

THE KHĀ TONG LU'ANG.

COMPILED BY MAJOR E. SEIDENFADEN, M. R. A. S.

About these shy evasive savages, two small papers have already appeared in "The Journal of the Siam Society", namely one written by the writer of these lines (Vol. XIII, part III, pp. 49-51) and, quite recently, another from the hand of Dr. Kerr (Vol. XVIII, part II, pp. 142-144). Readers having perused both of these notes will perhaps remember that the habitat of the Khā therein mentioned was given as the slopes of the extensive mountain range that separates the circles of Nakon Rajasima and Udon from the Nām Pāsak Valley, also that in neither cases had the writers personally met these people, but had obtained all their information from Lāo villagers who, at rare occasions, did some bartering with them.

The following information, obtained from Mr. T. Wergeni of The East Asiatic Company's forest staff in Mu'ang Prae during a recent visit to Bangkok, will therefore, no doubt, be read with interest. Mr. Wergeni, who probably is the first and only European to meet these people, saw them for the first time during last summer (i. e. 1924) at Ban Nām Pu, a hamlet lying on the road that leads from Mu'ang Prae to Nakon Nan, about fifty kilometres to the north east of the former town. Mr. Wergeni, who succeeded in gaining the confidence of these extremely shy and timid people, describes them in the following terms:

Physically the Khā Tong Lu'ang or, as they are called in the Prae-Nān region, Phi Tong Lu'ang, are characterized by their strongly developed and muscular legs while the upper parts of their bodies are proportionally less well developed (as a result of their hill climbing life). Their facial expression recalls that of the Lapps in Northern Sweden, their fronts sloping strongly backwards and their faces being long and oval shaped. The nose is depressed at the root but has a distinct tip, with the nostrils rather broad. The mouth is big, but with thin lips, the upper lip being rather short. The chin is weak. There is no abnormal hair growth on the body;

the hair of the head is lank and straight, the so-called Mongolian hair, the colour a deep black, but, by reason of exposure to all kinds of weather, often bleached. Grey hair is common even among the younger members of the tribe. Their hair looks dusty and bristling, the tips of the individual hairs often being split in two, caused by the influence of rain and sun. The men wear their hair down to the shoulder, the women theirs to the waist. (Mr. Wergeni has, so far, only met male members of the tribe).

Their eyes are small and brown of colour, the white being of a yellowish tint. The axial line is horizontal, the eye sight is extraordinarily sharp as befitting a typical race of hunters; on the other hand, the expression of their eyes is somewhat dull and unintelligent like that of a dreamer or rather as that of an opium smoker. Their skin is of quite a fair complexion, even fairer than that of the Lāo people, being yellow in colour by reason of their life in the shady depths of the jungle. These people do not practice artificial deformation of any kind whatever, unless the piercing and expanding of the ear lobes, in which they often wear large wooden or bamboo plugs be so-called. The wearing of this plug tends to widen the hole which little by little becomes quite big, while the ear lobe, becoming more and more elongated, droops towards the shoulder. Tattooing is practised only a little by some members in imitation of the Lāo people, and is then but clumsily done, consisting of a few horizontal streaks or dotted lines on the front, running along the rim of the hair, and some other lines running along the edge of the jaws and chin. In former times tattooing was quite unknown. The piercing of the ear lobes as well as the tattooing is done purely for ornamental reasons, these people being very fond of "dressing up," and no superstition or ceremonies are attached to it. A certain Lāo monk living in a wat in Bān Sai Bao, Amphoe Rong Kwang (N. E. of Prae) is said to have taught them the tattooing.

The teeth of the Phi Tong Lu'ang are strong and somewhat long, even old people keep their teeth intact; the jaws are heavy and strongly developed.

The habitat of these people is the hilly plateau lying to the north east of Prae, between the Mē Yom and the Mē Nān Valleys,

as well as the Mē Tā district, lying to the north west of Prae, also round the sources of Nām Wā on the border of Nān and the French protected Lāo state of Luang Phrabang. (Nām Wā is a tributary to Mē Nān and falls in same a little below Amphoe Punyu'n). They prefer to live on the very tops of the hills in places where springs are found. Not far from Bān Wang Phūng (S. S. E. of Bān Nām Pu) lies a certain hill called Phu Sām Sao, i. e. "the hill of the three columns", which is considered by all the clans of the tribe, as a kind of national meeting place where they gather for the annual spirit offerings. (So at least, was Mr. Wergeni told by the chief of the clan he met at Bān Nām Pu).

