

**TALES FROM GAILI:
A SELECTION OF THE
ZELIANG TRIBE'S
FOLKLORE AND
CHILDREN'S TALES**

—

IRANGGUMLE HEMANG





ZUBAAN

128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor

NEW DELHI 110 049

EMAIL: contact@zubaanbooks.com

WEBSITE: www.zubaanbooks.com

Published by Zubaan Publishers Pvt. Ltd 2021

In collaboration with the Sasakawa Peace Foundation



All rights reserved

Zubaan is an independent feminist publishing house based in New Delhi with a strong academic and general list. It was set up as an imprint of India's first feminist publishing house, Kali for Women, and carries forward Kali's tradition of publishing world quality books to high editorial and production standards. *Zubaan* means tongue, voice, language, speech in Hindustani. Zubaan publishes in the areas of the humanities, social sciences, as well as in fiction, general non-fiction, and books for children and young adults under its Young Zubaan imprint.

Typeset in Arno Pro 11/13

PREFACE

This essay comprises a short collection of folk tales from the village of Gaili, nestled in the far corners of the state of Nagaland in North East India. These stories were passed on from generation to generation by elders and storytellers of the Zeliang tribe. The Zeliang are a Naga tribe spread across the states of Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam. Though a community with rich cultural and historical traditions, unlike the other major tribes of Nagaland, the Zeliang have never been considered a major tribe. Their cultural history and oral traditions have largely remained unexplored and undocumented. The Zeliang can further be divided into two distinct tribal communities—Zeme and Liangmai.

The village of Gaili holds an important place in the history of the Zeme tribe. In olden times, the village had over 1,000 households till an internal strife led the tribe to split. Half the community returned to its ancestral villages in parts of Manipur, while another group migrated to the North Cachar Hills in Assam. Among the Zeliang villages, Gaili is also considered to be one of the oldest. The village is located in Peren district in Nagaland. The village lies at the heart of the historical rift that ruptured and displaced the Zeme community.

Long ago when the Zeliang ancestors reached the spot where the village stands today, they found it overgrown with a meadow of grass called *Gaili Hei*. They decided to name their new village after the verdant green of their surroundings. When the village was established, every *hemingiana* (orphan) was given a mouthful of food and rice beer/wine by every *hezwakna* (wealthy person). Many years later, a wealthy young man named Nhiangsauna was killed by accident. The villagers involved in this act exiled themselves. They left the village and migrated elsewhere to avoid any further bloodshed. However, this was a huge loss, and the village became lonely and deserted. It was decided that the elders of the village should be brought back to rebuild Gaili. In those days, a village could be founded only in the presence of elders from the two clans—the Heuna and the Hauna. So, when the exiled group reached the village of Ngwalwa, Haikube (a Heuna elder) and Paudi (a Hauna elder) were brought back to rebuild the village. The new village was built on top of the old one. The word ‘Gaili’ came to mean ‘rebirth.’ They built the village with the same spirit as their ancestors. But this time, they learnt to set aside their differences and to share with and care for their own. In this new village built on hope, there was love and unity among the people. They worked together in warmth and camaraderie, lived in harmony, and flourished for centuries. They carried on their great warrior spirit, honed their skills as craftsmen and artisans, and women were considered a family’s most prized possession.

The gender norms of the Zeliang were built along ideal perceptions of men as warriors and women as skilled workers and devoted caregivers. Men were the heads of their families, and it was their duty to protect and provide for their members. Only men were allowed to take major public decisions. They also had to set a moral example by being disciplined, dutiful, courageous, and kind. Even so, women were also seen as important figures in society. Naga society in general is well regarded for its egalitarian treatment of women, particularly compared to mainland India. In the olden days, women were adored and respected by the menfolk. They were allowed to move around freely

in relative safety. From a young age, they learnt how to sing, dance, and weave. They were taught to be gentle, disciplined, supportive, and committed to their domestic and familial duties. Moreover, women who could do agricultural work like tilling the fields were very highly sought after. It is notable that in many of the folk tales, it is a woman's ability to work tirelessly and contribute to her family which makes her more desirable rather than other superficial aspects like facial beauty. In many of the stories, we see strong women characters who take bold decisions but at the same time show deference to the conventions of the community.

It has to be noted that the Zeliang society was still dominated by patriarchal norms. Political power and social prestige were mostly restricted to men alone while women were mostly assigned a supporting role as mothers, wives, and daughters in the household. The folk tales of the Zeliang offer a glimpse into how social norms were framed, narrated and reinforced through stereotypical representation of women characters acting within well-defined gender roles. The following folk tales provide a way of looking at the different gender roles, how they define masculinity and femininity, and how they shape desirability and romantic relationships in Zeliang society.

From the earliest days, the people of Gaili were guided by many stories, myths, and beliefs. They conducted various rituals to appease an unknown god (called *Hera-pui* or *Herabe*). On other occasions, they worshipped *Tingrang-pui*, or the mother goddesses, who was considered the creator of the world. For the Zeliang, the mother goddess was a sign of wealth, prosperity, fertility, and abundance. To appease the goddess/creator, the people conducted rituals and made offerings on festive occasions. On *tingna-nai* no one worked and they offered food and wine served on *helui* (banana leaves) or kept on a cloth to *Tingrang-pui*, asking for her blessings to protect their farms and to ensure a fine harvest. *Ngwa rai ngyi* was a life-cycle ritual celebrated in the month of *Kerie* (January). Young boys were taken to the *rodi-ki* (hall) and their hair cut in the characteristic round fringe as a sign that they were now accepted as young men in society. This ritual was

completed when a boy and his father held hands and jumped on the ground together which is called *hejo* (long jump). Another important festival called *Bung-tak* was celebrated in the month of *Kezing* (March) every three years. During this festival, families sought the blessings of *Tingrang-pui* and asked her to grant wishes for their well-being. If the spirit mother was sufficiently propitiated, she would follow them home and grant their blessings. But if she was not rightly appeased, she would neglect the family's fortunes. Among the Zeliang, *Tingrang-pui* is considered the source of all blessings and the protector of the people from dangers, perils, and misfortunes.

