

The Significance of Naga in Thai Architectural and Sculptural Ornaments

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Abstract:

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

Introduction

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

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

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The Indigenous Serpent Cult in Thailand and Southeast Asia

The serpent cults were by no means exclusive to India and it seems that the worship of serpents, as symbols of fertility and water, occurred independently in many parts of the world, especially in Southeast Asia where the water culture played a crucial part in the residents' daily life activities (Michael Freeman and Roger Warner 1987: 124). The serpent cult of Southeast Asian region has been mainly found among the communities living along the banks of Mekong River¹ (แม่น้ำโขง), from Yunan (ยูนาน) Province of China, to the lower part of its river in Vietnam. Here, the indigenous ethnic groups believe that the serpent is the creator of nature and life and that it nourishes human beings. The serpent, furthermore, is also supposed to have assisted people in establishing the state cities, the citadels and bestowing prosperity and richness. But the serpent can also punish people by releasing an over - supply of water, causing flood and destroying the state cities. Most of the imaginative mystery are truly believed by the indigenous residents, especially the serpent legends related to the state cities, citadels and the kingdoms; stories of the serpent being at the origin of the matriarchy lineage and human race are very popular among the ethnic communities in Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia and the Khmer in Vietnam.



Nagini (serpent princess) decorated on stair of Phra Keo Pagoda, Bangkok.

Photo: Phan Anh Tu



Naga King decorated on stair of Phra Keo Pagoda, Bangkok.

Photo: Phan Anh Tu

A Tai Lu (Water Tai) legend called the story of Nang Sa² (นางส้า) tells how the Tai³ race originated from the water serpent. Tai men in Sipsongpanna (สิบสองปันนา, Yunan province), Sipsong Chu Tai (สิบสองจุไท, the North of Laos and the Northwest of Vietnam) and the North of Thailand usually tattoo the water serpent on their back and arm as an obligatory rite when they come of age. Chinese and Vietnamese chronicles called them “Khin – man” that means “Great Snake” (Sumet Jumsai 1997: 138). Up to now, a few old Thais⁴ residing in the North and Northeast of Thailand still called the mythical water serpent “Tua Luong” (ตัวลวง) that is nearly similar with “Thuong Luong” in Vietnamese legends. The two words are pronounced with similar sounds which imply the belief of the serpent ruler of the water world has its source from human imagination. They could also be ancient names for the mythical water serpent of the Southeast Asian minority ethnic groups.

According to traditional beliefs, Thais and Laotians think that the mythical serpent lived in a zone of terrestrial moisture under the human world, called Muang Badan (เมืองบาดาล), the sacred citadel, located

somewhere in the Mekong river bed, in the river course between Nong Khai province, Thailand and Vientiane capital of Laos. From Muang Badan, the underworld river rose, and mythically linked to all the rivers and oceans all over the world. Muang Badan⁵ is also considered as a mythical kingdom which provides for the endless water source to keep the Mekong River (แม่น้ำโขง) and all other rivers from drying out. According to the ancient belief, the Thais and Southeast Asian people thought that the serpent spirits only lived in the water realm. With the influence of Indian culture, they came to believe in the serpent living in heaven (Suchit Wongthet 2003: 2). In the rain prayer festival, Bun Bang Fai⁶ (เทศกาลบุญบังไฟ), which is yearly held in Yasothon Province in the middle of June, village men launch the serpent shape bamboo rockets into the sky. The rockets send the human message to the God of Thunder, Phra In (พระอินทร์, Indra in Hindu mythology), to ask him to enter into his serpent cloud and make rain. These beliefs might have come from Indian culture, after having been assimilated into the Thai folklore, especially in E - San region which suffers from lack of water all year round.

