

## CHAPTER 2 “ Crocodiles and dragons ” : Fauna and Folklore in the Forests of Northern Laos

著者	Badenoch Nathan
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## CHAPTER 2

## “Crocodiles and dragons”: Fauna and Folklore in the Forests of Northern Laos

Nathan Badenoch

## [Abstract]

The "water spirit" is a common cultural motif across mainland Southeast Asia. This paper examines the Bit word *ɲas* 'ngeuak' (water spirit) to uncover semantic and phonological change processes in the specific cultural context. The analysis uses semantic categories created by collocation to provide insight into how the shared cultural phenomenon of ngeuak fits within speakers' perceptions of boundaries in the animate world, drawing on data from folklore. The paper asserts the importance of collecting detailed data on fauna names as well as the benefits of triangulating between lexical data, local knowledge systems and oral literature.

## 1. Boundary crossings at the river's edge

The edge of the river is a dangerous place. It is a place where spirits such as the ngeuak can cross between the earth and the underworld. As avid fishers, the Bit of northern Laos are reliant on river resources for their livelihoods and fish have important cultural meaning in their cosmos (Badenoch 2020a). Bit folklore is full of stories about the edge of the river, where people and spirits cross between the world of water and the world of land. When traveling, it is important to note if one is going by land (*waʔ dii siŋ*) or river (*waʔ sɔv rɔv*). In either case, it is likely that one will find themselves at the river's edge (*cmpeer rɔv*), and the many stories recounting the need for care will be on one's mind.

The boundary between land and water is given its primary meaning by the act of crossing it. For people, capture of fish and other river food (*mʔuə mndaac*) is critical for survival, but there is risk of being taken by the dangerous beings (*ckhɛɛ ɲas*) living in the water. The latter category of dangerous water beings is composed of two words for creatures that cross the water-land boundary, and straddle the line between biology and belief. The first, *ckhɛɛ* [cī.kʰɛ:] 'crocodile' is a borrowing from Tai (*khɛɛ* C1 'saltwater crocodile'). The second, *ɲas* [cī.ŋayʰ]<sup>1</sup> has several manifestations, with a significant area of overlap with the Tai *ŋiək* and Indic Naga phenomena, and are part of the larger and culturally ambiguous category of "dragon". In Lao cosmology, ngeuak is

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<sup>1</sup> In my orthography for Bit, /y/ represents [j]. For other related languages, I use /-yʰ/. Native Bit phonology has no aspirated stops. In old borrowed Tai words, they are realized as unaspirated, while in modern borrowings there is individual variation. The word /ckhɛɛ/ tends to have the original Tai aspiration.

considered to be “chao nam chao tha”, a friendly lord of the water and the riverbanks (Ngaosirvathana and Ngaosrivathana 2009).

In line with the common understandings of this creature, *cɲas* could be loosely glossed as a “water spirit”. In Bit folklore the *cɲas* is manifested in snake-like form, as depicted by expressive words commenting on its body and movements. However, the abode of the *cɲas*, where careless people may be taken, is a world under the earth, or more commonly in Bit narration *piin rɔv* ‘the bottom of the river’ (piin < T phiin ‘bottom, base’). The stories that take place here are not “in” the water, but more accurately “under” the water. Nonetheless, the wandering spirit of a person who has become sick or injured may be “fished” from the river with a scoop net (Badenoch 2020a). The world from which humans are brought is sometimes referred to as *miəŋ teen*, which would normally indicate the heavens<sup>2</sup>. The *cɲas* can also take the form of *ɲnaa naak* (Lord Naga); in this form, the *cɲas* is paired with *ɲnaa ʔin* (Lord Indra). Here, the *ɲiək* is elevated to celestial status. At the same time, the Bit demote Indra to the status of *ɲnaa* (Phanya) the Lao/Lue title of a local lord that is bestowed by the King. Together with *ɲnaa teen*, these three make up the most powerful of the celestial spirits, yet all bear the same worldly title that is shared with the *ɲnaa caw miəŋ*, or district governor<sup>3</sup>.

Together, *ckhɛɛ* and *cɲas* form a poetic construction indexical of the dangers that exist at the river’s edge. Both words indicate what people consider to be “real” beings, although most will not admit to having seen one. Such elaborate expressions can offer important insight into linguistic culture, and further into the social space where daily life and worldviews intersect in a range of performative practices. In Bit, elaborate expressions may also reflect the multilingualism of the Bit people and the points of cultural contact with the many *kee mooc* “others” that share upland landscapes with them. In this case, the pairing of a Tai term and a Bit term for this category of dangerous beings is worth some exploration. The Tai *ckhɛɛ* is representative of the riverside dangers of the downstream areas, where larger rivers and settlements of Tai are found. The *cɲas* is something to be encountered in the upstream areas where smaller rivers are travelled and fished. The upstream/downstream dichotomy reflects a more general orientation of higher/lower, with the upper direction (*sɔv duul*) being familiar and intimate and the lower (*sɔv dəəm*) associated with the unpredictable and dangerous (Badenoch 2020a).

In contrast to the transparent etymology of *ckhɛɛ*, the “real” meaning of *cɲas* is not immediately clear. Synchronically and ethnographically, this is not a problem, because Bit people know what a *cɲas* is and the threat it poses. Diachronically, it is an interesting question, because the form *cɲas* is not known widely in Austroasiatic (so far), but the word *ɲiək* (ngeuak) is found commonly in areas where Tai and Austroasiatic people have been in contact. Starting synchronically, the shared c- in *ckhɛɛ cɲas* is likely motivated both by aesthetics and grammar in a contact situation. As Chamberlain shows (this volume) in Lao there is evidence of a /cii/ ‘lizard’ Life Form term. The evidence

<sup>2</sup> This word is a multilayered borrowing: *teen* < T. *theen* A1 < Ch. *tiān* ‘heaven’

<sup>3</sup> This word is not found in Tai languages to the east, which would mean that it would have entered Bit through Lao or Lue, relatively recently. In Lao, Intra usually has the title *pha?*

from Lao is not complete, and gets more patchy as one moves into the Tai languages spoken where the Bit have lived over the past 200 plus years. Interestingly for the Bit ngeuak is the fact that this /cii/ is found in the Lao term for crocodile *cii khεε*. It is possible that the c- in *cɲas* could be part of a contact induced change involving semantics, phonology and folklore.

