

# SACRALIZATION OF THE MEKONG RIVER THROUGH FOLK NARRATIVES<sup>1</sup>

Pathom Hongsuwan<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

*This paper aims to identify the construction of the sacredness of the Mekong River through folk narratives created by the communities of Tibet, China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, located along the banks of the Mekong River.*

*In this paper, the sacralization of the Mekong River is explained through four major kinds of folk narrative; firstly, those about the origin and the characteristics of the Mekong River; secondly, narratives about sacred objects and sacred places; thirdly, narratives about sacred animals and sacred trees; and fourthly, narratives explaining rituals and traditions.*

*This paper discusses the relationship between the Mekong River and folk Buddhism through folk narratives, beliefs and rites that exist among the riverine communities along the Mekong River. This paper will shed light on the folk perspective of the Mekong River as a sacred river through the folk narratives related to the Lord Buddha. Overall, the analysis in*

*this paper indicates the influence and the integration of Buddhism in the folk perception and folk beliefs on the Mekong River.*

## Introduction

Buddhism is the predominant religion of people living along the Mekong River, from highland Tibet (the source) through China, Burma, Laos, and Thailand (the middle of the stream) to Cambodia and Vietnam (the end of the stream). The houses of people are located in the lowland areas and it is believed that people started to settle along the Mekong River 4,000 years ago (Griffith 2001: 181). Thus, the Mekong River has long been a sacred place in peoples' lives, and the origin of civilization is as old as the river itself. This implies that there could be a close relationship between the Mekong River and religious notions, especially Buddhism, because the river has played an important role in the way of life of people in various communities. The relationship between Buddhism and the Mekong River has influenced people living along the banks to create folk narratives related to Buddhism and the common perception of the relationship between Buddhism and the Mekong River.

The peoples' way of life is closely related to the river and has been reflected in the construction of sacred narratives. Joel P. Brereton (1995: 526–531) explains that, according to folk belief, there is a "sacred area," a ritual space, which includes a frontier or boundary and can be separated from the "common area." To describe the sacred area explicitly, Jonathan Z. Smith (1982: 189) has suggested the helpful metaphor of the sacred space as a "focusing lens." The sacred space focuses the attention on the forms, objects, and

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a part of a post-doctoral research entitled, "*The Mekong River: Myths and Relationship with the Tai Peoples*," granted by Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) and The Thailand Research Fund (TRF).

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Thai and Oriental Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mahasarakham University

actions with in it and reveals them as the bearers of religious meaning. The sacred space describe the fundamental constituents of reality as the religious community perceives them, defines the way of life in accordance with that view, and provides a means of access between the human world and the divine world.

A survey of folk narratives among the various communities around the lowlands of the Mekong River, e.g. Tibetan, Tai Lue, Chinese, Laotian, Cambodian and Vietnamese, found that these narratives, to a certain extent, make reference to Buddhism. In the story of the river's origin, for example, it was believed that "the river was created by the power of Lord Buddha who separated the Himalayan mountain range, allowing the water reserved at the top of the mountain to flow down and become the main stream for humankind" (Gargan 2002: 22–23 and Bell 2007: 19, 31). Some narratives explain that the footprints of the Lord Buddha in his various lifetimes are enshrined in the Mekong River. Moreover, the river was also the place to which the Lord Buddha travelled to drink and bathe before *Nirvana* (Luang Phrabang Chronicle). These beliefs have been passed down through folk narratives which can be viewed as creative and imaginary stories that do not exist in the Buddhist canon. However, such folk narratives serve as useful sources when trying to understand the folk perception of Buddhism.

This paper aims to illustrate the relationship between the Mekong River and folk Buddhism through folk narratives and rituals among the communities in the lowlands along the Mekong River. It is hoped that this paper will shed light on the meaning of the Mekong River as a sacred river through the folk narratives about the

Lord Buddha. The findings from this study will add to previous studies of folk Buddhism and the Mekong studies.

