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Serpent Archetype in Philippine and Thai Mythology: Cross-Cultural Themes and Symbolism

Jennyfer F. Mendoza
Graduate School, Centro Escolar University–Manila / Isabela State University–Angadanan Campus, Philippines
jennyfer.mendoza@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the socio-semiotic dimensions of the Nāga and the Bakunawa, two significant serpent figures from Thailand and the Philippines, respectively, and investigated how these figures generate meaning and become woven into collective memory, identity, social values, and the relationships among humans, nature, and the sacred. Guided by Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Theory and Émile Durkheim's Theory of Social Facts, the study employed a qualitative comparative case study design in Bangkok, Thailand, and Iloilo, Philippines. Data were triangulated from documentary analysis, examination of visual and ritual artifacts, and semi-structured interviews with six purposively selected key informants—three Thai and three Filipino cultural experts, educators, and tradition-bearers. The data were analyzed thematically, through denotative and connotative interpretation, Peirce's triadic model of representamen, object, and interpretant, Durkheimian sociological interpretation, and cross-case comparison. Five themes emerged: the serpent as guardian and protector, as cosmic regulator, as symbol of cultural identity and collective memory, as mediator between the human and sacred worlds, and as living cultural heritage. The Nāga and the Bakunawa share symbolic ties to water, cosmic forces, cultural memory, and the human relationship with nature, yet their cultural roles diverge: the Nāga acts primarily as an institutionalized guardian of sacred space, moral order, prosperity, and spiritual protection within Thai Buddhist tradition, while the Bakunawa embodies cosmic disruption in Visayan mythology and is being reinterpreted as a symbol of collective action, resilience, ancestral memory, and cultural recovery. The study concludes that both figures operate as living socio-semiotic institutions whose meanings are continually produced, reinforced, and reshaped through rituals, institutions, education, art, and communal practices, with implications for comparative mythology, Southeast Asian studies, and heritage preservation.

Keywords: *Bakunawa, Nāga, Peircean Semiotics, Social Facts, Cultural Symbolism, Southeast Asian Mythology*

INTRODUCTION

Myths have long provided human societies with symbolic frameworks for understanding the natural world, developing cultural identity, passing on moral values, and preserving historical memory. Within mythologies, symbols represent something beyond the physical object depicted, and through stories, images, rituals, and material culture, they allow societies to express philosophical, religious, and cultural ideas. Among the many symbolic figures in world mythology, the serpent is one of the most common and meaningful. From ancient Mesopotamia to Egypt, Greece, India, China, Mesoamerica, and Southeast Asia, it has represented the guardian of knowledge, the creator of the world, the protector of life, the intermediary between humans and the supernatural, and the symbol of fertility and renewal, but also danger, chaos, and destruction. Because the meaning

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of the serpent in each culture depends on its history, environment, and tradition, understanding serpent archetypes requires attention not only to myths themselves but to how myths and symbols change and adapt along with the societies that sustain them.

In Southeast Asia, the serpent is especially significant in Indigenous cosmologies and religious traditions. Before the introduction of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, Indigenous communities viewed the world as an interconnected system of ancestral spirits, sacred beings, and natural forces, in which the serpent often served as a protector of rivers, mountains, and forests and represented fertility, protection, and ecological balance. When the major religions arrived, these serpent traditions changed in some respects while retaining many original meanings. In Thailand, the serpent became closely linked with the Nāga of Hindu-Buddhist traditions—protector of the Buddha, guardian of sacred places, and keeper of rivers and life-giving waters. Recent archaeological and anthropological work shows that the Nāga myth shaped settlement patterns, temple building, and sacred landscapes in northern Thailand and continues to reassert cultural persistence amid modernization (Moonkham, 2021), while Peircean semiotic analyses of temple architecture show that serpent ornamentation communicates sacred authority, cosmological harmony, protection, and historical continuity (Noer & Pradnyawan, 2024).

In the Philippines, the Bakunawa, a giant sea serpent associated with lunar eclipses in Visayan mythology, represents the relationship between humanity and the natural world and the balance between order and disorder in the universe. Despite colonization and Christianization, the Bakunawa survived through stories, folklore, literature, and heritage efforts, and it is increasingly regarded as a symbol of Indigenous identity and cultural revitalization in literature, education, visual arts, and heritage work (National Commission for Culture and the Arts [NCCA], n.d.). Although derived from shared Southeast Asian serpent motifs, the two figures developed under contrasting historical, religious, and socio-political conditions: the Thai Nāga became embedded in the religious architecture and state-supported heritage of Theravāda Buddhism, whereas the Bakunawa remained centered in Indigenous Visayan cosmology and was later redefined under Spanish colonization (Chang, 2022; Moonkham, 2021).

Renewed scholarly interest in myths as living expressions of culture has been reinforced by global efforts to protect Indigenous knowledge and intangible cultural heritage, including Sustainable Development Goal 11, Target 11.4, which calls for strengthened efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2003). Nevertheless, the literature on Southeast Asian serpent mythology consists mostly of isolated studies of either the Thai Nāga or the Philippine Bakunawa that focus on religious history, folklore, archaeology, or heritage within national contexts. Few studies analyze both serpent figures comparatively, and fewer still integrate semiotic and sociological perspectives to explain how serpent symbols generate cultural meaning while also becoming collective social realities that shape identity, heritage, and social practice.

To address this gap, the present study conducted a comparative socio-semiotic analysis of the Thai Nāga and the Philippine Bakunawa, guided by Peirce's Theory of Semiotics and Durkheim's Theory of Social Facts. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions: (a) What recurring themes, cultural roles, commonalities, and differences emerged in the portrayal of the serpent archetype as represented by the Thai Nāga and the Philippine Bakunawa? (b) How did the representations of the Thai Nāga and the Philippine Bakunawa reflect evolving social realities and belief systems in Thailand and the Philippines? and (c) What socio-semiotic insights might be derived from a comparative analysis of the two using Peirce's and Durkheim's theories? The study examined the symbolic, cultural, religious, and socio-cultural dimensions of the two serpent traditions; it did not address the historicity of mythological creatures or the theological validity of religious beliefs, nor did it survey other Southeast Asian serpent traditions such as the Cambodian Neak or the Lao and Burmese Nāga except as comparative background. By developing an integrated socio-semiotic framework and documenting the two traditions as enduring expressions of Indigenous knowledge and cultural identity, the study seeks to contribute to comparative mythology, Southeast Asian studies, semiotics, anthropology, and heritage studies, and to inform educators, cultural institutions, policy makers, and local communities engaged in cultural preservation.

