

**Some information concerning the "Phi Tawng Luang"
obtained from a few residents of a village
in the Nam Wa district, east of Nan.**

BY PHRA WINIT WANADORN.

(1) The Phi Tawng Luang, a forest roaming tribe, have in general the stature, appearance and complexion akin to the Khamu type, and talk their dialect with an accent which sounds something like that of the Khamu or Khamer. Those members who have had some connections with villagers speak the Lao tongue tolerably well. Both male and female wear loose hair, and wear garments of the Lao when coming down to villages on business. In their wild habitat, both male and female alike wear two bits of loin cloth, one hung in front and the other behind. This cloth is simply the naturally woven bast fibre of the ยางน้ำ Yang Nawng tree (*Antiaris toxicaria*) beaten out and separated into sheets of the thickness required. Mattresses and blankets are also made out of the same material.

(2) These people come down to villages (usually those skirting the forest) at most once or twice a year, to barter their collected forests products such as hides and horns and honey and beewax, for knives, spades, matches, flints, rice, and even for articles of luxury, by the way, such as tobacco and betel nuts and leaves, the use of which they at times take fancy to. The female members very rarely leave their jungle abode, and will on no account knowingly allow themselves to be seen by outsiders, and when they ever accompany male members to villages they remain far out of sight.

(3) Their temporary dwelling camp consists of a rough and ready shed made up of bamboos and tree branches, and roofed over with leaves; the roof being just high enough for a man to sit up in without his head touching it, and having one side of it sloping down and touching the ground.

Within the shed is raised a low platform floored with split and flattened-out bamboo (ฟาน) for sleeping on. Invariably this platform is found to have its surface inclined towards the foot and in order to prevent the sleepers (the whole company sleep together)

sliding down a piece of bamboo is tied across the lower side to serve as a foot-hold. Around the shed is built a fence or barricade of branches and brushwood, to keep off unwelcome intruders, both man and animal. The duration of each camp depends on the conditions of the surroundings: it is left when food is found scarce or when other things become unfavourable to existence.

(4) They live on all kinds of animal and vegetable products so long as these are edible. Among their animal foods are honey, meat of all sorts of animals ranging from mouse and rats to deer and buffalo, and even to elephant if necessary. Cannibalism is not known. Among foods of the vegetable origin are yams (*Dioscoreas*) and other edible roots and tubers, herbs and fruits, which last include the seed of ມະກຸນ (Makhom) produced in the rainy season by an *Icacinaceous* shrub which is pretty common in moist shady ravines. This seed when roasted, has a bitter-sweetish taste, and also forms a popular article of diet among the village people. Another item of food, and a queer one, is a rotten wood mixed with honey.

(5) When going about they carry a knife and a long-handled spear, with the other end of the handle shod with a narrow-bladed spade. The spear handle is made of palm-wood, probably the outer part of the stem of Khüang ມັງຄາ (*Caryota urens*), or of some other palms such as *Arenga* and *Livistona*, which are common in the heavy forest. With this spear-spade implement (poisoned spear when required) they hunt animals, unearth vegetable tubers and roots, and dig at burrows inhabited by food animals. They use no hunting dogs. When having to tackle a biggish and dangerous animal they do so from a tree branch or from some other safe station. In the case of ordinary game they sometimes beat the jungle, otherwise they hunt singly.

(6) The poison used for the spear is said to be the milky sap of the well-known *Antiaris toxicaria* mixed with some other ingredients the nature of which is unknown to outsiders. Some people say that, as sometimes used by the villagers, the usual ingredients are cotton-seed oil, ginger, Kha-ໜີ (*Alpinia*) and lamp-black, with an addition of human saliva. According to Mr. Wergeni's

statement in Major Seidenfaden's paper on the "Kha Tawng Luang" which appeared in the previous issue of the Siam Society's Journal, the poison used by the tribe is derived from a bush with leathery leaves growing on certain hill slopes. From this meagre description it is very difficult even to guess what the poison plant in question may be. It would be interesting to know what the plant is. There are many plants belonging to several diverse families that have been known to produce deadly poisons, and among them may be mentioned several species of *Strophanthus* of the *Apocynaceae* family, which give from their seeds one of the deadliest and quickest poisons known. This genus of plants is also represented in our neighbouring countries such as Burma and the Malay Peninsula, and the occurrence of some species of it in Siam is possible. May the poison plant of the "Phi Tawng Luang" mentioned by Mr. Wergeni be an erect-growing species of *Strophanthus*, as some species of this are used by certain wild tribes of Africa for such purposes.

(7) Hunting dogs and other domesticated animals some say are kept by this tribe, some say are not. Possibly some clans do keep them and some clans don't.

(8) These people are very good at spear-throwing, rarely missing a small leaf placed 3 or 4 wah away. This performance was once exhibited to one of my informants.

(9) They have not many belongings; when moving camp the few things they have are packed into bamboo baskets, which are slung round the shoulders after the Myao's or Nyao's fashion and not round the forehead as in the Karen's mode. They have no cooking pots; the raw food is cooked in a bamboo joint.

(10) Marriage is said to be contracted on a purely mutual ground, there being no sanction or consent of a third party required.

(11) When a member dies, the corpse, some say, is buried underground, some say is hung up on a tree. The latter custom of disposing of the dead is said to have been first suggested to the Phi Tawng Luang, who formerly used to leave the corpse on the open ground, by the Myao or Nyao, with the explanation that if it were not done the tiger might eat the dead body and getting to like the taste of human flesh, would attack and kill living people and eat them also.

These fragmentary notes are compiled from information given to me by uneducated and unintelligent villagers. Should there be something in them that seems in any way to differ from or to be contradictory to Mr. Wergeni's statement, I must say that I have not written them with the purpose of contradicting or in any way disparaging those given by that gentleman. Where things do not agree, I myself would prefer to accept the facts given by Mr. Wergeni, who has had the advantage of studying the subjects personally. Possibly, however, different clans of the tribe have different ethnological minor details, as an adaptation to localities.