The nights at Gaili were lit by the stories narrated by elders and storytellers. In these tales, myths, fables, and legends, the elders talked about the relation between humans, animals, and spirits. They recalled the time of creation when every thing and every being coexisted and lived in harmony and friendship. Men and women, humans and animals were able to understand one another and share the same lives. They lived in peace as a big family. But this vision of beauty was soon shattered by violence and destruction.

Before the outbreak of the Indo-Naga War during the 1950s, Gaili was one of the oldest and most culturally important village of the Zeliang tribe. Apart from having a rich oral tradition, Gaili also possessed many significant artefacts such as traditional ornaments, attire, rubies, trophies, and many more. The *morungs* (or dormitories) of different *khels* (clans) were centres of learning and cultural transmission. All the valuable ancestral possessions and cultural artefacts were lost when the *morungs* of different *khels* were burned down by the Indian Army in 1957. The village was torched, its granaries burnt to ash, and its livestock captured or slaughtered. Once again, the people of Gaili were forced to abandon their homes and leave their homeland. The village has since been recreated, for the second time since the great split in the olden days. The village has now been repopulated and rebuilt. It has extended to two parts—Old Gaili and Gaili Namdi (new village). Now the village prospers and the people live a blessed life.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

For this project, I have chosen to focus exclusively on the folklore of Gaili. This is partly because of the difficulty in marking out and categorising Zeliang folklore as such. Zeilangs' myths and legends are closely connected to the village of their origin. The folklore repeatedly refers to the people, the history, important geographic landmarks, and architectural features of the village. As a result, Zeliang folklore—despite overarching similarities—differs from village to village. It chronicles a history of settlement, represents their distinct cultural background, geographic and agricultural specificities, and reveals the persistence of history in the contemporary village. The village's spaces, rituals, beliefs, and customs are commonly associated with communal memory through the use of myths, legends, and folklore. I, as a Zeliang woman, find it imperative at this juncture to document our myths in written form to save our memories from oblivion. My project, therefore, documents the myths, legends, and fables which have been passed on for generations in my native village of Gaili. The stories in this chapter were specifically chosen for children and young readers, though they may interest older readers as well. Some parts of the stories might be grotesque or distasteful for certain sensibilities, but this is how they have been narrated to me by my mother, elders, and other storytellers in my village. So, even though the stories have been slightly edited or revised, they retain their original tone and tenor, reflecting the same themes and content.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank almighty God for his unfailing love, enabling me to embark on and complete this project. My deepest gratitude goes to my parents, Mr. Pausuiheing Hemang and Mrs. Heicuhingle, for their constant support and for narrating several stories included here.

I would also like to express my regards to Mr. Lungbwa Haikube, who is also the keeper of Gaili's history. I would also like to thank Mr. Riateri and his wife Mrs. Rängeibamle, and other village elders in Gaili who addressed my queries and narrated these folk tales with great patience.

I would like to acknowledge all those who stood by me and helped me during my research. I would like to thank Dr. Achuth A., my teacher and M.Phil supervisor, for his ceaseless support and for constantly pushing me to challenge myself. I would also like to thank my sister, Heigumlunle Hemang, my guide and mentor, who was with me at every step of rediscovering my roots, and my little sister, Ilungtuile Hemang, who endured many sleepless nights with me, helping me hone and edit the stories presented here.

I am indeed deeply indebted to the Zubaan team and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation for giving me this incredible opportunity to explore the literary world with the little experience I have. I always wanted to write and speak about my people and our culture. It was a great honour and privilege to be able to, in this small way, shed some light on my culture and share a few stories which shaped my childhood.

I, therefore, wish to thank each and every one who helped and extended support for my work. For them, I can only gift a small prayer: May their life be a blessing to everyone who meets them. And may god bless them immensely in their lives.

Iranggumle Hemang

1.

LWAKEREIBILE AND NRIMSWANG

The sky was clear and a cool breeze blew over the village. Like every other day, the elders woke up to witness the beauty of their lives. Womenfolk lit the fires to prepare meals for the day. Smoke rose in wispy gusts from every house filling the air with an aroma of food which filled the village—*hachitak* served with mashed pumpkin and *tangratam*. Children played in front of the *morung*; young girls swept the floor of their houses and their dormitories, preparing for the day's work, and tilling the land hoping for a good harvest. The village, Gaili, as it was called, was known for its wealth and prosperity. The village signalled a sense of hope; the two ancestral groups of the village, the Heuna and the Hauna, had long ago come together with the aim of building a new village. The Heuna came all the way from Nnuire (Ze-Mnui in present-day Manipur) and called themselves Megaimé, Hemangme, and Mringme; while Hauna are called Haume. But as time passed the clan increased to include Charing-cha, and Heleu-cha as well.

As the village flourished from one generation to the next it started practicing many rituals for good and for evil. One such ritual was held at the end of *Kerie* (January) when the villagers offered sacrifices to evil spirits who demanded a tribute of human blood to fulfil their thirst for the human soul. Whether they liked it or not, every year the villagers had to sacrifice a pure soul—a virgin girl with a pure heart, belonging to earth mother, a girl so spotless in features and so matchless in beauty that a man or a spirit would be besotted and satisfied with her. This ritual started at the time of their ancestors and it continued with only a faint hope that one day a hero will show up and save all the beautiful maidens from their dreadful fate.

There once lived a girl named Lwakereibile, whose beauty mesmerised the whole village. She had the purest of hearts and the wishes and blessings of all her friends. She was a fine weaver and handy in the fields. She was considered the most beautiful girl in her village and many young men tried to impress her and win her heart over during the many festivals that they celebrated. She was a good dancer and singer who enchanted many men and womenfolk alike. Her long black hair was like silk in the moonlight. She had a beautiful long face with fair skin, without a single speck anywhere on her body. So flawless was her beauty that people from different villages came to see her charms. However, as an obedient child, she loved her parents dearly making her the best of all the maidens in the village. Her unparalleled beauty, her personality, her skills at tilling, and taking care of the household made her the most suitable bride who many young men dreamt off.

