MAINTAINING THE BALANCE

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• The Nagas: Guardian Spirits of all Creation

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We seemingly live in an increasing topsy-turvy world, where upside down and back to front is the new right-side up and right way round.

When I first started working with Native American medicine teachers, such as Sun Bear, Hyemeyohsts Storm and Wallace Black Elk - getting on for forty years ago now - they would tell us about the coming ‘Earth Changes.’

They taught that western civilisation was doomed to fall, because we had messed up the environment so badly, and therefore things would not be so easy for us in the future.

Since then, I and my friends have been waiting for it to happen, doing what we could to prepare and learn sacred ways as a storehouse for when things get rough. And over those nearly forty years, I and my friends have watched the slow changes that have taken place, like an afternoon gradually changes to an evening.

This issue starts with teachings about the importance of the nagas, and ends with the Ghost Dance. In other words, we begin with the importance of living a good life and showing respect to the spirits of the environment, who will wreak havoc upon us if we disrespect them, and we end with the warning that - in the worlds of John Lame Deer ‘The earth ‘would roll up like a carpet with all the white man’s ugly things - the stinking new animals, sheep and pigs, the fences, the telegraph poles, the mines and factories. Underneath would be the wonderful old-new world as it had been before the white fat-takers came.’

I put it to you that as a culture we have lost ourselves. We do not know where the ‘sacred centre’ is any more, and we do not collectively stand in that centre, in a respectful way for all beings anymore. And that loss of centre has big consequences.

We need a new dream, we need a new connection to Sacred Life, Grandmother Earth and the spirits again, and we need to be prepared for the Rolling Up, which in my eyes seems to be gaining a pace all around.

So, I ask myself, how I am going to stock and supply my ‘storeroom of the sacred’ for the more than likely hard times to come? And I invite you to ponder on the same question yourself.

Blessings to all Beings
Nicholas Breeze Wood
Nagas are a class of long-lived, serpent-like, semi-divine, awakened spiritual beings, highly revered as masters of wisdom by shamans and spiritual practitioners. They are respected for their healing powers, their magical skill, and their great courage; but sometimes they are feared for their violence and quick tempers. Nagas vary in their types of perception and also vary in their levels of wisdom.

Nagas can transfigure into other forms at will, but mostly they appear snake-like, typically depicted as attractive beings, richly adorned with jewels. They are awe-inspiring, their upper bodies appear human, either male or female, but they have a serpentine tail below their waists.

They are deeply connected to the earth, water and the other realms, and nagas are seen as protectors and the bestowers of abundance, both material and spiritual.

The word 'naga' is Sanskrit for cobra, and in most of the languages of Nepal and India the word nag means snake, especially a cobra. The word can be used for nagas of either gender, but often a female naga will be called a nagini. The word naga is also the name of the forest-dwelling people of north-eastern India and Myanmar.

Naga practices have been a living tradition in Nepal from time immemorial.

In the Himalayas, some of the most powerful deities and spirit beings are depicted with crowns, necklaces, bracelets and anklets in the form of serpents, nagas, and a strong serpent cult is present in all the leading religious practices of Asia, such as the Vedic religion, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and the Bön practices. This importance of nagas is also found within the prevalent myths, rites, rituals, and healing practices of the dhami-jhankri (shamans) of Nepal and the Himalayan regions, as nagas are primal spirit beings who play a dominant role.

Nagas are considered to be present in all of the phases of the creation, nurturance and final termination of the universe, and they play the same role in all of the life phases of individual living beings too.
The realm of the nagas is called naga loka, and it is the lowest part of the Lower World realms. From there, the nagas command and rule the whole universe. They are also thought to inhabit the underworlds below the land and the sea, as well as being in rivers, lakes, wells and oceans, as well as inaccessible caves and caverns. They can also be where there are geothermal vents and hot water springs, which provide pockets of warmth to protect them from harsh weather conditions. But they are not just thought of as physical beings, as they are also considered to be unseen spirits, associated with space, air, fire, water and fluidity.

