Stories and Legends of the Liangmai Nagas

SUJATA MIRI

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STORIES AND LEGENDS OF THE LIANGMAI NAGAS

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Preface

This is a much revised, and hopefully, improved version of my earlier book, *Liangmai Nagas*, *Legends and Stories*, 1991 (Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd.). The stories and legends put together here were collected with the help of my research student Newmai Honibo; and, as far as Newmai and I know, this is the first time that these tales are being told in English.

The Liangmais are a sub-tribe of the Zeliangrong Nagas. The Zeliangrong country straddles the present day Nagaland, Manipur and Assam. They believe in a golden age when they lived together and flourished as a powerful community—prosperous, unmatched in skills of warfare, the envy of other communities because of their great excellence in the art of weaving, making implements of warfare and many other crafts. But now this great community is much depleted and lives in discrete enclaves.

My first debt of gratitude is to the elders of the villages of Ritiang, Incheng, Thalon, Impa, Pheluang, Reng, Innemning, Tamingzam and Inkan. They told these tales to Newmai and allowed him to record them on a rather primitive tape recorder. These were then transcribed and finally translated into English. In the present revised version, I have tried to improve the translation as well as the presentation. But I have no doubt at all that much of the spirit of the original is lost in the translation and in the retelling.

The stories are vigorous, permeated by an earthy wisdom, and a sturdy sense of humour in the midst of the inevitable deadly twists and turns of life. I have tried to present them in a way so that both children and adults can enjoy them.

I wish to express my gratitude once again to Newmai Honibo, for his hard work in bringing this book to life.

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THE ORIGIN OF LIANGMAI NAGAS

It is said that Liangmai Nagas originally came from the extreme northern part of their present "country". They migrated from the land of their ancestors in search of new fertile lands. As they were leaving their ancestral land their grand father gave them a cow and a walking stick and told them that they should settle down at the place where the cow started lowing. They moved along the western part of what is now Dimapur and reached a place called Makhiang (the present Makhel village in the Mao area) when the cow started lowing. So they settled down there. In due course of time when Makhiang became overpopulated, some brothers from the group spread out in different directions to other areas. But before parting from each other, they planted the walking stick in the ground. The stick grew up as a big pearl tree with four major branches.

It was a belief among them that if any of the large branches of the tree were to become either fruitless or leafless that would be a sign that the brothers who had gone in the direction pointed by the branch were facing famine or some natural calamity. Even worse fate for the brothers would be indicated if the branch were to die. By observing these signs the brothers who were left in the village would try and bring succor to the ones in distress. This tree still stands in Makhel, and if a branch of the tree falls to the ground people of the village stop

all work for the day in mourning.

The great grand father whose name was Munhu-Nguiba also left Makhiang leading a group of Zelinagrong Nagas. The group reached Ramting-Kaben (the cave from which stars could be seen even during the day) and settled down nearby. They named their village Makuilongdih. In course of time the village came to have seven thousand seven hundred and seventy seven houses. Men and women from every household gathered twice or three times in a year to clean up the entire village. Once when it was time to gather for cleaning up the village only seven men came. Munhu-Nguiba took this as a sign of bad tidings.

The chief had married twice, because his first wife, Noudunbo, bore him no child and was thought to be incapable of doing so. His second wife, Namgangliw, gave birth to a son who was named Magangtubou. After a few years, however, the first wife too gave birth to a male child and they called him Kadingbou. In course of time, a second son was born to the younger wife. Not long after the first wife too had another son, and she named him Renbangbou. When their father grew old, the first wife's son Kadingbou and the elder son of the second wife, Magangtubou began to quarrel about who, among the two, should become the chief. The father thought that the best person to settle the dispute between his two sons would be his younger brother who was the King of the Meiteis. He therefore took them to Makidih (present day Imphal) where his younger brother ruled.

