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## The fireball ghosts, in three major countries of Southeast Asia culture

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### Abstract

The mystical mindset is not only common among Indonesians, who frequently associate all events with the supernatural. In neighboring countries, such as Malaysia and Thailand, there is a belief in the existence of mystical or occult things. This research aims to describe the mystery of *Banaspati* in ASEAN countries, specifically Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia. Furthermore, this study will describe the story of Islamization in Java, which is inextricably linked to the influence of mysticism, one of which is *Banaspati*. This study employs a descriptive-qualitative methodology with a content analysis strategy. According to the study's findings, Indonesians believe that *Banaspati*, particularly in Java, is a supernatural ghost or spirit that manifests as a blazing fire with great power. In Thailand, *Bong fai phayanak* (dragon fireballs) is a supernatural phenomenon that occurs in the Mekong River and is caused by the Mekong River's guardian dragon in October. In Malaysia, it is known as *polong* or "fireball." People in Malaysia believe that the *pod* is a form of a mystical pet item of humans who have black magic, which functions to bring disaster to someone they don't like. The community's concept of fire elemental ghosts is related to the beliefs of Buddhists in Thailand and Muslims in Indonesia, especially in Java.

**Keywords:** *Banaspati, Fireball Ghost, South East Asian Culture, Islamic, Buddhist*

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## Introduction

The relationship between humans and mythological images shapes the character of the invisible spiritual realm. Everything that is mythological is an important event in the ongoing human civilization. The understandings that emerge can originate from things that are natural and eventually form a myth in primitive society, which is then passed down and becomes a belief until now. Human knowledge tends to be obtained from the perspective of things related to nature to represent an event (Allerton, 2009).

In general, all regions have a grasp on primitive mythologies that are rooted and then believed to this day. The mythology created is believed to be realistic, even though it depicts a symbol that can be considered unnatural. Wild mythological images become dominant, even though they could only be the result of the human imagination itself, and then spread (Kamolovich, 2018).

The mindset towards mystical matters is not only familiar among Indonesian people, who often associate all events with the supernatural. However, there is a belief in the existence of mystical or occult things in neighboring countries, such as Malaysia and Thailand. People believe that there are other creatures that cannot be seen with the naked eye. This belief has a strong connection to ancestors or ancestors who believe in animism and dynamism (Kurniasih, 2022). Because of the territory of one family, almost the same perspective on mystical things may occur.

Belief in a certain mindset is a manifestation of the culture of the local community. Culture in the form of a mindset is a collection of ideas, norms, values, and rules (Koentjaraningrat, 1985: 186-187). Culture related to mindset is referred to as “mentifak”, namely the basic thoughts and philosophies of culture. Mentifak forms are associated with the thoughts, philosophies and beliefs of the local community, such as religions and myths that are believed by the local community (Geertz, 1973: 100).

Observations made regarding mythology, which is part of the local culture in ASEAN countries, show that there is a mythology that originates from a mindset and belief which then forms a visual symbol in the form of a fireball. Although with the same form but has a different perspective. Thailand calls this fireball myth as *bong fai phayanak (naga fireballs)* (Cohen, 2007). Indonesia has its own perspective on this fireball mythology and calls it the *Banaspati* fireball mythology (Widiyanto, et al., 2021). Malaysian people call that kind of mythology of fireball as *polong* (Yaakup, Wan Mahmud, & Ali, 2016).

The physical form resulting from the mindset in the form of a fireball is unique to be studied in more depth. Although in form they have similarities, the three countries have different perspectives on fireball mysticism. This shows that mystical things are very close to the construction of social life. The diversity of people's mindsets is based on mystical reasoning built by myths and belief in certain supernatural powers. In this reasoning, society believes that the ideological dimension of human religion cannot be separated from the role of supernatural spirits, whether they are considered good or evil because they are believed to be able to have a certain impact on daily life (Nadhiroh, 2019). The results of this mindset are of course inseparable from the role of local culture of the local community (Sardjuningsih, 2015).

