

# **WATER LORE: THAI-TAI FOLK BELIEFS AND LITERATURE**

**Prakong  
Nimmanahaeminda<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

*Water is essential in the Thai-Tai way of life. Thai people in Thailand as well as Tai peoples outside Thailand depend on water for agriculture, domestic daily uses, transportation and recreation. This paper is a result of an in-depth study of the relationship between water, beliefs and literary traditions of the Thai and some ethnic Tai groups. The findings reveal that the Thais and the Tais have religious beliefs involving water concerning four important water beings: first, the water spirit, known as sua nam (เสือน้ำ); second, the water serpent known as nguek (เงือก); third, the great serpent or naga (นาท); and fourth; the river of the dead.*

*Of the four beliefs, the first two concerning the water spirit and nguek could date back to very ancient times and are common among several Tai ethnic groups. They provide a clear indication that the Thais and Tais hold nature in high reverence and awe. With the notion that nature is regulated and protected by a life-force, a rite to ask permission to use water from the spirit is almost always staged prior to the actual use. While Thai and Tai people recognize the benevolence of water and perceive it in life-form, they are fully aware of the precariousness of nature. The pervading influence of the mythical naga*

*can be seen in Thai art, and the naga character in literature, folktales, legends concerning city building, religious architecture, and in rituals. The role of the naga in Thai and Tai narratives has been modified or adapted in various local traditions.*

*River and water motifs are woven into Thai-Tai literature in both form and content. Impromptu recitation of sakawa (a form of folksong), niras (travelling-narration poetry), and Karb hey Rua are related to waterway in form; while idioms and metaphors, prayers of characters in dilemma, waterborne society in a drama or play, and marine warfare, etc. are in content.*

## **Water and Way of Life of Thai-Tai People**

Water is essential in man's life. The saying "Water is life" is more than a concise metaphor. Man depends on water for agriculture, sanitation, cooking and transportation. His Majesty the King of Thailand who is keenly aware of the significance of water in the life of Thai people has devoted a fair amount of his energy and time to water resource development and irrigation projects geared to give access to water for his people. His Majesty's thoughts and concerns regarding water needs can be gauged from his remarks.

"The important idea is -there must be water for drinking, daily uses and cultivation of plants. Since life is where water is, the availability of water spells the difference between survival and cessation of life. Man can live without electricity. Given electricity but without water, man cannot survive".

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<sup>1</sup> Associate Fellow, The Royal Institute

“Water is of absolute importance to agriculture. Even with poor soil and perhaps few other obstacles to plant growing, once the access to water is secured, all other favorable elements to agriculture should follow in due time” (National Archives and Museum, 2541: 27).

Thai and Tai societies are generally characterized as rice cultures. Rice is the main staple and diet. Accounts to this effect can be found in Chinese as well as Vietnamese records. Rice growing necessarily depends on water. The majority of Thai-Tai rice farmers chiefly rely on water drawn from the river or man-made reservoirs through a system of dykes. Hence their paddy fields are known as *na nam muang* (irrigated-water paddy fields). As far as the Thai-Tai are concerned, water and paddy field are, as they are, two inseparable entities. Thus, for settlement, the majority of the Thai and the Tai have always shown a preference for living by a river basin. *Tamnan Pathom Kapp*, (ตำนานปฐมกับปพรหมสร้างโลก) the Creation Myth of Tai Lue in Sipsongpanna, Yunnan, China tells us about the migration of their ancestors from the original settlement known as *Muang Lue Luang* (translated as “main city of Lue people”). An outbreak of cholera forced some one hundred thousand Lue people to abandon the city and settle in the River Khong basin where Sipsongpanna now stands. (Yanyong Jiranakorn and Ratanapon Sethakul 2544: 15)

The legends of Black Tai and White Tai indicate the original settlements of the Tai at three sites: the *Nam-U* and *Poo Fang* (น้ำอูฟูฝาง) basin, believed to be the original *Thaen* city, now in China; the *Hua-Tae Nam-Na* (หัวแต่น้ำนา) of *Muang Boh Tae*, now in China; the *Hua-Tow Nam-Dang* (หัวตาวน้ำแดง) of

*Muang Om, Muang Ai* (เมืองอมเมืองอาฮย) and *Muang Tum Hwang* (เมืองตุมหาง), identified as *Wan-Nam* province in Vietnam.

