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The Folklore of Geckos: Ethnographic Data from South and West Asia

Abstract

This paper is based on an empirical study of human behavior, attitudes, and beliefs toward geckos in South and West Asia. Proverbs, sayings, and information provided by numerous informants show that the common small house geckos are regarded as ominous creatures associated with ill fortune. They are also considered highly impure, and thought to be carriers of leprosy and other diseases. People are nevertheless rather ambivalent on the question of whether geckos should be killed; in some cases there is evidence of underlying beliefs that link the animals with fertility and well-being.

Key words: geckos — omens — magic — structuralism — skin disease — human behavior

THE Gekkonidae form a very large group of lizards, with at least 73 genera, 668 species, and 257 subspecies.¹ Geckos are typically small, with flat bodies and a total length of under forty centimeters. They regularly shed their skin, and can detach their tails as a means of escaping their enemies. The cells of their toes are outfitted with microscopic hooks that help them cling to vertical surfaces, and even to ceilings. Most of the big-eyed geckos are active in hunting insects from dusk to dawn.

People are often afraid of geckos, as the creatures are regarded in many parts of the world as poisonous (see HENKEL and SCHMIDT 1991, 23, for southern European beliefs on geckos). This is not always the case, however — in Southeast Asia, for example, the animals are regarded as bearers of good luck and fertility. The present paper examines attitudes and behavior toward the small common house gecko (*Hemidactylus spp.*) in South and West Asia. Since searches of the literature proved less than productive, the data presented here were collected primarily during interviews with inhabitants of Pakistan and North India during various field trips to the area in 1992 and 1993.²

These harmless, yellow-brown, insect-eating little lizards are regarded at best ambivalently, and more often quite negatively, by people in areas both urban and rural. The shrill sounds they utter (they are the only reptiles with a real voice) have given them such onomatopoeic names as *tokī* (*Gecko gecko*) and *chichak* (*Hemidactylus frenatus*) in the languages of Southeast Asia, *chapkilī* and *chapkalī* in Urdu and Hindi, *tiktikī* and *chikchikī* in Bengali, and *kirlī* in Seraiki (southern Punjab). Their association with leprosy (*korh*, *kor*) has led to the name *korhkirī* (*korhkillī*, *korhkirarī*) in Punjabi (SINGH 1895, 624). Further west we have the Pashto term *randa migi* and the Persian and Afghan Dari *chalpāsah* or *chalpāsak*.³ In Arabic the gecko is called *borṣ* or *wazaghah* (LANE 1863, 188–89).

The peculiarities and characteristics of this animal are a frequent

subject of proverbs and sayings. One example is a Punjabi expression describing an unsuccessful attempt: "It is as if a gecko would strangle the beams of a ceiling" (*Zāt dī koṛhkirī shatīriañ nu japhē*).

BAD OMENS

Geckos, as mentioned above, are known for their shrill cry (though in Uttar Pradesh they say, "He keeps his mouth closed tight as a gecko" [*Chapkilī kī tarhā muñh band rakhta hai*]). The gecko's cry is considered a very bad omen in many parts of the Indian subcontinent. In Bengal it is said, "One who does not believe in (the bad effects of) sneezes and geckos is a donkey" (*Hanchi tiktikī badha je na mane se gadhā*) (although the Bengalese also say, "If a house-lizard [*Ptyodactylus gecko*] utters its peculiar cry 'tuck tu' when a man is speaking of something, then he cries out 'Satyi, satyi' — 'true, true', and it is believed that the thing spoken of will surely happen" [MITRA 1892, 582]). Across the whole of North India it is believed that the cry of a gecko will bring evil upon the house unless the gecko's *chit-chit* or *tik-tik* sound is immediately imitated. More ambivalent is the South Indian folk belief reported from Madras and the west coast by WALHOUSE: "The little familiar house-lizard (*balli*) that runs up walls often utters a chirping cry; this proceeding from the east wall of a house is very lucky, but from any of the other three walls extremely bad, and sufficient to break off any enterprise" (1876, 21).⁴