Naga in Thai Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism

Naga and Thai Brahmanism

Brahmanism (ศาสนาพราหมณ์) is considered as the Arians' main religion, founded in the Vedic period, about 3,000 years ago. Buddhism (ศาสนาพุทธ) came later, in the 5th century BC. Both of them, however, spread to Southeast Asian region at the same period, in the first centuries AD. The god serpent was called Naga in Sanskrit and Nag in Pali scripts. These terms are used to designate king cobra, elephant, mountain and water. It appears that the worship of the Naga as a type of totem originated from the Dravidian culture. Later it became the holy beast of Brahmanism in the post - Vedic Era, when the Arian absorbed the Dravidian's indigenous cults. The Naga⁷ was called Nak (นาค), Phaya Nak (พญานาค) or Tua Nak (ต่วนาค) in Thai. Moreover, the term Naga refers to the indigenous people, for instance, the Naga tribes living in Naga Hill, Assam state in Northeast India. The Tam Nan Urangkathat (ตำนานอุรังคธาตุ), a Thai ancient chronicle, states that Naga was the term used to designate the ethnic people originally residing in Nong Sae (หนองแส), South of Yunan province, who emigrated by small

groups for settlement along the banks of Mekong River (Suchit Wongthet 2003: 4). Thus, Naga undoubtedly refers to the Tai race who emigrated southward as the development process of their ethnic history. In the first chapter of the Tam Nan Urangkathat (ตำนานอุรังคธาตุ), there is a part quoted from Indian trade men's narration as the following "Suvannaphum region is the living quarters of Naga race" (Suthit Wongthet 2003: 5). According to Indian chronicle, Suvannaphum (สุวรรณภูมิ) or Suvarnnabhumi means "the Golden Land" which nowadays is believed to be Siam peninsular or mainland Southeast Asia. There, the indigenous residents were naked people as the descriptions in Funan Ki, by Khang Tai and Chu Ying, the ambassadors who were sent to the Funan royal court as the China's Wu emperor's envoy in the Three Kingdom period (220 - 280 AD). In other words, the Thai Tam Nan Urangkathat term of designating the indigenous people as Nagas must have come from the Indian influence.



Five headed - Naga at the end of balustrade, Khmer art, Angkor style, Ca: Late 12th century A.D Nakhon Ratchasima. Photo: Phan Anh Tu



Head of Naga on the water pipe, Ca: early 20th century, Ubon Ratchatani National Museum. Photo: Phan Anh Tu

The Naga cult was assimilated to the indigenous serpent cult and turned into a state depended divine who is a protector of the new religion and the king's holy lineage. This is illustrated in the legend of a Brahmin, Kaudinya who married a Soma princess (พระนางโสมมา), the daughter of the Naga king, thereafter giving birth to the kings' descendants. A similar story was carved in the Champa⁸ stone inscription in My Son, the holy land in Central Vietnam, after which it was specifically narrated in the legend of the Funan Kingdom⁹ (อาณาจักรฟูนัน) established by Ambassadors Khang Tai and Chu Ying). The Khmer also have a similar story that tells of Prince Preak Thong marrying Princess Nieng Neak, daughter of King Naga, and ultimately it was adapted into the "Phra Ruong" (พระร่วง) story by the Thais, in 13th century AD, explaining the serpent princess lineage (Nang Nak - นางนาค in Thai) of the first

kings of Sukhothai Kingdom¹⁰ (อาณาจักรสุโขทัย). Along with the assimilation of Indian elements into indigenous cultures, all of the stories also bear the stamps of popular stories told in the South or Southeast of India (as the Indian Kings' stories under Manipur and Pallav dynasties). Mahabharata (มหาภารตะ), the Indian poem epic in verses, moreover, told the story about Hero Ajuna marrying Naga Princess Ulupi, the daughter of King Naga Nila who was dominating Potala, the water realm. Nevertheless, there is main difference in the details among the legends; the Southeast Asian stories always tells of the serpent princess Soma or the empress Lieu Diep's very important role in the indigenous societies. She is both a supreme ruler of a powerful kingdom and a military chief but doesn't care about being clothed until her marriage to a Brahmin husband. These details are good illustrations of the cultural and social background of Southeast Asia in Pre - Indian influenced period. The indigenous residents are nearly naked and lived in a matriarchal society, with the female position respected within the family and community circles.

