

Left: Tuvan snake-like dragon being called Amyrga-eren, a family protector. Shamans would make these for families in their care, and the family would hang them up

in their homes for protection.

Often, children wore a small protection amulet called a 'child of Amyrga', designed to keep them safe from harm.

Late C19th

## Shaman's Snakes from Siberia

Snakes, and snake-like creatures made from fabric, are a common feature found on shaman's clothes right the way across Southern and Central Siberia. The snake is a powerful spirit and shamans wear the snake for protection and power.

Snakes are often associated with the water spirits, known as lus in Mongolia. These are really the same as the Tibetan and Indian Naga, the water spirits who live in the earth. As underworld dwellers, they are associated with the Lower World of the shaman's universe, and as dangerous beings, capable of attacking any that seek they harm, they form an important part of the shaman's armour, which they wear when they go to work in the spirit worlds.

In addition to being fixed to shaman's coats, snakes and snake like beings are also often hung in homes as family protector spirits.

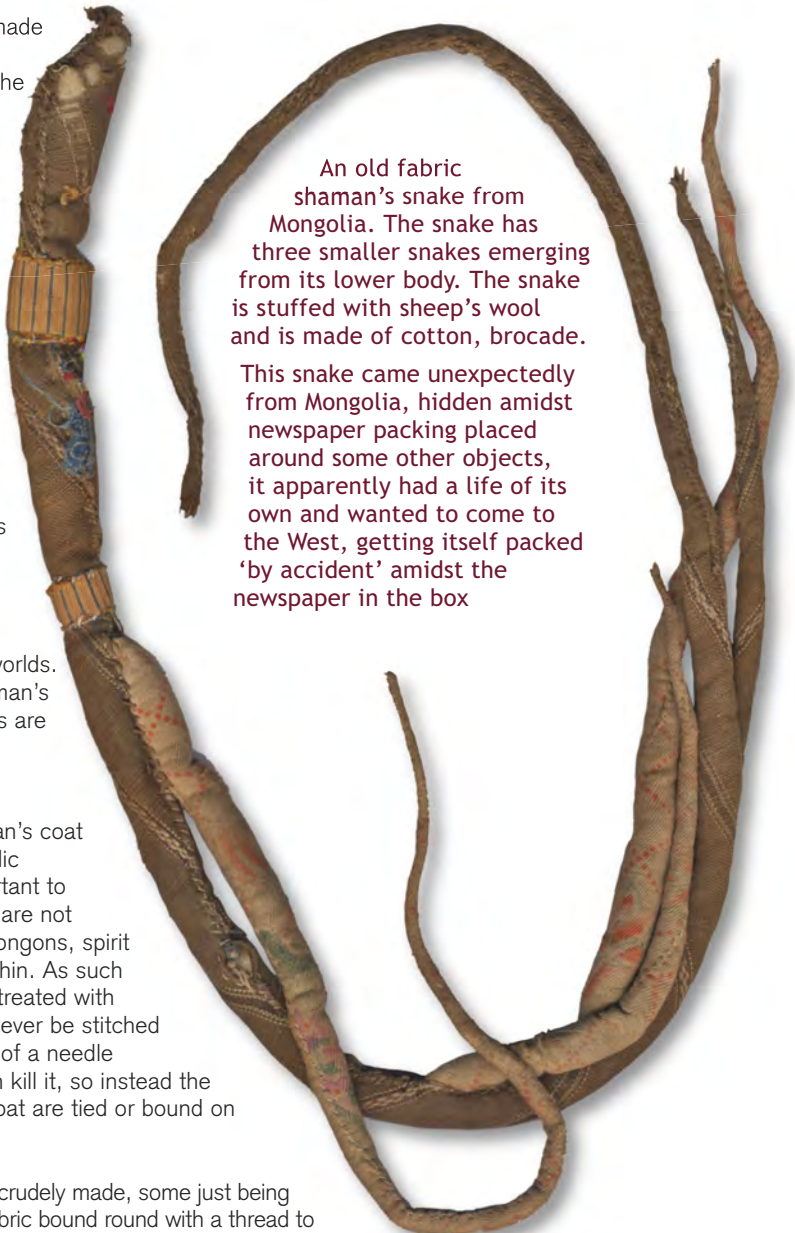
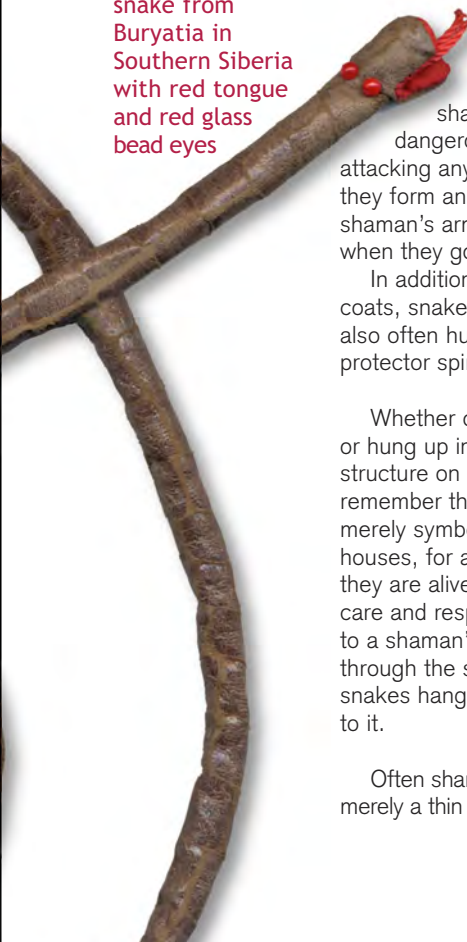
Whether on the back of a shaman's coat or hung up in a tent or other nomadic structure on the steppes, it is important to remember that these fabric snakes are not merely symbolic. They are actually ongons, spirit houses, for a snake spirit to live within. As such they are alive, and must always be treated with care and respect. A snake should never be stitched to a shaman's coat, as the passing of a needle through the snake will harm or even kill it, so instead the snakes hanging from a shaman's coat are tied or bound on to it.

