
Stories, identity and struggles: How local communities live with and talk about Mekong's landscape

Different words, different sides



When asked what this picture is about, you are likely to answer, “An atomic bomb” in English. Most Japanese would say, “Genshi bakudan,” a direct translation of the English term in Japanese. The survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, may use the expression “Pikadon”. “Pika” refers to the bright flash of the explosion and “don” to the following thunderous boom in Japanese. The expression thus encapsulates the victims’ experience with the devastation which took place in August 1945 (1). As such, as American poet Arthur Binard points out, the term “Pikadon” can take us to stand inside the atomic clouds and imagine how it would have been like being there (2). The expression “Atomic bomb”, in contrast, lacks such a capacity, keeping us safely outside the atrocity.

Though not as dramatically, views towards the Mekong river basin also differ between the local communities who live there and those who come from the outside. Expressions such as “development” and “sustainability”, routinely used in talking about the Mekong region, especially among outsiders, may have the same limiting effect as “atomic bomb” in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki context. These terms fall short of capturing and appreciating the communities’ experiences with the Mekong, the region covered by the 4,800 kilometer-long Mekong river originating from the Tibetan Plateaus and flowing through six countries.

Peoples’ stories such as legends and folktales reveal how the local communities in Mekong have made sense of the region’s landscape. People’s stories embody a process through which the local communities accommodate and/or resist events that take place in the Mekong region. In these respects, people’s stories, like trees, rivers and land, are “commons” that the local communities rely on for their life.

Peoples’ stories in Mekong: Two examples

The stories presented below were recently collected in northeast Thailand or “Esan”- as popularly known to people who live in Thailand (3).

Phadaeng and Nang Ai (4)

Nang Ai was the daughter of Khita Nakhon’s king. Her beauty was widely known. Phadaeng,

a young man, travelled to Khita Nakhon, sneaked into Nang Ai's room and had an affair with her. Phangkhi, the son of King Naga who ruled the underground kingdom, also learned about Nang Ai (5). He was doomed to meet her because the two had been married in their previous life. Phangkhi transformed himself into a white squirrel and visited Nang Ai's terrace. Nang Ai noticed the squirrel, wanted it and told her servant to catch it. But the squirrel escaped into a "suan mon", or mulberry garden, which today is the Suan Mon Village. The squirrel passed a forest to get to a "jan" tree on Um Jan Hill, which today is the Um Jan Village. The hunter tried to shoot the squirrel with a bow but the string or "sai" broke. He found a new one and carried it to what today is the Khon Sai Village. The hunter finally shot the squirrel to death. He sliced the meat, which multiplied and filled up one thousand carts. Everyone in Khita Nakhon, including Nang Ai, ate the meat. King Naga became furious, as his son had been killed and eaten. He sent his army and destroyed Khita Nakhon. Phadaeng tried to save Nang Ai, but she sank with Khita Nakhon. Only a lake full of water remained. This was how the Nong Han Lake today was created.

This story mentions the names of existing local villages, i.e. Suan Mon, Um Jan and Khon Sai. The act of locating physical landmarks and naming them is one of the steps through which the local community makes sense of and relates to the surrounding environment. Explaining the origin of the place names in association with the spatial objects, i.e. a mulberry garden and a "jan" tree, gives justification not only to the names but to the entities (i.e. the villages) they signify. Also, by putting the individual names together as components of one legend, the Phadaeng and Nang Ai story offers coherent scripts, to which the local community can more easily relate.

In other words, local place names are not simply an index to physical locations, as they may appear to indifferent outsiders. Place names can conjure up personal and collective memories of the local life and history as well as the people's feelings of attachments to the surroundings. Naming landmarks, giving them a legitimate profile and incorporating them into their experiences, the local community can strengthen their identity as a group and identify with the environment. This way, the community comes to care about trees, rivers and land in Mekong and passes this on to future generations.

