Myths of the North-East Frontier of India

Verrier Elwin

This book contains some three hundred and eighty stories collected in the remote villages, largely untouched by external influence, of the hitherto little known North-East Frontier Agency of India. This great tract of mountain and forest is inhabited by people who have preserved their social organization and cultural institutions almost intact throughout the centuries. Their mythology is thus of absorbing interest, for although the motifs of some of the stories are known elsewhere in India and indeed throughout the world, there are many others which are fresh and original. This book, therefore, will not only be of value to professional students of folklore but will also open a door of exciting surprise to anyone interested in a good story with a new and unexpected flavour.

Rs 575

Verrier Elwin (1902-64) was born in Dover, England. He studied at the Oxford University. He was one of the greatest scholars of India's tribal people. His ethnograhpic studies, and popular books on tribal, custom, art, myth and folklore were pathbreaking for anthropology and for creating an awarenesss for cultural diversity. He has published several books including *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin: An Autobiography.*

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TO

THE MEMBERS

OF THE

INDIAN FRONTIER ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE

If I have harboured love within my breast,
'Twas for my comrades of the dusty day,
Who with me watched the loitering stars at play,
Who bore the burden of the same unrest.

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PREFACE

THIS is the first of what I hope will be two or more volumes dealing with mythology and folklore of the North-East Frontier Agency of India (NEFA). The Philological Section of the NEFA Research Department will produce other volumes containing the original versions of these and similar stories. Dr B. S. Guha, formerly Director of the Department of Anthropology, is engaged in recording and translating the great Adi (Abor) myths, the *abhangs*, especially those known in the Pasighat area, and these will form the subject of yet another volume. I have, therefore, not attempted to reproduce any of the *abhangs* as such here, though I have included certain episodes from those chanted in the northern Siang villages, and I have left the task of printing the originals of the stories to our philologists, who are far more qualified to do so than myself.

This book, therefore, has the modest and restricted purpose of making available English versions of nearly 400 tales, many of which are of exceptional and some of unique interest, and all of which throw a great deal of light on the thought and poetic imagination of tribes about whom little has hitherto been written.

In all tribal areas, there is a great divergence of ideas, especially in the realm of folklore, mythology and religion: stories and the names of gods and heroes vary from place to place; the same informant may even pronounce a word, or use a name differently on two successive days. This is inevitable in a region where there is no fixed deposit of doctrine, no sacred books to carry traditions from one generation to another, and where the repositories of knowledge are human beings exposed to the inspirations of their dreams and fancies.

In northern Subansiri, for example, I found the name of a great tribal ancestor pronounced in several different ways. The Tagins said something between Abo-Tani and Abo-Teni; the Miris said Abo-Teni or Ab-Teni; and the Apa-Tanis and Gallongs said Abo-Tani. It was equally

difficult to decide the proper transliteration of the Wancho name of the Supreme Being; informants would say Rang, Jang and Zang almost in the same breath.

In translating I have followed the principle described in my *Tribal Myths of Orissa*. 'My custom was to translate the stories on the spot, as they were narrated or interpreted to me. I have translated them literally, as if I was translating poetry: that is to say, I have inserted no new symbol or image, and I have tried to avoid words which, though neutral in themselves, carry associations alien to the tribal consciousness. I have never, of course, tried to make the stories intelligible or attractive to my readers.'

In making a collection of this kind a scholar is bound to incur many debts of gratitude. My chief debt is to the tribal interpreters who travelled with me and went to enormous pains not only to make the meaning of the stories clear but to persuade informants to tell stories at all. For, although the Sherdukpens and some of the Adis were forthcoming and even eager to explain their traditions, others, especially in Tirap and Tuensang, were reluctant to do so. NEFA is not an easy place for research; it does not give up its secrets readily. A common attitude was summed up by one of my assistants: 'he doesn't know and if he did know, he wouldn't tell'. In the Khamlang Valley only the priests can tell stories, and for nearly the whole of my visit there, no priest was to be found—until, at the very end, one was proudly produced, and he proved deaf and dumb!

In an area where a fantastic variety of dialects is spoken it was inevitable that I should have had to depend on interpreters, except in a few cases where informants told stories directly in Hindi. But I was fortunate in obtaining the services of exceptionally good official interpreters, among whom I must make special mention of Shri Wangdun of Tirap, Shri Tapang Taki of Siang, Shri Ita Pulu of Lohit and Shri Bini Jaipur of Subansiri. To them, and many others, I tender my grateful thanks.

