

THE CONCEPT OF THE NĀGA IN CAMBODIA SOCIETY

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Abstract

In Cambodian culture, the fundamental beliefs in the Nāga stem from 1) the ancient belief that the Khmers are the descendants of Phra Thong and Nang Nāga 2) the belief in Hindu religion which uses the figure as part of their architecture and sculpture such as the Nāga in several Cambodian temples and 3) the belief in Buddhism which even the Buddha was once born as a Nāga and the Nāga is depicted as the protector of the religion. All these 3 beliefs have been blended, forming the belief in the Nāga of Khmer people.

The Nāga has been used as symbols in Cambodia society. For instance, it can be a symbol of Cambodian ancestors and reproduction. In the wedding ceremony of Khmer people, the groom has to hold the hem of the bride's shawl. This symbolizes an event in the legend when Phra Thong holds the hem of Nang Nāga's shawl while they are going down to the world of the Nāga. Both the wedding ceremony and the legend of Phra Thong and Nang Nāga imply the idea of reproduction of the Khmer. Further to this, the Nāga has also been portrayed as people born with luck and with special privileges. A case in point is the legend of Preah Sdach Kon who is believed to be supported by the Nāga until he is made king. Apart from this, the Nāga is also depicted as those who protect Buddhism. This can be seen when Buddhists use flags with the Nāga in Buddhist ceremonies and rituals. Moreover, the Nāga is used as the symbol of fertility and a bridge connected between the earth and heaven. Therefore, the Nāga has been portrayed in paintings, sculpture, architecture, and traditions and has also been used by many companies and government departments.

Keywords: Nāga, belief, Cambodia Society.

INTRODUCTION

The word "naga" in Khmer is borrowed from Pali and Sanskrit, meaning most sublime and pure. It is used to call Buddhas, private buddhas and arhats because these persons are immaculate ones who have extinguished all defilements and do not have to enter the cycle of birth and death ever again. Ordinary people with shame and fear for evil deeds or those intending to receive Buddhist ordination are also called nagas. Naga also means elephant, big snake and Alexandrian laurel tree (Supreme Patriarch Chuon Nath, 1967: 499-500). Nonetheless, on hearing the word naga, most people think of the big snake rather than the others.

This article is aimed at examining the naga folklore apparent in Khmer society, including the naga symbol

apparent in Khmer society, from the past to the present.

Origin of Naga Folklore in Khmer Society

3 streams of naga folklore are apparent in Khmer society: 1) naga from the traditional belief of the Khmer, 2) naga from the Brahmanic belief and 3) naga from the Buddhist belief, with details as follows.

Naga from the Traditional Belief of the Khmer

Naga is regarded a sacred animal revered by the Khmer as their ancestor. This belief originated from the legend of the origination of the Khmer race, "Preah Thong - Neang Neak", which says that a foreign king named "Preah Thong" travels by sea from a faraway land until he meets "Neang Neak Soma". Afterward, she becomes his wife. The naga who is his father-in-law drains the whole sea, resulting in the appearance of a land named

“Khokatholok Land”, for above that ground a Pipal tree has come up. The naga grants this land as a wedding gift, which later on becomes Cambodia in the present, and the descendants of Preah Thong and Neang Neak become the ancestors of all the Khmer (Prom Chinda, 2013: 11-25).

This legend reflects the significance of the naga as the originator of the land of Cambodia and a being related to the Khmer regal lineage. There probably is some signification to this account for there is a legend that says that Phimean Akas is believed to be a sacred place where ancient Khmer kings had to come to sleep with the 9-headed naga for the abundance of the kingdom before they could go to sleep with their wives or concubines.



Figure 1. Phimean Akas Temple, Siam Riap, Cambodia.

Naga from the Brahmanic belief

In Brahmanism, naga is a sacred animal. Indian mythology often mentions nagas, such as Naga Ananta, who is the seat of Narayana, and Naga Kaliya, who is subdued by Krishna.

