

SOME COMMON ERRORS
CONCERNING WATER-LILIES AND LOTUSES

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The terminology for translating the omnipresent names for lotuses and water-lilies in Sanskrit literature continues to prove problematic for various reasons. Some attempts to deal with the problem suffer from unclear botanical terminology, others use more trustworthy sources, but mixed with outdated works. Fortunately the well-known and widely quoted article by WILHELM RAU, the standard reference when dealing with the Sanskrit names of lotuses and water-lilies,¹ provides a clear, but succinct orientation. However, it seems that the fact that this article was meant to be used *instead* of earlier sources is less well understood.

In a recent contribution the present author has tried to show, by building on RAU, that by using updated information from botanical sources some of the remaining problems surrounding the Sanskrit names for lotuses and water-lilies can be solved.² Because of the brevity of the one and the long-windedness of the other, it may not be unwelcome to present here a convenient summary and list the most common errors.

RAU had concluded that Indian poets distinguished clearly between water-lilies (*Nymphaea*) and lotuses (*Nelumbium*). Below that level only the colour of the blossom mattered to the poets. Since there is botanically only one kind of lotus, the translation and identification is simple: Terms like *pañkaja*, *abja*, *kamala* etc. can be translated simply by “lotus” with the colours added, if specified in the text. The colour of the blossom does not change the identity of the plant, thus no thought may be spared on whether a red lotus is a *Nelumbium speciosum*, a yellow lotus *Nelumbium indica*, or vice versa.

The case of the water-lilies is different: there are many water-lilies and a mapping of botanical terminology on the Sanskrit names, based only on colour, will probably be unsuccessful.

The remaining problems, already identified by RAU, were the “golden lotus”, which is best understood as a poetical convention, and the “blue

¹ “Lotusblumen”. In: *Asiatica. Festschrift Friedrich Weller*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1954, p. 505-513.

² See “The Blue Lotus. Oriental Research between Philology, Botany and Poetics?” In: *ZDMG* 152.2 (2002), S. 295-308.

lotus”, which does not exist in nature, but can be interpreted as the blue water-lily, just as *mahotpala*, literally “large water-lily”, has come to mean “lotus”. There is therefore not much scope for error as long as one uses the list of names as given in RAU – unless of course less informed sources are combined with its conclusions. This is, however, done quite frequently and the following errors are found even in works where RAU’s *Lotusblumen* is known and quoted as a source.

1. *Dictionaries are often no valid source of information.* This applies to Sanskrit dictionaries, but also to encyclopedias and dictionaries of the target language, where unbotanical wrong usages are often listed but not disclosed.³
2. *Lotuses are not water-lilies.* As a first indispensable step the reader is kindly encouraged to compare pictures of lotuses and water-lilies in a botanical or even gardening handbook, or preferably, visit a botanical garden. The anatomical differences should convince the reader that although both plants can be confused in secondary literature, they are not likely to be confused in real life. The use of the word lotus for water-lily, although wide-spread in various reference works, is botanically wrong and misrepresents the differentiation found in Sanskrit literature.
3. *Ignore old terminology.* According to WILHELM BARTHOLOTT, botanist at the University of Bonn and well-known discoverer of the lotus effect, the family “lotus” cannot be divided.⁴ In other words, there is no difference between *Nelumbium speciosum*, *Nelumbo nucifera* and the like. It is true that Sanskrit authors have used colour as an additional distinguishing feature of lotuses, but we cannot align this with scientific botanical terminology.
4. *Lotuses do not blossom at night*, only (some) water-lilies.
5. *There is no blue lotus*, only a blue water-lily; Sanskrit terms with the literal meaning “blue lotus” (*nīlāmbuja* etc.) denote the blue water-lily.⁵
6. *The so-called Egyptian lotus is not a lotus, but a water-lily.*

³ See below for some examples from German dictionaries.

⁴ As quoted in detail in JÜRGEN HANNEDER: “The Blue Lotus. Oriental Research between Philology, Botany and Poetics?” In: ZDMG 152.2 (2002), p. 295–308.

⁵ For an explanation, see HANNEDER, op. cit.

