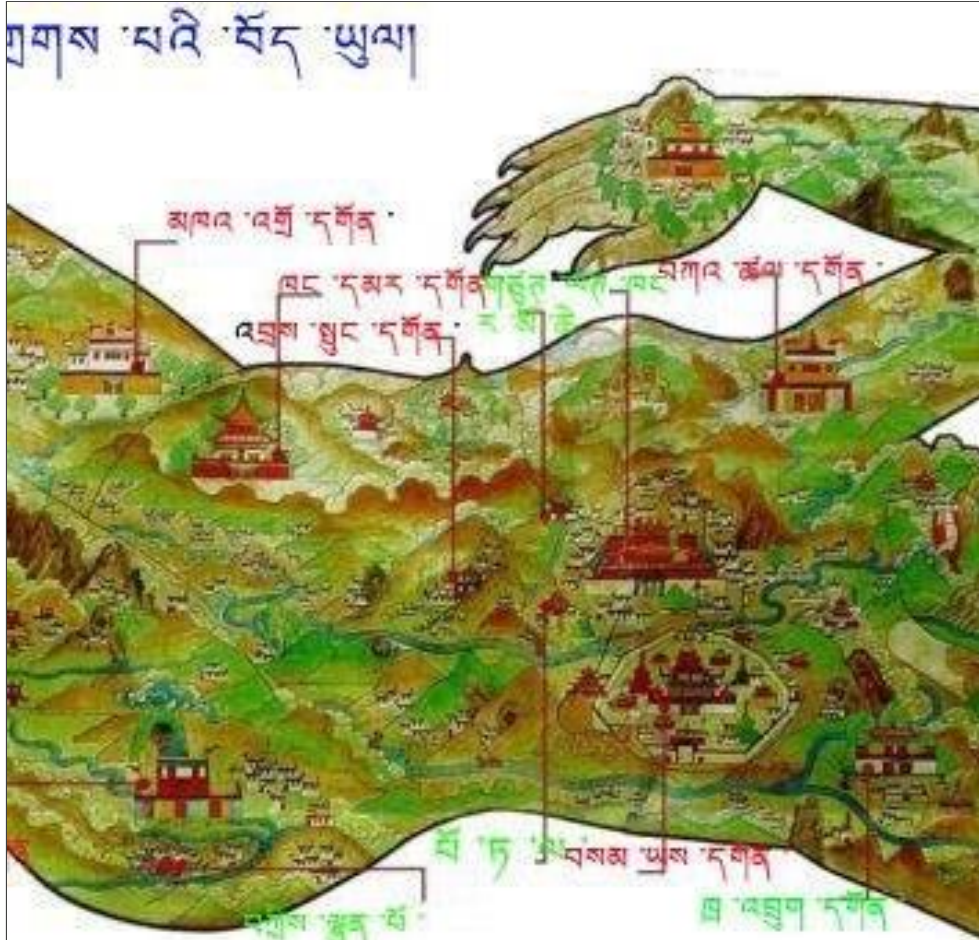




Nāga and Indo-Tibetan Spirited Agencies

Dr Dawn H. Collins



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Canolfan Sophia
The Sophia Centre

Nāga (नाग) – Spirited agencies in ancient India



- In traditions originating in Indian, such as Hindu, Buddhist and Jain, a *nāga* is a member of a class of mythical semidivine beings, half human and half snake (cobra-like).
- They can assume either wholly human or wholly serpentine form and are potentially dangerous but often beneficial to humans.
- They live in an underground kingdom called *nāgaloka*, or *patalaloka*, which is filled with resplendent palaces, beautifully ornamented with precious gems
- The deity Brahma is said to have relegated the *nāga* to these underground places because their population was overrunning earth, commanding them to bite only the truly evil or those destined to die prematurely. They are also associated with waters—rivers, lakes, seas, and wells—and are guardians of treasure



Viṣṇu on *Sesanāga*

Renowned *nāga* (नाग)

