

ABSTRACT

The mythical serpent known as "naga" is a major cultural symbol prevalent among peoples of the Mekhong river area. Naga is represented in local literature, rituals, architecture, folk art and painting. The considerable variety of specific meanings of the naga suggests that its meanings have been repeatedly modified and reinterpreted over a long period of history.

This dissertation is a study of meaning of naga in the context of a particular rite known as "pithi bucha phaya Sattanaga" or the rite of honouring Lord Sattanaga, the great serpent. The rite takes place in the town of Thatphanom, the site of an ancient Buddhist stupa Phra Thatphanon. The analysis draws on Victor Turner's ideas of ritual and social process.

The study has found that this rite emerged in 2500 B.E. (1957 A.D.) against the background of local groups competing to be the guardian of the stupa. The rite was introduced and organized by Buddhist monks and local merchants of Chinese origin, vis a vis another local group that used to oversee the stupa in the past.

The naga is represented in many forms during the rite. Through many levels of mediation, the naga has reappeared as the force that protects Buddhism and as a non-human being that aspires to attain the Buddhist ideal of Enlightenment. The naga symbol thus serves as a means to legitimate the organizers as the protector of the stupa, as well as provides a model for aspiring Buddhist laymen.