There is an archetypal image of Shiva and Shakti - the primordial male and female aspects of creation – as two mating serpents, interwoven to form a caduceus symbol. This is an image found in esoteric tantric art, and symbolises complete union; the great naga, kundali.

In this form the great Shiva and Shakti nagas are at the centre of the naga universe, at the centre of the naga loka.

Flanking these primordial male and female aspects of creation, and all around them, there are said to be the eight Naga Raja [naga kings] and Naga Rani [naga queens] with four Naga Dikpala [guardians] - at the four quarters of the circle of the universe.

The Naga Raja can be recognised by a glowing gem, which is found on the top of his head, or on his forehead, or in his mouth. This gem can grant wishes and manifest the power of the nagas. This is called the naga mani, and it is one of the most precious things that a naga holds.

In our tradition, we say that when a shaman journeys to the lowest part of the Lower World, it is not dark, deep down there, because of the light that the naga mani radiates, making everything luminous instead of dark. So we say the naga mani is one of the most precious things that the world has ever had.

There is also a special naga, called Naga Kanya, or sometimes Naga Kumari. Naga Kanya is the ‘virgin naga,’ which means she has no family and lives on her own.

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In the winter of 2004 I met the late Quinturay Raypán, an Araucanian woman from Nueva Imperial in the Araucanía Region in the southern part of Chile. I met her in an old house in Ñuñoa, in Santiago de Chile, where she and her group ‘Leufu Licanche’ performed sacred dances and songs.

The performances she and her group gave was unusual, and rather detached from the normal folkloric performances one comes across. It began with an invocation, made by Quinturay herself, where she expelled the wecufus - harm causing demons - and other negative forces from the area, in order to ritually consecrate the space where the sacred dances and songs would take place.

Over the course of time I attended several other performances they gave, but despite trying to connect with Quinturay, her response to me - although cordial - was somewhat distant.

All this changed one day however, when I told her about a dream I’d had. In the dream, I was in a forest at night, a forest - similar to those of Araucanía or Alto BíoBío in the south of Chile - and a voice in the dream told me Quinturay was the name of a flower.

When I told her this peculiar dream, she nodded, and something in her face seemed to confirm the importance of the dream; and she
told me that this was indeed the case. It was then that our relationship changed and the distance I had felt from her evaporated, giving way to a deep friendship.

Soon afterwards she invited me to her home. I remember Quinturay showed me different objects there and introduced me to her pets. One of the first things that caught my attention was a kultrún, a ceremonial drum of the Araucanian people, used by their machi medicine people. It was hanging on a wall, and when I looked at it, she remarked emphatically “A kultrún should never be on the ground.”

Over the time that I knew her, I had many conversations with Quinturay - whom I discovered to be a very wise woman - and here are just some of my memories of some of the things we talked about in those conversations.

SACRED DRUM OF FIVE SUNS
Quinturay told me more about the kultrún drum in due course. She told me it is the ceremonial drum of the machi, and it consists of a large wooden bowl, whose upper part has been covered with an animal skin, on which the machi paint a design of the meli wintran mapu, which represents the four regions of the mapu, the earth.

Quinturay explained to me that the kultrún is consecrated for sacred use in a special way, and has certain special objects placed inside it, such as stones and the seeds of sacred plants. She told me that when the kultrún was ‘closed’, when the skin was put on, part of the consecration process was the breath and a special prayer made by the maker, which was sealed inside the bowl of the drum.

The design of the meli wintran mapu is a record of the great eras, or ‘suns,’ of the history of the Araucanian people. The four suns are painted on each of the quarters of the kultrún, because four suns have passed, and we are in the time of the fifth sun now, which is represented by the cross in the centre of the kultrún.

Four suns are painted on the drum because four suns have been seen, and when each ends, everything was destroyed with great cataclysms, where the earth was turned, and even the sun was lost.

