# BRINGERS of the RAIN

## the naga spirits of Asia

Nicholas Breeze Wood

*painting: Nicholas Breeze Wood*

*Above*: thangka of Nagakanya, Goddess of the Three Worlds

*Inset*: Tibetan, protective naga door handle

*Below*: thangka painting of a Garuda bird

About six years ago, while working with my helper spirits in shamanic trance, I was introduced very forcibly to a new spirit helper, a being half snake and half woman. As I became accustomed to letting this spirit work with me, I came to understand she was a naga.

As I gradually got to know her own very unique personality, I became more interested in the naga spirits of Asia, and researched them. I found out she is in fact Nagakanya, the daughter of the Naga King Nagaraja and in Tibetan Buddhism considered to be the Goddess of the Three Worlds (Lower, Middle and Upper). I was even able to find a traditional Tibetan statue of her which I now keep on my altar and make offerings to.

I was also told at our first meeting that she was a protector spirit, but was not there to protect me, as her role was to protect another Tibetan spirit who I work with. I discovered some time later that the shrines of this other spirit are often traditionally decorated with images of protecting nagas.

Nagas are serpent-like spirits who live in oceans, lakes, rivers and wells, and they play an important part in many Asian mythologies, religions and folk tales. In sanskrit, *nag* is the word for cobra.

Nagas are regarded as having strong magical powers, vast knowledge and a capricious nature, which can quickly change from friendly and helpful to angry and malicious - a character I have been at the sharp end of on many occasions, during my own shamanic work.

As beings of the water element they are bringers of rain; in Tibetan Buddhism the Lord of the Weather is known as Apalala Nagaraja.

As keepers of water's treasures - which are seen as magical gems and precious stones - nagas are often portrayed holding gems in their hands, or adorned with them. In traditional lore the precious stones they carry give immortality and magical power (sanskrit: *siddhi*), and so nagas have many enemies who wish to steal their power.

Their arch-enemies are the mythological garuda - giant flying birds with wingspans of several miles. According to Indian mythology nagas and garudas are cousins, but the nagas tricked the garudas into getting them the elixir of immortality from the gods, and ever since the *garudas* have tried to kill and eat them because, unlike nagas, they were doomed to be mortal.

But although immortal, nagas suffer greatly through the carelessness, ignorance, and lack of respect shown to Nature by human beings. This causes them to retaliate, and they can cause humans great harm. Because of this, offerings are made to them at lakes and wells, and their help is sought in bringing rain, for personal protection and to grant fertility and wealth.

Offerings often take the form of precious stones, and are especially made if a naga has been upset in any way, for example because a water course has been polluted.

Near the start of my own relationship, I upset Nagakanya with an act which I thought was honouring to her. She very angrily told me I 'must never ever do it again', and my other spirits rushed me away and told me I had deeply offended her, and had to go immediately to a local river and make offerings of silver, shell, red coral and turquoise to appease her or I would be at risk of harm.

Nagas can be associated with life energy or *chi*. Guru Rinpoche, the Tantric Buddha and 'first shaman' figure in much Himalayan shamanism, was meditating at a lake once when he was disturbed by a naga who lived within it. He decided to fight the naga, and used all his magic. But as he fought, he became weaker and weaker until he nearly lost all his power. Then suddenly the naga came out of the waters and told him he could not kill her because in doing so he would kill himself, so Guru Rinpoche gave up the fight and left the lake and the naga in peace.

Nagas occur in folklore all over Asia, from the bottom tip of India, across to China and from Cambodia and Java in the South to Mongolia and Southern Siberia in the North.

They hold an important place in Hinduism as well as Buddhism, and are seen as the aquatic servants of Varuna, a powerful god, and in the Indian epic the *Mahabharata*, the naga Prince Sesha is the son of the god Shiva.

In Southern India ceremonies, a mix of Hinduism and shamanism, are performed in order to build a good relationship with nagas to help the people who live there prosper (see Sacred Hoop Issue 46).

In North India many people

consider themselves to be descendants of nagas, and in Kashmir the word *naga* means a spring, and they are seen as the first settlers of the region. Legend tells that Kashmir was raised up out of water and left under their care, and a large number of temples, built near springs, are dedicated to them.