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Literature Review

Myth as a Cultural System

Scholarly perspectives have shifted from viewing mythology as a remnant of ancient society to understanding it as an evolving form of cultural knowledge. Malinowski (1926) emphasized the social functions of myth, describing myths as "charters" that validate social institutions and guide community life. Geertz (1973) argued that culture is a system of symbols through which members of a society express and transmit their values, beliefs, and meanings, while Eliade (1959) held that myths and sacred symbols link a community to its origins and preserve religion and culture across generations. Douglas (1966) further highlighted the importance of symbols and rituals in maintaining social order.

Myths are also closely tied to collective identity and memory. Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined communities explains how shared narratives and symbols allow people who never meet to imagine themselves as members of a common community, and Smith (1999) observed that ethnic and national identities are formed around origin myths, historical recollections, and sacred symbols. Assmann's (2011) theory of cultural memory explains why myths retain long-lasting importance: through texts, rituals, monuments, and institutions, cultural memory preserves a group's self-image across generations. In Southeast Asia, these processes are evident in serpent mythologies, where the Nāga has long been associated with Thai religious and cultural identity and the Bakunawa has been reinterpreted in modern Philippine heritage discourses (Chang, 2022; Moonkham, 2021; Munsap & Phakdeephasook, 2022).

Serpent Symbolism in Comparative Perspective

Serpent symbols are among the most enduring images in human mythology. Jung (1964) associated recurring symbols with the collective unconscious and regarded the serpent as an archetype of transformation, instinct, wisdom, danger, and renewal, while Campbell (1949) linked recurring mythic elements to universal human experiences of creation, initiation, death, and rebirth. Eliade (1959) noted the association of serpents with regeneration, fertility, water, and sacred land, and the shedding of skin has long served as an image of cyclical renewal. In South and Southeast Asian religious traditions, serpents are also associated with divine attributes; Boonsong (2018), for instance, analyzed serpents as symbols representing the characteristics of the Hindu god Shiva.

Although archetypal theories explain recurring elements, recent research cautions that serpent symbolism is not consistent across time and space. Myths and symbols are shaped by specific social, historical, and cultural circumstances that allow communities to create, share, and reinterpret meanings (Della Costa, 2023; Munsap & Phakdeephasook, 2022). Comparative work on Southeast Asian serpent traditions shows that serpent symbols mediate between human society, supernatural forces, political power, and natural systems, yet the meanings attached to them differ from culture to culture (Chang, 2024; Gabica, 2025; Moonkham, 2021). A comparative view of the Thai Nāga and the Philippine Bakunawa therefore requires attention to both the shared regional heritage of serpent imagery and the particular historical, ecological, and religious features of each society.

Indigenous Cosmologies in Southeast Asia

Indigenous cosmologies function as knowledge systems that shape social arrangements, environmental ethics, and community identity, and they emphasize relationality—the view that humans are part of networks involving plants, animals, ancestors, spirits, and cosmic forces (Whyte, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Descola (2013) and Ingold (2000) argued that many Indigenous communities do not draw sharp boundaries between nature and culture, situating humans within ecosystems, and Wilson (2008) stressed that Indigenous ways of knowing emphasize relationships with place, community, ancestors, and spirits. Research on Indigenous ecological knowledge further shows that sacred relationships with the environment transmit ecological observations and responsibilities and can make environmental protection a moral obligation (Cajete, 2020; Zurba et al., 2022).

Within such cosmologies, serpents commonly inhabit water and sacred land and serve as intermediaries between the human and divine realms, symbolizing fertility, renewal, transformation, and cosmic balance. The

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Nāga's association with rivers, rain, and fertility reflects the water-based cosmologies of mainland Southeast Asia, particularly the Mekong region (Moonkham, 2021), while the Bakunawa's association with the sea, the moon, and celestial movements reflects an Indigenous maritime understanding of environmental processes and cosmic equilibrium. These cosmologies provide the broader framework within which the two serpent figures can be compared.

The Thai Nāga

The Nāga originated in South Asian religious traditions as a semi-divine being associated with water, fertility, protection, hidden knowledge, and sacred places. As Indian religions spread into mainland Southeast Asia, the Nāga interacted with pre-existing beliefs about water spirits, ancestors, and sacred landscapes, and it was incorporated into temple architecture, sculpture, royal symbols, and rituals. In Thai Buddhism, the story of the Nāga king Mucalinda, who sheltered the meditating Buddha from a rainstorm, established the Nāga as a guardian, protector, and devoted helper, and Nāga sculptures along temple staircases and entrances mark the transition between ordinary and sacred space (Moonkham, 2021).

The Nāga continues to carry diverse meanings in contemporary Thailand. Studies have documented the semiotic construction of Nāga beliefs at shrines along the Mekong (Phutthanathanapa et al., 2022), the meaningful value of Nāga patterns on the religious textiles of Thai-Khmer communities (Klangrit et al., 2021), and the creation of new traditions and rituals of Nāga worship in contemporary Isan (Munsap & Phakdeephasook, 2022). Chang (2017, 2022, 2024) traced Nāga narratives and visual images in Thailand and showed how the Internet has influenced contemporary Nāga worship. These studies demonstrate that the Nāga persists in public monuments, festivals, arts, tourism, and digital media; however, they tend to examine the Nāga within single disciplines, and few treat it simultaneously as a symbol and a socially institutionalized cultural phenomenon.

The Philippine Bakunawa

The Bakunawa is an important serpent figure in Philippine mythology, especially among the Visayan peoples, commonly depicted as an enormous sea serpent that swallows the moon during a lunar eclipse. Communities traditionally responded by beating drums and gongs and making noise to compel the serpent to release the moon, an act that expresses the reciprocal relationship between people and the cosmos. McCoy (1982) documented the persistence of Bakunawa beliefs in Western Visayan animist religion, where the serpent was associated with eclipses and other natural phenomena, and Gabica (2025) examined the legend as a source of cultural knowledge transmitted through storytelling.