Quinturay told me that according to her traditions, when this present sun - the fifth sun - was born, all the people in the north of Chile who were on the earth’s surface died, and for that reason some took refuge in underground cities placed under the desert and inside the volcanoes.

She told me; “Those who stayed upstairs became fools…” and explained to me how everything -
ora was late; still breathing heavily as she logged on to our Zoom meeting. I could see in her dark eyes that she was worried. “Hi Nora, so glad you could make it, and seeing you alive,” I cheerfully welcomed her. “We are waiting for you. Are you ready to guide us on a journey?”

She smiled; “Sorry I was biking as fast as I could. London is very crowded these days.” she apologised.

“Would it be OK if I tell people how we met?” I asked her.

“Oh, sure!” She giggled. It all started with her mother, Lesley. Lesley had recommended that Nora come for a few sessions, as she was in a very confusing time of her life. Nora had a failing fashion business and needed to find herself. After a few months, I asked her if she could help me with editing and organising a book I was working on, which she did, but unfortunately for me, she found a ‘real job,’ working for a late-night TV talk show; so we said goodbye, but kept in touch.

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One day, Lesley called me, frantic with worry. “Can you see what happened to Nora, she is very sick,” she begged.

I stopped what I was doing in my office and entered the ‘other zone,’ and as I did an image arose in my mind’s eye.

“I see her on an Island, it is dark, is it Bali?” I asked.

“Yes, yes, she went to Bali,” Lesley exclaimed.

“I see her at the entrance of a small house, no, it is like a hotel, there are two young women in the entrance.”

“Yes, she was travelling with her girlfriend.”

“But in the back, I see a local woman, with a dark face, long dress, black flowing hair, and she is mad with anger. I think she sent Nora a curse with her hands, into her stomach; like a bolt of lightning. I think she wanted to kill Nora as revenge.”

“Let me see. This is a European hotel. They took her livelihood. Also, a Western tourist molested her daughter, and now she hates tourists, and especially those who remind her of her daughter’s suffering.”

I felt exhausted by the traumas unfolding in my vision.

“Is any of that true? I asked.

“I’ll ask Nora and get right back to you.” Lesley hung up abruptly.

I didn’t have to wait long for her call. “Yes,” she said. “Everything you said was right.”

I wanted to hear it from Nora, so Lesley gave me her number, and I rang her right away.

Nora told me that she had felt great until that night, when she had a panic attack. Nora had lived in Bali for two years and was visiting her university friend, Claire. They had decided to visit some of the smaller islands off Bali.

Arriving late to the Island, they were relieved to find a small hotel before dusk turned to dark and night fell. Immediately after checking in, Nora began to feel terribly sick, as if someone had punched her in the stomach, and in the following days she felt increasingly angry and emotional for no reason she could define.
She was hit with what seemed to be a stomach bug; and a few days later, she flew back to New York to seek treatment. By then, it was liver failure. She turned yellow, the doctors were worried and put her on the liver transplant waiting list.

She grew sicker by the day, as the doctors searched but found no cause for her sudden liver failure. Over the course of three weeks, she was tested, probed, questioned, and given no medication that might obscure the path of the disease. Her liver’s function dropped dangerously low until the doctors gave her about three days to live, and she rose to the top spot on the transplant list. Then, a miracle happened, and a matching healthy liver was found, just before Nora’s body could no longer sustain itself. She was scheduled for the operation and needed to see me urgently.

As the head of the ICU department – who was remarkably open to someone doing shamanic work on a patient – and the nurses stood guarding the door, I performed a full limpia - a traditional cleansing ceremony from the Andes - with trago [sugar cane rum], plants, Agua de Florida, eggs, stones and flowers.

Nora’s body was puffed, bloated, and frighteningly yellow. She was anxious and in deep panic. We all knew that there was a good chance her body would reject the new liver. I asked her to communicate with the mighty Imbabura - a masculine volcanic mountain in Ecuador - and embody his strength and grounding to fortify her weakening body.