Black Tai, however, migrated along the Red River and eventually settled at *Muang Lo* (เมืองลอ) on account of its vast flat land fed by a river. The bard sang about the sites of settlement at various river basins in verse form, translated as follows:

“We two live in different villages  
Belong to the same chiefdom  
Are different progenies of the same  
progenitor  
Hail from the rivers of Tae, Tao, U and  
Khong  
That are one and the same..”  
(Bhatiya Yimrawat 2544: 150)

As Tai settlements were to be found at various river basins, it was natural that the nomenclature of Tai peoples was based on the names of the rivers near which they settled. The first Sukhothai inscription describes two Tai groups that came to swear allegiance to the Sukhothai kingdom: “*The Tai U and Tai Khong also came forward to join us*”. *Tai U* and *Tai Khong* referred to the Tai people residing in the U River and the Khong River basins respectively. At present, the practice of naming Tai groups by the rivers whence they came persists. Thus, *Tai-Khoen* are Tai people who settled in the Khoen River basin, Chieng-tung, Myanmar; *Tai-Mao*, the Mao River basin, Dehong, Yunnan, China. The groups-naming system was also extended to include *Tai-Tai* (ไทไต) and *Tai-Nua* (ไทเหนือ) (southern Tai and northern Tai) in Myanmar and Yunnan, China, where *Tai-Tai* and *Tai-Nua* referred to the Tai living south and north of the Kong or Salaween River. Chiengmai province was known as *Nakorn Pingka* (นครพิงค์) by virtue of being situated along the Ping River.

From the perspective of the Tai people, water and land appear to be equally important. Tai-Lue has sayings which underline the significance of water and land for life forms, especially for plants. For example, the saying, “Land causes things to happen and water fosters them,” means the land is where fertilization of plants takes place and water takes on the task of nurturing them. Traditionally, Tai-Lue in the past, despite referring to their leader as *chow paen din* (Lord of the Land), held both land and water to be the sole property of their king. Hence, the saying “*nam chow din chow*” (น้ำเจ้า ดินเจ้า) meaning the water and the land of the Lord, and “*chow nam chow phaen din*” (เจ้าน้ำ เจ้าแผ่นดิน) meaning the Lord ruling over water and land. Should there be a dispute over the right to the throne, the contest was referred to as “*yaeng ching khet nam daen din*” (แย่งชิงเขตน้ำแดนดิน) meaning contentious strife for water and land.

The political administration of various Tai groups was closely connected to the administration of paddy fields. The necessity of irrigate water for rice cultivation led to a system of distributing water and a system of cooperative gang labor, “*long khaek*,” for digging and dredging dykes and also damming irrigation water. Each community had a specialist known as *kae mueng kae faii* (แก่เหมืองแก่ฝาย) in charge of irrigation and related matters. Thus, members of the ruling class were inextricably entrusted with overseeing the distribution of water. In all likelihood the system of water management had a very early, long history. The chronicles of Tai-Ahom tell us that Khun Luang Khun Lai (ขุนหลวงขุนหลาย), the first two kings of Muang Ree Muang Ram (เมืองรี เมืองรำ), rode elephants to inspect the city, dykes, water irrigation

system and the cultivation of rice. (Renu Vichasilp 1996: 45)

Living in close proximity to water-ways, the Thai-Tai peoples not only used water for planting, cultivating, drinking and cleaning, but also for waterway transportation. It was hardly surprising that the dispute over the right of access to water did occur from time to time, hence the system of arbitration and laws on water – related matters. “*Mangrai Sastra*” (มังรายศาสตร์) or the Code of King Mangrai of Lanna Kingdom contained many clauses and articles related to regulation of water for livelihood. The excerpts from the version of Soa-hai (เส้าไห้) district, Saraburi B.E. 2432, transcribed by Professor Dr. Prasert na Nakara, provide several articles in laws related to the construction of dykes, the theft of water from neighbor’s paddy fields, damage inflicted on neighbor’s dykes, or theft of aquatic animals.