The stories were collected mainly on long tours in the frontier mountains during the four years 1954 to 1957. Others were recorded for me by my indefatigable assistant,

Shri Sundarlal Narmada, who has now worked with me for nearly a quarter of a century. He is responsible for collecting the Singpho, Bugun, Hrusso and Dhammai myths (most of which I personally verified later) and he went with me on most of my tours. A few other stories were collected by the Assistant Research Officers of the NEFA Administration and in particular by Shri T. K. Barua, who has spent a number of years among the Mishmis, and who accompanied me on arduous tours along the Patkoi Range and in the Khamlang Valley, and by Shri B. K. Shukla who has been working for the past year in Subansiri. I must also express my appreciation of the loyal and tireless work of my stenographer, Shri S. Lahiri, and typists, Shri P. Banerji and Shri Higher Land Syiem, in the preparation of the manuscript.

I am grateful to the Asiatic Society for permission to reproduce a number of stories from G. D. S. Dunbar's 'Abors and Galongs', which appeared in the *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal,* Vol. V (1913-17).

In the second volume I hope to give much more introductory material, and in particular a full account of the various tribes. But in view of the keen interest that the tribal people are themselves taking in the preservation of their own oral literature, it seemed desirable to produce this preliminary collection as soon as possible, and I hope that its publication will encourage others also to record the NEFA mythology before its clear and original outlines become dimmed by the external influences which inevitably accompany the march of material progress and development. A Motif-Index to cover both books will be included in Volume Two.

VERRIER ELWIN

SHILLONG
29TH DECEMBER 1957

INTRODUCTION

THE North-East Frontier Agency is a wild and mountainous tract in the Assam Himalayas which covers some 27,000 square miles bounded by Bhutan to the west, Tibet to the north and Burma to the south-east, and into which the Valley of the Brahmaputra projects like a great spur. It is now divided into five Frontier Divisions, Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit and Tirap and accommodates about four hundred thousand people. Some parts, such as central Siang, are heavily populated; others, like northern Subansiri and Lohit, are sparsely inhabited in isolated villages along the river valleys. The rainfall is heavy, as much as 200 inches in Subansiri. The countryside offers almost every possible type of mountain scenery. On the 14,000-foot Se-La Pass on way to Tawang, with its masses of rhododendrons and other multi-coloured flowers, the traveller is reminded of Kashmir; in the lovely valleys of Siang with their background of snow-capped mountains, you are at one moment in Austria, at another in Wordsworth's Lakes. Nor are the formidable slopes of the Patkoi, the wide and open glories of Tirap, the dark jungles of Lohit, easily forgotten. An early traveller described this country as 'back-breaking': I would rather call it 'heart-warming', for though the marches are long and difficult, the people's welcome and hospitality quickly wipes away the memory of fatigue.

This area, which was almost completely isolated until very recently, is populated by a large number of tribes speaking different languages and dialects of the Tibeto-Burman family and exhibiting a great diversity of culture, dress and custom. It may be divided into three main cultural areas. The first is largely inspired by Buddhist ideas and includes the people of Western Kameng, small tribal groups living all along the northern frontier through Subansiri, Siang and Lohit, and the Buddhist Khamptis and Singphos in the foot-hills near Tezu and Margherita. The second cultural province consists of the great central block of territory—

eastern Kameng, Ṣubansiri, Siang and Lohit and the third to the south-east, is a small but important area, now consisting only of part of the Tirap Frontier Division which is populated by the Wanchos and Noctes. Although each of these provinces has much in common with the others, there are a number of definite cultural traits which distinguish them.

The Buddhist or near-Buddhist tribes have a developed civilization which has been considerably influenced by Tibet and Burma. In western Kameng live the Monpas and Sherdukpens, gentle, courteous people who cultivate on terraces, maintain large numbers of cattle, sheep and horses and are to a great extent under the influence of the lamasery of Tawang. Both tribes combine in their religion and mythology traditional tribal ideas with the Buddhist theology. In fairly close geographical proximity live the Buguns (Khowas), Hrussos (Akas) and Dhammais (Mijis) who, although not Buddhists, share some aspects of their neighbours' culture. The Membas and other tribes living along the northern frontier may be conveniently grouped with them and so may be the Buddhist Khamptis and Singphos who migrated in historical times from the Irrawady Valley and have lived for some generations in close proximity to the Assam plains.

