

# The White Critter, the Cataclysm, and the Lacustrine Inundation : On the Trail of a Folktale in the Sakon Nakhon Chronicle

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The legend of the white critter, the cataclysm, and the lacustrine inundation functions in the Sakon Nakhon Chronicle (Phraya Prajantapraphetthani et al., 2520: 1-3) to “explain” the origins of some natural and man-made features in the environs of Sakon Nakhon, a town in the far northeast of Thailand which stands on the western shore of Thailand’s largest lake, Nong Han, or Nong Han Luang.<sup>2</sup> The natural features are streams which feed and drain Nong Han, and the man-made features are the ancient structures of That Choengchum, which is in the principal monastery of Sakon Nakhon town, of Tha Nang Ap (or Heuan Setthi), which is on the shore of Nong Han about six kilometers to the east of That Choengchum, and of the ruins on Dorn Sawan, which is an island in Nong Han about one kilometer northeast of That Choengchum (Seidenfaden, 1922: 79-80). These structures were probably built about a thousand years ago.

This is a translation of the legend presented in the Sakon Nakhon Chronicle:

In the time of the religion of the Buddha Kassapa,<sup>3</sup> Sakon Nakhorn was called Nong Han Luang, about which there is this story among the teachings of Our Lord the Buddha Gotama in Book II<sup>4</sup> of the *Urangkha Nithan*:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Nong Han Luang “the Greater Nong Han” lies north of a range of hills called the Phu Phan. The lake grows with the rainy season and dwindles with the dry, its depth varying from 1.2-1.5 m in the dry season to 3-7 m in the wet season. Its area is usually given as 48,600 rai, or about 78 km<sup>2</sup> (*Thailand’s Inland Fishery Resource*, 2517: 31). It does, however, grow much larger, its waters reaching “out to about 166 km<sup>2</sup> in area, 17 km long from north to south and about 14 km wide from east to west” (Kato, Iki and Matsui, 1966: 194). The receding of the waters has been reduced in recent years by a floodgate, which was erected between 1941 and 1953 (*Thailand’s Inland Fishery Resource*, 2517: 31). Before this, it is likely Nong Han presented a dry season aspect less lake-like and more swamp-like. Old-timers say there used to be villages in the area now inundated, and I once saw the lake referred to as “Mae Nam Nong Han,” or “the River Nong Han.” So perhaps in the past, Nong Han was a tract of bogs and ponds, the ponds connected one to another to form something like a river. This reached from the Nam Phung, Nong Han’s major tributary, which flows down from the Phu Phan into the southwestern arm of the lake, twisted northward past Sakon Nakhon town to Tha Rae at Nong Han’s northern end, and then turned and wound its way to the southeastern arm of the lake to the Nam Kam, which flows from the southeast arm of the lake to the Mekong River at That Phanom.

<sup>3</sup> The Buddha who preceded the Buddha Gotama.

<sup>4</sup> Books were written on palm leaves which were strung together in bundles.

<sup>5</sup> The *Urangkha Nithan*, or the *That Phanom Chronicle*, is a religious history concerned with the establishment of Buddhism in the middle Mekong basin and particularly with the enshrinement of a relic of the Buddha at That Phanom. It was probably composed in the seventeenth century. (Phiset Jiajanphong, 2521: 5)

During the dispensation of the Buddha Kassapa, Prince Khorm,<sup>6</sup> a nephew of the King of Inthapat Nakhon,<sup>7</sup> came with his servants and slaves and built a capital on the shore of Nong Han Luang at Tha Nang Ap. He named the town Nong Han Luang. Prince Khorm proclaimed himself king and became a vassal to the King of Inthapat Nakhon.

The son of King Khorm was named Sura-uthok, for his birth was accompanied by two extraordinary happenings. The first was that when he was born, he was grasping in his hand a sword.<sup>8</sup> The second was that, on the day of his birth, a spring gushed forth near the edge of the town. This spring came to be called Song Nam Phu,<sup>9</sup> for King Khorm used to go there each year at Songkran<sup>10</sup> to enjoy himself.<sup>11</sup> Because the spring appeared miraculously on the day his son was born, King Khorm named the boy Sura-uthok.

