

## **The Research of the Symbolism of Phra That Phanom and Indigenous Ethnoecology Synopsis**



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**ABSTRACT:** Southeast Asian Stupas contains Buddhist iconography having rich symbolism. The symbolism of Buddhist stupa (or chedi) is a kind of arts illustration of Buddha's intelligence, and it also contains the intricate man-land relationship locally. Localization occurred on the architecture of stupas thereby the indigenous knowledge influenced the symbolism of the traditions of stupas that originated from India. Hence, this paper is dedicated to exploring the relationship between the symbolism of Phra That Phanom and the local ethnoecology. By combining the years of fieldwork experience and the related ethnoecological theories, the symbolism of Phra That Phanom and the regional man-land relationship could be interpreted in an innovative perspective. In the end, a comprehensive analysis about *Mahabhuta* symbolism of Phra That Phanom will be conducted to test the paper's demonstration.

**KEYWORDS:** Stupa, Symbolism, Buddhism, Phra That Phanom

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### **I. INTRODUCTION: THE LITERATURE REVIEW OF PHRA THAT PHANOM'S PAST AND PRESENT**

#### **1.1 The Background of Phra That Phanom before the Buddhist Era**

Phra That Phanom is a typical stupa in Lan Xang style located in present Wat Phra That Phanom in Nakorn Phanom Province of Thailand. Phra That Phanom and other antique Lan Xang style stupas in Thai Isan are important Buddhist heritages to research Tai ethnoecology.

Phra That Phanom is the most sacred *Phra That* (Thai: Buddhist Pagoda) in the Thai Isan region. According to some local *Tamnans* (Thai: folklore or legends), natives in the region believe it was initially built by Monk Maha Kassapa, one of Gautama Buddha's chief disciples. Conspicuously, the local *Tamnans* reflected the psychological quality of the regional Tais helping to form the sacralization of Phra That Phanom. They also mentioned that there is Buddha's breastbone relic in it.

Academically speaking, the archaeologists hold different views about the actual completed time of Phra That Phanom. Damrongrajanubhab asserted that it was built in the period of the Fu-Nan Kingdom, roughly between the first to sixth centuries. On the other hand, Prince Souphanouvong thought that it should be an ancient Khmer-style architecture. Moreover, some foreign scholars conjectured that it should be constructed between the fourth to eleventh centuries (Souphanouvong, 1985).

Unfortunately, the natural calamities caused the collapse of Phra That Phanom in 1975. Nevertheless, Thailand positively and instantaneously organized the restoration between 1975 to 1979. Thanks to this large-scale restoration, based on multi-disciplinary tests, such as soil tests and archaeological excavations, some more archaeological evidences helped reveal Phra That Phanom's initial completion time. These soil tests proved that the innermost brick chamber at the ground level of the stupa was built about the seventh to eighth centuries (Baknam, 1986). The Chinese scholar recorded that before its collapse in 1975, on the west door of Phra That Phanom, there was an image of Brahma riding his mount Hamsa and holding a rosary string in his left hand. Brahma in the image was accompanied by deities and two Apsaras flanking on the left and right upper parts respectively. This scene illustrates Brahmaloaka of Hindu epics (Deng, 2015).

Based on the fieldwork, this author believed that by the comparative studies among the Dvaravati arts, Chenla arts, and early Khmer arts, the initial Phra That Phanom could be inferred as a Hindu-Brahmanic architecture. Furthermore, relying on the

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iconographic researches of the original carves on the stupa that illustrated a scene of hunting and killing animals. So too the stupa did not belong to Buddhism in the first time (the 7-8th centuries should be the pre-Buddhist era of this Tai region). Firstly, this hunting scene contradicts the first precept, the prohibition of killing in *pancasila* (Pali-Sanskrit: Five Precepts). Secondly, there were the pictures of Vishnu mounting Garuda emblazoned on the north door, as well as the Shiva's Nandin was found on the west door of the brick chamber of Phra That Phanom. Thus, according to the historical records, the style of architecture of Phra That Phanom initially adopted the style from Champa that possessed profound Hindu impact as well (Cummings & White, 2019).