The great central area is populated by a large number of tribal groups who have been divided from one another by the difficulty of communications and by the state of war in which they lived for centuries before they were brought under regular administration. In the east of the Kameng Division is a fairly large population of Daflas, who are here known as Bangnis; the same tribe extends into the west of the Subansiri Frontier Division. The wild and desolate hills of Subansiri are also inhabited by the Tagins and Gallongs in the north, by a tribe which for want of a better name is usually called the Hill Miri and by the Apa Tanis whose system of cultivation would be remarkable even in a fully settled area. The life of the people in the northern and western mountains, where puny man fights an arduous battle against the giant forces of nature, is in striking con-

trast to that of the Apa Tanis on their beautiful plateau where nature has been largely dominated and controlled by tribal genius.

Siang, the happiest of the NEFA Divisions, is the home of bright colours, lovely weaving, dancing, singing and an enchanting people formerly known collectively by the Assamese word 'Abor', which means 'independent', but who now call themselves Adi or hillmen. Here too are striking contrasts. On one side is Pasighat, now a prosperous little township, with a High School, a fine Hospital and various training establishments. On the other, are the remote valleys to the north inhabited by Ashings, Pailibos, Ramos, Bokars, Boris and other tribes of whom we still know comparatively little.

Also included in the central area are the Mishmis of Lohit who are divided into three main groups—the Idus (Chulikattas), the Taraons (Digarus) and the Kamans (Mijus). The Taraons and Kamans differ only in dialect and are not easily distinguished. The 'crop-haired' Idus, however, who represent an earlier wave of migration from Burma, differ in many ways and resemble in appearance (though not in culture) the Padams who are their neighbours. All Mishmis, however, live in very small villages, some of which consist of a single great house in which as many as forty to sixty persons may be accommodated. They have few social virtues and are the most individualistic of the NEFA tribes. On the other hand, their weaving is probably the finest in the whole area and the Taraon and Kaman women are distinguished by their attractive hand-woven cloth and the coiffure and silver ornaments which give them an unusual and striking appearance.

In Tirap are the virile and picturesque Wanchos, who are organized under influential and wealthy Chiefs; the Noctes, who have adopted a very elementary form of Vaishnavism and have been more in contact with the outside world than any others, with a resultant loss of much of their traditional culture; the many small groups collectively known as Tangsa, a charming friendly people who have migrated from Burma, and still have many links

across the border; and small populations of Singphos and Khamptis.

Throughout NEFA the unit of social organization is the patrilineal family; polygamy is fairly common, a fact which is often emphasized in the tales, and there are traces of polyandry among the Gallongs. Each tribe is divided into a number of exogamous clans and, as a general rule, the tribes do not intermarry, although there are many examples of this rule being ignored. The people all live in villages, but the Mishmis and Daflas tend to make the house rather the village the centre of their social interests. Village government varies from the autocracy of the great Wancho and Nocte Chiefs to the highly democratic system of the Adi tribes, which are governed by a Kebang or Council of the leading members of the village clans. The people are generally well organized, at least within the clan or village, a state of affairs which is encouraged by the existence of communal dormitories among the Wancho, Nocte and Adi groups.

All the tribes live by what is known in Assam as *jhuming*, or shifting cultivation, the harvests of which they supplement by a wide variety of forest produce. Many of them are also skilled hunters and fishermen. Few of them drink distilled spirit, but everywhere they make a light and nourishing rice-beer which is used on all ceremonial and social occasions. Many of them grow their own tobacco and some grow opium for their own consumption and for trade. Although formerly suspicious and hostile to strangers, they have, under the present policy of the Government of India, become friendly and co-operative. They are in the main hospitable and well-disciplined, hard-working, truthful and honest. Former customs of inter-village wars, head-hunting, kidnapping and slavery have largely disappeared and in the new era of peace there is an increased inter-mingling of the tribes, a fact which will undoubtedly have its influence on their mythology and folktales in time to come.

Until Independence such contacts as the people of NEFA had were with soldiers, the merchants to whom they sold their goods, a few explorers and members of the

Topographical Survey and, in the later years of the British period, with a few Political Officers who visited their villages and settled some of their disputes.

There is no space here to recall the long and distressing story of tribal raids on the inoffensive plains or of the punitive expeditions that went into the hills to rescue captives or avenge the dead. In the thirties of the last century, for example, Tagi Raja, the Chief of the Kapaschor Akas or Hrussos, led his followers to murder and pillage and in 1835 wiped out a British outpost at Balipara. The Adis made frequent attacks on the plains villages throughout the century, and their hostility culminated in the murder of Williamson and Gregorson with forty-two of their followers in 1911. The first official record of the Mishmis, in 1825, declares that they were 'very averse to receive strangers' and in 1854 the intrepid Father Krick with a fellow-priest who had successfully crossed the pass at the head of the Zayul Valley was murdered on their way home. Forays by the Daflas and Apa Tanis were less serious, but the Khamptis and Singphos proved worthy antagonists of British arms in their early raids on Sadiya, though they later settled down to the pacific life to which their Buddhist faith naturally inclined them. The tribes of the Tirap hills have always had more friendly relations with the plains people, and except for an occasional kidnapping of individuals for slavery or sacrifice, the only outstanding tragedy was the massacre of Holcombe's Survey party by the Wanchos in 1875. The people of Tuensang further south lived in almost complete isolation; they were visited by Dr J. H. Hutton in 1922, and in 1936 Mr J. P. Mills led an expedition to punish a village called Pangsha, which had taken 400 heads in a few months.

