

ETHNOZOOLOGY OF THE *NGOO-HOW-PAK-PET* (SERPENTES: TYPHLOPIDAE) IN SOUTHERN PENINSULAR THAILAND

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(with one text-figure)

ABSTRACT.– The tiny snake called *ngoo-how-pak-pet* is worshipped by the inhabitants of the southern Siamese peninsula, who zealously keep dried and perfumed specimens at home as lucky charms, and attribute to it a mythical kinship. According to some, the snake originates from *nok-karaweg*, the king of the birds in paradise. Others believe it is the son of the giant snake *pa-yaa-ngoo-yai*. These legends seem to derive from Indian mythology. The specimens that we obtained were provisionally referred to the typhlopidae species, *Ramphotyphlops braminus*.

KEY WORDS.– Ethnozoology, Indian mythology, Typhlopidae, *Ramphotyphlops braminus*, Thailand.

INTRODUCTION

Various cultures have attributed a mythical ancestry to snakes based upon their gigantic size, strength, or toxicity. In West Africa, some tribes continue to worship pythons. Cobras, fascinating on account of their ability to flatten their neck to form a hood but feared because of their potent venom, were raised to the rank of deity in Ancient Egypt and venerated in many parts of Asia, especially in India.

Most people whom we spoke with from the provinces of Phang-Nga, Surat Thani, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Trang and Krabi, knew the story of the snake called *ngoo-how-pak-pet*, which is firmly anchored in the folklore of peninsular Thailand, south of Chumphon Province. The *ngoo-how-pak-pet*, although totally lacking venom and having as its distinctive feature its extreme small size, is said to have a mythical origin, and is worshipped fervently by the local population. According to popular belief, every encounter with this minute snake will bring good

luck in the near future. Dried specimens are precious and kept as lucky charms and venerated. We interviewed many people about this legend, and in the course of our investigation, obtained several specimens that allowed us to determine the species.

THE LEGEND

The first part of this story, which seems to be known by nearly everyone in the area, was recorded in July 1998 from Sister Punnee Leakpai (Krabi), a Buddhist nun at the temple of Mongkut Phra That Chedi Nimit, Messrs. Gitti Leeowtragoon and Udom Choosiri (Royal Forest Department, Phang-Nga), and Mrs. Amarat Limarun (Trang), and in February 1998 by Miss. Tasanee Thongjan, Siriwan Wansu and Jutarat Wichaikul (Phang-Nga). It is detailed below.

An encounter with the *ngoo-how-pak-pet* can happen anywhere and is a particularly auspicious event if it occurs in the house. Most of the time, the snake is found already dead and dried out,

which does not, however, decrease its value. The snake quacks when entering a house to inform the owner of its arrival and to announce his good luck to him. The vernacular name (the suffix *pak-pet* meaning duck beak) is derived from the fact that the locals see the elongated head of this snake as resembling that of a duck, and they believe that this snake can produce sounds comparable to those emitted by ducks. The cry was variously described as 'jep-jep-jep...', 'pet-pet-pet...', or 'pit-pit-pit...'. Although none of the villagers of Thung-Hua-Chang (Muang District, Krabi Province) had ever caught nor even seen a *ngoo-how-pak-pet*, they all claimed that it quacked like a duck.

The discovery of a *ngoo-how-pak-pet* is a very important occurrence, demanding some ceremony: 'When people meet the *ngoo-how-pak-pet*, they do not catch it with their hands, but delicately place it on a bank note or on a white tissue or garment (Fig. 1). If it was found outside the home, people bring it in as quickly as possible to the home, and place it in a box in which they have already accumulated other lucky charms, such as gold coins and Buddhist effigies, after which they pray. The snake is then generally perfumed'.

'While drying, the dead specimen, which initially is completely black, becomes uniformly

silver, the colour of happiness'. Then people try to guess Thai or Arabian numbers in the coils of the body of the dry snake and use these numbers for playing the lottery and cards. Arabiac numbers are used more often rather than the complicated Thai numbers. The field numbers that we assigned to the specimens that we received were immediately noted and later played by witnesses!