Spanish colonization and Christianization transformed Indigenous worldviews; Blanco (2023) and Bankoff (1999) described how colonial religion reshaped native beliefs about the supernatural, yet Indigenous traditions persisted in local practice. Recent scholarship challenges the view that Indigenous knowledge was simply lost during colonial times: Acabado and Martin (2022) argued that communities reclaim and reinterpret their histories, Abuso (2022) emphasized the enduring cultural diversity of Indigenous peoples, and Presto and Viceral (2025) presented folklore as a decolonial tool. In contemporary literature, Derain (2021) reframed the Bakunawa through self-translation, illustrating how storytelling gives new meaning to ancient mythology. Still, studies of the Bakunawa remain divided among folklore, anthropology, and literary studies, and comparative studies with the Thai Nāga have not been thoroughly undertaken.

Heritage Preservation and Cultural Sustainability

The UNESCO (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage broadened the definition of heritage from physical objects to living practices, oral traditions, and knowledge transmitted across generations and constantly recreated by communities. Smith (2006) argued that heritage is not simply inherited but constructed through social processes of interpretation and participation, and Harrison (2013) described heritage as a critical, future-oriented practice. Rosetti et al. (2022) emphasized that the participation of local communities in heritage management links conservation with sustainable development. From this perspective, the

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Thai Nāga and the Philippine Bakunawa can be regarded as living heritage whose meanings are sustained through ceremonies, narratives, artworks, festivals, museums, education, and media.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study was anchored on two theories. Peirce's Semiotic Theory (Peirce, 1931–1958) holds that every sign has three interrelated components: the representamen, or the form of the sign; the object, or what the sign stands for; and the interpretant, or the meaning produced in the mind of the interpreter. Meaning is not fixed but develops through continuous interpretation—unlimited semiosis—shaped by social and cultural contexts. Related semiotic scholarship strengthens this view: Barthes (1972) distinguished denotation, the literal meaning of a sign, from connotation, its culturally shaped symbolic meaning, and described myth as a system of meaning; Eco (1976) emphasized that sign meanings depend on cultural conventions; and Chandler (2007) described semiotics as the systematic study of meaning-making within a culture. In this study, the Nāga and the Bakunawa were treated as signs whose meanings are constructed and reconstructed in myths, rituals, visual arts, architecture, literature, and contemporary cultural expressions.

Durkheim's Theory of Social Facts (Durkheim, 1895/1982) holds that society functions through shared beliefs, values, norms, customs, and institutions that exist independently of individuals and exert coercive power over their thought and behavior, and his later work on religion describes collective representations and collective consciousness sustained through ritual and institutions (Durkheim, 1912/1995). Carls (2022) revisited Durkheim's late work to show that symbols emerging from ritual shape behavior and meaning within society. Applied to this study, Durkheim's theory explains how serpent meanings become established in society and act as social facts that influence shared beliefs, customs, and identities. Together, the two theories allow the study to examine how serpent figures function simultaneously as semiotic signs and as social facts.

As shown in Figure 1, the Nāga (Thailand) and the Bakunawa (Philippines), situated within their cultural contexts, were examined through textual, visual, and ritual data as signs carrying ideas about serpent archetypes. Their meanings were interpreted through Peircean triadic semiotics, and the resulting interpretations were examined through Durkheim's concept of social facts to understand how the serpents shape common beliefs, moral standards, cultural identities, and social customs. The findings for both cases were then synthesized through comparative cross-case analysis to formulate insights into how the serpent archetypes establish distinct forms of cultural sense-making and worldviews within their communities.

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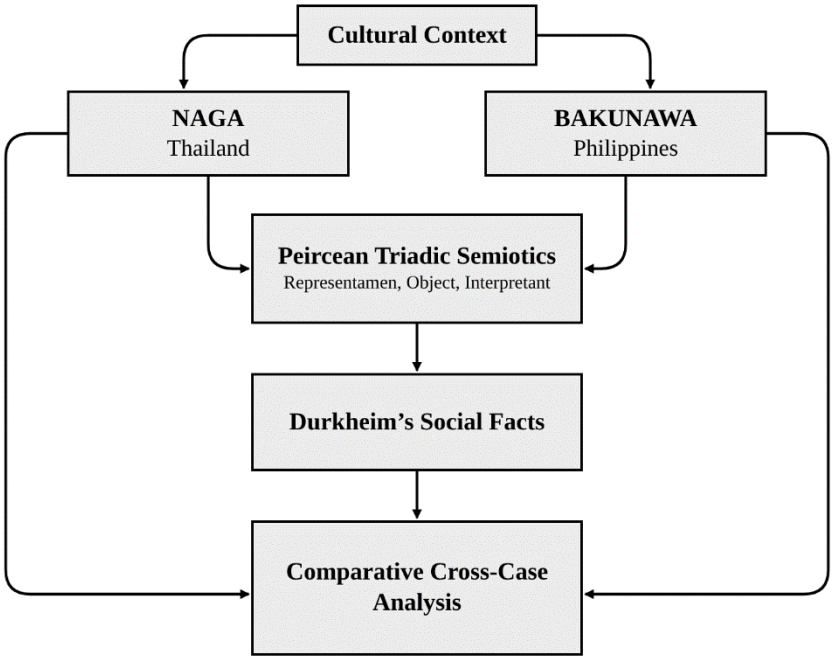


Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework of the Study*

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative comparative case study design anchored in the interpretive-constructivist paradigm, which holds that cultural meanings are socially constructed and continually negotiated within historical and social contexts (Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012). Case study research promotes in-depth understanding of complex cultural phenomena in their natural settings (Stake, 1995), and comparative case studies make it possible to identify similarities, differences, and contextual variation across cases (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Thailand and the Philippines were treated as two independent yet comparable cultural cases. Methodological triangulation was achieved by combining three complementary sources of evidence: documentary and archival materials; visual and material artifacts; and semi-structured interviews with purposively selected cultural experts.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in two culturally significant settings: Bangkok, Thailand, and Iloilo, Philippines. Bangkok, as the political, religious, and cultural center of Thailand, contains numerous forms of Nāga symbolism in Buddhist temples, royal architecture, museums, shrines, public monuments, art installations, and festivals. Iloilo was chosen because the Bakunawa is strongly tied to Visayan tradition and is preserved there through oral history, folklore, literature, art, museums, festivals, and educational institutions. The sites were selected on the basis of cultural relevance, comparability, accessibility of multiple forms of qualitative data, and methodological suitability for applying both Peirce's and Durkheim's theories. Field observations were conducted in Buddhist temples such as the Grand Palace and Wat Pho, community shrines, museums, and commercial-cultural spaces such as ICONSIAM and the Park Hyatt in Bangkok, and in museums, cultural centers, heritage places, and public murals in Iloilo City.

