



# LIANGMAI NAGAS

## Legends and Stories

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Sujata Miri



This book is a collection of stories—mythical, legendary, semi-historical—of the Liangmei Naga people who live in the State of Manipur. The Liangmei Nagas are a small tribal community with a powerful sense of identity and allegiance. These stories have never appeared in print before. While, as is to be expected, there are many common features which these stories have with stories from other cultures, tribal or non-tribal, there is also a distinctive streak of individuality about these stories. The introduction makes an attempt, tentative though it is, at understanding the moral, the sociological, and the metaphysical underpinnings of these stories. No doubt the structuralist will have a field-day in unearthing the 'meanings' of the stories. But here they are offered not just as possible objects of curiosity for the structuralist or the seismologist but also as a simple innocent source of entertainment.

SUJATA MIRI is Professor of Philosophy in North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Over the last 15 years or so that she has taught in this University, she has developed a deep interest in the problems of understanding cultures other than one's own, particularly tribal cultures, such as those of North-East India. Her interests range from Philosophy to Anthropology, History and Literatures of the tribal people of this region. In her published work during the last few years she has, according to many critics, shown the way for a fresh and creative look at the 'tribal situation' in the country.

She has published widely including two books concerning the problems of understanding a 'native' religion, namely, the religion of the Khasis.

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## Acknowledgement

(The Liangmai Nagas are a sub-tribe of the Zeliangrong Nagas, found in the three states of Nagaland, Assam and Manipur. The elders report that before the advent of the British, the Zeliangrong were one of the most outstanding of the Naga groups in their music and crafts. Today of course they have split up and are probably, in some ways, the meekest group amongst the Nagas who are differently classified in the three states.)

Newmai Hunibo belongs to the Liangmai group from the State of Manipur. My first debt of gratitude is to the village elders from Ritiang, Incheng, Thalon, Impa, Pheluang, Reng, Innemning, Tamingzam, Incheng and Inkan. The elders all above sixty years of age, and not in very good health, were kind to Hunibo and allowed him to tape some of their songs and tales making the present narration of stories and songs possible.

The aim of this book is to achieve an intimate awareness of a particular culture in the north East, through its traditional tales and songs. Most of these have come down to the Liangmai, in the way of all folk tales, through a kind of collective anonymity. And in this, they have a uniquely organizing role in the Liangmai perception of his tradition. For me the importance of the present enterprise lies precisely in this fact. I think, the tales told here give us intimate and authentic glimpses into the pivotal ideas which held the Liangmai mind and spirit together. And, it is my conviction, that without such glimpses into the Liangmai past, it is impossible even to begin to understand the "modern" Liangmai. The guidance for this mission has come to me from

Prof Mrinal Miri whose encouragement and support I must acknowledge.

Let me assure the would-be critic that I am perfectly aware of the fact that with time and because of drastic changes introduced into the life of the Liangmai in the last fifty years or so, most of these stories and legends have lost their original unifying function. But their importance is not thereby lost. It is through a renewed attempt to grasp their import that a fresh vital role can be found for them. In any case I am committed to completing this work as a gesture of appreciation of the sincerity and enthusiasm of my student Newmai Hunibo, a Liangmai, who is an ardent admirer of his own tradition.

As usual my research was handicapped by all kinds of lack of facilities not to speak of the not so softly whispered rebuke that this kind of intellectual enterprise is not worthy of any serious academic attention, because it belongs to an academic no-man's land of no significance whatsoever. If not for the faith in me of friends and other well-wishers I would have certainly left it half way.

The Fellowship awarded to Newmai Hunibo by the Himalayan Eco-development Project NEHU, made it possible for both of us to undertake this work. For this we are grateful to them. It was impossible to find an adept translator of the few poems and songs included. I have dared to include them with a brief account of the respective poem's main ideas. I hope the immense limitations of the work will be forgiven for my purpose here is to motivate other Liangmai scholars to venture deeper into their tradition in order to bring forth a better collection.

In the past few months, as I have struggled with these pages, Parimal Chakraverty, Morning Lyngdoh and Rani Kurian in their own ways have helped to ease my tension. For this I express my gratitude and respect for their patience.