Mrs. Wichaikul owns nine specimens of which three were found in front of her house (Phang-Nga Police Station, Phang-Nga City) in 1996 and 1997, and six others she inherited from her mother who collected them in the vicinity. She very graciously offered us three of her specimens (MCZ 182619-621). Mr. Nildbodee, a policeman in Phang-Nga, gave us a fourth specimen (MCZ 182622) that he received as a lucky charm from a friend. Sister Punnee has a friend who has accumulated more than 60 specimens. It does not seem unusual that people keep at home such large numbers of *ngoo-how-pak-pet*; however, it is a rare that people agree to part with even a single.

The second part of the legend, concerning the origin of the magic snake, is rather complex and controversial. Among the few persons we met who knew the ins and outs of the legend, two distinct origins were proposed. There are some who



FIGURE 1: A dry and coiled *ngoo-how-pak-pet* placed on a Thai bank note.

claim that the *ngoo-how-pak-pet* originated from the king of the snakes, but others believe it is derived from the king of the birds.

The first origin was explained to us in July 1998 by Venerable Phra Acharn Pisarn Purinthako, a famous Buddhist monk in southern Thailand, admired for his mediumistic talent. Purinthako explained that the *ngoo-how-pak-pet* is the child of the King of Snakes, '*tow-wiroon-luk-puk*', a giant snake residing in the deep forest in the west of Thailand. 'This snake is so big that all humans take flight when they meet it. One day, while I was in the forest, I was bitten by a cobra. With my death approaching, I began to meditate. Then the *tow-wiroon-luk-puk* appeared. He ordered my soul, which had already left my body to return, and he gave me two medicines that saved my life. Then we became friends. He told me himself that the *ngoo-how-pak-pet*, the smallest of all snakes, is his child, whereas all other snakes are its subjects. I still have these secret remedies and provide them to people who are bitten by venomous snakes. In exchange, he asked me to release nine snakes every year. Presently, I have already released almost 100 snakes'. (According to Buddhist beliefs, people who release captive animals gain merit.) His encounter with the King of Snakes is detailed in Anonymous (1997: 49-50) where the giant snake is called '*pa-yaa-ngoo-yai*'.

The second origin was reported to us in February 1998 by the Buddhist monks Rit Srisawan Tapanyo (Wat Kiri Wong, Ban Tham Thong Lang, Tap Put District, Phang-Nga Province), and Boonchop Santajitto and Dat Thong-Samrit Pitriyano (Khao Tao Rattanaorn, Ban Khao Tao, Muang District, Phang-Nga Province). Venerable Tapanyo derives from the Province of Nakhon Si Thammarat, Santajitto and Pitriyano from the Province of Surat Thani; the legend is also current in those provinces. While these monks knew perfectly well this very old story, they immediately informed us that it was not a part of the Buddhist teachings.

The *ngoo-how-pak-pet* comes from the paradise in the sky, and more precisely originates from the King of Birds, called '*nok-karaweg*'

('nok-kalawèg' in French transliteration; 'nok' meaning 'bird' in Thai). 'The King of Birds occasionally loses some feathers that fall to the ground. At the precise moment that the feather touches the ground, every one of its barbules becomes a *ngoo-how-pak-pet*. This happens mainly during the hot season, when terrestrial birds have difficulty finding food. These *ngoo-how-pak-pet* are thus originally produced as extra food for birds. When some birds are satiated, they express their gratitude by taking some extra *ngoo-how-pak-pet* back to the *nok-karaweg* to eat because he cannot leave Paradise'.

'The King of Birds can appear in the dreams of humans to show them a place where they could find a *ngoo-how-pak-pet* that will bring them good luck. In general the *nok-karaweg* indicates the entrance of a cave, or near or under a rotten log on the ground'.

'The person who had such a dream keeps it secret and goes as soon as possible to the designated place in order to catch a *ngoo-how-pak-pet*'. Tapanyo has a cousin from Nakhon Si Thammarat who dreamt that the *nok-karaweg* indicated to him a cave where a *ngoo-how-pak-pet* remained: 'He went there, but at the moment that he arrived he saw a bird eating it and flying away'.