*Banaspati* is a ghost known to the public as a ghost who has the element of fire. *Banaspati* can be found in the forest and is usually used by shamans for black magic. It looks like a ball of fire with a human face. If this ball reaches a resident's house, the resident will probably commit suicide (Arafat, 2022). The naming of the appearance of fireballs varies by region in Indonesia,

especially in neighboring countries such as Malaysia and Thailand. Not only in terms of different naming, local beliefs also have a different perspective.

Based on this explanation, this paper will examine the mystery of *Banaspati* in several ASEAN countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. In addition, *Banaspati* will be described in the context of Islamic and Buddhist beliefs. Research related to the mystical event of *Banaspati* was conducted by (Rumilah et al., 2019) under the title “Islamization of the Land of Java in the 13th Century AD” in the Book of Musarar by Shaykh Subakir. This research describes the beginning of Islamization in Java which was thwarted by many supernatural beings, namely, jinns, demons, and demons. Islamization in Java began with a ritual of expelling all occult things, one of which was *Banaspati*, who at that time participated in thwarting the Islamization of Java.

The research equation lies in supernatural beings, namely *Banaspati*, which is one of the obstacles to Islamization in Java. However, this research is more focused on the process of Islamization in Java by Syekh Subakir. While the focus of this research is on the conception of *Banaspati* in several countries in ASEAN and its relation to local beliefs, namely Islam and Buddhism.

Another research project related to *Banaspati* was conducted by (Sumadi, 2016) with the title “Various Decorative of Kala as an Ornamental Art Works”. The study describes the temple's pattern with a giant fiery head ornament called *Banaspati*. The research equation lies in the context of the form of *Banaspati* which is a supernatural being with the element of fire. The difference lies in the focus of the research, this research focuses on the conception of *Banaspati* in several regions of ASEAN countries and its relation to local beliefs, namely Islam and Buddhism.

This research includes a qualitative descriptive type. According to (Creswell, 2009: 173) qualitative research is a method that uses text and images with interesting steps in analyzing data and using various investigative strategies. Qualitative research aims to gain insight regarding the construction of reality that occurs to be interpreted (Cropley, 2019: 10). The strategy used in this research is content analysis. According to (Weber, 1990: 9) content review is a way of drawing conclusions by trying to get messages that are carried out objectively and systematically. Content analysis is used in studying human behavior by analyzing the communication contained in novels, short stories, newspapers, textbooks, and so on (Frankel & Wallen, 2012: 2012).

The source of data for this research is literature related to *Banaspati* and Islamization during the Wali Songo period. Data collection was carried out by using observation and note-taking techniques. The note-taking technique is the technique of capturing data by recording the results of data storage (Sudaryanto, 2015). Then the data is classified based on research needs and analyzed. The data analysis technique uses content analysis techniques.

### **The *Banaspati* fireball ghost**

The Indonesian people have a mystical perspective in the form of a ball of fire called *Banaspati*. *Banaspati* is believed by the people of Indonesia, especially on the island of Java, to be a kind of supernatural ghost or can be called a spirit that takes the form of a huge flame of fire. *Banaspati* is a very legendary creature from mystical stories from time to time. The public's belief regarding *Banaspati* as contained in Indonesian cultural sites is believed to have started during the Majapahit Kingdom era, which was sourced from someone who had black magic.

Based on public belief, *Banaspati* has two different forms, namely in the form of a fireball and a fireman. *Banaspati* in the form of a fireball is believed to have the size of an adult's hand. However, the size of the fireball from *Banaspati* will increase when there is a sense of fear among humans who see this *Banaspati*. Meanwhile, *Banaspati*, who is in the form of a fireman, has a human-like body, but his body is filled with flames. Even though he has a human-like body, *Banaspati* is a fire man who walks with his two hands. *Banaspati* in the form of a fireman has a long flame and big eyes. *Banaspati* in any form is believed to chase humans who are their targets, then burn them.

Apart from being viewed from the side of mysticism, *Banaspati* is also part of the culture in Indonesia. It can be said that because the form of *Banaspati* is depicted in the architecture of temples in Java. The form of *Banaspati* which is engraved in the architecture of temples in Java is carved in the shape of a giant headed frog. *Banaspati* reliefs are engraved at the entrances to temples in Java, especially in sacred rooms. This is intended as an antidote and deterrent against evil influences that come from outside to destroy the sanctity of the temple.

