

**SOME TIBETAN EXPRESSIONS FOR "DRAGONFLY",
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE BIOLOGICAL FEATURES
AND DEMONOLOGY**

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Six Tibetan expressions for "dragonfly", viz. "sgo.na.nas.t'on.pa" "c'u.rkañ.rten.'bu", "c'u.srin.rgyal.mo", "a.c'og.ts'al.pa", "p'ye.leb.šog.bži" and "a.ts'ags.ts'ags.pa", as obtained from autochthonous Tibetan informants or mentioned in various dictionaries, are discussed in the context of the biological features of dragonflies and Tibetan demonology. In Tibetan, like in South-East Asia, the dragonfly names appear emotionally neutral; the dragonfly is considered neither a lovable nor a frightening creature. This is at variance with the expressions in the Far East (China, Japan), where the dragonfly is generally respected and admired, while in European cultural areas its appellations often incur a superstitious dislike.

INTRODUCTION

The term "dragonfly" is one of the standard items of dialectological atlases and word lists. Its various dialectal forms were listed, in several languages, as early as 1793 by NEMNICH, while in the modern linguistic literature its etymology has been dealt with monographically (or nearly so) in such standard works as e.g. the Sprach- und Sachatlas Italiens und Südschweiz (JABERG & JUD, 1930, map No. 479) and the Deutscher Wortatlas (item No. 98; cf. NITSCHKE, 1965). The importance of the term in dialectological research is demonstrated also by the fact that the "dragonfly" is included also in the Swadesh 100-word list. As such, it has been dealt with, without etymology, for

some languages of the Tibeto-Burman (Sino-Tibetan) group spoken in Nepal (LEHMAN, 1970; HALE, 1973), while a few etymological notes, for some of the languages of the same group, were furnished by KIAUTA (1973).

Just as in China and Japan (cf. ASAHINA, 1974), in Tibet too, dragonflies represent one of the requisites of the traditional materia medica (cf. RECHUNG RINPOCHE, 1973). Though it is likely that they found their way into the recipes of the Tibetan medical literature from the classical Chinese *Pen Tshao* (cf. CHU & KAO, 1950; KONISHI & ITO, 1973), they are apparently used much less frequently in Tibet than in China and Japan. Anyway, dragonflies are lacking among the medicinal materials both of the *Āyurveda* as used in Tibet (CHANDRA, 1971) as well as in the rGyud.bzi medicine (POZDNEEV, 1908). Contrary to the situation in some areas of South-East Asia, in Tibet dragonflies are not used as human food (cf. ABDULLAH, 1975).

The present report is the first in a series on the etymology of Tibetan insect nomenclature, the field work on which has been commenced during the Second Nepal Research Mission of the Netherlands Centre for Alpine Biological Research (1973). Its aims are: (1) to analyze etymologically all Tibetan expressions for "dragonfly" known to the author both as appearing in various Tibetan dictionaries and as collected from her Tibetan informants, and (2) to indicate, where possible, the etymological parallels in dragonfly nomenclature between Tibetan and other languages.

Contrary to the European cultural area or China and Japan, in Tibet the dragonfly does not seem to be a very well-known insect, and it is apparently much less deeply rooted in the consciousness of the people than in many European and Asian countries. Consequently, the Tibetan language possesses but relatively few expressions for this insect. Nevertheless, some parallels could be detected between the etymology of the Tibetan epitheta and that of those existing in other cultural areas though, in general, Tibetan dragonfly nomenclature does bear a peculiar spirit and reflects a very specific relation of a Tibetan man to this insect, which is certainly, for a great deal, quite different from that found in countries of other cultural traditions.

Finally, it should be stated that, contrary to the beliefs of some non-entomologists, based on the prevailing rough and arid climate, high altitude and peculiar topography, the dragonfly fauna of many Tibetan areas is rather rich, particularly so in the southern and eastern regions, though it is entomologically but very little explored (cf. e.g. McLACHLAN, 1894, 1896).