When the boy had reached the age of fifteen, King Khorm died. The ministers, officials, and people together invited Prince Sura-uthok to succeed his father. He took the name King Sura-uthok. He had two sons; the elder was Prince Phingkhara, and the younger, Prince Khamdaeng.

One day, King Sura-uthok ordered his ministers and officials to call up an army, for he wished to inspect the borders of his domain. When they had reached the mouth of the Mun-nathi River<sup>12</sup> on the frontier of the Kingdom of Inthapat Nakhon, his ministers and officials informed him that from that point, the border between the Kingdoms of Nong Han Luang and of Inthapat Nakhon followed the course of the Mun-nathi River to the Dong Phaya Fai,<sup>13</sup> and that his father, King Khorm, and the King of Inthapat Nakhon had made the naga<sup>14</sup> lord Thana-mun the guardian of the border.

At this, King Sura-uthok became incensed and said it was a grave impropriety for his grand uncle and father to have entrusted the border to a mere beast. He thus decided to test his powers against those of the naga. Drawing the sword with which he had been born, he used his magic powers to walk out upon the waters at the mouth of the Mun-nathi. He flourished his sword and demonstrated his wondrous skill with the weapon, all the time pouring out insults upon Thana-mun. Enraged, the naga lord manifested itself to King Sura-uthok and his men and performed many prodigies. With that, the encounter ended, and each side withdrew.

King Sura-uthok returned with his army to his capital. Meanwhile, Thana-mun, still seething with anger, mustered its minions and set off in pursuit. Reaching Nong Han, the naga lord transformed itself and its army of nagas and serpents to appear as albino barking deer, each one pure white, and they walked past the town toward the meadow Pho Sam Ton.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Khorm* is a local word used to refer to the ancient inhabitants of the area who left shrines such as That Phanom, That Choengchum, and That Na Weng, as well as reservoirs, settlements, pottery, and inscriptions in the Mon and Khmer languages.

<sup>7</sup> In the That Phanom Chronicle, the kingdom which bordered Nong Han Luang on the south.

<sup>8</sup> *khan* พหริศ, according to McFarland (1972: 143), refers to "a large sacrificial knife; a double-edged weapon (similar to a bayonet)." This is the term applied to the weapon held by some of the figures on That Phanom (*Phra That Phanom*, n.d.: 27, 55).

<sup>9</sup> On the western side of Nong Han

<sup>10</sup> The traditional new year, which falls in the hottest time of the year.

<sup>11</sup> "Song" (สง) is a word of the royal language. So Sethaputra (1965: 438) explains that "when used before a noun [as it is here], [it] has the force of a verb, the term becoming an intransitive verb (which can also be used as an adjective) with a meaning appropriate to the object." Nam Phu (น้ำพุ) means "spring," so the meaning of "song nam phu" would be "for a royal person to do what is appropriate to do with a spring." The *Chronicle* goes on to explain that the place was so named because King Khorm went there to observe the spring (ทอดพระเนตร thort phra net) and to enjoy himself (ทรงพระสำราญ song phra samran).

<sup>12</sup> The Mun River

<sup>13</sup> The range of hills which bounds the Korat Plateau on the west and in which the Mun River rises

<sup>14</sup> Naga are a race of serpent-like demons that inhabit the regions under the earth (McFarland, 1972: 449).

<sup>15</sup> Evidently, at the northern end of Nong Han, between Chiang Khreua and Tha Rae

Many of the townspeople saw them and reported what they had seen to their ruler. Without carefully considering all that had occurred, King Sura-uthok immediately ordered up a large party of huntsmen. He told them to capture the deer alive if they could, but if not, to kill them. The huntsmen set off, followed by a large number of officials and people. When they came upon the herd of barking deer in Pho Sam Ton, they tried to surround them. However, the nagas and serpents scattered, slithering off every which way, dodging and hiding.

