

A Protective Spirit in Lao-Tai Textiles: The *Pii Nyak* and Its Indian Antecedents

by Ellison Banks Findly¹

Abstract

The Pii Nyak design, from Lao-Tai textiles, is rarely discussed by scholars and is mysterious to the weavers themselves. Described by them as representing an evil spirit from the forest who kidnaps passersby, its image becomes a protective one when embedded in the textile. By tracing the iconography back to the evil Nyaks of the *Sinxay* epic, and then to Hindu and Buddhist material, this article argues that the Pii Nyak belongs to an old association of Indian *yakshas* and *nagas*, figures both beneficial and malevolent, with “door-protectors” of sacred spaces. Translating this into the Pii Nyak, we find that the image’s two serpent arms and terrifying face match the antecedent image as, when on a head cloth, it protects the interior space of human consciousness.



Figure 1: *Pii nyak, paa dtuum* (body wrap). Author’s Collection: Catalog Number SS-56. (Images from the author’s collection listed hereafter will follow the short format AC: SS-56.)

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Introduction

In Lao-Tai textiles, there is an image of great beauty, power, and mystery. It is an image known to weavers as the *pii nyak*, “the great or evil spirit” (Fig. 1). The design of the image in textiles has two parts: (1) a diamond-shaped head, known as a *gaap* pattern, that has upright crests, eyes, and earrings, and (2) two arm-like “appendages” that derive from the serpent, the Lao *ngueak* or *naak (naga)*. These limbs come in two varieties: either the coiled tail of the serpent asleep, or the upright head of the serpent in motion. The “great spirit” figure appears in a number of different textiles. We find it woven into head cloths, worn here by a weaver from Xam Tai (Fig. 2, 3) and used for everyday, ceremonial, or shamanic wear; into body wraps, worn here by a woman in Muang Vaen (Figs. 4-6) and used by parents to carry children, or by men and women when they go traveling; into shamanic healing cloths, shown here by a healing shaman (*maw mon*) from a village outside of Xam Tai (Fig. 7); and into Buddhist door curtains or temple hangings (Fig. 8). In each of these cases, the *pii nyak*, itself once an evil spirit but now embedded in a textile, provides protection from other evil spirits and, thereby, ensures the prosperity of the user.



Figure 2: Xam Tai weaver wearing a modern head cloth containing *pii nyak* patterns



Figure 3: *Pii nyak, paa kaan hua* (head cloth).
Xam Nuea. AC: EF-172



Figure 4: Woman carrying baby in a *paa dtuum*.
Muang Vaen.

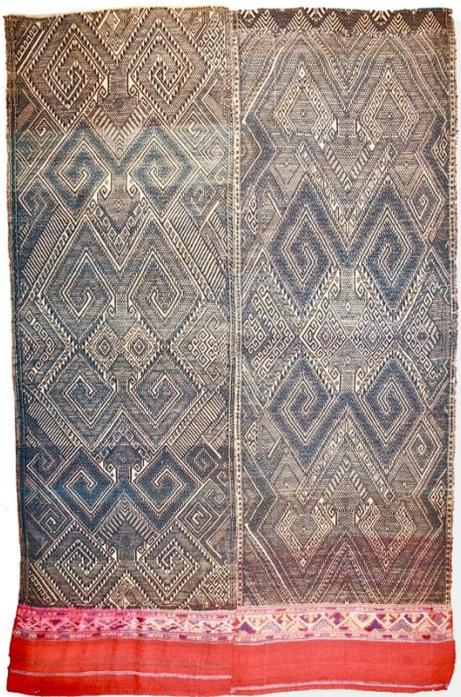


Figure 5: *Pii nyak, paa dtuum*. Xam Nuea.
AC: SS-56



Figure 6: *Pii nyak, paa dtuum*.
Xam Nuea. AC: SS-59

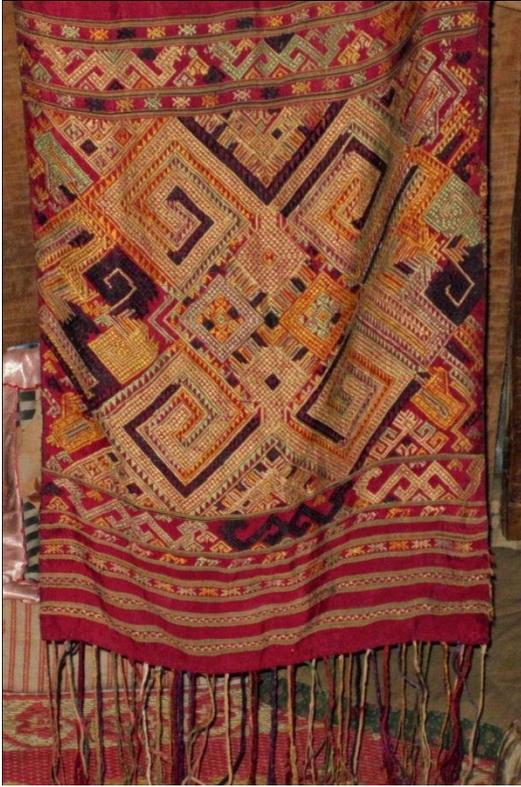


Figure 7: One end panel of a healing shaman's *paa sabaai* (healing shawl). Xam Tai.