### **Sacralization of the Mekong River through folk narratives concerned with the origin and characteristics of the river**

The folk narratives of the people along the Mekong River reflect the perception of the Mekong River as a sacred river created by the Lord Buddha. The origin myth of the Mekong River told by the peoples in the upstream Mekong, e.g., Tibetans, Nepalese, etc., indicates the role of the Lord Buddha as the god who created the Mekong River. It is told that, originally, there was a huge lake encircled by mountain ranges. It was the Lord Buddha who divided the mountain ranges into half and, by doing so, liberated the lake and the water to become the streams that flowed downwards giving birth to the Mekong River which travelled a long way onwards to the ocean (Gargan 2002: 22–23).

Thus, it was the power of the Lord Buddha that created the great stream of the Mekong River. In other words, it was the Lord Buddha who split the mountains, creating the watercourse that led to different boundaries. Had he not done so, the Mekong River would never have been born. Another version of the *myth of the Himalayas* tells how the Lord Buddha used a sword to slice into the mountain and release the water inside thus creating the watercourse. The watercourse became sacred streams that flowed downward creating the Mekong River we know today. For Tibetans, all the river streams running from the Himalayan mountain ranges, including the Mekong River, are symbols of an entity that acts as the eternal bond between the Lord Buddha and human beings.

In the culture of certain peoples living in the upstream segment of the Mekong River, there exists a trek that symbolizes the relationship between the Mekong River and the Lord Buddha. The Tibetans living in the highlands of the Himalayas have a tradition of people travelling in pilgrimage across the mountain ranges that divide the Mekong and the Salawin Rivers. This pilgrimage is believed by the people to be “a travel to heaven to see the Lord Buddha.” This belief and practice among the Buddhist people of highland Tibet in the upstream part of the Mekong also signifies a powerful accumulation of merit and a return to nature (Suttichai Yoon 2009: 30). In addition, the *Legend of Muang Chiangrung*, (a legend of the Tai Lue (Dai) in Yunnan, China) tells that the muddy colour of the Mekong stream is due to washing of the Lord Buddha’s robes and those of his followers’ in the Mekong River. This kind of folk narratives indicates belief that the Mekong River has a sense of sacredness.

The narratives mentioned above reflect a belief in the relationship between the Lord Buddha’s supreme power and the origin of the Mekong River, which flows from the sacred mountain range down stream. Later on, the watercourse became the habitat of the *Nagas*, the place becoming known as *Nong Sae*/หนองแส. In Laos and Northeastern Thai myths, there are stories about the two *Nagas* who were good friends who loved and supported each other. One day, they quarrelled over the sharing of food and a war developed between the two *Nagas*. The war created trouble for other living creatures in the stream so *Thaen Luang*/เทพทันหลวง ‘the Great Sky God’ commanded that the two *Nagas* compete by digging up the land to make a path to the ocean and the winner would be rewarded with a giant

golden catfish. Eventually, the *Naga* who dug the Mekong River became the winner.

Even though the content of this legend does not present the Lord Buddha himself as the one who commanded the two *Nagas* to dig the river, in other legends, for example, the *Legend of Mun River*/ตำนานแม่น้ำมูล (a Northeastern Thai legend), the character of the Great Sky God, *Thaen Luang*, is replaced by *Indra*, a Buddhist deity. So in this legend, it is *Indra* who gives the command to the *Nagas*. This then reflects creation and the making sacred of the Mekong River through a Buddhist deity, *Indra*.

This same story of the fight between the two *Nagas* which ends with one *Naga* receiving a giant fish as a reward has also been used to explain the exclusive existence of natural giant catfish in the Mekong River. This also demonstrates the belief that the river has a “life” and “mind” and that the river creates stability for the universe, since it is the source of various kinds of fish. Moreover, many people believe that the nearer the river is to the sea, the more plentiful it will be. For instance, the entrance of the Mekong River before flowing into the South China River is called *Lake Tonle Sap* (in Cambodia) meaning the area that has the greatest abundance of fresh water fish in the Mekong River.

In relation to the legend concerning the land being dug to create the Mekong River, the *Legend of Phra That Phanom*/ตำนานพระธาตุพนม (a legend of Laotian and Northeastern Thai origin) states that all the *Nagas* became the Mekong River’s guardians and were known as *Phi Chao Nam Chao Tha*/ผีเจ้าน้ำเจ้าท่า. When the Lord Buddha travelled down to earth to propagate Buddhism,

these Nagas, after listening to His teaching, had faith in Buddhism and volunteered to be the guardians of all Buddhist places built along the Mekong River.