Like generations in the past, the villagers continued with the ritual of human sacrifice. There was a spirit called Herabe or the beast (tiger spirit) which resided below the *herieki*, the customary gateway to the village. The villagers believed that the Beast had to be appeased through sacrifice, failing which the whole village would be brought to ruin by its wrath or due to some inevitable disaster. As the month of *Kerie* drew to an end, the village elders had to find someone to offer for the sacrifice. It was the duty of the elders to entrust someone to

carefully observe the beautiful girls in the village and choose one for the ritual. As the search started, they found no one with features perfect enough to please the Beast. But as they reached the far corner of the village, there was a young woman who was as beautiful as the swan in the water, and her radiant beauty shone in the eyes of the elders. Not realising that she was the prize of their village, they choose her to be the perfect one for sacrificing to the Beast.

When she was about to be marked as the prize for the Beast, her parents came to the villages elders and begged them not to do so as she was their only daughter and was treasured by her family and her relatives. She was taken to be examined for the ritual, and they found not as much as a black mole on her body. As she was the purest of all the maidens in the village, she was marked to be bestowed to the Beast at the ritual ceremony. Her parents cried day and night for their daughter till the day of the ritual. The news of the sacrifice spread like wildfire across many villages. An invitation for the ceremony was passed on, 'The beauty of Gaili village is going to be sacrificed to the Herabe. All people of repute as well as the best warriors of every village are invited to witness her beauty before she is bestowed to the Beast.' The news passed through eleven villages.

There was a young warrior called Nrimswang who was well-known in all the neighbouring villages because of his skills in hunting and defending his village from any kind of threat. He was the best wrestler and a brave warrior; he was smart and wise and very good looking. He was considered the most handsome among the young men around. When he heard that the most beautiful girl from Gaili village was about to be sacrificed to the Beast, he decided to rescue her from the ritual. But it was not going to be easy. The ritual had taken place for countless decades and many a good and powerful warrior had lost his life fighting the Beast. But as a young man, he was filled with remorse and compassion when he heard about the sad fate of the girl from Gaili. He decided to risk his life for the sake of this unknown maiden. He sharpened his *hengie* (spears) and *hekie* (dao or machete), the weapons he would carry for his adventure and for his protection.

He started the journey from his village. He crossed eleven villages just to witness the beauty of the girl and to rescue her from the Hekau (the Beast). He walked relentlessly for seven days and nights till he reached Gaili. When he reached the village, the ritual had already started. The whole village had gathered to perform the ritual, bearing all their gifts and offerings to the Beast at the village gate. As they waited for the girl, he asked one of the villagers 'Ailau be pui dedeni?' (Is this the woman?) whenever a fair maiden passed by on the road towards the *hereiki*. The village boys would reply, 'Mereu' (Not her). As he kept asking, a boy told him, 'Releipui chide hang de pepai hecida paipau kena nswalu, peli hecida ket takjua lu, ket nkang lu dele hang neilei' (When the girl arrives she will be clothed in a new shawl and mekhela). On observing the crowd, he saw that there were many people coming towards the *hereiki*. His eyes were caught by a girl who was escorted by her mother and father. On enquiring, he was told that she was the one. He grinned to himself. So captivating was her beauty that he was ever more willing to take the risk. The villagers brought and left their offerings near the *hereiki*. They brought eggs, chicken, and other produce of the village. Lwakereibile was made to take a seat, surrounded by eggs and chicken, where the villagers covered her with a *tae* (a big wicker basket) and left her, sealing the village gate behind them as they went back inside.

The young warrior hid himself above the gate, making himself comfortable as he lay in wait for Herabe to appear. There was thunder and lightning and then...!! At first, it appeared as an egg. The second lightning came with a flash accompanied by rolling thunder. The Beast became even bigger, growing to the size of a chicken, then a cat, and then a dog. With each roll of thunder and each flash of lightning, the Beast grew bigger, the size of a calf and then a bull, and finally the spirit revealed himself in his true form of a Hekau (spirit tiger), as black as coal, the fear of darkness embraced its appearance. Now that the spirit had transformed itself into the image of a black tiger, it started devouring the eggs around the girl. The tiger licked its jowls after tasting each egg and licked the girl in between. Every time he licked the

girl, she grew more enchanted by his spell. Caught in a trance, she was laughing at the top of her voice, seeming to enjoy what was happening to her. She was not her real self; the spell of the spirit was making her behave as though she was mad. When all the other offerings were finished, it was time for her sacrifice. But instead of attacking her, the Beast toyed with her for a while as the young warrior observed the whole scene intently. When the time came for the spirit to eat her, he opened his mouth wide like there was no head attached to it. With that Nrimswang, took out his *hengei* and blessed it saying, '*Heraleila, rekaleila apau hengei tun de pau hanglut pemui gada pau perunki ga petun ngau kabau lo'* (Oh mighty one, the creator, let this spear pierce through the mouth and come out of its anus). Lurking in the darkness atop the gate, he then threw the spear with all his might at the spirit. The spear struck the tiger just as he had blessed it, impaling it from mouth to anus. The girl was still laughing like a mad woman, oblivious to everything around her. Nrimswang waited for the tiger to let out its last sigh to be sure that it was dead. He heard the buzz of a housefly. He asked the housefly to go and check whether the tiger was dead or just pretending to be dead. So the fly went into the mouth of the tiger and came out through its anus, and stated that it was still alive! As he waited a bit more, there came a bee. So he asked the bee to go inside the tiger's anus, bite its throat and come out through its mouth. This time, the bee came out saying that the spirit was dead.

After killing the spirit, Nrimswang came down from his perch above the gate and chopped off the spirit's head. However, Lwakereibile was still laughing hysterically. He tried to wake the girl from her stupor, but the spirit's charm was so strong that it was impossible for him to bring her back to consciousness. So he went and collected seven sticks and started beating her. Till the last stick, she barely realised what was happening to her. Then suddenly, she came to her senses and asked him to stop beating her. Nrimswang picked her up, and they walked back together to the village gate.