The uncle told his two nephews not to worry because god himself would decide the heir to the chieftainship. Next morning he had chicken and rice cooked separately. The chicken was divided into two portions and put in two separate packs, and so was the rice. Outside the house a buffalo and a dog were tied to two separate poles. The uncle called out to Magangtubou first and told him to pick a pack of

the rice and a pack of the chicken and take either the buffalo or the dog. Magangtubou chose the buffalo along with a pack each of the rice and the chicken. Kadingbou took the rest of the food and the dog. The uncle then pronounced that whoever got the head of the chicken in his pack of chicken would be the heir.

So the two nephews and their father headed back home. When they reached Koubru Mountain, they stopped for their meal. When they unwrapped their meal packs, it was Kadingbou's pack that had the head of the chicken. This made Magangtubou very sad and angry; so his father decided to give him another chance: The one who would reach home first and light the lamp would be made the heir. Magangtubou did not bother with his food any more and egging his buffalo started running homewards. Kadingbou finished his food, and thinking that his brother would in any case reach home earlier than him, he started walking at a leisurely pace. But, unfortunately, Magangtubou had to stop on the way because of his buffalo. The animal was so exhausted by all the running in the hot sun that it decided to take rest by wallowing in a wayside pool of water! So Kadingbou reached home first and lit the lamp. Accordingly he was declared to be the next chief of the village.

When Kadingbou became the chief, he had a big house built for himself. The house was sixty feet in height, and its width was a hundred feet. The new house was inaugurated with a feast to which Kadingbou invited his elder brother as well. Magangtubou attended the feast, but the splendid house and arrangements for the feast made him very jealous and sad. His eyes welled up and tear drops fell on the pillar of the feast hall. People gathered for the feast took this as a sign of bad tidings; their word for it was *chakemkiwbo*. The villagers slowly became strangers to one another. Many left the village. Magangtubou—with

his step brother and father—went to the valley of Buiky (preset day Barak) and became the ancestors of the Zemai tribe. The younger brother Renbangbou and his followers went southwards and later came to be known as the Rongmai or the Maruangmai tribe. Kadingbou and his followers stayed on and became the Liangmai tribe. Still others went eastwards and formed the Puimai tribe.

Kadingbou had five sons whose names were: Karangbou, Mazangdin, Intangbou, Sunghungbou and Singbabou. The four elder brothers went to a village called Kuilong, somewhere in the northern part of present day Manipur. The youngest brother Singbabou decided to stay behind.

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CHARAHWANG, THE KING OF GODS

Once there lived in a village a spinster named Charahsingrangpui. One day a stranger whose name was Tanghotpiw came to the village. The moment the stranger saw Charahsingrangpui, he fell in love with her. He stayed with her in the village for a few days, but then he left the village suddenly without telling her. Later Charahsingrangpui discovered that she was pregnant. She was sure that her lover would never come back to her. So she went to the river bank and planted a banana plant. She made a fire under the plant, placed a large pot on the fire and put a grain of rice in the pot. She also placed a dao beside the fire. Then she laid eight eggs beside the banana plant and left the spot for her village.

As time went by the eggs started hatching. The first to come out of an egg was a god called Puichamiw. As soon as he came out he was surprised by a strong wind which made him lose his balance. This made him realize that there was going to be a war. So, in great fear, he went back into his shell again. Then Charahwang broke out of his shell. Looking around he saw that his brothers were still inside their shells. "I am the eldest", so he proclaimed. Puichamiw was not too happy with this proclamation, for it was he who had come out first; but there was no way he could prove this. One after another the brothers came out of their shells except one. The other brothers tried hard to pull the last brother out, but in vain. At last they lost

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patience and threw the egg with the brother inside in the river. But as soon as the egg hit the river bed, it broke and the brother came out in the form of a python. The python became the king of rivers.