Pitriyano did not himself possess a *ngoo-how-pak-pet*, but a cousin of his does: 'A cousin found the *ngoo-how-pak-pet*, which died suddenly. He took it, perfumed it and put it in his house with his other lucky charms. Then everything changed for him: he won the lottery and became rich'. Several times we were informed that *ngoo-how-pak-pet* died at the exact moment that they were encountered. In fact, we know only one person who brought back a live one, but it unfortunately escaped from the box in which it had been placed.

Santajitto specified that the *ngoo-how-pak-pet* is not venomous, and that 'some people believe that it does not come from the sky, but was born as a worm and was later metamorphosed into a snake during its life.' However we did not meet any people who shared this belief.

DISCUSSION

Local people put the '*ngoo-how-pak-pet*' close to the '*ngoo-din*'. The word '*ngoo*' means 'snake' and is applied to most species of snakes by Thai people. The word '*din*' means 'earth', and their combination usually designates the diminutive fossorial ophidians of the family Typhlopidae. The same name is, however, sometimes applied to the caecilians of the genus *Ichthyophis* Fitzinger, 1826 (Amphibia: Gymnophiona). This homonymy is widespread in Thailand (Nutphand, 1990) and also exists in Laos where these phylogenetically very distant animals are termed, in French transliteration, '*ngou lao*' (Deuve, 1970: 36), and in Vietnam, where they are called *con trùn* (Bourret, 1938: 5). Because of their fossorial habits, caecilians look like typhlopids, but this very superficial resemblance is strictly limited to the elongation of the body and the absence of legs.

Whereas the same denomination covers animals belonging to two different classes, the *ngoo-how-pak-pet* is strictly distinguished by the local people from the '*ngoo-din-tham-ma-da*' ('*tham-ma-da*' meaning 'common' in Thai), *Ramphotyphlops braminus* (Daudin, 1803), another blind snake, very common throughout Thailand, and distributed worldwide (Gasperetti, 1988; David and Vogel, 1996; Manthey and Grossmann, 1997).

The verb '*how*' means 'to hiss' or 'to bark'; '*ngoo-how*' designates all Thai species of the genus *Naja* Laurenti, 1768. The Thai spelling of these words can be found in Cox (1991: Appendix 10). In Laos, '*ngou hao*' (French transliteration) designates the *Naja* and more generally all dangerous snakes (Deuve, 1962: 76). By extension '*ngoo-how*' can designate other snakes of exceptional nature, and could be considered the Thai equivalent of the Indian word '*naga*'. The suffix '*pak-pet*' consists of the word '*pak*' meaning 'mouth' and '*pet*' meaning 'duck'. The *ngoo-how-pak-pet* is sometimes called *ngoo-pak-pet*, or *ngoo-lahm-pak-pet*, the latter name curiously also applied in the same area to the short-tailed python, *Python curtus brongersmai* Stull, 1938 (Thai spelling in Cox, 1991: 470).

Thai dictionaries (Thiengburanathum, 1993: 58, 730; Winitchaigoon, 1982; Yarnprateep, 1991) provide sparse information on the mythical *nok-karaweg*, summarized below. The word '*kalawig*' (French transliteration) is a synonym of '*nok-karaweg*'. This legendary bird lives in *Himmaphaan*, a mythic cold forest in the north of India. It can fly far above the clouds. It has a marvelous voice, and when it sings, all the other animals stop in order to listen to it. According to I. Das (pers. comm., 1999), the word *Himmaphaan* may be derived from the Sanskrit *hima* (snow) and *vaan* (forest), and could be in the Himalayas.