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The Southern Paiute are a tribal people who live in Northern Arizona, Southern Nevada, and Southwestern Utah in the USA. Before the European invasion of their homelands and subsequent genocide, they had a long established sacred healing tradition which now only survives in fragments, like much of other Native American sacred ways. This article is based on accounts and material gathered during the 1930s and subsequently published by Isabel Kelly of the University of California. Although it is written in the past tense, some of these traditions no doubt still exist, at least in part.

In Paiute medicine ways, the act of dreaming was completely integral in the tradition, and medicine dreamers who healed - puaxant - always received their healing power through their dreams. The Paiute puaxant tradition was not a shamanic tradition in the strict sense of the word, as trance and shamanic trance journeys were not part of puaxant techniques; indeed spirit trances of any kind were unknown to the puaxant. But despite this they were still able to work with spirits in the dream state and also by ‘seeing’ the spirits and communicating with them in the everyday awake world; as a puaxant was said to have a special awareness, not found in ordinary people.

Sacred power came unsought, through their dreams, but the act of dreaming was considered dangerous, for to forget a dream could prove fatal; and to wake someone up if they were dreaming might frighten that person to death, and bring sickness to the person who did the disturbing.

**SEEKING A DREAM**

Someone who was to become a puaxant might begin to dream when they were quite a young child, carefully remembering their dreams until early adulthood. The dreams took many forms, but sometimes where of repeatedly struggling with an animal - the same animal every night - until the dreamer overcame it. When that happened the spirit animal would start to teach them. A person who dreamed a strong dream which indicated they might

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**Left**: Chief Lemee [Christian Jorgensen ‘Chris’ Brown] (1896 - 1956) a Paiute dancer and costume maker. Photo C1940

**Below**: the landscape of the Paiute people

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**DREAMERS, DANCERS AND SINGERS**

Southern Paiute Medicine Ways, as recorded in the early C20th
have the ability to become a puaxant, but who did not want to become one, could throw the dream away and not act on it. They would rise early in the morning and, holding their hands to their mouth, blow away the spirit of the dream. If they did this there were generally no negative consequences.

Sometimes powerful medicine dreams where sought at sacred places within the landscape, such as the now famous Gypsum Cave, near modern day Las Vegas. The dreamer would make an offering, which was usually tobacco, to the spirits of the place, and then remain there throughout the night.

When finally confident that they had a true gift of power, the new puaxant announced their calling, and were given an opportunity to test their power by treating someone.

Becoming a puaxant was open to members of any gender, male or female, or those who were ‘berdache’ - two spirited - between or outside of binary gender. However most puaxant were men, and those who were women were sometimes considered to be potentially malevolent and treated with caution.

The spirits who came in dreams sometimes came in human form - a man a woman, or a child - but, more frequently they came in the form of an animal such as a bear, coyote, badger, wildcat, mountain lion, mountain sheep, porcupine, eagle, hawk or another animal. Some puaxant reported that the spirit was not visible to the dreamer straight away in their dreams but they saw it later, in the daytime, when alone, and then it began to visit them in dreams at night.

These spirit animals were visible only to the puaxant, and although other puaxant might know their identity, an ordinary person would not.

Several different spirits could come to a puaxant in the course of their life, from whom they received healing songs, dances and all the other ritual instructions they needed.

The puaxant’s spirit helper imposed individual rules of ritual conduct, which varied between puaxant. For example, one puaxant might always dance with a hand clapped to their ear because their spirits told them to dance like that. Ritual objects too were individual.
It was on a Saturday afternoon, and the sun was sinking below the trees next to Red Clay Creek, throwing shadows onto the natural amphitheatre where we were gathered. It was October 1991, and I was at the Ashland Nature Reserve, in Delaware, North America. The steamy heat of the east coast summer had fallen away to leave the warm days of autumn, and the foliage was starting to turn.