Geckos are regarded as highly poisonous, so that physical contact



is — with few exceptions — considered quite dangerous for the health.⁵ It is commonly believed that any contact with the animal requires a thorough washing, though Khushwant SINGH, the famous Indian writer, says that “it [is] not the sort of dirt which [can] be wiped off or wiped clean” (1956, 24). In his novel *Train to Pakistan* he evokes a somewhat gloomy and ominous atmosphere by describing two fighting geckos that are touched by a man. Writing on Hindu beliefs, S. S. MEHTA remarks,

If [a gecko] happens to fall on the body of a human being, the person is believed to suffer from illness in a short time; and if, while the person is asleep it creeps over the body, he or she is believed to meet death in a few days. (1929, 355)

The Bengalis say that “if a lizard falls on the body or passes urine or ordure thereon, then it beckons illness. Sprinkling the body with Ganges water averts the evil” (MITRA 1892, 585). In Peshawar I was told that a gecko falling directly on the face will cause one to become an albino, while in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh it is claimed that a gecko dropping on a person will result in serious skin disease unless the person takes a full bath, particularly in “gold water” (hot water in which one or more pieces of gold have been laid). The faith in gold water stems from the belief that the yellow color of the metal can absorb and neutralize the yellow substance of the gecko.⁶ A similar notion is reflected in the Arab belief that storing yellow saffron in the kitchen keeps geckos away (DYMCK 1892, 443).

In Uttar Pradesh Muslims and Hindus alike generally believe that a gecko falling on the right shoulder is a good omen, while one falling on the left shoulder is a bad omen. One woman from Peshawar told me that if a gecko falls on a man’s head, then that man will become king.

GECKOS AS CARRIERS OF LEPROSY AND LEUKODERMA (*VITILIGO*)

Geckos have the capacity to change their color between pale and dark by shifting the melanophores in their skin cells. They shed their skin, so that when one touches them some of the regenerating epidermis is likely to be left on one’s hand.⁷ The tail also detaches quite easily.

These qualities have tended to link the gecko through association — *similia similibus evocantur* — to certain diseases whose symptoms are the same. In the Punjab leprosy is generally attributed to contact with this animal, or, more especially, with its urine.⁸ In Uttar Pradesh I collected a humorous proverb that goes, “You can neither swallow a gecko nor spit it out. If you eat it you will get leprosy, and if you don’t eat it you will

remain hungry." Similar ideas are reflected in the Arabic name for a leper, *ābraṣ*, which derives from *borṣ* (gecko) (LANE 1863, 188).

In Yemen and other Arab countries skin diseases are attributed to a gecko having run over the face of the afflicted person as he or she slept at night (WRANIK 1993, 9). In the region between North India and Afghanistan it is believed that contact with the gecko, or with its excreta, will cause the skin disease known as leukoderma (*leukoderma acquisitum*), an acquired type of skin depigmentation characterized by whitish blotches on the face, hands, feet, back, arms, and legs.⁹ In Afghanistan this disease is called *baras* or *pēs*, and in Pakistan and India *phulbēri*. Leukoderma is an immune disorder that is treatable if diagnosed early.¹⁰ It often appears after inflammations caused by syphilis, psoriasis, leprosy, eczema, neurodermititis, etc. Pakistani skin specialist Jamil SHAHID notes that the condition is more common among the colored populations of the world, and that in Lahore, for example, it accounts for 2–3% of all skin disorders (1992).¹¹

GECKOS POISON FOOD

Among North Indian Hindus there is an oral tradition that the god Śiva, described in Hindu texts as a carrier of disease, dispensed poison to every living creature. Only the gecko, the last to arrive, received none. Śiva himself thus prepared a strong poison with a grater and gave it to the gecko, which licked it up and has been deadly poisonous ever since. Eating one, it is believed, can lead to vomiting, serious illness, or even death.¹² Similar beliefs are widespread in the Arab world, where the little lizard is called *borṣ sam*, "poisonous gecko."

