invested in properties, hotels, and resorts (Department of Business Development, 2018). From the place where the Naga belief is found, money is spent by visitors on worship items like flowers, incense sticks, candles, red clothes, offering sets, Baisi trays, various types of fruits, etc. People also spend money on other things, for instance, amulets, souvenirs, and white clothing worn in a worship ceremony as told in the interview about economic benefits with one of the state officials:

“...People don't just come for the Naga; the destination of most tourists is Phra That Phanom. In the past, they might go straight to Nakhon Phanom because there were no Naga sculptures here. But we have them now so we can attract tourists, too. It's like we have a share in the tourism market...” Sommai (personal communication, June 7, 2019)

The part above is also consistent with the local people who were indirectly affected by the signs and whose benefit form of income was from trade, as seen in the interview with one of the local entrepreneurs below:

“...The existence of the Naga in the community positively affects the career of the locals, whether they are in Christian or Buddhist communities.... people gathered as a group to make Mak Beng, an offering set to the Naga. They made 200 sets on the first day and they

were sold out. After that, they tried making small ones, which cost 20 baht each, and a lucky set for 150 baht. We set the price. If it goes like this, we will make around 35,000 baht per month. But some were still left..." Chanchai (personal communication, November 11, 2019)

At the same time, each area has created various tourism activities, especially the annual Naga worship ceremony that has been promoted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), northeastern region office. Entrepreneurs in the tourism industry such as hotels and restaurants, therefore, also benefit from such support as shown in the interview.

"...All kinds of people coming to this place. For example, those coming for blessings, if their wishes come true, they will return with donation money. They mostly come here because they are Naga believers, and they come to pray. The number of tourists usually peaks at weekends, during Songkran Festival, and Phra That Phanom worship event. Many tourists are from the northeast (Isarn), north, and central part. Most come here because they believe that the Naga can grant anything they wish for. Apart from this, foreign tourists like Chinese and Vietnamese visit the place, too. And more and more European countries come to this place as well..." Tantai (personal communication, June 8, 2019)

It was found that the Naga belief also brings social and cultural benefits that significantly help develop the Special Economic Zone of Mukdahan Province. Society has been organized and controlled through different processes that came with Buddhism, which can be reflected from activities arranged at the Naga worship ceremony that prayers always begin by praising the Lord Buddha before moving to other specific prayers. The prayer to praise the Lord Buddha begins with the verse "Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa." Moreover, for wishes to be granted, apart from practicing the prayers, people also have to observe the Five Precepts, which is similar to the traditional tale of Naga. In the tale, Naga was once a faithful believer in Buddhism and ultimately wished to be ordained but was unable to do so as he was an animal, not a human being. Because of this, he had to meditate and observe the precepts for him to accumulate enough good deeds to be freed from animal form (Phra Dhammakittiwong, 2005). Therefore, those Naga believers are also required to constantly make merits by donating, observing precepts, and praying before asking the Naga to grant them wishes. One of the believers said "...when we worship Naga, we need to keep our words because the Naga favors someone who strictly observes the precepts...He will grant them as wished...whether a baby, luck, or anything..." (Toiting personal communication, June 12, 2019). This is also compatible with another interviewee's statement, "...If you want to become a Naga believer, you need to keep the precepts because the Naga was a strong believer in Buddhism and wished to be ordained. He had to follow the religious rules by observing the precepts. So, those who believe in Nagas should do it, too..." Maha (personal communication, June 8, 2019). Tourists tend to feel relaxed, relieved, and hopeful after practicing prayers, especially when the ones used in the Naga worship ceremony. People feel like they are mentally healed through observing the Five Precepts. If Naga believers wish to be blessed by the Naga or wish to be bestowed merits to succeed in everything, they must keep their words and continue to observe the Five Precepts.

