

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

AN INTERESTING COMMENT ON THE TIBETAN DRAGONFLY  
EXPRESSION, *BLA.MA.MA.NI*

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According to personal information from a former member of the Dalai Lama's Cabinet, known as "a recognized authority on the flora and fauna of Tibet", the Tibetan dragonfly name, *bla.ma.ma.ni*, as discussed in ODONATOLOGICA 6 (1977): 71-73, refers to the dragonfly's habit to stand still in the air, thus resembling the stick or the hand of a Tibetan lama, explaining a detail on the Tibetan painted scroll, *thangka*. The text of the Tibetan original letter and its English translation are reproduced.

Through the mediation of Mr. GYATSO TSHERING, Director of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharmasala, India, we have received an interesting comment on the above mentioned previously unpublished expression, as discussed in ODONATOLOGICA 6 (2): 71-73; 1977. The author of the comment is Mr. J. TARING, former member of the Dalai Lama's Cabinet, now living in Rajpur, Uttar Pradesh, India. According to information given by Mr. G. Tshering, Mr. J. Taring is "a recognized authority on the flora and fauna of Tibet". Since Mr. Taring's letter, dated September 7, 1977, furnishes essential additional information to that presented in the said publication, we have requested Mr. Taring for permission to publish his original letter along with its English translation. The former is given in Figure 1, and the translation of the relevant text runs as follows:

" . . . As far as I know there is only one kind of dragonfly in Tibet (Lhasa - 12000 ft.). It is yellow in colour and is only seen during summer, usually after the rains set in. They are known as "lamamani" because they move about the air like a lamamani's hand, stick or rod points at the thangka, while relating and chanting the story painted on it. Lamamanis fly about in the air usually above swamps, catching mosquitoes, and they can stand still like a helicopter, or like a lamamani keeps his stick still while explaining a particular detail on the thangka . . .".

In the facsimile (Fig. 1) the underlined term, *sbrañ.ma.bla.ma.ma.ni*, thus means a "dragonfly". It is composed of "sbrañ.ma" = fly, bee, wasp, mosquito or a similar (buzzing) insect, and "bla.ma.ma.ni", a lama explaining a *thangka* motif.

It seems, thus, that there are two different backgrounds of the expression. The explanation given by the Lhasan lama, as narrated in our original paper, is based on the sudden appearance of dragonflies in spring, while the one furnished in the above letter is based on the mode of dragonfly flight, combined with the "ritual" handling related to the well-known Tibetan painted scroll, *thangka*. The "clerical" overtone in the name is thus apparent. Since both informants originate from Lhasa, there is no reason to doubt the correctness of both versions.

It is interesting that in the letter reference is made to a "yellow" dragonfly. Among the specimens used in our inquiry, *Pantala flavescens* was the only "yellow" species. It

is quite possible that this species is common in Lhasa. Anyway, in the Himalayan region it is often seen hovering up to elevations of 4000 m and more. Never-

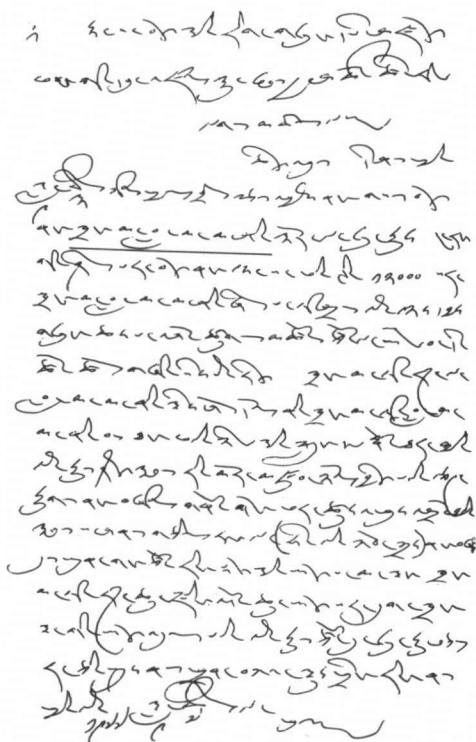


Fig. 1. Facsimile of Mr. J. Taring's original (hand script) "dragonfly letter" (28 x 18 cm). The term, *sbrañ.ma.bla.ma.ma.ni*, underlined by M.A.J.E.K. Further explanation in text.

theless, we are inclined to believe that the *bla.ma.ma.ñi* is a dragonfly (aniso-pteran) group name rather than a name of a well defined particular species. On his way to Lhasa, Dr. L.A. WADDELL (1905), Principal Medical Officer, naturalist and scientific recorder of the Colonel (later Sir Francis) E. Younghusband's Expedition, noticed that "several species of . . . dragonflies were common in all the ditches".

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It goes without saying that we are greatly obliged to Mr. G. TSHERING for his interest in our dragonfly work, and to Mr. J. TARING for his valuable comment, and for the permission to publish his letter.

#### REFERENCE

- WADDELL, L.A., 1905. The fauna of Central and South-western Tibet, with descriptions of new birds, fish, etc. *In*: L.A. Waddell, Lhasa and its mysteries, with a record of the Expedition 1903-1904, pp. 479-490. Murray, London. — [Reprinted by Sanskaran Prakashak, Delhi, 1975].