Popular oral traditions perpetuate such beliefs in the form of short stories that are presented as true incidents. For example, Ashok Mukherji, a Bengali living in Kanpur, told me of an incident he had heard about in which two boys in Varanasi bought sweets and some yogurt in a clay pot from a shop. In the pot they found a dead gecko, which they removed along with some of the yogurt. They then ate the yogurt; they are said to have died soon after. In another incident that reportedly occurred in the small town of Khanpur, southern Punjab, during the 1980s, two children are said to have drunk some milk tea that had been poisoned by a gecko. Both got seriously ill and were rushed to the hospital; fortunately they survived. In the Punjab there is a story about a woman who served *dāl* (lentils) to her seven children, one of whom suddenly started to talk like a *tuṭlī* (someone who cannot pronounce a hard *t*). Soon all the children started to speak in the same way. Later it was found that they had ingested the meat of a gecko that had

fallen into the *dāl*.

Housewives, aware that a gecko could fall into a cooking vessel and — if unnoticed — even be consumed, have various customs relating to geckos and the kitchen. If one of the creatures falls into an empty pot, jug, etc., then the vessel must be broken and thrown away, as food or drink kept in it would become *makrūh* (not religiously approved). An anecdote, recorded in Lahore, reflects this belief. A beggar went to a house in the walled city one hot summer day and asked for something to drink. A boy gave him a clay bowl filled with fruit juice. He then gave him a second serving, and a third, and a fourth, until the beggar finally asked, "Is there nobody in your house who wants this delicious juice?" "Well," the boy replied, "you should know that a gecko fell into the pot of juice." Thereupon the beggar smashed the bowl on the ground. The boy started weeping bitterly, but the beggar only said, "Why are you so upset? Earlier I saw your dog drinking from this bowl!"

Other customs dictate that if a gecko falls into a container filled with, for example, flour or sugar, the animal must be removed along with about one cubic foot of the foodstuff. Kitchens (especially the kitchens of restaurants) are often sprayed to prevent infection.

TO KILL A GECKO?

Despite the widespread abhorrence of geckos, it is still said that a housewife should never kill one of the creatures lest her meals become tasteless and lacking in *barakat* (blessing). In Uttar Pradesh people even say that a house with many geckos is generally a prosperous one, adding that the killing of a gecko would prevent the lady of the house from becoming pregnant. This may be related to the fact that, like geckos, women in the area often have their first children in the winter, since the favored time for marriages is between February and April. It should be noted that in other cultures as well lizards are regarded as symbols of fertility (FRAZER 1951, 302), perhaps because they seem to renew their youth every time they shed their skin.

Thus in the Punjab it is recommended that geckos not be killed but instead turned out of the house using a stick with a piece of cloth tied to its top. This prevents the house from coming under a curse.¹² Of course not everyone adheres to this popular belief, and many people feel no compunction about killing the creatures. Some informants even told me that to do so is considered *sawāb*, that is, of religious merit. Such people, particularly among the Sunnis, legitimize their actions by citing pious legends. In one the Holy Prophet and Abu Bakr, on their flight from Mecca to Medina, hid in a cave where a helpful spider covered the en-

trance with a web and thus prevented their discovery; the two suffered from thirst, though, since a gecko had chewed a hole through their leather bag of drinking water. Shiites relate the chewing through of the water bag to the thirsty companions of Imam Hussein in the desert of Karbala.

GECKOS IN MAGIC AND FOLK MEDICINE

It is little wonder that an animal as feared as the gecko would be used by the practitioners of the malevolent and antisocial magic arts. My research reveals that in the Punjab, North-West Frontier Province, and Afghanistan the *jadūgār* (magician) uses the tail, skin, and blood of the gecko to prepare special potions.¹³ It is said that if one cooks a gecko and mixes it in with the food of an enemy, then the enemy will weaken and his skin start to peel off.

