

Article

# Cobra Deities and Divine Cobras: The Ambiguous Animality of Nāgas

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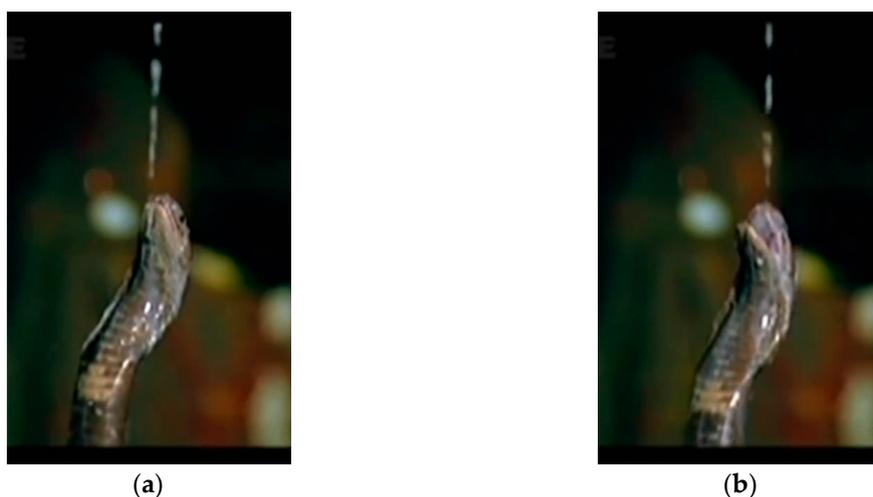
**Abstract:** In South Asia, cobras are the animals most dangerous to humans—as humans are to cobras. Paradoxically, one threat to cobras is their worship by feeding them milk, which is harmful to them, but religiously prescribed as an act of love and tenderness towards a deity. Across cultural and religious contexts, the Nāgas, mostly cobra-shaped beings, are prominent among Hindu and Buddhist deities. Are they seen as animals? Doing ethnographic fieldwork on a Himalayan female Nāga Goddess, this question has long accompanied me during my participant observation and interviews, and I have found at least as many possible answers as I have had interview partners. In this article, I trace the ambiguous relationship between humans, serpents and serpent deities through the classical Sanskrit literature, Hindu and Buddhist iconographies and the retelling of myths in modern movies, short stories, and fantasy novels. In these narrations and portrayals, Nāgas are often “real” snakes, i.e., members of the animal kingdom—only bigger, shape-shifting or multi-headed and, curiously, thirsty for milk. The article focuses on those traits of Nāgas which set them apart from animals, and on those traits that characterize them as snakes.

**Keywords:** Hinduism; mythology; iconography; Nāgas; Buddhism; dragon; human-nonhuman sociality; serpent; snake; symbolism

## 1. Loving and Killing Snakes

*Sunita, a young, pious woman in distress, bites her lower lip and directs her gaze, displaying a mixture of hope and worry, towards the termite hill. Together with a group of fellow devotees, she waits for a seemingly endless time; the tension is raised by chattering birds. Finally, a cobra raises her head out of a hole in the termite hill. Sadness gives way to enthusiasm, while some of the participants seem rather shocked. The cobra rises to her full height as yellow haldī and red sindūr powders—turmeric and vermilion—are thrown towards the snake to worship her, accompanied by increasingly rapid drum patterns. The cobra goddess is offered burning oil on a leaf, an egg and a garland of white flowers. Sunita sings, her song expressing some urgency to fix the snake to her spot and to prevent her from disappearing. We see the cobra from a frog’s-eye-view—notwithstanding other implications of this term vis-à-vis a snake, this cinematographic act illustrates the devotees’ submission and the majesty of a goddess in her serpent form. Sunita and the other women in the group raise a pot of milk, and we see a stream of milk gushing over the erected head of the cobra, who finally opens her mouth to drink the milk (Figure 1).*

This scene<sup>1</sup> from the Tamil movie *Devi*, “the Goddess”<sup>2</sup>, features a goddess who is also a cobra—a Nāgī, to use the Sanskrit term. The Nāgīs (f) and Nāgas (m) of Sanskrit mythology—i.e., the Nāgins and Nāgs in modern Hindī or, in this case, a South Indian Nāgamma—are, at the same time, both cobras and something else. In different cultural and religious contexts, the term has (and, for about three thousand years<sup>3</sup>, has had) different meanings. Unlike other snakes (Skt. *ahi*, *sarpa*, *pannaga*, *uraga* or *bhujamga*<sup>4</sup>), Nāgas are “hybrid” and “supernatural” (Cozad 2004, p. 32). Originally, a Nāga might have been merely “a snake that is exceptional due to its great size, its great powers, or perhaps both” (ibid.).



**Figure 1.** Stills from the movie *Devi* (Ramakrishna 1999). (a) A stream of milk gushes over the head of a cobra, who is worshipped as a goddess; (b) She opens her mouth to drink the milk.

Nāgas are often worshipped in front of termite hills (cf. König 1984); in the Himalayas, they are believed to dwell in springs (cf. Handa 2004; Lange 2017). These habitats highlight their relationship to fresh water, as well as to the earth;

“Kadrū, ‘the Tawny One’, who, according to the Mahābhārata epic, is the mother of the thousand Nāgas, is a personification of the Earth. The snake-mother is also called Surasā, ‘she of good flavor’” (Vogel 1926, p. 20).

In their “Trans-Himalayan context” (Deeg 2016), which extends throughout the Hindu and Buddhist imaginaries of Nepal, Kaśmīr, Tibet and China from the first centuries CE up until now, Nāgas<sup>5</sup> often have nothing to do with cobras, but are providers of water—dwelling in mountain, lakes and rivers, or in rainclouds.

This connection to water does not seem to be a prominent Nāga trait in South India, where they are much more consistently and affirmatively identified with cobras (cf. Alloco 2013, 2014). In the words of an elderly sweeper of a Nāgamma’s temple in Chennai, the animal is “her ‘true form’, that of a slithering snake”, (Alloco 2013, p. 235)—other shapes in which Nāgammās appear are, among others, the stone sculptures and painted images of their worship. Like in the movie scene, a Nāgamma can

<sup>1</sup> (Ramakrishna 1999), minutes 37:10–38:10.

<sup>2</sup> *Devi* by Kodi Ramakrishna (1999) tells the story of a young, distressed woman, who is supported and rescued by her family goddess Devī, who is a Nāgamma, a “cobra mother”. In general, the film can be categorized as a devotional film for a religious audience that—not unusually—features elements of romance, action and other movie genres. In variance of traditional conceptions of the otherworld of the Nāgas, the movie begins with Devī and her sisters arriving on earth in a kind of UFO.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Section 3 below.

<sup>4</sup> Like the Latin *serpens*, *sarpa* means “creeping”; *uraga*, *bhujamga* and *pannaga* respectively mean “walking on the chest”, “moving by bending”, and “creeping low”; *ahi* is related to other Indo-European terms for snakes (cf. Mayrhofer 1992, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> In Chinese, the term is equivalent to *long* 龍, the “dragon” (Deeg 2008, p. 108); in Tibetan, to *klu*.

also shift into a “beautiful ‘ladylike’ form” (ibid.)—although she is still a snake.<sup>6</sup> Sarah Caldwell, on the other hand, cites a Keralese informant according to whom “the snake that we worship is not the ordinary snake that we see, such as the viper, cobra, etc. The real snake is different. It is invisible. We cannot see those snakes in the *sarppakāvū* (sacred serpent grove). They are gods with great powers” (Caldwell 1999, p. 144).

*Devi* shows this ambiguity of being a cobra goddess on many levels. For one, she changes her form throughout the movie, from serpent to young woman and back. Not only is it impossible to define one of these forms as her original self, her animal form, albeit conceived as such, is not defined in a biological sense. Rather, its meaning is attributed by Hindu religion or, more precisely, folk religion from Andhra Pradesh, as represented in a feature film. Apart from the opening scene, which shows the Nāga goddess and her sisters entering the human realm from some kind of space ship, the movie stays close to religious beliefs and practices from across South Asia. Throughout these traditions, milk is a supreme symbol of love and devotion (*bhakti*), and therefore, it is the best gift to offer a goddess. Even the South Indian “cobra-mothers” (*nāgamma*) seemingly love to drink milk, symbolizing maternity, purity and nourishment per se (Lange 2019a), and embodying the tender relationship between worshippers and the worshipped (Lange 2019b). Throughout South Asia, depicted and living serpents are given offerings, often milk, to placate them, to lure them to one’s side—and, of course, to prevent them from killing humans.

Nevertheless, the symbolic relationship between snakes and milk, prominent all over the world and throughout history (cf. Ermacora 2017), stands in contradiction to biological and biomedical conditions:

“the construction of a snake’s mouth (sharp teeth, inflexible lips) together with the absence of a diaphragm, makes it impossible for a snake to suck in the same manner as young mammals do. In addition, a snake’s digestive system does not permit the digestion of lactose: reptiles, of course, lack the lactase enzyme” (ibid., pp. 61f.).

Worshipping cobras can thus be deadly for them, as seen in statements by animal activists<sup>7</sup> and in the pertinent literature. In a 2012 *Times of India* article, the author uses *Nāg Pañcamī*, a Pan-Indian Nāga festival, to create awareness about what “really” benefits snakes, instead of simply making offerings to them in a cruel manner: “The reptiles are abused. Their fangs are removed, and they are starved so that they consume milk offered to them by the devotees. This kind of torture proves fatal for the snakes.”<sup>8</sup> That said, the title of that article suggests not to abandon religious traditions in favor of scientifically embedded practices, but rather to reform the religious festival and to give it a new meaning: “This Nag Panchami, protect the snake!”

*Devi* evokes an atmosphere of passionate engagement between humans and a Hindu deity in the form of an animal; the offering of milk to the cobra signifies tenderness and love between members of different species. Scientific and environmentalist discourses, however, see in the tenderness of “devotion” a form of “cruelty”: The benefit to the animal is not the same as the benefit to the deity. Does this mean that the deity and the animal are not the same being? There might be as many answers to this question as there are people who call themselves Hindus; still, a look into the complex mythological, iconographic and ritual histories of the Nāgas provides interesting insights into who or what is considered to be a god(dess), animal or human being.

<sup>6</sup> In South India, the worship of Nāgas has the main purposes of overcoming childlessness—which is interpreted as the curse or revenge of a snake for being killed, hurt or disturbed by a human—and to prevent snakebites (cf. Alloco 2013). Appeasing the deity also means developing good terms with the animals; thus, their main festival (*Nāga Caturttī* in South India and, in North India and only on one day, *Nāg Pañcamī*) takes place in “the rainy season, a period in which snake bites are more likely due to the fact that snakes are often displaced from their subterranean homes during the monsoon, and when many Tamil farmers are sowing paddy seeds and may encounter snakes in agricultural fields.” (ibid., p. 242)

<sup>7</sup> <https://savethesnakes.org/2017/07/29/nag-panchami-good-for-snakes/>, last accessed 26 March 2019.

<sup>8</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/environment/flora-fauna/This-Nag-Panchami-protect-the-snake/articleshow/15098629.cms>, last accessed 26 March 2019.

These questions are in the center of my ethnographic fieldwork on the worship of the Naiṅīs or Nāginīs, who are nine Nāg goddesses in the Indian Central Himalaya who will be the focus of Section 2. Although people do not worship them in the shape of an animal, they are often alluded to as cobras. Do they merely share their name with the shape-shifting goddess of the South Indian movie, and with the cobras whom the *Times of India* aim to protect against being worshipped? To find out how much common mythological background these different, currently worshipped Nāgīs share, Section 3 develops a historically rooted view on their religious traditions by outlining some exemplary roles Nāgas play in the *Mahābhārata* epic, in Buddhism and in modern Indian literature. Since the 19th Century, an additional discourse has emerged in academic and political retellings and reinterpretations of Hindu mythology, raising the question of whether Nāgas and other nonhuman beings are, instead of being either deities or animals, an allegory for human ethnic groups. This modern discourse will be the focus of Section 4, after which I finally apply the reformulated question about the animalness of Nāgas to the Himalayan goddess.