SOURCES OF MATERIAL

In all, six Tibetan terms are discussed in the present note. Save for one, all refer to adult insects. Three of these have been obtained from our Tibetan informants, the others were collected from the following dictionaries: DAGYAB

(1966), DAS (1973), DHONGTHOG (1973), GIRAUDEAU & GORÉ (1956), JÄSCHKE (1972), KAZI LAMA (1973) and KOWALEWSKY (1941). The transliteration system adopted is a slight modification of that of JÄSCHKE (1972).

As informants served: (1) a Khampa (*k'ams.pa*) refugee, who arrived in Nepal as a child in the 1950's, and who is now running a kind of business at the foot of the Svayambhunat, Kathmandu; he speaks fluent Nepali, fairly good English, and does master Tibetan in writing to the extent he learned as a child first in a monastic school in Amdo, and later in a refugee school in Nepal; – (2) a learned Lama from Chamdo (*c'ab.mdo*), associated with the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, London, and now residing in Switzerland.

The informants have given the names after having been shown material of the following species respectively: (1) dead specimens of adult *Ischnura aurora* (Brauer), *Acisoma panorpoides* (Rambur), *Crocothemis erythraea* (Brullé), *Diplacodes trivialis* (Rambur), *Orthetrum pruinosum neglectum* (Rambur), *O. sabina* (Drury), *Palpopleura sexmaculata* (Fabricius), and *Rhyothemis variegata* (L.); – (2) black-and-white photographs and dead specimens of larval and adult *Lestidae*, *Calopterygidae*, *Aeshnidae* and *Libellulidae*.

While our Khampa informant clearly recognized the zygopteran *Ischnura aurora* as a dragonfly, the Lama stated that the terms he has given apply solely to the anisopteran adults and larvae.

It is interesting to note that none of the adult members of a refugee family from southern Tibet, not far from the Bhutanese frontier, living now in Switzerland (cf. BRINK, 1976), to whom we have shown colour photographs of various insects, was able to state any Tibetan term for dragonfly, though all of them did recognize them as the German "Libelle", and did know the Tibetan expressions for most of the other insects demonstrated (e.g. butterfly, bumblebee, beetle).

REVIEW OF THE TERMS, WITH DISCUSSIONS ON THEIR POSSIBLE ETYMOLOGY

སྐྱེ་བ་ལྷན་ལྷན་གྱི་པ་

SGO.NA.NAS.T'ON.PA

This is a very general expression, meaning something like "the one hatched from an egg", and is usually applied by Tibetans to birds, although under the keyword "larva" it is listed by DHONGTHOG (1973: 244). We were surprised, therefore, that our Lama informant from Chamdo, after having inspected a number of zygopteran and anisopteran exuviae and photographs of larvae, stated that this should be the name of the anisopteran larvae, and stated explicitly that he did not know any term applicable to the larval stage of the Zygoptera.

ཐུ་ཀང་རྟེན་ལུ་

C'U.RKAÑ.RTEN.'BU

With the French keyword "*libellule*" this word is mentioned by GIRAU-DEAU & GORÉ (1956: 168). Literally it means "with-the-legs-on-the-water-resting-insect" and is thus based on a superficial observation of dragonfly behaviour.

ཐུ་སྤྱན་རྒྱལ་མོ་

C'U.SRIN.RGYAL.MO

The term is listed by DHONGTHOG (1973: 122) and KAZI LAMA (1973: 236) with the English keyword "*dragonfly*", without which we would be unable to recognize a dragonfly name in it, since, literally, it means "the queen of water insects".