This word offers a chance to explore the overlap between a specific local term and broader regional culture. The approach to *cɲas* taken in this paper was catalyzed by a cultural category found in the Austroasiatic Phong language spoken in Huaphanh province on the Laos-Vietnam border. Informants mentioned a category of dangerous “creepy crawlies” in the forest known as *mar trɲaay<sup>h</sup>* ‘snakes and centipedes’. The similarity of the terms – Phong *trɲaay<sup>h</sup>* and Bit *cɲas* – in categories of dangerous beings in the forest, together with the overlap in imagery among snakes, nagas and water spirits, and dragons suggested an approach that looks at poetics, local ontology, semantic shift and oral tradition. Because categories are the product of human experience and imagination (Lakoff 1987), “crocodiles and dragons” allows us to see how linguistic forms represent the cultural adaptations and innovations that produce understanding of how people, animals and spirits coexist in the natural landscape. Drawing on insights from these smaller Austroasiatic languages that have long been in contact with larger Tai groups also helps shine light on how interethnic, multilingual interactions shape elements of shared “areal” culture.

## 2. Water spirits and fertility in the mountains

The Bit *cɲas* is part of a regional tradition of interrelated, overlapping but not identical animated “water” beings that includes tutelary reptiles such as the snake and the salt-water crocodile and supernaturals such as the naga, or naak as it is known in the Tai world (Ngaosirvathana and Ngaosrivathana 2009). The multiple identities and manifestations come from the process of adopting, adapting and accommodating the Indic concept of naga, together with Buddhism, to the existing autochthonous ngeuak. The ngeuak was originally the salt-water crocodile, known historically to the Tai-speaking people as *ɲiək*. The term, now usually glossed ‘mythical water creature’ is old enough to be reconstructed back to Proto-Tai \*ɲuak DL4, and since then has travelled several different semantic paths in different Tai cultural areas and is likely a product of ancient linguistic contact itself (Chamberlain 2019b). Historically, in the Tai world *ɲiək* has been used together with the word for ‘snake’ *ɲuu*, forming an alliterated poetic pair *ɲiək ɲuu*. Because this crocodile (*Crocodilus porosus*) is enormous, it is not surprising that it came to occupy a place in the mythology and cosmos of the Tai people and the people they were in contact with.

When *ɲiək* was overlain with naga, it took on additional cultural meaning. Naga is a giver of culture and society, and a protector of fertility and prosperity. Naga are often represented as half-human and half-serpent, offspring of the earth that dwell under the water (Wessing 2006). Naga and humans can produce offspring; the story of the Khmer prince who married the naga is well-known. Tai kingdoms often feature naga in their founding myths. In the Kingdom of Luang Prabang, there are fifteen nagas occupying

the physical landscape onto which the royal power and social structure is mapped. To the Luang Prabang Lao, nagas are a part of the political mythology, but they live in specific, known places and some have proposed ethnic affiliations of different naga. The founding of the kingdom is the result of two hermits striking a deal with the local ngeuak, in a reciprocal arrangement of protection and propitiation. With the Indic naga came new ideas of morality and social order. Foundational myths centering on the union between a male human and female naga are found in ancient polities across the region, but are absent in the eastern part of the Tai world.

In many parts of Southeast Asia, naga are generally considered to be female (Wessing 2006). The role of protecting fertility is related to this gendered role and seems important to the political explanation and justification needed for the imposition of external political systems on autochthonous populations. The telling that remains in history is one of a negotiated reciprocity, yet the narrative suggests a suppression and integration of the female within male structures. In Bit oral literature, the *cɲas* is not always female, although when appearing as a main character in a story it is usually as a female. The abode of the *cɲas* has married couples, children and kinship relations that mirror human society in many ways, but the main points of contact with humans tend to be in the female form of the *cɲas*. And when the *cɲas* appears in male form, it is to marry a human woman and usurp the reproductive capacity of the human, resulting in the loss of lineage. In the oral tradition of the Phong Laan, an Austroasiatic group related to Bit, *ɲiək* witnessed the betrayal of a moral code of coexistence between humans and animals in the forest and pledged to hold the humans accountable for their transgression, appearing in various forms from the underworld by way of rivers (Badenoch 2020b). In Phong Laan, the Tai term *ɲiək* has been borrowed, probably as a part of the larger cultural influence from Buddhist practices they adopted. For the Phong Laan, *ɲiək* is part of the supernatural landscape, while *mar trɲaay<sup>h</sup>* is part of the biological forest. Both require care when moving outside of the village.

In Southern Laos, the oral history of the Nya Heun people tells how they were able to slay the Mekong ngeuak that had taken the daughter of the Lao king. In the process, the Austroasiatic Nya Heun obtain palm-leaf texts that have sacred power that is mobilized in ritual practices that legitimize their ethnic identity in relation to the more powerful Lao society (Baird 2021). For the Bit, ngeuak live under the small rivers and present themselves to humans on an individual basis, as part of the “normal” interactions that cross human-animal-spirit realms. In Bit stories, ethnic identity is not usually specified, but the opposition of Tai *muang* culture and Bit forest culture is pervasive. In this paper, I will draw on lexical material and oral performances to explore the meaning of *cɲas* to the Bit within their conceptualizations of “graded personhood” (Sprengr 2015) and the crossings of animacy borders.

### 3. Forest life: Transparency and opacity in classifying the intimate

General words to classify large groups of life in the forest are not numerous in Bit. The only general words for “animal” are elaborate phrases, probably motivated by similar constructions (Badenoch 2019): *sat siɲ liɲ may* and *sat saa waa siɲ*, where both have the

Indic borrowing *sat* ‘animal’ heading an ABBC rhyming pattern. Similar phrases are found in Tai languages, and these are usually used in Bit in their full form in poetic language, although *sat siŋ* is heard in constructions such as *mih sat mih siŋ* [watch-animal-watch-?] ‘to take care of livestock’. Forest animals, as prey of hunters, can be referred to in general as *sat*, but in common usage the word is suppressed entirely for avoidance purposes; a hunter heading out into the forest is said to *waʔ teʔ kwaa peŋ* [go-do-walk-shoot] or *diən paa diən doŋ* [wander-forest-wander-forest].