## 2. Naiṅī Mātā, a Nāg-Goddess of the Central Himalaya

Do the Nāg deities of today's popular Hinduism have anything to do with cobras or other snake species? I have been doing fieldwork on Nāga-related goddesses in the Indian Central Himalaya since 2011. *Naiṅī* (= Hindī *nāgīn*) is the name of nine sisters, each believed to rule as goddess (*devī*) and mother (*mātā*) over a part of the Pindar river valley. In the rituals, festivals and processions devoted to them, they have a huge range of ritual embodiments: a pole clothed with saris, male dancers in evening performances, women in states of possession. To an unassuming observer, in none of these embodiments do the Naiṅīs look or behave differently from other local Hindu gods. They do not show off their serpentine features and, unlike other Indian Nāgs, are never depicted in sculptures or posters. However, at second glance, the songs sung during the rituals and the stories told to me in interviews reveal that both their snake-like nature and their connection to the Nāgas in classical Hindu mythology indeed play a huge role. My interview partners often signaled that they were talking about a Naiṅī by a hand gesture mimicking a cobra with its hood spread. Interestingly, the same gesture also appears in the opening few seconds of the film sequence used to introduce this article.<sup>9</sup>

While most of my fieldwork takes place in Himalayan regions above altitudes of 1500 m, where no “real” cobras are encountered, the imaginary Nāgs are nonetheless very real to the people, who regard and love them as nonhuman family members. The *Naiṅī* of the village Rains, for instance, had to be worshipped for half a year from 2016 to 2017. Her devotees (*bhakt*) attend to her as the village's mother and relative, but also as an unleashed *śakti*, an ambivalent “force” which has to be tamed by a priest. As I was told by the teacher B. S Rawat in Chopta village, this priest, called *gaṇve*, “is controlling Nāginā Devi, makes some sounds, and Goddess Nagini dances. That means, he is the master of that Nāginī. In the simple language we can say: He is *saperā* [a snake charmer]!”<sup>10</sup>

These festivals are held for most of the nine Naiṅī sisters in intervals of 40–50 years. Each goddess spends the long time between the festivals devoted to her in a clay pot filled with milk and buried beneath a tree.<sup>11</sup> When some affliction [*doṣ*] is felt to befall the village—cows give less milk, or their milk is mixed with blood—this is seen as a sign that she starts missing her people and that these must prepare a festival in her honor. Ritual specialists dig up the pot, which means that she “comes out of

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhoabvEFIRg>, last accessed 26 March 2019, minute 35:48:10. Using this gesture, a secondary character proclaims that there will not remain “one single drop of milk” in town, for it will all be used for the Nāga festival.

<sup>10</sup> Interview from 18 October 2016.

<sup>11</sup> “In that pot we put water and milk. In our religion we believe that a snake drinks milk. So we put that *gaṇā* [pot] there for that Nāginī Devī, [this] is the symbol of *Patāloka* [the netherworld]. And we believe that snakes live in *Patāloka*. Generally, we know snake lives in [underground], generally, they come out in the summer season but in other seasons they go down under the ground for long sleep. Same way, the Nāginī Devī is also a snake. We put her in that *gaḍḍā* for a long period [ . . . ]. The soul of Nāginī lives in that *gaḍḍā*, which is covered in the root of that *Tūn* tree” (ibid.).

the underworld" (*pātāl lok se nikaltī*). After several weeks, a bamboo pole is prepared and animated with her being.<sup>12</sup> In this form, she then spends six months among her human devotees, who convoy and carry her around the whole region. She visits all the villages into which the *dhiyānīs*, women from the village, have married, even when this took place generations ago. In all these villages, large groups of women gather and sing songs to her. One of them, *Reṇḍyo-Keṇḍyo* ("crawl and be carried on [our] shoulders") is sung repeatedly every day. Parvati Devi Mehra, an elderly woman of Bhāṅgota village, explained to me that Naiṇī is not only seen as *Nāginī*, a mythological cobra goddess, but also as a living snake (*sāṃp*):

"To begin with, Nāginī Mātā is like a snake. How does she move? That is her song, like this. How she walks, that is what the song is [about]: *Reṇḍyo-Keṇḍyo*."<sup>13</sup>

Six months of this procession, and many more rituals, finally culminate in the making of a grass rope several kilometers long. This rope, as B. S. Rawat told me, is not only the symbol of a snake, but the snake itself, whose head "runs" (i.e., is carried by crowds of people) uphill and the tail downhill. Afterwards, she again vanishes into the pot—or rather, into the netherworld. When asked about the whereabouts of this realm, B. S. Rawat gave an answer I did not expect:

"In the past, people [thought that] Europe, Asia and Middle East, only this is the earth! [Now we know that on] this side [are] Asia, Europe, and [on the] opposed side Amerika. That is called *pātāl lok*."

[Question: "Therefore, if I go to America, I will be in *pātāl lok*?"]

"Yes. [...] Anacondas, much variety of snakes live in America, you know? [In Hindi:] Of all places of the world, most snakes dwell in America. This is why, in our village, we believe it to be the *nāg lok*, the realm of the Nāgas."<sup>14</sup>

The movie *Devi* also calls the netherworld inhabited by Nāgas *pātāl*.<sup>15</sup> Whereas, in South Indian imagination, *pātāl* is connected to this world by termite hills, Himalayan beliefs and practices take springs and mountain lakes as the dwelling place of Nāgs and as entrances into their own world (cf. Lange 2017). In opposition to the South Indian Nāgīs, whose "real" shape is that of a cobra, the Naiṇīs are said to take on human form in their own world, while they appear in this world as (sometimes invisible) cobras, but also as ropes, poles and possessed people.

At first glance, Naiṇī and Nāgamma do not seem to have more in common with each other than with other Hindu deities, apart from their name. However, a closer look reveals features that more firmly embed them within Pan-Hindu concepts of Nāgas:

- Both names, Naiṇī Mātā and Nāgamma, mean "cobra mother".
- When feeling neglected, mistreated or hurt by their human "children", both "mothers" are able to curse them—if involuntarily—with an affliction or disease (*doṣ*) related to their poisonous nature.
- Both mothers are fed with milk; Naiṇī Mātā's *doṣ* is also said to spoil the milk as a sign of her bad mood.
- Both are said to live in *pātāl lok*, a netherworld.

Furthermore, when I asked for the Naiṇī sisters' parents, I usually heard names that I knew from Sanskrit sources; their mother is said to be Padmā Nāginī and their father either Vāsuki Nāg

<sup>12</sup> "*Brahmobandan*, that means, [...] a bamboo stick covered with clothes, *sārīs*, and on [2:00] top of that bamboo, covered with some [...] colored cloth; that is the head of the snake. That is our belief! And that *niṣān* is the symbol of Naiṇī Devī. Naiṇī means Nāg!" (ibid.)

<sup>13</sup> *Ārambh śūrū, sāṃp jaise Nāginī Mātā hai. Nāginī Mātā kaise jāti hai – yeh hai uskā gānā, yeh hai [...] Jaise callī hai, vaise gānā hai iskā: Reṇḍyo-Keṇḍyo* (interview recorded on 18.10.2018).

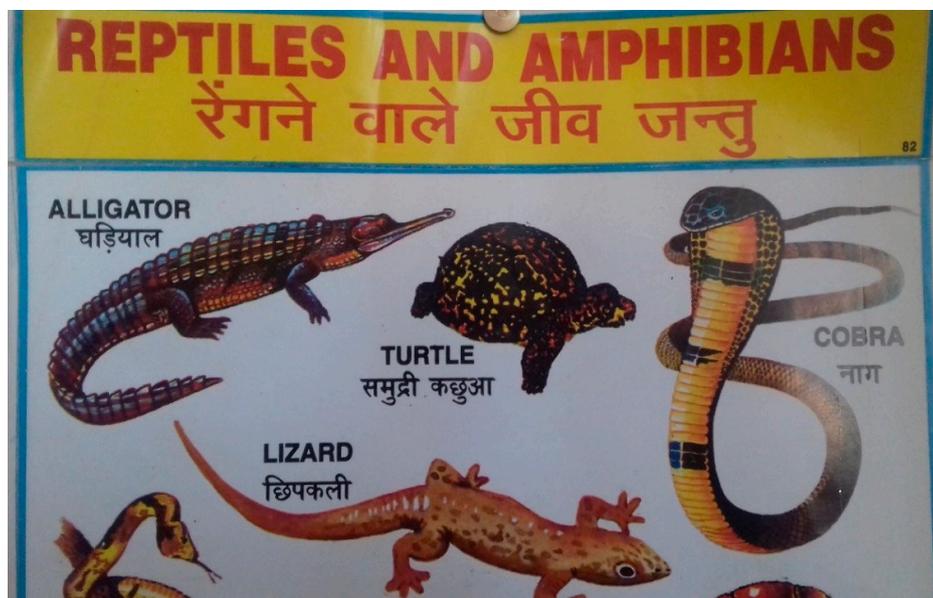
<sup>14</sup> Interview from 18.10.2016. The last sentences are translated from Hindi: *Duniyā ke sabse jagah snake America mein milte hain, uslie ham usko Nāglok bhi kahte hain. Hamare gaunv me usko Nāglok manā jāta hai!*

<sup>15</sup> *Devi*, minute 35:48:00.

or Kāliya/Kalaṅgiri Nāg. To better understand this background, the anthropological approach can be complemented by philological and archaeological findings, providing more contexts for “Indian serpent lore” (Vogel 1926).

### 3. Nāgas as Animals, Deities, and Demons

In modern Hindī, *nāg* means “cobra”. As such, Nāgas are classified among the reptiles, the *reṅgnevāle jīvo jantu* (Figure 2)—they are “living animals” (*jīvo jantu*) which crawl, creep, slither and snake (*reṅgnā*). In ordinary human-animal encounters, cobras and other poisonous snakes usually do not behave as protectors, as Devī does in the movie, but rather as something to be protected against, being the most dangerous animals in India.<sup>16</sup> Dated around 900 BCE, *Atharvaveda* 6.56 (Embree 1988, pp. 23f.) already provides a spell against their deadly bite, simultaneously praising and threatening the serpents (*ahi*). Here, snakes are imagined both as slayers of humans and as praiseworthy “divine folk”—similar to the snake goddess Mansā of current Bengal, who kills with one eye and revives with the other (Smith 1985, p. 46; 2015).