The belief about naga that came along with Brahmanism has appeared in Khmer art since the Pre-Angkorian period, in narrative carved images and component parts of religious places, such as bridge railings, especially during the Preah Ko, Koh Ker, Baphuon, Angkor Wat and Bayon periods, in which naga-related art was particularly profuse. For example, at Bakong (built during the reign of King Indravarman I), a naga bridge was built at the entrance to the castle, or at Thom Castle, Koh Ker (built during the reign of King Jayavarman IV), a

bridge with images of nagas creeping on the ground near the castle entrance was built. The construction of naga bridges shows the cleverness of the Khmer artisans, who rendered not only architectural beauty but also an irrigational benefit, for in the construction of the castles, moats were usually required to be built around them. This is a principle in the cosmological tradition (Yian Chittai, 2010-2011: 115-116).



Figure 2. Vishnu asleep on the naga, Angkor Wat Temple, Cambodia.

Naga from the Buddhist belief

In Buddhism, naga is a very important animal because the Lord Buddha once assumed an incarnation of “Naga Phurithat” who had excellent preceptive virtue, which is the sixth incarnation in the ten incarnations.

Besides, in the 7th week after the Supreme Buddha attained enlightenment, “Naga Muchalinda” crept up and spread his hoods to shelter the Supreme Buddha from the sun and rain (McMeher, 2002: 54). This is the origin of the Naga-Sheltered Buddha image, the Buddha image of those born on Saturday and the most important one revered by the Khmer.

Naga symbol in Khmer culture

The naga symbol apparent in Khmer culture can convey 4 types of meanings: 1) Khmer ancestors, 2) identity of a blessed one, 3) the weather or the bridge between the human world and heaven and 4) guardian of Buddhism. The symbol functions as the constructor of Khmer culture in different aspects as follows.

Naga is the symbol of Khmer ancestors

When a man and a woman is bound in love, the families of both will take the dates of birth of the couple to a monk or someone with astrological knowledge to help check their fortunes, which is called “naga compatability” reading, a method of telling fortune on the love and marriage relationship of a couple to be married. The reason the naga is used as a symbolic animal for this divination, in the author’s view, is the naga is the symbol of the ancestors in Khmer culture, a matter concerning procreation. Divination with the aid of the naga to check whether the fortunes of the man and the woman are compatible is a matter directly related to procreation.

As the fortunes of the man and the woman are well compatible, the relatives of both partners will arrange a wedding ceremony. In a Khmer wedding ceremony, which is regarded as a procreative ritual, the bridegroom holds the edge of the bride’s breast cloth while walking into the ritual hall where water is poured from a conch shell over the couple’s hands. The custom of the bridegroom’s holding the edge of the bride’s breast cloth while walking inside is derived from a motif in the legend of Preah Thong and Neang Neak, which is about the origination of the Khmer race, when Preah Thong holds the edge of Neang Neak’s breast cloth while descending into the underworld.



Figure 3. In Khmer wedding ceremony

Moreover, the Khmer turned the Brahmanic and Buddhist nagas into a naga that is the Khmer’s ancestor as seen in the explanation of the Khmer of later generations that the carved images at stone

castles presenting the “Krishna-Subdues-Naga-Kaliya” scene are images of Preah Thong killing the naga who is his father-in-law, for instance. In the story, after Preah Thong marries Neang Neak, he takes her up to the human world. The father-in-law naga orders Preah Thong that when building the castle, the creation of any image of the Garuda is absolutely prohibited because the Garuda and nagas are natural enemies. When Preah Thong has the Bayon Castle built, however, he orders a Garuda image to be made at the stairway because he does not wish for the father-in-law to pay visits. As the naga comes to visit his daughter and son-in-law, he sees the Garuda image at the entrance at the front of the castle, so he cannot get inside and is obliged to creep in through the ancient well in the middle of the castle instead. As he sees the son-in-law, the naga is delighted and hurries to wrap himself around him and squeeze him. Yet Preah Thong mistakes this for the father-in-law’s intention to kill him, so he rips the naga’s body in two, splattering naga poison on his body. It cannot be washed off no matter how hard he tries, which results in his leprosy. Thus, the Khmer of later generations mistake the images of Preah Yom with lichen stains on him for those of Preah Thong having become leprous. As for the carved images of the Krishna-Subdues-Naga-Kaliya scene, some Khmer mistake them for those of Preah Thong killing the father-in-law naga (Uem Sokhonthea, 2006: 20), and this tale has been passed down and become considerably popular in Khmer society.



Figure 4. “Krishna-Subdues-Naga-Kaliya”, Wat Phu Temple, Laos.