In common language, animals in the forest are grouped into categories formed by pair words of representative members. These folk classifications, falling under the poetic practice of elaborate expressions, are defined along cultural terms that reflect people’s many relationships with the forest life. The main categories are:

Bit	Gloss	Category
<i>prəək prəŋ</i>	‘squirrel-rat’	small mammals that are trapped
<i>jiəŋ kaap</i>	‘chicken-duck’	poultry
<i>pos tyaak</i>	‘muntjak-deer’	larger game animals that are hunted
<i>traak bəʔ</i>	‘buffalo-cow’	large livestock
<i>ceem kdeh</i>	‘bird-?’	birds
<i>mʔuə mndaac</i>	‘fish-?’	fish
<i>saan mron</i>	‘elephant-[horse]’	large animals of physical strength and power
<i>kneʔ bus</i>	‘[rat]-[bamboo rat]’	animals that must be ‘dug’

From this list, there are two models at work. In the first group, names of common animals of similar size are collocated to form a general class. For *prəək prəŋ* and *pos tyaak* there is a clear sense of the methods that are used for hunting. The two livestock classes, *jiəŋ kaap* and *traak bəʔ* are the representatives of animals commonly sacrificed in rituals.

The second group is lexically the same type of construction, but the semantics are marked. In each, the first element is the common name of a “representative” animal, but the second is a form that is not found in the lexicon on its own. Thus, *ceem*, *mʔuə* and *saan* are the common words for ‘bird’, ‘fish’ and ‘elephant’. The identity of the second element varies. The pair word for bird, *kdeh* is reportedly a small bird that has not been seen for generations. It is likely that *mndaac* means something like ‘small ones’ and completes an avoidance pair with *mʔuə*, which is itself a taboo form that replaced the common Austroasiatic \*kaa ‘fish’. The word collocated with *saan* ‘elephant’ is often glossed by villagers as ‘rhinoceros’, although the common word for this now “mythical” animal is the Tai borrowing *rɛet* DL4. However, *mron* can be traced to the Austroasiatic word for horse, Proto-Khmuic \*hmron and Proto-Palaungic \*mron. The Bit now use *maa*, borrowed from Tai.

The last pair given in the table above *kneʔ bus* is interesting, in that the pair is itself an evasive term. Unlike *mʔuə mndaac*, where the original evasive terms have

assumed the unmarked position, *kneʔ* is the reflex of the originally unmarked word for ‘rat’, commonly known throughout Austroasiatic (see Proto-Khmuic \**kniʔ* and Proto-Palaungic \**kni(i)ʔ* ‘rat’). The second element *bus*, is homophonous with the word for ‘loose dirt expelled from a hole when it is dug’. However, it is also notably similar to an older Austroasiatic word for ‘bamboo rat’, Proto-Palaungic \**kpuuj* and Proto-Vietic \**k-buuj* ‘bamboo rat’<sup>4</sup>. In any case, *kneʔ* was replaced by *prvŋ* as the common term for ‘rat’, while the original form then assumed the marked position as an avoidance. Interestingly, *kneʔ* is also an evasive term for male genitals, and more generally small items of value.

These classes are defined by social values and effected by beliefs and practices relating to the potency of life among the animals that the Bit interact with. The combination of these related terms – whether through semantic connections of similarity or paths of change influenced by taboos – follow Bit preferences for pairs that can be combined in poetic constructions. Animals that do not fit into these larger categories, can still be “generalized” with different socio-semantic implications. For example, ‘dog’ can be found in an elaborate pair *cvʔ mvŋ* [dog-?], where the second element is likely a reduced form of *mvŋ* ‘civet sp’. The elaborate pair for ‘pig’ is *clek clvk* [pig-CHIME], but this is a phonic manipulation. Tabooing animal names in Austroasiatic names is concerned with lexicalization, rather than phonological representation (Diffloth 1980). In this case of ‘pig’, the echo word produces not a salient category, but simply an acoustic vehicle for use in aesthetically motivated language. Speaking of ritual, *clek jiar* ‘pig chicken’ indicates animals raised for sacrifice. The categories created through these collocations are indexical of the Bit understanding of forest life. They provide a framework through which they can deal with the danger associated with the “hunter’s dilemma” (Århem 2015), integrating spatial reference, ecological knowledge, technology and relations of reciprocity. Even though these encounters are often of a violent nature, the classification delineates a sphere of intimacy through knowing and naming.

#### 4. “Snakes and centipedes”: Categorizing and cursing dangers in the forest

In Bit there is no general term for insects, but the category *ckhɛɛ cŋas* has its roots in a category that refers to dangerous animals that creep and slither in the forest. This category, introduced above as “crocodiles and dragons”, can be traced back to a class of forest life that is firmly located in the biological forest shared with people. In this analysis, we can see that the reorganization of the lexical material may indicate how notions of intimacy added extra meaning to the lexically straight-forward pattern of category-through-collocation.

Hints to the history of “crocodiles and dragons” appeared first in my study of the Phong Khami language, an Austroasiatic spoken in Huaphanh province. After a session of eliciting animal names, my informants began a discussion of collecting forest

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Bamboo rat’ in Bit is *diək*. Two varieties are well-known: *diək cɔək* (large) and *diək leh* (small). The general term for large bamboos is *cɔək*, while *leh* is the broom grass plant.

foods. At one point someone spoke of the need to be careful of *mar harŋaay<sup>h</sup>*, and pointed out that we had covered both of those in our earlier work session: *mar* ‘snake’ and *harŋaay<sup>h</sup>* ‘centipede’. The closely related Phong Laan language has *mar* ‘snake’ and *tarŋaay<sup>h</sup>* ‘centipede’. Ksingmul, another Austroasiatic language spoken in Huaphanh, shares these terms as well, *mar* ‘snake’ and *kuŋaay<sup>h</sup>*.