In Sipsongpanna, Yunnan, China, many temples were constructed in the land of the Tai Lue people where the people living along the river are Buddhists. Luang Temple is one of the oldest temples and a statue of Naga is kept there. It is believed that in the past, the Nagas at Luang Temple wanted to sneak out to play in the Mekong stream at Nong Toeng/หนองเต็ง, not far from the temple. The villagers were afraid that the Nagas might not return to guard the temple so they shackled the Nagas' feet with metal to prevent them from going to play in the river (Bunchuay Srisawat 2004: 170). This resulted in the change of the Nagas' habits from those of "wild" Nagas to "virtuous" Nagas (นาคทรงศีล). The Mekong River is therefore considered a powerful river that has the potential to change the status of Nagas from "wild" to "virtuous" beings.

Apart from the various narratives explaining the relationship between the Mekong River and the Lord Buddha as described above, there is also another legend, the *Legend of the Huay Nam Mak*/ตำนานห้วยน้ำหมาก. Huay Nam Mak is called "Huay Mieng" in the Laotian language. It is a stream near *Wat Phon San*/วัดโพนสัน, a temple in Bolikamsai, Laos. The legend recounts how the Lord Buddha and his 400 followers came to the Ponsan (where, later on in 1933, a Buddha footprint was found, dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century) and the Buddha's followers helped to construct small pavilions to stay in during the rain's retreat. The followers chewed betel nuts (*mak*) and a novice who served the followers collected the monks'spit from

chewing the betel nuts (*nam mak*) and poured it into the stream resulting in the lower stream of the Mekong River turning red (due to the red colour of the betel nuts). Nowadays, this stream is still a muddy red. Accordingly, the colour of the Mekong River has been associated with the folk narrative concerning the Buddha's life history.

Water from the Mekong River is however perceived to be sacred because it has been used in various court and community rites. For example, in the past, Laotians in Luang Phra Bang believed that water from the Mekong River had to be used in the King's accession ceremony. Similarly, it is also believed that water and stones from the Mekong River were used in the tradition of worshipping the That Phranom Stupa in Nakorn Phanom province. The water was used as an intermediary to invite *Naga*, as the Mekong river guardian, and *Upakut*/พระอุปกุต, the God of Protection in Laotian and Northeastern Thai folk belief) to come to guard and help the ceremony proceed smoothly. The fact that people use water from the Mekong River for various ritual purposes confirms that people along the river believe in the sacredness of the Mekong River.

### **Sacralization of the Mekong River through the folk narratives of sacred objects and sacred places**

Apart from the narratives indicating that the Mekong River was created from the Lord Buddha's power, there is also another set of folk narratives that explain the sacredness of the river by making sacred objects and places along the river in relation to the Buddha's journey. It is narrated that the Lord Buddha travelled to visit the communities along the Mekong River and taught *dharma* to the indigenous

peoples. It is also told that the Lord Buddha would press his feet on the stones along the river bank and, thus, the stones became the evidence of his sacred footprint. Other kinds of evidence are the various Buddhist temples along the Mekong River.

There are quite a number of folk narratives about the Buddha's footprint. There is the story of the Nagas asking the Buddha to impress his footprints on the stones so that the Nagas could bring the sacred stone down to the bottom of the Mekong River to worship. In the *Legend of the Ponsan Buddha's footprint/ตำนานพระบาทโพนสัน* told around the Bolikamsai sub-district of Laos, it is said that when the Lord Buddha came to preach to the indigenous people along the Mekong River, the people asked him to leave his footprints near the river bank. Since then there has always been water coming out of the footprint and people believe that it has certain sacred powers and can help cure sickness and remove evil.

Another interesting folk narrative is the *Legend of the Wernpla Buddha's Footprint/ตำนานพระบาทเวินปลา* told among northeastern Thai people. It is related that when the Lord Buddha travelled to this area, the king of the golden-mouth fish/ปลาปากคำ asked Him to press his footprint on a stone in the middle of the Mekong River. This sacred stone of the Buddha's footprint is believed to be guarded by the king of the golden-mouth fish. It is also believed that the king of the golden-mouth fish will live long until the era of *Phra Sri Arayamettrai* (the future Buddha). This story can thus be seen as sacralizing the stone in the middle of the Mekong River since it is believed that it was pressed by the Buddha's footprint.