### 1.2 Naga Belief in Phra That Phanom and the Indigenous Ethnoecology

The analysis above showed Phra That Phanom possesses influences originating from the before predominated Mon-Khmer people, Hindu-Brahmanic traditions, and some pre-Buddhist indigenous knowledge. And then, the symbolism of Phra That Phanom experienced integration when Buddhism met Hindu traditions, and the indigenous animism, and experienced a transformation from the Tantric Buddhist epoch (around the 8-12th centuries) to Theravada influence (since the 14th century). Eventually, diverse Buddhist elements were injected into the re-construction and renovation of Phra That Phanom. This author believed that Phra That Phanom's Naga belief is one of the outcomes in this fusing progress.

Undoubtedly, Phra That Phanom's Naga is a Hindu symbolism that is older than Buddhist ones. Some current Thai Isan's Naga belief rituals and ceremonies bonded worship of Phra That Phanom, production and life, religion, education together. Therefore, the investigation of the Naga belief in Phra That Phanom can interpret the indigenous ethnoecology based on the theory of man-land relationship. This author coded and summarized the fieldwork about Phra That Phanom's Naga belief as below.

Tais, who live along the Mekong River, believe that the Mekong River is the residence of Nagas. Because of the location of Phra That Phanom (the largest stupa on the Mekong River bank in Thailand), locals trust firmly that this stupa is protected by the Nagas living in the Mekong River. The staffs in Wat (Thai: temple) change new Naga ornaments on the peak of the stupa<sup>1</sup> annually during each Songkran Festival. This author, fortunately, met this activity on 12th April 2019. People in the temple introduced to me, Naga is a symbolism of water worship, and Thai (Tai) people's production and life all depend on the rivers so that worship the Naga protected Phra That Phanom can show respect to water resources. Briefly speaking, the worship of stupa is a good educational way for the traditional Tai society to introduce environmental awareness (conserving water resources). Pay homages to *Sattanaga* (Pali-Sanskrit: Seven Great Nagas), which protects the stupa and town from dangers, is another important activity in Wat Phra That Phanom. Through participatory observation, the author practiced the manners. In order to worship *Sattanaga*, participants practiced meditation and prayed from the evening to the night. After that, a monk preached a sermon that explained that this activity is devoted to delivering the education of dhamma, good health<sup>2</sup> as well as praying for Mekong's gifts.

Moreover, this sermon made this author realize another important point. In the sermon, Naga stories were narrated: "Nagas are the guardians of water and earth, they can bless you but also can destroy you if you are greedy.....the chest bone relic of the Lord Buddha is protected by humanoid Nagas.....this duty is performed by the Seven Great Nagas which Indra instructed (the monk cited a part of *Phongsawadan Phra That Phanom*).....owing to the great Nagas are intimately close to mortals, therefore, Nagas of here (Nakorn Phanom) are a protective." This author had heard similar sermons in other Tai communities along the Mekong Rivers basin, such as Laos and Sipsong Panna of China. Sumet Jumsai's (1997) works also indicated this situation. He stated in his book, Naga is a sort of water symbolism universally existing in the traditional communities along the Mekong River, the symbol of water possesses the identity of fertility, protector or destroyer. Naga symbolism has irreplaceable agricultural intelligence to this regional Tai people.

Overall, albeit the fieldwork review merely analyzed a single case of Naga symbolism of Phra That Phanom, this case inspired the consideration of the relation between stupa's symbolism and ethnoecology. The symbolism of Phra That Phanom is a great significant perspective to the collaborative research and comprehensive analysis of the relationship between religion and natural environment of Tai communities inhabiting along the Mekong River basin. And, it helps to improve the historical-cultural coherence and connectivity of the Tai studies in Mekong region.

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<sup>1</sup> The Naga ornament is set above on the Harmika of Phra That Phanom.

<sup>2</sup> Pathom Hongsuwan (2017) mentioned in this paper as well, Nagas can use healing magics to recover the physical health of the participants during the meditation.