	‘snake’	‘centipede’
Phong Khami	mar	harŋaay <sup>h</sup>
Phong Laan	mar	tarŋaay <sup>h</sup>
Ksingmul	mar	kuŋaay <sup>h</sup>
Bit	mar	[cŋas]
Thai Then	mar	kneh
Khmu (Khmuic)	mar	kʔiip
Lawa (Palaungic)	saʔoijn	saʔaip

Looking further afield in Austroasiatic, there seems to be some semantic coherence to this category, as evidenced by the Nyah Kur *chròom-khikhìir* ‘snake-centipede’ (Theraphan 1984 in SELANG Mon-Khmer Etymological Dictionary). Conceptually, this is not challenging, but noteworthy here is that the forms found in northern Laos given above, are not found widely outside of the area.

This form of ‘snake’ *mar* is shared more broadly with other Khmuic languages (reconstructed as \*ma:r for Proto-Khmuic), but beyond these, the reflexes of the Proto-Austroasiatic ‘snake’ \*[b]sɔn are common in the Palaungic and some Vietic languages of this region. Note also that Proto-Vietic has a reconstruction for ‘dragon’ \*s-mir, which may be relevant in light of the discussion below. In the Katuic language Pacoh, *mar* is a specific variety of small, black snake that rises up to attack as if flying. In recent works Chamberlain (2019a, 2019b) has used SNAKE words to elucidate the linguistic history of the region, but *mar/ma:r* ‘snake’ seems to be concentrated in the Khmuic languages.

‘Centipede’ represents a clear grouping of Phong languages and Ksingmul. Given the Ksingmul form, it seems reasonable to posit on both phonological and typological grounds that the Bit form belongs here as well, with an “original” meaning of ‘centipede’. Based on this data, we could preliminarily propose an older Phong form \*Crŋas and an older form shared by Bit and Ksingmul \*c/k(r)ŋas.<sup>5</sup> Khmu does not have this form, and in Bit it does not refer to the centipede. Thus, centipede, as a lexeme, seems to be rather unstable in this part of the Austroasiatic world. Otherwise, reflexes of the very well-established and broadly distributed Proto-Austroasiatic form \*kʔip / \*[k]ʔiip / \*kʔaip ‘centipede’ dominate, as in the Khmu *kʔiip*.

<sup>5</sup> It may be worth noting that Htin (Mal-Pray, most closely related to the Phong languages) has *ŋaas* ‘needle’, suggesting the possibility that this form is a metaphoric innovation motivated by the sharp pain of a centipede sting. Mal-Pray languages also share the *mar* form for ‘snake’.



A type of markedness in this category can be related to the element of danger associated with these animals. In Bit, pairs of animal names falling into this category are also used in curses that are either directed at the animal, or used discursively as an index of human reaction to the threat of harm of one. For example, a dog can be cursed with the phrase *rwaay knii smrɔɔk-ɔɔk-cɔɔk*. This curse is composed of *rwaay knii* ‘tiger wolf’ and *smrɔɔk-ɔɔk-cɔɔk*, a word play based on *smrɔɔk* ‘dhole’, where two rhyming syllables are added. In one story where a hunter is tormented by large predators, he said *rwaay knii həə* [tiger-wolf-those] cursing those animals.

In another instance, I heard someone cursing a raven that was stealing food from a field hut with *klʔaak car klʔaak klaaŋ* ‘raven civet raven hawk’, a poetic construction playing off of the pair *car klaaŋ* ‘civet hawk’, indicating animals that steal aggressively from the land and air. Less aggressive, but similar sentiments are directed towards the soul of the rice (*srmaal sŋvɔv*) when called in the annual rituals: *mah məʔ pen sŋvɔv mool sŋvɔv mɔvɔk* [rice-invite-be-rice-weevil-rice-?], ‘Let the rice be infested with weevils and insects’. The sentiment here is asking the soul of the rice to produce so much grain for the household that it cannot be consumed completely and it is eaten by insects in the barn (Badenoch 2019-2020). In Bit, every noun has at least one poetic partner form. Phonologically motivated vowel alternation, such as *clec clɔk* ‘pig’ provide a euphonic effect, but the moral affect of collocations like *rwaay knii*, *car klaaŋ* and *mool mɔvɔk* are based on encodings of ontological details of human/non-human enmity in the Bit forest.

## 5. Forest floor to the top of the rainbow: *cŋas* from centipede to “dragon”

In Bit, there are two types of centipede: *smnaar* (large, black) and *smriiŋ* (small, red). The *sm-* minor syllable is a common element of many insects and larger animals, many of them in what could be classified as the ‘non-intimate sphere’ – consider *smrɔɔk* ‘dhole’ in the curse above. The form *smnaar* can be considered stable within the recent history of the language. Within the Khang languages spoken in Vietnam (the languages most closely related to Bit), we find Makhaan *tam nan* and Xa Chang *man nan* ‘centipede’ (Gérard Diffloth pers. comm.). These languages both underwent change of final -r to -n, so with the disyllabic structure including medial nasal, the terms can be mapped with confidence to the Bit form. This means that the Bit terms are part of the shared lexicon of the Bit-Khang group, and thus of some historical depth. Words for ‘centipede’ are presented below.

	‘centipede’
Bit	smnaar
Khang (Makhaan)	tam nan
Khang (Xa Chang)	man nan
Proto Bit-Khang	*cm.naar
Proto Pramic	*C(r)ɲas
Proto Khmuic	*kʔiip
Proto Palaungic	*sʔip
Proto Mon-Khmer	*kʔiip / *kʔaip

What then of the putative reflex of the \*Cɲas ‘centipede’ word proposed above? It was suggested that *cɲas* is the original Bit reflex, later undergoing semantic shift from the centipede to a water-based creature. There is supporting evidence in Ferlus’ Khang data, which gives *bu<sup>13</sup>ɲa<sup>213</sup>* ‘con rông’ (dragon), fitting perfectly with the Bit form: *bu<sup>13</sup>* is an animal prefix in Khang (Edmonson 2010), and *ɲa<sup>213</sup>* is the expected reflex of /cɲas/, where the minor syllable is lost, and -s drops, leaving a creaky low-rising tone. Thus, at this stage, *cɲas* had already moved into the semantic area of ‘water-spirit’, and \*cmnaar had moved into ‘centipede’.