With Brahmanism becoming a dominant religion in the royal courts, the king god (Deva-raj) system found its justification of the king having a sacred role. The Naga was an essential symbol of matriarchy related to the kings' noble lineage. In *The Customs of Cambodia*, by Chou Ta Koun, a diplomatic attaché of China's Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 AD), visiting the royal court of Angkor in 13th century AD, told the story of the Khmer king who each night was expected to mate with a nine headed serpent princess to continue the royal lineage and ensure the prosperity of the kingdom. In the other Thai legend stories, the Naga is solemnly narrated as the state protector of devout kings; the Naga assists people to dig rivers for irrigation, protects water dams and constructs state cities for human beings. On the contrary, if the kings or their subjects are malefic, anti – religious, the Naga will punish them by raising water level and sinking the cities, damaging the soil and tearing villages down. Such instances are the stories which happened in the ancient cities of Nong Han Luong¹¹ (หนองหานหลวง), Vieng Nong Lom¹² (เวียงหนองลอม) and Yonoknagaphan¹³ (โยนกนาถพัน) in the North of Thailand, Nakhon Suvankhomkham (นครสุวรรณโคมคำ) in Laos. Phadeng Nang Ay¹⁴ (ผาแดงนางไอ่). The E - San Thai poem epic in verses, also tells the story of King Naga Suttho, who rules Muang Badan, and leads his serpent troops to flood the mainland and kill the entire people who ate meat of his son. Prince Naga Phangkhi.

Naga in Theravada Buddhism

The conflict between Theravada Buddhism (ศาสนาพุทธนิกายเถรวาท) and serpent worshipped cult is reflected in the legends in Thai folklore. Bang Fai Phya Nak¹⁵ (บั้งไฟพญานาค), the E - San Thai legend tells of the Naga living in the Mekong River before the time when the crown prince Sakya – Muni (สัkkายมุนี) founded the religion in India. Other legends state that as Buddha came to preach his religion to E - San region, he met many powerful Naga kings who were dominating the area for long. Those stories show that the serpent worship cult was firmly entrenched and had permeated residents' spiritual activities in Siam peninsular in Pre-Buddhist period. Here, the issue needs to be understood in two main aspects of Theravada Buddhism, history and



Vishnu reclining on coils of Ananta – Shesha serpent, bas – relief decorated on the Khmer Theravada Buddhist Temple in Bac Lieu Province, Vietnam.

Photo: Phan Anh Tu

mythology. If the Lord Buddha had preached his religion in E - San region, this implies that Buddhism had expanded into this area, but it can't be true in the historical range because the Buddha had never set foot into Southeast Asia. Urang Kathat tells many conflicting stories between Lord Buddha and the Nagas. All of them, however, are described in the same main motive as following: the Lord Buddha was meditating in a certain sacred peak, located near the Naga kings' fief. The aureole behind his head shines so dazzlingly that it reached the Naga's realm, irritating the Naga kings. Thus, the Naga kings lead their serpent troops to creep into Lord Buddha's meditation seat and attack him by using their magical power. But the Lord Buddha could not be harmed, and the Nagas got tired and weak. The Lord Buddha brought forth his tenets and calmly explained them to the Nagas. The Nagas, henceforth, were persuaded and accepted to follow Buddhist moral codes. When the Lord Buddha made his journey to Laos, the Nagas asked him to set his footprint (Buddhapad) as a memoir for the next generations to worship. The Lord Buddha met the Nagas request, after which he continued preaching his Dharma in Laos and the Nagas stayed back to protect his relics.



Cobra King and his two concubines, mural painting on the Khmer Theravada Buddhist Temple in Bac Lieu Province, Vietnam. Photo: Phan Anh Tu

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

Naga in Thai architectural ornaments

According to Thai mythology, the Nagas had so faithfully served the Buddha's truth that there were given key positions in Buddhist temples under variable forms. The Nagas usually appear on finial, gable board, arch, balustrade, along the tiers of temple roof, and especially on skillfully carved stairs leading to the main shrine (Viharn in Thai). Most of the Naga significations in Thai architecture, however, possibly find their origin in Brahmanism which Theravada Buddhism had assimilated.