**Figure 2.** Educational poster, bought by the author in Delhi, autumn 2016. Published by Geeta Enterprises, Delhi.

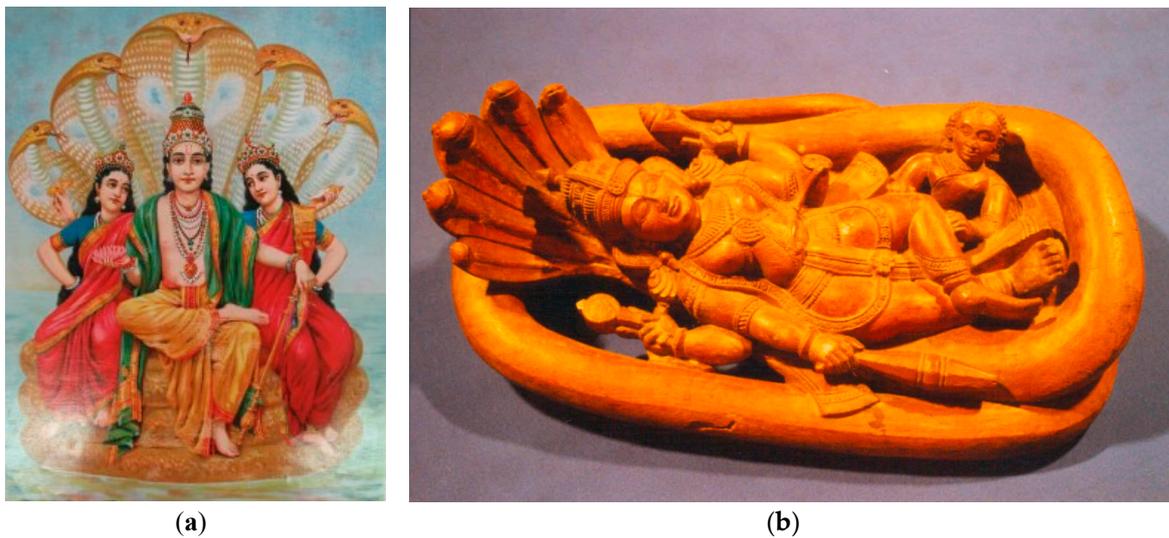
The word *nāga* in the senses of “serpent” or “serpent demon” first appears in the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* (Mayrhofer 1996, p. 33), which can be dated back to the first half of the first millennium BCE.<sup>17</sup> The *Mahābhārata* epic is the first text dwelling extensively on Nāgas as such and on the stories of individual Nāgas, such as the cosmic snake Śeṣa, the Nāga kings Vāsuki, Takṣaka, Airāvata and Karkoṭaka or the princesses Ulūpī.<sup>18</sup> “The firstborn was Śeṣa, and Vāsuki came after him” (*Mahābhārata*

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/wildlife-biodiversity/serpentine-problem-58396>, last access 26 March 2019.

<sup>17</sup> For me, the evidence that the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* uses *nāga* in this sense seems not very strong. Cozad (2004, p. 32) specifies the passage as ŚB 5.4.1.2. I did not find any Nāgas mentioned in this passage, at least in the version available on [gretil.org](http://gretil.org), but “biting and stinging ones (serpents) who are neither worms (insects) nor non-worms” (*naite krimayo nākrimayo yaddandaśūkā*). Another passage, ŚB 11.2.7.2., mentions people who “come in droves as if desiring to see a great Nāga” ((Cozad 2004, p. 203); [gretil.org](http://gretil.org) has the Sanskrit text thus translated as *mahānāgam ivābhisaṃsāram didṛkṣitāro*). The commentary of the Mādhyabdhinas specifies that this is in reference to a great snake (*mahāsarpa*) and not an elephant or a mountain (ibid., p. 169, fn. 18).

<sup>18</sup> *Mahābhārata* 1.31 gives a long list of prominent Nāgas, continuing with the story of Śeṣa in 1.32. The story of Ulūpī’s affair with Arjuna is narrated in 1.206, and Karkoṭaka plays major roles in the famous story of Nala and Damayantī (3.63) and in the foundation myths of Nepal (cf. Deeg 2016, pp. 171, 195).

1.31, transl. van Buitenen 1973, p. 91). Śeṣa and Vāsuki are the names of the Nāgas most often worshipped, even today, depicted on many posters and walls as the bed of the god Viṣṇu (Śeṣa, cf. Figure 3b), as the garland of the god Śiva and as the rope used for churning an ocean of milk (Vāsuki in the ubiquitous motive of *samudramanṭhana*). For this reason, I will dwell on the *Mahābhārata* in a separate subsection, neglecting the earliest Vedic accounts on the serpent (*ahi*) Vṛtra, who is not called a Nāga—although Vṛtra’s role as a blocker of the waters (*āpaḥ*), especially of the “seven rivers” (*saptasindhū*<sup>19</sup>), has probably made an impact on later conceptions of Nāgas (cf. Deeg 2016, pp. 222f.).



**Figure 3.** The Hindu god Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa is enthroned or bedded on the Nāga Ananta-Śeṣa, whose multiple hoods serve as a royal parasol: (a) Print by the Ravi-Varma-Press, Bombay (given by Rudolf Otto to the Marburg Museum of Religion, photo by Özlem Ögütçü, acc.nr. B-Kp 083); (b) Wooden sculpture of Viṣṇu, Lakṣmī and Śeṣ (given 1936 to the Marburg Museum of Religion, photo by Aiko Wösner, acc.nr. Lp 214).

Archeological findings from the earliest centuries CE do not show the Nāgas in a completely human or animal shape, but always in between. In his 1926 monograph on “The Nāgas in Hindu Legend and Art”, which is the most comprehensive study of Hindu and Buddhist Nāgas to date, VOGEL points out that

“the Nāga of Indian mythology and folk-lore is not really the snake in general, but the cobra raised to the rank of a divine being [ . . . ]. The evidence of Indian art points to the same conclusion. The Nāga, represented either in a purely animal or in a semi-human shape, is always characterized by the snake-hood” (Vogel 1926, p. 27).

In South Asia, Nāgas started to populate the religious imagery as cobras with several hoods or as humans behind whose heads several cobra hoods are raised as a parasol (*chatra*), indicating royalty (Srinivasan 2007). The early Buddhist and Hindu art of the first centuries BCE and CE, found in Sanchi, Gandhara and Ajanta, displays an “intermingling between the theriomorphic and anthropomorphic nature and power of Nāgas” (Srinivasan 2007, p. 376):

“Generally human and animal properties are strangely blended [ . . . ]. We can in the main distinguish three iconographic types: first, the form of the serpent, usually many-headed; second, the human form universally characterized by means of the polycephalous serpent-hood; third, a combination of the two, the upper part of a human body being

<sup>19</sup> Among other passages, *Ṛgveda* 1.32.12, 2.12.3 & 2.12.12.

combined with the lower half of a snake's coils. Of these three forms, the one last mentioned is comparatively rare; it does occur in Brahmanical sculpture, but in Buddhist art it is hardly ever employed [ . . . ]. Just as the gods are distinguished from mere mortals by the plurality of their arms, thus the divine serpents are many-headed" (Vogel 1926, pp. 37f.).

For instance, in a relief from Mathura, dating back to the 3rd Century CE, a "large Nāga is flanked by two shorter Nāginīs. They are all depicted as humans but with the addition of snake hoods; the male has a seven-headed hood, the female hoods contain three. At the bottom of the relief is an inscription that reads ' . . . a tank and a garden (were caused to be made) for the holy Nāga Bhumo' [ . . . ]. The place of worship is outdoors, near a body of water" (Srinivasan 2007, p. 374).

An inscription from Gandhāra in the upper Indus Basin further affirms the connection of the Nāgas to fresh water, "stating that a tank was made for the worship of all snakes" (ibid., p. 375, fn. 62). Furthermore,

"the Sonkh Nāga temple supports such a linkage for it seems to have originally stood by the banks of a river. [ . . . ]. In the area of Sāñcī [ . . . ], of the sixteen groups of Nāga sculptures dating between the 2nd Century B.C. and the 10th century A.D. whose provenance is known, seven are associated with irrigation reservoirs, five with village tanks and four with rivers or streams" (ibid.).

As divine, demonic or spiritual guardians of the water, the Nāgas of this early epoch are different from animals, as well as from humans. Polysemy further complicates the matter, as the Sanskrit word *nāga* can also mean "cloud", "mountain" or "elephant".<sup>20</sup> The odd homonymy of serpents and elephants can be explained by an Indo-European etymology as a "hairless, naked animal", rather than as a cognate of English *snake* (cf. Mayrhofer 1996, p. 33). Possibly, the "elephants of the four directions" (*dīn-nāga*, *dig-gaja*) in Hindu as well as in Buddhist worldviews have their origin, via reinterpretation, in cobra kings as the four or eight "guardians of the world" (*loka-pāla*, *dik-pāla*; cf. Vogel 1926, pp. 9, 210f.; cf. Srinivasan 2007, p. 382). Airāvata, for instance, occurs in the *Mahābhārata* both as the name of the elephant of Indra, king of the gods and agent of the weather,<sup>21</sup> and as the name of a serpent king.

According to Max Deeg (2008, p. 97), in 4th–5th Century North India, at the latest, a distinction was made between Nāgas as supernatural beings and their manifestations in the shape of serpents (Skt. *sarpa*, *bhujamga* or *ahi*).<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, a Nāga (Chin. *long* 龍), who lives in a lake in the Hindu Kush, allegedly describes his own species as "wild animals" of a low and evil kind, but of huge power, riding on clouds, drinking the wind, walking across the sky and water, often overcome by hate and violence they forget to control.<sup>23</sup>

Embodying forces of nature tamed by their own religious devotion, the Nāgas Śeṣa and Mucalinda appear as prominent servants of the Hindu god Viṣṇu and of the Buddha, respectively. Similarly,

<sup>20</sup> In modern Hindī, *nāgā*—a word derived from Sanskrit *naṅga/nagna*, "naked"—denotes both the tribal inhabitants of Assam and Nāgaland and the *Nāgā Bābās*, members of the sometimes-militant orders of "naked Yogis".

<sup>21</sup> Vettam Mani's *Purānic Encyclopedia* (p. 19) cites the "belief that Airāvata is one of the eight elephants guarding the eight zones of the universe. These eight elephants are called the Aṣṭadiggajas. Airāvata is supposed to guard the eastern zone". In the *gretil* version of the *Mahābhārata*, however, I was unable to find this specific information, only that "Airavata, the divine elephant, the huge elephant, was the son of [Bhadramanā]" (*Mahābhārata* 1.60.61, *airāvataḥ sutaḥ tasyā devanāgo mahāgajaḥ*) and that her sister "Śvetā gave birth to the quickly moving *dig-gaja* called Śveta" (ibid., 1.60.64, *diśāgajaḥ tu śvetākhyam śvetājanayad āsugam*). Airāvata could mean "son of Irāvati", which had been a former name of the Ravi River in Panjab and still is the name of the Irawaddy, the central river of Myanmar. On the other hand, Airāvata could also mean "belonging to the ocean" or "cloudy", for *irā-vat*, "providing refreshment/food", is a term used for clouds as well as for the ocean and the rivers mentioned. Translating *airāvata* as "cloudy" makes sense, for the elephant of the weather god is also called *abhramātaṅga*, the "cloud elephant".

<sup>22</sup> Deeg draws this conclusion from his translation of the accounts of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Faxian, who visited Kāśmīr, the Gangetic plains and Śrī Laṅka between 399 and 413 CE. He reports on the *nāga* (chin. *long* 龍) of the city Sānkāsya who, once a year, takes on the form of a serpent with white ears. Thus, the *long* clearly is no usual serpent and different also from Chinese dragons (*long*), which are denoted by the same characteristics.

<sup>23</sup> (Deeg 2008, p. 100) provides a German translation of this narration by another Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, Xuanzang from the 7th Century.

the Jain religion has the Nāgī Padmāvati and her husband Dharaṇa as servants of Pārśvanāth, one of the most venerated *tīrthaṅkaras*, “creators of passages”. Their iconography depicts all four of them as living umbrellas, using the hoods of their multiple cobra heads to provide shelter from the sun or the rain (Figures 3 and 4; cf. Vogel 1926, plates XVII, XIX, pp. 57, 102f.).



**Figure 4.** Mucalinda, a five- or seven-headed Nāga king, rises like an aureole behind the Buddha, who is sitting in the lotus position (*padmāsana*): (a) Brass figure from Thailand, purchased for the Marburg Museum of Religion in 1957 (photo by Heike Luu, acc.nr. Mq 027); (b) Gypsum replica of a Burmese figure, probably from Bagan, 11th–12th c. CE (photo by Georg Dörr, acc.nr. Mq 030; for a detailed examination on their provenience, cf. (Luu 2017).