It is tempting to connect the word *kalawig*, because of the phonetic similarity, with the '*Kalayéni*' (cited in Duchâteau, undated: 60), 'le roi des Yavanas et des serpents', synonym of *káliya* (cited in Vogel, 1926: 88), 'the fierce lord of snakes, the enemy of the snake-eating *Suparna* [or *Garuda*] the king of the birds', in the Brahminical tradition. Vogel (1926: 55) specified that the giant bird *Garuda* which feeds on the *Nagas*, can cover the sky and eclipse the light of the sun. The hereditary enmity between the *Nagas*, and their cousin, *Garuda*, is a favourite theme in Indian literature and art (Vogel, 1926), also adopted in the Chinese mythology (Mathieu, 1983: xciii). The expansion of Brahminism, and hence the cult of the *nagas* and *garudas* from India to Indochina began at least as early as the fifth century before Christ (Mathieu, 1983: lxxxix). The legend of the *ngoo-how-pak-pet*, a snake born from a bird but eaten by them, expresses also the paradoxical kinship and enmity between these animals.

The feud between the bird and the snake is a classical subject in the mythologies of many other peoples from ancient Mesopotamia to modern Mexico and even Homer's *Iliad* (Lurker, 1987). The struggle between the bird and the snake symbolizes the fight between life and death to the Bambaras in Mali (Mathieu, 1983: 428).

The word *nok-karaweg* is encountered in the common language everywhere in Thailand, particularly by people who do not know the story of the *ngoo-how-pak-pet*. When somebody sings very well he is complimented as having the voice of the *nok-karaweg*.

Vogel (1926: 54) reported a case of the birth of snakes from feathers in Indian mythology: 'the feather dropped by *Garuda* [the king of the birds], when struck by *Indra*'s thunderbolt, breaks into three pieces, from which peacocks, two-headed snakes, and mongooses are said to take their origin'. It is noteworthy that the Hindi and Oriya names of *R. braminus* mean 'two-headed snake' (Das, 1998: 37). Typhlopids, because of their almost invisible eyes, and their similarly blunt head without neck and truncated tail, bear this vernacular name in many parts of the world.

The belief that the *ngoo-how-pak-pet* occurs because of the severity of the dry season and also brings good fortune plus the similarity of its name to that of the cobras (*ngoo-how*) is possibly linked to the Indian association between the cobras and the fecundity brought by the rainy season (Boulnois, 1939: 30, 31, 45).

On July 27 1998, Mr. Numkhong gave us a living typhlopoid (MCZ 182617) that he found while digging in the garden in front of the Police Station of Phang-Nga where several *ngoo-how-pak-pet* had already been found. All of the people to whom we showed this still live specimen claimed that it was just a *ngoo-din-tham-ma-da*, but not a *ngoo-how-pak-pet*, because its mouth was not flattened like that of a duck. This 'ordinary' snake was indeed positively identified as a *R. braminus*. However, the four 'authenticated' *ngoo-how-pak-pet* (MCZ 182619-622), are probably also *R. braminus*, although their enlarged vertebral scales and brown chins put them closer to *Typhlops khoratensis* Taylor, 1962, a very similar species. The definitive identification of these specimens as *T. khoratensis* would imply a major range extension southward for this species, since this endemic Siamese taxon is not yet known from the peninsula.

Unfortunately, the poor condition of these dried specimens prevented us from noting the visceral and meristic characters that could allow a precise identification.

The story, although with mythical elements, depicts some elements of accurate observation of the natural history of the animal. For instance,

the indications given in the dreams by the *nok-karaweg* about where to find the *ngoo-how-pak-pet* are strikingly realistic. They are often found at the entrance of caves where the soil is generally soft and suitable for typhlopids as they can easily burrow into it. They also like to stay in decaying wood (see notably Smith, 1943) where they find their preys, such as small arthropods, worms, plus termites, ants, and their pupae. Also, it is true that typhlopids often venture into dwelling places; for example, *Ramphotyphlops braminus* is regularly found inside gardens and houses (Tweedie, 1954; Minton, 1966) where it presumably forages.