Naga on the roof of Phra Keo Pagoda, Bangkok. Photo: Phan Anh Tu

In accordance with Thai Buddhist conception, Buddhist temples symbolize the holy mount, Phra Sumen (พระสุเมรุ), or Mount Meru¹⁶ in Vedic cosmology, which represents Tavatimsa Heaven where Queen Siri Mahamaya (พระนางสิริมหามายา) (Buddha's mother) and Hindu divinities reside. Nagas decorated along the tiers of temple roofs represent the cosmic river of life source which springs from Mount Phra Sumen streaming down to the human world. This emanates from a Vedic belief which tells of a time during the Ice Age when a Naga swallowed all the waters of the world and coiling its serpentine body to hibernate on the top of Mount Meru. The earth suffered from a severe drought and human beings were dying. To restore life to earth, God Indra (Phra In - พระอินทร์ in Thai) hurled his thunderbolt to the deadly serpent. The bloated Naga busted, causing water to stream down the mountainsides, circulating as rivers throughout the parched world (Pamela York Taylor 1994: 57).



*Naga on the roof of Chom chaeng Pagoda, Chiang Rai Province.
Photo: Phan Anh Tu*

In Theravada Buddhist architecture, the Naga-shape carved stairs always hold a very important position in the temples, symbolizing the three ladders mythically linking earth to heaven. The pious believers' souls are said to be lead up to Nirvana (นิพพาน - heaven in Buddhism)

on the magic ladder by the Naga. The gods use them to descend on earth. Theravada Buddhist mythology also says that the Buddha uses yearly the Naga ladder to descend to earth on a sacred day in middle of November (วันออกพรรษา) after having preached to his mother and the divinities in Tavatimsa Heaven. Besides the signification of Buddhist mythology, a Thai folk legend also tells of Nagas bring earth from the bottom of rivers to build base of temples. Thus, the Naga shape carved stairs are present everywhere in Buddhist temples in Thailand. The most beautiful ones are found in Wat Phumin (วัดภูมินทร์) in Nan (น่าน) province, Wat Supat Thanaram (วัดสุปถนาราม) in Ubon Ratchathani (อุบลราชธานี) province, Wat Doi Suthep (วัดดอยสุเทพ) in Chiang Mai (เชียงใหม่) province, Chedi Phra That Chomkitti (เจดีย์พระธาตุจอมกิติ) in Chiang Saen (เชียงแสน) district, Chiang Rai province (Wat - วัด— means temple in Thai, Chedi เจดีย์ means stupa) where the wave like long serpentine stairs are skillfully carved, called Nak Sadung¹⁷ (นาคสะดุ้ง) in Thai, to symbolize primarily the cosmic water source streaming down to the parched world as described in Vedic mythology. On another note, the mythical Naga is considered as a guardian (Dvarapala - ทวารบาล) in the Theravada Buddhist temples, which frighten monsters away; therefore they may appear on Buddhist constructions as nothing more than in this capacity. There are, to sum up, variable forms of the Nagas found in Thai architectural art but all of them are present in harmonized relationships within cosmology, religions and the water culture.

Naga in Thai sculptural ornaments

In Buddhist mythology, the Naga figures have faithfully accompanied the Buddha since he was about to be born upto his Nirvana. Nagas even stay in the world of men to protect the Buddhist Trinity or the Triple Gems¹⁸ and to guard the Buddhist vestiges for the future generations. Buddhist mythology also states that when crown prince Siddhartha (เจ้าชายสิทธัตถะ) was newly born in Lumpini (ลุมพินี) royal garden (today, in the South of Nepal), the multi-headed *Naga* caused warm waters to gush forth for the baby prince's first bath. The Jataka¹⁹ (called Chadok (ชาดก) in Thai), a Buddhist literature work, created by the Ceylonese (Sri Lanka) in 5th century AD, telling of the Buddha's 547 reincarnations, mentioned in the Bhuridatta Jataka (ภุริทัตชาดก) episode how the Buddha was once born in a Naga form before being

reincarnated into the crown prince Siddhartha. The Naga theme, in Thai Buddhist sculpture, is represented in many ways as given below.