Mentally these people are weakly developed and only some very few individuals may be said to rank above a general low level of intelligence. As already mentioned they are called Phi Tong Lu'ang by the surrounding Lāo, the name literally signifying "the spirits of the withered leaves" alluding to their very manner of living and their more than primitive leaf shelters. To this name, however, they strongly object; the name by which they call themselves is still unknown, when asked they reply in a mixture of Lāo and Khamu that they are "Khon Pā", i. e. people of the jungle. They are very shy and timid and easily frightened, having in former times been much maltreated by the Lāo who used to hunt them down and kill them like wild animals.

They are extremely credulous but simple and honest folk, real Natures children, and, as might be imagined, very superstitious; to them the whole world is peopled with evil spirits, every hill, rock and stream, even the trees, being inhabited by spirits of all of whom they are mortally afraid.

The tribe is split up in several clans, groups or hordes, none of whom have any fixed abode, these people being typical hunting forest nomads. They camp in one place only for just so long a time as the food supply suffices, their life in fact being one incessant struggle against starvation. When camping they do not construct any structures resembling houses or huts, but only very rough leaf-shelters, one for each family. This kind of shelter consists of a sort of wind screen seldom more than one meter in height; it is

made of a square-formed screen plaited of broad leaved boughs resting with one edge on the ground, the other one being propped up with a stick which keeps it in an angle of about 45 degrees. (This type of shelter is well known by the Shan and Lāo traders who often use them when camping out during their journeys and is by them called "kadub"). When their leaf shelters wither the Phi Tong Lu'ang break up for "pastures new" Hence their name!

They possess no furniture nor any utensils for cooking purposes; when they, as rarely happens, get hold of a little rice, they cook it in bamboo tubes which they cut in the forest. Water and honey, the latter for their babies, they also keep in bamboo tubes. Both sexes go generally stark naked, the women always so. The men, however, sometimes wear a loin cloth of the scantiest description, as when they visit the Khamu villages for purposes of barter.

Their food consists of everything eatable, from the biggest game down to rats, snakes, maggots and worms; the sprouts and tender roots of bamboos are one of the chief items of their "menu." They do not chew betel but they sometimes smoke tobacco when they can get hold of it; they do not know the use of opium.

These people eat their food in a most primitive and revolting manner, not knowing such luxuries as forks, spoons, plates or even chop sticks. When a piece of game has been killed, they usually put it straight on the fire without first having skinned, quartered or cleansed it, even the entrails are left unremoved. By and by, as the meat becomes more or less roasted, they tear off pieces with their fingers and start feeding.

Their chief means of livelihood is of course hunting and the collection of edible roots and sometimes honey.

When hunting they rarely use dogs; their only weapon is a long lance provided with an iron head at one end, the steel obtained from the Lāo or the Khamu, but fashioned by themselves, a few of them understanding a little smithing. The shaft is made of a kind of pliable and very strong palm stem obtained from a wild palm growing on the top of the hills. These lances or spears often attain a length of 11 feet. (Mr. Wergeni was good enough to present me with one of these spears

the length of which is 9 feet $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches or 2.93 m. The spear head is 11 inches or 0,28 m long).

The spear head is fastened to the shaft by driving its pointed lower end into the shaft, afterwards fastening it solidly with a circular band of iron and a lashing of string. The lances are often poisoned, the poison being a vegetable one obtained from a bush with leathery leaves growing on certain hill tops.

The Phi Tong Lu'ang do not know the use of bows and arrows and possess only a few old knives they have got by barter from the Khamu. The poison used is very strong and of deadly nature, even a slight scratch inflicted by such a poisoned spear will kill a giant like an elephant or the armoured rhinoceros in a very short time. The poison spreads rapidly to all the organs of the wounded animal and lames it so quickly that it seldom can get away from the hunters. When an animal has been killed, the hunters cut out the flesh nearest the wound as this is uneatable by reason of the poison, if this is not done quickly the poison will spread and spoil the whole of the game and the hunters will then have hunted in vain. Poison is therefore only used when absolutely necessary, i. e. when the larder of the clan is quite empty.

These children of the hills and the forest are very courageous hunters and attack all kinds of animals with the exception of the tiger which they fear. Their speciality is the hunting of the rhinoceros still to be found in these northern regions in reasonable numbers, though now far from numerous. These Khā do not know the use of snares or pitfalls, fishing is also unknown, as they seldom descend into the valleys. They are, of course, born trackers and can follow a spoor for miles without losing the scent. As mentioned above, they do not often use dogs when hunting but use beaters instead. They possess no domesticated animals (with exception of said dogs given them by the Khamu), and do not know any other means of transport than their own feet; canoes or rafts are also unknown. They do not cultivate the ground, even gardening is unknown, they say that they desist from doing so for fear of the spirits who else would be offended. Their only kind of commerce consists in barter; money is unknown and they do not understand

its value. The barter is done with the Lāo and the Khamu, chiefly with the latter with whom they feel more confident.

