

From the Myths and the Beliefs on Naga of the Isaan People to Cultural Tourism: A Case Study in Nongkhai Province, Thailand

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This article highlights the evolution of the myths and beliefs on Naga of the Isaan people into cultural tourism through a case study in Nongkhai province, Thailand. The article is part of the research results on the beliefs around Naga in Nongkhai province, Thailand. The research aimed to study the history of the belief in Naga, and the area in Nongkhai province where the belief is still prominent, through non-participatory observation, non-structured interviews, and the study of the related documents and research. The study revealed the Nongkhai people have been passing down the myth and the belief of Naga, through storytelling from their ancestors to the current generation, as a way to maintain their faith in Buddhism and to draw the connection between the belief and their settlements. Currently, the myth is being passed on to the tourists who show an interest in knowing more about the tradition and culture. The "Naga fireballs" phenomenon, which had become a majestic festival that reflects the identity of the children of the City of Nagas, is also being passed on this way. The myth and belief are still present, but their role has been added to, according to the social context that focuses more on the economy, by incorporating them as part of the provincial cultural tourism. This is a way to increase the values of the culture, society and economy, both at the local and the national level.

Key words: *Myth, Belief, Naga, Thailand, Cultural Tourism*

Introduction

Isaan, or the northeast, is the largest region in Thailand. The region consists of important rivers such as the Mekong River, the Chi River and the Mun River. The northern part of the region has its border with Laos, while the south has its border with Cambodia. In the past, there had been migrations of people due to the impacts of war or plague, or the effort to find more suitable areas to settle their communities. Isaan society was an agricultural community that focused on growing rice, field crops, fisheries and raising livestock (Charles F. Keyes, 2009 cited in Sriruksa, 2014). Their society's nature had led to the integration of the different cultures, beliefs, traditions and rituals of the people in this area.

The Isaan livelihood and culture also stemmed from the problems they faced in their daily lives, such as during plagues or natural disasters, which is beyond the ability of normal human beings to solve and was believed to be caused by supernatural powers (Thammawatra, 1985). Those powers might be those of the gods, the spirits, the wild animals, the sun, the stars, or the four elements. Therefore, in preventing these disasters from happening, they turned to ask those supernatural powers for help. They believed that if they could please the beings who hold those powers, those beings would keep them safe and grant them happiness in their livelihood. This belief was reflected through sacrifices and rituals. Also, the coming in of Brahmanism and Hinduism and their integration into the traditional beliefs of Isaan people had created the integration of traditional cultures, beliefs, traditions and rituals.

As for the cultures, beliefs, and rituals of the people within the Mekong region, which includes the Isaan people, the most outstanding and collective symbol of all the cultures in this region is Nagas's story. The content of the story, the meanings and the symbols have changed according to the times. However, the passing down of the story through literature, myths and storytelling can reflect the livelihood of the people within the society who are living in a similar environment who are from the same cultural root. To understand society and its culture, one needs to pay attention to the social value system in order to gain a deeper understanding of the people in the area. The study of society and culture through literature, by trying to draw the connection between the myths and the livelihood of the people, can be achieved by different methods. The different functions of myths were, for instance, includes: myths that explain the livelihood of the local people both in terms of the way of life, social norms and nature; myths that explain the role between men and women in those societies; myths that present the morality structure between different groups of people. The myths that explain the phenomena that were formed by beliefs are in line with William Bascom and Siraporn Na Thalang (2009), who explained the four following roles of myths: 1) to explain the history and rationale of the rituals; 2) to provide education within the society through storytelling 3) to maintain the quality of the social behaviour and patterns, and 4) to provide entertainment and a solution for individuals who were frustrated with the social regulations.