Water resource management was part and parcel of rice cultivation, and aqua-culture was almost a natural occurrence to the Thai-Tai peoples who were confirmed fish eaters. The main meal of the Thai-Tai people, at least in former times, was rice and fish. The first inscription of Sukhothai kingdom described, “*In water, there is fish, in paddy fields there is rice.*” presenting the image of a plentiful city. Other Tai ethnic groups also had a fair share of proverbs and sayings containing the two words - rice and fish.

In the Thai-Tai people’s world of water, the watercourse was not only exploited for water in daily use and other necessities but also for transportation –mainly by boat and raft. Rivers, big and small, provided a rich store of exciting activities, such as boat racing. (The city of Luang Phra-Bang on the Mae Khong River stages the “*nang dam*

- *nang don*” (นางดำ นางดอน) boat rally as an annual event soon after the end of Buddhist Rains). The timing and the myth lends a ritualistic touch to the event. Legend has it that *nang dam* had the status of the first wife, and “*nang don*” that of the consorting lady – both were the guardian spirits or genie of Luang Phra-Bang. The race was arranged such that the team of “*nang dam*” would prevail over that of “*nang don*”. This was to ensure regular seasonal rainfall needed for the wealth and well-being of the city. Thai people in the central plain maintained boats of various sizes and styles befitting life along river and canal. The offerings for *kathin* and *pha pa* were to be seen carried in a waterborne procession which terminated at the temple. The sight of a Buddhist monk paddling in a small boat on his morning alms collecting was once common place. In former times, the common folks of the central plain took to the boat -young men on one side, young women on the other to banter with each other via extempore dialog boat songs (*pleng rua*-เพลงเรือ). The waterways thus not only provided the utilitarian advantages of living near the water but also a source of recreation and a venue for pursuing religious fulfillment.

### **Thai-Tai Beliefs Concerning Water**

There are many beliefs of the Thai-Tai people that are related to water. The deliberation that will follow will be confined to four main categories of belief: those relating to the water spirit, *ngeuk*, *naga* and the River of the Dead.

#### **Beliefs related to the Water Spirit**

The findings of the author are in concurrence with several eminent scholars

on one very important idea – that prior to the coming of Buddhism, the Thai-Tai were already entrenched in animism.

The concept of Thai-Tai beliefs in spirits is divided into two classifications, i.e., the spirit that resides in each of all things in nature, and the spirit of the departed.

The belief in the water spirit known as *phii nam* (ผีน้ำ) or *sua nam* (เสือน้ำ) is the extension of the idea that each object in nature is endowed with a guardian spirit. The origin of the water spirit if ever known, has long since been lost to antiquity. In any case, the belief in the spirit of the water was shared by some Thai communities in various regions of the country and also by several members of the Thai-Tai grouping. The rite of prolonging the life of the river or *sueb cha ta Mae Nam* (สืบชะตาแม่น้ำ) rite of the northern Thai people most likely stems from the belief in the guardian spirit of the river. The main idea was if the river was dry, the rite to prolong the life of the river was to be performed to propitiate the spirit of the water. Likewise, the rite to prolong the life of the city was to appease the guardian spirit of the city. The practice of appeasing the spirit of the water is akin to the Hindu practice of revering the Goddess of the River Ganges. From all available data, it can be concluded that the Tais were in the habit of performing a sacrifice rite for the spirit of the water on various occasions, such as on new year day, as a prelude to channeling water into the paddy field or the catching of aquatic animals.

The Zhuang in Kwangxi Province in China offered a sacrifice to the spirit or the deity of the water before going into the river to catch prawn or fish, and also for the guardian spirit of the lake before casting their fishing nets. Sacrifices were also

periodically conducted to mark the time and the seasons in each year.

