

Spirit Cults and Buddhism in Luang Prabang, Laos: Analyses of Rituals in the Boat Race Festivals

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Theravada Buddhism is the official religion in Laos and the ethnic Lao have been denying, theologically and historically, spirit cults (*phi*). However, many researchers have found that the spirit cults remain strong in practice, and are sometimes mingled strongly with Buddhism. Even in Luang Prabang, the royal capital of Laos until 1975, where supremacy of Buddhism, as the official religion of the kingdom, was and still is especially emphasized and where residents express negative attitude toward spirit cults, some aspects of the cults can be noticed in their rituals. Specifically, influence of the spirit cults is observed in the Buddhist rituals related to ceremonial boat races, including the “boat spirit” worship deriving from the sacred tree from which the boats are manufactured, the rite of *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* deities, and veneration of the *Naga* (mythological river deity). These are carefully integrated into Buddhism through justifying procedures and are considered to be separated from general spirit cults.

Keywords: spirit cult, Buddhism, ritual

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1. Introduction

The present paper introduces *Boun Suang Heua*, annual boat race festivals which take place in the 9th month of the lunar calendar in Luang Prabang¹ (Figure 1), northern Laos. Further, through analyses of rituals related to *Boun Suang Heua*, the paper clarifies how spirit cults (*phi*) in Luang Prabang are interpreted and practiced in the context of Buddhism.

Although these boat race festivals can be based more on spirit cults than on Buddhism, it seems that Lao people² in Luang Prabang, while acknowledging the presence of spirits, mix Buddhist elements into the rituals and pay close attention that spirits are not a specific object of the cults. A reason for this may be associated with the history of Luang Prabang.

Luang Prabang was once the capital city of the Lan Xang Kingdom founded by King Fa Ngum who spread

Buddhism in Laos in the 14th century. In 1563, the capital city was transferred to Vientiane by King Setthatirath. In the early 18th century, after the Lang Xang Kingdom was divided into 3 kingdoms: Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Champasak, the city of Luang Prabang became the capital of the independent Luang Prabang Kingdom again. From the late 19th to 20th century, these Lao states were reunified as a colony of France. In 1953, after full independence, the Kingdom of Laos was founded and continued until the King, who resided in Luang Prabang, abdicated the throne in the 1975 revolution. Partly because successive kings had protected Buddhism, there are many temples in cities; especially in Luang Prabang, every morning Lao people living there genuflect on the road as they give alms to the Buddhist monks.

The socialist regime, which abolished the aristocracy in the 1975 revolution, also basically designated

¹ In the present paper, Luang Prabang encompasses not only the current administrative area Muang Luang Prabang but also the area on the opposite side of the Mekong River. In one lunar month, the first half refers to the waxing period when the moon is waxing, and the second half refers to the waning period when the moon is waning.

² In the present paper, Lao people are mainly ethnic Lao people, unless otherwise noted.

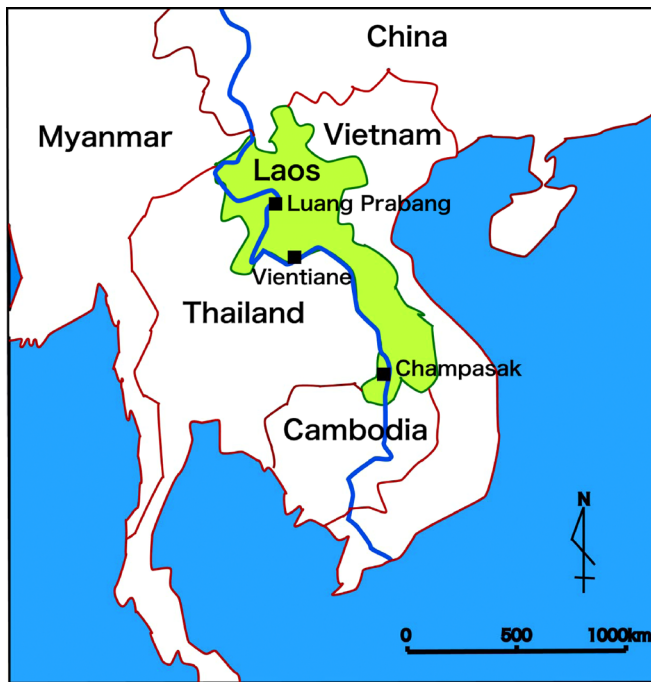


Figure 1 Location of Luang Prabang.

Theravada Buddhism as the religion of Lao people, while it denied spirit cults, as primitive religion³. On the other hand, Lao people have been practicing spirit cults as coexisting with or veiled in Buddhism, as pointed out by Iwata (1963), Condominas (1970), Zago (1972), and many other researchers. Evans and Tamura have implicated that even current Luang Prabang has spirit cults similarly to other regions (Evans, 1998:73; Tamura, 1996:117-118), but the Luang Prabang region has been less specifically investigated and only ambiguously discussed as to what