At first it was only Charahwang, among the brothers, who could see. As he looked up from his egg shell he saw the ripe bananas hanging from the banana tree planted by his mother. He took the dao left by his mother and cut down the bananas from the tree. He gave each of the brothers a share of the bananas; but each complained that he had not got a fair share. Just then Charahwang saw a black monkey eating away one of the brother's share of the bananas. In anger he chopped off the monkey's arm and sprinkled its blood over the eyelids of the brothers. This gave them their eyesight. They saw the wilderness around them and set off to look for their mother. "The grain of rice inside the pot will become a potful of boiled rice once you have found your mother", prophesied Charahwang. But search as much as they did, they could not find their mother. At last Charahwang disguised himself as a crow and started looking for her. He flew down to the mouth of a river where he saw a house which stood all by itself. A woman came out of the house, and noticing the crow, she said, "This crow, I hope, has not eaten all my eggs." Charahwang knew immediately that he had found his mother. He went back to his brothers and all of them together rushed to the river bank to find that the pot was indeed full to the brim with boiled rice. They ate the rice happily and headed towards their mother's home. Their mother, however, refused to accept them, as they were only seven while there should really have been eight of them. They then told their mother how they had to throw the eighth egg into the river. The mother believed their story and accepted them as her children while shedding a tear for the one who was not there. "Had you waited for him

to come out of his shell, he would have been the strongest among you all", she said.

As years went by, the mother became old and frail and she was no longer able to toil hard for her children. So she began stealing vegetables from the kitchen garden of a deity called Banglahwang. But one day she was caught and brought before the deity. On hearing her sad story, the deity took pity on her and adopted her seven sons. As they grew up, the god came to love the children as his own and met their every desire.

In the deity's palace, there lived six beautiful maidens who were attendants to the goddess-princess Kaimahdiliw. The god was extremely indulgent to the maidens, but terribly strict with his own daughter. While they wore the most beautiful clothes in the kingdom, the princess had nothing nice to wear. One day Banglahwang asked the brothers to choose a fowl each for their evening meal. The six younger brothers chose the fattest fowls in the royal chicken yard. But, strangely, Charahwang chose only a lean black hen. This he did on the advice of his mother. When Banglahwang asked each of the brothers to choose any girl in the palace to be his wife, Charahwang asked for the hand of a woman who looked ugly and old and sat by the ashes of the kitchen fire. Banglahwang refused at first, but finally agreed to the marriage upon Charahwang fulfilling a condition. On his mother's advice again Charahwang accepted the condition. So a ceremony was arranged. Many girls, including the one Charahwang had chosen, were brought to the god's reception room; their hands were fully covered with a thick cloth with only the fingers showing. Charahwang was asked to identify the fingers of the one he had chosen for himself. Charahwang looked anxiously at the different sets of fingers laid out before him. Suddenly he saw a fly alight on one set of fingers and instantly he pointed to these fingers as the ones

belonging to his chosen one. Indeed they turned out to be the fingers of the ugly lady who spent her days sitting by the fire. And surprise of all surprises, this very woman was also none other than Banglahwang's daughter. The father could now do nothing but to agree to the marriage.

All the seven brothers were married off on the same day. Each brother then built his own home to live with his wife. Puichamiw, the second brother, built a house taller than that of Charahwang's. This made Charahwang very angry, and he decided that Puichamiw's house must be destroyed. He then thought out a clever plan for achieving this. "Let us pull down our houses," he said to Puichamiw, "so that we can block the river and trap all the fish." Next day, Charahwang collected some thick black clouds around his house, hung many empty vessels from the roof and began to shake his house. All this made a great deal of noise, and Puchamiw thought that his brother was already pulling down his house. He then hastily brought down his own house. It was only after this that he learnt of the trick that his brother had played on him. In utter disgust he left that neighbourhood, and built himself a house further south. But he could still see Charahwang's house from there; so he moved down to the southernmost corner of Zeliangrong. The house that he left behind is now the Thalon cave.