Nrimswang had killed the *Hekau* (the Beast) of the village. The girls of the village gazed in admiration as they walked to the main

entrance of the village. He shouted to the entire village, asking them to open the gate as he had saved both the girl and the entire village from the Beast. In wild jubilation, he howled, ‘Aooowwe, Aooow!’ as a sign of victory over evil. The entire population came to witness the glorious and historic day when the maidens of the village were freed from the cruel sacrifices. They were welcomed with songs and howls. There was laughter everywhere, knowing that the Beast had been killed, and the village was free of the human sacrifices.

On witnessing this act of bravery, Lwakereibile’s parents wanted Nrimswang to marry their daughter, but he refused this proposal. Her parents insisted that he should stay with her for five years so that they could convey their gratitude by offering their daughter’s hand. As a man of honour, he accepted this proposal and was gifted with new garments, necklaces, and new traditional attire. As the years passed, he grew to love Lwakereibile. But as an heir of his own village, he did not take her to bed but lived with her as a protector alone. As the day of his return approached he kept trying to get away from her. At times, he went for a chitchat to his friend’s house and spent the night there. His wife waited for him all night and found him in the morning either at a friend’s house or at the *morung*. This continued for days. One day, he decided to leave for his village. So he started showering all the love he could ever offer on Lwakereibile. He was so good to her suddenly, and this made her nervous that he was planning to leave soon. But she trusted him, and, on the final night, Nrimswang did not leave her sight but stayed with her all night. That morning he rose before the sun was up. He took out all the clothes that had been gifted to him on their marriage and kept them by his wife’s bedside. Before anyone could notice, he took his old attire and started running as fast as he could to flee from the village and from his wife. He fled from Gaili not because he did not love his wife or love the people around him but out of his responsibility as an heir of his native village. As the bravest warrior of his village, it was his duty to safeguard it. It was his duty to stay in his native village and protect it at all times. But after his marriage, Lwakereibile’s parents had not allowed them to go back to his village

as they dreaded parting from their only daughter. Though he wished to honour their wishes, his responsibility was leading and protecting his own village.

As he fled to his village miles away, his wife ran after him with all his ornaments and clothes, with tears in her eyes asking him to stop. But he didn't look back because he knew that if he did, he would not be able to run away from his wife seeing her in tears, desperate to be with him again. So he ran faster... and faster... He ran past the eleven villages and crossed the big river called *Nbaiki reuki*. Lwakereibile reached the river and came to a halt. She had been running for days following him bearing his clothes and ornaments. But the river was too swift, its currents too strong. So she shouted at the top of her voice, '*Nrimswang nang acu nreu gwang pie gailak de nhezak kanggade de piegai lo*' (Nrimswang, even if you can't turn around and see me, please spare a moment to glance at me through your arms). He turned and looked through the crook of his arm. And as he glanced, he saw her desolately dropping all his ornaments and his traditional clothes into the river as she sang, '*Arimswangn lam henim diak lo, I zue mei chang kera*' (Arimswang clear your pathway for me, I will chase you till the end). She wept bitterly and returned home to Gaili, and her husband went to his village to take on the responsibility that had been entrusted to him long ago.

To this day, there is a myth associated with the sparkling white stones you can only find in Nbaiki river. These stones are said to have evolved from Nrimswang's ornaments or clothes which his wife threw in the river when they left each other. The man who came to Gaili returned as a legendary hero who had not only saved Lwakereibile but also entire generations of fair maidens. Nrimswang is still celebrated as the hero who put an end to human sacrifice for the sake of rescuing a beautiful woman from the clutches of an evil spirit. Though they may have lived apart, the story of their love lives on to this day.

2. FOUR FRIENDS

Long ago there was a time when everything in the world coexisted, and every living being lived in friendship. There were four friends—*Zangbei* (the monkey), *Hemokne* (the bird), *Hegapui* (the crab), and *Hegai* (the gibbon). When the season came, they decided to help one another in their fields like they had done all through their lives. They decided to work on *Zangbei*, the monkey's field first. So off they went, trudging a long way up the mountains and far down the valleys till they reached the field, which was so green and fresh that it filled their minds with joy. That spring morning, the road trailed through shimmering green pastures merging with the pastel colours of the flowers blooming in the jungle which spread upwards to the clear blue sky. In high spirits, they sang together as they walked and soon started working in the field.

While the others continued their work on the field, their host—the monkey—prepared lunch for them. The monkey, being smart and intelligent, wanted to impress his friends. He had hidden the rice and curries he had prepared in different corners of the field. When the

time came, he excused himself saying he had to take a pee. He went to a corner of the field and, lo! he returned with a pot of rice. After a while, he said he would go and throw his spear on the other side of the field. Again, he disappeared to a corner of the field, threw his spear, and came back with the pot of curry. His friends looked at him with wonder, and they sat together and enjoyed a hearty meal.

The next day, they went to work on *Hemokne*, the bird's field. Impressed by the monkey's tactics, *Hemokne* decided to follow the same strategy. She excused herself saying she had to relieve herself, and went and laid an egg. She made one excuse after another and finally laid four eggs. She went to the hut on the field and cooked the four eggs. She brought the eggs, and all four friends feasted on the sumptuous lunch.

It was now time to work on *Hegapui*, the crab's field. *Hegapui* was not as smart as the rest of her friends. She had watched in awe as the monkey and the bird had conjured up meals by going to the corner of the field. She did not realise that her friends had secretly cooked the meals that they had shared. Instead, she was convinced that it was magic. So, when the sun climbed up to its zenith, *Hegapui* told her friends that she was going for a pee. She went to the corner of the field, but found that no pot of rice magically appeared. She went again to throw her spear on the other side of the field, and again no curry appeared. *Hegapui* was at her wit's end. It was an insult not to bring food for her friends who were toiling on her field. She ran to her small hut and put a pot of water to boil. She added salt, chilli, and every ingredient she could think of. But there was nothing to cook. She paced around her boiling pot, scratching her head wondering what to do next. In a circle she crept, round and round the pot when she suddenly slipped and fell into the pot. Her friends kept waiting for her to call them for lunch. Finally, tired and famished, they decided to check what she had cooked for them. They reached her hut and to their utter surprise found that *Hegapui* had cooked herself! Not wanting to create a scene or to insult their dear friend's sacrifice, they quietly ate their friend and went back home.