Phase 4 Overcoming depression: From 2019 onwards, locals and tourists posted on Facebook, one of the main social media sites, to spread negative views about the government representatives. Also, harsh words were used to criticize how tourists dress via a microphone and a speaker, harassing and frustrating many tourists. Moreover, visitors were also forced to buy flowers and incense sticks that are only available at the shrine. A series of complaints were sent to the governor of Mukdahan Province through the Damrongtham Center, as well as criticisms posted by tourists through online media about the restrictions to using the site, the administrative transparency of the site administrator, the no-donations plate removed or destroyed for the shrine to still receive more money. What is more, a sign marking the border of the shrine was used to prevent tourists from using outside services and facilities (they were not allowed to visit Phayanak Museum located next to the shrine). Such problems led to new regulations so that the administration would be transparent. New shrine committees were also appointed by people in the community (at the beginning of 2020). One of the committees commented:

“...Before this, the shrine had received lots of complaints from the tourists about the previous administrator. He had a lot of problems with tourists so new committees were appointed to create a better image to attract more tourists. The new committees selected were from people living in the community and they were approved by the province, unlike the previous administrator who was appointed by the District Office of Highways. After all the problems the DOH had, they finally decided to transfer all the responsibility to the village, for example, profits would go to the village and jobs would mainly belong to people in the community. It’s unlike what they did in the past when the benefits were not shared with the community...” Tantai (personal communication, June 8, 2019)

In the case of concealing the no-donations sign, the government agencies viewed that donations are made when people have faith, so it would be very difficult to completely stop receiving them. As a result, people can donate money to the shrine, however, they will ask the representative to manage the donated money as they believe that the government sector should not be involved in this case. At present, the shrine is closed until further notice.

4.2 The creation of the Naga signs at Poo Phayanak shrine located near the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge in Muang district, Mukdahan Province.

The signs of Naga appearing in the SEZ of Mukdahan Province are greatly influenced by folklore and legends of the past along with new signs created to increase popularity. This research presents the creation of signs at Poo Phayanak shrine, explaining a signifier and the signified that both reflect denotation and connotation as follows:

1) Poo Phayanak shrine has architecture representing a new dwelling place for the Nagas. It is one of the significant signs found in the area. The sign was created upon the medium’s suggestion that is based on an abstract idea. That is, before the construction of the bridge began, the Naga spirit possessed a 5-year-old child and warned that the bridge must not be built where their cave is located. If the construction continues, it means showing disrespect to the fearsome Nagas and many people will die. After the construction began (on March 21, 2004), accidents continued to occur. In 2005, there was an accident during the construction of the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge connecting Mukdahan Province to Savannakhet Province in Lao PDR. On the day of the accident, the water currents were extremely strong, and the gigantic cement bar being lifted by a crane was too heavy. While engineers from Thailand, Japan, and the Philippines, and workers were working on the bridge, in the middle of the Mekong River, a barge carrying the crane lost its balance and hit the sling hanging across the bridge resulting in it being cut off. The huge cement bar suddenly fell, causing 2 deaths, 14 injuries, and 2 missing persons.

After such a tragic incident, rumors about the Naga began to spread widely. One rumor was that a villager saw a small boat abandoned in the Mekong River. Seeing no owner, he and his relatives decided to go and claim the boat for personal use. After about 10 meters the boat suddenly became larger and became so large that they could not see its edge. Extremely terrified, they hurriedly rowed back to the land to save their lives. Another rumor was that some locals saw a creature near the bridge construction site. It was swimming to cross the river. What they saw above the water was the fin of a fish going upstream from Laos to Thailand and toward Pak Namhuay or the area called Huay Bansai. When they ran to get a closer look, the creature suddenly disappeared. Such rumors are believed to have put the construction on hold. Therefore, the medium advised that “a shrine for the Nagas” must be built near the construction area and a ceremony to invite them to live in a new place must be performed so that the construction could be continued. He also said that to complete the invitation process, Phrasuk, the buddha image of the Naga’s daughter kept in the underwater world, had to be brought to the shrine as well. This had left people wondering where to find the Buddha image since they were not sure if it really existed. Later, a miracle happened when a fisherman pulled a fish net out of the water, and stuck in the net was a bronze Vientiane-style Buddha image, 35 centimeters in width and 70 centimeters in height, which is assumed to be Phrasuk. After such an incredible event, the medium has become very much respected by locals.

The shrine was constructed by the Department of Public Works and Town Planning and the Office of Highways in Mukdahan Province. They jointly designed and built a steady building (like the present shrine)

under the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge to offer a new place for the Nagas, instead of the cave in the Mekong River, where the bridge was being built. However, both the medium and locals considered the Naga as, for literal meaning, a powerful creature that can cause fear to humans. A meaning hidden under the construction of the shrine is that the act of asking for forgiveness from the Naga was performed to relieve the Naga's anger to completing the construction in 2010.



Figure 2 Poo Phayanak shrine at the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge was built due to the beliefs of people in the community.