At last, all of them had disappeared save Thana-mun itself. It lured the huntsmen and all the other people into chasing it back through the woods. When it reached Nong Bua Sang,<sup>16</sup> the naga lord pretended to be hurt. The pursuers encircled it, but no matter how or what they tried, they still could not capture it alive, so finally, they poisoned an arrow with *nomg*<sup>17</sup> and shot it from a crossbow. The arrow struck the deer in a vital spot, and no longer wishing to squander its powers contending with a pack of mere children, the naga lord withdrew its spirit, and the deer died.

Thana-mun then made the dead deer's body grow to the size of a bull elephant's. On seeing that the deer was dead, the huntsmen had the people try to carry the carcass, but it was too heavy to lift, and so the huntsmen had them drag it. In this way, they managed to get as far as Thung Pho Sam Ton on the shore of Nong Han Luang, but once there, though they pulled with all their might, they were unable to budge the carcass of the white barking deer. The huntsmen sent a messenger off on a swift horse to inform their lord of what had happened. King Sura-uthok gave orders that they bring him the venison, and so the huntsmen and most of the populace set about butchering the white barking deer. For three days and three nights they worked, but no matter how much they cut from the carcass, more venison sprouted up in its place. All the people ate of it, and King Sura-uthok enjoyed it immensely, for the flesh of the white barking deer was more delicious than that of any other animal.

Still in a rage, Thana-Mun mustered his army, and by means of their magic powers, they secreted themselves beneath the waters of Nong Han Luang. Late that night when everyone was sound asleep, they dug their way beneath the town. Thus undermined, the town collapsed into the earth, and the waters of Nong Han Luang rushed in to cover it so that the place where the town had once stood became part of the lake.

Thana-mun went straight for King Sura-uthok and took hold of him. The naga lord and its minions bound him securely and dragged him off toward the Thana-nathi River (which is now called the Mekong). Thana-mun had Phraya Sura-uthok dragged back and forth in twists and turns to torment him the more and heighten the pain and horror of his death. When they reached the Thana-nathi (the Mekong), King Sura-uthok expired, and Thana-mun bore his corpse to Inthapat Nakhon.

Meanwhile back at Nong Han Luang, those who had survived the attack of the naga host had taken up positions on Phon Meuang on the southern shore of the lake. After searching the countryside for place to settle, Prince Phingkhara, Prince Khamdaeng and the ministers finally chose Phu Nam Lort. Prince Phingkhara prayed, "I will bring my servants and family here to Phu Nam Lort to build their homes and establish a town. May the guardian deities grant this town prosperity." At that moment, there appeared the naga lord Suwanna, carrying a golden ewer of heavenly perfume. It rose up from out of the earth, miraculously arraying itself in golden scales, and said, "I am the naga lord Suwanna, guardian of

<sup>16</sup> A pond northwest of Nong Han

<sup>17</sup> *nomg* นม or นม้ง is the sap of the *nomg* vine and is a deadly poison (*Photjananukrom Phak Isan-Phak Klang*, 2515: 431). It is used for dressing the tips of arrows for hunting and for warfare.

the footprints of the Buddhas in Phu Nam Lort.”<sup>18</sup> The naga then anointed Prince Phingkhara as king of Nong Han Luang and gave him the name King Suwanna-phingkhara,<sup>19</sup> and the new king ruled in peace and prosperity.

It so happened that at that very time, the kingdom of Nong Han Noi (what is today Kumphawapi District in Udonthani Province)<sup>20</sup> had no ruler. Its ministers sent an embassy bearing gifts as tribute and invited Prince Khamdaeng to be their ruler. Thus it was that Prince Khamdaeng became the king of Nong Han Noi, and since that time, Nong Han Noi and Nong Han Luang have enjoyed friendly relations as brother kingdoms.

The track dug into the earth when King Sura-uthok had been dragged down to the Mekong by the naga army became a stream that carried the waters of Nong Han Luang to the Mekong. It came to be called the Nam Kam<sub>1</sub> because it was there that the naga had tortured King Sura-uthok to death; however, people now refer to the river as the Nam Kam<sub>2</sub>.<sup>21</sup>

The track left when the carcass of the white barking deer had been dragged from Nong Bua Sang became the stream that flows from Nong Bua Sang to Nong Han Luang, and this is called the Nam Lak<sup>22</sup> because of the way it came to be.