Finally, the day came to work on *Hegei*, the gibbon's field. Together they sang, '*Tala... tala... kedai teilei? Teilula... saklula peram meize*' (Tilling...tilling... what should we do? we eat, we drink and we go back home). When he reached home, *Hegei* realized that there was nothing to cook in his hut. So he waited for them to come and eat the lunch they had made for themselves. *Hegei*, like *Hegapui*, had not really figured out how his friends had miraculously appeared with food. He, in fact, thought that all his friends had brought small packets of lunch for themselves every day. So poor old *Hegei* never thought of cooking any food for them. When the two friends returned to *Hegei*'s hut, tired after the day's work, they were looking forward to a hearty meal. But they were stunned to find that *Hegei* had not made so much of a morsel for them to dine on. The friends got so angry that they picked up a piece of burning charcoal from the fire in the hearth and rubbed it on *Hegei*'s mouth. Thus, *Hegei*'s descendants continue to walk the earth with a black face—a face charred by the charcoal rubbed by his hungry friends.

3.

THE ETERNAL LOVER

Long ago, in a small village in Zeliang area, there lived a beautiful girl name Kebumaile. At a very young age, Kebumaile learnt to cook and clean her house and help her parents in the field. Everyone knew her to be a smart young girl. She was the only daughter, and she had three brothers, amongst whom the eldest brother loved her the most. He was so fond of her that he never let her out of his sight. He was worried to let her walk outside alone and always stood guard while she worked in the field.

With the love and affection of her family, Kebumaile grew into a graceful and charming woman. Many young men wanted to marry her. But her heart belonged to Senting, a poor village boy who was known for his courage, humility, and spirit of adventure. Senting lived near Kebumaile's house, and they had spent their childhood together. As they grew up, they realised that they loved each other. Senting, however, also realised that he would have to work hard to earn the right to ask for her hand. Kebumaile was from a rich and respected

family. Even though Senting tried his best to impress them, he never got the courage to speak openly to her family.

But they were deeply in love. They promised to stay with one another till the very end. As time passed by, Senting mustered enough courage to approach Kebumaile's family and ask for her hand. Though surprised at first, her family agreed but on one condition. In those days, the man had to pay a hefty bride-price to marry a rich and beautiful maiden. Senting was poor and all alone. Kebumaile's family demanded that he bring a red-horned bull, a mythical creature which was revered and respected by the people. To fulfil this request, Senting had to leave for another village, earn enough money, and bring the red-horned bull as the prize for his beloved. He set off from his village, bidding farewell to his love, promising her that he would not fail her. He told her that he would return shortly and bring her home as his bride with great love and respect. Tears flowed down Kebumaile's pale cheeks. She promised to stay faithful to him. They did not have the vaguest idea of what lay ahead. Yet, they were sure of their love.

Soon after Senting started his journey, word of his imminent marriage to Kebumaile spread like wildfire. Lesser men were racked with jealousy, others were in remorse. Soon the news reached a neighbouring village and caught the attention of the richest family there. Taking advantage of Senting's absence, the family members came to talk to Kebumaile's parents. When they offered a necklace of *tangku peu*, Kebumaile's mother's eyes lit up with greed. Her mind, along with those of her husband and her sons, slowly started wavering. But the eldest brother—the one who loved Kebumaile the most—refused to accept this offer. He wanted Kebumaile to marry Senting because he knew Senting to be a good and loyal man, even though he was not as rich as the new suitor. He also took heart from the fact that Senting loved his sister unconditionally, and as they stayed nearby he could visit his sister and take care of her at any time. But the rest of the family—their minds twisted by avarice—failed to understand this logic. Kebumaile's eldest brother, however, stood his ground and finally managed to convince them.

But time went on in a ceaseless flow. Days turned to weeks ... weeks into months. There still was no news of Senting. Kebumaile, who had stayed strong and steadfast, started worrying about her beloved. The situation at home was worsening by the day. Her mother, who now had her eyes set on the wealth of the new groom, started forcing her to accept the rich man's proposal. She thought that if Kebumaile married the rich man from the distant village, her family would become rich and their name would be respected throughout the land. So, when the rich man returned with his proposal one fine day, her mother gave him her word!

The decision was taken without asking Kebumaile's opinion. As a devoted and dutiful daughter, she was forced to accept the proposal. The decision taken was final, but Kebumaile wept and begged her family not to send her so far away from home. Her eldest brother, who had stood by her for so long, found it hard to defend her any more. Senting had not shown up for many months. Though the wedding day was announced, Kebumaile did everything in her power to delay it. On the first occasion, she fell down intentionally hurting herself in the process. When the date was shifted, she pretended that the day was taboo for her marriage. The next time round, she lost her *kelwa*—the cane basket for carrying rice and vegetables making it fall from her back. Another time, she kicked a stone and said, 'The goddess is not pleased with my wedding today.' This went on for over a month. By now, everyone knew that Kebumaile was just finding excuses to delay her wedding. In fact, Kebumaile herself realised this, but she kept on doing it hoping that word would spread about her forced marriage and the news would reach Senting. But as the moon waxed and waned, there was still no news of Senting. The rich man was getting impatient. He decided that the next time the marriage was fixed, he would drag Kebumaile home with him by force. Finally, Kebumaile herself lost hope in Senting's return. Tired of waiting for him, she married the rich man and moved to his village far, far away.