The key of the etymology of the word is the meaning assigned to the term "*srin*". The latter has, in different composita, a number of meanings: – (1) *srin* is a kind of disease (DAGYAB, 1966: 734); – (2) *srin.bu* (= *srin.'bu*) or *'bu.srin* stands for insect, worm, vermin (JÄSCHKE, 1972: 582); – (3) *srin.po* and *srin.mo* are deities of the pre-Buddhist Tibetan pantheon (DE NEBESKY-WOJKOWITZ, 1956: 280), identified with *rākṣasa*, resp. *rākṣasī*, (DAS, 1973: 1290). According to JÄSCHKE (1972: 582), they are supposed to be, for the most part, of an enormous size and generally hostile to mankind. The Tibetans are even said to be the descendants of an ape (sent by, or emanated from, Avalokiteshvara) and of a Tibetan *srin.mo*; – (4) *c'u.srin* is the Capricorn of the Zodiac, and stands for water or sea monster (JÄSCHKE, 1972: 159; DAGYAB, 1966: 208). *c'u.srin* is listed by DAS (1973: 421) in the compositum *c'u.srin.rgyal.mts'an*, being the name of a king whose royal standard was a crocodile, in Sanskrit: *makaradhvaja*, hence we may say that *c'u.srin* and *makara* are the same kind of creatures. *Makara* is a Sanskrit term, and may also mean a "particular species of insect or other small animal", in which meaning it is used in *Suśruta* (MONIER-WILLIAMS, 1974: 771). Since the *makara* is a reptile-like creature (resembling a crocodile, a snake, a dolphin or a turtle; cf. DAS, 1973: 421; JÄSCHKE, 1972: 582; SCHMIDT, 1969: 159), one would be inclined to believe the term to apply also to the aquatic larval stage. There is, however, no evidence for this at all.

It is certainly due to its large size that the Tibetans call the dragonfly by this name. In German too, the dragonfly may be called "*Wasserkönigin*" (NITSCHKE, 1965) and in English "*kingfisher*" (SAROT, 1958).

ཨ་རྫོག་ཚལ་པ་

A.C'OG.TS'AL.PA

This term does not appear in any of the consulted dictionaries. In his 1973 paper KIAUTA recorded it for eastern Tibet in the form "*acoktsalpa*", and stated that the term "is associated with a demon whose characteristics are a light flight and jumping". Our Khampa informant was very resolute in calling all adult dragonflies by this name.

The etymology of the term can be approached from two points of view: (1) the morphological appearance of the insect, and (2) the dragonfly behaviour.

M o r p h o l o g y . — There are three possibilities, all of which can be discussed on the basis of the above Tibetan term, viz. (1) the dragonfly may resemble another insect to the extent of being mistaken for it, (2) the resemblance to another insect is noticed, but at the same time, the two insect types are realized as distinct, and (3) the dragonfly is named after one or more of its physical characteristics, e.g. slenderness.

(1) In their general appearance, while on wings, the large dragonflies do, to a certain extent, resemble some species of grasshoppers, particularly the flying locusts. This is certainly the reason that they are often mistaken for locusts in the folk nomenclature of many languages (cf. e.g. NITSCHKE, 1965; SAROT, 1958). In Tibetan there are a number of very distinct terms for grasshoppers and locusts, e.g. *cog.cog.pa*, *c'a.ga.pa*, *c'a.ga.'bu*, *ts'a.ga.'bu*, *ts'ag.ts'ag*, *ts'ag.ts'ag.pa* (DAS, 1973: 384; CHANDRA, 1971: 263; DHONGTHOG, 1973: 186; JÄSCHKE, 1972: 142, 152, 442; KAZI LAMA, 1973: 330). Hence it seems that the two types are generally well recognized by the Tibetans as being two different insects.

It should be mentioned, in this context, that SCHMIDT-THOME & THINGO (1975) have described a children's play "from Tibet", similar to that known among the Sherpas of Khumbu and Pharak under the name: "*ani tha thag thag*". The children catch a grasshopper, keep it fast in hands singing (in authors' transcription): "*ashün tserpa ngali markhu löd*" (= "Grasshopper, give me melted butter!"). Prevented from jumping away, the grasshopper will in its defense soon excrete a drop of brownish fluid which, in children's imagination, resembles melted butter. The term "*ashün tserpa*" does resemble our *a.c'og-ts'al.pa*, while there is no doubt that the insect in question is a grasshopper, since dragonflies do not excrete any fluid.

(2) Although grasshoppers and dragonflies superficially look alike, their differences are evident enough. Some folk names express both resemblance and difference between two forms, thus, the colloquial name for dragonfly is in Chinese *ma-lang*. "*ma*" is a part of the word for locust, *ma-cha*, while "*lang*" is a part of the praying mantis, *t'ang-lang*, with which the Chinese apparently

confuse the dragonfly (SAROT, 1958).

