

## SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

### A NOTE ON THE DRAGONFLY FOLK NAMES IN NEPAL\*

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A list of six dragonfly folk names as used in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, is given, viz. three in Nepali, two in Newari and one in the Tibetan language. Save for one, the etymological explanation of which could not be found out, they are all related to various natural features of dragonflies, and are often brought in connection with some mythological creatures. As it appears the Sherpas of the Khumbu Himal, Everest area, do not have a word for dragonfly.

### INTRODUCTION AND TECHNIQUES OF NAME COLLECTING IN THE FIELD

During a small expedition to the Khumbu Himal, Everest Region, Nepal, in September-October 1972, the author had the opportunity to collect a few dragonfly folk names in the Kathmandu Valley. Aside of the well known Japanese and Chinese dragonfly consciousness (cf. SAROT, 1958; MOORE, 1960; NITSCHKE, 1965) and a few records from Indonesia (HAMAR, 1971; SMITS, 1971), the Philippines and the Hawaiian islands (SAROT, 1958) there are, to our knowledge, no other references to the dragonfly in the folklore of the East. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to bring on record our Nepalese observations.

Nepal is well known for its ethnic and linguistic diversity, consisting of a number of Tibeto-Nepalese and Indo-Nepalese groups (cf. HAGEN, 1971). While the Indo-European Nepali is *lingua franca* for the great majority of the

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population, the other main languages are Newari, Maithili, Bhojpuri and Magadhi (ELLIOT, 1969).

In our inquiries we used dead specimens of *Orthetrum sabina* (Drury) and *Neurothemis fulvia* (Drury); in most cases also *Ischnura aurora* (Brauer). They were shown to persons who were then requested to name them in their own language. In addition, on most occasions we also used some of the following species: *Orthetrum pruinosum neglectum* (Ramb.), *Palpopleura sexmaculata* (Fabr.), *Acisoma panorpoides* (Ramb.), *Crocothemis erythraea* (Brullé), *Diplacodes trivialis* (Ramb.) and *Rhyothemis variegata* (L.). As a test we have often shown at the same time also some butterflies and large grasshoppers.

On many occasions there was the opportunity to ask the name of a specimen on wings, including *Neurothemis fulvia* and *Rhyothemis variegata*. In coloration these two species greatly resemble a butterfly (*Neurothemis* particularly some nymphalids common at the same localities), while *Rhyothemis* also "sails" through the air in the way of some papilionids.

The inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley appear very good observers. Not in a single case have we received a wrong name and even the most butterfly-like species were never mistaken for a butterfly, regardless whether dead or on wings.

The persons questioned were of all ages, of both sexes and of different professions, e.g. farmers, labourers, servants, soldiers etc. There was only one male intellectual who did not know the name of a dragonfly, but, as it turned out, though a Nepali, he was born and educated abroad. Usually women and children recognize insects better than men, but in the Kathmandu Valley there is scarcely any difference in this respect.

In view of the apparent keen interest of the Nepalese people in insects, it is somewhat surprising that they practically do not distinguish between different species — in spite of their great diversity in habits. Only twice were different nominations used for *Orthetrum sabina* and *Neurothemis fulvia*.

In the elevated Sherpa country, in the heart of the Himalaya, there occur but few dragonfly species and usually dragonflies are seen only while flying swiftly across alpine slopes and at some distance. On the slopes under the village of Namche Bazaar and at the confluence of Dudh Kosi and Phunki Drangka *Anotogaster nipalensis* Selys is relatively common (though difficult to catch), but neither the author's Sherpa, URITHA, nor his Sherpa porters were able to give it a name. Uritha, a nephew of Tenzing Norgay of the Everest fame, speaks quite good English and immediately recognized it as a "dragonfly", but stated there is no special name for dragonflies in the Sherpa language.

## REVIEW OF THE COLLECTED NAMES

The following names are given in the usual technical (thus not English) transcription.

## N e p a l i

- (1) "*Gainē*" = "singer". Save for the Newari settlements this is by far the most widely spread dragonfly name in the Kathmandu Valley. As far as we could understand the people are firmly convinced that dragonflies are responsible for the sounds produced by crickets.
- (2) "*Pāñi-cikva*" = "the one mating with water". After some hesitation, with some embarrassment and blushing, or with a significant smile, the children will occasionally tell this name, both in the town of Kathmandu and in the province. The term is clearly associated with the behaviour of the ovipositing females of those anisopterous species that dart down to the water table and make characteristic dipping movements during which the tip of the abdomen touches the water surface so that the eggs which have accumulated at the vulva are washed off.

It is interesting that the same ethological phenomenon forms the background of the Chinese expression of a delicate touch, viz. "ching-t'ing tien shui" – "like the dragonfly sipping water" (SAROT, 1958).

- (3) "*Bhadaurē-kirā*" = "the August-September insect". Bhadaure is the Nepalese month lasting from August 15 to September 15. This Kathmandu term appears peculiar to *Neurothemis fulvia*, though it is but seldom used. Towards the decline of the monsoon (September) this species is emerging at suitable breeding sites everywhere in the surroundings of Kathmandu in countless numbers. Due to the brown coloration of its wings it can be easily distinguished from all other local species.

## N e w a r i

- (4) "*Jhyaliñcā*". This is the name of a small dancing demon and is used by Newaris everywhere in the Kathmandu Valley. It seems that people associate the dragonfly-flight with the dance of the demon.
- (5) "*Lākhēy*". This again appears a more or less specific name. It has been designated in a single case, by a Kathmandu employee, to *Orthetrum sabina*. We were unable to trace its meaning or etymology.

## T i b e t a n

- (6) "*Acoktsalpa*". After inspection of a series of specimens of different species, this name, in the Tibetan Kham dialect, has been told to us by a refugee from the East Tibetan district of Amdo. The term is associated with a demon whose characteristics are a light flight and jumping.

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