The policy of Government in the pre-Independence period was to attempt no more than a skeleton administration in the foothills; to send out punitive expeditions in reaction to the more serious raids; to impose blockades and establish fortified posts at strategic points; and in certain cases to pay what is called *pôsa* to the Chiefs on condition that they kept their people under control.

Another form of external contact was through the explorers who from the earliest times pressed into the interior.

In 1826, for example, Wilcox reached the Upper Irrawady from Assam and the following year went into the Kaman Mishmi country as far as the point where the Brahmaputra, 'after flowing nearly south from Tibet suddenly changes its course and flows in a westerly direction'. Ten years later the botanist Griffith succeeded in travelling as far as the village of Ghalum on the Lohit, but was unable to enter the Kaman hills. In 1845, Rowlatt went up the Du river as far as Tuppang where he met a number of Tibetans. E. T. Dalton, later to become famous as the author of one of the classics of Indian anthropology, the *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal,* made a trip up the Subansiri River in 1845 and visited the Adi country, though not very far in, ten years later. Perhaps the most remarkable of these early travellers was T. T. Cooper, a British businessman who, in 1868, was invited by the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce to attempt to reach India from China through Tibet. In this he failed and the following year attempted the journey in reverse, starting out from Sadiya. He came to within twenty miles of Rima, but was then compelled to return.

The first person to visit the Apa Tanis was an adventurous Tea Planter, H. M. Crowe, who went into their hills in 1889 and got on very well with them, an experience which was not shared by the German explorer von Ehlers who followed him a few years later but was robbed and driven out of the country. Another Tea Planter, who made extensive explorations with the idea of extending the trade of Assam beyond the frontier, was J. Errol Gray who left Saikwa at the end of 1892 in an attempt to cross into western China. He travelled unarmed with a comparatively small party and succeeded in crossing the Nam-Kiu and entering the valley of the Tisang, an important affluent of the Irrawady.

When the Topographical Survey of India directed its attention to this area a number of survey parties went far

into the interior and the leaders of some of them such as R. G. Woodthorpe, H. J. Harman, and C. R. Macgregor established friendly relations with the tribes.

Another way in which the hill people came in touch with the outside world was through trade. The Mishmis have always been keen traders and they brought down musk, *Mishmi teeta* which was at one time widely used as a febrifuge, ivory and skins. At one time, the Apa Tanis brought large quantities of rubber for sale. The Adis bartered skins, cane and wool for salt. The Mishmis and some of the tribesmen in Tirap also used to smuggle opium into the plains areas. The Hrussos and Sherdukpens have had trade-contacts with Assam for generations.

From the middle of the last century annual fairs were held at Udalgiri, Doimera, Sadiya and elsewhere, and were visited by large numbers of hillmen.

Finally, there was the impact on the people of Government officials. It was not until 1894 that a Political Officer, J. F Needham, was appointed to study the languages and politics of the tribal people and try to win their goodwill by sympathy and contact. He made many promenades (as they were then called) to within a few miles of Rima, to the Hukong Valley, to Burma across the Patkoi Range, and accompanied two disastrous military expeditions, one in the Abor Hills and another in the last year of the century to the Idu Mishmi country. There is no doubt that he, as well as his successor Williamson, made many friends on the frontier and contributed to the more hospitable reception which visitors received in later years. During the present century the number of visitors as well as the gradual expansion of some sort of administration naturally increased and we may mention the work of the Miri Mission in northern Subansiri in 1911 and the still more adventurous expedition of Dr C. von Furer-Haimendorf in 1944 to the Upper Kamla Valley and beyond.

These varied contacts had remarkably little effect on the life and culture of the people. They were probably too transient and occasional to have a deep effect, but they did succeed in slowly bringing the inhabitants to realize that

the greater world outside their hills was not hostile to them but only wished them well. At least the isolation of NEFA was not complete.