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Participants and Sampling Technique

Six key informants—three from the Philippines and three from Thailand—were selected through purposive sampling, which allows researchers to select information-rich participants with special knowledge of the phenomenon (Etikan et al., 2016; Patton, 2015). Inclusion criteria required that participants (a) be experts in history, anthropology, cultural studies, folklore, or linguistics; (b) have direct knowledge of or professional engagement with serpent traditions in the Philippines or Thailand; (c) be affiliated with a cultural office, research institution, university, or government heritage unit; (d) participate voluntarily; and (e) have at least five years of experience in cultural work. Individuals lacking direct expertise in serpent-related traditions and those with potential conflicts of interest, such as commercial promoters of cultural events, were excluded. The sample size was guided by the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016) and by the recurrence of themes across interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Table 1 presents the profile of the key informants.

Table 1. *Profile of the Key Informants*

Code	Nationality	Expertise	Professional Role	Institutional Affiliation	Interview
PKI-1	Filipino	Bakunawa	Educator, Associate Professor, Cultural Bearer	Central Philippines State University	Online
PKI-2	Filipino	Bakunawa	Social Science Faculty Member, Cultural Bearer	Capiz State University	Online
PKI-3	Filipino	Bakunawa	Social Science Faculty Member, Cultural Worker, Cultural Bearer	College of Arts and Sciences, West Visayas State University	Iloilo City
TKI-1	Thai	Nāga	Educator, Associate Professor, Buddhist Religious Practitioner	Linguistics Department, University of the Philippines Diliman	Online
TKI-2	Thai	Nāga	Educator, Associate Professor, Buddhist Religious Practitioner	Faculty of Education, Ramkhamhaeng University	Bangkok
TKI-3	Thai	Nāga	Lecturer, Buddhist Religious Practitioner	Bangkok University	Bangkok

Note. PKI = Philippine key informant; TKI = Thai key informant.

Research Instrument

Three instruments were used: a document and artifact analysis guide, a semi-structured interview guide, and a cross-case comparison matrix. The document and artifact analysis guide recorded the source, type, cultural context, representamen, object, interpretant, observed themes, and evidence of symbolic or social meaning of each item. The interview guide, developed from the research questions and the themes identified in the documentary review, covered the representation and symbolic meanings of the serpent archetypes, their historical development, religious and cultural significance, changing contemporary interpretations, institutional preservation, and emerging socio-cultural issues. The interview guide was content-validated by a panel of experts in qualitative research, Southeast Asian studies, mythology, and cultural studies, revised according to their comments, and pilot-tested with individuals of similar backgrounds who were not included in the final sample.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered in four phases. In the first phase, documentary research reviewed books, peer-reviewed articles, historical documents, folklore collections, museum and heritage documents, government documents, theses, and digital archives on the Nāga and the Bakunawa; sources were included only if they substantively concerned either serpent, had verifiable authorship or provenance, and contributed to at least one research question. In the second phase, visual and material artifacts—temple sculptures, museum collections, public monuments, murals, statues, heritage exhibits, and festival imagery—were documented through field observation and analyzed in four successive stages: description, denotation, connotation, and theoretical

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interpretation. In the third phase, semi-structured interviews of approximately 60 to 90 minutes were conducted face-to-face in Bangkok and Iloilo City or through secure online platforms, depending on the informants' availability, and were audio-recorded with permission. In the fourth phase, documentary findings, artifact analyses, and interview data were systematically integrated to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through an iterative, multi-stage process. Following Creswell and Poth (2018), thematic analysis proceeded through data familiarization, open coding of recurring symbolic meanings (e.g., guardianship, protection, fertility, water symbolism, cosmic balance, eclipse mythology, sacred mediation, community identity, and heritage preservation), categorization of similar codes into conceptual clusters, and development of themes guided by recurrence across data sources, relevance to the research questions, and theoretical significance. Each theme was then examined at the denotative level (literal, observable features) and the connotative level (culturally constructed meanings). Peircean semiotic interpretation identified the representamen, object, and interpretant of each serpent representation, and Durkheimian sociological interpretation assessed whether serpent meanings exhibited the externality, recurrence, influence, and collective roles of social facts. Finally, cross-case comparison identified similarities and differences between the two traditions. Table 2 illustrates the code-to-theme progression used to ensure that interpretations could be traced from raw data to conclusions.

Table 2. *Illustration of the Code-to-Theme Progression*

Raw Data	Initial Code	Category	Theme
"The Naga serve as symbolic guardians of holy areas"	Protective presence	Divine role	Symbols of power and authority
Royal seats from the 20th century feature multiple Nāga and serpent adornments	Divine kingship	Political authority	Symbols of power and authority
"The Bakunawa is powerful because it can affect the environment"	Supernatural power	Cosmic authority	Symbols of power and authority
"Bestow upon warriors the Bakunawa's power and presence during combat"	Protection	Symbolic guardian	Symbols of power and authority

Trustworthiness was established following Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation, member checking of interview summaries, and prolonged engagement with the data; dependability through an audit trail of methodological decisions and a uniform analytical sequence; confirmability through reflexive journals, analytic memos, and the use of direct quotations linked to documentary and artifact evidence; and transferability through rich descriptions of settings, participants, and analytic processes.

Ethical Consideration

The study was approved by the Centro Escolar University Institutional Ethics Review Board (CEU-IERB) before data collection. Participants were invited formally through e-mail letters explaining the purpose, duration, and voluntary nature of the study, and interviews proceeded only after signed informed consent was obtained. Participants could decline any question or withdraw at any time without penalty. Recordings, notes, and transcripts were stored on a password-protected device with encrypted backup accessible only to the researcher and are to be retained for five years, and participants were identified only by codes. The study posed minimal risk; no monetary compensation was given, but participants received certificates of appreciation. Permission was sought when photographing sacred objects or spaces, sources of textual and visual materials were credited, and the researcher declared no conflict of interest.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Recurring Themes, Cultural Roles, Commonalities, and Differences in the Portrayal of the Thai Nāga and the Philippine Bakunawa

The triangulation of documents, artifacts, and interviews yielded five recurring themes. Table 3 summarizes how each theme was expressed in the two traditions, followed by a discussion of each theme.