In the *Mahābhārata* (1999), this motif is not yet developed; here, Śeṣa is a Nāga leaving his siblings behind to live the life of an ascetic, “wearing the hermit’s hair tuft [*jaṭā*] and bark shirt [*cīra*], his skin, flesh and muscles dried out”<sup>24</sup>—features clearly indicating that he is not restricted to a serpentine body. However, when Brahmā gives him, as the fruit of his penance, the task to carry and stabilize the whole earth, his address makes clear that Śeṣa still has some bodily features of a serpent, at least potentially:

“Thou art Śeṣa, greatest of Snakes, thou art the God of Law, for thou alone lendest support to this earth, encircling her entire with endless coils.”<sup>25</sup>

A later text, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, probably completed in the 9th–10th century, dwells on this image of Śeṣa carrying the earth, but again humanizes his body—as well as the bodies and emotions of other Nāga princesses and princes—in multiple ways:

<sup>24</sup> *Mahābhārata* 1.32.5, pariśuśkamāmsatvaksnāyūṃ jaṭācīradharam (accessed on [gretil.org](http://gretil.org), transl. van Buitenen 1973, S. 92).

<sup>25</sup> *Mahābhārata* 1.32.23, śeṣo ‘si nāgottama dharmadevo; mahim imāṃ dhārayase yad ekaḥ / anantabhogaḥ parigrhya sarvām (accessed on [gretil.org](http://gretil.org); transl. van Buitenen 1973, S.93).

4. The Snake-Lords (*ahi-pati*) look at their own enchantingly beautiful faces, their cheeks' surfaces adorned by the glow of their shining earrings (*kuṇḍala*), [reflected] in the round and pearly nails of [Śeṣa's] two foot-lotuses, which are of a bright red.
5. The Nāga-princesses look shyly (*sa-vrīḍa*) at the "aravinda-lotusflower" of his face, whose eyes, watching [them in return], are reddened by compassion (*aruṇa-karuṇa*) [ . . . ]—hoping for blessings, [they] smear ointments of aloe, sandalwood, saffron on the "silver pillars" (*rajata-stambha*) of his spotless, long, white, delicate and beautiful arms, which are illuminated by the splendid bracelets on his limbs.<sup>26</sup>

Rather than "arms", *bhuja* might also mean the coils of a snake—but, when compared to pillars and belonging to someone with foot nails and a face capable of expressing human-like emotions, the more common meaning of the word is more likely.

The iconography of Jainism identifies Pārśvanāth by a cobra with seven or more hoods spread behind his head in a posture similar to that of Mucalinda. An account of his deeds, the *Pārśvanāthacarita* from the 9th c. CE, mentions right in the first verse the "female serpent (Padmāvati) carrying the umbrella" (Bollée 2008, p. 4). Together with her spouse, the serpent king Dharaṇa, with his "decorative, sparkling canopy of jewel-crested hoods"<sup>27</sup> (ibid., p. 28), she wards off a demon attacking them with rain, rocks and lightning.

When Mucalinda and the other Nāgas of Buddhist mythology (cf. Section 3.2) spread to Southeast and East Asia, they lost their mostly cobra-like shape, either merging with the Chinese dragons (*long* 龍) or other reptiles.<sup>28</sup> The mythological traditions of the Himalaya highlight their function as providers and controllers of water, which probably links these Nāgas to the early Vedic serpent Vṛtra (cf. Deeg 2016). A Buddhist text from the earliest centuries CE<sup>29</sup> says of itself that it should "be recited in case of drought (*anāvṛṣṭi*) or too much rain (*atīvṛṣṭi*)" (ibid., p. 57), to protect humans from the natural forces controlled by Nāgas. Both these aims in dealing with Nāgas are outlined in the Buddhist *Svayambhū-Purāṇa* and the *Nepālikabhūpavaṃśāvalī* of Nepal, as well as in the Hindu *Nilāmata-Purāṇa* and the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* of Kashmir. The latter, for instance, has it that when a Buddhist dynasty tried to end the worship of Nāgas at the springs and mountain lakes of Kashmir, the deities responded by sending down hailstorms and heavy snowfall.<sup>30</sup> In Kathmandu, on the other hand, "relief from famine and making of rain" (*durbhikṣa-śānti-vṛṣṭi-karana*) is effected by the *nāgasādhana* ritual, meaning "subduing", "taming" or "utilizing the Nāgas".<sup>31</sup>

Both the valleys of Kathmandu in Nepal and Srinagar in Kashmir are prehistoric lake basins and appear in the myths of their respective *Purāṇas* as such. Both of these primordial lakes are said to have been populated by Nāgas, of which a few still remain in contemporary smaller lakes, Lake Dal in

<sup>26</sup> My transl. from *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* 5.25.4–5: *yasyāṅghrikamalayugalāruṇaviśadanakhamaṇisaṅḍamaṅḍaleṣv ahipatayah [ . . . ] svavadanāni parisphurat- kuṇḍalaprabhāmaṅḍitaṅḍasthalāny atimanoharāṇi pramuditamanasaḥ khalu vilokayanti // 4 // yasyaiva hi nāgarājakumārya āśiṣa āśāsānās cārvaṅgavalayavilasitaviśadavipuladhavalasubhagarucirabhujarajata-stambheṣv agurucandanakuṅkumapaṅkānulepenāvalimpamānās [ . . . ] aruṇakaruṇāvalokanayanavadanāra- vindam savrīḍam kila vilokayanti // 5 //* (accessed on [gretil.org](http://gretil.org)).

<sup>27</sup> Verse 139: *prasphurad-ratna-phaṇa-maṅḍapa-maṅḍita*.

<sup>28</sup> For the Rmeet of upland Laos, for instance, Nāgas are earth spirits whose "horses" are boas with crowns (Guido Sprenger, pers. comm.). Inhabitants of Komodo in eastern Indonesia sometimes identify the famous "dragons" of their island, *Varanus komodoensis*, as Nāgas (Annette Hornbacher, pers. comm.).

<sup>29</sup> "The *Mahāmāyūrī Vidyārājīṇī*, the 'Queen of spells (called) the Great One of the Peacock', of which [ . . . ] translations into Chinese are extant from the beginning of the 4th century A.D. onward" (Schmithausen 1997, p. 53) is an "apotropaic text [seeming] to prefigure aspects of Tantra or Mantrāyana Buddhism" (ibid., p. 51). Rather than pacifying and converting the Nāgas by means of *maītrī* ("friendship" or "compassion"), this text shows "a typically Tantric break-through of the 'natural' attitude of counter- (or even preventive) aggression" (ibid., p. 56). For example, malevolent demons are "threatened with having their head split [ . . . ], the neutralization of poison [is] metaphorically called 'killing' [and] the wish that one's own enemies should be destroyed, burnt, cooked or killed is expressed" (ibid.).

<sup>30</sup> "Nordindien, Kāśmīr, aber auch Gandhāra waren bekannt für ihre Nāgakulte an Quellen oder Seen. Die kāśmīrische Chronik *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* berichtet, dass die Buddhisten zur Zeit Nāgarjunas die Verehrung der *nāgas* abschaffen ließen, und diese dafür eine Schneekatastrophe schickten, worauf die Verehrungen wieder aufgenommen wurden (Rāj.1.179f.)" (Deeg 2005, p. 281).

<sup>31</sup> *Svayambhūpurāṇa* 8, Sanskrit text in (Deeg 2008, p. 110).

Srinagar and Lake Taudaha near Kathmandu. This is not the place to dwell on the extensive literature on these textual traditions, which I will do in further on the watery aspect of Nāgas in the Himalaya. There, the Nāgas' animal nature is less accentuated than in the *Mahābhārata*, whose Pan-Indian plots and characters are taken up by the local *Purāṇa* texts.

### 3.1. The Nāgas of the Mahābhārata

How serpent-like are the Nāgas in those classical texts that have had the strongest impact on Hindu-imaginaries up until today? Originating between the 3rd c. BCE and the 3rd c. CE, the *Mahābhārata* presents the Nāgas as shape-shifters, children of Kadru ("the Reddish-Brown one", sometimes identified with the earth itself<sup>32</sup>), enemies of the bird Garuda and inhabitants of the netherworld (*pātāla*). The most elaborated among these mythical and symbolic motifs, which remain prominent today, is their strong connection to water and rain. In a story in which the Nāgas are in danger of all being killed in a sacrificial fire, some Nāgas suggest a plan for rescue: "We will become clouds, equipped with lightning, to pour out rain on this burning fire!"<sup>33</sup>

However, the Nāgas are not—at least not in all respects—"supernatural". The same long myth also explains these animals' actual characteristics: their laying of eggs<sup>34</sup>, their rejuvenating themselves by shedding their skin, and their forked tongues. When some drops of the nectar of "im-mortality" (*a-mṛt*) were spilled on the *kuśa* grass, they "licked the grass; thus, in this act, the tongues of the snakes became two-fold, while the grass became holy by the touch of *amṛt*."<sup>35</sup>

The *Māhābhārata* gives more good reasons for translating *nāga* as "snakes", as van Buitenen does. Chapter 1.60 presents a somewhat confusing genealogy of the Nāgas:

"Surasā bore the serpents, Kadru the snakes. Analā produced seven kinds of trees that bear round fruit. Śukī was also Analā's daughter, and Surasā was the daughter of Kadru."<sup>36</sup>

Nāgas are uncles of the Pannagas, the "low creepers"—van Buitenen translates *nāga* and *pannaga* as "serpents" and "snakes", respectively. Both are also cousins of the trees, vultures, eagles, horses, cows, elephants, lions and tigers, monkeys, bears, deer, parrots, geese and ducks, kites, owls (ibid., pp. 55–67), each species having an own divine mother, who is a daughter or granddaughter of Dakṣa, a son of Brahmā, the grandfather (*pitāmaha*) of all beings. Are they thus animals, being so neatly interwoven into the genealogy of other plant and animal species? One might think so, but, only one chapter previously, *Mahābhārata* 1.59.10–50 describes the Nāgas as sons of Kadru and as cousins of Garuda, Āruṇa and Vāruṇa, of the Āditya gods, of the Daityas, Dānavas and other demons, of the heavenly singers (*gandharva*), of the nymphs (*apsaras*), of the nectar of immortality, of the cows and of the brahmins. Again, one and the same context legitimizes counting the Nāgas among the animals as well as among the gods, demons and other supernatural beings.

When Nāgas shift their shape, they often turn into something resembling serpentine form. In one story, their mother Kadru wins a wager against her sister Vinatā, who had—rightly!—claimed that the horse Uchchaiśrava only had white hair in its tail. "Turn into black hair!"<sup>37</sup>, Kadru orders her thousand sons, the Nāgas. They first refuse, but are convinced otherwise after Kadru curses them to burn in the great sacrificial fire I have mentioned earlier. This refusal to participate in an act of deceit highlights

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 3.6.2.

<sup>33</sup> My transl. from *Mahābhārata* 1.33.21: *apare tv abruvan nāgāḥ samiddham jātavedasam / varṣair nirvāpayiṣyāmo meghā bhūtvā savidyutah.*

<sup>34</sup> "After some time, the great Kadru (mother of the Nāgas) laid a thousand eggs" (My translation from *Mahābhārata* 1.14.12: *kālena mahatā kadrur aṇḍānām daśatir daśa/janayām āsa*).

<sup>35</sup> My transl. from *Mahābhārata* 1.30.19–20: [ ... ] *darbhāms te lilihus tadā // 19 // tato dvaidhīkṛtā jihvā sarpāṇām tena karmaṇā/abhavaṃs cāmṛtasparśād darbhās te 'tha pavitriṇaḥ* (ibid.).

<sup>36</sup> Transl. by (van Buitenen 1973, p. 150), of *Mahābhārata* 1.60.66: *surasājanayan nāgān rājan kadrūś ca pannagān / sapta piṇḍaphalān vṛkṣān analāpi vyajāyata / analāyāḥ śukī putrī kadravās tu surasā sūtā // 66 //* (accessed on [grettil.org](http://grettil.org)).