How long Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara ruled Mu’ang Nong Han Luang or whether there were other rulers who succeeded him, the Urangkha-nithan does not say; it does state, however, that, in the time of Our Lord the Buddha Gotama, Jao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara had taken Phra Nang Chao Narai Jeng Weng, a royal daughter of Inthapat Nakhon, as his principal queen. Nevertheless, this cannot be the same individual because many ages passed from the time of the Buddha Kassapa, the previous Buddha, to the time Our Lord the Most Excellent Preceptor Gotama achieved Enlightenment and became a Buddha, and it would be impossible for the life of one person to span the dispensations of two Buddhas. We believe that many rulers must have ruled in succession before the name Chao Phraya Suwanna-phingkhara appeared in the time of Our Lord the Buddha Gotama.

Similar legends have been recorded at other points in the middle Mekong basin. By far the best known is the legend of Phadaeng and Nang Ai, associated with Nong Han Noi, or Nong Han Kumphawapi,<sup>23</sup> two versions of which are presented in Tambiah (1970: 294-298). In this legend, a naga, named Phangkhi,

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<sup>18</sup> Phu Nam Lort is the place on which That Choeng Chum stands. It is the place at which the prints five Buddhas’ feet (*choeng*) are gathered (*chum*). In the *That Phanom Chronicle*, the Buddha Gotama superimposes his footprint on the footprints of the three previous Buddhas, Kakusandha, Konakamana, and Kassapa, and there in the future, the Buddha Mettraiya will come to leave his footprint.

<sup>19</sup> “Suwanna” means “gold,” and “phingkhara,” “ewer used at the coronation of a king” (McFarland, 1972: 611).

<sup>20</sup> Nong Han Noi “the Lesser Nong Han,” or Nong Han Kumphawapi, is a large lake roughly 120 km west of Sakon Nakhon

<sup>21</sup> The Kam twists and turns torturously throughout its course. As the crow flies, the distance from Nong Han to the Mekong is less than 60 km, but because it meanders so, the Kam is over twice as long as this--about 133 km (Kato, Iki and Matsui, 1966: 194). “Kam<sub>1</sub>” กาม, the Thai form of “karma,” suggests “retributive torture;” Kam<sub>2</sub> กั means “reddish black” (*Photjananukrom Phak Isan-Phak Klang*, 2515: 34). The two words have the same initial consonant, vowel, and final consonant but differ in tone: “Kam” กาม “karma” is of the common tone class, whereas Kam กั “reddish black” is of the “ek” tone class.

<sup>22</sup> “Lak” means “pull” or “drag.” A stream of the same name is said to be the track left by the dragging of the giant albino barb in the *Ngoen Yang Chiang Saen Chronicle* (*Collected Chronicles*, vol. 34. 2512) p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> See note 19.

takes the form of a white squirrel rather than a barking deer, and it does this, not for revenge, but to gain the attention of a beautiful lady, Nang Ai. Also, rather than a contest between man and naga, the Nong Han Noi legends begin with a skyrocket contest. Nang Ai's father sponsored the contest and offered the lady as the prize. He entered himself, but instead of going up, his rocket blew up. Phadaeng, the lady's lover, entered too, but his rocket also failed to rise. The only contestant whose rocket went up was already married and so unable to claim the prize. Understandably frustrated, the lady went into her garden, and there she saw the creature. In fact, Phangkhi had been Nang Ai's husband in a previous life, but he had neglected her, and thus when he had attended the skyrocket contest in human form, she had ignored him. In the garden, however, when she saw the beautiful white squirrel jumping about in a tree, she desired it, and when it eluded capture, she had a huntsman shoot it. Phangkhi died, and the people feasted on the squirrel's superabundant flesh, but then the naga parents, enraged by the death of their son, took revenge. Phadaeng and Nang Ai attempted to escape the cataclysm on horseback. To speed their flight, they threw away various items they were carrying, and so, ponds and swamps along the way came to be named after the things they discarded. In the end, however, Nang Ai, who had eaten of the squirrel meat, was lost, while Phadaeng, who had not, survived.