The Existence of Nagas Reflected Through Literature, Myths and Beliefs

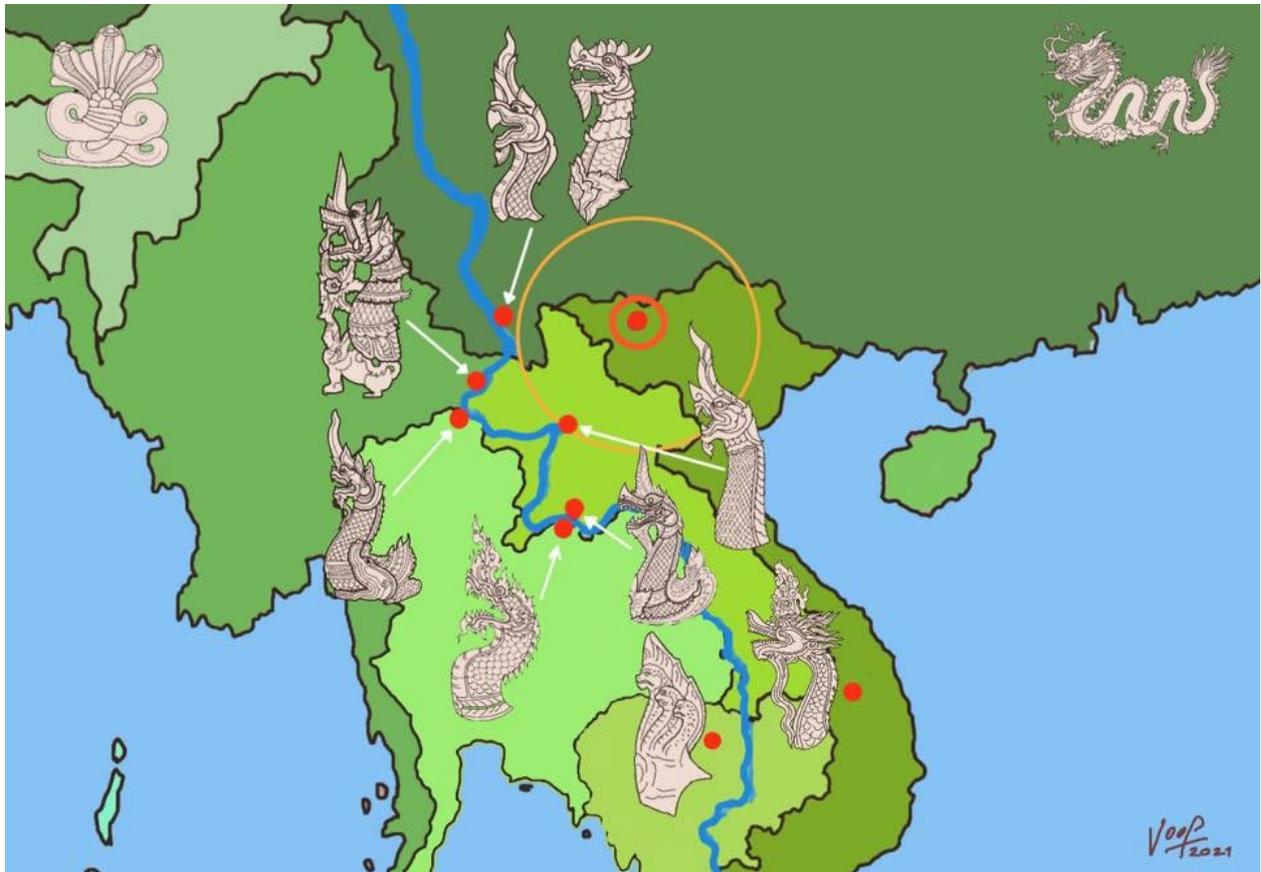


Figure 1: Naga beliefs along the Mekong River Basin. (Source: Kittisan Sriruksa, 2021)

Apart from the Isaan people's livelihood which is connected to agriculture, a dependency on nature, as well as to the supernatural beings and the coming in of religions, another belief that continues today is the belief in Nagas, or big snakes. According to the work of Wongted (2006), people from both sides of the Mekong River have always had the belief and have worshipped snakes since ancient time. Drawings of the snakes can be found on ancient pottery, unearthed in Ban Chiang, dating back more than 4,000 years. The beliefs in Nagas had been ingrained in the livelihood and the culture of the people within the Mekong region and have continued on until today. This is especially true for the people living on the banks of the Mekong River and its tributaries, creeks, swamps and ponds, in conjunction with the literature, myths, and stories.