I had brought my family to a Harvest Moon Festival being held there, and it had been a charming event for my three girls, pressing apples, walking nature trails and time in a pumpkin patch.

We were gathered under the trees, white oak, hickory, red maple, tulip trees and beech, to listen to William Netamuxwe Bock, Sauts, ‘The Bat,’ a medicine man of the Algonquin Lenni-Lenape Wolf Clan.

Sauts was a small man with a pointed nose, tanned skin and flashing brown eyes. He talked about the mythology of his people, and of the basic belief that the land had a certain amount of soul within it. He told us that this soul was shared between all the plants, the animals and the people, and it passed from one to another. As the plants grow and die, their souls pass into other plants, or into the animals and the people who ate them.

This passing of soul was always treated with respect. Soul bound together everything in the environment, but if the trees were taken away, or too many people came onto the land, there would not be enough soul, and people would be walking around as two-leggeds with no soul. A being who lived with no soul tended to fall into fear and anger, leading to depression, he told us, and explained how no-souls may even take their own lives, as they are cut off from the compassion which binds everything together.

The thought of compassion that binds people and the environment together struck me deeply, but it was at odds with the direction that my working life was leading me. For me, at that time, the virtues of ‘pushing ahead for the greatest
A mountain of bison skulls waiting to be ground up and made into fertiliser. Eradicating the bison was a deliberate policy to destroy Native people. “Kill every buffalo you can! Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone” was a typical quote of the time.

Photo: C1870
The other day I went to Rosebud and saw a group of about twenty Indians I know. They were sitting in the hallway of the council house. You can always find a crowd there, sitting and waiting, sitting and waiting, for lease money, for a job, for some kind of red tape to be cut. They let them wait. Indians have got so much time. Everybody knows that.

Well, those men gave me a big smile and I had to do a lot of handshaking. There was one old man from Norris. He had once been a medicine man, but had given up on it many, many years ago.

He said, “Say, John, you are a medicine man. I have been out of the Indian religion for a long time, but lately I feel bad about this. I want to tell my grandchildren, teach them the old way, but there is so much that I don’t understand, that I have forgotten.”

So I asked him what he wanted to know, and people were gathering around to hear what I had to say. The old man told me, “I want to know about the ghost dance.”

“Well, there are too many people walking here,” I tell him, “too much green frog-skin business and standing in line. How about going to the council hall and thresh things out there?”

“Okay, let’s go, hiyupo,” he said and followed me in there, and more people followed him.

It was like a tribal meeting, with everybody grabbing a chair, and I started to tell them what I know about the ghost dance. And from my vision, my dream, from what the Great Spirit and the little spirituals have shown me, from what I had heard from the old people when I was a small boy, I try to form the story.

Somewhere between 1880 and 1890 there was an eclipse of the sun. Many Indians felt the earth tremble and thought that the sun had died. They felt that a great misfortune was upon them. They had been put on the reservations to farm. They didn’t know how, but that didn’t matter.

They had years of drought. The wind blew their land away in clouds of dust. Even the white farmers, who had better land and the know-how, were having a hard time.

The Indians had been given some cattle for the land taken from them and they were supposed to breed them. But as the crops failed and the Government-issue food was late, the Indians ate the cattle. After that they starved.
Shaman’s Robe (Ritual Armour)
Buryat Mongol People, Southern Siberia
Late C19th
Goat skin and other leather, cowry shells
metal jingle cones, bells, and other amulets;
raven and hawk feathers; ermin and polecat fur;
woolen tweed and cotton cloth

An elaborate shaman’s robe made mostly from
tanned goat skin with fabric and fur additions and
hung with many iron jingle cones, bells, two iron
bows and arrows, zoomorphic amulets and other
items. It is hung with many cloth snakes on the back
which represent naga serpent spirits. Nagas - known
as lus in Mongolia - are a very important spirit power
in Mongolian and Siberian shamanism.