### II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RELATED THEORY

This paper is dedicated to exploring the relationship between the symbolism of Phra That Phanom and the local ethnoecology. This paper adopted the interdisciplinary qualitative methodology. The literature method, semi-structural interview, and participatory observation are the main research methods. In addition, the author realized that Phra That Phanom is not only a sacred religious place for the Laotian and Thai-Isan people but also is a prototype of numerous other stupas and chedis in this regions. Stupa or chedi is an expression of the ideal of enlightenment and the representation of Buddha's mind (Wang, 2006). Hence, the ethnoecology and ethnic environmental awareness could be inherited and spread following the influence of Phra That Phanom. Therefore, the research of Phra That Phanom's symbolism has the universally ontological and epistemological significance for the regional Tai studies.

Adrian Snodgrass's theories of the symbolism of the stupa are instructive to this paper. Firstly, based on the philosophical perspective, the symbolism of stupa can be macroscopically divided into two parts, the visual and spatial part, as well as the narrative and conceptive part (Snodgrass, 1991). The combining research of Buddhist sutta is indispensable. According to the Mahaprajnaparamita Sutta (Pali: Large Perfection of Wisdom Sutta), when Buddha would reach the *parinibbana* (Pali: nibbana after death), he enjoined on Ananda that after his *parinibbana* his remains should be cremated, and establish a stupa as the symbolic monument of his religious status and a refuge place where all beings adhere to Buddha's *dhammakaya* (Pali-Sanskrit: truth body) (Conze, 2003). Therefore, scholars of Buddhism raised a research paradigm that people need to combine the visual-spatial and narrative-conceptive aspects to comprehend the symbolism of stupas. In addition, architecture is a comprehensive expression of nature and culture, and the man-land relationship influenced both visual-spatial and narrative-conceptive parts in which the ethnoecological intelligence exists.

### III. PHRA THAT PHANOM AND HIGH-LEVEL EDUCATION: A PATH TO INHERIT AND SPREAD TRADITIONAL ETHNOECOLOGICAL VALUE

Monk's sermon in Wat Phra That Phanom is the traditional education that introduced environmental awareness and ethnoecological value to the populace in Buddhism. However, there is another case of the contemporary higher education—university education—that absorbed the symbolism of Phra That Phanom to achieve the young generations are capable of inheriting the traditional ethnoecological value sustainably.

Phra That Phanom is the school badge of Khon Kaen University (KKU). KKU's *Sukhwan* tradition will be held annually in Wat Phra That Phanom to welcome the freshmen ("Emblem-KHON KAEN UNIVERSITY", 2019). The ritual ceremonies of *Sukhwan* are consisted of decorating stupa, offering robes to monks, learning the history of Phra That Phanom, and traditional dance performance. During the worship ceremony, the students of KKU will wear traditional dresses of different ethnic groups. Ajarns (Thai: teachers, originated from Pali-Sanskrit Acarya) and Students introduced to this author that the participants enjoy the monk's sermon and stupa circumambulation to show gratitude to Phra That Phanom. Since the establishment of KKU in 1967, Phra That Phanom was adopted as the spiritual symbolism offering dhamma teachings (namely *wittaya* or good knowledge, *jariya* or good behavior, and *panya* or wisdom from learning and good thinking) to KKU groups. This is a result of Phra That Phanom's synergistic effects of visual-spatial and narrative-conceptive aspects. Eventually, Phra That Phanom's symbolism integrated into modern higher education, which promotes the young generations to inherit the history, culture, and traditional ethnoecological intelligence during the campus life.