Table 3. *Recurring Themes in the Portrayal of the Thai Nāga and the Philippine Bakunawa*

Theme	Thai Nāga	Philippine Bakunawa
Guardian and protector	Institutionalized guardian of the Buddha, sacred spaces, moral order, and prosperity	Protection arising from communal action against cosmic threat; protective imagery in material culture
Cosmic regulator	Controller of water, rain, fertility, and agricultural abundance; harmony of humans and environment	Embodiment of the cycle of cosmic disruption and restoration; guide to seasons and livelihood
Cultural identity and collective memory	Symbol of Buddhism, kingship, and national heritage; designated a national symbol in 2022	Symbol of precolonial Visayan cosmology and maritime heritage; recovered after colonial marginalization
Mediator between human and sacred worlds	Threshold guardian marking passage into sacred space; agent of spiritual transformation	Connector of human communities with celestial phenomena and the spiritual realm
Living cultural heritage	Sustained by temples, museums, festivals, tourism, popular media, and contemporary art	Revived through murals, literature, museums, education, digital art, and political reinterpretation

The Serpent as Guardian and Protector

Documentary sources describe the Thai Nāga as a guardian connected to sacred spaces, Buddhist teachings, and ecological well-being, epitomized by the account of Mucalinda sheltering the meditating Buddha. Temple architecture incorporates Nāga sculptures along stairways, entrances, and bridges, marking movement between ordinary and sacred space. The golden Buddha sheltered by a seven-headed Nāga at Wat Pho (Figure 2) illustrates this role: denotatively, a multi-headed serpent rises over and around the seated Buddha; connotatively, it signifies spiritual guardianship, sacred power, and the preservation of the Buddha's teachings. Thai informants confirmed this meaning. TKI-2 stated, "The major belief about the Naga, the first one, is to protect from danger, spiritual and physical. And the second one, blessing for wealth," and added that "the Naga is believed to protect and keep the good thing." TKI-1 described the Nāga as an object of devotion in times of hardship: "Some people, a lot of people—believe that naga is the kind of, of course, supernatural but angels: angels that we worship… when we need help, we have some difficulty, many people think about naga."

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Figure 2. *Golden Buddha Sheltered by a Nāga at Wat Pho, Bangkok, Thailand*

In the Philippines, documentary sources present the Bakunawa as a sea serpent that attempts to swallow the moon, a force that disrupts cosmic order. Its protective function emerges not from benevolence but from the communal practices developed around it, as communities beat drums, struck metal objects, chanted, and prayed to prevent the serpent from consuming the moon. PKI-1 explained, "It reminds us that there are forces bigger than humans and we need to respect and live in balance with them. So, during an eclipse, for example, communities would act together to protect the moon to show humility, cooperation and respect for the spiritual world." Material culture also links the Bakunawa to protection: a Visayan tenegre (bladed weapon) from Panay bearing a Bakunawa figural pommel associates the serpent's power with strength, vigilance, and readiness to confront threats. PKI-1 further observed that contemporary artists "paint the Bakunawa as majestic and protective, showing it rising over the sea, without evil connotations."

Comparatively, both serpents fulfill protective roles but through different cultural logics. The Nāga's protection is institutionalized, preventive, constant, and public, embedded in temples, rituals, monastic tradition, and religious life; the Bakunawa's protection is participatory, arising from moments of cosmic crisis that call for communal response. In short, the Nāga protects by holding off disorder, whereas the Bakunawa protects by compelling the community to restore order. This finding is consistent with Moonkham's (2021) account of the Nāga as part of the organization and legitimization of sacred space and with McCoy's (1982) documentation of collective eclipse responses in Western Visayan belief. In Peircean terms, the same recognizable representamen—a powerful serpent—yields different interpretants as it is encountered in different interpretive communities, illustrating unlimited semiosis. In Durkheimian terms, the protective meanings of both serpents exist beyond individual belief and are reproduced through temples, festivals, oral tradition, museums, and art, functioning as collective representations with normative force in community life.

The Serpent as Cosmic Regulator

Documentary records associate the Thai Nāga with the control of natural powers related to water, rain, fertility, and agricultural abundance. Buddhist texts, folklore, and historical accounts describe it as protector of rivers, springs, lakes, and underground waters, and rituals invoking the Nāga are linked to agricultural cycles,

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especially in communities along the Mekong River. Nāga balustrades along temple staircases and sacred ponds visually connect earthly space with spiritual cosmology, and Nāga statues along the Mekong relate natural forces to human existence. TKI-2 linked this regulating role to community life: "Naga tradition or belief can be represented as harmony or peace in a community, such as the Songkran Festival in Thailand… we have to put water in and Naga gives water and that's harmony. That's peace and community."

In the Philippines, the Bakunawa myth expresses a traditional Visayan understanding of cosmic order and disorder. Beyond explaining eclipses, it embodies a recurring cycle of disruption and restoration in nature and human life, often depicted in art as a serpent chasing or coiling around the moon. This regulating function is materially expressed in the traditional Ilonggo calendar, the Almanaque Panayanhon, which divides the year into four periods (panahon) with different positions of the Bakunawa in each (Figure 3). PKI-3 explained that the almanac is "a guide when to plant, when to harvest crops, to build houses and to transfer to new houses and what are the ideal months… And these are based on the movement of the Bakunawa," and that Indigenous communities in Panay are also familiar with the concept. PKI-3 added that whenever there is a lunar eclipse, the Bakunawa story resurfaces as an expression of "reverence with nature… especially among fisherfolk… [and] agricultural communities," while PKI-1 noted that the stories "encourage respect for nature, a sense of responsibility built through community, humility in the face of forces bigger than ourselves and the importance of balance in life."