Source: Sanook Travel, 2018.

2) Phaya Anantanakarat is the sculpture representing the Naga dwelling in the Mekong River. The sign of Phaya Anantanakarat has been used in many areas in Mukdahan by government agencies, for example, the Department of Public Works and Town Planning and the Office of Highways. The shrine's construction was funded by the Mukdahan Provincial Office. At the shrine, the sculpture of Phaya Anantanakarat whose body is covered in jet black curling around the golden pillar with his head lifting toward the Mekong River. According to Hinduism, Phaya Anantanakarat or Anantaset is considered an ancestor and the king of the Nagas because he is the first to be born as the Naga, supernaturally powerful so that he cannot be defeated by any other creatures. Thus, a sacred place should be built to respect his greatest power one of the community members said:

“...The reason why it has to be Poo Anan (Phaya Anantanakarat) is that he is the father of all Nagas. Every Naga respects him. In 2010, on the 15th day of the waxing moon on the 3rd lunar month, he came to curl around the pillar, but the Japanese did not buy such a belief, so the Naga took down the bridge. As you can see, the bridge's collapse was true...”
Saijai (personal communication, June 11, 2019)

Whilst a denotative meaning has been given to the Nagas as fearsome spirits, there has been an attempt by locals to make these water deities less fearsome by adding a connotative meaning that the Nagas are the protectors of the Mekong community. Those worshipping the Nagas with flowers, incense sticks, and candles will be protected and blessed with wealth, good fortune, and achievements.



Figure 3 The sculpture of Phaya Anantanakarat was built for people to come to pay respect at Poo Phayanak shrine at the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge

3) Phaya Srisutto is another concrete sign built at the same time as the sculpture of Phaya Anantanakarat at Poo Phayanak shrine. The sculpture of Phaya Srisutto was designed and created by the Department of Public Works and Town Planning and the Office of Highways in Mukdahan Province. The sculpture creation was financially supported by the Mukdahan Provincial Office. People in the area hold the belief that the location of the Poo Phayanak shrine is the cave of Nagas connecting to Wang Nakin Khamchanot where they previously lived. The legend of Suvannakhomkam city (Section 72 of the Historical Records) says that Ong Indra Tiratchao or Indra created “Phromprakailok” or Wang Nakin Khamchanot as the medium for traveling between the netherworld and the human world (this place is located at the joint of Wangthong sub-district, Baan Muang sub-district and Baan Chan sub-district in Bandung district, Udonthani Province. Sri Sutto is the name of the Naga born to the Arapot family. The sculpture shows the one-headed Naga whose body is covered in emerald green with a golden head and golden belly. His body curls around the black pillar. Phaya Srisutto refers to the gatekeeper between the netherworld and the human world. He also protects the land near the Mekong River (Thailand side). Connotative meaning is also added to confirm the existence of the Nagas and Wang Nakin Khamchanot. Both denotative and connotative meanings expressed have made people believe that the netherworld and the human world exist, as one of the believers said: *“Phaya Naga living down there is Poo Srisutto. His treasure is infinite. Praying for the above power will only give you a virtue. We pray to Poo Srisutto to ask for everything we wish to have. Like what they say, properties are both on land and in water. But there is a clear boundary about ruling power. If you go to That Panom district, you must pray to Poo Dam”* Nalinee (personal communication, July 29, 2019).



Figure 4 The sculpture of Phaya Srisutto, who in the legend is believed to connect to Wang Nakin Khamchanot in Udon Thani Province, is located in front of Poo Phayanak shrine at the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge.

4) The worship ceremony of Ong Poo Anantanakarat is considered an abstract sign. However, the ceremony performed at Poo Phayanak shrine near the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge has become very meaningful because while the bridge was being constructed, a strange wave appeared around the bridge pillar of the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (Mukdahan – Savannakhet) in Bangsai sub-district in Muang district, Mukdahan Province on the night of January 31, 2010. The incident very much frightened the locals who believed that it was caused by the Naga in the Mekong River. Since then, many people have continually come to the bridge to witness what is believed to be the Naga. Some locals did not agree with the idea of building a shrine because the Naga might be angry. They opposed the idea because they believe that the Naga expresses anger by the phenomenon of the Naga playing in the water, which could cause disasters or danger to people living near the river.