spirits (or guardian spirits) are religiously involved, what characteristics they have, and what their names are⁴. There are some historic background points that are presumed to have affected these investigation and discussion of spirits in Luang Prabang. (1) In 1527, King Pothisarath prohibited spirit cults in Luang Prabang, demolished the sanctuaries associated with them, and built a Buddhist pagoda on the site where people believed the guardian spirit of Luang Prabang lived. (2) In the 1950s, Buddhist monks promoted the prohibition of spirit cults and sacrifice for spirits in Luang Prabang's neighboring regions. (3) At the same time, the King, as the representative of Buddhism, placed the Lao Theung⁵, an autochthonous people who enshrine indigenous spirits, at a low-level in the social hierarchy and positioned spirits as an ancient religion that should be conquered by Buddhism while acknowledging the spiritual power of the Lao Theung (Condominas, 1975; Tamura, 1996; Hayashi, 2003). Although there are some ambiguous descriptions of spirit cults, the *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu*, ancestral deities in Luang Prabang having large, red faces, and *Nagas or Phanyanak* (in Lao), snake-like water deities, have been discussed by Halpern (1964), Archaimbault (1972), Trankell (1999), and many other researchers.

Then attention is directed towards the *phi*. Condominas (1975:254) pointed out that the term *phi* has a number of implications whose characteristics are complicated, and stated: "The term *phi* encompasses a number of diverse notions such as 'souls of the dead,' 'malevolent spirit,' 'guardian spirit,' 'natural deity, and the like.'" Ayabe (1959:109), who surveyed *phi* in *Ban Pha Khao* (*Ban* means village) in 1958, stated that the

³ During the era of kingdom, the Kings had a strong connection with the Buddhist *Sangha*. In order to break this connection, the belief of Lao people in Buddhism was strongly constrained from 1975 to the early 1980s (Evans, 1998:57-63). Since 2002, the government of Laos has permitted religious freedom of Lao citizens while not setting a state religion; however, the government, although avoiding a direct mention, has not designated animism (in the present paper called spirit cult) as a proper religion, and rather, has appeared to cover over its presence as irreligion. Besides Buddhism, the designated proper religions are Catholicism, Protestantism (Evangelism, Seventh-Day Adventism), Bahá'í, and Islam. In a religious census conducted by the government from 2003 to 2004, the item "Animism shared with Buddhism", which might acknowledge animism subsumed in Buddhism, was found, but no definition of animism was found (Vannasopha, 2005:48-49,103).

⁴ According to Vongkot Rattana (1971:98) who was a member of the royal family, a spirit shrine called *Ho Ngou Vang-Na* (*Ho* means spirit shrine; *Ngou* means serpent) kept before the revolution in the garden of his house in *Ban That Luang*. A spirit-enshrining ritual used to take place for 3 days on the 7th to 9th days of the waxing period in the 4th lunar month. Further back, there were 13 spirit shrines funded by members of the royal family in Luang Prabang's neighboring regions; however, the funding was abolished in 1918, and of these shrines, 11 no longer held rituals (*ibid.*:96-97). Of the other 2 shrines, one, located in the village mentioned by Vongkot Rattana, was presumed to be demolished as a royalty-connected spirit shrine when the aristocracy was abolished by the revolution; the other shrine was referred to as *Ho Phi Khone* located in *Vat Aham's* precinct by Vongkot Rattana, but is presumed to be identical to the below-described *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* shrine because both were located in the same place.

⁵ Since 1950, all peoples of Laos have been divided into 3 groups according to the altitude at which they live: Lao Loum, who speak Thai languages and live in the lowlands; Lao Theung, who speak Mon-Khmer languages and live in the mountains; and Lao Soung, who speak Tibeto-Burman languages and live in the highlands (Yasui, 2003:175-176). At one time, the Lao Theung people had been called *Kha*, a derogatory name meaning slave, by the Lao Loum (Tamura, 1996).

implications of *phi* were numerous and the interactive characteristics were hard to grasp. In addition, it should be noted that the *phi* discussed by Condominas and Ayabe involved the Lao people. Laos is a multiethnic country in which many minority groups have spirit cults (Evans, 1998:49); the Lao word for these ethnic spirit cults is *Sasana phi* (Hayashi, 2003:212). That is, the spirits for which ethnic minorities make cults are also referred to as *phi*. However, Lao people regard *phi* for ethnic minorities as different from *phi* for themselves—Evans described this as word schizophrenia. Although Lao *phi* cults are, from the viewpoint of outsiders, a superstitious religion prohibited by the government, Lao people incorporate them into Buddhism by claiming that they are an extension of Buddhist acts, and further, that Lao *phi* cults are not superstitious while those of minority groups are (Evans, 1998:74-75). This may, to no small extent, be true of the complex ideas of spirits that are found around Luang Prabang. Thus, the present paper analyzes how *phi* that Lao people regard as not superstitious is interpreted in the context of Luang Prabang guardian spirits, i.e., *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* and *Nagas*, and the spirits of boats, with respect to rituals in a boat race festival.

The survey for the present paper was conducted through a stay in Luang Prabang from July to September 2007. The main methods for the survey were participant observations and interviews.