The “dragon” identity of *cɲas* is not pervasive in Bit; much more common is the *ɲə̀k*-like character explored in detail below. However, *cɲas* does appear in terms related to ‘rainbow’, and this is a common semantic domain of “dragon”. There are two common phrases, the first of which draws on the regional motif of ‘drinking water’ in the sky *ɲjdoor teɲ ʔvɔm* [rainbow-drink-water] but does not feature the *cɲas* term<sup>6</sup>. The other reference to ‘rainbow’ is *naʔ cɲas* ‘the baby sling of [the ngeuak]’; when a rainbow appears, people say *cɲas taar naʔ kɔvɔn* ‘the ngeuak is drying its baby sling in the sun’. This is a clear expression of fertility symbolism. A related phenomenon is the erosion of riverbanks, which happens suddenly after heavy rain: *cɲas ʔuur* ‘the ngeuak erodes the bank’. Interestingly, Ksingmul has *bruəɲ* ‘phanya naak’ here: *bruəɲ ʔiik hɔ̀ɔt* ‘[phanya naak] drinks water’ for the rainbow and *bruəɲ luk* ‘[phanya naak] wakes up’ for erosion. Ksingmul uses the Tai form *ɲə̀k* to indicate a land-based water spirit, as opposed to *bruəɲ* the sky-based water spirit. The rainbow is itself depicted as a symbolic crossing the space between two rivers (Wessing 2006).

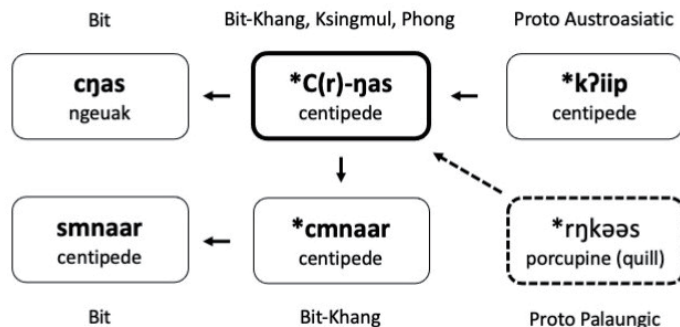
A more dragon-like identity is found in the Bit name for two lizards, as well, in a form cognate with the Ksingmul *bruəɲ* given above: *kaa ruəɲ* ‘Agamidae’ dragon lizards and *kaa ruəɲ snəɲ* ‘*Draco maculatus*’ (*snəɲ* ‘wing’) the spotted flying dragon. The reconstructed form \*bnriəɲ > \*brniəɲ > brɲiəɲ > [b]ɲruəɲ \* [b]ryueɲ (by metathesis), goes back to Proto-Austroasiatic (Shorto 2006). The Bit *ruəɲ* derives from this older form with the sense ‘dragon’, and is cognate with the Khmu *prɲɔ̀ɔɲ* ‘serpent, naga’. The term is also found in Bit as a descriptor modifying general fauna and flora terms: *boəɲ*

<sup>6</sup> In Lao, the phrase is “Dragon (huɲ) drinks water.” White Tai distinguishes between ngeuak and dragon: *lɔ̀ng* “a dragon (it is alleged that a lone dragon makes a river flood, but when there are more than one they are too busy to cause a flood)” (Donaldson 1970).

*cɲas* ‘type of Caladium’ and *cee cɲas* (type of *Phalangiidae* that resembles a scorpion). [See Chamberlain this volume for more on lizards in a regional context.] It is difficult to say if these are motivated by the image of an “older” centipede or a “newer” dragon; more pertinently, perhaps, they demonstrate the fluidity of the term in the linguistic culture of Bit and the complexity of defining these beings on the border of forest and fantasy.

This exploration of a possible semantic shift from centipede to *ngeuak* seems feasible, but historically is likely part of a larger set of shifts that is linked to ‘porcupine’. We return to the T’ in form *ɲaas* ‘needle’ (Huffman data cited in SEALANG database). If needle causes a sharp, piercing pain then it could be applied to a centipede’s bite. No form like *\*ɲas* is known widely in Austroasiatic with the meaning of needle. In traditional life porcupine quills were often used for needles, and one word can mean both ‘porcupine’ and ‘needle’. To follow the possibilities, we can posit a semantic change trajectory from porcupine to quill to needle.

In Austroasiatic we find a potentially interesting form that can provide a segmental change path to enable the hypothetical semantics proposed above: Proto-Palaungic *\*ɲkæəs* ‘porcupine’ and Proto-Katuic *\*ɲkæəs*, both meaning ‘porcupine’. In Palaungic languages, ‘porcupine’ is usually a reflex of this form, and many Katuic languages have the main syllable /kæəs/ preceded by an s- or c-. Closer to the area under discussion, Mlabri has *curhkalh* ‘porcupine quill’, derived from something like *\*crkas*, as well as keeping the older *kndēep* ‘centipede’. Metathesis of /-ɲk-/ to /-kɲ-/ would give “correct” main syllable *\*-ɲVs*, leaving a stop in front, and looking very much like the Ksingmul *kunjaay<sup>h</sup>* ‘centipede’. If the /r/ reconstructed for Proto-Palaungic is justified, then we also have the makings of a /C(r)ɲVs/ word, such as Phong *taryas* ‘centipede’. Diffloth data for Ksingmul (pers. comm.) gives *kaljaay<sup>h</sup>* as further evidence of a liquid in the minor syllable. From here we have a word that could have replaced the much older and otherwise stable Proto-Austroasiatic ‘centipede’ *\*kʔip* in Bit, Ksingmul, Phong and Thai Then. The historical relationship between *ngeuak* and centipede for Bit could be posited as:



This shift would leave a gap in the semantic space of ‘porcupine’ in these languages. One problem here is the fact that there are two commonly known “porcupine” animals in Southeast Asia. In Bit, the two are larger *sree* ‘porcupine (*Hysterix*)’ and smaller *soot* ‘bush-tailed porcupine (*Atherurus*)’. The former is a common Khmuic word, and the second is shared with Mal (T’in). More systematic collection of animal names would enable more complete comparison and further elucidation of this type of complex semantic shifting. Now we return to *cɲas* in Bit culture.