<sup>37</sup> *Vālā bhūtvā aṇjana-prabhāḥ* (ibid., 1.18.6).

their morally ambiguous standpoint, to some extent honest but flexible. After all, “their poison is pungent and potent, their teeth sting and their strength is huge”.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, the curse cannot be averted, and a long chain of stories spanning 39 chapters (van Buitenen 1973, pp. 71–123) leads to the sacrifice of serpents. When it finally begins, its power draws them from everywhere, throws them through the air into the flames and reveals their manifold shapes:

(20) They were seven-, two- or five-headed, some had poison [as strong] as the fire of [the end of] time, they were terrible. Hundreds of thousands of them were poured into the fire [like ghee], (21) big-bodied ones, immensely strong ones, rising like the peaks of mountains, spanning one or two *yojanas* (=units of several miles). (22) [Although] some of them had the power to take the shape they wanted to take, or to go wherever they wanted to go, [although] their poison was fierce like a blazing fire, they all burned in that sacrifice, forced down by the brahmins’ curse.<sup>39</sup>

Despite their supernatural powers and their ability to talk, to act morally and immorally, they are nevertheless characterized as snakes:

(20) Twisted pitifully and shouting for one another, (21) darting asunder, hissing, winding their tails and heads around each other, they fell into the glowing flames. (22) White, black and blue ones, the old and the young, roaring and howling terribly, they fell into the annihilating fire [...]; some [looked] like elephant trunks, some were [themselves] big and strong like maddened elephants. Many of them, great and small, multicolored, poisonous serpents, powerful snakes looking like iron bars, fell into the fire, damned by their mother’s curse.<sup>40</sup>

Rather like sea snakes and eels than like actual cobras, the Nāgas are said to live in *samudra*, the ocean, “inhabited by thousands of manifold and fierce living beings, impenetrable, filled with turtles and crocodiles, a rich source of all kinds of jewels, the abode of the god Varuṇa and of the Nāgas, the lord/husband of the rivers, the residence of the flames of the underworld.”<sup>41</sup>

As chthonic beings, the Nāgas are set in opposition to the bird Garuḍa<sup>42</sup> (Dave 1985). The long story of how they became enemies, as told in the first book of the *Mahābhārata*, is probably the most elaborated version of the enmity between serpent and eagle, which is a common motif in iconographies throughout the world (Wittkower 1939). As the opponents of Garuḍa, the Nāgas appear in sculptures and other depictions throughout the Hindu and Buddhist worlds, everywhere changing their specific shape in accordance to local imagination and style (Figure 5).

<sup>38</sup> Tigma-vīrya-ṣiṣā hy ete danda-sūkā mahā-balāḥ (ibid., verse 11).

<sup>39</sup> My transl. from *Mahābhārata* 1.52.20ff: saptasīrṣā dviśīrṣā ca pañcaśīrṣās tathāpare / kālānalaviṣā ghorā hutāḥ śatasahasraśaḥ // 20 // mahākāyā mahāvīryāḥ śailaśrīngasamucchrayāḥ / yojanāyāmvistārā dviyojanasamāyatāḥ // 21 // kāmarūpāḥ kāmagamā dīptānalaviṣolbaṇāḥ / dagdhās tatra mahāsatre brahmadanḍanipīditāḥ // 22 // (ibid.).

<sup>40</sup> My transl. from *Mahābhārata* 1.47.20ff: viveṣṭamānāḥ kṛpaṇā āhvayantaḥ parasparam // 20 // visphurantaḥ śvasantaś ca veṣṭayantaś tathā pare / pucchaiḥ śirobhīś ca bhṛśaṃ citrabhānuṃ prapedire // 21 // śvetāḥ kṛṣṇāś ca nīlāś ca sthvirāḥ śīśavas tathā / ruvanto bhairavān nādān petur dīpte vibhāvasau // 22 // ... hastihastā ivāpare / mattā iva ca mātaṅgā mahākāyā mahābalāḥ // 24 // uccāvacāś ca bahavo nānāvārnā viṣolbaṇāḥ / ghorāś ca pariḥaprakhyā dandaśūkā mahābalāḥ / prapetur agnāv uragā mātrvāgdaṇḍapīditāḥ // 25 // (ibid.).

<sup>41</sup> My transl. from *Mahābhārata* 1.19.4–6: sattvaiś ca bahusāhasrair nānārūpaiḥ samāvṛtam / ugrair nityam anādhṛṣyaṃ kūrmaḡrahasamākulam // ākaraṃ sarvaratnānām ālayaṃ varuṇasya ca / nāgānām ālayaṃ ramyaṃ uttamaṃ saritāṃ patim // pātālajvalanāvāsam (ibid.).

<sup>42</sup> The *Mahābhārata* describes Garuḍa as the ancestor of all birds of prey and as an eater of serpents, tortoises and elephants. As a zoonyme, *garuḍa* can thus be as broad as specific, being the name of the Himalayan Golden Eagle and of a South Indian Sea-Eagle, which is also called *nāgāśī*, “serpent-eater” (Dave 1985, pp. 199f.).



**Figure 5.** (a) Balinese wooden sculpture of a serpent being devoured by Garuda (purchased 1959 by Friedrich Heiler for the Marburg Museum of Religion, acc.nr. Ar 079); (b) Nāga-rāssa from Sri Lanka, used for mask dance performances, in which the Nāgas fight against their enemies, the Grurlâ, i.e., Garuda (purchased for the Marburg Museum of Religion in 1967 from Julius Konietzko, photo by Heike Luu, acc.nr. Lp 227).

Transcending this enmity, the Hindu God Viṣṇu is served both by Garuda as his vehicle and by the Nāga Śeṣa<sup>43</sup> as his bed (Figure 3)—a motif which shares a common Hindu or pre-Hindu antetype with the motive of the Buddha sitting on the coils and beneath the hoods of Mucalinda.

### 3.2. Nāgas Incorporated into Buddhism

How are the Nāgas portrayed in Buddhism, as compared to their portrayal in the classical Hindu sources discussed so far? Like in the *Mahābhārata*, Nāga bodies stand out with serpent-like features, but also in their capacity to shapeshift. Differences may lie in the religious evaluation of their nature and the role animals can play in a psychology and worldview focused on mastering one's own sensuality, aggression and other drives.

The Nāga king Mucalinda uses the coils of his body to protect the newly “awoken” Buddha, who is still in deep meditation, from a thunderstorm (Figure 4). When the storm is over and the Buddha opens his eyes, “he loosened his windings from the body of the Blessed One, made his own appearance disappear, created the appearance of a youth, and stationed himself in front of the Blessed One, raising his clasped hands, and paying reverence to the Blessed One”<sup>44</sup> (*Mahāvagga* I.3.3). Thus, the first being to honor the awakening of the Buddha is a Nāga. This might have added to the appeal for Buddhist kings to trace their genealogy back to Nāgas (DeCaroli 2004, p. 165; Przyluski 1925; Bloss 1973, pp. 40f.).

<sup>43</sup> Śeṣ is the “rest” that remains after the destruction of the universe and before its re-creation, and is thus also called *anant*, the “endless” or “eternal” one.

<sup>44</sup> Transl. by (Oldenberg 1881); Pāli text from [gretil.org](http://gretil.org): “atha kho Mucalindo nāgarājā sakabhavanā nikkhamitvā bhagavato kāyaṃ sattakkhattuṃ bhogehi parikkhipitvā upari muddhani mahantaṃ phaṇaṃ karitvā aṭṭhāsī”.

On the other hand, the same fundamental Theravada Buddhist text<sup>45</sup> makes it clear that Nāgas are animals, and may thus not enter any monastery (*vihāra*) to become monks (*bhikkhu*). *Mahāvagga* I.63 tells the story of a Nāga who was “aggrieved at, ashamed of, and conceived aversion for his having been born as a serpent”.<sup>46</sup> To “become released from being a serpent, and quickly to obtain human nature, [the Nāga], in the shape of a youth, went to the *bhikkhus*, [who] conferred on him the *pabbajjā* and *upasampadā* ordinations.”<sup>47</sup> Once, when he felt safe from discovery, he “fell asleep (in his natural shape). The whole *vihāra* [monastery] was filled with the snake’s body [*ahi*]; his windings jutted out of the window.”<sup>48</sup> Now, the Buddha himself tells him: “You serpents [*nāgas*] are not capable of (spiritual) growth in this doctrine and discipline”<sup>49</sup>, and the Nāga cries and goes away.

This story, while it describes Nāgas as shapeshifters, still calls them “animals”—*tiracchānagata*, from Skt. *tiraścīna-gata*, “going horizontally, not erect”. The Buddha himself uses this word in his final address to the monks:

“There are two occasions, O *bhikkus*, on which a serpent [*nāga*] (who has assumed human shape) manifests his true nature: when he has sexual intercourse with a female of his species [*sajāti*], and if he thinks himself safe (from discovery) and falls asleep [ . . . ]. Let an animal [*tiracchānagata*], O *bhikkus*, that has not received the *upasampadā* ordination, not receive it; if it has received it, let it be expelled.”<sup>50</sup>

Thai narratives further elaborate this event, having the Nāga plead that “if his religious desires could not be fulfilled through monkhood, at least he should be remembered by calling every initiate *nag* before ordination” (Tambiah 1970, p. 107). This is the tradition of Thai monks who renounce “the attributes of *nag*—virility or sexuality, and similar attributes of secular life” (ibid.; cf. Luu 2017, p. 84; Figure 6).

<sup>45</sup> The *Mahāvagga* of the *Khandaka* is part of the *Vinayapiṭaka*, a Pāli language collection of monastic rules for monks and nuns. Its text dates back at least into the 7th Century CE, but is probably much older. Dating the text by the use of the *āryā*-metre and assuming, that texts were brought to Sri Lanka from India, von Hinüber cautiously suggests that the text might be “older than about 250 BCE” (von Hinüber 1996, p. 19).

<sup>46</sup> Transl. by (Oldenberg 1881) from Pāli “nāgo nāgayoniyā aṭṭiyati harāyati jigucchati” (*Mahāvagga* 1.63.1, accessed on [grettil.org](http://grettil.org)).

<sup>47</sup> Transl. by (Oldenberg 1881) from Pāli “nāgayoniyā ca parimucceyyaṃ khippaṇ ca manussattaṃ paṭilabheyyaṃ [ . . . ] so nāgo māṇa-vakavaṇṇena bhikkhū upasaṃkamtivā pabbajjaṃ yāci” (*Mahāvagga* 1.63.1–2, accessed on [grettil.org](http://grettil.org)).

<sup>48</sup> Transl. by (Oldenberg 1881) from Pāli “so nāgo [ . . . ] vissaṭṭho niddaṃ okkami. Sabbo vihāro ahinā punṇo, vātapānehi bhogā nikkhantā honti” (*Mahāvagga* 1.63.1–2, accessed on [grettil.org](http://grettil.org)).

<sup>49</sup> Transl. by (Oldenberg 1881) from Pāli “tumhe khv’; attha nāgā avirūḥhidhammā imasmim dhammavinaye” (*Mahāvagga* 1.63.4, accessed on [grettil.org](http://grettil.org)).

<sup>50</sup> Transl. by (Oldenberg 1881) from Pāli “dve ‘me bhikkhave paccayā nāgassa sabhāvapātukammāya, yadā ca saajātiyā methunaṃ dhammaṃ paṭisevati, yadā ca vissaṭṭho niddaṃ okkamati [ . . . ]. tiracchānagato bhikkhave anupasaṃpanno na upasaṃpādetabbo, upasaṃpanno nāsetabbo” (*Mahāvagga* 1.63.5, accessed on [grettil.org](http://grettil.org)).



**Figure 6.** Helmet used for the ordination of Burmese novices (purchased for the Marburg Museum of Religions in 2012 by Ulrike Jeep, photo by Heike Luu, acc.nr. Mq 152).