The trick played by Charahwang on his younger brother did not please his father-in-law. He challenged Charahwang to a wrestling match. The one who lost would go to live under eight layers of the earth's crust. The match continued for eight days and eight nights. The earth shook terribly. But there was no victor. Banglahwang's wife became very worried—if she did not intervene, the entire earth would be destroyed. She called her daughter Kaimadihliw and handed her a strand of her magic hair saying, "Throw it at the feet of the one you would like to

lose—your husband or your father." In great confusion because she loved them both—Kaimadihliw threw the magic hair at the feet of her father who entangled in it, stumbled and fell down like a big oak tree. The earth shook as Banglahwang fell; but before he went under the earth's crust, he warned Charahwang that there would be revenge for the humiliation he had suffered. The place where he fell is said to be the present Chakuh valley-the land of the Angami and the Mao Nagas. Charahwang now became god, but he was never able to give a feast, as every time a feast was arranged, a big earthquake came and the feast had to be stopped. This was the revenge of his father-inlaw. But in time Charahwang did become the supreme controller of the earth opposed occasionally by his younger brother Puichamiw, who would cause a storm to raze in the calm spring season to remind Charahwang of the wicked trick he had played on his younger brother.

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THE STORY OF ABONBOU

Once Amangbou gave a great feast. The feast, alas, provedto be the first and last one in which all living creatures took part in equal measure. Abonbou was the chief organizer of the feast. Amangbou was very happy with Abonbou's efficient management and granted him a boon: Abonbou will be blessed with a prosperous life and the gods of rain and wind will be placed at his service. Amangbou then told someone, "Go and find out from everyone, who attended the feast, how he enjoyed it." Abonbou was asked this question too; and he replied, "The feast is the best thing that ever happened to me; I have been gifted with a great boon." The man then asked Abonbou if Amangbou had told him anything about his death. When Abonbou said, "No", the man advised him to go and ask Amangbou about his death. Amangbou became furious and told Abonbou, "If you hadn't shown curiosity about your death, you would have been immortal. Your foolishness has lost you, your immortality! You will be killed by your elder son-in-law."

Abonbou returned home in despair. At home he was given the news of the birth of his daughter. Remembering Amangbou's prophesy, he ordered his servants to kill the baby. They, however, took the baby in a basket and left it floating down the river. The baby was picked up by an old fisherman and his wife who were childless. The man told his wife to hide the child well and to pretend that she was

pregnant. She used to take flowers to the king's palace every morning; but now she told the palace guards that she would not be bringing flowers any more as she was

expecting a baby.

In course of time, the baby grew up to be a beautiful girl. She was given the name, Maisuangwiliw. Maisuangwiliw married Marangwangbou, the prince of that kingdom. News of her beauty reached every corner of the earth. Abonbou promised to himself that he would bring her as his queen. One day Marangwangbou went hunting to the forest with his wife and younger brother, Hukhambou. On hearing this, Abonbou sent his spy, who was also a magician, to the forest to lure Marangwangbou away. The magician turned himself into a golden hen and went close to the royal camp. Maisuangwiliw was fascinated by the golden hen and wanted her husband to catch it alive for her. But he refused, because he suspected some foul play. The next day, the magician turned himself into a golden deer and went grazing next to the royal camp. The wife wanted the deer for herself, and the husband once again refused. But he could not ignore the wife's desperate pleas and had, eventually, to go after the deer. However, he left his younger brother, Hukhambou behind to protect his sister-in-law, telling him not to leave the camp, no matter what, while he was away hunting the deer. After some time the queen heard a cry for help which she thought to be her husband's. She told Hukhambou to rush at once to her husband's rescue. Hukhambou refused at first, but when she taunted him with wanting an opportunity to start an illicit relationship with her, he left the camp. Before leaving, however, he drew a circle on the ground with his dao and told her to stay rooted inside the circle until he and his brother returned.

Soon after, Abonbou appeared at the camp and coming close to Maisuangwiliw said, "Beautiful woman, I have

brought some fruit for you!" She asked him to put the fruit down inside the circle. But, on one pretext or another, Abonbou would not do so. Finally, his pleas sounded so sincere that Maisuangwiliw stepped out of the circle to receive the fruit. Abonbou caught her and took her away

up through the sky.