Sujata Miri

## Introduction

"In the sphere of ideas, there is hardly yet any realization that we can think effectively only when we think in terms of the indigenous ideas that pulsate in the life and mind of the masses".\*

The stories related here afford a unique glimpse into the civilization of a much ignored tribe of North East India. The Liangmai Naga is a tribe with its own individual outlook as a result of its distinctive body of customs and mores which must have evolved through its long history. Unfortunately the people themselves appear to have relaxed their hold upon their past. Between them and it there is only a broken continuity and this work is a very small attempt to keep alive the continuity of their civilization. It will not of course present a complete embodiment of the ideals found in the society but the legends and songs (can we call them their "living mythology"?) do convey the spirit of what permeates the whole life of the people as a controlling influence. Most scholars when they write about tribes are of the opinion that the tribal's mind is so coloured with vague ideas and even vaguer emotions, that when it comes to forming answers to fundamental questions of life, he is silenced in a world of mystical, fearsome and supernatural power. A closer and a more sympathetic look however, uncovers a community of people whose society is based on the principles of equality and

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\*K.C. Bhattacharya, "Swaraj in Ideas", *Viswa Bharati Journal*, Vol. XX, 1954.

brotherhood. Its peoples were healthy and strong, well-adapted to the exploitation of natural resources, whenever necessary. This work is an attempt at presenting the legends and stories encountered in the Liangmai Naga (also called Kacha Naga) society in such a manner that the reader will be in a position to understand the individuals and the forces that have been at work in fashioning their basic expressions regarding life.

In their conception of reality there is seen an intimate ontological relationship among animals, vegetables and natural forces that constitute reality. Beings and forces interact with each other and also influence each other. Hence every being or force is entitled to a place in the scheme of things and every human being is entitled to the life which is given to him by his maker God (Charahwang), the first and the supreme force from which all other god heads (like Bangla Wang, Akangbou, Charahsingmeng and Maharatev) derive their existence. Life is the supreme value which the gods and the ancestors are committed to protect. Any interference into life, causing its diminution or outright annihilation is inexcusable. This view would not be in harmony either with the view deriving primarily from the great Kant according to which, man, in his true being, is "autonomous", or with the view of modern science according to which man is logically reducible to an object of nature. Both these views would lead to the similar conclusion that for morality we need make no appeal to anything other than man himself, in his isolation from both God and nature. For this community, as for most other tribes of the region, morality has an ontological basis and pertains not only to human beings but to other elements of reality including divine, human, animate and inanimate. Laws aim at ensuring peaceful harmonious relationship among the forces so that there can be a strengthening and preservation of man's right to life. It gives a central position to man but not absolute autonomy. A man's autonomy is seen as constrained by his relationships with other men and nature. In any case most of the stories told and songs sung speak of the days of mutual love and respect between human, animal (*Feast*

of *Amongbou*\*) and divine forces. The message being that it is human greed and other failings which lie at the root of human suffering, and the subsequent loss of the spontaneous order that existed between men and nature. *Maram Chengbou and the Tiger* talks of the great friendship that once existed between man and the beast which was subsequently lost for the ages to come by man's treachery and deceit.

The form of the Liangmei's particular value system is not totally determined by the manner of its adaptation to the environmental ecosystem in the way cultural materialists might believe. It is only when we understand their view of the relationship between man and man and between man and God, do we get a clear picture of their ideology. Of the multiplicity of values accepted by the majority of the people at that time, three stand out most prominently—the desire for success, happiness and a long life. The village and family deity bestow on man all the three! There is never a denial of the fact that man is engaged in a strenuous struggle for existence. While the lesser man ends in a feeling of helplessness, powerlessness and insignificance, not so the Liangmai warrior hero! Yet interestingly there is nothing incredibly exalted about him, good and evil are entwined in his nature as in us all. Nonetheless his every act of heroism is an act of meaning. Not only does he assert his commitment to the meaning bestowed and received by his tradition in each individual heroic feat, he also becomes the medium of the actualization of the meaning. He represents the village's ideal of the brave always helping the less fortunate when he in reality risks his life to rescue a helpless victim of a deadly python! His descendants see in his actions the highest values of their tribe actualized. The warrior hero in some of the following stories attempts to lay down an ideal for his village by pursuing it directly and unambiguously and not merely by directing operations from behind. Thus he becomes the perpetual culturaliser, the ideal embodiment of that form of life of which laws and theories

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\**The Feast of Amongbou* unfolds a world in which birds and beasts could talk with and also comfort man.

can give but the briefest abstract yet towards which the hope and effort of every Liangmai child must have been directed.