The Nong Han Noi and *Sakon Nakhon Chronicle* legends are similar in that in both, the cataclysm is caused by an offence against a naga. The offences, however, differ. In the Nong Han Noi legend, the naga parents take revenge because the huntsman had killed their son at Nang Ai's behest and she and the people had consumed its carcass. In the *Sakon Nakhon Chronicle*, on the other hand, neither the killing nor the eating of the creature brings on the cataclysm. The naga does not die; it withdraws itself from the barking deer, the deer then dies, and it is the flesh of the deer, magically multiplied by Thana Mun, on which the townspeople feast. Rather, the cause of the cataclysm is clearly the hubris of Chao Phraya Sura-uthok. In his pride in his prowess with his wondrous weapon, he has the audacity to insult the naga, the lord of the underworld and the teeming fecundity of water, and in so doing, also commits a double offence against filial piety since it was his father and his granduncle who had made the naga the guardian of the boundary.

Earlier versions of these legends are found in the *That Phanom Chronicle* (2521: 56-57). In one, a huntsman killed a naga named Phangkhi who had transformed itself into a squirrel, but the hunter did this to please the king rather

than a lady. In the ensuing cataclysm, which created Nong Han Kumpawapi, the vengeful nagas devoured those who had eaten the squirrel, and gave their belongings to those who hadn't. There is no mention of the lovers Phadaeng and Nang Ai nor of a skyrocket contest. In fact, a skyrocket contest figures in the lore of Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom as well (Governor of Nakhon Phanom *et al.* 2500: 4), but the rockets there are aimed at explaining how the Bang Fai, the river that empties into the Mekong opposite That Phanom and the mouth of the Kam, came to be so named, "bang fai" meaning "skyrocket." It thus seems that Phadaeng and Nang Ai and the skyrocket contest are elements which have been incorporated into the Nong Han Noi legend recently.

Likewise, in the *That Phanom Chronicle* (2521: 56), the naga Thana-mun regarded King Sura-Uthok's walking on the waters of the Mun as treading on its head and exacted retribution by having its minions destroy the king's capital. There is no mention of the transformation of nagas into white creatures or of feasting on the meat of nagas, deer, or any other sort of creature. These elements thus seem to have been introduced into the *Sakon Nakhon Chronicle* legend at a time after the composition of the *That Phanom Chronicle*.

Nevertheless, despite these differences, the *Sakon Nakhon Chronicle* and Nong Han Noi legends share a common feature that distinguishes them from all of the other legends of the white critter, the cataclysm, and the lacustrine inundation I know of: it is only in these two legends that naga manifest and transform themselves; in the other legends, there are no naga at all. The naga may have slithered into the story from afar. Seidenfaden (1952: 152-3) mentioned a legend of Kashmir in which, similar to the *Sakon Nakhon Chronicle* legend, an offended naga caused an earthquake which destroyed an entire district and its inhabitants and formed a lake near Srinagar. It may therefore be that naga came to take a role in the legends of the white critter, the cataclysm, and the lacustrine inundation at about the time and place that the *That Phanom Chronicle* (Urangkha Nithan) was written, i.e., in the Kingdom of Lan Xang in the seventeenth century. Supporting this hypothesis are the facts that naga, particularly Suwanna, are conspicuous characters in the *That Phanom Chronicle* and that Phangkhi and Nang Ai in the Nong Han Noi legend are linked by reincarnation, which is an important organizing principle in the *That Phanom Chronicle* (Pruess, 1976: 13-14; Phiset Jiajanphong, 2521: 8-12).

What people may have dined on is immaterial in the *Sakon Nakhon Chronicle* legend, for Thana Mun is concerned with settling accounts with King

Sura-uthok. However, in the Nong Han Noi legend and other legends of the white critter, the cataclysm, and the lacustrine inundation, it is the killing and eating of the white creature that causes the cataclysm. In some, it seems that the offence that brings on the cataclysm is particularly the eating of the creature. Thus, in the legend of Tonle Marech,<sup>24</sup> when the townspeople offered the best portion of the meat of a deer to a monk, he accepted and ate it. He had no part in killing the animal, but he consumed its flesh. This is said to have been a violation of monastic discipline, for monks must abstain from game, and as a result, devastation followed him from one village to the next (Levy, 1943: 88, note 1). Also, in the legend of Phra Klang Tung,<sup>25</sup> it is pointed out that those who ate of the creature were those “who had residues of *kamma* from previous lives” (Pruess, 1975: 62). These perished, while those who were guiltless did not partake of it and survived. In both of these legends, it is Buddhist concepts of causality rather than naga that are operant in bringing on the cataclysm.