White elephant path (6)

Phya Thaen, who had created the earth, made the first humans from his scurf. They were Grandpa Sang Ka Sa and Grandma Sang Ka Si. When the two came down to the earth, they were blown apart by a strong wind and separated on both sides of a big river. They built a bridge across the river with gourd vines and finally met each other. Sang Ka Sa asked Sang Ka Si to marry him. However, Sang Ka Si said, "Only if you can answer my riddle". The riddle was "What is dark and light in this world?" Sang Ka Sa had to travel to find the right answer. After ten thousand years, he found the answer with Phya Thaen's help. The answer was "It is the human mind. When it is dark, the world will not proceed. When it is light, the world will prosper". Sang Ka Sa went back and married Sang Ka Si. They lived together and had many children. The two also worked on a farm and had rice, fish and gourds to eat. However, they were not tasty and nutritious. So the children were very thin, weak and not smart. Phya Thaen was worried and transformed himself into a white elephant. The white elephant urinated over Sang Ka Sa and Sang Ka Si's land. The white elephant's urine became salt. Sang Ka Sa and Sang Ka Si used the salt to make "pla daek" or fermented fish. Pla daek made food tasty and Sang Ka Sa and Sang Ka Si's children became stronger and healthier.

This story is full of transformations. Phya Thaen's scurf became the first human couple. Phya Thaen changed himself into a white elephant and the elephant's urine became salt. We can see the same in the Phadaeng and Nang Ai story when Phangkhi transformed himself into a white squirrel. In these stories, animals, humans, spirits and even objects like salt and scurf seemed able to change it/themselves into one another.

Such transformations may suggest that local communities in Mekong can recognize the ubiquitous life in their surroundings. This attitude towards the world is in sharp contrast with the one in which humans alone were created to rule the world. When framed in the latter perspective, "development" can often become centered on the human beings only, separated from a hostile "nature" that needs to be controlled or even conquered.

People's stories may offer alternative views in which the world may be more horizontally organized, and life can traverse across different forms without placing one over the other. This interpretation of the world enables the local community to find more harmonious ways to live with the environment and sustainable ways to utilize natural resources.

The role of stories in current struggles: Some recent anecdotes

When collecting people's stories in the Mekong region, the authors often encountered village elderlies who regretted that they found increasingly fewer opportunities to tell stories within the daily life of their community. While sharing their lament, however, the authors would like to believe that the act of making sense of life through stories is rather deep-seated at Mekong's local communities and will not disappear easily. The following two anecdotes suggest that people's stories are not a thing of the past but are created anew.

The first anecdote is from a campaign launched by a local community in central Thailand against building a huge wastewater treatment plant. In the late 1990s, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) funded the Thai government to construct a large-scale facility to process industrial wastewater in a community called Klong Dan in Samut Prakarn province. The project proponents claimed that the discharge of the so-called treated water into the coastal area would not damage the environment. They actually argued that the project could improve the already deteriorated natural environment in Klong Dan.

The Klong Dan community thus had to counter the proponents' claim by showing how rich the local environment was. In fact, mangrove grew extensively along a network of "klong" (a word for "canal" in Thai). Klong Dan was also well known for its productive mussel-shell farming. Neither ADB nor the Thai government, however, would acknowledge this. The community actively engaged in public debates and staged a number of fierce protests. The project was eventually cancelled due to corruption scandals.

Interestingly and throughout their campaign, the Klong Dan community insistently called the project "Klong Dan Wastewater Management Plant", as opposed to "Samut Prakarn Wastewater Management Project", the "official" name of the project and to which ADB officials (as well as international NGOs which supported the community's fight) always referred. The community's choice was understandable because the plant was physically located in Klong Dan. It was also possible, however, that "Klong Dan" came to represent far more than just the location to the local community. To them, the name symbolized the entire environment, life and history, which they had to defend. Calling the project with its "official" name might have appeared to the Klong Dan community a denial

of their identity.

The second anecdote is from the Mun river basin in Esan. Mun is one of the major tributaries of the Mekong. In the early 1990s, the World Bank funded the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) to build a hydroelectric dam near the confluence of Mun and Mekong's mainstream. The project was called the Pak Mun dam ("pak" means "mouth" in Thai). Scientists, environmental NGOs and the local community warned that the dam would block fish migration and irreversibly damage the Mun river's ecology. The community whose livelihood heavily relied on the environment opposed the project.