Apart from the narratives of the Buddha's footprints, there are also many stories about the Buddha images found under the Mekong River. For example, the *Legend of the Phra Suk Buddha Image/ตำนานพระสุก* told by northeastern Thais tells of the three images of the Lord Buddha, Phra Suk, Phra Sai and Phra Serm. These three images were constructed in Viantian in the Lanchang Kingdom in Laotian history. Later, the three Buddha images were put on a raft along the Mekong River but there was a big storm and Phra Suk sunk beneath the river. Consequently, villagers called this area Wern Suk.

A similar story of a Buddha image being enshrined under the Mekong River is also found in the northern Thai *Legend of the Lan Tue Buddha Image* of Chiang Rai province in Thailand. It is said that the temple where the image of Buddha was enshrined collapsed during the Chiangsaen period. The whole temple as well as the image of Buddha, sank into the Mekong River, where it has remained ever since (Dararat Weerapong 2003: 39). This shows how the local belief in the object lying beneath the Mekong River is related to the Lord Buddha and it sheds light on the belief that the Mekong stream is sacred so that people need to be respectful to the river.

It is believed by the Laotians that these sunken Buddha images used to be the Lanchang Kingdom's Buddha's images. Later on when Thailand and Laos became separate countries, the Mekong River became the border between them. It was believed that the Buddha images had feelings like those of humans and since the images loved both countries, they sank beneath the Mekong River and they became the mutual property of the two countries, not of either particular side.

The sacralizing of the Mekong River includes folk narratives of the Buddhist stupa (the Buddhist for housing the Buddha's relics) in the river. An example is the La Nong Stupa/พระธาตุหล้าหนอง commonly known as the *Stupa in Middle of Mekong River*/พระธาตุกลางลำน้ำโขง in Muang District, Nong Khai province, Thailand. It is believed that, originally, this stupa was located on the river bank. It is narrated that several hundreds years ago when the Mekong stream changed its direction, the stupa was submerged beneath the river. Since then, the villagers have believed that the Buddha's relics were instead taken care of by the Naga in his underworld kingdom. So, this illustrates the villagers' perception of the Mekong River as a sacred river containing the Buddha's relics.



Figure 1: La Nong Stupa or known as the stupa in the middle of the Mekong River.

Furthermore, certain stones or small islands along the Mekong are also associated with the Lord Buddha. Examples of these are *Khon Phi Long*/คอนผีหลง, an island at Chiang Kong District, Chiang Rai province and the carved stones of Buddha's image found there. Another place is the Ting Cave/ถ้ำติ่ง in Luang Phrabang, Laos. In this

cave, a number of Buddha images are enshrined. Moreover, the construction of many temples in Luang Phra Bang or in the communities parallel to the Mekong River can be seen as examples of the special notion of building sacred places along the river which is a different notion that of central Thailand (Surasawat Suksawat 2001: 48).

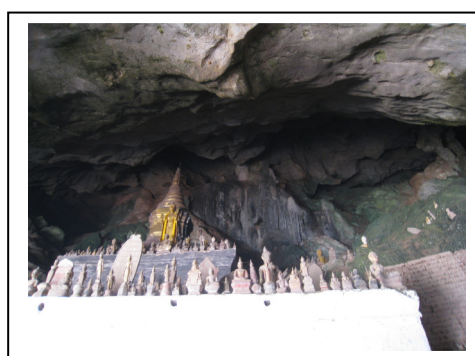


Figure 2: Ting Cave, located along the Mekong River in Luang Phrabang, Laos

The kinds of folk narrative mentioned above provides evidence indicating people's perception of the Mekong as a sacred river. Since the temples were constructed parallel to the stream of the river, the main Buddha images have to face upstream since this was also believed to have been the birthplace of the Lord Buddha. The Mekong River is therefore like a "compass" to the Buddhist architecture along the river and for this reason, the Mekong is considered to be a part of the Buddhist architectural system of thought. Clifford Geertz (2000) argues that people's behaviour in the community is the constructed symbol for communication and so this reflects the hidden meaning in the symbolic behaviour of the Laotian people. It also reveals the attempt to construct a relationship between the Mekong River and the Lord Buddha.