Tai people in Muang Tuek in Vietnam offered a sacrifice for the spirit of the water in the twelfth month (February or there about), known as *sen phii hua nam* (เสนผีหัวน้ำ) at the inauguration of an irrigation dyke before embarking on rice growing. The rite was a cooperative effort at the village level with the participation of all communal members. After the rite was completed, the dyke would be put into commission. Black Tai held a sacrificial rite for the spirit of the water in the ninth month (March or there about). The sacrifice, consisting of bananas, sugar cane, eggs, rice, and toasted fish, were cast into the water to conclude the rite. (Prakong Nimmanahaeminda et al 2544: 90-91)

Tai Khoen of Chiengtung in Myanmar had the custom of propitiating the spirit of the Nong Tung Lake during the Songkran (New Year) celebration in April. (Prakong Nimmanahaeminda et al 99)

The physical appearance of the spirit of water is not at all clear. Based on an interview with Dr. Huong Luang, a scholar on Tai study of Muang Tuek Vietnam, some Tai groups in Muang Tuek believed that the spirit of the water was in the form of a large serpent known as *nguek* (เงือก) or *tua nguek* (ตัวเงือก), hence the term *phii nguek* (ผีเงือก). Pathiya Yimrewat, in an interview with Black Tai of Muang Lo, Muang La and Muang Moy, obtained similar data, i.e., the spirit of the water was indeed *tua nguek*. (Pathiya Yimrewat 216)

Besides the belief in the spirit of the water, the Thai-Tai people, who were deeply entrenched in the tradition of building irrigation dykes, also held a belief in the guardian spirit of the dyke. The Lanna Code,

*Mangrai Shastra* (มังรายศาสตร์) contained clauses which amply demonstrate the belief in the guardian spirit of the dyke. (*Mangrai Shastra*: 97)

### Belief related to “nguek”

The Lexicon of the Royal Institute B.E. 2525 provides several meanings of *nguek*. First, it can mean ‘snake’ in the old Tai language. Several Tai ethnic groups spoke of *nguek* as a large snake. Terweil believes that *nguek* was definitely not *naga*. He went on to explain that *nguek* in the Tai belief was a mythical creature residing in a swamp. (B.J. Terweil 1981: 80-85)

The description was consistent with the author’s data obtained during the interview with Dr. Huong Luang and the research of Pathiya Yimrewat. The latter gives an account of *nguek* as follows:

“The creature, “phii nguek”, possessed extraordinary strength, so much that it could rip apart the whole house in a flash. Yet in spite of its awesome power, it never prey on human beings. Sudden encountering with “phii nguek” could frighten men to death. The sight of “phii nguek,” resulted in all eighty “khwan” leaving man’s body forever. Even the best of “poh mod” (shaman) could not retrieve all the souls by his soul-calling rite”.

The word *nguek* was sometimes used to mean *naga*, as in the Oath of Allegiance by the Ritual Water of Curse (*Ongkarn Chaeng Nam* - โองการแช่งน้ำ) in exaltation of Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva.

In *Mangtra Rop Chiengmai* (Mangtra’ Raid on the City of Chiengmai - มังทรารบเชียงใหม่), a literary composition during the Ayutthaya

period, describes the city of Chiangmai as being fortified by a circumnavigated city wall. The protecting wall was in turn surrounded by a deep and wide moat where lotus were in bloom and filled the air with scent. Brimming with water, the water defense line was home to “*nguek*” and crocodiles lying in the path of would-be intruders.

Dr. Bradley’s *Dictionary of the Siamese Language* provides several descriptions of *nguek*, e.g., *nguek*, a kind of animal with the body of a snake, a face of man, lives in water. *Nguek nam* (เงือกน้ำ) is a type of *nguek*. Some look like fish, others like a snake. All have the face of a man and long hair and live in water.

From these descriptions, it may be surmised that the word *nguek* originally applied to a very large and extremely venomous snake that lives in water. Since its face is like that of man, *phii guek* is thought to look like a *nguek*. However, it does not mean that all creatures known by the name of *nguek* are *phii guek*.

It will be noted that the image of *nguek* as half fish –half woman sporting long hair is a relatively new concept in the Thai mythology.