## 6. ‘His wife was a *cɲas*’: Gender, prosperity, and morality at land-water divide

The Tai phrase *ɲiək ɲuu* provides a useful cultural framework for considering how Bit people imagine the *cɲas*. In oral performance, *cɲas* is able to transform between its “original” and human forms. We get important imagery about the original or natural form of *cɲas* by expressives used to depict scenes where humans encounter them. These expressive depictions often evoke snake imagery<sup>7</sup> – in particular the *cɲas* standing erect with its bobbing and weaving slowly, and the serpentine body coiled on the ground. For example, in one story an Orphan unknowingly married a *cɲas* woman and eventually encounters her in her non-human form:

paatitoo kan kɔɔ mɛɛn mar cɲas hee cukɲuk  
 oh.my wife then COP snake ngeuak this EXP: long.and.limp  
**Oh my, his wife was a snake, a Ngeuak! *cukɲuk***

baat hɛə kɔɔn mɔɔ kɔɔ mɛɛn cɲas ɲɔɔ  
 moment that child male them COP ngeuak 3S-M  
**Then he saw, his son was also a ngeuak.**

kɔɔn mkan laa dee kɔɔ mɛɛn cɲas  
 child female youngest EMPH then COP ngeuak  
**His youngest daughter, was also a ngeuak.**

mɛɛn lɲtaa kɔɔ mɛɛn cɲas brwah-brwih  
 COP father.in.law then COP ngeuak EXP:  
 many.snakes.coiled.up.together  
**His father-in-law was also a ngeuak *brwah-brwih***

<sup>7</sup> In White Tai, a language that the Bit were previously in contact with, there is ‘serpent-like’ imagery associated with the *ngɔ̃* (White Tai drops final -k after long vowels and has no diphthongs) according to Donaldson’s dictionary (1970).

The iconic physical feather of the *cņas* is the crest on its head (Bit *crņooy*, Lao *hǎon*, and references to this characteristic are also depicted with expressives. In another story, a mother discovers that her daughter has married a *cņas*, seeing the underworld (*miǎj lum*) of the *cņas* with her own eyes and thus unable to fully “return” to her human form. In the house of her in-laws, the mother of her *cņas* husband combs her hair, attaching a hair pin to her head, which becomes the crest. When the daughter returns to her human home, her mother asks

“paa ʔuuc cǎe lee dee krɛh ʔoo bii coo” laʔ seʔ  
 2S-F to return LOC husband REFL to get NMLZ what wonder to say like this  
**“When you went back to your husband, what did you get?”, she said.**

“ʔooo ʔah krɛh ʔandai krɛh tɛɛ crkal mət ʔan” laʔ seʔ  
 oh NEG to anything to only hair one CLF to like  
 get get pin say this  
**“Oh I didn’t get anything, just this hair pin”, she said.**

lņcaak hǎə koo meʔ mɛɛn mih klaak koo nɛɛ  
 after that 3S-F mother COP to look head 3S-F EMPH  
**And then her mother looked at her head.**

ʔooy koon ʔǎy pan duǎy yɔɔ mih klaak paa dɛɛ laʔ seʔ  
 hey child VOC to to 1S to head 2S- EMPH to like  
 share follow look F say this  
**“There, child let me have a look at your head”, she said.**

baat kwaac mih klaak ʔoo mɛɛn crņooy cņas  
 moment to separate to look head oh COP crest ngeuak  
 pɛnsiǎn nɛɛ  
 EXP: shining EMPH  
**When she parted her hair to look at her head, oh it was a ngeuak’s crest *pɛnsiǎn*!**

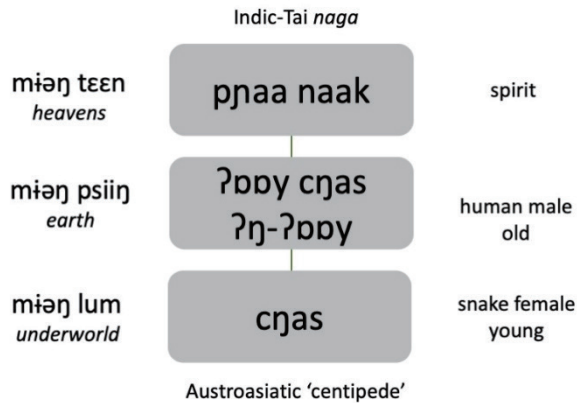
lɛɛ koo baay meʔ kɔɔ mɛɛn ɲaam koon dee  
 and 3S-F mother then COP to cry child REFL  
**and the mother wept for her child,**

ʔoo mɛɛn krɛh lee cņas koo  
 oh COP to get husband ngeuak 3S-F  
**‘Oh, she has taken a ngeuak for her husband!’**

In some local traditions of Laos, the ngeuak appears most commonly as a female, especially in the Indic embodiment of *naaη naak*. In others, ngeuak is a male being that rapes women while they are swimming. In Bit, *cηas* can be either female or male, and this gendered identity is often foregrounded by theme of ngeuak-human marriage. Bit stories often take us into the realm of the *cηas* under the river (*miəη lum*) where we encounter an entire society of ngeuak. The *cηas* community mirrors the human in its social relations and this seems to be one of the cultural factors that facilitates crossing the boundary between the human and non-human. As suggested by Howell’s analysis of the Chewong, an Austroasiatic forest people of Malaysia, the paired principles of separation and metamorphosis are integral to Bit notions of a social world beyond their own (Howell).

Observing language use in Bit oral literature, we find an inherent feminine default for *cηas*. The term *cηas mrvv* ‘male ngeuak’ indicates that a male manifestation requires lexical marking. There may be internal cultural motivation for the female basis in Bit distinct from the regional idea of *naaη naak*. In Bit, insects are considered to be female, as indicated by the use of the third person feminine pronoun as a definite marker (Badenoch 2016). If *cηas* originally meant ‘centipede’, this word would take the feminine pronoun, so it is possible that this grammatical factor reinforced the regional tendency. However, when *cηas* appears in the form of *pηaa naak*, it is always as a male deity. Taking a human form, *pηaa naak* is also called *ʔvvy cηas* (not marked for gender) or *ʔη-ʔvvy* (marked as masculine), a general term for powerful supernatural characters meaning ‘The Old Man’. Davis (1984) suggests that Tai spirits with /aay/ prefix can be associated with aboriginal origins, but in Bit folklore *ʔvvy* ‘grandfather’ is also a general reference to the sky. The three most common *ʔη-ʔvvy* are Indra, Thaen and Naga, all of whom move easily between male human and non-human forms.