2. Boat race festivals

Boat race festivals are thought to be intended as prayers to *Nagas*, which control the water that is essential for the wet-rice agriculture (rice being the principal Lao food), asking for a good harvest and local protection that year. According to the folk beliefs of Laos, *Nagas* are believed to live in the Mekong River during the dry season and in inland water places during

the rainy season. At one time, boat races held in Luang Prabang were set to take a course from the mainstream through a first subordinate stream to a second subordinate stream of the Mekong River in the 9th lunar month of the rainy season and vice versa in the 12th lunar month of the dry season, so as to follow the *Nagas'* migration path. Ritually, this implies that *Nagas* are welcomed inland through subordinate streams from the Mekong River so as to stay at inland paddies and abundantly provide water for them in the period when rice plants require water, and after that, are sent back from the paddies to the Mekong River in the dry season when the paddies no longer require water (Archaimbault, 1972:15-16, 20).

During the era of kingdom, boat races held in the 9th and 12th lunar months were royal rituals, in which the Kings dedicated offerings⁶ and prayed for local peace to the King of the *Nagas* which guard Luang Prabang, and these boat races were intended to show the King-centered hierarchy of the kingdom. Especially in the boat races held in the 12th lunar month, the race matches-ups were said to have been predetermined according to hierarchy ranks so that boats of higher ranks could always win (Archaimbault, 1972:19).

The boat races of the 12th lunar month have not been done since 1930, whereas those of the 9th lunar month, when the water heights of the rivers are highest, are held in the Mekong River on the 12th day of the waning period, in the Khan River on the 14th day of the waning period, etc.⁷. The 14th day of the waning period is the day of a Buddhist festival called *Bun ho khao phadab din* which offers solace to ancestral deities. On the day of this festival, people decorate the grounds around their houses and temples with packages of rice at about 3:00 a.m., and then at dawn, depart to a temple for alms-giving and preaching by the monks. Although ancestors are believed to come to get the rice packages (Masuhara, 2003:267), there is nothing that connects

⁶ From an interview with a 78-year-old ex-royal insider named M, the Kings were said to have dedicated offerings to : (1) *Pha Seua*, which guards the northern kingdom; (2) *Kon Kai Fa* and *Pak Khan*, located around the mouth of the Khan River; (3) *Tha Pha Bang*, located around the midstream of the Khan River; (4) *Pha Bhad Tai*, located around the mouth of *Houay Hop* (*Houay* means subordinate stream), which guards the southern kingdom; and (5) *Pak Dong*, located around the mouth of the southern Dong River.

⁷ The race held in the Khan River on the 14th day of the waning period is the biggest (the race distance is about 800 m and its goal point is set around the mouth of *Houay Kang*). Other Luang Prabang boat races are held in *Ban Had Hian* on the 8th day of the waning period and in *Ban Sangkhalok* (from around the mouth of *Houay Hop* to around the mouth of Dong River) on the 12th day of the waning period (*Houay* means subordinate stream). The boat race of *Ban Sangkhalok*, held in the era of the kingdoms as well, was not held after the 1940s (Archaimbault, 1972:15), but it was learned from an interview with the current village head that the race was resumed in 1997 using small boats carrying 20-25 persons in an effort to restore the tradition. In an interview with Mr. Bounthanh Phongphichid, it was noted that in the old days, the boat race festivals in Luang Prabang were fierce races which allowed blocking of competitors during the racing.

these offerings for ancestors with the boat race festivals. Archaimbault (1972:16) hypothesized that *Bun ho khao phadab din* might be associated with boat race festivals because of the role of funereal boats in sending back ancestral deities which come to get the rice, but there is no support for this hypothesis. From the author's interview with various persons, no association with the offerings and the boat race festivals was mentioned; it seemed that the boat races took place on the day of *Bun ho khao phadab din* when the water height of the Khan River becomes the highest just in conformity to Lao tradition.

Generally, boat race festivals of Laos take place to coincide with a festival called *Ook Pansa*⁸ held at the end of the rainy season in the 11th lunar month, which is a different time of year from those of Luang Prabang⁹. Although rituals and implications of boat race festivals vary depending on different historic backgrounds and geographical conditions among regions, Archaimbault (1972:88-96), who surveyed boat race festivals from northern to southern Laos in the 1950s, reported that festivals in Vientiane and Champasak, which were once flourishing capital cities of two kingdoms, were intended to pray to the Naga water deities for a good water supply and for local protection and further were intended to show the re-creation of the kingdoms via the rituals. Recently, however, rituals have tended to become simplified, emphasis on the cult of the *Nagas* in boat races has been lessened, and boat races in some regions are becoming sports-like forms. Under such circumstances, the boat race festivals in Luang Prabang have continued as rituals for *Nagas* which were handed down from the era of kingdoms, and are important as a rare case in which the relationship between the *Naga* cult and boat race festivals can still be confirmed.

Boats used for the Luang Prabang races are basically dugouts that carry 45 to 55 oarsmen with a total length

of about 20 m, a width of 1.2 m, and a depth of 50 cm. The bow and stern are horn-shaped and called *ngeam*, and are not the dragon- or bird-shaped ones found in neighboring Southeast Asian countries. Although symbolic implications of the shape are unknown, oarsmen said that a movement called *nyom*, in which the bow-seated crewmen move as if they pushed the boat forward while grasping the horn-shaped portion of the bow in both hands during rowing, is unique to the Luang Prabang region. The bud-like decoration placed on the bow and stern is called *Mak beng*, which also is unique to Luang Prabang (cf. **Figure 5**)¹⁰. Moreover, floral patterns of lotus, a Buddhist motif are portrayed on all boats. The number of crewmen including oarsmen is not specified, but oarsmen are limited to males. Except for several oarsmen who stand in the rear of the boat to steer, all the others pull unfixed oars while seated in two lines facing in the traveling direction.