It seems likely that, in a similar way, the first part of *a.c'og.ts'al.pa* is related to the western Tibetan word for grasshopper, *cog.cog.pa* (DAS, 1973: 384).

(3) There are many dozens of folk names, in various languages, related to the long, slender appearance of dragonflies, e.g. the well known English epithets "adderbolt", "atherbil", "ether's nild", "darning needle", "devil's needle", "spindle", etc. (cf. e.g. DAVIES & FORBES, 1929; SAROT, 1958; MONTGOMERY, 1965). The Chinese standard name for dragonfly is *ching-t'ing*, "t'ing" meaning a "pointed thing" or "like a stick" (SAROT, 1958).

Similarly the Tibetan "*ts'al.pa*" means a splinter or a fragment, very possibly indicating that the dragonfly is a thin splinter-like insect, since most Tibetan species combine colourless (hyaline) wings with an inconspicuous, often brownish, body coloration, thus resembling, both in flight and perched, a piece of a small stalk, stem or twig. In combination with the word for grasshopper ("cog"), the name could mean that a dragonfly is a thinner insect than a grasshopper.

B e h a v i o u r . — The territorial and particularly the courtship behaviour of some dragonfly species is very conspicuous and has, consequently, repeatedly found its way into folk nomenclature. In Europe terms like the English "spindler" (MONTGOMERY, 1965), and the German "Ringelmacher", "Spulrädchen", "Schocker", in Africa the Banthu "shikukuwanda" (NITSCHKE, 1965), or in China the expression "shu ching-t'ing" ("to stand on one's head" as the dragonfly balances motionlessly in the air) (SAROT, 1958), all refer to the peculiar dragonfly behaviour. The Indians of Peru have a special "dragonfly dance", a rhythmic performance in which the movements or steps of the dancers are supposed to follow the flight of a dragonfly (SAROT, 1958). Also the very common Newari dragonfly name "jhyaliñcā", as used everywhere in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, is associated with the dance of the deity of the same name (KIAUTA, 1973).

Asked for the meaning of "*a.c'og.ts'al.pa*", our informant explained that the name is associated with a dancing demon (cf. also KIAUTA, 1973).

The dragonfly movements in the air may suggest the type of dance performed by the demon *Cog.la.tsal.rtse*. According to DE NEBESKY-WOJKOWITZ (1956: 221), *Cog.la.tsal.rtse* is a mountain deity, who is believed to rule over all the *sa.bdag* of the province of Hor. *Sa.bdag*, or *sadag* of some authors, are earth demons (owners of the earth), innumerable in number, occupying the soil and lakes like the plebeian *nāgās* of the Hindus, and probably worshipped already before the spread of Buddhism. They have retained a ritual importance as lords of the ground and their permission must be asked for any intrusion upon their territory. JÄSCHKE (1972: 569) describes them as jealous, angry creatures, DE NEBESKY-WOJKOWITZ (1956: 298) states they are malevolent and are held responsible for a number of illnesses, while BEYER (1973: 294-295) charac-

terises them as neutral, but easily offended demons. (Cf. also GORDON, 1959: 102; WADDELL, 1974: 371-372). The dragonfly, with its characteristic behaviour at the waterside may very well be associated with the lake *sa.bdag* and, through them, with their master, *Cog.la.tsal.rtse*.

It should be noted that in most European as well as in some other languages there are exceedingly many so-called tabu names for dragonflies. In the Christian cultural area a part of these are often associated with God, Maria, Jesus, the Devil and with the names of the better known saints (cf. e.g. NITSCHKE, 1965). Also the Japanese "*yamma*" means a demon dragonfly (SAROT, 1958).

ཕྱེ་ལེབ་ཤོག་བཞི་

P'YE.LEB.ŚOG.BŹI

This term is listed by KOWALEWSKY (1941: 584). Although the Mongolian keyword mentioned is "*örüm-e qularayiči*" (= cream thief), the Russian ("*strekoza*") and French ("*libellule, Odonata [Libellula]*") translations do not leave any doubt as to the meaning.