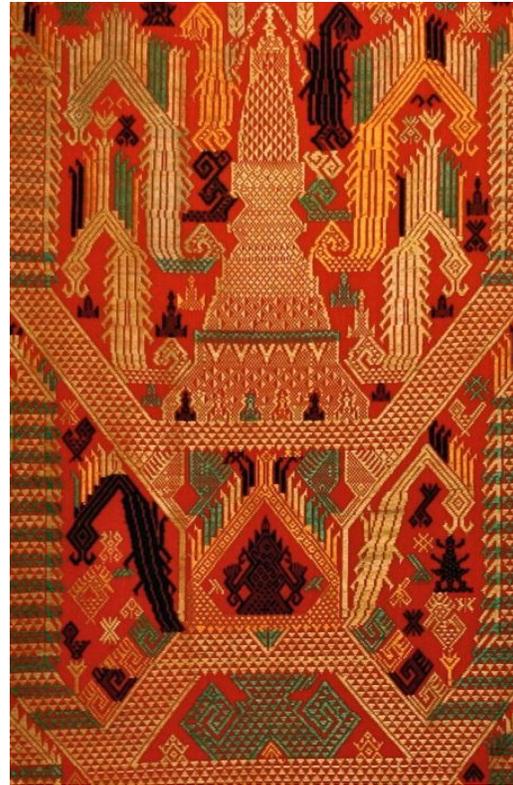


Figure 8: Buddhist door curtain or temple hanging, showing a Buddha, *thupa naga* pillars, and *naga* candles. In the lower register is an abbreviated *pii nyak* image. AC: SS-37

The design of the *pii nyak* has great resonance in the world of the textile. Its head, as a *gaap* design,² belongs with a large range of other *gaap* designs, not necessarily connected to one another. First, the diamond head style is similar to that of the head of the *ngueak laeng* or “dry serpent” (Fig. 9). The “dryness” of this serpent refers either to the “dry season” when the serpent is likely to come into town and do mischief, and to use his supernatural powers to bring rain, or to a “dry place,” namely mountain caves, where he lives with little water around him. Most weavers opt for the second interpretation, that of a mountain serpent, a small serpent living in the dry caves or holes in the mountains and never approaching water except during the rains. Second, the *gaap* design can refer to such small design elements as the triangular scales on the elephant (Fig. 10) or other triangular decorative features, appearing along lines or covering plain surfaces. Finally, the *gaap* design reflects another diamond pattern, the *koom*, that is often used in a larger format to hold things like flowers and small birds, and found as a design element in its own right or as a filler in other designs. It is also interpreted as a “third eye” on shamanic healing shawls (*paa sabaai*) (Fig. 11), and as a pattern for the notion of a “ritual threshold” or “transit doorway” when a person is moving from one religious state of being into another.

² It may be that these triangles derive from *gaap*, “to bow in respect with palms together,” an action that would create a triangular form both in the folded palms and in the bend of the body.



Figure 9: *Ngueak laeng, paa faa* (baby blanket). Xam Nuea. AC: SS-14



Figure 10: *Saang with gaap scales, paa kang* (door curtain). Xam Tai AC: SS-53

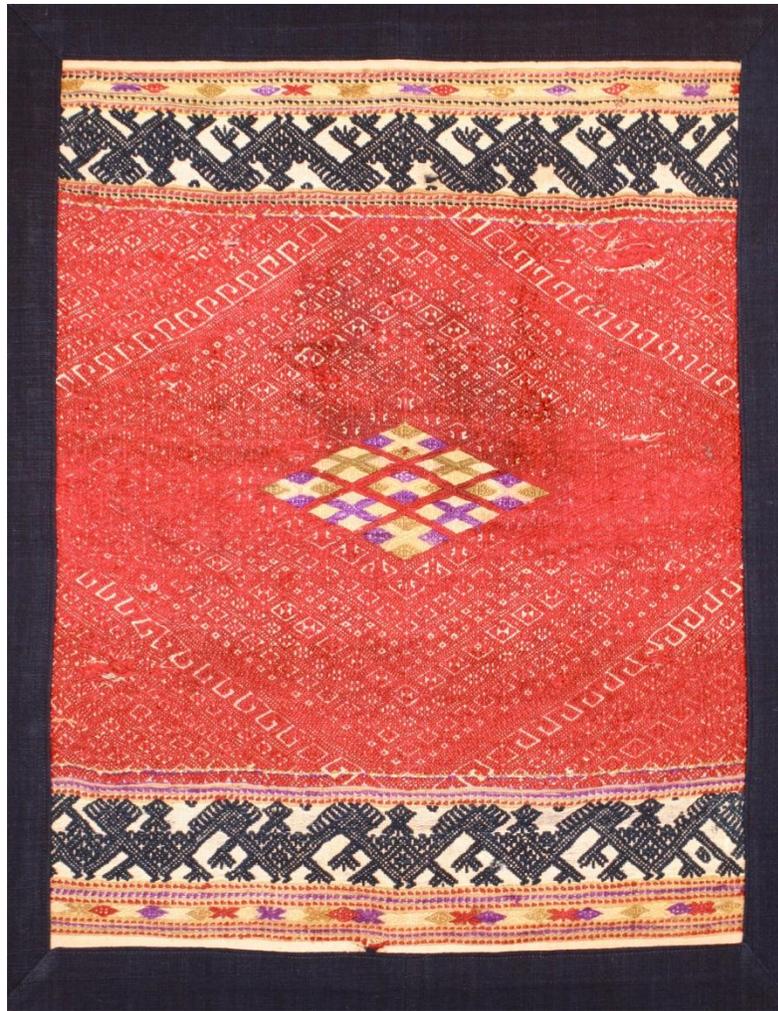


Figure 11: End panel of a healing shaman's *paa sabaai*, showing the central eye, or *dtaa*, in the middle of the traditional red ground, bordered by the traditional indigo panels of figures. AC: SS-108

The *pii nyak*'s other structural elements, its "appendages," are derived from both the head and the tail of the *ngueak/naak* body. It is important to note here three things. First, there are two appendages, positioned in an open and inviting mode as if offering entrance to a space inside. Second, the appendages belong to a serpent who – unlike beneficent creatures in Lao-Tai design like the bird or the elephant – has a dual nature, being well disposed when treated properly by humans, and destructive when not. And, third, the coiled tail and the striking head are the power points of the serpent, the former representing stored energy, hoarded and ready to be unleashed, and the latter being the source of poisonous attack.