On February 7, 2010 (the 8th day of the waning moon), one week after the strange wave appeared around the bridge, Mukdahan Provincial Office invited 2 mediums who were very much revered by people in the province to perform a worship ceremony to ask for forgiveness from the Nagas that are believed to be the Mekong deities. Those who try to challenge them could face serious accidents or death. People coming from different areas, whether they wanted a shrine to be built or not, crowded at the shrine to attend the ceremony. Regarding the atmosphere, the mediums brought tributes and Naga-shaped offerings properly prepared for the ceremony inherited from the ancestors. As the ceremony was being performed, rain began to drizzle. After the ceremony ended, the rain miraculously stopped. A huge wave, which looked like a creature moving under the water, appeared near the 1st pier, 5 meters to the south of the bridge several times. People at the ceremony were astonished by the phenomenon of the Naga playing in the water. They shouted with excitement when they saw the wave, making them believe that it was the Naga's movement underwater (they believe the Nagas truly exist).

The phenomenon of the Naga playing in the water in Mukdahan Province well reflects the unity of Thais and the locals flocking to the area to experience such a phenomenon, regardless of political viewpoints. They all came with the same goal, to see Phayanak. Nobody ever dares to challenge the Nagas because people are afraid that they would be endangered as narrated in the story told by their ancestors. Not only do locals living near the Mekong River believe in the Nagas, but people from many parts of the country also share the same belief. This incredible phenomenon has greatly promoted tourism and trade in the province because people not only come for the Naga phenomenon, but they also visit the Indochina Market for shopping, trade, tourism, and businesses in the area such as accommodation, restaurants, and souvenir shops to thrive.

The ceremony to worship Ong Poo Anantanakarat and Ong Ya Noi is still performed these days. Mukdahan Provincial Office announced the worship ceremony, an annual festival that takes place on June 8-9 at Poo Phayanak shrine near the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge. The festival is co-hosted by government agencies such as the Department of Highways, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) as well as private agencies. The festival is led by the representative of the Royal Household, the governor of Mukdahan Province, and the director of TAT (northeastern region). State officials, entrepreneurs, merchants, and the public participate in this festival, too. The ceremony on the evening of June 8 includes the evening chanting and Mae Baisi opening ceremony. Locals are also encouraged to place tributes, offering sets, 9 types of fruits, and Naga-shaped Baisi trays at the ceremony. Rituals in both Buddhism and Hinduism are performed all day. The next morning (June 9), people gather to offer food to monks at the ceremonial site and the worship ceremony begins afterward. At the end of the ceremony, all the guests gather to float lotuses in the river to pay respect to the revered Nagas and Mother River. Cultural assimilation is also seen in the festival when people float the sculpture of Ganesh in the river. The ceremony lasts 2 days and 1 night.



Figure 5 The atmosphere of the annual worship ceremony taking place at Poo Phayanak shrine

It can be said that the worship ceremony of Ong Poo Phayanak and Ong Ya Naknoi is a sign that is important to government agencies and people living near the Mekong River because the ceremony is performed grandly every year, from generation to generation. The ceremony means to worship and invite Phaya Anantanakarat, the Naga families, guardian spirits, the Naga, and the Nagi to the shrine to receive tributes and offerings. The ceremony is also organized to ask for forgiveness from them and Mother River (Mekong River). For connotative meaning, people attending the ceremony wish to receive protection, blessings, happiness, and success from the Nagas. Some locals define the ceremony as a way to make them healthy, wealthy, and lucky as stated in the interview:

“... Here is the path of 5 Buddhas. No medium, no imagination. You have faith, you can ask him for anything. But you need to pray for the Lord Buddha first because he is the greatest master of all. Pray to him first so the gate will open. Luangpoo Man used to walk past this area, so the Naga took his path to come up to the human world. Why Poo Anan? He has a great relationship with Lord Narai because he is one of Lord Vishnu’s perceptions. Before the Lord Buddha reached enlightenment, he was the only god. Now Lord Buddha is the greatest, every god follows him. The creatures living in the netherworld are Buddhists. Lotuses represent the Lord Buddha, so we pray through lotuses floating in the river believed to flow down the Himalaya where the Lord Buddha lives...” Ampan (personal communication, November 8, 2019)