- Notable *nāga* are Shesha (or Ananta), who in the Hindu myth of creation supports Narayana (Vishnu) as he lies on the cosmic ocean and on whom the created world rests; Vasuki, who was used as a churning rope to churn the cosmic ocean of milk; and Takshaka, the tribal chief of the snakes. In modern Hinduism the birth of the serpents is celebrated on Nāgapancāmi in the month of Shravana (July–August)
- The female *nāgini* or *nāgi* are serpent deities of striking beauty and dynasties of Manipur in northeastern India, the Pallavas in southern India, and the ruling family of Funan (ancient Indochina) each claimed an origin in the union of a human and a *nāgi*



Nāga in Indo-Tibetan Cosmologies

- The whole mandala-like structure of Mount Sumeru constitutes a cakkavala, or world system
- Mount Meru, 84,000 yojanas high (a yojana is c. 3-17.5 miles)
- Halfway up Mt Meru is the Heaven of the Four Great Kings and at its peak Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods presided over by Sakka, their king and the overlord of the terrestrial realm.
- Surrounding Mt Meru are 7 circular ranges of mountains, each one half the height of the preceding one, separated by circular seas
- The whole area is surrounded by the world ocean and by a steep range of iron cliffs, forming the wall of the world
- In the outermost ocean are the four great continents, too far apart for human navigation – we inhabit the southern continent of Jambudipa, the Rose-Apple Land



Nāga (नाग) – Guardians of the Heavens

- *nāga* inhabit *nāgaloka* and also various parts of the human-inhabited earth - some are water-dwellers, living in streams or the ocean; others are earth-dwellers, living in caverns
- They can be conceived of as followers of Virūpākṣa (Pāli: Virūpakka), one of the Four Heavenly Kings who guard the western direction in the Mount Meru scheme of cosmos
- Also as guardians of Mount Meru, protecting the gods of the 33 heavens (Trāyastriṃśa) from attack by the jealous gods, the *asura*



Viṣṇu on Garuḍā

Garuḍā – other non-human beings

Garuḍā are giant bird-vehicles of the gods - in Indian mythology seen as at war with the *nāga*

The Sage Kashyapa had a wife called Kadru who gave birth to 1000 snakes considered to be the ancestors of the Snakes on earth – his other wife Vinita gave birth to the powerful Garuḍā

Once Kadru and Vinita put a bet on the color of the tail of the horse Uchaishravas - a seven-headed flying horse that was obtained during the churning of ocean or Samudra Manthan...

Kadru (mother of the snakes/serpents) claimed the color was black and Vinita (mother of Garuḍā) claimed it was white. The stake was whoever lost the bet will serve the other. Kadru cheated by asking her *nāga* sons to hang on to the tail of Uchaishravas. The white tail of the divine horse turned black as the *nāga* hung on, so Vinita & Garuḍā were forced to serve Kadru, who treated them badly. Later the *nāga* agreed to free Garuḍā and his mother if he brought them the Ambrosia in the possession of Indra, the king of demi gods - Garuḍā did as bidden to free himself and his mother from servitude... **But** the cheating and the insult suffered made Garuḍā arch enemies of *nāga*.



A FISH-EYE VIEW OF THE COSMOS - MOUNT MERU

- *nāga* span across various dimensions of the Mount Meru cosmos
- However, here can be seen the view a fish might have from it's habitat in our Jambudipa, the Rose-Apple Land, ocean
- This illustrates how each inhabitant of the cosmos sees their world from their perspective – which doesn't negate the existence of other dimensions of the cosmos they cannot at this point in cyclical reincarnatory existence 'see'



Indo-Tibetan spirited agencies of land

Nagārjuna, around the 2nd Century CE, is attributed as founder of Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy

As can be seen from the image, he taught *nāga* along with human students and this was not 'para' normal, but normal within context of Indo-Tibetan understandings of identity and existence

- Śūnyata is the idea that no phenomena exist as independent realities in their own right – i.e. **nothing exists independently, in and of itself, but only in relation to other things**
- Everything is a conceptual construct, void of any intrinsic existence, only relative to its causes and conditions
- The true nature of phenomena is somewhere between existence and non-existence
- The 'self' is also illusory and impermanent
- This way of conceiving of the world is similar to contemporary physics or deconstructionist philosophy



In Newar culture, Seto Machhindranath, also known as Karunamaya, is considered to have power over rain

Deity control = self-divinization or the control of 'others'?