A variation on the traditional *pii nyak* image is the image of "mating serpents" (*ngueak saung gaang*, "ngueaks with a cavity (*saung*) in the middle (*gaang*"). In **Figs. 12** and **13**, we see the womb-like *koom* or diamond design made by the serpents' tails as the two have their backs to each other in intimate relationship. Weavers often say of this image that, because their bodies are touching and entwined in a certain way, the *ngueaks* are copulating, and have made a womb with their tails in which there are eggs.

What is unusual about these versions is that the crested *gaap* head of the *pii nyak* caps the *koom* design housing the bird³ or candles, each signifying offspring in this design. Here the *gaap* head usually has small colored diamonds for eyes but no ears or earrings, and the lower *koom*/diamond design of the entwined tails is normally filled with emblems of the next generation. It would make sense, then, to describe this design either as of a pregnant *pii nyak*, or as of mating serpents protected by the *pii nyak*.



Figure 12: Mating *ngueaks*, *paa kaan hua*. Xam Nuea. AC: EF-135



Figure 13: Mating *ngueaks*, *paa kang*. Xam Tai. AC: EF-164.

Who is the Pii Nyak?

Weavers in our four main research sites – Xam Nuea, Xam Tai, Ban Muang Vaen, and Ban Sop Hao in Hua Phan, as well as Tai Daeng⁴ weavers in Vientiane – recognize the *pii nyak* as an important weaving design.⁵ When we ask the weavers about the meaning of the *pii nyak*, their answers are consistent. The *pii nyak* (Fig. 14), they say, is a real animal who lived long ago. Though once a water animal with a long fish body and

³ In support of the “mating” attribution to these inner-*koom* elements is that one of the religious functions of the bird in Tai-Lao textiles is to bring babies down from heaven to expectant parents.

⁴ Of those informants who identified themselves as Tai, most further identified themselves as Tai Daeng. We interviewed Lao-Tai weavers in four sites in Hua Phan, Laos (Sam Nuea, Sam Tai, Muang Vaen, and Ban Sop Hao) over the course of the years 2006-2010. Our approach was to gather groups of “eldress” weavers together over 4-5 days, and show them images of textiles and textile details and asked them various questions. In total, we met with 40-50 weavers over the five years, the same groups each year in order to pull from their knowledge as much as we could. Each year the answers could differ, and this added to the complexity of our final understanding of each textile

motif, and to my conclusion that design motifs are multi-valent, and that textiles are poly-functional. During the sessions there was vociferous discussion of each design element. The weavers would each offer their own views and then would develop a consensus view, all noted next to the textile design in my large image file.

When I give “consensus” views, they are “consensus” views noted three or more times on separate occasions, while “divergent” views are those noted only once or twice on separate occasions, either by individuals or by groups. That is, a “divergent” view might be a group view given on only one or two occasions over the years.

⁵ The research for this article, and for the author’s manuscript entitled *Spirits in the Loom: Religion and Design in Lao-Tai Textiles*, has been carried out during the years 2006-2010, by a small three-person team, consisting of the author, Peter Whittlesey, and Baythong Sayouvin Whittlesey, in these four sites in Hua Phan as well as in a number of Tai Daeng communities in Vientiane.

a curved tail, he is not one now – living instead in the mountains and the forests, and sometimes near temples. Because he was once an aquatic being, he has a body like a serpent, a *ngueak*, and like a *ngueak* he is both feared and worshipped.

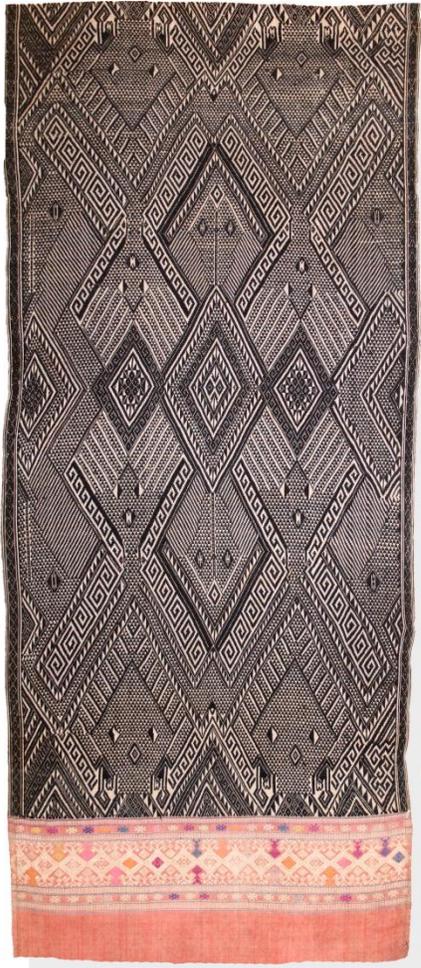


Figure 14: *Pii nyak* images, *paa dtuum*. Xam Nuea. AC: MM-67.