By analyzing the case of KKU, this author summarized that the reasons traditional environmental awareness could be inherited and vivid, ascribed to the three factors. Firstly, the inclusiveness of history. Phra That Phanom's history can be traced back to the 7-8th centuries. Its original construction was a square brick structure, which possessed the Cham and Mon-Khmer patterns. It experienced several times restores and extensions. According to the historical records, King Setthathirath's pursuit of inheriting his fatherly footsteps of Photisarath, Setthathirath restored and expanded the Phra That Phanom and other important Lan Xang stupas in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Some scholars deduced that Setthathirath renovated the anda and the spire parts of Phra That Phanom, and the earliest lotus-bud shape (anda part) was set on (Evans, 2012). And then, Phra That Phanom collapsed in 1975 due to the constant rainstorm. Nevertheless, the event was related to the Communist Pathet Lao seized Vientiane by many locals (Cummings & White, 2019). However, the restoration of Thailand from 1975 to 1979 was not impacted by the political ideology,

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so that this Lan Xang stupa was restored in accordance with its original appearance. Therefore, the original ethnoecological “mental maps” in the stupa are preserved well.

Stupa plays a role of ethnoecological image recorder. Those images are the ethnoecological mental maps that record the regional ethnic, cultural, and eco-environmental landscapes. Hence, the inclusiveness of history made a good result of protecting original ethnoecological mental maps so that the symbolism of Phra That Phanom can reflect the original man-land relationship and lifestyle in this region. So, the second factor is that the symbolism of stupa aroused the people’s resonance to natural ecology. For example, the reliefs on the bricks of Phra That Phanom recorded the typical man-land relationship in the Mekong River basin. One of the images on the north wall illustrated the ecological relationship between humans and animals. There are *singha* (Pali-Sanskrit: lion), adult elephants, and minor elephants, as well as a peasant walking behind his elephants. This image records the elephants ploughing civilization of Tai. This kind of agricultural landscape cannot be found in modern society, but Phra That Phanom offered a benign educational resource about harmonious development between man and nature to the modern people (Pruess & James, 1976).

The third factor is that the symbolism of Phra That Phanom exerted its function of coordination. History, human culture, ecology, and traditional environmental awareness are gathered in the worship of Phra That Phanom, and combined with higher education to form a new environmental perception system. Finally, it realizes the inheritance and spread of culture and history and the unique awareness of the environmental sustainability of local people.

## IV. THE MAHABHUTA OF PHRA THAT PHANOM AND THE LOCAL ETHNOECOLOGY

### 4.1 Mahabhuta and Stupa Symbolism

The construction of stupa abides on the Buddhist doctrines and the strict disciplines of Buddhist art. But those doctrines and art disciplines experienced the influence of local knowledge when the Buddhism integrated into local societies. Therefore, the research of *Mahabhuta* of stupa will help us to further interpret the relation amongst stupa symbolism, Buddhism, and ethnoecology. In Theravada canonical texts, *Mahabhuta* usually refers to the four Great Elements that formed the Buddhist cosmos. In the stupa construction, *Mahabhuta* can be manifested by the stupa structures and the colors.

This author summarized some clues from Buddhavmsa of Pali Canon. A stupa ought to be comprised of the eight structures, they are platform, three steps, four steps, anda, harmika, thirteen rings, parasol, and peak ornament from down to top. And, they symbolize the *parami* (Pali: perfection), three refuges, *appamanna* (Pali: four immeasurables), *satta sambojjhanga* (Pali: seven factors of awakening), ariya atthangika magga (Pali: the Noble Eightfold Path), *anussati*, *karuna* (Pali: compassion), and *bodhicitta* respectively (Vicittasarabhivamsa, Ko Lay & Tin Lwin, 1990).

Subsequently, the comparative research of *Mahabhuta* and Buddhavamsa can reveal the relation among the stupa structures, colors, and the natural elements. The structures from the platform to the four steps formed a portion that represents *pruthavi-dhatu* (Pali: earth element). Yellow is the representative color of *pruthavi-dhatu* that illustrates the wisdom of equanimity. The anda portion represents *apa-dhatu* (water element). Anda is the symbol of Buddha’s begging bowl and womb that means the birth and prosperity. White is the representative color that represents mirror-like wisdom. Harmika and thirteen rings formed the conical spire of stupa, which represents the *teja-dhatu* (fire element). Red is the representative color that means the wisdom of discernment. Vayu-dhatu (air element) is blue, and the parasol is the representative of it. It is a metaphor of protecting all beings from the suffering of scorching sun and rain. It represents the wisdom of accomplishment. Finally, due to Theravada prefers to pursue the Arhat cultivation than Bodhisattva cultivation. Hence, the peak ornament that represents the *bodhicitta* is rare to found in Theravada stupas and chides (Kumar & Nitin, 2002).