Unfortunately, the local community's protest could not stop the project. Rapids along the Mun river, which were important feeding and spawning grounds for migratory fish, had to be removed with dynamite to make way for the project. The authors later heard and read the Pak Mun villagers' testimonies. They said that they had heard the rapids cry when they were being blasted. This could have been the community's metaphorically speaking of the noise of the explosion. It was possible, however, that the community sensed life in the rapids and actually heard them cry. Or maybe, the rapids did cry.

The same sensitivity to life across the environment is also captured in the following lines from "lumlong", a song recently composed in the traditional Esan-style by a local artist. (7) This song depicts animals, plants and other little creatures living in the Seaw river, a Mun tributary, who are vocal about the hardship of being affected by salt water discharge from the industry into the river. (8)

...A frog said to his friend, a snail, "You are lucky to be born with a hard shell, which enables you to tolerate the salt water. Poor me, a creature who has been painfully suffering from the skin disease". The snail replied, "I can't stand it any longer. It's so sad to leave my dear friends in the Seaw river. But I have no choice. It is so salty and kills us all."

A periwinkle also complained, "I can't live in the salt water like this. My friend, a freshwater crab, has carapace and is stronger than I." A freshwater shrimp spoke up, "Why does the river smell so bad with the toxic salinity? It may be just a tilapia fish who can survive"...All little voices talking aloud about the salt-contaminated discharge from salt-making plants into the river...

Stories, identity and resistance

In the Mekong basin, where people's livelihoods are deeply rooted in the natural world of rivers and forests, many legends, tales and narratives that revolve around nature have been created and handed down from generation to generation. These stories have played an important role in protecting nature by avoiding the over-exploitation of natural resources. Folktales, legends and other people's stories in the region reveal how the local communities have tried to make sense of Mekong's landscape. These stories can help form their identity as a community member and identify with environment. By means of stories, the communities search for ways to accommodate and/or resist changes that are taking place in the Mekong river basin.

Last year, the authors together with a team of researchers collected more than 100 stories in five locations in rural Cambodia, Lao PDR and Thailand, in different languages. These stories cover a wide range of topics, including community's history and genealogy, traditions and customs and knowledge on plants and herbs. Quite a few describe the origin of place names, spiritual beliefs and livelihoods. The stories very clearly indicate linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity as well as complex natural configurations of the Mekong river basin. People's stories, trees, rivers, spirits and land, can

be valued as “commons” that the communities depend on for their survival. For outsiders, these stories can open a window through which they can view the people’s experiences with the Mekong region. For those who face similar challenges elsewhere, people’s stories in Mekong can be a source of inspiration to strengthen their own struggles.

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(1) *Pikadon. In Their Words... Recollections of Hiroshima & Nagasaki.*

<https://1945neveragain.wordpress.com/pikadon/> Last viewed 7 July 2016.

(2) *Binard, Arthur. 2013. American poet Arthur Binard calls idea of A-bombs dropped to end the war “mistaken”. Hiroshima Peace Media Center.*

http://www.hiroshimapeacemedia.jp/mediacenter/article.php?story=20131119092846177_en Last viewed 7 July 2016.

(3) *For more people’s stories, see Doi, Toshiyuki. (ed.) 2015. Plants, animals, salt and spirits: How people live with and talk about the environment in rural Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. Tokyo: Mekong Watch. http://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/Booklet_PeopleStory.pdf Last viewed 7 July 2016.*

(4) *The story was told by Mr. Thawon Manosin at Huay Sam Phad Sub-district, Prajak Silapakhom District in Udonthani Province on 9 November 2014. See Doi (2015), pp. 100-107. The illustration is by Amarit Muadthong.*

(5) *King Naga or Phaya Naga is a mythical creature with a serpent-like figure. Local people believe that King Naga lives in the Mekong river and rules the underground world.*

(6) *The story was told by Mr. Thongsin Thonkannya in Tha Yiam Village, Wang Luang Sub-district, Selaphum District in Roiet Province on 25 October 2014. See Doi (2015), pp. 91-99. The illustration is by Worajak Maneewong.*

(7) *Boonyung Kannong. 2006. Creatures talk about salinity in the Seaw river. Manuscript in Thai.*

(8) *A salinity crisis occurred in Esan in 1980s. The local community protested and had the Thai cabinet issue an order to stop the salt industry in the Saew river basin. The industry, however, has moved to other Esan provinces. The problem not only remains unsolved but also has spread across Esan.*