In other legends, too, irrespective of their merit or demerit in previous lives, those who do not eat the flesh of the creature survive. Among these are the old women in the legends of Tonle Marech (Levy, 1943: 88, note 1), Chiang Saen<sup>26</sup> (Manich Jumsai, 1970: 26), and Nong Han Noi (Tambiah, 1970: 295, 297), whom their fellow townspeople refuse a portion of the meat. Sometimes not only their lives but also their homes are preserved. Such an old woman figures in the lore of Sakon Nakhon as well. Her dwelling is said to have been on Dorn Sawan, and thus to this day, the island and its ruins, held to be her dwelling, remain above the waters of Nong Han Luang.

Old women have a central role in the Chiang Saen and Nong Lom legends. In Chiang Saen, when the townspeople caught an enormous albino barb (**Collected Chronicles, vol. 34., 2512: 45**) or eel (Manich Jumsai, 1971: 26), an old woman was denied a share. While everyone else was feasting, a stranger came to her home. He is mysterious, but there is no suggestion that he is a naga. The stranger told her that her having no part in the feast was for her good and warned her not to go out of her house no matter what happened. Later that night, there was a great storm, the town fell into the earth and was covered by a lake, and only the old woman survived.

<sup>24</sup> A large swamp near Kampong Thom, some 480 km south by east of Sakon Nakhon

<sup>25</sup> A tambon some 60 km east by south of Sakon Nakhon

<sup>26</sup> A town at the confluence of the Kok and the Mekong Rivers, some 540 km northwest by west of Sakon Nakhon

In the Nong Lom<sup>27</sup> legend (Manich Jumsai, 1971: 312), when a deer, the color of which is not specified, appeared outside the village of Tamaleui and “cried out ominously seven times,” the villagers killed, butchered, and cooked it. Despite this, in the evening, it got up and ran away into the woods. Late that night, an old woman appeared and asked the villagers if they had seen her dog. There is no suggestion that the woman was a naga. When they said they hadn’t, she accused them of lying and of having killed and cooked her dog; following this, a great storm arose, and the village was destroyed and the area inundated.

It may be that the legend of the white critter, the cataclysm, and the lacustrine inundation had its origins in totemism. Manich Jumsai (1971: 311-312), for example, explains that the Ta Oy of Saravane abstain from venison because they are descendants of a doe. The killing of the creature would thus be the murder of the community’s progenitor, the one to whom the community owes its existence; in other words, the act would amount to the murder of the community itself, and thus when the act is committed, the community is annihilated.

The types of animal that figure in various legends are shown in Table 1. At lacustrine sites, the critter is a terrestrial animal, while at riverine sites, it is aquatic, the exception being Sakon Nakhon, where both an aquatic and a terrestrial animal appear in versions of the legend. With the exception of the Nong Lom and the Xieng Khouang legends, the critter is white or albino. Such coloration may be regarded as auspicious. For instance, among the signs that led king Mengrai to the site of his new capital, Chiang Mai, were an albino rat, albino deer (a doe and two fawns) and albino barking deer (a doe and a fawn) (*Yonok Chronicle*, 2506: 202-203). On the other hand, whiteness may also bode ill. For example, in the Holy Man’s Rebellion in 1902, it was white creatures—buffaloes and pigs—that the prophet predicted would turn into ravenous ogres (Phraya Prajantaprathetthani *et al.*, 2520: 18). Among the various types of animal that appear in the legends, white or albino individuals are probably rare enough that their appearance would be regarded as remarkable. The odd critter out is the white squirrel, for white squirrels are not at all uncommon. The variable squirrel, for instance, is a beautiful large species among which appear pure white individuals as well as pure black and pure red ones (Askins, 1977: 353-354, Pl. III).