From the review of the literature and related research, it was found that the people living on the bank of the Mekong River on both the Thailand and Laos' side have a strong belief in Nagas, which has led to different local myths and stories in different areas that connects people from both sides of the river together. This can be seen in the myth on the establishment of the cities, the underwater city that connects the two sides of the river, and Thai and Isaan people's stories and beliefs of Nagas (Sriruksa, 2015). This is in line with the study by Poonnatree Jiaviriyaboonya (2013), who stated that the stories on the creation of the natural resources of

water are all tied to Nagas. For example, the story on the creation of the Mekong and Nan Rivers, which were believed to be dug up by the Nagas (Jiaviriyaboonya, 2013, as cited in Sonjan, (2018).

Naga myths are still being studied today, such as the Urangadhatu myth, and many academics, including Panchin (2010), have stated that it is a mythical Naga story about the era before the creation of this land and the rivers that has been passed down since ancient time. The story also mentions the settlement of a group of people that moved from Nong Sae, Yunnan, China, along the river down to Laos, scattering throughout different areas, starting from the Ping River in the northern part of Thailand to the area along the Mekong River, the Mun River and the Chi River in Isaan. The content of the Urangadhatu myth talks about two Nagas who were friends and living together in Nong Sae Swamp. The first Naga was named Pintayonok Naga. This Naga ruled the northern part of the swamp while the other Naga, named Thanamun Naga, ruled over the southern part of the swamp with Chiwaya Naga, his nephew. The two had made a vow that if an animal fell into either the northern or the southern part of the swamp, they would share the meat. One day, an elephant fell into the southern part of the swamp, and Thanamun Naga shared the elephant meat with Pintayonok Naga. Two days afterward, a porcupine fell in the northern part of the swamp, Pintayonok Naga shared its meat with Thanamun Naga. When Thanamun Naga saw the porcupine's quills, which are longer than elephant hair, he began to think that a porcupine would be bigger than an elephant. Due to the small portion of the porcupine meat he had received, he became furious, accusing Pintayonok Naga of not keeping their promise. The two started to fight and ended up killing many animals in the swamp. The swamp god tried to stop the two but to no avail. The god went to Indra, who ordered Vishnukarman to chase the two out from the swamp. The two Naga had to dig their way out from the swamp with their chests and created rivers. Chiwaya Naga, Thanamun Naga's nephew, also dug his way out. The river was called Urankonti River or the Mekong River. Pintayonok Naga dug his way out towards Chiang Mai and created the Ping River and led to the creation of Yonokwatinakhon city, a name taken from the Naga. When the wandering spirits and ghosts saw that many animals had died, they gathered around the swamp to eat the dead animals, which caused the rest of the Nagas (consisting of Suwannak Naga Phuttopapanak Naga, Papparanak Naga, Sukaranak Naga, and Hattisisattanak Naga) to not be able to continue living in the swamp and they had to flee to the Mekong River (Empan, 2002; Panchin, 2010). These Nagas tried to flee from the spirits and ghosts. The remaining Nagas and snakes fled to the Mekong River as well but moved towards the south of Srisattanak city, which is opposite to Nonkangri mountain in Laos. Suwannak Naga stayed at Ku Wian Mountain, in the northern part of Isaan. Phuttopapanak Naga dug its way out and created Bua Ban swamp and stayed there. Papparanak Naga went to stay in Phu Luang Mountain, while Sukaranak Naga went to stay in Weung Lod, which is in the Isaan region. Apart from these Nagas, the rest of the Nagas went to stay wherever they wanted. The snakes are the servants of the Nagas that scattered off everywhere. One of the snakes did not want to stay with the others, dug its way out, and created Ngeum River, or Nguak Ngu River, in Laos. The Urangadhatu myth reflects the belief in Nagas



as well as the explanation of the creation of their land. The names of the rivers are taken after the Nagas who created them.

