

Lubum: Dwellings for the Serpents



Lu (ལུ) or a naga according to Buddhist belief is a subterranean being. The lubum (ལུ་འབྲུག་) or naga house are constructed in very much keeping with the experience of ancient tradition and customs. Countless subterranean beings live in the water and earth, and their images are seen all over Bhutan. The spirits called nagas are believed live everywhere. A lubum is a mini chorten like structure known as *lu khang* or naga house built to appease these subterranean naga spirits.

It is believed that when Zhapdrung Ngakwang Namgyel came to the country, he brought a *lu* known as Ralung Lu (ར་ལུང་ལུ) from Tibet as a protector with him. *Lu* are half human and half snake form, but only eminent lama can see them in a snake form. Lubum is a naga shrines in varied shapes built near the house or in flower garden with red belt stripes to mark its sacred nature. The lui bunter (ལུ་འབྲུག་གཉེར་), a treasure vase containing sacred substances for naga is inserted in the structure, in order to avoid being harmed by *lu sadak* (ལུ་ས་བདག) or naga landlords.

Lu, it is believed, live in a clean, pure and sacred spaces. They are vulnerable to pollution, so if one despoils the earth, then naga will exact revenge. Before one erects a house, building, or any other structure in Bhutan, one has to do a ceremony to ask the naga for permission to rearrange the earth. The Bhutanese believe that many illnesses, especially skin diseases, are caused by unhappy naga. If you are environmentally friendly, then naga will bestow wealth on you and give you good crops.

They are particularly sensitive to pollution. If the water level of lakes goes down, it is an indication that the *lu* has moved on. However, the *lu* is particularly vulnerable to physical and spiritual pollution and will react for this foment by causing prolonged illnesses, including boils and other skin infections. The *lu*'s home must be kept clean with milk and water three times per month, on days designated by the *tsip* (astrologer). By providing the spirits clean and respectable shelter, people are able to stay in their good graces and gain continual boons for their harvests and well-being. The *lu*, a spirit associated with water, brings prosperity and is believed to control a storehouse of underground treasure, like the Indian naga. If the *lu* is well placated, this bounty will accrue to the family who maintains their habitat, through bountiful harvests and other good fortune. If not happy, it can inflict great pain on the human beings in the form of skin diseases and wounds such as leprosy. In order to appease subterranean beings, a small structure is built out of mud and stones to represent their palace and from time to time offerings of milk, sugar and first harvest of the grains are offered with special rituals. The people conduct *lu chö* or offering to the *lu* mostly in the fifth month of the Bhutanese calendar to appease them for good fortune.

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