Taking *Ban Aphy* as an example of a village which participated in a boat race festival in 2007, actions in the festival are outlined chronologically. Further, spirits (*phi*), the main theme of the present paper, are analyzed in the context of the rituals¹¹.

September 6, 2007 (5 days before the race)

A.M. The boat was transferred from the boathouse to the precincts of a temple. *Tao kea*, an elderly person responsible for the boat, decorated it by covering the bow and stern with colorful cloths.

18:00 For the spirits of the boat¹², a ritual called *baci*¹³ was performed by 2 monks of the temple and 2 villagers. After that, silken ropes were fastened to the bow and stern by the monks who then blessed the boat and prayed for safety in the race.

⁸ It is regarded as a feast day at the end of Buddhist lent days, during which monks reside in the temple to which they belong and dedicate themselves to ascetic training for 3 months of the rainy season (from the full moon day of the 8th lunar month to the full moon day of the 11th lunar month).

⁹ Since 1985, the boat race festival has been held at *Ban Sieng Meen* on the 14th day of the waxing period of the 11th lunar month in the Mekong River, using small boats carrying 20-30 oarsmen.

¹⁰ Usually, *Mak beng* is the name for offerings made at pagodas, and done by placing objects in folded banana leaves.

¹¹ Rituals for spirits of boats could be confirmed directly in 4 villages. The rituals did not differ greatly, although only oarsmen of *Ban Aphy* and those of the corporation *Vilai Kun* which had their boats stored in *Vat Aphy* went to visit the spirit shrines of *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* on the day of the race.

¹² The boat of *Ban Aphy* was purchased from Sainyabouli Province. The spirit of the boat was called *Nang Non Hiao*.

¹³ *Baci* are also called *sou khouan*. The human body is believed to carry 32 souls, which are restored by the *baci* when weakened by illness or returned to the body when having left it. At the time of various milestones such as birth, marriage, Buddhist initiation, and start of the New Year, these rituals are also held with blood relatives, friends, and neighbors assembled.

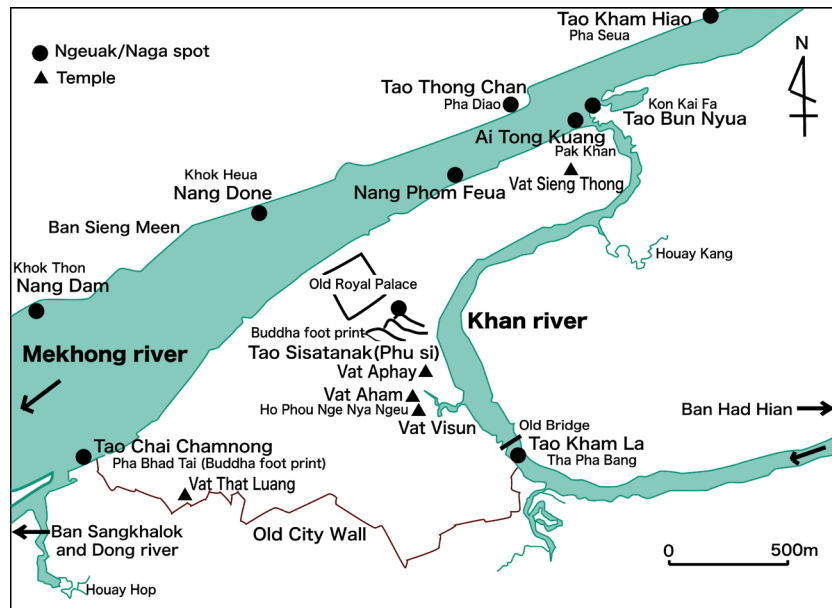


Figure 2 Center of Luang Prabang (refer to Berger, 2000).

September 7, 2007 (4 days before the race) (Figure 2)

09:00 The boat was passed in front of *Vat Aham* (*Vat* means temple) which enshrines *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu*, which are believed to guard the land of Luang Prabang, and then, it was carried to the Mekong River.

P.M. (until the eve before the race) Racing practices were done for about 2 to 3 hours in the afternoon every day.

September 11, 2007 (Race day)

07:00 In *Vat Aphyay*, the Buddhist festival *Ho khao phadab din* took place.

08:00 After sutra reading by monks, oarsmen called *siphai* gathered in the precincts, within which they arranged oars in front of a pagoda called *That*. Then, the oarsmen and *Nang heua*¹⁴ went into the temple to have monks read sutras and throw holy water (*Nam mon*) on themselves. *Huana heua*, the leader of the oarsmen, called out in front of the monks “*Xana* (We are going to win)!” In response to this, the other oarsmen also called out “*Xana* (We are going to win)!”

09:00 The oarsmen with *Nang heua* positioned in front of them picked up the oars and then left the temple walking in a line to the spirit shrine of *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* in the precincts of *Vat Aham*. *Nang heua* and several representative oarsmen went into this spirit shrine to pray at the altar. Subsequently, the line of oarsmen left for a pagoda erected in the precincts of the adjacent *Vat Visun*, went around this pagoda 3 times¹⁵, and then left for the boat (Figures 3 and 4).