Linguistically, story tellers differentiate *cηas*, *ʔvvy cηas* and *pηaa naak*, indicating particular interactions with the human world.



In her feminine form *cɲas* represents fertility and prosperity, but at risk of losing one's humanity. The story of *naaŋ nok kuək kap cɲas* "Lady Bulbul and the Ngeuak" presents this dilemma from the perspective of Orphan, who happens to catch her father in his fishing net (The full text of this story is presented in Badenoch this volume). The *cɲas* appears together with her sisters with full human beauty and convinces Orphan to help her father. He is taken to *miəŋ lum*, which is a land of riches and social status, and frees the father from the net. In return, he receives the ngeuak father's permission to marry his daughter. He sends them back to the human world (*miəŋ psiij*), with a farmer's hat that magically creates a luxurious house for them. They have servants and guards, all of whom forbid him from hunting and fishing.

After some time, Orphan becomes frustrated with his household constantly telling him that he cannot go to the forest by himself, and falls for another beautiful woman he encounters, again at a body of water. At her bidding, Orphan divorces his ngeuak wife, sending her back to the Underworld. His new wife is a bulbul in human form (known in this story by her Tai name *naaŋ nok kuək*, in the text "Lady Bulbul"), and he immediately becomes destitute. He curses her and sends her away, and in his misery he is visited by a Toad, whom he refers to as Grandfather. The old man gives him a crossbow and tells him to wait for two boars. When the boars appear, he shoots one, only to learn it was the spirit of his *cɲas* father-in-law. His *cɲas* wife pleads with him to return to the Underworld to save her father. He repeats the task of saving the ngeuak father and is again rewarded with his daughter. This time, Orphan refuses to return to the world of humans, but he is forbidden from looking at his wife and children when they are sleeping. After three years, his curiosity gets the best of him and he sneaks a look, to learn to his horror that they are all *cɲas*. They are immediately transported to the human world, and the villagers descend upon the household to rid the area of the ngeuak. If Orphan takes the hand of his *cɲas* wife, they will all return to their human form and survive the attacks of the villagers. Despite the calls of both the *cɲas* wife and his *cɲas* children, he is not brave enough to take her hand, because he knows that if he does he will never be able to return to the world of humans. He accepts his fate and is killed by the villagers.

Orphan's *cɲas* family is based on human kinship relations, with expectations of reciprocity and respect. He is protected from the Otherness of *miəŋ lum* with a magical provision of the prosperity he should receive as part of *cɲas* society. While *miəŋ lum* mirrors human society in an idealized form, Orphan's life in *miəŋ psiij* is an illusion created through the power of the *cɲas*.<sup>8</sup> Even when Orphan betrays his *cɲas* family, he is given a second chance, and eventually a third chance. In the end, when he finally sees the real identity of his *cɲas* family, he is only able to see them for their physical form and is unable to make a conscious decision to leave *miəŋ psiij*. The messages of morality

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<sup>8</sup> In the Tai world, *miəŋ lum* normally refers to the human world from the perspective of *miəŋ theen*. The seeming semantic incongruence here should not be taken as a point of narrative confusion but rather as a statement of cultural ideology in matters of the human-spirit interactions (Baumann 2022).

in the story are Orphan’s betrayal of his *ɕɰas* wife and *naaŋ nok kuək*’s deception of Orphan; the two messages are a parallel structure that highlights the impossibility of humans crossing the divide to the non-human world. Indeed, it is the non-humans that cross into the human in the Bit oral tradition. Storytellers frequently interject the phrase *snmaaŋ kee ban buəs psiŋ* ‘in old days they understood human language’ to contextualize the ease at which animals cross over. The term *buəs* includes spoken language and social behavior, and although we never hear of *ɕɰas* understanding or speaking human language, this story shows that they can behave according to human social norms. They are also capable of bestowing power, prosperity and status. In the end, it is the human that cannot accept the Otherness, and the boundary crossings at the river side live up to their potential for danger.

This story presents *ɕɰas* in the context of another areal schemata, the celestial siblings Naga and Garuda. The mythical bird is the opposite of Naga, and can take the form of a raptor or a hornbill (Wessing 2006). Lady Bulbul is a variation on Garuda, serving the purpose of emphasizing the problem of Orphan’s relationship with *ɕɰas*. In popular representations around the region, there is an opposition between the female, under-world Naga and the male, above-world Garuda. But they symbolize a unity in the original Indic order, born of the same father. Lady Bulbul symbolizes crossing the forest-settlement boundary. Orphan is repeatedly told not to cross this border on his own by his *ɕɰas* attendants, which is an affront to his male (Bit) Human desire to *diən paa diən doŋ* ‘wander in the forest’. The bulbul is a bird that lives on the edge of the wild-domestic divide, and thus a polysemous embodiment of Orphan’s moral dilemma. Even though he abandons Lady Bulbul, he aligns with her in a domestic sphere of deception. The only non-deceiver is *ɕɰas*. Human betrayal of the non-humans in the forest seems to be a subtle theme found in the oral traditions of Austroasiatic people in the uplands of northern Laos, with *ngeuak* characters representing a higher moral position than humans (Badenoch 2020a). As border-crossing stories, these suggest tensions between forest orders in the history of contact with Tai groups.

## 7. Taming dragons and uncoiling snakes

The Bit *ɕɰas* offers an upland perspective on the *ngeuak* phenomenon that is commonly associated with lowland society and its large waterways. Culturally, the *ɕɰas* is a dynamic character assuming several different types depending upon its interaction with humans. In this sense, the *ɕɰas* is one of many beings that crosses the human/non-human divide in Bit oral literature. Although *ɕɰas* tends towards female cultural values of fertility and prosperity, in Bit stories we often get glimpses of *ɕɰas* society, which is modeled after an idealized imagination of Tai society. Human-*ɕɰas* interactions are often stories of marriage and family creation, with the promise of riches and retainers for the human who marries the *ɕɰas*. Even though these border crossings seem to be easily achieved, there is a fundamental incompatibility between humans and *ɕɰas*, meaning that such matches and matings are not accepted by human society. It is often the human who is punished, rather than the *ɕɰas* being defeated; in fact, as shown here the *ɕɰas* may be a victim in the story.