Nāgas can represent the animal part of the human condition, the inner wildness before becoming civilized and converted to the doctrine. The many Nāga figures in local Buddhist myths work as symbols of pre-Buddhist wildness and of older religions (cf. Bloss 1973) who, by converting to Buddhism, help to integrate local kingdoms and local beliefs into a Buddhist superstructure:

“The context of Buddhist doctrine posits a totally revolutionized society where caste distinctions and hierarchies of birth are superseded by hierarchies-based upon understanding, religious attainment, and service. Within this context, metaphors of otherness are employed, such as the *yakkha*, the criminal, the unbeliever, and the *nāga*” (Sutherland 1991, p. 119).

Not only in this early and Indian context does Buddhist society and doctrine appear as an ideal civilization, social organization and infrastructure, condensing around monasteries—and opposed to the wildness of Nāgas and animals (cf. Schmithausen 1997). These have to be pacified or driven off by the Buddha or by Buddhist agents to make the land inhabitable for humans or to “restore an inhabitable state, which has been disturbed or even destroyed by the acts of the *nāgas* and by the natural forces they unleash”.<sup>51</sup> The taming of the Nāgas is not always complete. In some accounts, it is more of a compromise—but even in this way, natural catastrophes are brought into some form of order and predictability by being legitimized by the Buddha (Deeg 2008, p. 103). The act of overcoming animals and “nature”—an act of “domestication”?—is as ambiguous as the animals and nature themselves:

<sup>51</sup> (Deeg 2008, p. 93); transl. from German: “Der Buddha steht vor der Aufgabe, diese [nāgas] zu befrieden, um entweder das Land für die Menschen erst bewohnbar zu machen oder aber einen bewohnbaren Zustand wiederherzustellen, der durch das Wirken der *nāgas* und der von ihnen entfesselten Naturgewalten gestört oder gar zerstört ist.”

Mucalinda comes to the Buddha and serves him freely, whereas he subdues other Nāgas, such as Apalāla and Gopāla in the upper Indus basin, against their will (cf. Deeg 2016, pp. 96–113).

Buddhism not only spread Indian Nāgas across the greater region to install them as the force of wilderness to be expelled or tamed, as in the Sri Lankan *Mahāvihāra* chronicles (Deeg 2005, pp. 159, 563); throughout East and Southeast Asia, its propagators also dealt with already-worshipped, autochthonous dragons and serpent deities. Adapting their mythology, Buddhist stories, in turn, influenced the local mythologies. *Long*, the famous Chinese dragon, serves to translate the *nāga* of Buddhist Sanskrit sources into Chinese, thereby fusing into an inseparable new entity (cf. de Visser 1913). Japanese dragons, in turn, incorporated features of originally Japanese serpent spirits (Kelsey 1981). They bring rain, like Hindu Nāgs in the Western Himalaya (cf. Handa 2004, pp. 140f.) or their Tibetan counterparts, the *kLu* (Hummel 1991), none of which can be traced back fully to Buddhist stories.

The water dragons of China and Japan act amorally, potentially as harmful or beneficial as the rain itself. To control them or to dispel them—like animals—people allegedly made use of their aversion against iron. To make it rain, they annoyed and stirred them up by throwing iron into the ponds in which they lived (de Visser 1913, pp. 173, 235); when the building of a dam was hindered by dragons, they could be driven off by piling up iron nearby (ibid., p. 70). Like wild animals, they are either tamed and made use of or, when they cause damage, scared off like crows.

Buddhist and Shinto traditions accept the animal-like features of humans, even of the most exalted ones—and perhaps their relationship to serpents gives them a little other-worldly and thus superhuman touch. The *Kojiki*, a Shinto collection of myths composed in the early 8th Century as propaganda for the emperors' family, mixes serpentine descent into their genealogy. One story (*Kojiki*, pp. 42–46) has “the daughter of the sea-deity” (Philippi 1969, p. 151), Toyo-tama-bine, having a child with Po-wori-no-mikoto, who is the great-grandson of the sun goddess Amaterasu and the grandfather of the first emperor of Japan, Jimmu Tenno. Not unlike Melusine in Western European legends, she warns Po-wori not to watch her delivery, but “he watched in secret as she was about to give birth; she turned into a giant crocodile<sup>52</sup> and went crawling and slithering around” (ibid., p. 157). It is likely that this sea goddess or spirit does not only derive from the fish-like mythical beings of the Pacific, but also from South Asian Nāgīs.<sup>53</sup>

Be the princess of the sea a Nāgī, a crocodile, or even a shark, in any case, her legacy within the Japanese emperors' family is a non-human bodily trait. According to a tale from the fifteenth century, the Emperor Ōjin (circa 270–310 CE) “had a dragon's tail, because he was a descendant of the sea-god (Jimmu Tennō, his ancestor, being the grandson of the sea god's daughter). To hide this tail he invented the *suso* or skirt” (de Visser 1913, p. 145). In a completely different setting, the marriage between a Nāga girl and a human prince in the Swāt valley of Northern Pakistan also results in their offspring having awkward, animalistic features. As the Chinese Buddhist traveler Xuanzang recounts in the 7th Century,

“every time he went to rest by the side of his wife from her head there appeared the nine-fold Nāga crest. The husband, in disgust, waited till she slept and then cut off the serpent crest with his sword. In consequence the descendants of the royal pair were ever afflicted with headache” (Vogel 1926, p. 34).

<sup>52</sup> *Wani*—which, according to (Philippi 1969, p. 407), might also denote a serpentine being or shark.

<sup>53</sup> Although “strikingly similar tales have been found in Indonesia, in the Caroline Islands, and among the American Indians of the Pacific northwest” (ibid., p. 148, fn. 1), I assume a Nāga-related background to this story, for Toyo-tama-bine gives her husband a “tide-raising jewel” and a “tide-ebbing jewel” (ibid., p. 44). Nāgas are often associated with *nāgmanīs* or *nāgratnas*, marvelous jewels which can illuminate the darkness or restore life (Vogel 1926, pp. 25, 77) or provide “food and drink in plenty” (ibid., p. 149). Chinese dragons carry “Thunder-pearls” (*leizhu*) in their mouths, which can “illuminate a whole house during the night”, or “replace wine” (de Visser 1913, p. 88) and are probably related to the Buddhist “cintāmani or precious pearl which grants all desires” (ibid., p. 107). Their playing with these pearls or with balls causes thunder and rain (ibid., pp. 103–8).

Having headaches in eternity seems much worse than covertly accepting one's inner, animal nature, if these are the alternatives. On the other hand, Nāgas from the Hindukush seem vulnerable to headaches even when unharmed (cf. Deeg 2008, p. 99)

The taming of Nāgas by Buddhist agents can be an act of suppression as well as of calming, “ordering and harmonizing these parochial deities, who represent the ambiguous forces of nature” (Bloss 1973, p. 52). While I would not go as far as interpreting these stories as a call for acceptance between humans and animals or civilization and wildness, in many of the *Jātaka* stories about the Buddha's previous lives, he often appears as an animal, sometimes as a Nāga (cf. Vogel 1926, pp. 132–65). The *Nāgananda* (“joy of the Nāgas”), a play ascribed to the North Indian king Harśa (circa 590–647 CE), is about one of these previous existences, Jīmūtavāhana, who sacrifices himself to end the massive slaughter of Nāgas by Garuḍa. Ending their enmity, he overcomes the conflicts and violence attributed to nature. Finally, convinced of the wrongness of his killing and of his huge appetite, Garuḍa leaves the Nāgas in peace:

“Now let the race of Nagas wander happily in the mighty ocean—at times stretching from shore to shore like bridges, at times taken for whirlpools, through the coiling of their bodies—and at times resembling continents, from the multitude of their hoods, large as alluvial islands. Again, let the damsels of the Nagas in yon grove of sandal trees celebrate joyfully this glory of thine, thinking lightly of the fatigue, though their bodies faint with the exertion, and though their cheeks, browned by the touch of the rays of the early sun, seem as if bedaubed with red lead, while their hair let fall to their feet resembles the darkness of clouds” (*Nāgananda* V.102 f., transl. Boyd 1999, pp. 45f.).

These verses elegantly express the double nature of the Nāgas, whose animal bodies wind through the sea, while at least the females have more hair and feet than any serpent. In their human shape, they also have features of cobras – but these can be overlooked, as it happens to Garuḍa in a dramatic climax of the play. Nāga prince Śaṅkhacūda mocks him for this error:

“The error is a likely one indeed! Not to mention the mark of the swastika on the breast, are there not scales on my body? Do you not count my two tongues as I speak? Nor see these three hoods of mine, the compressed wind hissing through them in my insupportable anguish, while the brightness of my gems is distorted by the thick smoke from the fire of my direful poison?” (ibid., V. 93, p. 42).

### 3.3. Nāgas and Serpents in Modern Indian Movies, Comics, and Literature

After examining how the Buddhist, epic, and iconographic portrayals of Nāgas indicated a complex ambiguity of human and animal features, a quick look into modern Hindu imagery reveals astonishing continuities as well as transformations over the millennia. The self-description of the Nāga Śaṅkhacūda from the *Nāgananda* play can bridge the gap between 7th Century theatre and 20th Century films and literature. To give just a few examples: serpent hoods above the human head (or, more commonly, as part of a Nāga's crown) can be seen in *Naag Panchami* (1972)<sup>54</sup>, in *Nache Nagin Gali Gali* (1989), and in *Sheshnaag* (1990). The notion of serpents carrying gems in or on their head reappears most famously in *Nagina* (1984) and gives movies like *Naagmani* (1991) its name.

In such films, Nāg mythology continues to be developed further. Most are based on the more folkloristic than classical stories in which Nāgas appear unequivocally as animals. Especially the folktales around the shapeshifting *icchādhārī nāgs*—snakes, who after a long penance have gained the ability to turn into humans—have inspired numerous films. Right at the beginning of *Nagin* (1976), a protagonist explains that an *Ichchādhārī* Nāg is a snake, who, after a hundred years,

<sup>54</sup> Like most of the following movies, *Naag Panchami*, which tells the story of Mansā Devī (cf. 2015; Smith 1985): It can be easily found on Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmrX-PxLZ74>, last accessed on 23 May 2019).

has gained supernatural powers and human form.<sup>55</sup> The Nāgas of these stories are, therefore, primarily animals—and, in the movies, most often women.

Both the special effects in *Nagin* and the wonderful dance of the famous actress Shridevi in *Nagina* highlight their serpentine character in motion: dangerous and sensual. Even in the shape of humans, they are wild and vengeful, especially if a Nāgin's husband is accidentally (*Nagin*) or intentionally (*Nagina*) killed. A *Filmi Snake Spotters Field Guide*<sup>56</sup> is thus very helpful, although the series *Naagin* (2015–16), which has been rebroadcast repeatedly in Indian television since its premiere, has since added still new layers of special effects and scales to the serpentine-humanoid skins. The domain of Indian superhero comics, in turn, is ruled by *Nāgrāj*, the “king of the Nāgas” (1986–present), whose agelessness, “super generative healing”, infrared vision, hypnotism, “poison-bite”, “snake-spit”, and the “Millions of microscopic shape shifting snakes in his body”<sup>57</sup> derive from Nāga mythology, from genre-specific expectations and, not least, from zoology.

Not only do the mythical, comic, and filmic Nāgas show, exaggerate or multiply features of biological snakes—they also have an influence on the way serpents are imagined and characterized in modern non-religious Hindi literature. Here, they still are ambivalent and, if only slightly, supernatural. KAMLEŚVAR'S short story *Sāmp* (“The snake”, 1963) has a paranoid male protagonist who imagines snakes everywhere—“the symbol of danger, of threat, of a hidden evil that is dreaded” (Markova 2005, p. 37)—even mistaking the touch of his girlfriend's arm for a snake. In an older story of the same name written by AJÑEY, instead of feeling threatened by a snake a young man and his girlfriend are watching, he admires its beauty—until he suddenly feels the urge to kill it because it looks so vulnerable. The attitude of the male protagonist to the snake reflects his relationship to the woman at his side, for he muses that he “had been rather watching her than the snake” (ibid., p. 34).