Moreover, the reason the Khmer prefer making Naga-Sheltered Buddha images to making Buddha images of other modes is the naga is the representative of the

Khmer ancestors. Paying homage to the Buddha images of this mode is tantamount to paying homage to their ancestors as stated above. No one thinks of Naga Muchalinda as apparent in the history of the Lord Buddha in any way.

Another major piece of evidence showing that the Khmer prefer creating Naga-Sheltered Buddha images to creating Buddha images of other modes is the “Ratnatraya Mahayana” worship tradition, the worship of 3 divine beings together as a triad, which has existed since the Pre-Angkorian period. The worshipped representation consists of the Naga-Sheltered Buddha image, which is usually made in the middle and the representation of the Lord Buddha, and the images of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva and Maitreya Bodhisattva or Vajrapani Bodhisattva on the sides. Later on, the image of Prajnaparamita started to be created in place of Maitreya Bodhisattva around the 15th Buddhist century and became most popular during the reign of King Jayavarman VII (Vanvipha Suneta, 2003: 26). Noticeably, the Khmer artisans choose the Naga-Sheltered Buddha image as the representative of the Lord Buddha. Although there are Buddha images of numerous modes, the others are not popular.

Most of the Naga-sheltered Buddha images made during the reign of Jayavarman VII hold some objects in their hands. This signifies the Buddha named Bhaisajyaguruprabha, or Medicine Buddha. Usually this Buddha sits on a lotus without the sheltering naga as seen in Khmer art. This characteristic is not found in any other countries with the Mahayana Buddhist faith, whether in China, Korea, Japan, or India, which is the origin of Mahayana Buddhism (Seng Khonthee, 2009: 55-56). Subsequently, even though the Khmer have turned to Theravada Buddhism, Naga-Sheltered Buddha images are still popular due to the close ties derived from the belief that nagas are their ancestors.



Figure 5. Ratnatraya Mahayana, National museum Surin, Thailand

Naga is the symbol of identity of a blessed one

Dr. Ruah Cantriabot (2007) bizarrely talked about the history of Preah Sadechakorn who is an important figure in Khmer history that he was one with great merit deserving to be appointed king, for he had a naga that was there to help him. For instance, when Preah Srisukhonthabot had a dream in which a naga blew fire to burn the city and then held a tiered umbrella between his teeth and flew eastward, as he awoke from his sleep the next day, he summoned the court astrologer to tell his fortune in the throne hall. The astrologer divined that there would come a blessed one to usurp his throne. As he turned his gaze to King Preah Sadechakorn, Preah Srisukhonthabot suddenly saw a miraculous vision; he saw two nagas spreading their hoods over Preah Sadechakorn on his left and right.

When Preah Srisukhonthabot intended to kill Preah Sadechakorn by trickery, ordering Preah Sadechakorn to dive and fetch a net and then commanding the nobles to help one another cast the net to catch Preah Sadechakorn so as to hinder him from getting a chance to rise above the water surface to breathe, the naga rescued him up from the water and brought him to shore. Afterward, when Preah Srisukhonthabot's soldiers who followed Preah Sadechakorn found him and intended to kill him, the naga came to his assistance again, rescuing him from death.

Later on, Preah Sadechakorn assembled men and led them to seize Angkor. After killing Preah Srisukhonthabot, he had his coronation held to become king. His reign lasted only a short period of time, and not much is said about him in historical documents. However, his story seems to impress the

Khmer and endure in their memory to a considerable degree, as evident in the its appearance in the form of children's literature, printed in color in 2 languages, Khmer and English, by the Books World press in 2012. The impact of his story is also seen in the construction of his statue to be worshipped as a "holy soul" by the sea in Kep Province in order to protect the people living in that area from tribulations.

Even Samdech Akeak Moha Sena Padey Techo Hun Sen compared himself to Preah Sadechakorn for their being commoners and born in the year of the dragon or naga but being able to rise to the status of having power in the land because Preah Sadechakorn had a naga that was there to help him and so does Hun Sen. He said that he was born in the year of the dragon with flooding, that is, he was born in the greatest year of the zodiac cycle, the year of the naga, and the occurrence of a great flood in that year was a manifestation of the naga's great power; he can bring about a great flood, which is an abnormal incidence that does not happen so often (Cannara, 2014: Interview). The matter about Hun Sen's admiration for Preah Sadechakorn seems to be true because Hun Sen granted a fund to support Dr. Ruah Cantriabot in researching and publishing the book "Preah Sadechakorn". Hun Sen also wrote a commendation to exalt Preah Sadechakorn as a heroic king in this book.