A year after Kebumaile left her village, Senting walked down the path to the village. With him was a mighty and magnificent red-horned

bull which he had brought as the price for his beloved. His face was beaming with joy, filled with thoughts of his life with Kebumaile. As he approached the village gate, he passed a hunter who paused and asked, 'Hei, Senting... *Lei sui ana peiya nang aurau lo...*' (Hey, Senting my son, you're not meant to be...). Senting walked past him without responding. But as he kept walking, every villager he met said the same words. When he was about to reach Kebumaile's house, an old lady stopped near him and started wailing, 'My son, your fortune does not favour you this time! You're not meant to be.' The old lady was about to walk away, when Senting caught hold of her and asked her why everyone was acting strangely towards him. When he insisted, she told him that his beloved had been married off to someone else.

Right there and then, Senting started crying. He cried bitterly, gouging his eyes. Being a man, he tried to control his emotions and hold back his tears, some of which had also trickled down his cheeks. He walked till he reached his *khel morung*. As he was hiding and crying below the *machang* of the *khel*, the keeper of the *morung* asked him why he was crying. Senting did not want to show that he was crying over his lost love. Acting strong, he said, 'My stomach hurts... That's why tears are falling from my eyes.' Later, once he had regained his composure, he asked a few boys from the *morung* to go and fetch the bull which he had brought as the price for his beloved. As the boys were trying to untie the feisty bull, Kebumaile's mother saw the majestic animal. With its shiny coat and curving red horns, it was indeed a prized possession. She wanted the bull as well. So she went to Senting and told him that she would still accept his offer to marry her daughter if he was willing to bring her back from her in-law's place. Senting, moved to tears, replied, 'Even if my Kebumaile is old and ugly, even if she has lost all her teeth, I would still die for her and love her with every breath of the thousands I breathe.' Hearing this, the mother understood that Senting would do anything to get Kebumaile back. She asked him to bring her back from her husband's house so that she could be given to him in marriage. But the question naturally arose: How could he bring her back? Kebumaile's mother devised a devious plan. She asked

Senting to bring Kebumaile back by saying, 'Your father is dead, and you mother is vomiting and shitting blood.'

After a long and arduous journey, Senting reached Kebumaile's house. On finding Kebumaile with a child on her back, he broke into tears. Kebumaile too cried her heart out, but she never blamed him for what had happened. She was now the mother of another man's child. So, even though she still loved him, she denied her feelings for him. Finally, she asked Senting why he had come in search of her. Senting told her exactly as he had been instructed. Kebumaile was suspicious; she knew her mother's greed. She told Senting to return stating that she was busy raising her child. Heart-broken, Senting went down to the village gate and spread a mat to rest. As he was crying, Kebumaile hid and watched him. Tears flooded her eyes as she bitterly remembered all the beautiful moments they had shared when they were still lovers. Senting could not stop crying. Seeing his plight, Kebumaile approached him and asked him why he had not left yet. Senting mumbled through his tears, 'What am I supposed to tell your dying mother and the dead spirit of your father?' 'Tell her that Kebumaile was kneeling down and weeping bitterly,' came the reply.

Alone and disheartened, Senting made his way back to the village and explained what had happened. Her mother, still not satisfied, asked Senting to go a second time. He was to tell Kebumaile that her dearest brother Nsingkwakbe had passed away. This time, the ploy worked. Kebumaile loved her brother more than the world. As soon as she heard about his death, she burst into tears. She left everything she was doing and quickly collected the offerings she had to give for her brother's funeral. Together, they made the journey back to the village.

When she reached her village, Kebumaile was stunned to see her brother leisurely weaving a basket, singing happily to himself whilst sipping *hejau* (rice wine). Despite her shock, Kebumaile was happy to see him. But, at the same time, she felt betrayed by her lover. So she enquired about her brother's health and the well-being of his family. She told him how she was misinformed that he was dead, but seeing him alive had filled her with joy and relief. When her brother asked her

to stay for the night, she told him that she had to rush back home as she had left her family in a hurry. Kebumaile ran as fast as she could. She had left her home in disarray, her child unattended. She reached home weak and panting. She collapsed on the floor, spitting blood and died.

The news of her death was taken back to her family. Senting was beyond consolation. He decided that he would stay in the village Kebumaile had died in, to be closer to her in death than he was able to be in life. The funeral took place with deep solemnity. Kebumaile's husband gifted one cow, a buffalo, and other animals to her bereaved brothers. Her husband then showed them how Kebumaile had kept away the gifts she had received on her marriage from her two younger brothers in a *hebau* (a big basket in which rice is stored). The basket was filled with trinkets and spoilt meat. She never touched them or accepted them wilfully. On the other hand, whenever Nsingkwakbe sent anything, she would happily eat the meat with her children. The brothers were moved by guilt and remorse. They realised how they had offended their sister by forcing her into a marriage she was not ready for. Hanging their heads in shame, they quickly slipped out of the gathering.

After the funeral, Kebumaile's body was left in the house. During those days, whenever a family member died the body was left in the house. The house was then abandoned, and the family built a new home to live in. So, Kebumaile's body was left behind in her house, and her husband and children moved away to begin their lives anew. But Senting still could not believe his eyes. He could not accept that the frail body of his beloved was lying cold in death. During their whole life, they could not be together. Senting, like a mad lover, craved for her love even after her death. After everyone departed, Senting brought some rice and gently put it inside his beloved's mouth. This was an old practice. He waited by her side. In the middle of the night, Kebumaile woke up from her deathly sleep. She came back to life and, till the break of dawn, they sat together conversing under the light of

the stars. When the sun rose over the hills, her body turned cold and she returned to the world of the dead.

Senting and Kebumaile spent their nights together like this for weeks. The villagers were unnerved. This had to be stopped. So one of the village elders suggested that Kebumaile should be buried. Thus, determined to end these nightly sojourns, the villagers waited for Senting to go away during the day. When he was away, they quickly gathered her body and buried her. When Senting returned, he desperately searched for Kebumaile. But she was nowhere to be found. His anguished wails echoed through the hills. But Senting lived on, hoping that they would be reunited in the netherworld.