Naga-protecting Buddha

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



Buddha sheltered by Naga's hood, Lopburi style, Ca: 13th century, founded at Wat Na Phra Men, Ayuthaya Province, Bangkok National Museum.

Photo: Phan Anh Tu



Naga protected Buddha, Chom Chaeng Pagoda, Chiang Saen district, Chiang Rai Province. Photo: Phan Anh Tu

The meaning of the Naga-protecting Buddha is a classic reference to Buddhist mythology, which tells how the Buddha meditated for the first seven weeks in different positions. In the sixth week, he was seated under the Muca-linda tree, home of a serpent god called Muca-Linda²⁰ (มูจลินท์). When a strong rainstorm suddenly poured down, the Muca-linda crept out of its lair. The Naga coiled its body into seven circles and lifted the meditating Buddha up above the powerful stream. In my opinion, the Naga-protecting Buddha image was possibly transformed from the Brahmanist legend of Vishnu (วิษณุ) reclining on the coils of the cosmic serpent Shesha-Ananta²¹ (endless serpent) and giving birth to Brahma²² (Phra Phrom - พระพรหม in Thai) the God Creator from a lotus blossoming out from his navel as recounted in the

Bhagavad-Gita, a part of the Mahabharata epic. Before the Naga-protecting Buddha image was known in Indian sculptural art; it appeared that people had come across the statue of Naga coiling around the Jainists' naked body with its seven heads spreading as a canopy. There are, however, some differences: Vishnu is seen to recline on the serpentine coils whereas the Jainists represent the Naga coiling around their bodies and the seated Buddha is shown to meditate on the Naga. The Buddha and the Muca – Linda might have been Indian traditional images which were formed in the pre-Buddhist Era and later transformed in the Buddhist Era.

Naga and Garuda

Garuda²³, the sun eagle (Khrut - กรุต in Thai), is the relentless enemy of the Naga, accordingly to the original description of these two holy beasts in Vedic mythology. In Indian iconography, people usually carve the Garuda image standing on the Naga, the two hands of the bird clasping the tails of the Naga but the Naga cannot be killed as it is also immortal as its enemy, the Garuda, according to the mythology.



Long line of Garudas stepping on Nagas and holding Naga tails in their talons, Wat Phra Keo, Bangkok. Source: <http://depositphotos.com>

The Thai sculpture depicts the image from both the Indian and the Khmer arts but the Thais think that though Garuda is standing on Naga, it is not destroying Naga. Together Naga and Garuda constitute a balance between sky, earth, rain and sunlight. The light from the Garuda illuminates the earth and the water source of the Naga helps growth of the cereals, allowing for continuous life. Differing with the Indian thought, the Thais consider the relationship of Garuda and Naga as a symbiotic association, leading to good harvest. In the traditional iconography, the Thai artists carved Garuda riding on Naga along the walls of Wat Si Sawai (วัดศรีสวาย) in the ancient citadel of Sukhothai (สุโขทัย) or Garuda riding on Naga appears on the front of Wat Na Phra Men (พรหมน้ำพระเมรุ), Ayuthaya (อยุธยา) province and etc. In the Hindu temples, located at Phimai (พิมาย) plateau, the Khmer artists created long queues of Garuda – riding on Naga with two hands lifting the temple roofs. The motif was enthusiastically adapted by the Thai artist when they made a string of Garuda clasping the tails of Nagas, symbolically lifting up Wat Phra Keo (วัดพระแก้ว), Bangkok. The image represents the symbiotic association of Garuda with Nagas rather than their destruction.



Phra Narai on his mount (Garuda) subduing Nagas and Rahu.