In the Arab countries parts of the gecko are considered effective agents for extracting urine or foreign bodies from those who are ill. Thus LANE reports in his *Arab-English Lexicon* that the gecko's "blood and its urine have a wonderful effect when put into the orifice of the penis of a child suffering from difficulty in voiding his urine, relieving him immediately; and its head, pounded, when put upon a member, causes to come forth a thing that has entered into it and become concealed therein, such as a thorn and the like" (1863, 189).

SUMMARY

The ethnographic data from South and West Asia presented in this paper demonstrate the popular view of geckos as inauspicious creatures. Because of their appearance they are considered highly impure and are regarded as carriers of leprosy and leukoderma. They are also considered capable of poisoning any food they come in contact with. Nevertheless, there are other underlying associations that link the creature with fertility and well-being.

The ritual behavior of humans toward the gecko centers on habitual avoidance. Since geckos can be found virtually anywhere in the house — though, like demons, they are active mostly at night — they form an invisible but nevertheless threatening presence that fosters a continual state of awareness in the housewife as she goes about her daily work. This results in the useful side effects of careful cooking, proper covering of vessels, and orderly keeping of the kitchen.

NOTES

1. For a general survey see, for example, HENKEL and SCHMIDT 1991; for the distributions of the various species of Gekkonidae in South and West Asia compare SMITH 1935 and WELCH, COOKE, and WRIGHT 1990.

2. I am especially thankful for information provided by, among others, Begum Farhana Hassan, Begum Shaukat Niazi, Begum Gill, and my friends and acquaintances Azam Chaudhry, Asif Zaidi, Ashok Mukherji, Sayyid Anwar, Amir Ansari, Asad Esker, and Osman Salimi. I would also like to thank P. N. Chaudhary (Delhi) and Dr. Wolfgang Böhme (Museum Alexander Koenig; Zoological Research Institute and Museum in Bonn, Germany) for their careful reading of the manuscript and their helpful suggestions.

3. In Afghanistan other members of Gekkonidae are called *sūsmār kuchak*, *kolbāsah* (*kolpāsah*, *karbāsah*, *karbāssh*, *karbāsshah*), *mātūrang*, and *bāshu*. The lizard, known as *bozmaye* in Persian, is called *mār-mulak* in Afghan Dari. (For data on Afghanistan my thanks to my uncle Osman Salimi.)

4. Dominique LAPIERRE, in his novel on Calcutta, mentions that the cry of a gecko is regarded as a good omen for long life (1985, 363).

5. A person whose appearance is disgusting and repulsive is sometimes called in Punjabi a *koḥkiriḥ*.

6. This brings to mind the treatment for jaundice practiced among the Middle European Serbs and Greeks: golden amulets are worn for prevention, and water in which a gold coin has been placed for a night is imbibed for medication (BERTHOLET 1978, 115). Similarly, Parsis are believed to have used cow urine (*āb-i zar*, "gold water") as a prophylactic against leprosy (MODI 1922, 244).

7. Personal communication by Dr. Böhme.

8. Another explanation current in Punjab is mentioned by Prakash TANDON, who says that "it was believed that mixing milk and fish caused leprosy" (1961, 40).

9. For the explanation of the medical aspects I would like to thank my friend Dr. Thomas Eising (Bonn).

10. Did A. W. HUGHES mean consumption when he wrote, concerning the area of Sehwan in Sindh, that "the 'han khun', a species of lizard, is said by the natives to be so poisonous as to cause immediate death" (1874, 707)? In Agra I heard a story of a thirty-year-old man in a nearby village who had regularly eaten geckos for the past six years, and who suffered from *phulbēri*. People in Bahawalpur, southern Punjab, spoke of a heroin addict who killed a gecko with a burning match, thrust a cigarette onto the animal, then deeply inhaled.

11. Shahid adds that *phulbēri* leads to social ostracism for afflicted women, whose chances for marriage are much reduced.

12. From Iran, Alfons GABRIEL mentions a similar timidity to kill lizards, which are considered incarnations of evil (1971, 81).

13. SINGH notes that in the Punjab a special oil is made from the skin of sand lizards. This is supposed to strengthen male power, making the penis enlarge when rubbed on it (1956, 107).

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