The Belief in Naga among the Lao

The word naga in Lao has the same meaning as ngeuak or luang: a big, magical snake in Lao folktales that has a red crest and the ability to change form. Many Lao folktales depict naga as King Naga from the Mekong River, who fell in love with a human woman. They got married, lived by the river, and had nine children, who are believed to be the ancestors of Lao. ‘Nine’ in Lao is kao. Therefore, the Mekong River is called Kao Loang or Kao Luang in Chinese, meaning nine nagas.

Lao people who live by the Mekong River still believe that naga protect them. When boatmen travel along the river, they pray to the water spirit. At the end of Buddhist Lent (Aok Phansa), the 15th of the 11th month in the lunar calendar, people float fire boats on the Mekong River to pay respect to naga and thank him for the rain, which is essential for farming rice. People pray with flowers, candles and incense in areas where purple-pink fireball plants, or Bung Fai Paya Nak (Lord Naga’s fireballs), appear on the surface of the river.

The belief in naga-ngeuak is represented in many other ways; for example, body tattoos of the naga image are popular among elderly men, especially among Buddhist monks. Tai-Daeng people in Huaphan province avoid wrapping their heads with red cloth or wearing red shirts and sinh (tube skirts) when they cross rivers. Because red is the colour of his crest, naga will be angry if he sees them in red. Lao do not harm snakes in the forest. Even if snakes come into people’s houses – which is believed to bring bad luck – they will chase the snakes away and pray.

Naga patterns in Lao woven textiles are created in many styles, with names such as Nak Hong Thien (naga candle holder), Nak Peung Horn (naga spreading his crest), Nak Song Hua (two-headed naga) and Nak Harm Son (naga carrying pine trees). These patterns appear in most textiles, including sinh, shawls, door curtains, cushion covers and blankets.

Before World War II, most Lao women knew how to weave, grow cotton, raise silkworms and weave silk thread. Instead of going to school as men did, women stayed home and learned how to weave. They began with weavings for their own personal use, then made them for family members, and before they were married had to weave sinh, blankets, cushion covers and shawls as presents for their in-laws. When a woman had her own family, she produced textiles for her husband to sell at market.

Today, women have an equal opportunity to go to school, where weaving is not part of the curriculum. Thus women have less time to learn how to weave, and the number of weavers is declining. Some women in rural areas, who only attend five years of primary school, learn how to weave at home, but it is hard even for them to become skilful weavers because they are busy helping their husbands in the rice fields.

Female shamans in rural areas wear sinh and shawls with special, sophisticated naga patterns to keep evil spirits away. Otherwise, women nowadays wear sinh with naga patterns not because they believe that the naga will protect them, but for aesthetic reasons. Even weavers no longer know the meaning of the patterns. Young people prefer imported jeans and T-shirts to traditional clothes and wear the latter only for special occasions, such as weddings and religious ceremonies. Efforts to have schoolchildren wear locally produced uniforms have not been