To this day, the story of Senting and Kebumaile's eternal love is narrated as the best romance in Zeliang folk tales. It is also believed that it was from that time onwards that people started burying their dead. They learnt that the house should not be abandoned, and the spirits of their loved ones should be left alone. The dead needed to be buried to separate the world of the living from the world of the dead.

4. THE CLEVER FRIEND

Once, in a village there lived two young men Asa and Mirung. They were bound by *mehnu* (friendship) and tilled their fields and did all the work together as one. Though they were almost inseparable, Asa was smart and cunning, while Mirung was a bit of a simpleton. Mirung had the unfortunate habit of jumping to conclusions and imitating all that Asa, whom he much admired, did.

One morning, a morning like any other, the whole village was preparing to go for work. Mothers were cooking meals for the day and small girls were carrying water from the jungle where a small stream flowed with water as clear as crystal. The menfolk had gathered in front of the *morung* and were having a sprightly conversation about some rich merchants who were going to pass their village that night. In good spirit, they made fun of the whole occasion saying, 'We too will have their wealth and will become rich like them.' When the women went out to the fields with their *kerangs* (vegetables cane baskets), the menfolk accompanied them for work.

The village had a taboo that against entertaining any guests that day. The village was almost empty when the merchants arrived due to this taboo. They had with them several strong and healthy cows. Their bulky shoulders gleamed in the noon-time sun while their horns curved like crescent moons. Looking for a place to rest and also to feed their cows, the merchants reached Asa's house. They asked him whether they could stay the night and rest at his place. A plan arose in Asa's mind. He struck a deal with the merchants saying, 'I will let you stay at my place and will feed your cattle very well. But only on one condition... If they pee, drop dung or dirty my place, I will have them all for myself. If I find the place as clean as it is now tomorrow morning, you will not have to pay me a single penny for my hospitality.'

The merchants were shrewd and clever, and had a trick up their sleeve as well. They inwardly laughed at the naivete of this young villager and agreed to his deal. In the evening, they went and fed the cows a certain medicine which would stop them from emptying their bowels. As night fell, they all fell asleep. In the middle of the night, Asa silently crept outside his house. He went and brought the leaves of *hebaunei* or *beurai* (yam leaves). When cooked, yam leaves have a striking resemblance to cow dung. In the cover of darkness, he cooked the leaves and left them to cool in the night breeze that blew across the village. After a while, he stepped out and put the boiled mush on the rump of the cows and scattered some lumps on the floor.

When the sun rose, the merchants woke up to the cows' hungry moans. Asa still pretended to be deep in sleep. The merchants were astounded to see the cow dung and knew they had to honour the deal which they made the previous day. Asa slowly stirred from his sleep, and after a long yawn acted as though he was completely unaware of what had happened in the night. He went straight to the place where the cows were tethered. With a straight face which bespoke seriousness, he told the merchants, 'You shall now keep your promise as it is the law of nature to be true to one's promises.' The merchants had to give up the cattle and walk away in dismay to their own village.

The same day, Mirung came to Asa's house and was surprised to find the herd of cattle. He was beyond belief. In deep admiration, he asked Asa, 'How did you get all this wealth within one night?' Asa replied with a bright smile, 'A clever person always gets good things.'

Amazed by his cleverness, Mirung pestered Asa to tell him how he had ended up getting all the cattle from the rich merchants. Asa started narrating the events of the previous day ... the deal he had made with the merchants, how he had boiled and put the *hebaunei* (yam leaves) on the rear sides of the cows ... Before Asa could complete the details, Mirung—being the excited fool that he was—ran back to his house with glee. To his utter delight, he saw an even richer merchant coming down the road, accompanied by his cattle as well as a mighty army. Like Asa, he too invited them to stay at his place. He made the same deal with them. This merchant too gave his cattle the same medicine, but in double the dose. At night, like Asa Murung too went to his garden and collected some yam leaves. He too cooked them in the dark. But, the dim-witted Mirung was very excited and eager to carry out his plan. So, instead of letting the boiled leaves cool off a bit, he took the steaming leaves and rubbed them on the cows' backs. The cattle moaned aloud in pain, and the merchant and his army woke up from their sleep. They caught Mirung red-handed bringing harm to the cattle.

The next day, when the villagers were getting ready to go to their fields, news spread that Mirung had been captured by the rich merchant and his army and had been taken prisoner. The news was a bolt out of the blue for Asa, and he was determined to rescue his friend from the rich merchant. Without a second thought, he ran ahead to the bridge that separated their village from the next one. Beside the bridge stood a big tree, its thick and lush canopy leaning over the river. Asa quickly caught as many fish as he could. He then carried the fish up the tree and tied them using a string high up in its branches. He then waited for the merchant and his entourage to pass under the bridge.

As he saw the merchant, followed by the long line of cattle, bodyguards, and the unfortunate figure of his captive friend, Asa leaned on the tree and acted as if he was the owner of the river and the

tree. As they approached the river, he stopped them saying, 'Merchant! Have you ever cast eyes on a magical tree? It is true... I can catch fish on the tree... The fish on this tree are more plentiful and far more delicious than any fish you will catch in the river.' The merchant was curious. He wanted to see whether Asa was speaking the truth. The clever Asa immediately climbed up the tall and mighty branches of the tree, so high that they disappeared into darkness. Hidden among the branches, he pretended he was catching the fish. 'Oooh! Haaa...' he said as he slowly untied the fish he had already left on the tree. He kept saying, 'Oh! I caught a fish. Just look at it...' and threw it in front of the merchant and his crew. He did this several times and, by the time he descended from his perch, there was a basket full of fish at the foot of the tree.

This made the greedy merchant want to have the tree all to himself. He asked Asa what he wanted in return for the enchanted tree. Asa pretended to be nonchalant. 'This tree is magical,' he said, 'No amount of money will be enough for it.' The merchant tried to persuade Asa. Finally, with much reluctance, Asa said, 'If so, I may take a servant for myself for I need a labourer to work on my fields.' The merchant rubbed his hands in glee. He was more than happy to let Mirung go, who anyway seemed a bit on the slower side. He released Mirung from his chains and gave him to Asa as a servant.