According to the weavers, the *pii nyak* is a terrifying creature, a real and evil spirit who inhabits the forest high up in the mountains. Tall and dark skinned with big eyes, big ears, long arms, and large fingers,⁶ he (or she) stands up straight like a tree with his arms hanging down and laughing wildly until the sun goes down. Because he doesn't want people in the forest he will, at night, attack and eat anyone who walks by, in particular, children who have mistakenly gotten lost in the forest. It is this attribute – that the *pii nyak* eats people – that weavers universally focus on when describing their fear of him. After sunset, they say, the *pii nyak* will grab a unsuspecting person, open his own mouth and, with his teeth, bite the person at the base of the neck, one lip covering the face and the other covering the body down through the chest. He then breaks the person's head open and drinks his or her blood. The *pii nyak* not only eats people physically, but can also consume their spirits (*kwan*) making them sick – and this is why people are exceedingly afraid of him. Ordinarily, however, weavers say, he only eats bad people – “people who aren't good people” – as well as bad spirits, though all people try to keep a far distance from him. One way of keeping the *pii nyak* away when walking in the forest is to wrap bamboo sticks around one's hands and arms, so that the *pii nyak* can't grab hold.

A good person, “a regular person,” can ask the *pii nyak* who eats bad people to come and protect his/her family from the other bad spirits. The *pii nyak*, then, comes to be a protective being who keeps evil at bay. Xam Tai weavers say: “We ask the bad spirit (e.g., the *pii nyak*) to protect us because we are good and it is powerful. We don't let bad spirits into the house; we use a ‘picture’ to scare them away.” The transformation of the *pii nyak* from a spirit who can cause great evil to one who can provide great protection seems to happen when the image is woven into a textile – for as one informant told us, “we don't depict evil spirits in our textiles.” Thus “enshrined” in a textile, a large *pii nyak* on a door curtain then prevents bad spirits from entering a

⁶ Another version given by weavers is that the *pii nyak* has no arms and no legs, only a head.

private room and, in a body wrap, from penetrating the wrap to harm the child held inside.



Figure 15: *Pii nyak* images inside *saang* bellies, *paa kang*. Xam Nuea. AC: MM-30

Sinxay, the hero and his brothers, Siho (half lion – half elephant) and Sangthong (half human – half snail), successfully battle against the Nyaks who have kidnapped *Sinxay*'s aunt, Nang Soumountha (**Fig. 16**). The Nyaks are described as ogres, half demon – half human creatures, who are cannibals and who can travel in mid-air. They are terrifying, angry, and hateful beings, who are full of tricks and strong powers, and have the magic to call upon nature to help their cause as when, in the epic, they successfully call upon rocks from heaven to fall upon their enemies. They guard their home territory fiercely, as when one Nyak says to *Sinxay*:

I am Valoonna Nyak who is very brave, daring, and well-known all over this forest. Every human who arrives here always dies and never leaves our land...Once I've got you in my hand I won't let you get away.

And, when *Sinxay*, reaches the border of the Nyak homeland, the Nyak border guard says:

Who has come and trespassed across the border? You have chosen the wrong road and coming here like this means you are offering your life to me.

The presence of a *pii nyak* can also be used to explain diseases, as in **Fig. 15** that shows *pii nyaks* inside the bellies of *saang* elephants. Weavers in several villages say of this piece that the elephant will soon die, as the presence of the *pii nyak* means that the elephant is diseased and sick. Here the *pii nyak* woven into the textile has not been transformed into a protector of the health of the elephant but is one of the elephant's descriptors, that is, it could be "pregnant," it could be a "parent," but here it is "sick."

Where do Pii Nyaks Come From?

While it's always possible that the *pii nyak* is entirely the product of the indigenous Lao-Tai imagination, several authors note that the Nyaks of the Lao epic *Sinxay* are none other than the *yakshas* of Hinduism and early Indian Buddhism. In



Figure 16: Nyak carrying away Nang Soumountha, *Sinxay* epic. Wall mural. Wat Sunuan Wari, Khon Kaen, Thailand

Nyaks attack humans with large wooden clubs, spears, and rocks, but are fatally susceptible to the swords, arrows, and fire unleashed by righteous humans, and can even be crushed by the likes of *Sinxay*'s brother, Sangthong.⁷ The epic tells us that Nyak faces are distorted, and have protruding eyes, frizzy hair, and skin that is usually dark or green in color.⁸ In these ways, then, the characterization of the Nyaks in *Sinxay* as evil-minded, tempestuous, and powerful, eaters of creatures (**Fig. 17**) fits well with a description of a negative version of the Indian *yaksha* – but it fits this version better if we add elements of a companion figure from the Indian tradition, the *rakshasa*.

In early Indian culture, the *yaksha* is among the first Indian deities to be depicted in anthropomorphic form as an icon, beginning around the 3rd c. BCE in the Mauryan period. **Figure 17:** Nyak, *Sinxay* epic. This early appearance, and the nature of the *yaksha* character, has led some scholars to argue that he is the



Wall mural. Wat Chaisi, Khon Kaen, Thailand.

⁷ Material taken from a rough draft of a new English translation of the *Sinxay* epic, especially pp. 34, 35 of the rough text. Courtesy of Peter and Baythong Sayouvin Whittlesey.

⁸ Leslie Desmangles, Trinity College, private translation of Outhine Bounyavong, adapt., *L'Épopée de Sinxay de Pangkham*, Vol. II. Vientiane: Dokked, 2004.

prototype of the Buddha image. In general, the *yaksha* is a vegetative divinity, associated with the earth, whose jurisdiction is life and death, health and disease, fertility and mortality, and whose natural home is the lonely and remote recesses of the forest, where there is no noise or sound of any kind, where breezes blow across from the pastures through the trees, and where the place is hidden from humans. Sometimes, *yakshas* are said to inhabit holy sites, such as pilgrimage spots or temples. The shape shifting quality of the *yaksha*, gives him two personalities, associated with his ambiguous capacity to heal and harm, to protect and make mischief, and to promote life and bring death.