They exchange ivory, rhinoceros horns (rarer), wax and honey for cloth, tobacco and sometimes rice. They never visit the markets, being too shy, but go to the outskirts of some Khamu village, where they sit down on the ground until they are invited to come up into the houses. They do not then all go up, but leave some of their number on the ground as guards, always being very afraid of treachery. Having no idea about weights or measures, they give away all they have brought in exchange for the articles they especially want. Barter with them is therefore often rather lucrative.

Fighting among the clans or between them and the surrounding people is unknown, but they may be dangerous if met unexpectedly in the jungle when they may attack suddenly, their only motive for doing so being overmastering fear.

Their social organisation is very primitive, the tribe living within the geographical limits already stated is split up into eight clans each under its own chief. The clans, however, recognize a common overlord, if one may use such a high-sounding title.

Monogamy is the rule, the reason for this perhaps being that the number of women is smaller than that of the men. But in all other respects the position of woman is extremely low; she is practically a slave, doing all the work and acting as a beast of burden. A wife is obtained by purchase, the prize generally being a piece of big game; if, for instance, the suitor is successful in killing a Kating ox (sladang) he is sure to be accepted as son-in-law. Exogamy is strictly practiced. The parental authority is limited and must often give way for the decision of the chief of the clan who is a very autocratic ruler. The chieftainship is not inherited, the ablest hunter being elected whenever the office falls vacant. Communism is practiced with regard to food, all getting their equal share of the killed or of the edible roots collected. Their industries are few, besides making their lances they sometimes carve their earplugs and the bamboo tubes for carrying their fire implements (they use tinder and steel for producing fire), a little ornamenting these with a kind of geometrical figures something akin to those carved by the

Semang Negritos in Malaya on their women's "magic combs". (See Skeat and Blagden "Pagan races of the Malay Peninsula", Vol. I, p. 420 and onwards).

They have a kind of song, a simple monotonous ditty somewhat resembling the Khamu songs. Musical instruments are quite unknown. It may be added that during the rainy season these people rarely leave their mountain fastnesses.

No kind of medicine is known: to cure illness, recourse is had to offerings to the spirits and exorcisms, such as the "khao phi" well known among the Lāo people.

Very little is known with regard to the religious ideas of these people, they are, by all accounts, animists believing in a host of malign spirits peopling the forest, hill and vale, the rocks, the streams and even the trees. Sacrifices are made to these spirits, the grandest offering being that of a pig; when making offerings they sing special spirit songs.

When a member of the clan dies, he or she is buried in a deep grave to protect the corpse from being dug up and eaten by the tigers. Should this nevertheless happen, it is believed that the unlucky spirit, the owner of the corpse, becomes an evil one who, at once, begins to haunt the camps and torment the living.

Magic is, as far as is known, non-existent; officiating priests or sorcerers are also unknown. Whether these people believe in a supreme being has not yet been ascertained, but at least they believe in a soul and a future existence.

With regard to language no records are, so far, available, the Kha Tong Lu'ang use a mixture of Lāo and Khamu for bartering purposes; their own language seems to consist of a collection of strange guttural and staccato-like sounds, in which the letter R does not occur. To the observant ear their language sounds like a piping and unmanly sort of gibberish.

So far Mr. Wergeni's account of this strange people, perhaps the only existing tribe on the earth (or at least in Asia) whose members really go entirely naked. As Mr. Wergeni intends to take up the study of this people, a task for which he is singularly gifted and for which the conditions seem as ideal as they can be, we may

soon get additional information, of which a fuller description of their social organisation and religious ideas as well as a vocabulary will be especially welcome to science.

From the information, so far gained, it seems probable that the Phi Tong Lu'ang belong to a most primitive branch of the Mon-Khmer race, and it may also seem reasonable to suppose that they are identical with the Khā Tong Lu'ang who, according to Dr. Kerr's and my reports, are said to roam the forest-clad slopes of the long mountain range that separates the Nām Pāsak Valley from the Udon-Nakon Rajasima circles. The latter point can, of course, only be proved by actual contact with, and study of, the latter. May we soon be able to find somebody to do this because, as far as information goes, these interesting links with the childhood of man are quickly dying out.

Bangkok 11-1-1925.