So, the folk narratives concerning the Buddha's footprint, images and the stupas enshrined in the area of the Mekong River are evidence which reflects the beliefs and practices of people living along the river banks. These people have tried to integrate the unified relationship between the Mekong River and Buddhist belief. Such construction of the sacred meaning of the physical environment whether they be mountains, streams, islands, stones or the bends of the watercourse of the Mekong River reflect the worldview, values and beliefs of the people along the Mekong River. The Mekong River has thus been treated as a *sacred river* that contains many Buddhist symbols and this has enhanced the value of the river as a natural resource which should be maintained, guarded and protected.

The co-existence between the Mekong River and the symbolic representation of the Lord Buddha indicates the unified relationship between humans and nature. Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that even though the content of the myths might not be reliable, the story has been created using "language as a code" which needs to be understood in addition to the thought used to communicate myths. The investigation of all folk narratives reflects "the primitive thought" which was the result of the human beings living together with nature, being a part of each other (see more detail in Siraporn Nathalang 2009: 277–284).

### **Sacralization of the Mekong River through the folk narratives of sacred animals and sacred trees**

Folk narratives concerning the Mekong River told in various communities along the river have enhanced the peoples'

perception that the animals inhabiting in the river are somehow related to Buddhist belief. The giant catfish/ปลาบึก widely known as an important species of fish living in the Mekong River, has been accepted as a sacred fish and its narrative is related to the legend of the Mekong River.

The giant catfish is perceived by local people as a large animal that eats only plants and is kind and harmless to other kinds of animals in the river. Moreover, the white skin of the giant catfish indicates "purity" and "cleanness." The distinctive feature of the giant catfish are the eyes that look downwards in the same way as the eyes of the Buddha images (Pathom Hongsuwan 2009: 155). For this reason, the image of the giant catfish with its eyes looking downwards as if kindly looking after people has led to the belief that it is a sacred fish and that it is perceived as a "meritorious fish" thus relating it to Buddhist notions.

In addition, Thais and Laotians believe that the giant catfish swam against the stream to pay its respects to the Phra That Phanom Stupa and Phra Bang's Buddha image, as well upstream of the Mekong River to pay its respects to the Buddha who was believed to be the creator of the river. This illustrates the relationship between the folk narrative and beliefs concerning the sacred fish and the Buddha.

William Bascom (1984: 9) indicates that the myth is the sacred narrative of supernatural beings, not of human beings. Thus animals in myths may have some kind of cosmological symbol related to world creation. The image of the giant catfish in the sacred narrative told among people along the Mekong River thus presents the giant catfish as a "sacred

fish.” This has led to the formation of the local beliefs and certain custom and prohibitions regarding the sacred giant catfish of the Mekong River.

The image of the sacred fish also exists in Chinese culture. For example, animals on palace roofs look like dragons that have tails like fish. In the Chinese myth, it is believed that this kind of dragon with the fish tail is the symbol of “the Rain God” and so, this figure is put on the roof to protect the building from fire (Morgenstern 1993: 119).

Furthermore, in Laotian-Thai culture, there is a rain making ritual in which the fish figure has a place. In the rain-making ritual, there is the tradition of “the chanting of the fish spell/พิธีสวดคาถาปลาคือ.” This is in accordance with the folk narrative that tells how, in the past, the Lord Buddha was born as a snake-head fish living in a pond. At that time, there was a drought so the pond became dry and all the animals living in the pond were suffering. So, Lord Buddha, as a snake-head fish, made a request to the rain god and since the snake-head fish was a “moral fish” that never exploited or troubled other animals, the rain god provided heavy rain and brought fertility back to the pond (Khampuy Pilawong 2009: 264). Hence, narrative presents the image of the fish as a symbol of fertility and morality.