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<sup>27</sup> I have not been able to locate Nong Lom. It seems to have been in the province of Saravane, the seat of which is about 300 km east-southeast of Sakon Nakhon.



| Creature                                     | Location                 | Reference  |
|--|--------------------------|--|
| albino barking deer                          | Sakon Nakhon             | <i>Sakon Nakhon Chronicle</i><br>(Phraya Prajantaprathetthani et al.<br>2520: 1-3)         |
| un chevreuil blanc                           | Tonle Marech             | Levy, 1943: 88, note 1   |
| a barking deer                               | Tonle Marech             | Seidenfaden, 1952: 152-3   |
| a white deer                                 | Tonle Marech             | Schrock et al., 1970: 7  |
| a white-faced deer <sup>28</sup>             | Nong Taeng <sup>29</sup> | <i>An Englishman's Siamese Journals: 1890-1893 n.d.: 245</i>                               |
| a deer                                       | Nong Lom                 | Manich Jumsai, 1971: 312   |
| a white squirrel                             | Nong Han Noi             | Tambiah, 1970: 294-298   |
| a giant white eel                            | Chiang Saen              | Manich Jumsai, 1971: 26  |
| a white eel                                  | Sakon Nakhon             | Seidenfaden, 1952: 152-3   |
| a giant albino barb <sup>30</sup>            | Chiang Saen              | <i>Ngoen Yang Chiang Saen Chronicle</i><br>(Collected Chronicles, vol. 34., 2512)<br>: 45. |
| a large albino water<br>turtle               | Phra Klang Thung         | Pruess, 1975: 62   |
| an albino snapping<br>turtle                 | Phra Klang Thung         | Pruess, 1975: 62, footnote 14  |
| a skate with an albino<br>head <sup>31</sup> | Phra Klang Thung         | Pruess, 1975: 62, footnote 14; <i>That Phanom Chronicle</i> , 2513: 114                    |

Table 1 The animals that figure in the legend of the white critter, the cataclysm and the lacustrine inundation at various locations and in various sources.

<sup>28</sup> The report of the legend is very brief: a huntsman shot a white-faced deer, and that night there was a storm and an earthquake. The village and the people were swallowed up by the water which formed the lake.

<sup>29</sup> I have not been able to locate Nong Taeng. It is said to be in the province of Xieng Khouang, the seat of which is about 250 km north-northeast of Sakon Nakhon.

<sup>30</sup> an albino barb (pla taphian) as big as a sugar palm (tan) tree, about seven fathoms long ปลาตะเพียนเผือกตัวหนึ่งใหญ่เท่าต้นตาล ยาวประมาณ ๗ วา

<sup>31</sup> pla kraben sisa dorn ปลากระเบนสีระด่อน (*That Phanom Chronicle*, 2513:114)

## Conclusion

Legends of the killing of the white or albino animal, the cataclysm, and the lacustrine inundation have been recorded at a number of widely separated points in the Mekong Basin extending from Chiang Rai and Xieng Khouang in the north to Kampong Thom in the south. They function as etiological myths, a type of didactic myth explaining how features of an area, both man-made and natural, came to be. In them, a white or albino animal is killed, the people of the community feast on its flesh, and there follows a cataclysm: an earthquake and storm, as a result of which their settlement is inundated and many of the people perish. These legends may have originated from totemistic beliefs combined with experience of the subsidence and inundation of settlements. For example, Rau and Thiva Supajanya (1985) present evidence that inhabitants of the ancient town on the site of Sakon Nakhon had to contend with inundation by the waters of Nong Han and theorize that this was caused by subsidence of salt deposits that underlie the lake. At a later time, probably in the seventeenth century, in the Lao kingdom of Vientiane, a tale of a naga lord taking revenge upon a human king, such as that of Thana-mun and Sura-utok, was introduced, and still later, white creatures were incorporated in it. In another line of development, the white creature became a manifestation of a naga, and the legends of the skyrocket contest and of the lovers Phadaeng and Nang Ai were incorporated.

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