The belief and the influence of Nagas can be seen in the different myths and chronicles, just like the Urangadhatu myth that was mentioned above. Apart from the local myths about the Nagas, Buddhism has also played a huge role, with literature evidence of Nagas being mentioned in Buddhist scripts (Maneechot, 1985, as cited in Kliangphaiboon, 1997). For instance, the Mahavastu and Lalitavistara Sutra state that when Lord Buddha was born, two Nagas by the name of Nandha and Uppanandha Naga created the hot and cold-water pipes for Lord Buddha to shower. During the time when the Lord Buddha was about to leave his palace in Kapilavastu, one of the gods who guarded the four cardinal directions and had a Naga as his transport sent his Naga as a support on the ground to prevent the horse galloping to create any noise. Before Lord Buddha became enlightened, he came to eat the rice pudding prepared by Suchada. After eating, he floated the golden tray on the river. The tray flowed upstream to the underwater world of the Naga and landed on top of the other three trays. After he became enlightened, the Buddha spent time resting under the Mujalin tree for seven days. The wind suddenly became strong, and it rained for seven days. The Naga Mujalin spread its hood to protect Lord Buddha from the cold, heat, wind and sun. After the storm was gone, he transformed into a man to worship the Buddha (Sakchuwong, 2005). The story about Lord Buddha received the invitation from Suthud Nagarach of Taya when he went to Varanasi found carvings at Borobudur where Lord Buddha was sitting on the throne while Suthud Nagarach was standing beside him to the left. The Naga was half-standing and half-sitting about to offer food to Lord Buddha. Also, the Mahayana script mentioned a story about a Naga achieving nirvana, Suwannaprapas Naga consulted with Erapata Naga about a sermon on which no one was able to read. Erapata Naga transformed himself into a Brahman and went to Varanasi. He met with Nandra, who explained the sermon to him, and then he went to talk with Lord Buddha and taught the sermon to him. Nandra saw the truth in life and went to tell Erapata Naga and became a disciple of Lord Buddha named Katayayana or Maha Katayayana. A story of a Naga asking to be ordained in the Mahawat script, a Naga transformed himself into a man and asked to be ordained. However, when he was caught, the monks had a meeting and told the Naga to hold the eight precepts instead (Maneechot, 1985, as cited in Kliangphaiboon, 1997) which is similar to the information by Sakchuwong (2005), the Naga transformed himself into a man in order to get ordained since he developed faith in Buddhism and was tired of who he was. While he was at the temple, he transformed back into a big snake and scared some of the monks. Lord Buddha had a meeting with other monks and told the Naga to hold the eight precepts instead. Through holding the eight precepts, the Naga can escape from being a Naga and be reborn as a man. Lord Buddha told the other monks that Nagas were animals, and they cannot be ordained. Those who were already ordained need to step out from the monkhood.

It can be seen that the belief in supernatural powers and sacred beings had been told through local literature while integrating with the religion that came into the area and led to the myth about the Nagas since ancient times. The Nagas' role concerning the agricultural way of life is

the bringer of abundance, while its role in Buddhism is the protector. Therefore, one can see the importance of Nagas in society that has existed since the past to the present and the reoccurring trend of interest in the topic. When Act-Art Generation Company had brought the novel *Nakee* to be made as a drama, the interest in the topic of Nagas had increased. The role of Nagas is no longer just the creator of the rivers and streams, the bringer of abundance, the protector of religion, but also the role of boosting the trend of cultural tourism within the country.

The Existence of Nagas Reflected through Traditions and Rituals in Nongkhai Province

The belief in Nagas can be considered a common culture of people in Southeast Asia, whether they are Myanmar, Lao, Cambodian, or Thailand. In this case, the belief in Nagas of the Isaan people living by important rivers in Nongkhai Province, a province where almost all its border is right on the Mekong River. This had helped maintain many traditions that people still see their importance and are still being practiced today.

In the literature, the myths and the beliefs surrounding Nagas can still be seen through different branches of arts and architecture (Lanwong, 2017). For instance, most railings are made in the form of Nagas, such as the roof decorations of religious buildings such as the Chofa, Bai Rakha, and Hang Hong, which are parts of the gable apex. From the cultural aspect, since the Nagas represent abundance, for the people living in Isaan to be successful in their agricultural practice, they pray to the sacred beings they respect. Therefore, many traditions in Isaan point to the importance of Nagas and are still being practiced. For instance, at the beginning of the rainy season, the Isaan people will light up their rockets as a sign to a deity, Phaya Thaen, to allow the Nagas to play in the water, which will guarantee seasonal rain so that the people can start planting rice. There is also the Illuminated Boat Procession tradition along the Mekong River, the streams and creeks at the end of Buddhist Lent to pay respect to the Nagas. These traditions can be seen in different places throughout the province, which all tie to the beliefs in Nagas.