Apart from the narrative concerning the sacred fish living in the Mekong River as discussed above, there are also narratives regarding sacred trees in the Mekong River. The Maneekote tree/ต้นมณีโคตร is a local tree whose name is derived from *Rama Jataka*, a Laotian version of *Ramayana*. The narrative of this tree is related to both the Buddha and the Mekong River. In the story, the Lord

Buddha in one of his past lives was born as Lord Rama. The tree was brought from heaven by Indra. In the story, while Rama was travelling along the Mekong River, he found a Maneekote tree in the middle of the river and ate the fruit from one of its branches. After eating the fruit Rama became a monkey and later on got another monkey to be his wife and she gave birth to a son named Hanuman. Until today, Laotian people believe that this magic tree can be found only on the isles in the middle of the Mekong River especially at Khon Phapheng/คอนพะเพ็ง and also at Lee Phi waterfall/น้ำตกหลี่สี in southern Laos. Accordingly, the Mekong River is, in this way, sacralized by the folk narrative of the magic “Maneekote tree.”



Figure 3: The Maneekote tree in the middle of the Mekong River, Champasak Province, Laos

The narrative of Rama as an episode from the Buddha’s life concerning his eating of the fruit from a sacred tree situated in the middle of the Mekong River suggests the connection between traditional beliefs about this sacred tree and Buddhism. It was later on claimed that the Buddha used to sit under this Maneekote tree. Accordingly, in Laos, it is widely believed that if the people worship this tree, it is like worshipping the Lord Buddha.



Among northeastern Thais, there also exist other narratives about magic trees. The story goes that there was a king travelling on a boat from southern China downstream to the lower Mekong River. He was very hungry so he came ashore to find some taro and yams to eat. A lady giant who was the owner of the territory, saw him and tried to harm the king and his retinue. The king suppressed the giant with his power. The giant begged for her life giving the king two sacred things in return. The first sacred thing was a branch of the Maneekote tree that can make people die if one end is pointed at them and can revive dead people if the other end is pointed at them. The second sacred thing was a magic gourd. After that, the king preached dharma to the giant telling her to stop killing animals and to observe religious precepts.

Examples of the narratives described above reflect the belief in certain sacred trees in the Mekong River. This suggests that special trees in the Mekong River are sacred and they have a certain kind of magic power. It is also believed that the Maneekote tree has three prosperous branches pointing in three directions: to Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, so, if the three countries are on good terms, they will be blessed with prosperity. Therefore, this sacred tree is perceived as the symbol of prosperity and wealth.

On the one hand, such narratives reflect a belief in sacred nature in relation to the Mekong River. The animals and trees represent a natural environment to be respected and protected by people along the river. On the other hand, they are folk narratives that sacralize the Mekong River. Either way, the importance of the Mekong River is emphasized through these folk narratives and the notion of sacredness.

### **Sacralization of the Mekong River through folk narratives explaining the rituals**

The relationship between the Mekong River and folk Buddhism is clearly shown in the calendrical rites in the Laotian and northeastern Thai way of life. These rites reflect the perception of the people towards the relationship between nature, humans, streams, folk beliefs and folk Buddhism. All indicate that the Mekong River is the river of faith and sacredness to the people who live along it.

Regarding the calendrical rites, in northeastern Thai and Laotian tradition, at the end of Buddhist lent on the full moon day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month, there is the rite of *lai rue fai*/ไหลเรือไฟ (decorating the boats with lanterns) to worship the Buddha. It is explained in a folk narrative that Phra Anuruth became a Buddhist saint because he used to give lanterns to the Buddha in his previous life. The venerating of the Mekong stream by lighting lanterns was like the worship of the Lord Buddha. The rite of *lai rue fai* can be seen as using the Mekong River as the mediator between humans and the Buddha. It should also be noticed that the lantern lighting festival also exists in Cambodia with the similar explanation of worshipping the Naga who lives in the *Naga* world to worshipping the Buddha. Performing the *lai rue fai* ritual is also believed to be a way of making merit to enhance the happiness and the prosperity of the people and the community.



Figure 4: The “Fire Boat” (*Lai Rue Fai*) in illuminated boat procession, Mekong River, Nakhon Phanom, Thailand.