**Table.1 The Colors of Mahabhuta Expression in Different Buddhist Sects**

Sects	Earth	Water	Fire	Air	Space
Mahayana	Yellow	Blue	Red	Green	White
Theravada	Yellow	White	Red	Blue	
Vajrayana	Yellow	Blue	Red	Green	White

**Note:** Different Buddhist sects have different definitions to the colors of *Mahabhuta* thereby forming the different forms of stupa art.

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On the basis of the brief review above, the *Mahabhuta* symbolism of Phra That Phanom is helpful to research the relation between Buddhism and natural elements that influenced the formation of regional ethnoecology. The context below will analyze the local concepts about the relation between the stupa symbolism and ethnoecology.

### 4.2 Local Concepts and the Relative Demonstrations

The distinctive lotus-bud-shaped *anda* is the most conspicuous characteristic of a Lan Xang stupa. The *anda* occupies a half or a half more proportions of a stupa planning. Furthermore, the second largest part is the portion of *pruthavi-dhatu*.

This author interviewed a monk of Wat Phon Chai in Dan Sai County, Loei Province. This monk provided valuable information about the local concept of the relationship between Buddhist stupa symbolism and the eco-environment. He mentioned that: “Stupa is a portrayal of life. The water and earth are two indispensable parts of a crop-growing ethnic group. *Anda* and the lower portion of a stupa represent the *apa-dhatu* and *pruthavi-dhatu*. Furthermore, Naga belief perhaps had rooted in Thai Isan and other Mekong areas before the arrival of Buddhism, and *Phraya Nak* (Thai: Great Naga) is regarded as the symbolism of water and earth either by locals. Consequently, *apa-dhatu* and *pruthavi-dhatu* portions of Lan Xang stupa are intentionally exaggerated. Stupa art can reflect the environmental value of locals. They really care about the prosperities of water and land resources” There also is another important interview. The Theravada bhikkhu of Wat Phra Mahathat Kaen Nakhon, Pasaman, introduced that: “White is the expression of water in the Theravada Buddhism along the Mekong region, the famous *Nagarajas* (Pali-Sanskrit: Naga Kings), *Sesanaga* and *Vritra* both were depicted as white serpents, and Naga is the guardian of the Mekong River and underground world. Hence, white and yellow (or golden) are often used as the main colors of *Chao Mae Phraya Nak* and stupa, representing the water and earth symbolism.”

By comparing with Buddhist doctrines other Lan Xang stupas of Thai Isan and Laos, this author thought the statements of the monks should be persuasive.

Firstly, the lotus-bud-shaped *anda* is the common structure of Lan Xang stupa. According to the Buddhist doctrines, lotus is the symbolism of the prop of cosmos formed by *apa-dhatu* and *pruthavi-dhatu*, usually expressed as *anda* and lotus throne in stupa planning. Coomaraswamy (1935) researched the iconography of the lotus in Buddhist stupa deeply. The lotus is the assemblage of *Apa* (waters), which represents the possibilities of manifestation contained within *prakrti* (Pali-Sanskrit: substance). However, a lotus has a diremption of upper waters and lower waters, and the lower waters are those containing the formal possibilities of manifestation, and the upper waters are those containing its formless possibilities. The stupa is a meditating Buddha image, so too the nimbus of the Buddha image or *anda* generally shows lotuses—upper waters—to complement the lotus on which Buddha sits or stands is the lower waters or the throne of the stupa. The huge golden lotus of Phra That Phanom refers to the lotus throne—lower waters—and the *anda* represents the womb of dharma or Buddha, the upper waters. Therefore, *apa-dhatu* and *pruthavi-dhatu* symbolism of Phra That Phanom is also demonstrated by the Buddhist doctrines. The indigenous ethnoecology is related to the education of Buddhism to some extent.