This may account for the fact that, although many of the NEFA stories are original and most of the common motifs of Indian folklore are absent, there are some traces of external influence. A very few myths show traces of missionary teaching, heard on visits to the plains; there is an occasional echo of the Ramayana; one Singpho myth is based on a Jataka tale; a fable from a school primer finds its way, greatly altered, into the body of the mythology.

Among the motifs common in other parts of tribal India which will be found in NEFA are those of an original primaeval ocean out of which the world was formed, of earthquake as caused by the great animal on whose back the world rests, of lightning as the pursuit of a girl by an unwanted lover, traditions of a Land of Women, of opium as the reincarnation of a girl whom nobody loved in her lifetime, the taboo on opening something during a journey, the Fox Woman, the Trickster cycle and the widespread idea that monkeys were originally human beings who lost their status through idleness or breach of a taboo.

But on the whole the tales are remarkably original and seem to be genuine products of tribal creativity and imagination. There are no moral tales, though a few suggest the possibility of divine punishment for sin. There are very few formulistic or cumulative tales; there is little stress on sacred numbers; not a hint of astrology; and only one reference to the 'soul index' motif so popular in Indian folklore.

The myths are told on a variety of occasions: some are chanted during the dance, as for example the Adi *abhangs*, and the Sherdukpen tales; some are repeated at ceremonies, at a funeral or harvest thanksgiving or to save the life of a child; others are told round the fire in the Naga *morung* or Adi *moshup;* yet others are perhaps not told publicly at all, but are passed down from shaman to shaman as a kind of traditional wisdom or history.

Long ago Tylor suggested that myth was primitive

history and ethnology expressed in poetic form. The poet contemplates the same natural world as the man of science, but he expresses his discovery in a different way. And the primitive poet who puts his inspiration in the form of myth shapes it out of 'those endless analogies between man and nature which are the soul of all poetry.' The truth of a myth is thus in a way irrelevant. 'Myth is the history of its authors, not of its subjects; it records the lives, not of superhuman heroes, but of poetic nations.'

Many tribal people have a deep vein of poetic imagination, and only the difficulty of interpretation prevents us from enjoying it as we should. Many of the NEFA myths are rich in 'poetic' ideas, an expression which can hardly be defined, but which most readers will appreciate.

The NEFA stories of the origin or creation of the world, the sky, and the heavenly bodies have an almost Miltonic grandeur of conception. Earth and Sky are lovers and when the Sky makes love to the Earth every kind of tree and grass and all living creatures come into being. But the lovers must be separated, for so long as they cling together there is nowhere for their children to live. In a Minyong tradition, after their separation, the Earth always longed to return to her husband to be one with him again. But as she was raising herself to the Sky, the Sun and Moon appeared, and she was ashamed and could go no further. That part of her which was reaching towards her lord became fixed for ever, as the great mountains. In a Singpho story the rainbow is a ladder by which a god climbs from earth to meet his wife in the land of the Moon, high in the sky, and in Tagin stories the rainbow is a bridge by which a bride goes to her husband's house.

There is poetic inspiration in the Sherdukpen story about rainbows which tells how there are four water-spirits, white, black, yellow and red, who live in springs among the hills and from time to time wander across the heavens for ever seeking wives as lovely as themselves. The rainbow is the path of blended colours that they make across the sky.

The people of NEFA have a strong sense of beauty and love bright colours and flowers. There is a Nocte tale of two

brothers, one of whom lives on earth and the other, the younger, in the sky. 'From time to time the younger brother dances and throws showers of rain-drops down to earth. Then he asks the lovely fair-coloured girls of earth whether they have such beads on their necks. Sometimes too he throws the lightning down and asks the earth-people if they have such wondrous magic as this. Sometimes he beats his drum and when it thunders across the sky, he asks the earth-people if they have any music to match it.' Lightning always delights the tribal poets and myth-makers; it is, say the Minyongs, the flashing of a divine mother's eyelids; to the Mishmis it is the beauty of a star-girl running across the sky; to the Buguns, it is the long hair-pin with which a girl threatens an undesired lover.

The tribesmen are realists and there are plenty of ugly people in their stories, women with, for example, only one eye, one ear, one breast and one leg, but there are also many lovely creatures whose memory has come down from generation to generation. The Singphos, for example, speak of Raja Sitte-Charka whose queen shone like the light. 'When he went anywhere at night he used to take her with him so that her beauty could lighten the path by which he had to go. Not only light but a delicate scent came from her body.' Even after her death her body lay for months with its scented beauty unimpaired.

Such ideas, and others similar to them which will be found in this book, are the material of true poetry. It is consoling to reflect that Imagination, which is the light of the finest and most cultured minds, illuminates also the hard lives of the people of the hills.

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