*Banaspati* is frequently described as having the head of a giant Kala covered (overgrown) with flames, particularly his beard and hair.. Kirtimukha, or Mahakala in Java is also called *Banaspati*. Claire Holt 1967 (dalam Titib, 2001: 370) explained that *Banaspati* in East Java is Kirtimukha. In ancient Indian mythology, Kirtimukha is a giant (monster) who rises and jumps from between Siva's eyebrows when the god is angry. A being who came out of the fire of anger, he is never satisfied and always hungry, he was created to devour the demon Rahu, the messenger of the king of giants. This demon king was named Jalandhara. He sent the demon Rahu to destroy it (Sumadi, 2016).

### **Bong fai Phayanak (Dragon fireballs)**

Thailand's people have a belief about *bong fai phayanak* (dragon fireballs) which are believed by the people of the Thai state of Nong Khai, Vientiane and Bolikhamxai provinces. The elders of the community pass down their knowledge of Bong Fai Phayanak to future generations, ensuring that it becomes a deeply ingrained belief. In the past, some local villagers called it Ghost Fireballs. However, along with the development of supernatural science, local villagers call it *Bong fai phayanak* (dragon fireballs).

*Bong fai phayanak (naga fireballs)* is a term for fireball mysticism made by the people of Thailand. *Bong fai phayanak* (dragon fireballs) is a supernatural phenomenon that occurs in the Mekong River and is caused by the Mekong River's guardian dragon in October. *Bong fai phayanak (naga fireballs)* is in the form of a fireball fired by the Dragon guarding the Mekong River.

There is a story that is believed by the Thai people behind the fireballs fired by the Dragon guarding the Mekong River, that is, the fireballs originated from the Dragon's disappointment with the Buddha because he could not become human. Because of the compassion of the Buddha for the Dragon, the Buddha promised to make the Dragon in the Mekong River a symbol of holiness. As a result, the locals believe that shooting fireballs from the Mekong River's guardian dragon aims to welcome the Buddha who will descend to Earth So that *Bong fai phayanak* (dragon fireballs) has great power and is believed to be able to protect, spread wisdom, and provide peace in the lives of the local people.

### The Polong fireball ghost

The perspective of fireball mysticism also exists in Malaysia, but it has a different name, which is known as Polong/ bebola fire. Polong, according to Malaysians, is a type of pet mystical item of humans with black magic that functions to bring disaster to someone they don't like. Polong is believed to be made from the blood of a murdered person. Polong are preserved in a small vial and the peas are fresh blood from the keeper's finger. After eating fresh blood from the owner, Polong will obey everything the owner orders.

From the perspective of Malaysian society, when *polong/bebola api* hurts the target. Then, it is preceded by a pelting animal that resembles a grasshopper. This pellet will hurt the target through its mouth, then followed by the arrival of the pods. The delivery of these pods will make the target's house hot and the target sick. There is also the belief of the Malay community in Malaysia to prevent Polong from hurting its target, namely by showing Polong flying across in front of anyone who sees it, it is believed that Polong passing by is believed to break apart and not reach the intended target.

### Banaspati in the context of Buddhist and Islamic beliefs

The conception built by Thai people, especially around the Mekong river, towards the fireball phenomenon is interesting for further study. The Mekong River is one of the longest rivers in Southeast Asia. The Mekong River is not only the longest river in Southeast Asia, but the river has an interesting phenomenon. This phenomenon is the appearance of a fireball from the bottom of the river out into the air.

Once a year, at the end of September or early October, residents of the Nong Khai area in Thailand will gather on the banks of the Mekong River. They were waiting for a special phenomenon, namely the fire that emerged from the Mekong River. The fireball appeared, flew into the air, and then just disappeared. Thai people call it Bang Fai Phaya Nak. Thai people believe that the fireball comes from a dragon in another world, namely the world of water. The fireball is believed to be a gift from the dragon to Buddha.

