

# Village Of The Serpent

Kampung Naga is a Javanese village whose origins are buried in the mists of time and where the lifestyle has not changed for centuries. **Jonathan Agranoff** went there to learn a little more about this mysterious place and its people

DEEP IN THE WEST JAVA COUNTRYSIDE, AT the bottom of a deep and verdant valley, lies a village like no other there. Its name means serpent or dragon and the ancestry of its people—although they are friendly and hospitable—is shrouded in mystery and myth.

Unlike most villages in Java, Kampung Naga has no cars, no motorbikes and no street hawkers. In fact, it has no roads. The houses, like a nest of black ants with their thick black thatched roofs, loom out of the valley and are of a unique design. Based on an old Sundanese tradition, the identical houses face south, with the entrance from the north. Built entirely of forest products, these houses are the last vestiges of an ancient civilisation.

The children in this forgotten village travel up the valley to go to the modern primary school and the villagers make the occasional visit to the west Javan capital of Bandung, where they meet the fast lane of modern Indonesia. At the end of the day, however, they return to the feudal economy of their village, content to let the twentieth century pass them by.

So, where do these people come from and why are they so different? Alas, their past is still a mystery and all efforts to uncover their history have met with disappointment for, in 1956,



all written records of the village were lost forever. This was the year when the Darul Islam, a fanatical Islamic group that threatened the newly-independent country, ransacked the village and burned all its records.

Stacks of lontar leaf manuscripts, the ancient written scrolls dating back centuries and the only historical re-

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*The serpent (or dragon) still rules in this little village, but for how long is uncertain*

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cords of the Naga, were all destroyed by fire in a matter of minutes.

Well, almost all, for an ancient brass plate engraved in Sanskrit had been taken and lost by the Dutch many years before. To this day its whereabouts are still a mystery.

Only the village elders knew what was in the scrolls, and the last elder had died at the time of the fire, without a new one having been appointed.

The present headman comes from a generation that doesn't remember the ancestry of his people and raises

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his hands in despair when asked about it. What is clear is that the Nagas know they are different from their Sundanese neighbours and, although they share the same language, there is something distinctly different about them. Like foreigners orphaned in another land, the Naga people tend to be rather reserved but always polite and courteous to those who tread down their path and stare at their ancient way of life.

Kampung Naga is a pleasant and friendly village where everyone seems to have a job to do. The 105 little houses are traditionally thatched in either *alang-alang* (a type of grass), or *tepus*, a black palm-fibre from the forest that is an important traditional material. Similarly, the walls are made of woven bamboo strips that are painted over with white lime paint, their black roofs make them stand out like soldiers at the bottom of the valley. The



position of each house has been the same since they were built, probably about 200 years ago, although no-one really knows their age. Nevertheless, they were built to last and are scrupulously maintained.

The most important work of the villagers is rice-planting, which can produce at least three harvests a year because of the fertile volcanic soil, so that the village is self-sufficient in rice and sells the surplus in nearby towns or barter it for fertiliser.

The rice is processed traditionally in the village and is the job of the women who stand in the shade, rhythmically pounding the padi, their babies strapped to their backs.

They use the *lisung*, a long wooden hand-pounder with the padi in a large mortar, and this separates the husks from the brown rice beneath.

It is then milled by hand tools in the same way to remove the bran layers and produce polished white rice. There is no machine-driven rice mill in this village so everything must be done manually. In any case there is no electricity.

Although the people of Kampung Naga are now Muslims, they have retained many beliefs from their traditional past which have been integrated into their new religion. They believe in the ancestors, a trait specific to these ancient peoples.

In Kampung Naga they believe in one named Singaparana who created their village and is buried not far away on top of a hill where offerings are made.

Sacred relics are kept in his honour, although one cannot help noticing the incongruity of being strict Muslims at the same time.

Six times a year a special ceremony takes place in honour of Singaparana. The men go to the river, wash, then put on a special white cotton robe that they must wear to visit the grave of Singaparana. Suitably cleansed and attired, they carry cooked rice, burning incense and betel nut as offerings.

A ritual sweeping of the grave site then takes place, after which they feast in honour of their ancestors. An auspicious occasion, indeed, and one that few outsiders will ever witness.

The tiny community of Kampung Naga is the last of its kind. Although it has survived intact, it can no longer tell the tales of the ancestors to its children. As the sun sets over the rice

## Tracing The Spread Of The Nagas

The Naga civilisation once prospered all over Asia. Their story began thousands of years ago on the cold steppes of Mongolia. Little is known about this period; most knowledge comes from their descendants scattered throughout Southeast Asia, where there are shared myths and legends.


Clues are dotted around all four corners of the old empires; from Yunnan in China, to Myanmar, India and as far south as Indonesia, where descendants of the Nagas apparently still remain. Here, these "ancient peoples" are still found in the remote outer islands of Sumba, Mentawai and beyond to the remote outposts in the Arafura Sea.

From Mongolia, they travelled southward through China, Persia and India until they reached Sri Lanka, where they settled to build their empire possibly around 2600BC and long before the Buddhist era on the island. At that time the island was known by the name Nagadvipa, or "Kingdom of the Serpent" and homeland of the Nagas.

Later, Sanskrit writings described the Nagas as "semi-divine snake men of Hindu myth"; the five-headed cobra that traditionally guarded the massive reservoirs of Sri Lanka now remains as a reminder of their engineering achievements and of the empire they ruled.

When Buddhism came to Sri Lanka, Nagas and Buddhists lived and worked well together since neither forced their beliefs on one another. Naga statues were constructed outside Buddhist temples and today, the five-headed serpent can be found on most of the ancient shrines throughout India and Sri Lanka and is represented by the dragon in China. From Sri Lanka, the Nagas drifted farther east to the Malayan peninsula, Thailand and Indochina.

Here they scattered and left their present-day descendants, hidden in tiny lost communities.—JA

fields, there is little to see in the dark valley below, save for the flicker of candles and the rush of the river over the smooth rocks. For the time being, the serpent (or dragon) still rules in this little village, but for how long is uncertain. 

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