The positive, beneficent personality renders the *yaksha* a kindly and inoffensive figure who is associated with mountains and forests, as well as a caretaker or steward of the treasures that are hidden in the earth and among the tree roots. In this way, the *yaksha* is the keeper of secrets and hidden things, and the knower of places where magical amulets are kept. Because of his being custodian of water holes and of his association with the cyclical patterns of nature, the *yaksha* is thought to control the rains that are essential to prosperity and abundance and, related to this, is worshipped as a bringer of children. The name “*yaksha*” comes from the Sanskrit root “*yah*” which, in its desiderative form, suggests “to honor or worship,” and this lends itself to the characterization of his supporting a master in all situations, and providing friendly service and guardianship whenever needed. The *yaksha* is portrayed either as a squat, portly, big-bellied figure, often shown in a weight-bearing pose and associated with wealth, or as an agile figure whose slimness likens him to a vine. His earthy appearance – either squat and tree-like, or tall and vine-like – means that he is often green or brown in color, the green being a color often attributed to *nagas* as well.

The negative, threatening personality renders the *yaksha* a cannibalistic ogre or demon who, like his positive personality, inhabits the natural world. Here, however, he haunts the darker, wilderness areas, attacking and devouring travelers. “We Yakshas,” says the *Matsya Purana*, “are by nature cruel of heart; we eat anything, including flesh; we are habitually violent!”⁹ Here the *yaksha* can be a “warrior” but a warrior who, because of his warring tendencies, has a positive side. This strong and aggressive figure, the fiercely fighting champion, is the archetypal guardian, for in Indian art and literature, the *yaksha* is seen chiefly as a strong-armed attendant and gatekeeper (*dvarapala*), a bearer, supporter, and friendly server in all types of situations.¹⁰

The “door keeper” role of *yaksha* in his warrior mode can be seen in **Fig. 18**, from the early Indian cave site of Pitalkhora. Here the two *yakshas* guarding the staircase that goes up to the terrace stand in full protective regalia that, as J. C. Harle notes, is an example of an “archaic style” of dress, confirmed by the date of the particular site as late second to early first century BCE.¹¹ Two points are important here. The first is that such imagery, central to our argument, is of great antiquity in Indian iconographical history, and the second is that the *yaksha dvarapalas* are guarding a staircase to an inner religious space – a notion recapitulated in later Lao architectural and textile design patterns.

⁹ Dimmitt and van Buitenen, *Classical Hindu Mythology*, p. 248.

¹⁰ Coomaraswamy, *Yakshas*, pp. 5-11.

¹¹ Harle, *Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, pp. 48-52.