Literally, the word means "four-winged-butterfly". It is worth noting that, contrary to what one might expect, in folk nomenclature the dragonfly is rarely associated with a butterfly. A few such examples are found in European languages, e.g. the Italian "*farfala d'acqua*", the Friulian "*špèrawál*" (JABERG & JUD, 1930), the French "*papillon d'amour*", the Frisian "*wetter-flinter*", the Czech "*motýlice*" (all NITSCHKE, 1965) and the Croatian "*leptir vodeni*" (Dr. H.K.M. Moller-Pillot, pers. comm.). In the eight Tibeto-Burman languages, considered by HALE, (1973), the two insect types are never associated.

ཨ་ཇགས་ཇགས་པ་

A.TS'AGS.TS'AGS.PA

This term has been furnished by our Chamdo informant. After the inspection of a long series of zygopteran and anisopteran, mounted and unmounted specimens, the Lama explicitly stated that the name applies exclusively to Anisoptera.

This is the only case known to us that this term is used for a dragonfly. According to DHONGTHOG (1973: 186) it is one of the several denominations for a grasshopper; for other synonyms cf. above under *a.c'og.ts'al.pa*.

TIBETAN DRAGONFLY NOMENCLATURE IN THE LIGHT OF FOLK NOMENCLATURE IN OTHER CULTURAL AREAS

Looking through the catalogues and lists of dragonfly folk names of various countries, particularly those published by SAROT (1958), NITSCHKE (1965), MONTGOMERY (1966), SMITS (1971), HALE (1973), and KIAUTA (1973), it is apparent that, generally, the dragonfly is admired in the Far East, it is a more or less neutral creature in South-East Asia, whereas in Europe it often incurred a superstitious dislike, which probably should be ascribed to the fact that it is a (large) fly, which was in the Middle Ages a symbol of the diabolic spirits. A similar role has been played by snakes and reptiles in general (dragons), hence the frequent reptilian overtone in the dragonfly appellations in the European cultural area.

Physical features and similarities to other, better known insects also often play an important role in folk names.

Though occasionally a name is based on a surprisingly accurate observation of the insect in its natural environment, more often fairy tales and superstition are the basis of folk nomenclature. This circumstance is apparent in all languages, but the overtone of the names in Asia is often much more positive than in Europe.

Thus, there is nothing frightening or mysterious about the dragonfly in China, and in China like in Japan the dragonfly gained an important place in literature, figurative arts and medicine. In Japan, legend associates it with the Emperor. It is accepted as an object of natural beauty and since dragonflies are supposed to be brave and strong, their shapes are used as symbols of happiness and victory.

In Tibet, on the other hand, the dragonfly is a less well known insect. As far as we know, it has never been used in parabolic form in the literature and we were unable to trace a single picture of it. Generally, it is a neutral animal, and its sporadic practical application in medicine is most likely to have been imported from China rather than to have originated in the Tibetan cultural area. It is understandable, therefore, that in Tibet the dragonfly is more often named after its physical features and/or resemblance to other insects than by the superstitions about it. Even whenever the latter seems to be the case, the appellation seems to be based on the insect's appearance (*c'u.srin.rgyal.mo*) or behaviour (*a.c'og.ts'al.pa*) rather than on any malevolent features of the deities involved.

Summarizing the above, the Tibetan dragonfly names, though containing general elements as found in most cultural areas, are essentially neutral and therein clearly distinct from those known in China, but similar to those in Nepal. In the Tibetan world the dragonfly is neither a respected and lovable, nor a frightening creature.

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The author is well aware of Professor D.L. Snellgrove's (1966) warning that for a reliable study of [any aspect of] a Tibetan speaking people a very good knowledge of the language is necessary, and that her knowledge of colloquial and classical Tibetan is not adequate to comply with this demand. Nevertheless, she does hope that the most generous help of Dr. M. WINDER (Department of Oriental Manuscripts, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, London), and of Dr. R. POELMEYER (Kern Institute, University of Leyden) has made up for this deficiency. Both of them have not only helped with the tracing of some names, but also with various grammatical and etymological aspects.

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