### **Belief related to Naga**

Literary narratives, traditional architect, sculpture, art, and motifs on tapestries of the Thai-Tai communities depict *naga* in totality if not in part. From these items, it may be inferred that *nguek* in the Thai-Tai concept was a gigantic snake. Partly deity and partly mythical animal, *naga* was considered a sacred creature with strong spiritual linkage to water. For instance, the amount of annual rainfall was related to the number of *naga* charged with delivery of

water. Great rivers, such as the Mae Khong River, or large swamps or lakes were thought to be the abode of *naga*.

Besides local beliefs concerning *naga*, the prevalent concept of *naga* in Thailand and other southeast Asian countries was probably brought in from India or Sri Lanka from Hindu and Buddhist sources. Hindu works were mostly in Sanskrit and belonged to the genre of great epic and *Purana* texts (ancient texts), while Buddhist works were in Pali in the form of Buddhist tales (“*jataka*”). The *naga* in Pali and Sanskrit literature has the appearance of a snake and is half deity and part beast. It was often portrayed in the posture of spreading its hood. Most *naga* resided in water that might be a large reservoir, an expansive lake, or a great river, or along its banks. A big sea or ocean was sometimes mentioned as the abode of *naga*. The forest and the mountain were also cited as the abode of *naga* or the *naga* land.

It is hardly surprising then that the local concept of *nguek* as a large snake gradually became superceded by that of *naga*. In many instances, the legendary *nguek* in native tales was entirely replaced by the *naga* altogether.

### **Belief in the River of the Dead**

The people of Lanna Kingdom had a belief that a person upon death would make a journey to the Land of the Dead. On the funeral day, before the body was to be carried to a burial ground in the wood outside the village, the relatives placed a small packet of cooked rice into a shoulder bag laid in the coffin. The idea was to help the dead in crossing the bridge over the river to the opposite side. Once the dead person reached the other side, there would be no return, hence the River and the Land

of the Dead. This belief existed among the Tai in general and also several other peoples around the world. Sathirakoses, a Thai scholar, discovered that this belief is shared by the Tai-Yai and the Tai-Lue. He also explained that a coin put in the mouth of the corpse was for the dead person to hire a guide to help him cross the river. The Greeks also had the similar idea and gave the name of “*Styx*” to the River of the Dead. (Sathirakoses 2512, pp. 123-124 and 141) The belief in crossing of the bridge over the River of the Dead might have a basis in the environment in which the river was used to define territorial rights.

### Water Motif in the Thai-Tai Literary Tradition

In the Thai-Tai way of life close to the water, the waterways had a fair share of places in literature, especially in the form of metaphor. In a didactic piece of literature of the Black Tai “*song chu son saw*” (ส่งชูสอนสาว) a young man tried to assure his lover that his love for her was eternal. To him eternity was defined as until “*Nam Tow haeng toh lae- Nam Tae haeng toh tooh,*” (น้ำตาวแห้งท้อแล น้ำแตแห้งท้ออยู่) meaning until the river bed of the Nam Tow or Red River dried up like a flat plate or the Nam Tae or Black River was drained dry and became as narrow as a chop stick.

Since the path of the Khong River cut across the land of several Tai settlements, it is hardly surprising that the Khong River is mentioned in both poetry and verse. In the *Epic of Juang* (มหากาพย์เรื่องท้าวเจือง), Thao Juang laments over the pain and loneliness from departing from his lover, Nang Ngom (นางจ๋อม). In the poem, Thao Juang describes his hope for a reunion between them as being as remote as a distant star and any attempt for him to see her again would be

as arduous as draining the Mae Khong River dry single-handedly.

A nursery rhyme of the Tai Lue of Sibsongpanna composed some twenty years ago describes the scenic beauty of the city of Chiang-rung over the bank of the Mae Khong River and the Golden Bridge linking the two sides of the river.