When Marangwangbou saw his brother approaching him deep in the jungle, he immediately knew that his wife was in danger. They rushed to the camp and found it empty. As they looked for her with great anxiety, they met a buffalo and asked him if he could tell them anything about her. The buffalo said, "I presume she was taken up the sky way. Unfortunately, I was so busy filling my stomach, I had no time to look up at the sky. But it's a shame, you couldn't protect just the one wife of yours, I look after more than a hundred wives of mine!" Marangwangbou became very angry at this remark of the buffalo's and told his brother to twist its neck. That is how buffalo horns came to have creases on them. They still bear the finger marks of Hukhambou.

Next, they met a mithun and asked him about the queen. The mithun told them that he had seen a man with eight heads carry a woman southwards. Marangwangbou was happy with this bit of information and told the mithun to ask for the thing that he wanted most. The mithun said that he wanted nothing better than a pleasant voice for himself. That is how mithuns came to have a pleasant voice.

Then they met a bird and asked it about the queen. The bird made the same reply as the mithun. Pleased with this reply, Marangwangbou said, "Ask any boon and you shall have it." The bird said, "Let me have a long neck, so I can catch fish from the river bed."

The boon was granted.

But the bird's neck was so long now that it could not fly properly. One day the brothers saw the bird being attacked by *radoupuis*, the female demons. The two brothers wanted to save the bird without getting involved in a fight themselves. Marangwangbou told his brother to pretend to have fallen in love with one of the *radoupuis*. He did so, and the *radoupui*, believing this to be true, was so happy that she promised a boon to Hukhambou. Hukhambou said that all he wanted was the bird. When thus the bird was given to the brothers, Marangwangbou made its neck short by cutting off two thirds of its length.

And the brothers continued their search for the queen. After a long day's search, they became very tired and decided to rest under an olive tree. Olive trees, those days, had long leaves. For sometime now Hukhambou's relationship with the queen was playing in the brother's mind. So he decided at last to come out in the open and said to his brother, "If you wake up from sleep first, that would mean that you are in love with my wife." Then they fell

into deep sleep embracing each other.

Perched high up on the olive tree, a monkey called Ahunahman was also taking rest. The two brothers slept for months together locked in each other's arms, and slowly grass and weeds covered their bodies. Ahunahman saw them and thought, with great pain in his heart, of his own brother, Ahunahmai who had chased him out of his kingdom. Tears welled up in his eyes and drops fell on Hukhambou's face. He woke up at once. Marangwangbou woke up too, and seeing that his brother was already awake, was uncontrollably angry: "I am sure now you have bad intentions on my wife." Hukhambou denied this vehemently and said that he had been woken up by drops of warm water falling on his face.

The elder brother wanted to make sure. So he removed all the leaves of the olive tree by shooting arrows at them, and to his surprise, saw Ahunahman sitting on a branch of the tree. It is from that time that the original broad leaves

of the olive tree became smaller. Ahunahman seemed steeped in deep grief, and the brothers wanted to know all about his great sorrow. Ahunahman then told them his story. Marangwangbou was greatly moved by the story and promised to kill Ahunahmai for his unfair treatment of his younger brother; but in return Ahunahman had to promise his help in the brothers' search. Marangwangbou kept his promise; Ahunahman thus regained his kingdom, and began to rule. But soon he forgot the two brothers with whose help he regained his kingdom. The poor brothers waited in vain for many days, but there was no of Ahunahman coming for their help. Marangwangbou then decided to send Hukhambou to Ahunahman. Hukhambou found Ahunahman completely immersed in enjoyment; he shot an arrow at Ahunahman taking care only to hit the throne and not Ahunahman himself. Shocked by the arrow hitting the arm of the throne, Ahunahman looked in the direction from which the arrow came; and seeing Hukhambou, he immediately remembered his promise and apologized profusely to Hukhambou.