Makha Bucha Day also involves a tradition according to the belief in Buddhism. In Nongkhai province, there is a ceremony where people pay respect to Phrathat Bangphuan on the day of the full moon of the third lunar month. Phrathat Bangphuan is an ancient pagoda, which was said to be built during the Lan Xang period. Within the temple area, there are also seven important Buddhist locations that Lord Buddha went to spend his seven days retreat after reaching enlightenment. Nongkhai people believe that there is a Naga at Baung Phuang Pagoda who is there to protect the Buddha's relics and the sacred place. This goes in line with a study by Krutasaen (2014) and the work by Thabmanoch (2020), who had done the study on the particular issue.

Nongkhai people hold the ceremony at Bung Phuang Pagoda on the eleventh day of the third lunar month to the full moon of the same month, five days and nights every year to pay respect to the Buddha's relics at the pagoda. This ceremony was also done to carry on the valuable

local tradition. Within the ceremony, there will be a parade for Upagupta, there will be a rice donation ceremony to the temple, donation of money, listening to sermons, meditation, circling the pagoda with candles, and music at night.

Fourth Month Tradition or Phra Wade Ceremony was part of the Heet 12 Tradition of Isaan and in line with the Buddhist teaching. In Nongkhai, there is a celebration of Phra Chao Ong Tue. From the study of Phollawong (2008), the celebration of Phra Chao Ong Tue is done at Sri Chompu Ong Tue temple (also called Nam Mong Temple) at Nam Mong sub-district, Tha Bo district, Nongkhai province on the eleventh day of the first quarter of the fourth lunar month to the first day of the second quarter. People will walk around the temple with a candle on the night of the fourteenth day of the first quarter and the morning of the first day of the second quarter of the month, followed by the rockets' lightening up. There are also performances throughout the four days and four nights. This celebration is held for the people to be able to pay respect and ask for the blessing from Luang Phaw Ong Tue and a way to maintain the valuable tradition. Many activities are being done in the celebration, such as paying respect to the deities, providing food for the monks, and a light and sound show on the history of Phra Chao Ong Tue, as well as the performances every night (National News Bureau of Thailand, 2020). Luang Paw Ong Tue image is another important Buddhist statue of Nongkhai province. According to the history of the statue's construction, it was built during the reign of King Setthathirath in the year 1562 at Sri Chompu Ong Tue temple. From the research, it was found that when the statue was being built, the villagers were asking for the donation of gold, brass, and copper for the construction. On the last day where the hair was to be made, the monks had not had lunch yet, but gold still had not fully melted. So, the monks decided to go and have lunch first. Afterward, they found a man in a white robe had already finished the mold after they came back down. However, the man ran away into a nearby creek. Villagers believed that it was a deity or a Naga who came and helped build the statue.

Fifth Month Tradition or Songkran Tradition. All the traditions were done according to the Heet 12 Tradition of the Isaan people. From the study by Phollawong (2008), in Nongkhai province, the celebration of Luang Paw Phra Sai is held on the 13-15 of April every year during the period of Songkran days. Every year, Pho Chai Temple will bring out a cart and place Luang Paw Phra Sai statue, another important statue of the province, on the cart to go around the city for the people to pour water and ask for the blessing from the statue. According to the myth, the constructions of Phra Serm, Phra Sook, and Phra Sai statues were done with the help of the Nagas, who transformed into a man. Phra Serm, Phra Sook, and Phra Sai statues were moved from Khao Kwai Mountain in Laos to be situated in Pho Chai Temple in Muang district, Nongkhai province up until today. Through the belief in the holy power of the statue, the people then come together to celebrate Luang Paw Phra Sai statue every year during Songkran days. On the day of the celebration, there will be a ritual and a traditional dance to pay respect to Luang Phaw Phra Sai statue. There are also other ceremonies such as giving alms to the monks, parading the statue all around the city, sports competition, Miss Songkran pageant competition, a traditional dance for Luang Paw Phra Sai, and a flower parade (Nongkhai Online News,

2016). The celebration of Luang Paw Phra Sai is therefore very important to the livelihood of the Nongkhai people.