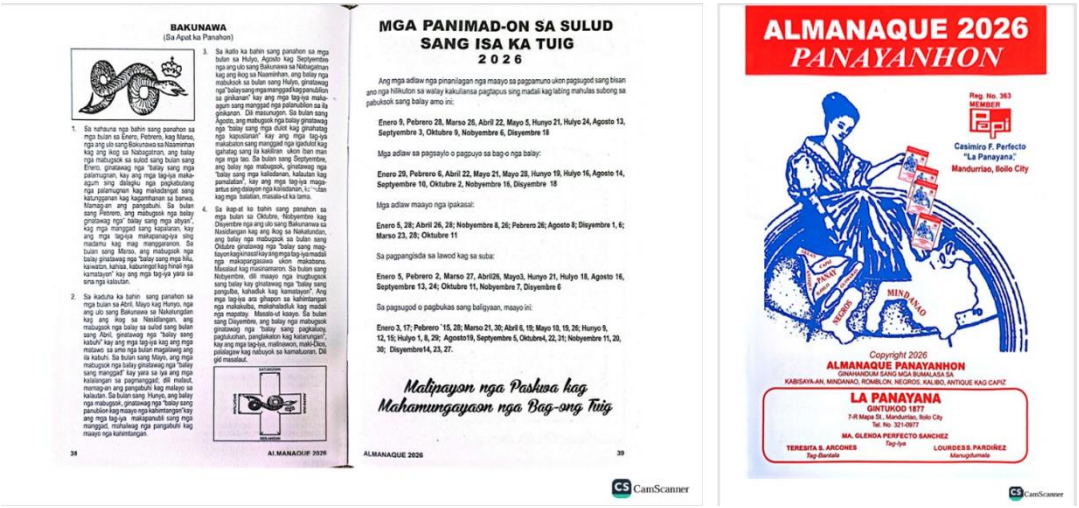


Figure 3. *Almanaque Panayanhon, Traditional Ilonggo Calendar*

Both serpents thus represent a concern with cosmic balance that relates human life to natural and sacred cycles. The Nāga regulates through its association with life-giving water, rain, and fertility, whereas the Bakunawa regulates through its association with the moon, celestial movement, and the timing of seasonal livelihoods. These findings support the view that Indigenous cosmologies transmit ecological observations and responsibilities through symbolic narratives (Cajete, 2020; Zurba et al., 2022) and are consistent with Gabica's (2025) treatment of the Bakunawa legend as a repository of cultural knowledge. As signs, the serpents' interpretants extend from supernatural beings to principles that govern relations among humans, nature, and the sacred; as social facts, these principles are embedded in festivals, agricultural practices, and calendars that guide collective behavior.

The Serpent as Symbol of Cultural Identity and Collective Memory

Historical documents show that the Thai Nāga is intertwined with Thai national identity as a long-established symbol of Buddhism, sacred tradition, kingship, and cultural heritage. A contemporary manifestation occurred in 2022, when the Thai government designated the Nāga as a national symbol, leading to a standard representation reflecting established beliefs and traditions. Museum collections reinforce this role; the royal

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chariot and royal seat with Nāga adornments at the National Museum Bangkok (Figure 4) demonstrate how the serpent was incorporated into royal and ceremonial objects that embody the history of the monarchy, Buddhism, and traditional cosmology. TKI-1 recalled, "Since we were born, I heard about the naga… when we go to the temple, we see the figure in almost all the Buddhist temple in Thailand," and affirmed that the belief "will be in the Thai culture last long, forever… because it's clearly like part of the root, with the Buddhism, with the architecture, with the structure. It becomes a part of the society."



Figure 4. *The Royal Chariot and the Royal Seat Featuring Nāga Adornments during the 20th Century*

The Philippine context differs. Documentary evidence suggests that the Bakunawa arose from precolonial Visayan cosmology as an explanation of lunar eclipses and an expression of the relationship between people and the cosmos. Historical material culture offers a point of comparison: the karakoa, a precolonial outrigger warship depicted in a historical engraving from Argensola's account of Spanish expansion in Southeast Asia, bears a serpent-like motif. Although this figure cannot be definitively identified as the Bakunawa, it serves as a visual reference for Indigenous serpent imagery, and the karakoa itself embodies precolonial maritime knowledge of boat-building, navigation, mobility, and communal organization (Scott, 1982). Filipino informants emphasized the Bakunawa's role in memory and identity. PKI-1 explained that the legend "strengthens Panundung or collective memory by passing these lessons and values from elders to younger generations, helping the community maintain a sense of kapwa or shared identity," and noted that "during colonization and Christianization, it became associated with evil… Today, however, many people are willing to see the Bakunawa again as a symbol of culture, memory and still, part of our identity."

Both serpents therefore serve as material and narrative anchors of collective memory, but from different historical positions: the Nāga embodies continuity through royal, religious, and state institutions, while the Bakunawa embodies the recovery of a precolonial identity marginalized by colonial rule. These findings reflect Assmann's (2011) account of cultural memory sustained through objects and institutions and Smith's (1999) observation that identities are built on origin myths and sacred symbols. They also echo recent scholarship on the reclamation of Indigenous histories in the Philippines (Acabado & Martin, 2022; Presto & Viceral, 2025). In Durkheimian terms, the serpents function as collective representations through which communities affirm who they are; in Peircean terms, the same serpent forms acquire interpretants tied to nationhood, monarchy, and Buddhism in Thailand and to indigeneity, kapwa, and decolonial memory in the Philippines.

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The Serpent as Mediator Between the Human and Sacred Worlds

Documentary evidence places the Thai Nāga in a cosmic position that mediates between the human and the sacred, both in Buddhist narratives such as the Mucalinda story and in the placement of Nāga figures along stairs and entrances of elevated sacred spaces, which visually accompany worshippers into religious structures. Thai informants emphasized this mediating and transformative role. TKI-2 explained, "Naga serve as between past and present… and human and spiritual realm," and TKI-3 recounted that the Nāga "met the Buddha and the Buddha enlightened him to be a really good soul… So if you are a bad guy, it doesn't mean you can't change yourself." The SookSiam Nāga escalator at ICONSIAM (Figure 5) transposes this threshold function into a contemporary commercial and cultural space, where Nāga balustrades frame the movement of visitors between levels.