09:40 First, *Nang heua* and the oarsmen got in the boat, and finally, an elderly person who had attended the *baci* for the spirits of the boat rode on the bow. The boat was rowed across the midstream of the Khan River, to a place near an old bridge and the elderly persons dedicated offerings to *Nagas* which are believed to live there (Figure 5). Then, the boat left for the junction with the Mekong River, where offerings were dedicated to *Nagas* which are believed to live in the mouth of the Khan River.

¹⁴ *Nang heua* are believed to be substitutes for the spirits of trees. Dressing them up beautifully in traditional costumes is believed to please the spirits of boats.

¹⁵ Going around 3 times is thought to be an assimilation of the teachings of Buddha/Dharma/Sangha in Buddhism (Suzuki, 1999:50).



Figure 3 *Nang heua*.

11:30 At the onset of the boat race, an exhibition boat race took place which offered a prayer for two *Nagas*, who are called *Nang Dam* and *Nang Done*¹⁶. Then, matches-up of the boat races between 2 teams were held according to the tournament table determined by a prior conference.

16:00 After the race, an award ceremony was held.

17:00 The boat was lifted from the river and transferred back to the boathouse in the temple. After that, the elderly persons dedicated offerings of boiled chickens to the



Figure 4 *Ho Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu*.



Figure 5 Offering to *Thao Kham La*.

spirits of the boat¹⁷.

2.1. Spirits of boats

For boat building materials in the boat race festivals

¹⁶ Luang Prabang has a folk legend connected to *Nang Dam* and *Nang Done*. In primitive times, the kingdom was populated by 2 *ngeuak*, which became the wives of the King by transforming themselves into human figures. The primary wife was called *Nang Done*, and the secondary wife was called *Nang Dam*. The King was thought to be a strong magic charm and was both feared and esteemed by the citizens. The King habitually shut himself up at an isolated site around every full moon (called *Vansin nyai*) for 7 days, during which time no one was permitted to enter the site. However, the two wives violated this prohibition and peeped at their husband, the King, there. They saw a huge coiled serpent, causing them to scream. Hearing their scream, the serpent plunged into a pond that led to the mouth of the Don River, around which it became a guardian god. On the other hand, the wives reverted to their original figures; the primary wife *Nang Done* became a god which guards Khok Heua located south of *Ban Sieng Meen*, and the secondary wife *Nang Dam* became a god which guards Khok Thon located north of the same village. This exhibition boat race for *Nang Dam* and *Nang Done* is believed to offer a prayer for the sacred *Nagas* which guard humans. The oarsmen are assumed to be villagers of *Ban Sieng Meen*, and the boat of *Nang Done* must win in conformity to the tradition (Phanmaly, 2008:10).

¹⁷ Of the 30 villages where interviews were done, only *Ban Aphy* villagers answered that they dedicated offerings on the day when the boat was taken out of the water and transferred back to the storage place; nevertheless, the offerings were not dedicated until nighttime, long after the boat was transferred back to the boathouse in the post-race period.

of Luang Prabang, a 25 m or taller tree (called *Mai khaen hin* in Lao; including trees of the scientific names *Hopea ferrea* Pierre, *H.pierrei*, *Hancea*, and *Parashorea buchananii* Symington (Callaghan, 2004:154)) are used. The belief that tall trees are populated by spirits is spread widely in Laos, and especially, trees to become boats are believed to be populated by female spirits and given beautiful names (“Vientiane Times” 1996: November 1-7.20, 2007: October 20.11, Phouangsaba & Vongsihn, 1999:39). Since neglect of rituals for the spirits of the boats or irreverent behavior to them¹⁸ is believed to lead to not only failure to win the race but also to rolling over of the boat or other accidents caused by the bad temper of the spirits, elderly persons in some villages put offerings on the bow and stern of the boats on the days of the new moon and full moon even during periods when a race is not held. Archaimbault (1972), who surveyed boat race festivals in Luang Prabang and other Lao regions in the early 1950s, mentioned spirits of boats with respect to Vientiane, whereas, regarding Luang Prabang, he described offerings on the bow of boats but did not mention the spirits of the boats; thus whether a cult of boat spirits did not exist 50 years ago or was just not documented is unknown. However, in all except 1 or 2 of the 30 villages where the author conducted interviews, female spirits were believed to populate the boats; interviewed Lao people called the boat spirits *phi heua*. Then the offerings were dedicated to the boat spirits before launching the boats: there were female-specific offerings (newly-made cloth, mirror, hair comb, lip rouge, and fragrant water) and 5 bundles of flowers and incense sticks which were set in a container made by folding banana leaves into a triangle.

Rituals for boat spirits, *baci*, were held in the temple precinct by a few persons. From the interviews, within the central area, these rituals were found to be held evenings in the villages that had boats as well as in *Ban Aphay*. Typically, *baci* are performed mainly by male *Mo phone*, who were men who had left the monkhood;

some *baci* involved a monk, but generally *baci* were performed by *Mo phone* who took over the tasks of monks who read sutras. This arrangement was also observed in a ritual for a housewarming, in which the author participated, and in rituals for a boat race in Vientiane. As well, Evans (1998:78) reported a similar form of *baci* rituals. However, it is noteworthy that *baci* for boat spirits in Luang Prabang were performed mainly by monks; even after *baci*, the monks of Luang Prabang took active roles in throwing holy water on the boat while rereading sutra beside the boat and in fastening silken ropes to the bow and stern while praying for safety in the race.