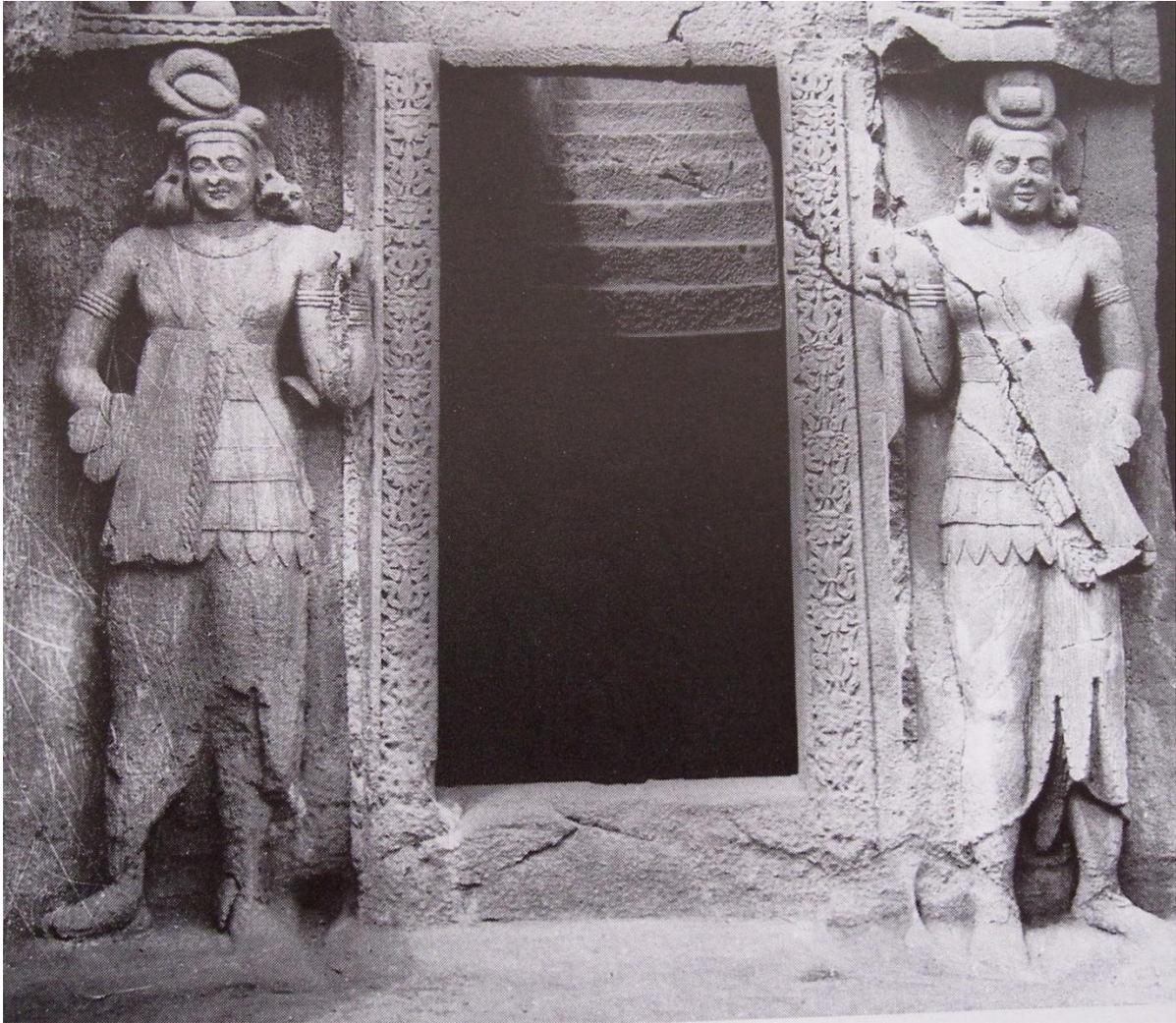


Figure 18: Two *yaksha* warrior *dvarapalas*, Pitalkhora Caves, late 2nd – early 1st c. BCE. Archaeological Survey of India photo

The *yaksha* is often combined (and confused) with his fellow, the *rakshasa*, who augments his demonic traits by himself being a flesh-eating cannibal, a powerful warrior, and a demonic and mischievous shape shifter. As the *Mahabharata* notes, *rakshasas* “are capable of assuming any form at will and will [often] change their forms” whenever needed. The *rakshasa* is yellow, green, or blue, with eyes like vertical slits, matted hair, large belly, and poisonous fingernails that can kill humans. In the *Mahabharata*, the *rakshasa* is described as having large red eyes, strong arms, “standing hair and large mouth...sharp teeth and fearful appearance,” and who is easily angered and prone to attack. Because the *rakshasa* kills and eats people, he is often addressed in the text with “O, cannibal,” as he grows and thrives on “unsanctified meat.”¹² Among the class of non-human semi-divines who inhabit the areas of the earth just above and below the surface – e.g. the Gandharvas, the Nagas, the Pishacas, the Ganas and

¹² Dutt, *Mahabharata*, Vol. I, p. 2001.

Ganeshas, the Yakshas and the Rakshasas¹³ – it is only the last two (the *yakshas* and the *rakshasas*) who enjoy all the same offerings: flowers, and meat and spirituous liquor.

The *yaksha* is tied to another figure in this family of semi-divines, the *naga*, both of whom have an association with water, in particular an association with the control of the rains for prosperity and abundance. *Nagas*, who inhabit the aquatic nether world are figures of fertility, in the same way that *yakshas* are in their association with trees and vegetation on the surface of the earth. In India, as in Laos, the *naga* has a dual nature. On the one hand, he can be a beneficent being, bringing rain and fertility to drought stricken regions (and, thereby, prosperity to humans), but on the other he can be destructive and harmful to humans when not properly propitiated. **Fig. 19**, a fresco from an Ajanta cave, shows the Naga King Shankhapala caught by villagers when he was mistakenly attacked out of fear of his powers. He was later to have a generous and supportive role in the wellbeing of the village. The protective powers of the *naga* are highlighted as well in early Indian art, as in **Fig. 20**, a relief from Bharhut, showing a five-headed *naga* paying homage to the Buddha (in the form of the Bodhi tree) and reminding worshippers of his protective role in keeping the monsoon rains away from the Buddha during his enlightenment experience. These protective powers, of course, come into full expression when the *naga* assumes the “door-keeper” properties of his fellow semi-divine, the *yaksa*. This process achieves its full realization in Southeast Asia, where *naga* protectors of entranceways at Buddhist temples are ubiquitous in a number of countries, and where the *pii nyak* image is a common sight in Lao-Tai textiles.



Figure 19: The Naga King Shankhapala being caught by villagers. Ajanta fresco, Pl. XIII. Courtesy of Vogel, *Indian Serpent Lore*, p. 150.

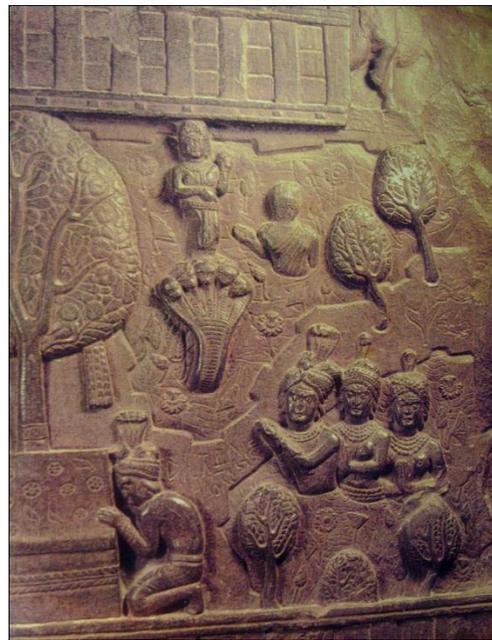


Figure 20: Relief of five-headed *naga* Elapattra paying homage to, and protecting a tree symbol of the Buddha. Courtesy of Vogel, *Indian Serpent Lore*, p. 40.

¹³ See Eck, *Banaras: City of Light*, pp. 36, 61, 146, 183, 201, etc. for the ubiquity of these groupings in, for example, the culture of the holy Indian city of Kashi.