The physical manifestations of *cɲas* are communicated through use of elaborate pairs and expressives, rather than descriptive prose. Snake imagery is the most common, pairing encounters with the *cɲas* in terms of forest danger. As seen in the following text, the offspring of a human-*cɲas* union is a transgression of village morality that spans the biological and the supernatural spheres.

“ʔoo tɛʔ      bii      ʔan      dok      kɔɔn      cɲas      kɔɔn      mar      ʔim  
oh      to do      what      then      to get      child      ngeuak      child      snake      to come

**‘Oh, why would you bring the child of a ngeuak**

#

khaw      boh      khaw      ɲaa  
to enter      village      to enter      house

**into our community?**

#

lip                      boh      lip                      ɲaa      laʔ      seʔ      bah  
to wash away      village      to wash away      house      to say      like this      NEG  
ʔɛɛ                      ɲɔɔ      kɔɔy  
CAUS                      3S-M      to bring

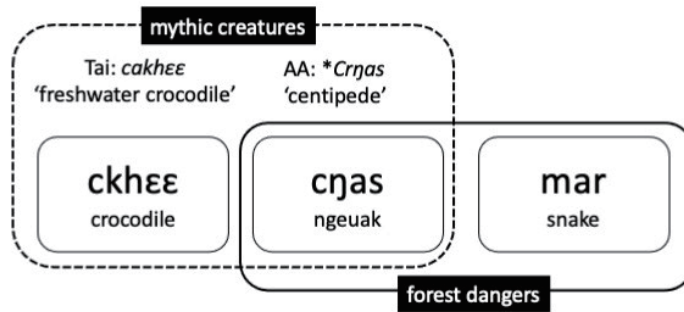
**The village will be cursed and ruined’, they said and refused to let them in.**

#

The villagers in this story identify the *kɔɔn cɲas kɔɔn mar* ‘ngeuak child, snake child’ as a curse, and they refuse entry. In the story of *naaŋ nok kuək kap cɲas* discussed above, when the *cɲas* true form was revealed Orphan was killed to prevent further misfortune in the village. But this narrative shows Orphan’s downfall to be a result of his second betrayal of his *cɲas* wife – twice he failed the test of his love and obligation to her, and twice he met with misfortune. The first was at the “hands” of an animal trickster, and the second at the hands of the villagers protecting the moral integrity of their village.

Linguistically, *cɲas* is part of a broader practice of classifying the world in which the Bit live with pair words and elaborate phrases. Where simple glosses, such as ‘dragon’ create confusion, we can look to language internal evidence from specialized registers and performative traditions (Rischel 2000). In addition to *cɲas mar* ‘ngeuak snake’, the pairing of *ckhɛɛ cɲas* takes us one step further away from the ecosystems of daily life to the mythical realm of dangerous beings. In these poetic couplets, the head comes first and the elaborating term follows. Thus, in *cɲas mar* we have a focus on the ngeuak as a creature that people believe can still be encountered, and that experience is imagined in terms of the snake. This structure was used by the old Tai as well, in the form of ‘ngeuak ngu’ (Ngaosrivathana and Ngaosrivathana 2009), an example of how poetic language creates regional culture. In *ckhɛɛ cɲas*, the head is crocodile, an animal that the Bit may have encountered in generations past. Paired with *cɲas*, this category is not one that has immediately biological implications but a moral concept that alerts people to the dangers of unknowable beings that threaten peoples’ travels through the forest landscape. The

Bit *cɲas* shows how the practices and performances underpinning these elements of shared regional culture are essential in understanding how meaning is created and recreated in specific local contexts.



The history of *cɲas* as a cultural notion can be traced through analysis of Bit folklore in contact with Tai and other groups. The contours of the *cɲas*-ngeuak-pɲaa naak conceptual landscape are drawn by the entanglements of ethnicity, ecology, knowledge and language. The term itself has a complex history of semantic and sound change, originating in a transportation of ‘centipede’ into a quasi-mythical space that is also populated with crocodiles. The original sense of the interim step *cɲas mar* remains in the closely related languages of Phong and Ksingmul, where the local reflex of the terms still means ‘centipede’ and the category reminds us to watch where we step as we travel through the forest every day. Because ‘centipede’ came to be denoted with another term in Bit, *smnaar*, the previously known biological form has been released into the spirit world to reside in *miəŋ lum* under the river. From this new abode, *cɲas* is free to interact with humans in complex ways that mirror normal household relations while maintaining the urgency of care and attention to the moral order of the forest.

The equation of Bit *cɲas* with Tai *ɲiək* and Indic Naga is problematic, and the presence of another Austroasiatic word /bruəŋ/ complicates the ‘water spirit’ situation further. Focusing on the *cɲas* here, it is important to remember that while Bit people do talk about *cɲas* in conjunction with *ɲiək*, and may provide this word as a translation when speaking Lao, we should not take the popular gloss as indication that they bear the same cultural semantics. Many cultural references and representations are shared among the diverse peoples of upland Laos and beyond, the result of sustained and intimate contact. High levels of bi- and multilingualism have facilitated these exchanges, and regional shared aesthetic grammar – such as category formation through four-word elaborate phrases and what I have called here category-by-collocation – makes it easy to speak across cultural worlds. Translation of concepts and constructs contained in oral texts remains central to ethnographic undertakings (O’Neill 2015), just as it is a part of the daily life people in the mountains of northern Laos. Phenomenon like *cɲas* should be examined carefully in their own cultural and linguistic contexts, together with native

storytellers and speakers, as this will not only provide depth to their local articulations but offer insights on shared areal culture as well.

## Data Sources

Bit (NB fieldwork)  
 Ksingmul (NB fieldwork)  
 Phong Lan (NB fieldwork)  
 Phong Khami (NB fieldwork)  
 Mlabri (Rischel 2000)  
 T'in (Huffman in SEALANG Mon-Khmer Etymological Project)  
 Proto-Palaungic, Proto-Khmuic, Proto-Katuic, Proto-Vietic, Proto-Mon-Khmer  
 Reconstructions (SEALANG Mon-Khmer Etymological Project)  
 Makhan, Xa Chang, Thai Then (Gérard Diffloth, personal communication)

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