What holds the attention of the listener to the narration is the warrior's behaviour which is characterized not only by a peculiar sensitiveness to the specific beliefs, customs and conceptions of his tribe but also by their manifestation in a thrilling and exhilarating outward expression. He finds the others accepting his superiority, rarely because of hereditary but mostly by his proven ability.

Today's reader might take a less optimistic view of the ancient Liangmai, might even speak of him as the 'human beast', 'inhuman', 'all savage', very much in the spirit in which American Indians have been spoken of before. But this is due more to a false 'civilizational' pride and insensitivity than anything else. To the more generous reader the individual feats of the man and animal heroes recall the famous study of Montaigne who in his essay 'Of cannibals' declares that the American Indians are wild only in the sense wild flowers are wild, in them are 'the true and most profitable virtues and natural properties most lively and vigorous!'

To come back to the Liangmai warrior, he never fails in his duty to protect his fellow villagers from threatening men and animals more as a gallant knight obeying the ordinance of chivalry, rather than as a humanitarian. The virtues of concern for fellow humans and self-control seem to be fundamental to the people. While the warrior is violent and angry when confronted with the evil designs of the aliens, he is generous and gentleness personified amongst his own people. Not only is physical valour admired and looked up to, there is great respect for individual mental prowess and wisdom. Many a conflict can be seen to have been resolved not as the fruit of any superhuman prowess or any talisman but as a victory of character over character. The constant battle of wits between *Ashabou and Missarungbou* and the final victory of Ashabou bears testimony to this.

There appears to be no delight expressed in erotic freedom, no raptures of free love. *A Tragic Love Story, The Thalon Cave* and

a few others speak of a demand for sexual inhibitions. The elders appear to be exercising some sort of moderating influence on courtship and choice of marriage partners.

Interestingly as man has been given the right to life, he is perfectly justified in fighting for his claim to it and eventually to revive his injured right. This right is capable of being strengthened into a great power which can offer resistance to the wicked wills which attempt to destroy it. This is the power which the mother of *Kaihuibou* wants to strengthen in her son so that he can when grown up avenge his father's death. What needs to be remembered is that the doctrine of 'an head for an head' is taken recourse to only when there is absolutely no other means of getting justice. The man who commits homicide ceases to be a member of the society for his act of murder threatens the very existence of the society as a corporate body. The murderer in any case, is believed to be hunted by the blood of his victim, and he can never live a happy life here and hereafter. Even a great warrior of the status and calibre of *Hungenang* had to meet with a sorry end as a result of the long line of killings undertaken by him to avenge the destruction of his near and dear ones!

The step mother of the *Boy who Turned into a Hornbill* is an example of an evil and unjust woman for her acts amount to an attempt on the life of her stepson. She does not recognize his right or entitlement to his place in the family and his father's life. For similar reasons the step mother of *the Seven Brothers* richly deserved the punishment of being thrown out of the house by the husband.

Traditionally the elders of the community are believed to be next to God in wisdom but the story of *Ngindonbou* is an illustration of how even a younger person can sometimes teach a lesson or two to his elders!

Then again justice rendered by the elders, normally acceptable to all members, can sometimes be found repugnant. In such situations the hero *Chewnuibou* does seek redress by appealing to his own wit. After a period of intense suffering and loneliness he does succeed in shaming his fellow villagers into accepting

him back into their fold. So also the hero *Ngindonbou* proves at every step to be a man of greater wisdom and common sense than his old father-in-law!

Lastly, it is also interesting that while each story offers a glimpse into the Liangmai perception of things, there are, occasionally interesting parallels with more familiar stories associated with the mainstream Indian civilisation. Similarity between "The Episodes in the Life of Abinbou" and "The Story of Abonbou" and the stories of the two epics of *Mahabharat* and *Ramayana*, is unmistakable. The stories *How a Poor Fisherman got the Python's Ring* and *The Girl who Married a Python King* remind one of the ancient Indian accounts of the seven *patalas* or underworlds, inhabited by the Nagas, quasi human beings, who possess a rich material civilization of their own.