Where and how does this Indian material show up in northern Laos? Historically, as Indian culture spread south and eastward, many argue rightly that it met the Lao-Tai peoples as Khmer culture moved northward in the Southeast Asian peninsula. Indian materials first appear in Kampuchea around the first century of the Common Era, with Hindu materials (including beliefs in the *yakshas*, *rakshasas*, and *nagas*) arriving earliest, followed by Mahayana Buddhist and then Theravada Buddhist materials some time later. From the large Angkor site come images reflective of their



Figure 21: Full-length extended *nagas* serving as guardians of an entrance. Angkor Thom. Courtesy of Andrea Wise

site, again highlighting the entranceway position of *nagas* and their protective functions. The “golden age” of Khmer culture is that of the Angkor period, 9-14thc. CE, and this culture moved north into what is now Laos, influencing the founding of the Lan Xang kingdom in 1353.

Contact with Indian materials also took place along the Southwest Silk Road that extended at least from Assam, India through Upper Burma, Yunnan and other areas in southern China, northern Laos, and northern Vietnam. We know that King Ashoka (304-232 BCE), the great Mauryan Buddhist king, had emissaries in southwestern Yunnan in the 2nd c. BCE, and that trade with India occurs along these routes from at least this time. Moving westward along the route, the first port of call in India is Assam, known to have a flourishing *naga* cult; and not too far away is the ancient city of Kashi (modern day Benares) on the River Ganga, whose sacred geography is built on old mythological beliefs in the *yakshas*, *rakshasas*, *nagas*, *gandharvas*, *ganas*, and *ganeshas*. We argue, then, that there is every reason to believe that the Tai peoples along the “wide arc” of this area have contact

Indian origin and supportive of our argument that there is a continuity between the old Indian material through its early transmission into Southeast Asia. **Fig. 21** shows a contemporary view from Angkor Thom of a sandstone terrace with multiple full-length *nagas* lining the entranceway, thus supporting the “door-keeper” theme of the *yaksha/naga* group. **Fig. 22**, from the Bayon temple at Angkor, shows another contemporary view of an upright multiple-headed *naga* lining a walkway at the Angkor



Figure 22: Close-up of one of the *dvarapala nagas*. Bayon.

Courtesy of Andrea Wise.

with this Indian material and that it, plus Khmer influence, is present in contemporary images that we find among peoples like the Lao-Tai.



Figure 23: Pair of Nyaks guarding gate at Vat Mixai, Vientiane.



Figure 24: Pair of Nyaks guarding temple doors at Vat Phonxai, Vientiane

To support this point, we note that Buddhist temple compounds in northern Laos are often guarded by Nyak or Yaksha figures. **Figs. 23** and **24** show Nyak guardian figures at Vat Mixai and Vat Phonxai, respectively, in Vientiane. Here they perform the same function as traditional Hindu *dvarapalas* or “doorkeepers:” they are dressed as warriors, and they have fierce faces, strident poses, and are colored green.



Figure 25: Single Nyak at Vat Mixai, Vientiane.

Most of all, however, the Nyaks are protectors, in the same way that the early Hindu and Buddhist *yakshas* are. Another image found even more ubiquitously in northern Lao temple architecture is the double *naga* protectors that line stairway entrances throughout the temple compound. As noted, we see such “*naga* entrance protectors” in places like Angkor Wat, but not in such pervasiveness as in Laos, where the *dvarapala* aspect of the *yaksha* has been conflated with the characterization of the *naga*, its close associate in the class of supernatural beings. As examples, we submit **Fig. 26** where two green *nagas* protect the entrance stairs at Vat Sisaket in the capital city of Vientiane; **Fig. 27** where two green *nagas* line stairs to an outdoor Buddha pavilion at the main Buddhist temple (Vat Ban Muang Yong) near the rural village of Muang Vaen near Xam Nuea in Hua Phan; and **Fig. 28** where two green *nagas* line the steps to the main temple in the northerly, rural Lao area of Ban Sop Hao. This latter is interesting, as weavers and teachers in Ban

Sop Hao proudly proclaim that their village has a hundred Tai (e.g., spirit religion, *saatsanaa pii*) families and only seven Lao (i.e., Buddhist, *saatsanna put*) families. The presence of a Buddhist temple in a strongly Tai Daeng area is not surprising, however, as, in times of sickness, the patient's family likes to keep its options open and often will go to a local healing shaman, a Buddhist monk, and a western clinic in that order, just to cover its bases.



Figure 26: Nagas guarding stairs at Vat Sisaket, Vientiane



Figure 27: Nagas guarding stairs at Vat Ban Muang Yong, Muang Vaen



Figure 28: Nagas guarding stairs at vat near Ban Sop Hao.

We now return to what the weavers in the four sites in Hua Phan call “the great spirit” or *pii nyak*. If the *yaksha*, with some *rakshasa* elements, and in conjunction with another “family” member, the *naga*, contributes to the meaning of the *pii nyak*, then we can argue that whatever negative (evil, hurtful, or scary) properties it has as a figure “out there,” they are tamed and transformed when rendered in a textile. (The same would be true when they are rendered in plastic form, in the case of the Nyak statues