Sixth Month Tradition. Rocket Festival. The ceremony was according to the Heet 12 Tradition. As for Nongkhai, according to the study from several academics such as Phollawong (2008) and Sakchuwong (2005), the Rocket Festival is done on the fifteenth day of the first quarter of the sixth month. Isaan people have been carrying on this ceremony as a way to pay respect to the Phaya Thaen deity. This can be seen in word of mouth around Phaya Thaen, one of the great god in heaven and can provide the rain during the planting season, that has been passed down through the generations. Additionally, there is also the tale of Toad King and the rocket festival. The Toad King story is about when Bodhisattva was reincarnated as a toad. During the time of drought, the Toad King went to war with Phaya Thaen and won the war. The agreement was that before the rainy season, the human would light rockets to the sky to remind Phaya Thaen to allow the Naga to play in the water. The rockets are made in the form of a Naga and will be light up to remind Phaya Thaen to send the rain. In other words, to provide water to the earth.

As for Nongkhai province, there are the beliefs, traditions, and rituals, such as the port in front of Sirimahakutchai Temple and Phrathat Lanong, with the fortune-telling rockets. A Buddhist ceremony will be done, and the monk will sprinkle the holy water before the rockets are light up. Three rockets will be lighted to tell whether the people of Nongkhai will be living a peace without any disaster or not. It is also a ceremony to pay respect to Phrathat Lanong. The fortune-telling ceremony is a belief that has been passed down from the ancient time where a fortune had to be read before any action could be done. If the rockets go up high in the sky, it means that there will be enough rain, and the province will prosper. If the rockets do not go up, and if the rockets blow up, it can be assumed that there might not be enough rain and water to use for planting rice (INNnews, 2019). However, in the year 2020, the province had prohibited anyone from practicing these traditions due to the spreading of COVID-19 since these traditions will involve a lot of people (Siam Rath, 2020).

Nongkhai province holds the tradition in front of Phrathat Lanong since it is a pagoda that people in Nongkhai pay respect to. The tradition that is being held every year is the rocket festival in the sixth month and light the rockets on the first day of the second quarter of the month. The ceremony to pay respect for the pagoda will be held on the fourteenth day of the eleventh month. The ceremony of the giving the Prasart Pheung will be held on the fifteenth day of the eleventh month. There will also be a longboats competition as a way to pay respect to Lord Buddha (Phrathat Nongkhai or Phrathat Klangnam, 2016).

Eleventh Month Tradition or End of Buddhist Lent Tradition. This tradition is also along the line of Heet 12 Tradition and the Buddhist belief. The End of Buddhist Lent is connected to a Buddhist history of when Lord Buddha came to visit earth after he spent time in

Trayastrimsa Heaven preaching to his mother and then came down to earth. All the deities, Nagas, and humans came out to greet his return.

In Nongkhai province, one of the traditions that have been well-known is the Naga Fireballs Festival. The province holds the **Naga Fireballs Festival** as a huge celebration and is famous not only in Thailand but also internationally. The festival was held in place due to the Naga fireballs phenomenon in the area next to the Mekong River. There had been many studies concerning the Naga Fireballs phenomenon. Watanapun Krutasaen (2014) studied and learned about the exploration of Gerard Van Wusthof, a Holland trader, and explorer who explored the Mekong River at the time. He traveled up from Cambodia during the year 1641-1642 during the reign of King Sourigna Vongsa, a Lao king who ruled from 1638-1695. Wusthof traveled to an area next to Vientiane and reported that he saw several strange fireballs shooting out from the Mekong River in October. The report goes in line with what the elders in the communities had been telling their children over the generations up until the present day. In the old days, some villagers called them Ghost Fireballs. Many villagers believed that the Naga Fireballs happened to welcome Lord Buddha back to earth, as well as celebrating his footsteps in the Mekong River.