It may be useful to mention one recent article in the present journal, where European nomenclature and illustrations are likely to confuse the reader. In her article on *The Flowers in the R̥gveda hymns*⁶ ENRICA GARZILLI has stated, following RAU, that the “white water lily [...] is sometimes confused with the lotus” (p.293). While this is certainly true, her treatment of *puṣkara* is itself confusing. She writes that “*púṣkara* is the name of the blue lotus flower.” (p.294) Now *puṣkara* is a name for “lotus” according to RAU, and no colour differentiation is implied in the word.⁷ In a footnote she refers to the PW and adds: “It should be the variety *Nelumbium Speciosum* or the *Nymphaea Nelumbo*.” It is true that the PW has “Blaue Lotosblüthe”, but this was exactly what RAU meant when he wrote: “Wer zwar nicht Botanik studieren, aber dennoch wissen will, was er unter den sogenannten „Lotusblumen“ der klassischen indischen Poesie zu verstehen habe, kann leicht in böse Verwirrung geraten.”⁸ What GARZILLI has done is to discard RAU and combine the entries in BÖHTLINGK with other unspecified sources. But the first option *is* a lotus, the second a water-lily; the author here seems to be undecided whether *puṣkara* is the one or the other, thereby unconsciously implying that RAU’s conclusion that Indian poets clearly differentiated the two species is faulty.

What is worse is that on the same page we find the drawing of a “*Lotus Aegyptia*” as an exemplification of *puṣkara*. While the reader of the footnotes remains confused, the reader of the main text is assured that *puṣkara* is the Egyptian lotus. Now the “Egyptian lotus”, botanical name *Nymphaea lotus*, is a water-lily (*Nymphaea*), not a lotus – as a glance at the illustration in GARZILLI’s article shows. This example is adduced to demonstrate that one cannot identify lotuses and water-lilies by trying to harmonize or add up definitions from contradicting sources.⁹

⁶ IJ 46 (2003): 293–314.

⁷ See there, p. 512, Blb, No. 63.

⁸ Op. cit., p. 505.

⁹ Another case is the listing of names in ENRICA GARZILLI: *Flowers of Consciousness in Tantric Texts: The Sacred Lotus*. In: *Pandanus* 2000. Prague: 2000, p.73–102. There we find that *padma* is *Nelumbium*, but is “often confounded with the white water-lily” (p.76); *nalina* is the “lotus flower or water-lily (*Nelumbium Speciosum*)”; *aravinda* is the “lotus *Nelumbium Speciosum* or *Nymphaea Nelumbo*”; etc. This account is utterly confused – neither “the red lotus *Nymphaea Rubra*”, nor the “blue lotus *Nymphaea Stellata*” or the “blue lotus or lotus *Nelumbium Speciosum* or *Nymphaea Nelumbo*” make any sense in scientific or old Indian plant taxonomy.

Incidentally the case of the lotus in Egypt is a special one, since the plant was apparently introduced probably around 500 B.C., but extinct before the 13th century.¹⁰ The arabic terms *nīlūfar* and *līnūfar* are both ultimately derived from Sanskrit *nīlotpala*, while in arabic an elliptic form *nūfar* occurs, which has also been used in botanical terminology, but for a different plant: *Nuphar lutea* “cow lily”. But the most confusing array of names for aquatic plants is perhaps found in German, where we find, apart from Lotus, “Seerose”, “Teichrose” and “Wasserrose”. If we look at WAHRIG: *Deutsches Wörterbuch* of 1991, we find sub “Wasserrose” a reference to “Teichrose”. There we read: “zu den Teichrosengewächsen (Nymphaeaceae) gehörende Schwimmpflanze des Süßwassers mit kreisrunden Blättern: Nymphaea; Sy[nonyme] Seerose, Wasserrose”. Here *Nuphar* and *Nymphaea* are apparently confused. Thus, for the purpose of translating from Sanskrit there is no other option than to discard such definitions and use the terms from the target language coterminous with botanical nomenclature.

We may add that in “Realienkunde” every case seems to be different. Whereas a clear identification of the lotus is possible – surely because there is only one botanical genus *nelumbo*, a differentiated equation of Sanskrit and European names for water-lilies would be as difficult as with aquatic birds, where too narrow identifications can convincingly be falsified.¹¹

¹⁰ See MANFRED ULLMANN: *Arabische Gedichte über Seerosen und Lotosblumen*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht 2001 [Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen. I. Philologisch-Historische Klasse 12]. I am grateful to the author for alerting me to his publication.

¹¹ See DITTE BANDINI-KÖNIG: “Von Kranichen, Brachvögeln und “Wildenten”.” In: *StII* 23 (2002): 27–50. Nevertheless I doubt that the author’s observation that lotus and water-lily are “often not clearly distinguished” (p. 47), as evidenced in a painting from Fondukistan, in which a water-lily is given a *karnikā*, is correct. (She refers to M. BUSSAGLI: *La Peinture de l’Asie Centrale*. Genève 1978, p. 41.) This may be the case in Central Asia and Tibet, but there is no reason to assume a frequent confusion of the two in the areas where they can be observed in nature.