

Further note on the Phi Tong Lu'ang.

BY MR. D. BOURKE-BORROWES, L. F. S.

The article on the Khā Tong Lu'ang also known as the Phi Tong Lu'ang published in Volume XX, Part I, of the Journal of the Siam Society, compiled by Major Seidenfaden from observations personally made by Mr. T. Wergeni about 50 kilometres North-east of Muang Prae, is of great interest.

It seems most remarkable that there should exist, scattered over a large area in the northern portions of Siam, small groups or tribes containing some of the most primitive people in the world, hitherto quite unknown to science, and who only come into contact with the local villagers on rare occasions. Mr. Wergeni is much to be congratulated on being the first European observer to meet with some of these people and to record definite observations about them; it is much to be hoped that he will continue this interesting work.

As regards Major Seidenfaden's remark that the Phi Tong Lu'ang are "perhaps the only existing tribe on the earth (or at least in Asia) whose members really go entirely naked," without wishing in any way to deny this statement, I should be inclined to doubt it. I believe, for instance, the Jarawas who inhabit the densest forests of the Andaman Islands are quite unclothed. Moreover, in spite of all the travel and exploration that has taken place there are still, even nowadays, large tracts of the earth still quite unknown and inhabited by many very primitive tribes, as for instance, in the basin of the Amazon River.

As very little is yet known about the Phi Tong Lu'ang of Siam, I send herewith a short note on a few of the Phi Tong Lu'ang met by Khun Wilas Wanawitaya of the Siamese Forest Service in May 1925. It is rather unfortunate that this official did not realize at the time the great interest of such an occurrence, and consequently made no special notes nor observations. But, he has kindly written down all that he could remember about it.

The following is the account given by Khun Wilas :

“On May 22nd 1925, while on tour, I marched from Ban Den Lek to Ban Siew in the Amphur Saantaw, Changwad Utradit. On entering the latter village, I saw 6 or 7 wild people whom the local people call Phi Tong Lu'ang.

They were all males, some young and some old. They each held a long lance in their hand and they all had a double-edged dagger in a sheath stuck into their waists at the back. They wore only shabby little pieces of cloth round their loins which scarcely concealed their persons. Their complexion was very dark, the pupils of their eyes were of bluish colour, their teeth were very white, their noses were of the Mongolian type and I was told locally that their hair was fairly curly and of brownish colour, but on this occasion when I met them, they had cut their hair so short that I could not possibly distinguish whether it was straight or curly. Their finger-nails and toe-nails were curved and projected to a length of not less than one inch, like claws. Their bodies were of ordinary size covered with soft brownish-coloured hair.

A most horrible odour emanated from their bodies, which made me feel quite sick on approaching them, so that it appeared that they were never in the habit of bathing nor washing.

They all appeared to be timid and shy. They did not talk to one another, but no doubt they have their own dialect. My elephant-man started to ask them some questions in Siamese, which only two older men among them with greyish hair could understand, but these two men were able to give us perfectly clear answers. They said they had come to the village to get matches and shabby torn clothes, that they had no use for money, nor for new clothes nor for anything else; that they lived on some kinds of forest roots and bulbs and especially on the flesh of wild animals which they usually killed with their lances, while beating the jungles. They also informed us that they used bamboo-culms as cooking utensils.

On being asked where they lived they pointed to some distant mountain ranges; thus ended our interview and they went off into the village on their own business. About dusk they left, expecting to spend the night in some distant place, as they could in no way be persuaded to stay over-night in the village.

Some of the villagers told me that they used to bring in honey and bees-wax and barter these in exchange for matches and old clothes. They also told me that these people sometimes came into the village wearing apparel made of leaves."