One theme which recurs in the [Newar] folktales referred to is the control of deities (or other supernatural beings) by a Realised One: he can force them to come and stay in a particular place. One of the best-known stories... tells how the Vajracharya Bandhudatta brings back the god Karunamaya from Kamarupa (Assam) to order to end a twelve-year drought. This myth also expresses another facet of Vajracharya's power, which is called upon by Buddhist s and Hindus alike: their ability to control holy serpents (*nāga*) and cause rain during a drought.'

Gellner 2001, 125



The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara,
known as Karunamaya by Newars
and Chenrezig by Tibetans

Spirited agency and Identity in Tantric Buddhist thought

- In Buddhist thought, the individual mindbody complex is not separate from its environment. These exist in interdependence.
- The way in which this is taken into account in Buddhist Tantric practice is that meditators do not just identify themselves with the deity. They also imaginatively transform their environment into a transfigured universe that represents the world as it is perceived and operated on by that particular divine form.
- This is the tantric maṇḍala.

Oracles and Demons of Tibet

THE CULT AND ICONOGRAPHY OF
THE TIBETAN PROTECTIVE DEITIES



RÉNE DE NEBESKY - WOJKOWITZ

Other Protective Deities of Tibetan Regions

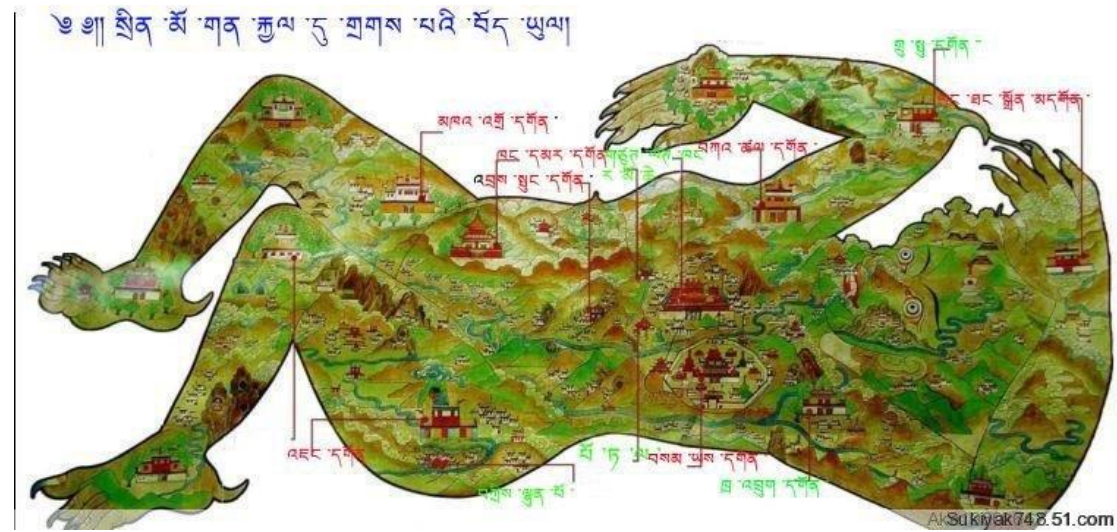
protective deities associated with
individuals and communities
include:

- Yullha: local area deity/god
- Payul: patriarchal deity or lineage
- Malha: matriarchal deity or lineage, attached to the homestead
- Dralha: warrior god

The renowned supine Demoness of Tibetan Lands

demoness (srin mo)
supine (gan rkyal du)
known/renowned/famous (grags
pa) of
Tibetan lands (bod yul)

[http://petroleumengineerings.blogspot.com/
2010/05/damming-tibet-yarlung-tsangpo.html](http://petroleumengineerings.blogspot.com/2010/05/damming-tibet-yarlung-tsangpo.html)