Apart from the outstanding sculptures of Phaya Anantanakarat and Phaya Srisutto, there are small sculptures of the Nagas for people to pay respect to. The shrine is also decorated with several Buddha images in different postures as well as other Hindu gods such as Ganesh and Brahma to increase the shrine’s sacred atmosphere. Ganesh is believed to be the god of arts and success. In the worship ceremony of the Nagas, Ganesh is also floated on the river alongside lotuses to signify achievements in everything (Ampun, 2019). The ceremony is like the Ganesh ceremony held in Turkey, the largest festival to worship Ganesh. The festival takes place in India and worldwide. At the festival, a gigantic Ganesh sculpture is built for the worship ceremony. Then, the sculpture of Ganesh is paraded around the city and led to the sacred rivers such as the Ganges and the Saraswati. Then, the ceremony is performed to release the sculpture into the river or sea. Hindus believe that a sculpture represents a god. To let the sculpture flow down the river signifies that even though Ganesh disappears people will always pray to him. Moreover, they believe that Ganesh will descend from heaven to bestow blessings upon those who pray to him (Hattapanom, 2015).



Figure 6 The sculpture of Ganesh is also placed near the shrine for people to worship.

5) Souvenirs related to the Nagas Ruenjompetch Museum are located south of Poo Phayanak shrine near the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge. In 2016, an entrepreneur built a Thai-style house as he believed the location of the house is the gate for the Nagas to travel to the human world. He often encountered strange incidents to confirm his belief, for instance, a serpent-like track was found on the basement wall during the construction, and a few marks were seen on the land under the bridge near the Mekong River. When locals heard about them, they believed the marks were made by the Nagas. A large crowd gathered to light incense sticks and ask for good fortune as stated in the interview with the museum owner:

“...When the museum was built, I was thinking about an old memory. When I went to a cave called Nang Keaw, I saw lots of sparkling stalagmites. So, I wanted to build a place like that to give the feeling of going uphill to meet Laungpoo. The Naga legend says that the Naga wishes to be ordained. When he comes to the human world he transforms into a human. That’s why we created a sculpture of half Naga half-human wearing white clothing. I built this place based on a legend dating back to the Buddha era. Many stories try to tell people that if they believe in the Nagas, they will be protected. If people try to challenge them, they will die. Many people see it this way but here (the museum) tries to tell the story differently...”
Asawat (personal communication, 11 June 2019)

The museum is divided into 3 major rooms; a basement that represents the netherworld exhibits different shapes of stones, for example, Naga-shaped glasses and sculptures. This floor was built according to the owner’s belief. She said, *“...I went to meet my boyfriend right after I finished work. Suddenly, I heard him scream loudly because the head of the Naga sculpture fell off, meaning that he was not satisfied with this head. We were very petrified, so we calmed ourselves by sitting down for a while. After that, my boyfriend started to mix cement with sawdust and mold a new head. When he finished, he called me to look at the new head. When I saw it, I was so terrified that it made me run away. The face really looked like a human face, very scary...”* Usa (personal communication, June 11, 2019)

The human world (1st floor) is where souvenirs about the Nagas like accessories, stones, and beads are sold. Beverages and other items are also available on this floor. Heaven, located on the 2nd floor, shows sculptures of revered monks in Thailand, for instance, Luangpoo Man Puritatto. The sculptures of the Naga and other souvenirs are all representations of the Nagas. It is said that those having souvenirs shall be blessed. Connotative meanings that come with such products are that people who buy such souvenirs believe that they will be granted protection, career advancement, good fortune, and wealth.



Figure 7 Crystal beads, amulets, and souvenirs related to the Naga belief in Ruenjompetch Museum

5. Discussion

The development of the Naga belief in the SEZ of Mukdahan Province clearly shows the connection between the belief and ways of life of people in the Mekong community. Modernization and benefit seizing began in phases 2 and 3 when the stakeholders such as the government sector, temples, and the community used the Naga belief to create signs to represent things as well as the concrete signifiers such as different sculptures with different colors to reflect different origin and power, and amulets and offerings used in the chanting and worship ceremonies. These signs, which are considered denotations or the denotative signified created, are widely accepted and understood by most people. For example, Nagas are giant snakes with a crest on their head, mythical creatures with special powers and they can change into any form. These are the signified of the Nagas. The ceremonies related to Nagas are also considered denotations as they represent showing respect to Gods or the Nagas.