Also, from the study of Watanapun Krutasaen, he stated that in the year 1986, Pitak Sritabut, a former member of parliament from Phonphisai district and some local politicians, started working with the Phonphisai Cultural Center to connect the Ghost Fireballs phenomenon and the traditional belief in Nagas of the local people and hold a tradition called Illuminated Boat Procession and Watching Ghost Fireballs, which later changed to be called Naga Fireballs. Later on, Phonphisai district had made the tradition grander by holding the Phonphisai World Naga Fireballs while adding more activities to the traditions, which draw much attention from the tourists domestically and internationally.

Apart from the Naga Fireballs Tradition, on the End of the Buddhist Lent day, there is also an Illuminated Boat Procession. From the study of Sakchuwong (2005) and Phollawong (2008), the **Illuminated Boat Procession** is held on this day every year to pay respect to Ganga goddess, the goddess of the water. This is similar to the Loy Krathong Festival in the north of Thailand. People from different communities along the Mekong River will come together to make Illuminated Boat, such as in Phonphisai district. In this tradition, villagers will make small Krathong, or floating baskets filled with betel nuts, tobacco, flowers, incense, and candles, to float on the river to respect the goddess of the water and the footprint of the Buddha. This tradition is also held to pay respect to the Nagas in the Mekong River and float away the bad luck and their miseries.

In addition to the Illuminated Boat Procession, there is also the Longboat Race, or Boon Suang Rua in Issan dialect, a longboat race where each community participated for entertainment. Today, people from Lao PDR also participated in the race. This race is held during the time when the tide in the river is low on the eleventh month of every year. This tradition helps



preserve the local sports that are connected to the river. Every year, rowers from within Thailand and Lao will participate in the tradition, creating laughter and unity.

This shows that the Eleventh Month Tradition, or the End of the Buddhist Lent Tradition, is another big tradition of Isaan and Lao people that stemmed from the belief in Nagas. Later on, the tradition had adapted to fit in more within Buddhism.

The evolution of the myths and the beliefs on Nagas of the Isaan people to Cultural tourism, Nongkhai Province

One of the main factors for every human and society is the economy. In Thailand, most of the income is from the tourism industry. Apart from helping promote the country, history, culture, and its beautiful traditions also helps bring investment, create jobs, and generate income for the local people. There is still much room for Thai tourism to increase its capacity and opportunities. This is due to the strong art and cultural aspect, as well as unique local traditions in each area. In the year 2017, the World Economy Forum (WEF) ranked Thailand as the 72nd of 137 countries and expected that the tourism industry would expand more in the future (Department of Tourism, 2018). From the tourism trend analysis, Thailand should focus more on supporting and developing the following tourism products and services: 1) The improvement of the capacity to receive tourists in sensitive tourist sites. 2) The development of a clearer tourism identity to increase the products and services' value and reduce the price competition. 3) The improvement of tourism database to help the tourists plan their travels and make the right decisions. 4) The development of technology and digital access to help facilitate tourists. 5) The improvement of the tourist products and services and the improvement of the transportation route to provide access for elderly tourists. 6) The development of travel routes' connections domestically to distribute the tourists from major tourist sites to minor ones and connecting the routes to other countries in Southeast Asia. 7) The development of technology and digital access to address new behaviours of tourists. 8) Increase the safety and security for the tourists. 9) Develop a new kind of tourism to support tourists from new markets such as tourists from India or countries within Scandinavia.

The information from this research should help provide the baseline information for the development of the identity and the stories within the area to be in line with the development direction of Nongkhai province. The province must develop strategies to increase the value-added of the tourist sites. Considering the ratio of international tourists from the Department of Tourism in 2018, most of the tourists coming into Thailand in 2018 were from East Asia and Southeast Asia. Tourists from Europe were the second largest. Another important point is the growth of aging tourists due to the structure changes where the world's population is entering into an Aging Society. However, there is also a growth in the tourist groups from the Y and Z generations as well as tourists from China and India.