Another noteworthy characteristic of boat spirits is the *Nang heua* who appeared on the race day and were regarded as a substitute for boat spirits. They were believed to please the boat spirits and were young, beautiful girls in their early teens who were dressed in Lao traditional costumes. In Luang Prabang, village elderly persons let these *Nang heua* participate in Buddhist rituals on the race day and had monks throw holy water on them to esteem Buddhism¹⁹.

2.2. *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu*

Villagers in *Ban Aphay* said that their boats were those of *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu*, also known as *thevada luang* (in Lao), which mean grandfather *Ngeu* and grandmother *Ngeu*. The *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* have large, red faces and large eyes, ears, noses, and mouths, and their bodies are covered with coats made of wood fibers. Called grandpa and grandma, they are believed to be husband and wife. In the New Year festival (*Bun Pimai*), they leave their shrine to appear together with a masked figure of a lion called *Singkeo-Singkham*²⁰. There are various folk legends about them: for example, (1) in the beginning, as the primordial couple, they created the land on this world which had been covered all around with water; (2) they cut down towering trees which had covered the land and made sacrifice of themselves to relieve the people of

¹⁸ Persons should not ride in a boat while wearing shoes and the bottom of the boat should not be struck by the oars.

¹⁹ Episodes connected to *Nang heua* have many obscure points. According to persons M (who appeared in footnote 6) and the village head of *Ban Sangkhalok*, *Nang heua* were said not to have existed during the era of kingdom. A similar answer was also obtained from the interview in *Ban Sieng Meen* which has an important role in setting up the boats of *Nang Dam and Nang Done*; the custom of *Nang heua* has had only a short history since around 1985. Regarding these answers, further investigation is required because some villages said that *Nang heua* dated from the era of kingdom.

²⁰ *Singkeo-Singkham* is a lion which was captured by *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* in the Himalayan forest and afterward became their adopted child. The *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* and *Singkeo-Singkham* were also involved in the That Luang festivals held in December in Luang Prabang until the 1960s.

darkness; and (3) in the beginning of this world, they bored holes in 3 pumpkins to produce humans; no matter what story is true, they were enshrined as ancestors of the Kings during the era of kingdom (Tamura, 1996). Another story is that in the 1975 revolution, all the central figures in Luang Prabang, i.e., the King, his family, and those who had had important tasks for the royal family, were sent to reeducation camps, and furthermore, the Buddhist statue called *Pha Bang*²¹, which was an object of veneration in a citizens' cult, was rumored to have been transferred from the royal palace to Vientiane. This almost destroyed the spiritual center of the citizens. But, *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* were believed to have been the central spiritual figures for the people in Luang Prabang and protected them from misfortune at that time, so they have been enshrined with high esteem by the citizens until now (Trankell, 1999:192).

Several researchers (Reynolds, 1978; Tamura, 1995; Trankell, 1999; Stuart-Fox 2006) have reported that the term for *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* expressed by Lao people conforms closest to *thevada luang*, whereas this term has been translated differently in other languages being *shugorei* in Japanese (Tamura, 1996:112), and in English guardian spirit (Archambault, 1964; Trankell, 1999; Stuart-Fox, 2006), guardian divinities (Reynolds, 1978), ancestral deities (Halpern, 1964), and ancestral guardians of the city (Stuart-Fox, 1996). Especially, the "spirit" of guardian spirit (or "rei" of *shugorei* in Japanese) has also been used for translation of *phi*, spirits that are referred to as non-thevada in non-Luang Prabang regions, so there is some doubt that *phi* and *thevada* are synonymous words (Iwata, 1963:223). In this regard, Iwata expressed an opinion as follows:

[The Thai and Lao peoples] try to build more stable lives from the blessing of good *phi* while protecting themselves from the aggression of evil *phi*. However, into this dualistic worldview, higher-level gods different than good and evil or friend and foe were brought. They can be called *taewada* [this term is Iwata's original description].... It is insecure for *phi*, which are just spirits no matter how they are dominant, to guard villages. If the term *phi* is replaced by *taewada* [meaning celestial deities], a word of Pali and Sanskrit origin, they may be dominant

somehow (Iwata, 1972:32).

Assuming that this opinion of Iwata is supported, *thevada* become superior to *phi*. Tamura (1996) described *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* as kings of spirits (*phi*) which are appropriate for large celestial deities, another name for them; this opinion may be similar to that of Iwata, and it is obvious that Lao people differentiate them from the other spirits by using the different terms *thevada* and *phi*.

These *thevada luang*, i.e., *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu*, who are superior to *phi* and follow Buddhism, dedicate offerings to *Pha Bang*, which can be said to be a Buddhist symbol in Laos, in the annual New Year festival. Other roles for them are to take water from the habitat of *Tao Kham La*, one of the *Nagas* which is believed to guard the land of Luang Prabang together with them and dwell in the midstream of the Khan River, and to pour the water into *hang lin*, a long wooden sluice in the form of a *Naga* which leads to *Pha Bang*. This water-pouring act is symbolic of how *Nagas* have not only purifying powers but also how they esteem the Buddha (Stuart-Fox, 2006:13).

Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu can be said to be in charge of various roles in the land of Luang Prabang. So, interpretive translations of *thevada luang* vary. For example, Tamura (1995:164,165; 1996:112) translated them as ancestors of the Kings, spirits of the Kings, guardian spirits of the land, kings of spirits, or collective ancestral ghosts, depending on the context. Trankell (1999:195) stated that *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* have a power that governs *Nagas*. Because *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu*, having aspects of spirits, are believed to have such overall powers, they are confirmed not to go against Buddhism based on the fact that they dedicated offerings to *Pha Bang* on which Buddhist Lao people rely in a city-wide, big New Year festival, and they are confirmed to be an object of a citizens' cult as *thevada luang* in Luang Prabang.

2.3. *Nagas*

In Luang Prabang, 15 *Nagas* are believed to dwell in rivers, ponds, caves, and mountains to guard the land of Luang Prabang. However, the names and habitats of these 15 *Nagas* vary among individuals, so what *Nagas* should be included in the 15 is uncertain. Rampon

²¹ This statue is said to have been presented from the Angkor Dynasty during the era of King Fa Ngum. One theory is that the *Pha Bang* statue was made in Sri Lanka, the birthplace of Theravada Buddhism and a present from the King of Sri Lanka to the King of Angkor, afterward it was presented to Luang Prabang (Mixay, 2006:22-24).

(2004:13-14) numerated habitats of 27 *Nagas* from chronicles and other materials.

On the day of the boat race festival which takes place in the Khan river, people pray that no major accidents will occur, and to this end, they dedicate offering to *Nagas* that are thought to be especially significant. By inviting *Nagas* to the races and having them participate in the races, people also pray for protecting of the land. There are 2 or 3 places where participating boats dedicate offering before the races, the first is *Kon Kai Fa*, a rock in which a *Naga* called *Tao Bun Neua* dwells, located at the river mouth of the Khan River. This spot is the subject of a legend.

When 2 hermits (*ratsi*) built the first kingdom in the current land of Luang Prabang, they set 4 points in order to determine the region of this kingdom. The first point was set at the Thong tree, which is believed to have flowers all year long, and is located in the junction of the Khan and Mekong Rivers; the second was set several meters downstream from the river mouth of the Dong River; the third was set at the summit of Mt. Phou Si; and the fourth was set at the place where *Vat Visun* stands currently. After setting these 4 points, the 2 hermits summoned 15 dominant *ngeuak* (*phi ngou*, also known as serpents/snake spirits)²² and *Nagas* onto a rock at the mouth of the Khan River in order to protect the kingdom in the future. These 15 *ngeuak* and *Nagas* received an explanation of the kingdom from the hermits and agreed to guard the kingdom. Shortly after that, the kingdom was built there and was named *Xieng Dong Xieng Thong* after the names for the first and second points. The 2 hermits are said to have been satisfied and reported their achievement to Indra deities dwelling in the highest Buddhist heaven (Stuart-Fox, 2006:12).

Especially, *Kon Kai Fa*, the rock where the 15 *Nagas* are believed to have gathered, is thought to represent a connection with heaven and Indra deities because its natural shape is directed to the sky. Thus, this rock is an important place which governs the 15 *Nagas*²³. The second site is near an old bridge in the midstream of the

Khan River. This site is the habitat of *Tao Kham La* from which *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* draw water in the New Year festival. At the second site, offerings are dedicated to this *Tao Kham La*. The third site is the southern boundary in the old kingdom (according to chronicles), or currently the mouth of *Houay Hop* (*Houay* means subordinate stream) where there is a stone footprint of the Buddha. At this third site, offerings are dedicated to *Chai Chamnong* dwelling there. In addition, just before the real races start, *Nang Dam* (Ms. Black) and *Nang Done* (Ms. White), female *Nagas* dwelling in the Mekong River, participate in festival and races as a representative of the sacred *Nagas* by being transferred to a boat which is rowed by black-dressed women and another boat which is rowed by white-dressed women in accordance with their respective names. For this reason, boat race festival which takes place in the Khan River is also known as festival for *Nagas*, and one theory is that *Nang Done* is believed to be a fortune-inviting *Naga*, *Nang Dam* is believed to be a misfortune-inviting *Naga*, and people pray for safety in all races and wealth and prosperity in the city by letting the white boat beat the black boat (Suzuki, 1999:53).

During the era of kingdom, *Heua Thong*, a state boat for the King, was followed by *Heua Then Sao*, a boat which was rowed by red-dressed royal soldiers at the right of *Heua Thong*, and *Heua Then Kham*, a boat which was rowed by green-dressed royal police officers at the left of *Heua Thong* to dedicate offerings to *Nagas*. After the King arrived at *Ho Xay Phatam-nad*, a high ground from which the King watched the boat races, a race was first held between the boats *Heua Then Sao* and *Heua Then Kham*. These 2 boats are believed to have been *Ahak* (synonymous with *thevada*) which guard the kingdom, and this race was an important ritual race which prayed for protection and prosperity of the kingdom just like the *Nan Dam Nang Done race*²⁴.