Often shaman's snakes are quite crudely made, some just being merely a thin twist of cotton or silk fabric bound round with a thread to

An old fabric shaman's snake from Mongolia. The snake has three smaller snakes emerging from its lower body. The snake is stuffed with sheep's wool and is made of cotton, brocade.

This snake came unexpectedly from Mongolia, hidden amidst newspaper packing placed around some other objects, it apparently had a life of its own and wanted to come to the West, getting itself packed 'by accident' amidst the newspaper in the box

Below: fabric snake from Buryatia in Southern Siberia with red tongue and red glass bead eyes





keep it rolled up. Others are stuffed with rope or sheep's wool, while other's are strips of leather - with or without a covering of fabric. Sometimes, when it is available, fabric which resembles the scales of a snake is chosen.

The heads of the snakes also vary, some are quite complex, with little red tongues and perhaps glass beads for eyes, where as others really have no naturalistic animal qualities at all.

Cloth snakes are also sometimes used in healing work done by shamans. Whips - used to drive away the spirits of illness - often have snake-like elements to them, and often a shaman's costume would have small iron or bronze amulets fixed to them as representations of the powerful snake spirits.

*Right: the back of a very elaborate Evenk shaman's coat made from reindeer skin and cloth.*

The coat is complete with the partial wing and clawed foot of an eagle, and underneath the cloth snakes that hang from the back is a small metal amulet of a bear. The bear and the eagle would indicate that these were the shaman's main spirit helpers. The red, white and blue decoration on the coat represents the Lower, Middle and Upper Worlds and the black and white banding on some of the snakes represent the paths of day and night, the two paths the shaman had to walk when he worked. The name of the shaman this coat belonged to was Semen Mikhailovich Urkanov, and the coat was collected from him in 1923.

*Below: shaman's bronze snake amulet, designed to be hung from a coat*

