



Laos Mythical Legend of Fifteen Naga Families in Luang Prabang

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Naga statue at Thatnoy Temple © Phonesack Phongphanith

“Ai-Lao people widely admired or worshipped the Naga in many important rites and tattooed Naga symbols on their arms and body. In Luang Prabang, the people refer to the Naga in the local dialect as ‘Ngeuak,’ which means ‘water snake.’”

Laos, having existed for thousands of years, is among the most ancient nations of the world. Chinese historical documents indicate that the original settlement of the Lao nation was in the region of the Ai-Lao Mountains along the River Mekong in what is now called Sichuan County. The region where Ai-Lao tribe lived was called Kao Long. This name was later changed to Kio Long Kieng, which means the river of nine Nagas—the territory of the nine snakes who were known as the authentic and original family of the Lao nation. Therefore, due to their origins, Ai-Lao people widely admired or worshipped the Naga in many important rites and tattooed Naga symbols on their arms and body. In Luang Prabang, the people refer to the Naga in the local dialect as ‘Ngeuak,’ which means ‘water snake.’

Fifteen Naga Families

The ‘Legend of the Mekong’ tells us that the Naga of Nong (Lake) Sae had dug several rivers from the north down to the south. A long time ago in the city of Naga, located in the Mithila region (now called Yunnan Province, China), there was one lake with a fourteen yot¹ perimeter, and to the south within a one-month walking distance, there was another lake with an five yot perimeter. Further south within a two-and-a-half-month walking distance, there was another lake one-half yot wide

and three yots long. Within this lake, there were two Nagas: the first named Sisatta Naga, who possessed troops seven kots² strong, and another named Nahoutta Naga, who was powerful in Nong Sae. The two Naga kings were dear friends, and both dug canal from River Mahi (the fourth of the Five Great Rivers), creating waves streaming down to a big lake called Nong Sae Luang (Kasae Luang, which the Chinese called Hong Kieng; the Vietnamese called Xong Keuy, and the French called Red River). Then, they both continued digging from the big lake to connect to another lake called Nong Sae Noi (the Vietnamese called Xong Bo; the northern Lao called Mae Muang; and the French called Black River).

One day, Sisatta Naga caught an elephant for his food and he shared the animal’s meat with Nahoutta Naga. Later, Nahoutta Naga caught a porcupine and shared this with his dear friend. However, when Sisatta Naga saw the big porcupine spines and little meat, he thought that his friend treated him unfairly, so Sisatta Naga mobilised the people to attack. In Sisatta Naga’s defeat, he led the people to dig canal up to Nong Sam Yot, but there was not enough space for them to stay, so he continued to dig, connecting to a river that flowed from north-east. This river, known as the River Oû (later as the River Ou), was full of turbulent waters. So the Nagas dug a canal to the

south where there was a calm and abundant lake. This lake of temporary accommodation was called the Anglong Lake (at the mouth of the River Ou). Then, all the Nagas continued digging for fifteen nights, staying in different places as the Luang Prabang people had told in an aphorism.

From this story, the Luang Prabang people say that theirs is the city of fifteen Naga families. As was written in the tale about King KhounBouRom Rajathirath in the episode of two hermit brothers appointed by the king to govern Xieng Dong-Xieng Thong:

“...then appointed the king of Xieng Dong
Xieng Thong Meuang Swa City
After that, before leaving, the hermits went to
sit in Pakham (tamarind trees)
Invited all the male Nagas to come for the
meeting
All fifteen Nagas appearing to see
The great hermits said to the Nagas this
meeting at KonKaiFa under Thong Tree
The Nagas bending, listening to what the
hermits said
This Xieng Thong is exceptional place”



Luang Prabang where the River Namkhan estuary joins the River Mekong © Phonesack Phongphanith



Pa-ouh Cave in Luang Prabang © Phonesack Phongphanith

- 1. 1 yot = 16 km
- 2. 1 kot = 10 million