*Nāg Pūjā*, “Snake worship”, was written in 1922 by PREMCAND, one of the earliest modernist writers of South Asia. It is a classical Hindī story of a girl called Tilottamā, who is protected by a black cobra—to the extent that it kills all men who want to marry her. The snake, it is said, had in a previous life been “a mighty Yogi, who, as a punishment for becoming arrogant, had to take birth into this existence”<sup>58</sup>. The girl continues to worship the Nāg, although he causes so much distress, until finally a zoologist marries her, survives the wedding and brings her to Dhaka. However, she seems to have brought the Nāg along with her, either as a personality trait or as an agent of spirit possession:

Her face contorted, her brows tightened, her forehead furrowed, her body burning like fire, her eyelids fixed open, her eyes flashed like lightning and discharged blazing flames. Blackness spread on her face. Although her body did not change visibly, one [ . . . ] could think she was a Nāgin. Sometimes she even hissed.<sup>59</sup>

Several people I know in India like reading the bestselling fantasy novels of the *Shiva Trilogy* by AMISH. Its second volume is called *The Secret of the Nāgas*, the back cover of which shows the motto: “Today, he is a God. 4000 years ago, he was just a man.” (Amish 2011). In the novels, this does not only hold true for Shiva, the protagonists, but also for the Nāgas:

“They are cursed people, [ . . . ] born with hideous deformities because of the sins of their previous births. Deformities like extra hands or horribly misshapen faces. However,

<sup>55</sup> “*Sau sāl ke bād sāmp koi hī rūp dhār sakte haiṃ*”, minute 5:00 in [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_OvFhuQL5Yw&t=302s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OvFhuQL5Yw&t=302s), last accessed on 23 May 2019.

<sup>56</sup> <https://cinemachaar.com/2011/07/31/filmi-snake-spotters-field-guide/>, last accessed on 22 July 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Taken from a list in the Wikipedia article on *Nagraj*, last accessed on 31 March 2019. Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DmYkiVM6LM>.

<sup>58</sup> *Koī barā yogī jab ahaṃkāra karne lagta hai to use daṇḍasvarūp is yoni meṃ janma lenā parṭā hai* (Premcand 1922, p. 289).

<sup>59</sup> My translation from (Premcand 1922, p. 196): *Uskā mukh vikṛt ho jātā, bhaumēṇi tan jātīṃ, māthe par bal par jāte, śarīr agni ki bhāntī jalne lagtā, palkēṃ khulī rah jātīṃ, netroṃ se jvālā-sī nikalne lagtī aur usmeṃ se jhulsatī huī lapteṃ nikaltīṃ, mukh par kālimā chā jātī aur yadyapi svarūp meṃ koī viśeṣ antar na dīkhāyī detā; par na jāne kyom bhram hone lagtā, yah koī nāgin hai.*

they have tremendous strength and skills. The Naga name alone strikes terror in any citizen's heart" (Amish 2008, p. 61).

AMISH'S Nāgas, despite their "deformities", are humans. This idea is not new, as the next section's look into the history of scholarly writing on the subject will show.

#### 4. Are the Nāgas Human?

Since the 19th Century, academic and popular interpretations of the Nāgas have held them to be neither animals nor deities—nor both—but, rather, a historical human ethnic group. Similar to the recent Indian fantasy novels, some colonial-period anthropologists imagined the species of Nāgas, Garuḍas, Asuras and Yakṣas to be different pre-Vedic, non-"Aryan" tribes (Fergusson 1868; Oldham 1905, pp. 16–18). According to Fergusson and others, worshipping serpents and trees was the pre-"Aryan" form of religion in India. In this meta-narrative, the natives, identified with the Vedic Dāsyus, became themselves identified with the Nāgas (cf. Deeg 2008, p. 92).

Historically, it seems unlikely that the Nāgas of the *Mahābhārata*, for instance, represent "autochthonous" tribes or religions (Kosambi 1964) of pre-"Aryan" North India—i.e., from a time at least 1500 years before the finalization of the epic texts. Iravati Karve, however, dwells upon the idea that the Nāgas were such tribes, symbolically dehumanized by the myth to legitimate genocide. Reading the story in this way, she has to strip the episode of the serpent sacrifice of its plastic descriptions of Nāgas as serpents, as shapeshifters, as children of the earth Goddess (cf. Section 3.1). Only by ignoring such narrative details can she claim "that the main Mahabharata story has woven into it a subsidiary theme—the feud between the Pandavas and the Takshakas—which incidentally tells us of the colonization of the land by the Aryans" (Karve 1969, p. 146). The related story of the Khāṇḍava forest, which is burnt down by the heroes Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, enables a similar interpretation as a "holocaust" (p. 138) not only against animals, but against human peoples marked as animals:

"Many of the animals may not have been animals at all but people belonging to clans having animal names. [ . . . ]. From the western Himalayas up to the middle reaches of the Ganga and to the south of the Narmada, the country was shared by the Aryans and the Nagas. The Nagas apparently lived along the rivers in the forests while the Aryans preferred a more open country. The house of the Nagaraja Airavata was on the banks of the river Iravati. The house of Takshaka was apparently in the Khandava forest on the banks of the Yamuna. Many an Aryan king must have acquired new lands by burning or cutting parts of a virgin forest not owned by anyone. However, in the Khandava fire it appears that Krishna and Arjuna had a more audacious plan to possess an entire forest in a part of which happened to be the kingdom of the Takshakas [ . . . ]. The land was usurped after a massacre, a massacre which is praised as a valorous deed" (ibid., pp. 143f.).

It remains highly speculative whether any "human qualities of the Nagas are played down" (ibid.) in the Mahabharata in order to legitimize their killing as though they were animals.<sup>60</sup> Maybe the Nāgas were simply not human at all. We will never know whether the epic gives an account of historical events about the attempted mass annihilation of totemistic clans, who were somewhat closer to "nature", to flora and fauna, than the "Aryans", who were unable to value the "sweetness of the forest" (ibid., p. 142). Hopefully, this old Indian holocaust will lose its plausibility alongside the whole Aryan invasion theory.

In her book on *Orthodox Images of Indian Snake Worship*, LAURIE COZAD elaborates a related theory, which, to me, seems less implausible than the idea that the Nāgas were actually a cypher for pre-Aryan native Indians. In her eyes, snake worship is to be identified with "grass-root" religion (Cozad 2004,

<sup>60</sup> Of course, while not killing them directly, the burning down of a forest inhabited by humans would mean taking away their means of production, their self-sufficiency, independence, culture and religion.

p. 1) and the resistance against Aryan or Brahmin dominance. Consequentially, she looks to identify such pre-Aryan traces in the earliest texts rather than in the *Mahābhārata*, starting her book with a chapter on the serpent (*ahi*) Vṛtra, who holds back the waters, until he is slain by the god Indra:

“The brahmin redactors render Vṛtra as a demonic character in order to legitimate his defeat at the hand of the heroic Indra. This results in the transference of exclusive control over earthly resources to Indra and those who worship Indra: the brahmin-led Āryans. I would argue that with the narrative demonization, defeat, and subsequent cooptation of Vṛtra’s powers, [ . . . ] a pre-established contextual framework centralizing a supernatural snake is dismantled in order to construct one centralizing a brahmin-controlled deity.” (Cozad 2004, p. 14).

In several passages, Cozad implies that the “pre-established” system of belief in a snake deity was pre-Aryan.<sup>61</sup> In her chapter about this complex of *the Rg Veda and the Threat of the Sovereign Snake* (ibid., pp. 13–22), I would have expected her to at least once mention the possibility that Vṛtra is not an autochthonous deity, but a concept brought to India alongside Indo-European languages. This is probably the case, as is obvious from the parallel and cognate titles of Indra as “*vṛtrahan*, ‘*vṛtra*-smasher’, applied to him over fifty times in the Rigveda” (West 2007, p. 246), and of the Old Iranian god *Vərəθraγna*, “the slayer of *Vərəθra*” or the “smiting of resistance”.<sup>62</sup> Indra is related to cognate Indo-European weather gods, who fight in a similar manner against dragons or snakes and, as a result of this fight, sometimes also free the waters (ibid., pp. 258f.). These are strong arguments against the claim that “Indra coopts the powers through which Vṛtra is known—he who ‘scattered about’ the ‘lightning and thunder, rain and hail,’ [Rgveda 1.32.13: *vidyut* and *tanyatu*, *miha* and *hrāduni*]—to become the supreme god ‘who wields the thunderbolt’ [Rgveda 1.32.15: *vajrabāhu*]” (Cozad 2004, p. 17).

Albeit fascinating, in this case, her “methodological strategy through which we are able to use a conventional religious setting to provide evidence of alternative avenues of religious agency.” (ibid., p. 12) does not work out well. Still, the name and function of Vṛtra not being native to India would not exclude the possibility that “the construction of this supernatural figure predates the incursions of the Āryans and reflects an indigenous tradition of snake worship” (ibid., p. 15). Deeg also points out that the Nāgas as aquatic deities are probably older than the so-called Indo-Āryan populating of North India, although they are also related to the Indo-Āryan mythology.<sup>63</sup>

In later chapters, Cozad’s interpretation, aiming at the intentions and text acts of the Brahmin redactors, becomes more plausible. In the *Mahābhārata*, for instance, political agendas indeed become visible in the way the Nāgas are portrayed: the text makes “use of the tamed, brahminicized Nāga, Śeṣa” (ibid., p. 83), of Āstika, a “nāganized brahmin” (ibid., p. 72) and son of a Nāgī and a Brahmin, and of the Nāga king Takṣaka, “characterized as a malevolent force bent on deceit and destruction” (ibid., p. 64). Furthermore, the narration is densely interspersed with moralist remarks about the superiority of Brahmins, as when Garuḍa is taught by his mother, Vinatā:

<sup>61</sup> “Indra is the exclusive property of a particular group of people [ . . . ], who exclude all but Āryans from their hierarchical social system, thus positioning the indigenous peoples of India and their divine figures outside of this system altogether. The Rg Veda thus marks our first encounter with redactors who wish to dismantle a pre-existing contextual framework, one which centralizes the supernatural snake and the desires of indigenous snake worshippers” (Cozad 2004, pp. 17f.). Unfortunately, the repetition of her own phrasing does not strengthen her argument, which sticks to the simplistic narrative of Āryans invading and suppressing an indigenous culture.

<sup>62</sup> The poetic formula “Indra slew the snake (*ahi*)” or “Indra slew Vṛtra” occurs throughout the Rgveda—but “the specificity of this verbal formula [can be demonstrated] not only in Indic but across most of the related older Indo-European languages over several thousand years in the narration of a specific theme” (Watkins 1995, p. 301)—in Hittite (ibid., pp. 321f., 448f.), Greek (ibid., pp. 357f.), and Old Norse sources (ibid., pp. 414f.).

<sup>63</sup> “Nāgas sind [ . . . ] schlangenartige Wesen, die [ . . . ] wahrscheinlich vor die sogenannte indoarische Besiedelung Nordindiens zurückreichen, aber auch Querverbindungen zu der indoarischen Mythologie aufweisen” (Deeg 2008, p. 92).

“A brahmin angered is a fire, a sun, a poison, a sword [ . . . ]. If a man has gone down your throat like a swallowed fishhook and burns like a coal, then, my son, you will know that he is an eminent brahmin!” (*Mahābhārata* 1.24.3–6, transl. van Buitenen 1973, p. 81).