The two brothers set off on their search again with Ahunahman accompanying them. At last they reached the sea shore. Marangwangbou told Ahunahman to jump across the sea and look for his wife on the other side. Ahunahman failed in his first attempt. The second time, he climbed up on the shoulders of Marangwangbou and took off from there. This time he reached the shore on the other side easily enough. This was the kingdom of Abonbou. Ahunahman found the queen—a prisoner inside Abonbou's palace. Ahunahman approached the queen stealthily and told her all that had happened since the time she disappeared.

The queen was worried that they might not be able to kill Abonbou because of his immense strength. But she also

knew the secret of his strength: it was the fruit of a tree in the palace gardens which gave him his strength. The tree, however, was guarded by a giant called Radoupui. The queen gave Ahunahman some of Abonbou's clothes with which to disguise himself as Abonbou. The trick worked. Ahunahman, disguised as Abonbou, told Radoupui to leave his post. As Radoupui did so, Ahunahman ate all the fruits of the tree. He then uprooted the tree and broke all its branches into small pieces. Ahunahman was now stronger than Abonbou; he took the queen on his shoulders and started to run away. Abonbou soon realized what had happened and began to chase Ahunahman. The three of them reached the place where the two brothers were waiting almost at the same time. Marangwangbou asked his wife if any part of Abonbou's body was particularly vulnerable. The queen hesitated at first, but then said that it was his right thigh which was vulnerable. Marangwangbou told his brother to shoot at Abonbou's right thigh. Hukhambou did as he was told and Abonbou was killed.

His wife's knowledge of the vulnerable part of Abonbou's body made Marangwangbou suscipicious of her chastity. She had therefore to prove her loyalty. She made a fire from sticks used for husking paddy and told her husband that if she had committed any sin her hair would burn in the fire. She then put her hair in the fire, but it did not burn. Happy with the outcome Marangwangbou brought her back to his kingdom.

But the people of the kingdom still believed that the queen had been sullied during her imprisonment in Abonbou's palace and demanded that she be exiled. For the sake of peace in his kingdom Marangwangbou accepted the demand and sent his wife away to the forest. There she gave birth to a son. Deep in the forest, the child grew up in the care of a female giant. One day, the queen went

to collect fruit asking the giant to look after the child while she was away. But the child followed the mother without her knowledge. Finding that there was no sign of the child in and around their hut, the giant became worried. In panic she started rubbing her body vigorously, and from the dirt that came off the body, she fashioned a child that looked exactly like the real son. When the mother returned with her son she was very pleasantly surprised to see another child just like her own. She accepted it as the twin of the other and named them Lungmahalakbou and Kaisunbou. They soon grew up to be handsome healthy boys and the giant was overcome by a desire to eat them. One day she brought two baskets full of fruit and gave one basket to each saying, "Start eating the fruit in your own basket; whichever of you is unable to eat every fruit in his basket will become my meal." Kaisunbou, the real son, ate all the fruit up in his basket. But Lungmahalakbou failed. The giant gobbled him up immediately; but since the boy was not made up of real human flesh, he reappeared. He was swallowed up again, but each time he reappeared; and finally the giant gave up.

Both boys had sweet melodious voices and they sang beautifully. They would wander around singing in the nearby villages. One day they were brought to sing before the king. They of course did not know that the king was their own father. Marangwangbou loved their songs, and asked them about their life. When he heard their story, he immediately realized that they were his own sons. However, he did not have the courage to ask his wife to return to her home fearing that she might refuse.

Meanwhile, the giants of the forest went on a rampage and began killing innocent people. No one in the whole kingdom had the courage to challenge them. However, the two boys, who were brought up by a giant, knew the secret of their strength and how to make them lose it.

They took them on in battle and killed them all. Marangwangbou was greatly pleased by this and he pleaded with the boys to come and live in the palace. They, however, would not leave their mother. The king went to her begging her forgiveness and swore to sit and starve near her forest hut until she agreed to come back with him. At last the queen relented and returned with her sons to the palace.

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