- Tibetan landscape is mapped in terms of spirited agency
- A whole community can also be connected to a lake or mountain through a 'la-lake' or 'la-mountain', and its wellbeing will be connected to the wellbeing of the lake/mountain
- Damage to these natural phenomena can therefore threaten the individual or community
- environmental concerns are hence intrinsically linked to those of community and individual health and to relationship with spirited agencies
- Buddhism adopted, incorporated or fused with Tibetan traditions of land as it spread

The leru – spirit medium festival

- The Leru is a spirit medium festival held across Tibetan Buddhist villages of the Rebgong Valley (site of my doctoral field research) at harvest time
- It is predominantly aimed towards appeasing and receiving advice from the local Mountain Gods -warrior figures and yullha (local deities, regional area gods) based in ancestral legends of the region and considered to be protectors of the lands and communities
- Each village has a designated spirit medium who enters trance and receives offerings/gives predictions as the Mountain God during the festival



The name *Leru* may indicate this festival was originally connected with the *le*, the *nāga*...

- *klu rol / glu rol*
- ལུ་ *klu* – serpentine/water deity/spirit (S. *nāga*)
- ལུ་ *glu* – song, tune, entertainment
- རོལ་ *rol* – enjoying, having fun, sport
- In support of the spelling of *leru* indicating the serpent spirits as prime focus for the festival, some villages have a traditional dance connected to the *le / nāga*

As can be seen in this video clip, such practices indicate the continuance of indigenous 'non-Buddhist' traditions in tandem with Buddhism.

Here the possession is not that of a Buddhist protector deity, but of a mountain deity; a local deity. Yet this practice is performed by Buddhist villages and their local lamas acknowledge the influence of the Mountain deities on pragmatic levels.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rlB5gALmu_g
(5.30 mins) – dance for the le 2.10 on this clip



Greening the Paranormal for Indo-Tibetan Traditions

- For Indo-Tibetan traditions the cosmological landscape is inhabited by spirited agencies who interface with humanity with some, such as the *nāga*, shape-shifting between human, demi-human and non-human forms – these are born and reborn across many dimensions within a Mount Meru model of the cosmos
- The body, on both tantric and Indo-Tibetan medical understandings, has correspondence and interdependent relationship with the environment through the elements of existence: earth, wind, fire, water, air – it is not discrete nor an entity but rather empty of inherent, separate existence
- Dreaming, waking, dying and passing from existence to existence taking different forms in the passing makes deep ecology embedded in Indo-Tibetan cultural norms
- Therefore, there is no *para*normal to green

References

- Clark, John 'On Being None With Nature: Nagarjuna and the Ecology of Emptiness', in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, Vol. 19, 4 (Dec. 2008)
- Collins, Dawn H. *Presence in Tibetan Landscapes* (unpublished PhD thesis, 2016 - <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.683646>)
- Goldstein, M. and Kapstein, M. T. (eds.), *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998
- Harvey, Peter, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013
- Gellner, David N., *The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001
- Kohn, Eduardo, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*, LA. London, University of California Press, 2013
- Lopez, D. S. (ed.), *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997
- Nagano, S. *Sacrifice and lha pa in the glu rol Festival of Reb-skong*. In Samten Karmay and Yasuhiko Nagano, eds., *New Horizons in Bon Studies*. Delhi: Saujanya Publications, 2000
- Nagarjuna, *The Precious Garland, Buddhist Advice for Living and Liberation*, Boston, Wisdom Publications, 1997
- Nebesky Wojkowitz, Réne de. *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, Oxford University Press, 1956
- Niangwujia (sNying bo rgyal). *Klu Rol in Transition: A Summer Ritual in A mdo North-Eastern Tibet*. Unpublished MPhil Thesis, University of Oslo, Norway, 2011
- Samuel, Geoffrey, *Introducing Tibetan Buddhism*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2012
- Tucci, G., *The Religions of Tibet*, London: Routledge & Paul Kegan Paul; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980