In addition, this *lai rue fai* tradition is also related to the Buddhist belief of worshipping the five Buddhas, i.e., Kukusanto, Konakom, Kassapo, Gautama and Sri Arayametrai. Mahasila Werawong (1974) states that the floating of the lit boats is to worship the Mother Ka Phueak, the Mother White Crow, who was in one life the mother of the five Buddhas. According to the story, the mother white crow made a nest to lay her eggs near the river. One day, there was heavy rain and her five eggs were washed away and floated along the stream. Later, various kinds of animals, i.e., a mother hen, a mother Naga, a mother turtle, a mother cow and a mother snake (some say a lion) took each of the eggs and hatched them and the eggs later became the five Buddhas. In gratitude to the mother white crow, Gautama Buddha taught Buddhist to lay people to make a white thread in the shape of the crow’s feet, put the thread in a container filled with oil, then light the fire. This represented a gesture of worship of the mother white crow and was also a way of thanking the stream for bringing the eggs to the five mother animals (Humpan Ratthanawong 2001: 21–22). Before floating the boats along the Mekong River, there was the ritual of the monks chanting to request protection from the Buddha. It is also believed that the Buddha’s power created a lot of rain for

rice growing. Sometimes, villagers also pray for rain from the Naga who lives in the Mekong River to ensure that there is enough rain and “plenty of rice in the field and plenty of fish in the water.”

In Northeastern Thailand and in Laos, there is also a folk explanation of the phenomenon of the red fire balls that emerge from the Mekong on the full moon day of the eleventh month that are the *bang fai phya nak*, the fireballs of the Naga and a means of the Naga paying respect to the Buddha. Some people explain that the event is related to the folk belief that this was the way Naga, when seeing the Buddha descending to earth after visiting his mother in heaven, expressed his joy by spitting fire.

There are certain variation on narratives explaining the “naga fireball” phenomenon although all the versions refer to the Buddha. In Laos, a certain variation narrates that while the Buddha was coming down to earth to save mankind from sin, he stopped around the Mekong river bank and preached to all living creatures. These living creatures had faith in the Buddha and two Nagas become the guardians of the Lord Buddha. Later, the two Nagas asked the Buddha’s permission to join the monkhood but He regarded them as animals. So, the Nagas magically transformed themselves into humans and the Buddha allowed them to be ordained as monks. When other Nagas heard that the two Nagas had joined the monkhood, they were so pleased that they fired rockets up from the Mekong to celebrate and to show gratitude to the Buddha. Ever since, the full moon day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month of every year, has been the anniversary of the day of the two Nagas attaining the monkhood. So, every year, when people see this phenomenon of red fireballs coming up

from the Mekong River, people say that these are the “Naga’s fireballs” (Boonlert Seewichai 1998: 11–18). The phenomenon of the fireballs described above implies the sacredness of the Mekong River.

Apart from the relationship between the Nagas and the Lord Buddha in the narrative about the fireballs, there is another narrative concerning the Naga’s guarding the Buddha from rain. It is believed that in the 5<sup>th</sup> week after the Buddha’s enlightenment, there was a big storm. Naga Mujalin coiled its body around the Lord Buddha and spread a hood over him to protect the Buddha’s head from the storm. This story indicates the integration between the Naga’s belief and Buddhism. And as a result, there is a construction of the Buddha image called *nak prok*, meaning Naga protecting the Buddha (Ruthurford, 2000: 144). From the Laotian perspective, all Nagas living in the Mekong River are therefore sacred animals which have a close relationship with the Buddha and Buddhism. Such an explanation makes the Mekong River part of Buddhist narratives.

In addition, in Cambodia, there is a water festival held on the full moon day of the twelfth month to show gratitude to the Mekong River. Such folk beliefs and narratives are again ways of sacralizing the Mekong River.

## **Conclusion**

This paper investigates the construction of the meaning of Mekong River as “the River of Lord Buddha” through the folk narratives and rituals of peoples in various communities along the lowlands of the Mekong River. In this paper, I have provided four kinds of folk narratives in sacralizing the Mekong River: narratives

concerning the origin and the characteristics of the river, narratives of sacred objects and sacred places, narratives concerning sacred animals and sacred trees in the river and narratives explaining the rituals associated with the narrative of the Buddha.