The Nong Khai people believe in the concept of fireballs originating from dragons. They even claim to have seen dragon footprints on the ground near the temple before the appearance of the fireball. The fireball phenomenon is related to the belief of Buddhists around the Mekong River that this event only occurs once a year, to be precise, before the full moon in September or October. The time of its emergence coincides with the Buddhist fasting days. There is a story that is believed by the Thai people behind the fireballs fired by the Dragon guarding the Mekong River, that is, the fireballs originated from the Dragon's disappointment with the Buddha because he could not become human. Because of the compassion of the Buddha for the Dragon, the Buddha promised to make the Dragon in the Mekong River a symbol of holiness. As a result, the locals believe that shooting fireballs from the Mekong River's guardian dragon aims to welcome the Buddha who will descend to Earth. So that *Bong fai phayanak* (dragon fireballs) has great power and is believed to be able to protect, spread wisdom, and provide peace in the lives of local people.

In Indonesia, the conception of ghosts in the form of the fire element has various stories. One of them is *Banaspati* who has a child named Satan Kober. The story of *Banaspati* and satan kober in this description relates to attempts at Islamization in Java which were always thwarted by satan kober, the son of *Banaspati*.

Satan Kober was born to a great *Banaspati* in the Purwacarita, ten times named King of the Seas, who came from the descendants of the demon selemen / nation of fire. Based on

the saga of the King of the Sea, he was actually defeated once in his life by the Prophet Khidir AS, precisely in the heyday of the famous King Dzulqarnain. Meanwhile, based on observation and co-existence, Satan Kober has a place to live like humans in general, namely in the Panji forest, in the border area between Cibogo and Benda Kerep, and this is also implied in RA Suladiningrat's book "Babad Tanah Cirebon".

During the war between Majapahit and Demak Bintoro, which at that time was led by Raden Fatah, assisted by 101 Waliyullah under the command of the great commander Sunan Kudus, for seventeen years, these two kingdoms had been involved in a fierce war, which also involved Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten as the warlord of Demak who at that time had just been married to Queen Ayu Kirana in Demak. They met 24 times in a great war, with Majapahit attacking Demak 18 times and Demak attacking Majapahit 6 times.

With a mature strategy, Satan Kober, who at that time was part of the Majapahit kingdom, began to spread his actions in several remote villages by killing one by one Islamic champions whom he considered to have plotted with the Demak Bintoro kingdom. The demon Kober killed at least 300 Islamic soldiers living in the countryside, he became the war strategist of the Majapahit Palace to defeat the commander-in-chief of choice of the entire kingdom in parts of the world. After many Islamic armies were defeated, however, the saints devised a strategy to defeat the Kober demons, who already possessed black magic.

Some Wali (religious leaders), such as Sunan Gunung jati, Pangeran Walang Sungsang, Sunan Kalijaga, Sunan Kudus and Sunan Hasanuddin Banten, began to line up. Finally, there was a battle between Prince Suto Wijaya Gebang and Satan Kober in the Panji forest area. Both of them fought back and exerted their powers for up to 40 days. Satan Kober was defeated by Prince Suto Wijaya, until Satan Kober finally stayed forever in the Panji forest.

In Babad Tanah Jawa, it is stated that the knowledge of Prince Suto Wijaya Gebang can be said to be one of the sciences that is also most feared by the entire stealth or supernatural nation, in addition to the knowledge that is also possessed by a few people in Banten. The knowledge he has is none other than the "Majmal Creed." If this knowledge is recited, then all the existing occultism will follow our speech. Thus, in the sparring war against the Cober Satan, it was this knowledge that became his mainstay, until the Kober Demon himself had to accept his defeat with a burning body.

## Conclusion

Based on this explanation, it can be concluded that the form of fireball ghost *Banaspati* is also known in every region, including Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand with different names and background cultural knowledge. The Indonesian people have a mystical perspective in the form of a ball of fire called *Banaspati*. *Bong fai phayanak* (dragon fireballs) is a mystic designation of fireballs made by Thai people. In Malaysia, however, it has a different name, which is known as Polong/bebola fire. People in Malaysia believe that the pod is a form of a mystical pet item of humans who have black magic which functions to bring disaster to someone they don't like. The people's conception of the ghost of the fire element is related to the beliefs of Buddhists in Thailand and Muslims in Indonesia, especially in Java.

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