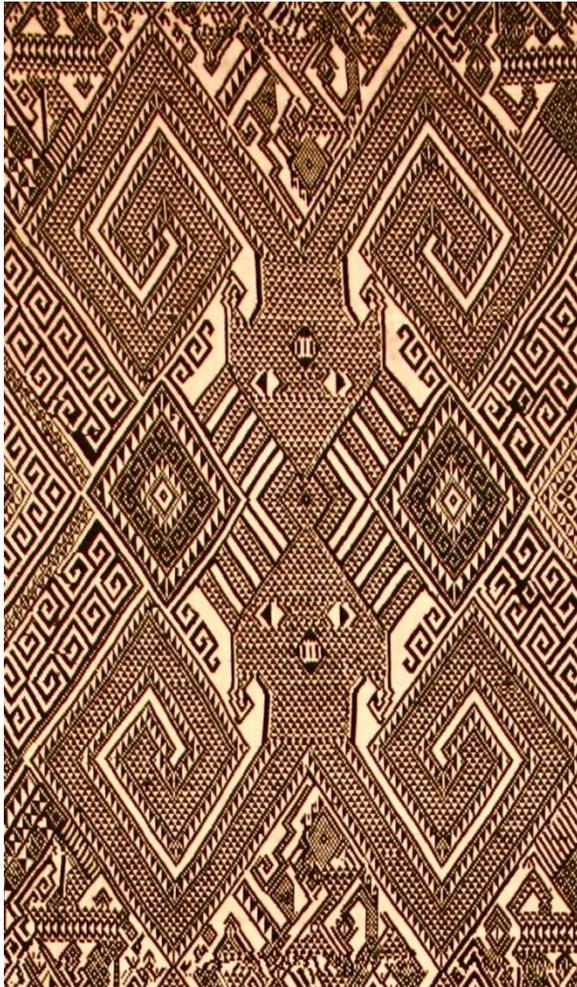


Figure 29: *Pii nyak, paa dtuum*. AC: SS-81

outside Buddhist temples.). Of **Fig. 29**, a body wrap for parents and children, weavers note the highly protective function of the *pii nyak*, whose visage indicates that he/she is on “high alert,” with erect crests of hair, attentive and vigilant eyes, long ears the better to hear approaching enemies, and coiled *naak* arms full of energy and ready to strike out in protection of the user of the textile. “*Naaks* are important for protecting people,” weavers commonly say, even though sometimes “in order for protecting yourself against the *naaks* you need amulets.”

If we apply this material to the *pii nyak* image in Lao-Tai weavings, then we can draw four conclusions. First, if the *yaksha*, with some *rakshasa* elements, and in conjunction with the *naga*, contributes to the meaning of the *pii nyak*, then we can argue that whatever negative (evil, hurtful, or scary) properties it has as a figure “out there” in the unseen wild, these dread-filled properties are tamed and transformed when rendered in a textile. Weavers commonly note that textiles cannot include designs of anything evil, so that whatever is in a textile, in this case, an image of a *pii nyak*, must be a good, beneficial image. If the Indian imagery of the *pii nyak* in the head cloth of **Fig. 30**, for example, has ambivalent antecedents that are changed for the good once it is “textile-embedded,” then we must note further points about the positive contributions of the *ngueak* serpent to the image.

Second, the *pii nyak* head makes use of the *ngueak*’s rainbow crest instead of hair. The rainbow crest of the serpent as rendered in Lao-Tai textiles makes reference to an old Hindu myth that describes *nagas* as living below the surface of the earth in palaces where they guard the earth’s treasures of jewels and precious stones. *Nagas* have entrance to, and exit from, these underground palaces via anthills on the earth’s surface. When there is rainbow following a thunderstorm, it is thought that the rainbow reaches down through the anthill into the earthly treasure of jewels. The



Figure 30: *Pii nyak, paa kaan hua*. AC: EF-168.

rainbow that shines in the sky is an emanation from (or reflection of) this subterranean world of the *nagas*, being made from the light of the jewels as that light hits the air above. Although *nagas* in India do not themselves have crests, those in the Lao arts do, and it is presumed that the serpent crest comes into Laos via influence from the Chinese dragon or *long*. In Lao-Tai Buddhist architecture, the *nagas* almost always have crests, although their crests are not rainbow ones but colored mainly in gold and red. It is primarily in textiles where the *ngueak* crest is rendered with rainbow colors, and we argue here, in the case of the *pii nyak*, that it is the textile rainbow crest of the serpent that harkens back to the Indian antecedents of the *naga* – rainbow – anthill myth.

Third, the *pii nyak* makes use of *ngueak* heads or tails as its body. We note, however, that the *pii nyak* has two *ngueak* heads or tails, and that they are rendered as if they are opening up a pathway for the viewer. Knowing the past history of the Nyak, we argue that what we see in the textile is the double *nagas* that line the entrance steps to Buddhist temples, and that this is a reiteration of their earlier *yaksha*-derived “door-keeper” function. This would confirm that this image – the *pii nyak* – is in fact a guardian protector. And what remains of the *yaksha* iconography in the *pii nyak* are signs of its two-fold nature, the malevolent and the benevolent: the scary face and bristly hair, on the one hand, and the protective open arms on the other. While all of these elements bear an Indian imprint, the facts that the *pii nyak* often appears on both

the head cloth and the body wrap – protecting the human seat of consciousness, and the ongoing generation of the family – suggest that the Lao-Tai transformation of the image has become highly personal, and that its protective function, like each textile, is here, not institutional (as for the temple), but individual.

How, then, fourth, do we understand the *gaap* head attached to two *naga* appendages, whether heads or tails? And, in particular, how do we understand the shift from “door protector” imagery of the temple – with Nyaks/Yakshas or *nagas* guarding the gates and stairways into the compound and temple building itself – to the *pii nyak* image in textiles? Here we make use of Carl Jung’s idea *that images of the house or building are actually images of the self*. If, as we argue, the embeddedness of the *pii nyak* in the textile (1) renders it protective rather than destructive, and (2) shifts the function of the image away from the institutional to the individual, then the *pii nyak*’s appendages protectively guard the entranceways into, not a house or a building, but the self: the seat of human consciousness, if it is used on a head cloth, for example, or the baby representing the next generation, if it is used on a parent’s body wrap. Thus, as a textile image, *the pii nyak maintains its old function of protecting the thresholds into the inside, but the insides here they are not those of a physical structure, but of the human self*.

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