Source: <http://thailex.asia>

In some Thai temples, one sometime sees Garuda riding on Naga with God Phra Narai (Vishnu's reincarnation) on his back. This illustrates the association between the two holy beasts, both of them being Phra Narai's holy rides. Although the theme has taken its inspiration from Hindu myth, its signification leans toward Buddhism and is only popular when Theravada Buddhism flourishes in Thailand. They appear in mural paintings in Thai Buddhist temples, especially on the walls of Wat Phra Keo. The motif, Vishnu on Garuda clasping Naga on its talons, moreover, is present in a variety of artifacts in Thai art. On the black and gold lacquered cabinet exhibited in the National Museum Bangkok, thick swirling carved designs show Garuda carrying Phra Narai on its back with two legs stepping on Naga and its talons tightly clasping the serpentine tails.

Naga and Makara

Makara (mythical sea monster) is Varuna's holy mount, God of the Ocean in Vedic mythology. The Indian mythology describes Makara as having the shape of a fish, crocodile, and even lion or dragon. When the Makara²⁴ impacted on Thai culture, it was eventually made to resemble a Naga or a crocodile. The Makara has a unique head with



Naga emanating from Makara's mouth, Chong Chang Pagoda, Chiang Saen district, Chiang Rai province. Photo: Phan Anh Tu

two ears on the sides, an elephantine nose and a wide mouth with Sharpteeth. Especially, in Sukhothai period, the Sawankhalok potters made the ceramic Makara statues by adding two horns, their mouths holding “a pearl” as Chinese dragon. The statues can be seen in the National Museum Bangkok.



Naga emanating from Makara's mouth, Phra Chao Lan Thong Pagoda, Chiang Saen district, Chiang Rai Province. Photo: Phan Anh Tu

In Thai culture, the relationship between Makara and Naga is clearly recognized in sculptural art. Thai artists usually make Makara – spouting - Naga on roofs, stairs of Theravada Buddhist temples. This theme popularly appears in some Southeast Asian countries for instance Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Besides this signification, they also act as holy beasts which frighten monsters away; they may carry a fertility meaning because both of them symbolize water and fertile soil. In Makara – spouting-Naga from its mouth, people can see Makara spouting vegetables or plants on wood or stone carving sceneries in Thai temples. On a field trip at Wat Chom Chang (วัดจอมช้าง), Chiang Saen province, I once saw many Makaras – spouting-Nagas on roofs and stairs. But here, Makaras’ claws and fangs were broken and their eyes blinded by two cement pieces. The villagers considered Makaras as monsters. Their fangs and claws if left intact, the Makaras could come out in the field and kill cattle. As I can see, Nagas symbolize the

good deeds but Makaras personify evil. The Makara – spouting-Naga implies that he has no ability to harm the other animals. And the villagers think that if they blind the Makaras, and take away their fangs, they are harmless. When I travelled to the other regions afterward I also saw many statues of Makara – spouting-Naga but the Makaras are still intact. It proves that there are different conceptions of Makara in Thai culture, according to the identity of each region in Thailand.

Conclusion

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

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

The significance of Naga in Thai architectural and sculptural ornaments is a representation of the association of the water culture, indigenous legends and philosophical influence of Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism. Furthermore, the architectural and sculptural images are inherited from different cultures such as India, Sri Lanka, Mon, Khmer, Java and China resulting into a specific Thai cultural identity, a sum of diverse influences. The serpent cult however did not last in Thailand and Southeast Asia as it did in Southern India. The reason was the widespread adoption of Buddhism, and the fact that Naga stories had permeated Buddhism to such a degree it became impossible to worship Nagas independently of the Buddha.