Most of the Tai in Dehong Autonomous Prefecture live near the Salaween River, while some others live near the Ruilli River – Nam Mao. There is an imaginative tale that provides an insight into the kind of relationship between two groups of people, and how the two rivers --Nam Khong and Nam Mao (น้ำโขงกับน้ำมาว) --came to be as they are. As the story was told:

“One day, a big elephant was found drifting along the Mow River and caught by Nam Mao. The beast was slaughtered for meat, half of which was given to Nam Khong who was quite pleased. Some time later, a porcupine was caught in the Mae Khong River, then slaughtered and cooked for food without giving any to Nam Mao. On a visit to Nam Khong, Nam Mao spotted the remains of the porcupine carcass in the form the spike fur, then realized that Nam Khong had no thought for him. Nam Khong then explained that the porcupine was so small that he decided to finish all meat by himself. Nam Mao was very hurt by Nam Khong’s way of doing things and decided they should part company altogether. From that day onward the courses of the two rivers had drifted apart to their present locations of to-day. (Prakong Nimmanahaeminda and Dao Chenghua 2542: 213)

The plot is similar to the tale of two *naga* in *Urangka-that*, the legend of Phra That Phanom, the stupa in Nakorn Phanom province situated by the Mekong River in northeastern Thailand. The *naga* were close friends. The tale of Nam Mao and Nam Khong and the tale of the two *naga* were probably designed to explain the relationship between two groups of people living by two river basins who used to be close to each other but later on were socially separated.

As the Thai-Tai lived near waterways, and earned a living by rice growing and fishing, there appears the fish motif in Thai-Tai stories and literary works, such as the stories of “*pla boo thong*” (ปลาบูทอง - the Golden Fish), in Central Thailand, “*along plaa som*” (อลองปลาส้ม- Along Bhotisatva, a kind of preserved fish) and “*plaa daag - plaa smoh*” (ปลาแดก ปลาสมอ - preserved fish) of Shan and Tai Khoen, “*Thao Busaba*” (ท้าวบุษบา) and “*Bhutto*” (พุทธโธ) of the Isaan and Laotian people, and “*Wankarn*” (วันคาร) of the southern people.

In some tales or legends, the waterway was used as a venue for sidestepping adversaries or would-be troublemakers. In the stories of “*Sang Thong*” and “*Jampa si Ton*” (จำปาสี่ตัน), the heroes are set adrift in a raft. In most cases the hero is rescued, by virtue of his accrued merits or his status of Buddha-to-be. The first king in the history of the Laotian people, Choa Fa Ngoom, who as a baby was prophesized as a future menace to his parents, was put on a raft and left to float down the river.

In some Thai literary works, the water course is used as a key factor in the plot, e.g., “*Lilit Phra Lo*” (ลิลิตพระลอ), a literary work in the genre of tragedy which casts Phra Lo as the tragic hero. In a scene on the

bank of the Kalong River, Phra Lo decides whether or not to go to the heroine’s kingdom. Phra Lo decides to seek an oracle using the water as the medium. His plea is a soliloquy expressed in a four-line poem. Its translation, which inevitably left the rhyme mangled, has been attempted and given as follows:

“Ye, of the Kalong River  
I beseech thee  
In my onward journey,  
Should I be gone and done for ever  
Pray move on in swirl.  
Or all should be well with me,  
Flow on stealthily.

No sooner had the supplication ended,  
The mass of the water heaved up in  
violent whirlpool,  
To Phra Lo, it was like a bloody red  
liquid in a spate.  
Devastated,  
Phra Lo felt like a big log of several arm-  
lengths in girth,  
Weighing down on his bosom.  
Resigned to his fate.”

In the central plain of Thailand, the highly developed system of waterways formed an environment around which people’s lives revolved. In the literary area, the poets created a special genre of poetry, namely “travelling poetry,” in which the poets undertook their journey by boat. In the early Ayutthaya period, there were ‘*Kamsual Klong Dun*’ (กำสรวลโคลงดั้น) and others known as *niras*-นิราศ (a literary genre used when a poet travels, being away from his love, thus describing his loneliness and sadness), e.g., *Niras Narin* (นิราศนรินทร์), travelling poetry by the poet Narin. Written in archaic language, most of these poems are a poet’s lament over the pain and loneliness of departing from his loved one, combined with the narrative of the beauty of the scenery. During the early Rattanakosin or Bangkok period, travelling



poetry was to be known by the destination and written in a language readily understood by the readers of modern times. Among these works is “*Niras Muang Klaeng* (นิราศเมืองแกลง)” by Sunthon Poo. Here is an excerpt:

“Upon the struck of midnight,  
The boat was gliding lazily along the  
water way  
Yellow moon light filtered through the  
clouds.  
Whereupon the boat reached the  
Temple of Dawn.  
Suddenly the moon became so bright  
Looking back over the shoulder  
As the mass of water filled the river  
bed.  
Too salty, too bitter even to taste let  
alone drinking  
It was as painful as,  
A young single man stood by the palace  
wall.  
Any thought of courting the ladies on  
the other side,  
Was to court a rattan cane,  
To an aching back -unto near oblivion”.