The two friends left the bridge and hastily retreated to their village. The merchant now asked his army to go up the tree and catch more fish. But to their utter surprise, there was not a single fish left on the tree. They realised that they have been fooled by Asa to save his friend Mirung. But it was too late. They could not return to the village and capture Asa and Mirung, whom the villagers would defend with their lives. So the merchant went home empty-handed, and the two friends lived happily ever after.

5.

A TALE OF VENGEANCE

Once there lived a young woman in a village. She was considered by all to be the most skilled in weaving and farming and a brave and loving daughter-in-law for her husband's family and relatives. She was loved by everyone around her, especially by her husband's uncle. This uncle adored her like a daughter and harboured the desire to make her his own daughter-in-law, even though she was his brother's son's wife. The uncle too had a son who needed to be married and, in those days, getting a wife who was known for her skills in weaving, diligence in housework, and hard work in the fields was considered fortuitous. And here was a woman who worked even more than a man and never shirked her duties.

The woman helped her husband in all the ways she could. Even though their marriage had been planned and arranged by the elders in their families, they had fallen deeply in love with each other. They shared all the work. They tilled the fields and worked together with love, and as days and years passed by, their relationship grew into a

mature understanding and their bond became stronger and more affectionate.

However, the uncle continued wishing that he could have the woman as his son's wife. He thought of a devious plan to get rid of her husband. One day, the uncle asked the husband to help him till a field. It was hard work, and all the villagers would be there, he told the husband, and they would all be staying back for the night to begin work early the next morning. The young husband did not know that this was a strange place haunted by ghosts. During the day, the ghosts took the form of living creatures and wandered about; the land belonged to the living, and people could till their fields during the day. At night, it was taken over by ghosts and phantoms who prowled around in search of souls to devour.

Listening to his uncle's advice, the husband stayed back for the night in a small hut in the middle of the field. He thought that his fellow villagers were staying nearby. As night fell, he could hear a lot of noises from the other side of the field, and, relieved that he had company, he went out to the field to pluck some vegetables to cook for dinner. As he was cooking, he heard some sounds from outside. The husband grew suspicious of these strange noises. The ghosts knocked on the door saying, 'Open the door and let us take shelter in the hut.' But the man refused to open the door. The ghosts got angry and called out for their leader, Cilaupai. Cilaupai, in his ghostly form, was monstrous in size. One footstep of his covered more than a kilometre. He towered over the small hut and commanded the husband to open the door. When the man refused, Cilaupai kicked the door open. When the door was broken the husband was waiting with a lit torch. It is believed that ghosts are afraid of fire. While the ghost stood at the door, the husband lunged forward and stabbed the giant's neck with the firewood. Cilaupai screamed out in agony. Blood poured from his wound and the other ghosts carried him away on their shoulders.

In the meanwhile, the poor woman heard that her husband had stayed back in the field. She knew that danger was sure to befall him there. She had heard stories of how no one who entered those fields

alone at night returned alive. The more she thought, the more she was convinced that it was her husband's uncle who was behind this trick. She stayed up the whole night crying and thinking that her husband would be killed by the ghosts. As soon as dawn broke, she decided to go look for her husband. She cooked some chicken and rice and carried some rice beer and rushed to the field, thinking that she would never see her husband alive again. When she reached the hut, she was shocked to find it covered in blood. But she was even more astonished to see that her husband was still alive. Out of joy, tears rolled down her cheeks, and she told her husband that she had to rush to him and that she had brought some food for him.

After they had their meal, her husband told her about what had happened the previous night. But her husband was not sure whether he had succeeded in killing Cilaupai. He asked his wife to accompany him while he followed Cilaupai's blood. They followed the trickle of blood leading down the field. Soon the trickle thinned into drops and finally stopped. Here, right next to the last drop of blood lay a chameleon and a butterfly. A chameleon and a butterfly—these were the two creatures that the mighty Cilaupai had transformed into during the day to live among the living.

The husband and wife hurried back to the hut. As they returned, the husband felt weaker and weaker so they decided to go back home. Even after reaching home, the husband's condition continued to worsen. Then, he suddenly collapsed and died. This was because even though he had killed Cilaupai, his soul had already been eaten by the ghosts during their brief encounter. The woman was saddened by her husband's sudden demise. But she was even more deeply hurt by his uncle's cunning plan. She started wondering why his uncle had acted so cruelly towards her husband and why he had lied to him that all the villagers would stay back in the field. She did not have to wait long for an answer. Even before she had finished mourning her husband's death, the uncle came to her house—his face filled with glee—and asked her to marry his son.

The woman could feel anger rise up her neck. But she was wise and did not react then. She could feel her anger and her desire for vengeance weighing her down like something placed on her heart. She calmly replied to the uncle, 'Yes, sure! Why won't I be his wife? ... After all, my husband is dead!' She had one request though—that she would be allowed to stay in her house till all the goods and provisions her husband had provided had been consumed. She added, 'I will inform you once I have finished these. But before I come, you must also collect all the valuables, utensils, and cattle in your household and keep them in your house so that I know that you can afford my upkeep.'

The uncle was happy with the terms of this arrangement. He eagerly waited for the days to roll by and for the provisions in the old house to finish. Finally, one day, word came from the woman that she was ready to go to her new home. Once they got this information, the uncle's family collected all their worldly possessions and left them in the house for the woman to inspect. But, though they waited and waited, the woman did not come. Finally, as night fell, the family dozed off, and the woman came to her new house. She found all the wealth and valuables arranged inside the house. Without further thought, she hung herself to death in the house. Back then, if there was an unnatural death (like suicide or murder) in a house, the whole house and everything in it had to be abandoned. It was taboo to touch things which were associated with a person's unnatural death. The next day, when her to be in-laws woke, they saw the misfortune that had fallen upon them. Everything was ruined. The family had to leave the house empty-handed leaving all their wealth and belongings behind. Through her death, the woman had made the ultimate sacrifice to punish the evil uncle who had destroyed her family.