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References

- ¹ Called Mae Nam Khong in Thai; Mae means mother, Nam means water; Mae Nam refers to the river; Khong means things; Mekong River means the river full of things.
- ² A main character's name in a legend of the Tai Lu groups those living Sipsongpanna. The story tells that in olden times, a young woman, Nang Sa went fishing in Mekong River near her home in Southern Yunnan, and touched what she believed to be a log floating in the water. Later, she gave a birth to 10 baby boys. A serpent king one day showed up claiming that the boys were his sons. Nang Sa was scared so she took her children to run away but the youngest boy couldn't escape. Thus, Naga King came to lap him, after which brought him to bath in Mekong River. When 10 baby boys grew up, Nang Sa asked for girls' hand for them. Then, the youngest boy was appointed to be leader of the tribe and this clan multiplied the descendants who became Tai groups. Among those, there were the ancestors of Thai and Laotian people
- ³ The same racial name of Thai although it is used to means those living outside Siam
- ⁴ Using solely for the name of the race representing the majority of people in Siam. The adjectives Thai and Siamese are interchangeable because of the pre dominance of Thais in the country
- ⁵ A sacred city under Mekong river course, which is the water realm of Nagas in Thai and Laotian legends
- ⁶ Bamboo rockets used in rain propitiation
- ⁷ Considered as the symbol of Thailand Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperative. It is also one of six symbols of Kingdom of Thailand including in Naga (Nak), Garuda (Khrut), Lotus (Dokbua), Eravan (Elephant), Nang Wack and Orchid
- ⁸ Ancient Indianized Kingdom located in Central Vietnam was annexed by Vietnamese in the 17th centuries. Nowadays, there are still Muslim and Hindu Cham communities living in the Central and the South Vietnam.
- ⁹ Early Indianized State in Southeast Asia, its central is suggested to be located in Mekong Delta (Southern Vietnam). The French scholars hypothesized Funam Kingdom as pre - Khmer empire.
- ¹⁰ Means the Dawn of Happiness in Thai. Sukhothai is considered as the first independent state of Thai nation

- ¹¹ Is a district in Udon Ratchathani province. In Thai legend, Nong Han Luong is considered as a Great Lake where Naga lived before becoming mainland
- ¹² An archaeological site located in Chieng Rai province. Vieng means City, Nong means Lake and Lom means Sink. Vieng Nong Lom means Lake Sunk City. This name reminds more or less of a Thai myth to tell of Naga king who sunk the city as the human king and his court officials ate a great white eel caught from Mae Khong River
- ¹³ Kingdom of Naga Race, that implies to a certain mythical land in the North of Thailand
- ¹⁴ The story of Thai E - San and Laotian tells of a Naga Prince, who wishes to marry a Khmer princess. So the Prince, Phangkhi, transforms into a squirrel to be near her. The Princess asks her hunter to get it for her. But, she orders a poison arrow to be used by mistake, and the Prince is killed. she shares his meat with most everyone in the city. When the Naga King finds out, he marches his army to the city and kills everyone who dared to eat the meat of his son
- ¹⁵ Each year, at nights in the middle of November, there is so much blame lighted out of the Mekong River, in the current between Nong Khai province and Vientiane of Laos. The legends explain that Phya Nagi (King Naga) vomits the blame to welcome the Lord Buddha who descends to the men's world from Tavatimsa heaven after preaching to his mother and Hindu gods
- ¹⁶ Called Phra Sumen in Thai, pyre usually shapes in receding tiers to represent Mount Meru
- ¹⁷ Naga in wave - like motion, used in several parts of the monastery including balustrades and compound walls
- ¹⁸ Which are the Buddha, Dharma (Law), and Sangha (religious community)
- ¹⁹ The Buddhist literature that tells about the Lord Buddha's 547 previous incarnations. Based on Jataka, the Thais adapted into the new one, called Panasa Jataka or Chadot
- ²⁰ A mythical serpent protected Buddha for his meditation
- ²¹ Endless Serpent carries Vishnu on the Milky Ocean
- ²² God of Universal Creation, who was born on a lotus base blossoming out from Vishnu's navel in Bhagavad-Gita
- ²³ Khrut in Thai, mythical bird – man, a carrier of God Vishnu
- ²⁴ Sea monster resembles crocodilian shape that is considered as holy ride of Varuna, God of Ocean, in Vedic myth