The Royal Barge Rhyme for the Royal Kathin Barge Procession is a tradition dating back to the Ayutthaya period and gave rise to the poetry in the genre of ‘*garp hae ruaa*’ (กาพย์เห่เรือ)

The metaphor concerning water is found in many literary works. In *Inao* (อินเภา), Jintara, Inao’s first wife, who thought that her lover had forgotten her, lamentingly compares love to a stream.

“What is love in its ephemeral  
manifestation?  
Know it,  
Love is a river stream,  
Always push on mercilessly.  
Never to return,  
Where it once was.”

In Thai literature of recent times, the spirit of water or *phii sua nam* is portrayed as an ogress akin to a demon. A Northern Thai version of *Panyasa Jataka* (ปัญญาสาตก) features both *phii sua nam* and *naga* as key players. In *Phra Apai Mani* by Sunthon Poo, *sua nam* is regularly referred to as a demon or ogress, described as a demoniac creature without gleam in either eye. It should be noted that the concept of *nguek* in the sense of a large snake has never occurred in Thai literary works of late. It should also be noted that *nguek* in *Phra Apai Mani* is much different from the indigenous or original *nguek*. The former is half woman-half fish, which is similar to the character *Suwan Maccha* (สุพรรณมัจฉา) in the adaptation of the Ramayana in play form by King Rama I, and did not appear in the original Hindu epic. But the Ramayana play did not refer to *Suwan Maccha* as *nguek*. Most conspicuous of all, *nguek* in *Phra Apai Mani* is very much like the mermaid in Western literature. It is quite probable that the *Phra Apai Mani* concept of *nguek* as half human being and half fish is a concept borrowed from the West.

Accounts of *naga* are found in many literary works of the central plain, and other regions of Thailand. It is also found in local traditions of Tai-Lue, Tai-Khoen and Laotian literary works. These works may be either tales, Buddhist literature, or legends of cities and famous temples. Peculiarities of the *naga* in these various works are their wealth, their abode of extraordinary splendor, magic gifts, ability to transform themselves into other beings, known to consort with human beings and produce human offspring and son. The *naga* are attendants and protectors of the Buddha, and Bodhisatva and of Buddhism as a whole.

In *Suwannasangkhā Jataka* (สุวรรณสังฆชาตค), Phra Sangkha, a Bodhisatva, is tossed into a river but rescued by Phaya Naga, protector of Bodhisatva or Buddha-to-be. Laotian as well as Isaan literature on Khun Thung Khun Thuang (ขุนทึ่งขุนเทือง) describes the journey of Khun Thuang, the hero, in the forest. Coming upon a garden which was brought into being by the magical creation of one female *naga*, Khun Thuang became captivated by its beauty. There he finds a young maiden who is a female *naga* in disguise. Enamoured by the *naga* in the form of a maiden, Khun Thuang follows her to the land of magic wonder and splendor of the *naga*.

Khun Thuang takes the maiden as his wife. Both enjoy the bliss of marriage for a long time, until the *naga* wife forgets to go into the water. The human world is thus seized by draught, which sends men and animals into suffering and want. In the end, the female *naga* is cautioned for negligence. Khun Thuang sees his *naga* wife in a water frolic on a Songkran day and comes to the realization that she is a beast not worthy of a husband-wife relationship. He then bids farewell to her. At that moment, the expectant *naga* splits her womb open and pulls out a fetus. She wraps a 'theung leaf' around the fetus before delivering it to him, hence the name Khun Theung.