The alleged ability of the *ngoo-how-pak-pet* to quack like a duck is quite intriguing. Sound production has not been reported in blind snakes, and all such accounts are rather anecdotal, with nobody being able to explain the mechanism used by the animal (Young, pers. comm.). For instance, Sweeney (1971: 12, 39) reported that the African species *Rhinotyphlops schlegelii* (Bianconi, 1847) may emit a very faint high-pitched squeak when handled. Schwaner et al. (1985) reported that *Ramphotyphlops australis* (Gray, 1845) makes an audible squeak when roughly handled. Typhlopids have chambered tracheal lungs just like *Ophiophagus* and *Ptyas* spp. that are known to vocalize. Therefore, vocal sound production in typhlopids is certainly possible. According to B. Young (pers. comm.), typhlopids would be more prone to making sound from their cloaca rather than through the respiratory system; cloacal sound production requires a lower volume of air and produces a higher pitched 'squeak'.

Interestingly, two other snake species are said by locals to be able to produce sounds. The *ngoo-how*, genus *Naja* spp. (Elapidae) and the '*ngoo-ga-pha-khaw-daeng*, *Rhabdophis s. subminiatus* (Schlegel, 1837) (Colubridae) are said to squawk like chickens, but only when they mate. These latter assertions are doubtful and such sounds seem to be so far unknown in these snakes (Chanhome, pers. comm.) which emit at the best only hisses when threatened, and no social sound is known in snakes (Young, 1997).

The Malayalam (Kerala State, India) vernacular name of *R. braminus*, *kozhi pambu* (see Das, 1998: 37), the 'hen-snake' might also possibly be derived from the belief that this snake produces sounds like those of chickens (Das, pers. comm.).

While the *ngoo-how-pak-pet* is regarded as beneficial, the other blind snakes, although being completely harmless, are generally considered by Thai people as highly venomous (Gyldenstolpe, 1916; Smith, 1914; pers. obs.) and is therefore dreaded. Bourret (1938: 6) specified that *R. braminus* is one of the most feared snakes in Indochina. According to Russell (1796), *R. braminus*, called '*rondoo talooloo pam*' in the area of Vishakhapatnam, is regarded as mischievous by Indians. Minton (1966) cited an interesting anecdote about a *Typhlops porrectus* Stoliczka, 1871 in Karachi (Pakistan): 'I collected one on February 11 as it was crawling in bright sunlight within a thickly populated refugee encampment. It was being chivied about by a group of excited persons who seemed curiously unwilling to harm it. I could not tell if their behavior was motivated by fear or by some superstitious regard for the reptile'. According to different regions and ethnic groups, typhlopids are regarded as either beneficial or malefic.

In Nyasaland, 'if a *Typhlops* is met on a road this is said to be unlucky, and often means that the person the man is going to meet or visit will be dead when the traveller arrives, or that the wayfarer himself will die' (Sweeney, 1971: 27). In western Cameroon, it is believed that if a young woman encounters a typhlopids, she will become pregnant soon (Lawson, 1993: 64; Stucki-Stirn, 1979: 133). Stucki-Stirn (1979: 134) also reported that in some parts of western Cameroon, typhlopids are believed to bring good luck to a house if they are seen near it, and locals even offer them palm oil; however in the Wum area these snakes are regarded as very dangerous.

As noted notably by Sweeney (1971: 27), and according to our own observations, it is precisely because of the curious fact that typhlopids seem to bear two heads, and are hence believed to be able to bite with their two extremities, that they

may be regarded as highly dangerous. For the same reasons have the harmless amphisbaenids an equally bad reputation in some areas. The ancient author Pliny told that if they had two heads, it was because one was not enough to eject all their venom (Morris and Morris, 1965: 83-84). On the contrary, the *ngoo-how-pak-pet*, because its head with its duck beak is therefore clearly distinguishable from the tail, loses this malefic appearance.