Some *Nagas* are used frequently for decorations of temples and subsist in Buddhism without antilogy,

²² Of these *Nagas* dwelling in the 15 habitats, those dwelling in 4 habitats are believed to be *ngeuak*, an old Thai word, and they have personalities different from Buddhist *Nagas*. The *ngeuak* are feared and believed to be fickle and unpredictable, and must be placated by people. Some Lao believe that those drowned in rivers died because *ngeuak* ate them. The *Ngeuak* are *Nang Dam*, *Nang Done*, *Nang Phom hua*, and the most dominant *Ai Tong Kuang*. At one time, animals were sacrificed to *Ai Tong Kuang* (Stuart-Fox, 2006:7-15).

²³ Also, the 2 hermits are believed to have built a pole of the kingdom (*lak muang*), which was made from jewels, on this rock (Archaimbault, 1972:17). Another theory is that the 2 hermits dwelt in a cave of Phu Si and built two poles above this cave to enshrine the heaven (Tamura, 1996:109).

²⁴ The state boat for the King is also known as *Heua Phathinang*. This boat, made in around 1961, is over 30 meters long boat and can carry 60 oarsmen. *Heua Then Sao* and *Heua Then Kham* (also known as *Iniang*), made in unknown years, can each carry 38 to 40 oarsmen. At present, these 3 boats are located in the palace museum.

whereas other *Nagas* are believed to be fearful spirits which have governed water since the pre-Buddhism era. Halpern (1964:51) and Trankell (1999:195) are found to have used the term spirit, e.g., tutelary spirit, spirit of the river, for an interpretation of *Naga*. According to Tambiah (1970), who surveyed religious systems in northern-east Thailand in the 1960s, malevolent and capricious spirits (*phi*) were considered meat-eating. The fact that offerings to be dedicated to *Tao Bun Neua* on the race day included dolls made from paper shows that Lao people regard *Nagas* as spirits and have dedicated sacrifices to them. Findings of Archaimbault (1972:18) and Stuart-Fox (2006:15) that Lao people had once sacrificed animals to dominant *Nagas* and dedicated the meat of water buffaloes, swine, and chickens to spirit shrines for *Nagas* provide a glimpse of Lao people's underlying cult of *phi*. However, from these complexly intertwined myths and rituals, it has been confirmed that *Nagas* are not openly spoken of as *phi* which deviate from Buddhism but are believed to be entities that depend on and esteem Buddhism.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, how spirits associated with rituals in boat race festivals are interpreted and how consistently they are maintained within Buddhism were discussed. *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* and *Nagas* have been considered through myths and legends and acknowledged as god-like entities which guard Luang Prabang while having an aspect of spirits. Further background behind this may be that the Kings, regarded as the highest of secular Buddhists, had once acknowledged and esteemed *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* and *Nagas* as guardians of the royal domain. However, even though the King is no longer present, the *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* and *Nagas* are still acknowledged as Buddhism-esteeming entities in rituals. There, they have been consistently called not *phi* but *thevada luang* or *Nagas*. Previous reports on *phi* for Lao people living in the central area of Luang Prabang have involved only *phi* in temples (Evans, 1998) excluding the *Phou Ngeu Nya Ngeu* or *Nagas*. Although characteristics of the *phi* reported by Evans, as pointed out earlier in the present paper, have been less specifically investigated, they may be spirits of pagodas in the precincts of temples by reference to Condominas's (1998:62-63) investigation on *phi* at temples in Vientiane. However, these spirits were temple spirits, so were unlikely to deviate from Buddhism. Further, Tamura pointed out the presence of

shrines for guardian spirits in the area of *Vat Xieng Thong*, whereas he did not explicitly discuss whether those guardian spirits were referred to as *Nagas* of the *Vat Xieng Thong* area or completely different *phi*. Among the spirits, those of boats were positioned as particular in some sense. The boats were purchased from Sainyabouli Province adjacent to Luang Prabang. The wood used to make the boats was from this province not a sacred place in the Luang Prabang region, so it was not associated with *thevada* or *Nagas*. It can be said that in order to incorporate the *phi* of the boats into Buddhism, active involvement of monks was required, the monks were the main performers in *baci* for the spirits of boats, and *Nang heua* required roles in receiving blessing from the monks, praying to *thevada luang*, going around a pagoda, and placating the *Nagas*. Lao people in Luang Prabang live in contact with the minority people Lao Theung who dwell in the mountains; presumably because of this, they were more sensitive to the word *phi* compared to those in Vientiane. In fact, rituals for spirits of boats in Vientiane also took a *baci* form, but in some villages, no Buddhist monks were involved in the *baci*, and on the race day, *chao cham* (intermediary guardian spirits of the villages) were the main performers of the rituals and there were no Buddhist monks. The villagers spoke of *phi* without hesitation and the shrine for the guardian spirits of the village was called *Ho phi ban*.

However, as described above, the presence of spirits in Luang Prabang was different from that in Vientiane and its neighboring regions. The spirits in Luang Prabang can subsist without antilogy only after being subsumed into Buddhism ingeniously. Thus, they demarcate superstitious spirits.

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