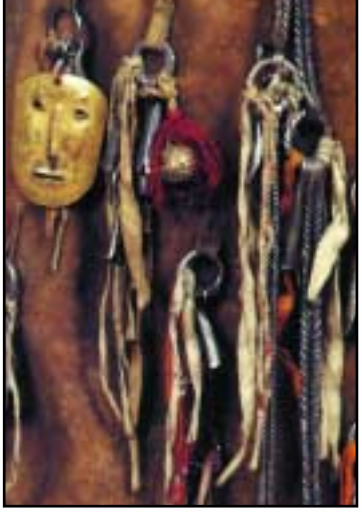
In Thailand and Java, nagas are seen as underworld wealth deities. The Mekong River is said to have one living in it, and villages along the river give respect and offerings to it. On this river each October, a strange phenomenon called 'naga fireballs' can sometimes be seen. These are glowing balls of fire the size of eggs, which shoot up from the river into the sky, sometimes as high as 200 metres. The number of fireballs varies each year, and they have been seen for centuries. The balls may be gas made by combusting, fermenting sediment in the river, but local villagers say they are made by the naga in the water.

In some Cambodian and Indian legends, nagas are said to live in a magical kingdom in the Pacific Ocean, and a Naga princess from there gave birth to the first Cambodian people; *Kemboja* (Cambodia) is the name of a ledgendary South Asian naga.

Snakes are very important in Siberian and Mongolian shamanism. In Mongolia snake spirits are seen as powerful problem causers that take over people's houses and must be driven out with ceremonies and offerings.

Often the backs of shamans' costumes are decorated with cloth streamers or ribbons which represent snakes which protect the shaman in his work (although some traditions say they represent feathers instead, which aid the shaman's flight).

I was once given one of these cloth snakes from an old shaman's costume, and soon after, Nagakanya leaped out at me unexpectedly while I was on a completely unrelated shamanic journey, and insisted I return from the journey straight away to perform a ceremony to honour the snake spirit, because the people who had cut the snake from the



costume had dishonoured it. Over the years I have learnt to do as Nagakanya demands, and so I returned and performed the ceremony as she told me to.

As well as cloth snakes on the costumes, twisted or cut-out metal shapes, generally of iron, representing snakes and other animals, are often fixed to the costumes. In Mongolia there is a form of shaman's drumstick called the 'speckled scaly snake,' wood covered with a snake's skin, and with long coloured ribbons hanging from the snake's mouth. When used, the ribbons flutter and look like a snake's darting tongue.

Some shamans in Northern Mongolia and Southern Siberia also carry snake staffs, often made of iron. These represent spirits who help the shamans with their tasks in the spirit world. Manchu shamans of Eastern Siberia make special offerings to snake spirits. During the ceremony they wear a type of sacred vest made from three pieces of cloth coloured red, yellow and black, which represent the colours of the snake spirit. When the snake spirit enters the shaman, they fall to the ground in a trance and move like a snake while their helpers sing songs honouring the snake spirit.

I did not set out to work with Nagakanya intentionally, and in fact working with her has been a challenge on many occasions. Sometimes she is helpful and kind, other times she can be dismissive and hard, almost cruel. On my altar she demands offerings be made to her before any of my other spirits, and my other spirits seem to be respectful of her when she appears in my shamanic journeys. Before she would work with me she gave me a set of tasks and ceremonies to perform. Some of these tasks were mundane, such as painting my front door a certain colour, but in all they took me almost a year to complete. Only after that would she allow a greater degree of contact.

It seems that snake spirits, like the natural environment we live within, demands our respect if we are to live peacefully with them.

*Om Nagakanya Sarva Siddhi Hung*

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*Top left*: bells and iron amulets hang from a shaman's coat

*Top right*: creating a sand painting of the Naga King in Southern India

*Right*: Hindu carving of the Naga King from Nepal

*Inset left*: Iron snakes on a ring, from a Siberian shaman's costume C20th

*Below*: early C20th Siberian shaman's costume showing the snakes hanging from the back