The legend of two disagreeable and quarrelsome *naga* and *naga* excavation of water courses are found in the legend of Urangkathatu and Isaan and Laotian tales on Phaa Daeng and Nang Ai (ผาแดงนางไอ่). The latter tells about two *naga* of the names Nagasuttho (นาคสุทโธ) and Suwanna Naga (สุวรรณนาค), both of Nong-sae (หนองแส). In the beginning, both are good friends, but later are pitched against each other over food. Only through the intervention of

Phra Vishanugama does the battle cease and both go their separate ways to engage themselves in making rivers: - Nagasuttho, the Khong River: Suwana Naga, the Nan River. The Vishanugama intervention is strikingly similar to that of the Buddha's visit to Sri Lanka to subdue Chulothorn and Nagamahothon described in the Mahavangsa text of Sri Lanka.

The legend of Doi Tung tells of a magic well near the pagoda of Doi Tung, known as Sinful Female *Naga* (Nang Nagaprapha). It happened to have been the dwelling place of a widow *naga*. Bent on having a rishi residing nearby as husband, the female *naga* concocts an elixir from the well water for the rishi to drink and having drunk it, he develops a fancy for her. In other part, the legend tells of Phaya Virupakkha (พระยาวิรุฬห์) using magic to create a lagoon to the east of the Doi Tung pagoda guarded by Champutinaga. (History of Doi Tung, p. 111) The legend of *Phra Chow Liab Lok* (ตำนานพระเจ้าเสียบโลก) tells of the Buddha's visits to various provinces in Lanna, Chiengtung, Sibsongpanna, and Tai-Dehong. Whenever there is a narrative on the Buddha's footprint or the sacred remains of the Buddha, there is bound to be a description of *naga* coming to pay homage. In all of these legends, the *naga* has the role of guiding and pointing out the significance of Buddhism and religious edifices. *Phra Pathom Somphothikatha* (พระปฐมสมโพธิกถา), composed by Somdej Phra Maha Samana Chow Krom Phra Paramanuchit Chinoros (สมเด็จพระมหาสมณเจ้า กรมพระปรมานุชิตชิโนรส), also talks about *naga* in the role of projecting Buddhism.

In central Thailand, there is a folktale known as "Krai Thong" (ไกรทอง) which is the story of a crocodile named Chalawan, a ferocious crocodile living in an underwater cave of magically wondrous beauty. In the

cave Chalawan appears as a handsome young man living with his many wives. It is rather uncanny that Chalawan had several attributes similar to those of the *naga* in Pali and Sanskrit literature that had found their way in Thai - Tai literary works. It may be that the two ideas had coincided by chance, or the concept of *naga* had been modified to fit in with a folk tale of the society where crocodiles were held in awe.

The study of river and water lore in Thai-tai folk belief and literary traditions has a vast and intriguing scope. Belief in the water spirit has an ancient basis and reflects both positive and negative attitudes of the Thai-Tai towards nature.

On the positive side, the Thai-Tai people lived close to nature and were constantly aware of man's dependence on nature and so had respect for nature. Nature in its fragility was protected by the spirits and guardian deity. When any natural resource was to be taken for consumption or use, permission had to be sought in the form of rite and ritual. Any impious act against nature such as defilement of water, would have to be atoned for by an act of asking for forgiveness. The floating of banana-leaved offering on *Loy Krathong* day is an act of asking forgiveness from the spirit of the river.

On the minus side, the Thai-Tai people looked at the waterways as being a mysterious source of power not to be taken for granted, as they could bring disaster when least expected. Many myths speak of a great flood overrunning the banks, killing people as an inundation sweeps through the city- all because of impious acts committed against tradition or society. The three destructive powers threatening the world were fire, water and

wind. Water, even though cool, is no less dangerous than fire. The Thai-Tai adopted the belief in *naga* from India and Sri Lanka and then transmitted it from generation to generation, often with modification to suit the taste and context of the locality. The waterway is related to the creation of literature in several ways, both in content and form.

The study of river and water lore in Thai-Tai folk belief and literary tradition can be investigated from various angles and in a multi-disciplinary fashion if knowledge is to be fruitful and facilitate an understanding of society.

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