Naga is the symbol of the weather and the bridge between the human world and heaven

At Khmer castles built in dedication to Brahmanic gods, a great number of naga-related carved images are often seen, especially those depicting the "Krishna-Subdues-Naga-Kaliya" scene. The reason is people during that time were afraid of water scarcity, of having no water to use, drink, or farm, so they had to carve these images, hoping to rely on the power of Krishna to subdue the naga, which is the symbol of the weather, as the myth says that after Krishna accomplishes the subjugation of Naga Kaliya, the cowboys are able to use water as usual. The Khmer in the past believed that these carved images would help make the rain fall in due season, so numerous images of this kind were carved as well as those of Indra riding the elephant Erawan, or those of Krishna Govardhana (Sombow Sopia, 2006: 20).

Presently, Cambodia's Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology uses the image of entwined nagas facing outward to the left and right with a star in the middle and the water below as its symbol. This is because the naga is the symbol of the weather. Any year the naga brings much water, the water sources will be well abundant, whereas any year the naga brings little water, the nation will suffer drought.



Figure 6. The sign of Cambodia's Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology

Furthermore, the naga is the symbol of the bridge connecting the human world to the land of the gods in heaven, as seen in Khmer stone castles where there usually are naga sculptures at the railings of the bridges or stairways leading into religious places (Arunsak Kingmanee, 2012: 51).

Naga is the guardian of Buddhism

A man getting ready for ordination, after having his head shaved and putting on a white robe, is called "neak" or naga by the Khmer. Regarding the origin of this designation, during a certain period of time when the Supreme Buddha was staying at Chetawan Mahavihara Temple, a certain naga with great faith and delight in Buddhism came in disguise to receive a Buddhist ordination successfully. One time when the disguised naga was sleeping in his cell, being in his somnial unconsciousness, he turned back into a naga. A small novice came upon him, so the novice reported this to the Blessed One. The Lord Buddha directed that the naga leave monkhood because he did not permit beasts to receive Buddhist ordination, so the naga asked for a benediction that from then on men who come to receive ordination may be called "nagas". Thus, this has become a custom ever since (Khmer Custom and Tradition Group, 1994: 26-27).

Noticeably, this tale is also widespread in Thailand, where men who are going to receive ordination are called “nagas” no differently than in Cambodia.

Ordination is one manner of prolonging Buddhism. Ancient people believed it to be a way to preserve Buddhism to last as long as to complete the span of 5,000 years. The practice of calling one coming to receive an ordination “naga” can be viewed symbolically as being due to the fact that he is coming to contribute to the preservation of Buddhism from vanishing, like the naga who guards Buddhism.

Moreover, even the component parts of Theravada Buddhist buildings are often made with naga designs. For example, on the roof of the ubosot or vihara, there are the parts called “chofa” (gable finial) and “bai raka” (ridge on the gable edge). The chofa is the naga’s head, which is a third of the gable in size. At some monasteries the chofas are only carved images of naga heads whereas at others they are carved images of nagas holding crystal balls in their mouths. As for the bai raka, it represents the naga’s scales (Hok Sokol and Preap Chanmara, 2010-2011: 115-116), and the naga is the symbol of guardian of Buddhism.



Figure 7. Gable finial and ridge on the gable edge in Buddhism Temples

SUMMARY

Regarding the belief about naga in Khmer society derived from the traditional belief of the Khmer that the naga is their ancestor, since the naga originated the land of Cambodia and is related to the source of the Khmer regal lineage, the naga is also the symbol signifying the identity of a blessed one. The belief

about naga in Khmer society derived from Brahmanism is the naga is the symbol of the weather and the bridge connecting the human world and heaven together. As for the belief about naga influenced by Buddhism, the naga is the guardian of Buddhism.

Naga is a sacred animal in Khmer society and will always be so, no matter how much the world progresses, for the Khmer descend from nagas and the land where they inhabit is also a gift from a naga.

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