Figure 5. *SookSiam Nāga Escalator at ICONSIAM, Bangkok, Thailand*

The Bakunawa mediates differently, by linking human communities with celestial events. During eclipses, communities acted together—making noise and calling the moon to return—so that the phenomenon became a shared encounter between people and the cosmological order. PKI-2 recalled from her grandmother's stories that the serpent was "associated with spiritual guidance… that you can overcome or defeat evil spirits. You have to strengthen your faith," and PKI-1 observed that the Bakunawa "has endured because it helps people make sense of things that are scary or uncertain like natural events or life challenges." In contemporary public space, the mural Si Magbanua kag ang Bakunawa along Muelle Loney Street in Iloilo City pairs a human figure from local narratives with the supernatural serpent, bringing the human and mythological worlds together in a maritime urban setting. Thus, the Nāga mediates through sacred architecture and Buddhist narrative, while the Bakunawa mediates through cosmological events and communal ritual. In both cases, the serpent as sign connects ordinary experience with a reality beyond it, and as social fact it structures how communities collectively relate to the sacred.

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The Serpent as Living Cultural Heritage in Contemporary Society

The documentary record shows that the Thai Nāga remains firmly embedded in the contemporary public sphere, as state cultural agencies, Buddhist organizations, museums, universities, and tourism bodies promote Nāga-related traditions through festivals, heritage programs, and education, and museum exhibitions increasingly frame the Nāga in relation to environmental protection and local history. The Nāga also appears in contemporary art and architecture, such as the Nāga installation by Hirotoshi Sawada at the Park Hyatt Bangkok, which renders a flowing serpent through a suspended series of batons. TKI-2 observed that "most of those who view the Big Naga [are] for tourism… Naga epic in film, drama, music… in modern Thai society, Naga reflects human search for… emotional security, meaning," while TKI-1 noted that the new generation knows the Nāga "because of the festival… We also read books… watch television series… soap operas… That's how not only the new generation but all of us learn about naga."

For the Philippine Bakunawa, documents reveal a significant cultural revival in recent decades, as universities, museums, cultural organizations, Indigenous communities, artists, and local governments reclaim and reinterpret precolonial mythology. Contemporary works include political reinterpretations, such as an art installation depicting a multi-mouthed Bakunawa as a metaphor for threats in the West Philippine Sea. PKI-2 stated, "Even if they don't see it as a literal creature or part of religious belief, the Bakunawa teaches lessons about respect for nature, cooperation, community values… it still remains relevant for shaping the new generation," and added that "artists, writers could bring it back with murals, literature and digital art… social media and animation are giving new life to the story."

Both societies, therefore, continuously reconfigure serpent symbolism in response to contemporary needs, but through different processes: in Thailand, relatively strong institutional continuity allows the Nāga to accumulate new meanings while retaining its religious role, whereas in the Philippines, the Bakunawa is undergoing cultural reclamation after centuries of colonial disruption. This contrast parallels Chang's (2024) finding that digital media are reshaping Nāga worship, Munsap and Phakdeephasook's (2022) documentation of newly created Nāga rituals, and Derain's (2021) literary reimagining of the Bakunawa. Consistent with the view of heritage as a living, participatory process (Smith, 2006; UNESCO, 2003), the findings show that mythological symbols remain alive because they remain socially productive.

Representations of the Thai Nāga and the Philippine Bakunawa in Relation to Evolving Social Realities and Belief Systems

The second research question examined how the two serpent archetypes have been reinterpreted as Thai and Philippine societies encountered historical transformation, religious change, colonialism, modernization, globalization, and heritage movements. Three patterns emerged, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. *Evolving Representations of the Thai Nāga and the Philippine Bakunawa*

Pattern	Thai Nāga	Philippine Bakunawa
Religious transformation and continuity	Pre-existing associations with water and fertility incorporated into Theravāda Buddhist cosmology; Buddhist interpretation remains dominant	Marginalized under Spanish colonization and Christianization; persisted in oral tradition and regional folklore
Cultural identity and heritage revitalization	Consistent national cultural icon in temples, museums, festivals, monuments, and tourism	Recent revitalization as an expression of precolonial cosmological thought and Indigenous identity
Contemporary ecological and social meanings	Metaphor for the preservation of rivers, forests, and biodiversity; ecological guardianship	Lesson in humility before nature, ecological reciprocity, and collective responsibility

Regarding religious transformation and continuity, the Nāga was progressively incorporated into Theravāda Buddhist cosmology, which reinterpreted rather than replaced earlier associations with water, fertility, and nature, transforming the Nāga from a local nature spirit into a sacred symbol of enlightenment, moral

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protection, and spiritual guardianship. Informants noted that Buddhist interpretation remains dominant, although younger Thais also associate the Nāga with cultural identity, ecological guardianship, and national heritage. In contrast, many precolonial cosmological beliefs in the Philippines were displaced under Spanish colonization, and the Bakunawa, though it persisted in oral tradition and folklore, became less publicly visible (Bankoff, 1999; Blanco, 2023). Informants and contemporary sources, however, reported a strong resurgence of interest in the Bakunawa as an embodiment of Indigenous spirituality, ecological wisdom, and precolonial historical consciousness.

Regarding cultural identity and heritage revitalization, the Nāga remains a consistent national icon encountered from childhood, even among those who are not religious, and museum exhibitions increasingly present it as part of Thailand's intangible cultural heritage. In the Philippines, museum exhibits, artistic performances, educational programs, Indigenous organizations, and academic studies are reinterpreting the Bakunawa as an expression of sophisticated precolonial cosmological thinking, and participants repeatedly stressed that the serpent today is about reviving Indigenous identity rather than mere folklore. Regarding ecological and social meanings, Thai participants—several of them Buddhist practitioners—described ecological guardianship as a modern expression of Nāga symbolism, while Filipino participants reinterpreted the eclipse story as a lesson in humility before nature, ecological reciprocity, and collective responsibility in times of environmental uncertainty. Murals, museum displays, literature, and digital media increasingly present both serpents as signs of environmental sustainability, climate consciousness, and cultural resilience.