In southern peninsular Thailand, the *ngoo-how-pak-pet* lives sympatrically with the longest snake in the world, the locally abundant *Python reticulatus* (Schneider, 1801); the smaller and rarer species *Python curtus brongersmai*; the very impressive king cobra *Ophiophagus hannah* (Cantor, 1836), the longest venomous snake in the world, and two species of *Naja* (*N. kaouthia* Lesson in Férussac, 1831 and *N. sumatrana* Müller, 1887). All of these snakes are the subject of some folk beliefs and the cobras are even represented in all temples in the area. However, except for the *ngoo-how-pak-pet*, none of them is respected by the locals in their everyday life. Pythons are even a much appreciated food item. They are hunted intensively and this coupled with the destruction of suitable habitats through deforestation has resulted in a decline in their numbers. The decline has been so severe that one of us (O.L.) initiated a breeding program for the Short-tailed Python. Nor are cobras spared. They are often purely and simply slaughtered because of their fatal venom and their unpleasant habit, otherwise shared with the pythons, to decimate the henhouses. Cobras, beaten nearly to death by the farmers, are sometimes thrown on the road, in hope that the next car will give them the *coup de grâce*, and prevent them from returning to the living. Such a method is frequent and was already observed in this area, notably by Frith (1978) on Phuket Island with *Cylindrophis ruffus* (Laurenti, 1768), and by Lim and Ratnam (1996) with *Boiga cyanea* (Duméril, Bibron and Duméril, 1854) on Pulau Langkawi Island in Malaysia. We (C.C. and O.P.) once relieved the whole family and neighbours of a farmer who had beaten and thrown on the road a very large *Naja kaouthia* (MNHN

1998.0503), by taking it away; all these persons were patiently waiting along the road so that the next car (in this case ours) would finish the animal off.

On the basis of the work of Russell (1796) on the snakes of the east coast of India, Daudin (1803: 277) coined the epithet of the scientific name *Ramphotyphlops braminus* and christened it *éryx bramine*. Its English vernacular name is therefore the 'Brahminy Blind Snake' (Smith, 1943). In the context of the legend of the *ngoo-how-pak-pet*, apparently derived from the Brahminical folklore, *R. braminus* never better wore its scientific epithet.

CONCLUSION

The fresh typhlopids that we obtained from the area, all regarded as common *ngoo-din* by the natives, were unambiguously identified as *Ramphotyphlops braminus*. The purported *ngoo-how-pak-pet* specimens that we got almost certainly belong to this species, although some might be *Typhlops khoratensis*. Only a handful of herpetologists is trained to distinguish both taxa and this usually requires the use of a good microscope; we may reasonably not attribute more scientific acuteness to the laymen. The diagnostic character by which the common blind snakes and the 'magic snake' are distinguished by the natives is the presence of a beak by the latter. The presence of the beak is probably explained by the fact that the *ngoo-how-pak-pet* are found already dead and dry. While desiccating, the head of a *R. braminus* (or of all similar typhloid - at present four blind snakes species are known to occur in southern peninsular Thailand) flattens, giving finally the rough appearance of a duck beak. The *ngoo-how-pak-pet* and at least *R. braminus* could thus be one and the same thing. Otherwise, Venerable Purinthako explained to us that 'a dead *ngoo-how-pak-pet* never rots away; if it was found spoiled, it was in fact just a *ngoo-din-tham-ma-da*'... *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

Presently the humble origin of the fabulous *ngoo-how-pak-pet* is virtually established, but one may still be filled with wonder at the fascinating worship of which it is the object in that

area while elsewhere blind snakes are generally neglected, even by most zoologists. Herpetologists know how rare typhlopids are in the collections of scientific museums and can only be in awe at the untold numbers of them resting in the homes of southern peninsular Thailand.

Folk beliefs exist about typhlopids around the world, reported notably by Tirant (1885: 424) about *Typhlops vermicularis* Merrem, 1820 in Greece, by De Silva (1990: 13) and Das (1998: 37) in India and Sri Lanka, or by Curran and Kauffeld (1951: 148-149) and Sweeney (1971: 27) in Africa. None seems to present the complex mythological dimension of the legend of the *ngoo-how-pak-pet*. In southern Thailand, these diminutive snakes really constitute a material link between the terrestrial and celestial worlds, and more than anywhere else, they belong to the everyday life of the people.

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