Secondly, Naga belief is the common local believe in both of Thai Isan and Laos. The same the structure and color symbolism expressions can be found in Phra That Si Song Rak, Phra That Kham Kaen, That Ing Hang, and That Luang. Moreover, Phra That Phanom and That Luang was renovated and established during an approximate period by Setthathirath (around the mid-16th century). Thereupon, the symbolism of Phra That Phanom has universally ontological and epistemological significance in this regional ethnoecology.

Hindu-Khmer originated Naga belief is the crucial clue throughout the entire context and connected the symbolism of Phra That Phanom, Buddhism, and local knowledge altogether. As a result, Naga is an indispensable cause to analyze the local concepts. Based on the literature research of important local Buddhist scripture, *Muccalinda Sutta*, the author observed another esoteric Naga symbolism of Phra That Phanom. *Muccalinda Sutta* recorded that:

“The four weeks after Buddha meditating beneath the Mucalinda Tree, the heavens plunged into darkness for seven days, and a heavy downpour descended. Nagaraja Mucalinda came from the earth and protected Buddha under his body from the storm.....(Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2012)”

Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s exegesis of *Muccalinda Sutta* mentioned that:

The action of Nagaraja Mucalinda is resemble to a seed growing from the soil and to be a glorious tree (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2012).

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The Mucalinda Tree pattern on the anda of Phra That Phanom is the symbolism of meditating Buddha protected by Nagaraja Mucalinda. And this proved that the anda part of Phra That Phanom represent the meditating Buddha, the upper waters, the symbolism of *apa-dhatu*.

Overall, the research of the relationship of *Mahabhuta* and symbolism of Phra That Phanom answered an interesting question about ethnoecology as Mayoury and Pheuipanh Ngaosrivathana did about a similar issue in Lan Na, Sipsong Panna, Laos, and Thai Isan. They asked, “Why should the Tai communities turned to animism (Naga) and Brahmanism harmoniously in an age which was supposedly piously Buddhist? (Mayoury & Ngaosrivathana, 2009)” Perhaps, the pre-Buddhist religion and Naga cult are less concerned with renunciation and liberation—the core of Buddhism—but with the management of a reality that encompasses the inheritance of ethnoecological values and environmental awareness, which are the keys to getting along with nature and the search for wealth, health, security, and fertility. In addition, Buddhism was adopted to legitimate the local knowledge and beliefs, and then stupa symbolism and stupa planning became a comprehensive “mass media” to spread Buddhism, history, indigenous ethnoecological value, and environmental awareness.

### CONCLUSION

Based on the interdisciplinary qualitative research methods, the relationship between the symbolism of Phra That Phanom and the indigenous ethnoecology was analyzed from the visual-spatial and narrative-conceptive aspects. The Hindu and Mon-Khmer originated Naga belief influenced the local deeply before the arrival of Buddhism. However, Naga belief can be integrated into Buddhism harmoniously because the locals always regarded the Naga cult as an agent with the reality that encompasses the inheritance and spread of ethnoecological values and environmental awareness. On the other hand, Buddhism helps to legitimate the local knowledge and beliefs. In other words, history, ethnoecology, and religion interacted with each other dynamically and synergistically, and their harmonious fruits were embodied concentratedly in Phra That Phanom’s symbolism. Then, the worshiping of Phra That Phanom became a medium to inherit and spread Buddhism, history, indigenous ethnoecological value, and environmental awareness. Finally, the cult of Phra That Phanom and the traditional ethnoecology are vivid hitherto, due to the traditions of Phra That Phanom combined with higher education, and they collectively form a new environmental perception system that achieves the young generations are capable of inheriting the traditional ethnoecological value sustainably.

Overall, art and religion come from life. Through the research of this paper, people can realize that the ethnoecology and the architecture of the stupa are an inseparable whole.

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