At this point, I agree with COZAD’s interpretation. Throughout the textual history of Hindu India, she highlights the animal nature of Nāgas, although their existence surpasses the biological capacities and bodily features attributed to snakes:

“Snakes, as ubiquitous, powerful denizens of the earth’s surface provide constant and easy access to anyone who might wish to approach them as objects of religious devotion. Snake worship can thus be seen as a form of religiosity created and maintained by those most often disenfranchised by orthodox religion, for example, women” (Cozad 2004, p. 3). “The primary ritual activities associated with snake worship obviate the necessity of a brahmin officiant” (*ibid.*, p. 11).

As for the Nāgas as proponents of a grass-roots religion, empowering women and farmers against caste hierarchy and patriarchy, COZAD makes her sympathy towards them quite clear. Thereby, she seemingly overlooks the fact that actual snake worshippers do not necessarily attribute positive character traits to their animalistic deities. This becomes clear from ALLOCO’s ethnographic work in Tamilnadu (cf. Allico 2013, 2014), from the stories about the Bengali serpent goddess Mansā, as well as from my own fieldwork in the Central Himalaya. The threat posed to humans both by Nāgas and by living cobras—where they are not altogether held to be the same—often makes the relationship between Nāgas to humans much less harmonious than COZAD portrays it.

While neglected in COZAD’s argumentation, the non-harmonious relations between humans and Nāgas only supports her premise regarding the likeness and close relatedness of Nāgas to serpents. I have demonstrated the evidence for such a perspective throughout the contexts examined in this article, most notably in modern film productions.

## 5. Discussion

Myths have manifold meanings—as much as they have to say about history, the human body, nature, the psyche or social life, they also reveal about animals as members of society and of the environment. Having analyzed Nāgas as protagonists in different religious, spatial and temporal contexts, I conclude that they indeed all have a lot in common. They are always more than just snakes, but never without any serpentine features, regarding both their bodies and their relationship to humans. This relationship is often tense and full of conflict, mutual cruelty and cycles of revenge.

I opened this article by showing that worshipping (divine) cobras can manifest itself in acts of cruelty towards (animal) cobras. The ethnographies from TAMIL NADU in South India and from UTTARAKHAND in the Central Himalaya (cf. Section 2) provide examples for Nāgas doing harm (*doṣ*) to their human devotees (*bhakt*), even though they love them as kin. Cruelty against Nāgas, be they animals, spirits or humans, also occurs in the classical texts. *Mahābhārata* 1.214–225 has Kṛṣṇa and other heroes burn down a whole forest, without letting anyone escape. Even if the massacred Nāgas are not human (as in the interpretation of this episode by Iravati Karve), but animals or imaginary beings, they are still portrayed as beings able to feel and communicate terror and pain, as they are hunted together with (other) animals, as “herds of creatures cried out wretchedly, elephants screamed, and deer and birds [ . . . ]. Some who came by narrow paths collapsed there; and Hari slew the Rākṣasas, Dānavas, and Nāgas with his discus” (*Mahābhārata* 1.219.28–30)<sup>64</sup>.

Although the *Mahābhārata* does not condemn this slaughter, in Hinduism and, much more so, in many “indigenous” traditions of India, many animals and plants are regarded, and often worshipped, as people (cf. Haberman 2013). Nāgas are sometimes cobras, sometimes people, sometimes clouds or mountain lakes, and potentially all at once. Deities are polyvalent; in my fieldwork I met villagers who talk about Naiṇī Devī as though she was a person—and indeed, she has a mythology in which she acts just like a human child—while others denied her any personhood, conceiving of her as an unintentional force (*śakti*) within the mountains and everywhere. If such a current concept of polyvalent divinity can be projected onto historical Hindu deities<sup>65</sup>, the ethnographic examples can help us to understand the Nāgas of earlier contexts better, be they blurred, semi-moral beings of the *Mahābhārata* or the embodied spirits of mountain lakes and natural forces incorporated into Buddhism. In the Buddhist story behind the *Nāgananda* play (cf. Section 3.3), the Nāgas and the bird Garuḍa are neither animals nor humans, but symbols of conflicting forces in nature, of heaven and earth. This opposition might or might not mirror concepts about human “inner nature”—in any case, these beings do symbolize the outer nature, representing all the species of their respective realm. Thus, they are seldom depicted naturalistically, as zoological animals, but never without some animal features. The mythological imagination both draws from observations of the environment and from the abstracting faculty of language, and, for instance, brings together snakes and elephants (both *nāga*) into one category, as food of Garuḍa (Dave 1985, p. 201).<sup>66</sup>

The *Nāgananda* ends with Garuḍa and the Nāgas becoming friends of the Buddha to be. Hindu myths can likewise be read as stories of friendship with animals, when Śeṣa, the firstborn of the Nāgas, decides to serve Viṣṇu (vgl. *Mahābhārata* 1.32), or when Śiva takes Śeṣa’s younger brother Vāsuki as a garland. Kṛṣṇa, on the other hand, first defeats the serpent Kāliya in battle, dances on his head and only then becomes friends with him (Figure 7).

<sup>64</sup> (Transl. van Buitenen 1973, p. 422), from Sanskrit bhūtasamghasahasrās ca dīnās cakrur mahāsvanam/ruruvur vāraṇās caiva tathaiva mṛgapakṣiṇaḥ // 28 // [ . . . ] // ekāyanagatā ye ‘pi niṣpatanty atra ke cana/rākṣasān dānavān nāgāñ jaghne cakreṇa tān hariḥ // 30 //.

<sup>65</sup> This is suggested by Michaels (1998, p. 206f.), according to whom Hindu deities throughout the epochs are potentially multiform, potentially featureless forces and potentially embodied.

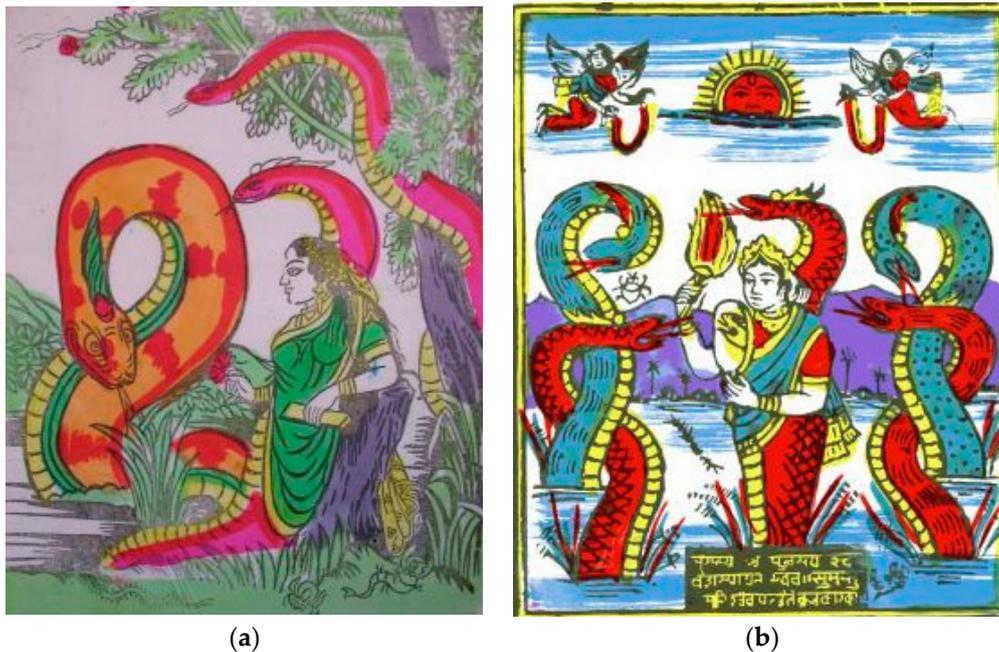
<sup>66</sup> For Garuḍa feeding on an elephant, cf. *Mahābhārata* 25.10–26.26.



**Figure 7.** Kṛṣṇa dances on the subdued Nāga king Kāliya, who had polluted the Yamunā River with his poison. Now, as the footmark of Kṛṣṇa protects him, Kāliya and his queens are safe from Garuḍa, who, as a devotee of Viṣṇu, also venerates his *avatār* Kṛṣṇa. (a) Metal figure given by Rudolf Otto in 1927 to Marburg Museum of Religions (photo by Eiko Wösner, acc.nr. Lp 139); (b) Figure from Bali, purchased 1959 for the Marburg Museum of Religion in Yogyakarta. In Indonesia, Nāgas are depicted as being dragon-like, while Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu can be identified by his four arms, holding a discus and lotus flower. Striking are the similarities in the posture of the legs and the gesture of the left hand, holding the serpent/dragon's tail (photo by Eiko Wösner, acc.nr. Ar 081).

If we take the Nāgas as symbols, who is domesticated, subdued or pacified here? Are they forces, dangers and resources of “nature” in general, or do they represent a whole species in one person? Are they something uncontrollable “within us”, or do they represent an older religion, maybe of older, subdued ethnicities? And what about the little Nāgas, the living house snakes fed with milk in India and elsewhere, sometimes seen as “ancestors come to life” (Ermacora 2017, p. 4)? Whatever they might stand for, in the first place, they are still animals, seen as animals and as protectors from other animals. In folk religion, some Nāg women act as intermediaries between human and serpent people (Figure 8).

In some sense, Nāgas, mythical beings and symbols of animality, *are* serpents and thus “animals”, as quoted from the Pali Canon in Section 3.2: *tiracchānagatā*, “going horizontally, not erect”. Where they are portrayed as humans, they portray our animal nature, as well as the human condition of being treated “like animals”. As figures in movies, literature and other myths, they are imagined to be intermediate between humans, animals and deities. At first glance, in the contemporary ritual embodiment of Naiṇī Devī, she does not look or behave differently from other deities. However, the mythical storytelling and the singing of songs highlight her as being a Nāg, her animal nature and her embeddedness within the web of Pan-Indian and ancient Nāga mythology. Thus, she shares with other Hindu and Buddhist Nāgas the capacity to connect different beings without a common language, even living in different worlds. Like other religious symbols and protagonists, Nāginīs and Nāgas help to make ineffable things effable and to speak with nonhuman beings.



**Figure 8.** Two *Nāg-kanyās*, “Nāga-maidens”, conversing with or warding off snakes with ritual items; wood-printed and painted as votive or protective images (artist: Pāine Thegana Nārāyan, Kathmandu 1994; both in the Marburg Museum of Religions): (a) *Nāg-Kanyā* holding a flower and a book (photo by Anne Beutter, acc.nr. B-Kp 155 011); (b) *Nāg-Kanyā* holding a fan and a mirror, possibly to ward off the evil eye or the hypnotic stare of snakes. The Sanskrit verse names five ancient sages, “Agastya, Pulasta, Vaiśampāyana, Sumantu and Jaimini, the five who resist the thunderbolt”<sup>67</sup> (photo by Anne Beutter, acc.nr. B-Kp 155 010).

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<sup>67</sup> Agastyaśca pulastaśca Vaiśampāyana eva ca / Sumantur Jaiminiś caiva pañcaite vajra-vārakāḥ // Other images from the same artist contain a longer text, starting with the same verse and explaining that whoever says aloud the names of these sages is safe from fire caused by lightning. Probably with a similar purpose, a third verse adds the list of “the eight praised Nāgas Ananta, Vāsuki, Padma, Mahāpadma, Takṣaka, Kulira, Karkaṭa and Śankha” (ananto vāsukiḥ padmo mahāpadmaś ca takṣakaḥ / kulīraḥ karkaṭaḥ śankhaś caṣṭau nāgāḥ prarkīrtitāḥ). Some of these names have occurred in this article.

<sup>68</sup> [https://www.uni-marburg.de/relsamm/welcome?set\\_language=en](https://www.uni-marburg.de/relsamm/welcome?set_language=en).

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