The findings from this study reflect various beliefs about the Mekong River. It is believed that this river was created by the Lord Buddha. It is also believed that the Lord Buddha implanted footprints both around the bank and down the stream. Furthermore, the river is the location where the Buddha’s relics and many images were kept. And also, rituals and traditions that have taken place along the river are explained in relation to the Buddha’s history.

So, the Mekong River is like an outdoor stage which is used to present faith in Buddhism. The folk narratives concerning the Mekong River discussed above indicate significant perceptions of the people living along the river. That is to say that the Mekong River does not have meaning in terms of nature only, but also a meaning in the cultural dimension which has played an important role in the ways of lives of the people. In other words, the folk narratives present the Mekong River incorporating with Buddhism to make it a sacred river.

Moreover, this paper also raises awareness concerning the values of Buddhism as a powerful religion that helps to protect nature and human beings. The construction of meaning for nature is usually integrated in the value and moral system and the people’s ways of lives. In this paper, I have discussed the relationship between human beings and nature, and in particular, the Mekong River. Most of the people living along the Mekong River believe in Buddhism, so they have

constructed “Mekong narratives in association with the Lord Buddha” in order to emphasize the status of the Mekong River as a river of sacredness, a precious and spiritual river which is to be respected because “this river is the representative of the Lord Buddha.”

## References

- Bascom, William. 1984. The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives. In *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, edited by Alan Dundes. London: University of California Press: pp. 5–29.
- Bell, Brian (ed.). 2007. *Nepal*. Translated by Mark Mana Warnado. Bangkok: Windows on the World.
- Boonchuay Srisawat. 2004. *Tai Sipsongbanna Volume I* (ไทยสิบสองปีนนา เล่ม 1). Bangkok: Siam. (In Thai)
- Boonlert Seewichai. 1998. *Naga Rockets*. Vientiane: Dungma Kanphim.
- Brereton, Joel P. 1995. Sacred Space. In *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade. New York: Macmillan Library Reference USA.
- Dararat Weerapong (ed.). 2003. *Mekong River: Faith Values and Memories* (ลำน้ำโขง: ศรัทธา คุณค่า และความทรงจำ). Bangkok: Sukkapabjai. (In Thai)
- Gargan, Edward A. 2002. *The River's Tale: A Year on the Mekong*. New York: Vintage Books A Division of Random House, Inc.
- Geertz, Clifford. 2000. *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York: Basic Books.
- Griffiths, Clare. 2001. *Laos and Cambodia*. Translated by Puangnin Khampangsu. Bangkok: Windows on the World.
- Humpan Ratthanawong. 2001. *Ceremony of Regatta and Fire Boat Flows*. Vientiane: Cultural Institution, Ministry of Public Relations and Cultures.
- Khampuy Philawong. 2009. *Ancient Culture and Traditions of Laos*. Vientiane: Duangma Kanphim.
- Mahasila Werawong. 1974. *Ceremony 12 Months*. Vientiane.
- Morganstern, Manfred (ed.). 1993. *China*. Translated by Chutima Sirisamatkhan. Bangkok: Windows on the World.
- Pathom Hongsuwan. 2009. *Lanna Myths of The Buddha Images: Intellectual Power of the Beliefs and Relationship with Local communities* (ตำนานพระพุทธรูปล้านนา: พลังปัญญาทางความเชื่อและความสัมพันธ์กับท้องถิ่น). Bangkok: The Thailand Research Fund (TRF.). (In Thai)
- Rutherford, Scott. 2000. *Myanmar*. Translated by Kittima Amonthut. Bangkok: Windows on the World.
- Siraporn Nathalang. 2009. *Folklore Theories: Methodology in the Analysis of Folktales* (ทฤษฎีคติชนวิทยา: วิธีวิทยาในการศึกษาด้านาน-นิทานพื้นบ้าน). Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press. (In Thai)
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1982. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago.

Surasawat Suksawat, M.L. 2001. *From Luang Phabang to Vientiane* (จากหลวงพระบางถึงเวียงจันทน์). Bangkok: Saitan Press. (In Thai)

Suthichai Yoon. 2009. *Mekong: The Untamed* (แม่โขงสายน้ำพยศ). Bangkok: Nation Documentary. (In Thai)