Furthermore, the 20 Year National Development Plan (2017-2036) consist of six strategies: strategy 1) the stability, strategy 2) creating the competitive capability, strategy 3) the development and the support of building human potential, strategy 4) creating opportunities and equality within the society, strategy 5) creating growth on the environmental friendly quality of life, and strategy 6) is on creating the balance and the development of the government's administration system, which mostly involve tourism or incorporating tourism into part of the strategy. As well as, the 2nd National Tourism Development Plan (2017-2021), there are five following strategies: strategy 1) The sustainable development of the quality of tourist sites, products, and service, strategy 2) the improvement of the basic infrastructure and facilities to support the expanding tourism industries, strategy 3) the development of tourism staff and encourage people's participation in the development of local areas, strategy 4) creating balanced Thai tourism for specific groups, the supporting of Thai ways, and build the confidence of tourists, and strategy 5) the integration between tourism management and international collaboration.

The above information helped identify the tourist groups that Nongkhai province should prioritize and prepare for the public relation and increase tourists' perception from the East Asia and Southeast Asia region, especially in China and India. The province should also pay more attention to the population structure changes while society is heading towards becoming an Aging society, which will lead to a significant increase of elderly tourists.

Another important point that needs to be considered is the variety of tourism. Cultural tourism is another interesting form of tourism, both tangible and intangible. The tangible forms of culture are, for instance, handicrafts, arts, and architecture. The intangible forms of tourism are the other aspects of tourism that need to be developed to attract and encourage more tourists. For the components of cultural tourism, Jittangwatana (2006, as cited in Jangjaicharoen, 2013) stated that there have to be at least three following components: 1) the attractions for each of the cultural tourist site. For example, the beautiful natural landscape, the value of culture and way of life, or other tourism activities such as performances or local food, 2) The accessibility of the tourist sites is an essential component that determines whether the tourist can gain access to those sites through safe roads and facilities for the vehicles that do not block the scenery, and 3) Tourist amenity to provide the service and satisfaction to the tourists. These components go in line with the study by Chanmun et al. (2016) on sustainable tourism planning. The researcher team saw the need to use the community resources such as the history, the tales, the natural resources, the nature, the food, the way of life, the culture, and the belief to help generate income for the communities. The points that they studied were 1) Identities, 2) Storytelling, 3) Infrastructures, 4) Tourism standards, and 5) Tourists.

Nongkhai province is a province in Isaan with strong cultural capital that is both tangible and intangible, as well as beautiful natural resources. The cultural capital is related to the myths and beliefs in Nagas. The traditions, the rituals, and the outstanding arts and architecture, as



well as the beautiful landscape, are all related to the myths and beliefs of the local people. This is a strong point that can be integrated with the national tourism strategies.

Also, Nongkhai province can bring up the point that they rank in number seven for the most liveable cities by Modern Maturity Magazine. There are 12 indicators for the most liveable cities: the weather, the living costs, the culture, the houses, the infrastructure, the transportation, the medical services, the environment, the leisure, security, the political stability, the technology, and interesting real estates. These should be advertised in different languages apart from what is available in order to gain access to more target groups. Another important point apart from the strength of the province is studying the tourists' behaviours, especially the tourists with high potentials, such as Chinese tourists, learning more about the values, beliefs, and consumerism behaviour and the Indian tourists with deep cultural roots whose culture had greatly influenced Thailand. All these steps should lead to a clearer management plan that goes in line with the target groups.

For the tourist with high potentials like Chinese tourists, the province and the related agencies need to bring up the outstanding cultural capital, such as the belief in Nagas, to present to the tourists in different forms. As for the Chinese tourists in relation to the culture, they mostly focus on souvenirs. The province and the related government agencies can, for instance, develop souvenirs related to beliefs, fortune, wealth, and health. Also, the content added to the souvenirs should also relate to Nagas.

Therefore, from the beliefs on Nagas and the supernatural powers that the people in Southeast Asia, such as Thai and Isaan people, have had perfectly blended to Buddhism's belief. However, religion and belief will not be able to exist without the rituals to reflect the worldview, carry on the values and the meanings for those beliefs. It also needs the storytelling aspect to spread these worldviews to be more known. Overall, Nongkhai province has the potential and the readiness to develop the myths and the beliefs into the creation of a sustainable economic base, which is the cultural tourism aspect.

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