These patterns show that shifting social realities do not weaken mythological traditions but generate new interpretations that keep them culturally relevant. Thailand represents a case of institutional continuity, in which Buddhist institutions allowed the Nāga to be religious, cultural, ecological, and national at once; the Philippines represents a case of cultural recovery, in which the Bakunawa is reconstructed by contemporary communities to address present concerns rather than restored in an unchanged precolonial form (Abuso, 2022; Acabado & Martin, 2022). In Peircean terms, the representamen takes new forms in sculpture, murals, literature, festivals, film, and digital art while the object remains anchored in established mytho-cultural tradition and the interpretant evolves with new historical conditions. In Durkheimian terms, these new meanings become socially influential as they are institutionalized and legitimized through religious institutions, museums, schools, festivals, the arts, and Indigenous movements.

Socio-Semiotic Insights from the Comparative Analysis

The third research question synthesized the findings through the integration of Peirce's and Durkheim's theories, yielding five socio-semiotic insights. First, the Nāga and the Bakunawa function as living sign systems rather than static mythological objects. The Nāga symbolizes sacred protection, wisdom, ecological harmony, and national identity, while the Bakunawa symbolizes cosmic balance, Indigenous resilience, historical memory, and ecological reciprocity. New historical conditions—globalization, environmental concerns, Indigenous revival, and digital communication—produce new interpretants without erasing earlier ones, consistent with Peirce's notion of unlimited semiosis (Peirce, 1931–1958).

Second, the longevity of the serpent archetypes depends on collective meaning sustained through social institutionalization. In Thailand, Buddhist temples and monasteries, educational institutions, museums, festivals, and heritage agencies regularly reproduce the Nāga's meanings; in the Philippines, museums, universities, Indigenous organizations, artists, local governments, and community traditions increasingly reenact the Bakunawa as a symbol of Indigenous heritage and ecological awareness. As Durkheim (1912/1995) argued, such collective representations become external realities that shape individual cognition and social behavior; informants consistently described the serpent traditions as part of daily culture rather than as old stories. Third, the relationship between meaning and society is reciprocal rather than linear: Buddhist institutions conserve Nāga symbolism while environmental movements reinterpret it toward ecological responsibility, and current educational, museum, advocacy, and artistic work creates new interpretations of the Bakunawa that, once institutionalized, shape how later generations understand Indigenous history and identity.

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Fourth, the serpent archetypes are socio-semiotic resources for constructing and negotiating cultural identity. Thai participants continue to see the Nāga as a symbol of continuity, Buddhist morality, and national heritage, whereas Philippine participants increasingly associate the Bakunawa with indigeneity, historical recovery, and decolonial consciousness. These differences are not contradictory but represent parallel symbolic responses to different histories, indicating that cultural identity is continually constructed through symbolic interpretation and collective institutionalization (Assmann, 2011; Smith, 1999). Fifth, both the Nāga and the Bakunawa may be understood as living socio-semiotic institutions. Their power does not depend on belief in their literal existence but on their capacity to organize a common system of meaning across religion, education, heritage preservation, ecological ethics, tourism, art, and cultural memory. Peirce explains how mythological meaning is continually generated, Durkheim explains how it persists through institutionalization, and together they show that serpent symbols endure through constant reinterpretation and the institutionalization of that reinterpretation.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the Thai Nāga and the Philippine Bakunawa should be understood as living socio-semiotic institutions rather than remnants of an obsolete mythological past. Their significance lies in the continuing interaction among representation, interpretation, collective practice, and social organization, through which they help communities explain sacred power, environmental uncertainty, moral conduct, cultural belonging, historical memory, and shared responsibility. A shared archetypal form does not produce a universal or fixed meaning: the Nāga developed within sustained Buddhist, monarchical, architectural, and state-supported continuity and became a visible guardian of sacred hierarchy, moral order, prosperity, and protected space, whereas the Bakunawa developed within an Indigenous maritime tradition that experienced colonial disruption and later cultural recovery, becoming a more fluid symbol of cosmic threat, communal response, resilience, ancestral memory, and Indigenous reclamation. The difference lies not in cultural importance but in how cultural authority was produced and maintained.

Cultural continuity, moreover, is not cultural immobility. The two serpent traditions remain meaningful precisely because they permit reinterpretation, and new associations with environmental conservation, education, tourism, national and regional identity, contemporary art, digital media, and political symbolism can extend the social life of heritage when grounded in cultural knowledge and community participation. Peirce's Theory of Semiotics and Durkheim's Theory of Social Facts are most productive when applied together, revealing a continuing cycle in which communities interpret symbols, institutions stabilize those interpretations, and changing social conditions stimulate further reinterpretation. Mythology thus remains an active form of social knowledge, and preserving the Nāga and the Bakunawa involves sustaining the communities, languages, memories, practices, and interpretive spaces that keep them meaningful.

Recommendation

Educational institutions in Thailand and the Philippines are encouraged to integrate culturally grounded discussions of the Nāga and the Bakunawa into social studies, literature, history, the arts, values education, and heritage education, moving beyond simplified descriptions of mythological creatures toward the worldviews, historical experiences, and ecological relationships the figures express; learning materials should be developed with cultural experts, tradition-bearers, local educators, and community representatives. Cultural agencies, museums, archives, universities, and local governments should prioritize the documentation of intangible serpent traditions—oral narratives, local terminologies, ritual practices, and community memories—following clear standards for consent, attribution, cultural ownership, and community control, and recognizing communities as partners with authority over how their heritage is represented.

Heritage programs, temples, festivals, tourism offices, and public art projects should support both continuity and responsible innovation, avoiding reducing the serpents to decorative branding or a single standardized meaning; in the Philippines, community-led recovery of Visayan and other Indigenous narratives

deserves particular support, while in Thailand, localized and religiously grounded Nāga traditions should be preserved even as the figure circulates in tourism and popular culture. Artists, writers, filmmakers, and digital creators are encouraged to continue reinterpreting both traditions in consultation with cultural bearers and with transparent acknowledgment of sources. Environmental and community organizations may draw respectfully on the ecological dimensions of serpent symbolism in programs on rivers, coastal environments, water conservation, and disaster preparedness, and regional cooperation through joint exhibitions, translated resources, scholarly exchanges, and community dialogues should be strengthened. Future researchers may broaden participants to include monks, Indigenous elders, students, artists, tourism workers, and digital audiences; extend fieldwork beyond Bangkok and Iloilo; conduct audience-reception and longitudinal studies; and apply the integrated socio-semiotic framework to other serpent, dragon-like, or water-associated archetypes in Southeast Asia.

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