Apart from denotations, connotations or connotative signified are also created to serve specific groups upon specific agreements or personal experience, that is, the legend about the curse of the Nagas is used as a reference to reproduce the Nagas' supernatural powers in society, making the Nagas fearsome creatures for people. Besides, the presence of a Phaya Anantanakarat sculpture, one of the most revered Nagas, in a court has caused people to increasingly believe in Nagas as he is believed to be a protector of the Nagas dwelling in the Mekong. Furthermore, the sculpture of Phaya Sri Suttho was also created to emphasize the Wang Nakin Khamchanot legend that there is a connection between the underwater world and the human world. The lotus and Ganesh floating ceremonies are also held to signify the success of the Naga worship ceremony. Additionally, objects related to Nagas give connotations as these commercial objects are thought to bring auspiciousness to the owner.

It can be concluded that the Nagas used for creating signs through different representations provide various meanings that could be denotative and connotative depending on different beliefs that have been shaped through socialization, personal experiences, and perceptions. However, in the SEZ, Buddhism is the religion of most people, with some rituals conducted in Hinduism. Their lifestyles are also connected to the Mekong River. Thus, their myths could be similar or different. For the context of the SEZ, the Naga signs are created.

6. Conclusion

This research aims to study the use of the Naga belief in creating Naga signs and a variety of interpretations that appeared at Poo Phayanak shrine located near the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge in Mueang District, Mukdahan Province. The Naga signs found in the area were created for denotation. The sculptures of Naga were created objectively, that is, to represent giant serpents. They are created with different shapes and skin colors to give connotations agreed by a group or community according to the semiotic study by Barthes (Kaewthep, 2004; Kaewthep, & Hinviman, 2010). These serpent sculptures (denotation) have different features, colors, sizes, and attires based on folk narratives in the area. They were also made highly sacred for uniqueness. For example, the sculpture of Phaya Anantanakarat was built from fear of the curse of the 2nd Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge. The Naga signs created in the area have caused changes in many dimensions. In the economic dimension, as such creations are believed to bestow good fortune and success upon people who come to pay respect to them, government agencies and the community saw the business opportunity and used the belief as a strategy to boost tourism through various activities or ceremonies. As a

result, the number of tourists has increased every year, causing service businesses, especially hotels and restaurants, to grow to the point at which they can serve all tourists and bring more revenue to the province. This finding is also consistent with Cohen's (2007) study which highlighted the importance of the Naga Rocket Festival in Nong Khai Province in terms of the local economy. It was found that the number of visitors has increased year by year contributing to income being distributed widely and directly to the community members. In the socio-cultural dimension, the Naga belief helps to organize society and keep people under social rules because the Naga folktales are related to the ways of the Mekong people in terms of agricultural rituals, art, and architecture as described in the study by Hongsuwan (2001). The study entitled "Sacralization of the Mekong through Folk Narratives" also explained that there have been attempts to make the Mekong sacred by resorting to folk narratives relating Buddhism to Nagas. Therefore, people in the community are quite familiar with the Naga worship ceremony that requires them to follow the rules. When it comes to mentality, as Naga signs represent success, people can use this free space to pray and make wishes in exchange for them having to practice the precepts, especially to refrain from intoxication and have peace of mind so that they can be hopeful and relaxed for their wishes to come true. The Naga signs created by stakeholders were also discussed in the research by Ratcharoenkachorn (1995) and are believed to reside in caves and protect the water world. Thus, it is important for people to comply with the rules regarding property use as well as try to create a pleasant landscape to make visitors aware of the Nagas' supernatural powers as narrated in some Thai folktales that the Nagas have supernatural powers and can disguise and transform into any form, to give warnings or keep humans safe from danger and bestow wealth upon people. However, if some people become aggressive or show disrespect to the Nagas, they will be met with revenge in the form of a miserable life brought by the Nagas (Chang, 2017).

The Poo Phayanak shrine at the 2nd Thai-Lao Bridge has made Nagas the signs because their folk narratives and legends are related to people's way of life. It can be said that the stakeholders including the government sector, the private sector, and the community should create representations that relate to the culture of people in the community or connect with the beliefs, folk narratives, or legends. Apart from this, signs should be created to give meanings connected to the identity of the area to boost tourism and draw tourists, contributing to increased economic benefits in the area. For further studies, it is suggested that long-term research should be carried out to investigate more the phenomenon of the Naga belief and the tourism trends after Phase 4, which involves cultivating benefits and applying economic concepts to help analyze data to better reflect the benefits of the sign creation.

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