

A Foolish Boy and His Clever Friend, Or The Discovery of Rice*

(An Ao-Naga Folktale)

Once upon a time, in a certain village there were two boys named Alemba and Temezakba. Now, these names were not their real names but they came to be known by these names because of their characteristics.

Alemba was a simpleton, trusting and gullible. So, many a time he was taken advantage of and was the butt of jokes in the village. On the other hand, his friend Temezakba, was cunning and always on the lookout for tricking his friends, especially Alemba. (In the Changki dialect, there is a term *Koba*, which means a friend, and is used by members of different clans to address each other. If both belong to the same clan the term used is *Kuti*, which also means a friend.)

These two boys, who called each other *Koba*, decided to go looking for a type of tuber called *acha* in the Changki dialect and *shi* in the Ao language. They went deep into the forest. In those days rice was unknown and people lived on yam, wild leaves and fruits only.

Alemba, the simpleton, being ignorant, asked his friend how to dig for the *acha*. The clever friend said, "You should dig the earth where you see the vines growing, until the entire root is exposed." (It is said that this type of yam grows deep in the soil and one has to dig quite a lot before one can uproot it.) Temezakba added, "Then you cut off the bottom portion, throw it away and collect only the top half."

Now everyone knows that in yam the bottom portion is white and edible but the top portion is brownish and not edible. But Alemba did not know this and so he diligently followed his friend's advice. He dug out a great number of yams, chopped off the bottom half and collected only the top in his carrying basket.

Meanwhile Temezakba, the clever one, was watching his friend digging and doing as he was instructed. When his friend's basket was full, he saw him take

it towards a small stream nearby. So he hurriedly collected all the portions thrown away by Alemba and soon joined him by the stream. They started to wash the yam before setting out for home.

When Alemba looked at Temezakba's collections, he saw that it was white whereas his was reddish brown. There was a perplexed look on his face and he asked his friend why his lot was different from the other. Temezakba pretended to be surprised and after a pause, said, "Oh, it may be so because I am washing my yam upstream whereas you are quite downstream." Alemba then said, "In that case I shall wash mine again, this time at the very fountain-head so that it becomes white." Saying so he started upstream. His friend, who knew that no amount of washing would turn the yam white, quietly lifted his basket and set off for the village, leaving Alemba alone.

Very soon it became dark and Alemba, though disappointed that his yam was still reddish-brown decided to set out for home. He found that his friend had not waited for him. Being unfamiliar with the terrain and because of the gathering darkness, he lost his way. He was frightened and started to call out for his friend - Koba.

His cry was heard by a dove-like bird called *Hili* (in Changki) which usually forages in leafy, mouldy places, but can fly too. It is green in colour and its cry sounds somewhat like Hi-li Hi-li.

Alemba kept on shouting,

Koba, ni kosu arutsuja?

(Friend, how will I come?)

And each time the bird would reply in a bass voice,

Longki longki mekep arung.

(Overturn the stones and come.)

After some time he came to a cave-like place under a big tree which seemed to be the nest or den of wild animals. Setting his basket aside, he explored and found a cosy place above the ground. He climbed up and was soon asleep. At around midnight he was awakened by strange sounds. He became immediately alert. He strained to see in the darkness and in the dim moonlight he saw

animals approaching the place where he was sleeping. There were tigers of all shapes and sizes. But what frightened him most was the sight of one which was huge. He seemed to be the King of the tigers. He sat on a knoll and Alemba saw that all the other tigers had brought offerings of meat for their King - legs of cows, pigs and deer. The King seemed pleased and, before the assembly began, he declared that they would all have a feast of meat and rice.

So he called out to *Jongrangku* (a small tiger) and said to him, "Go and look for rice in the interior of the den." When he was fumbling for the rice, some drops of water fell on him. It was so unexpected that he jumped up in fright and came out screaming. (The drops of water were the tears that Alemba was shedding on his perch out of sheer terror.)

Jongrangku was terrified and refused to go in again. At this the King tiger got angry and ordered the wild cat, called *Khoza* (in Changki) to do the job. Alemba was still crying and so when *Khoza* went in, he too was showered with the tear drops. He rushed out and said that something strange was going on and so he, *Khoza* would rather incur the wrath of the King than dare risk his life inside.

The King tiger was puzzled and so he decided to investigate. When he went near the place where the rice was kept, he too felt drops of water on him. But being the King and not giving in to fear, he began sniffing all around him, especially in the direction from where the water drops had fallen.

In the meantime Alemba was so petrified at seeing this huge tiger that he became still, holding his breath. The tiger poked its face towards Alemba and in the process, some strands of his whiskers went inside Alemba's nostrils at which Alemba let out a mighty sneeze - "Achoo", which sounded ferocious in the still night. Thinking that there was a mighty animal lurking nearby, the King tiger also bolted out and dashed into the jungle. Seeing this, all the other tigers turned their tails and ran away, leaving all the meat behind.

Soon it was morning and Alemba came out of his hiding place and saw the meat lying about. So, instead of the yam, he carried the legs of cows, pigs and deer and set out for home. One reaching home, he took out the tenderest

portions of the meat and made a curry putting a lot of red chillies. He took some for his friend and went to Temezakba's house.

When they met, Alemba asked his friend to close his eyes and open his mouth. Temezakba did as he was told, and Alemba put a fistful of the curry into his mouth. It was hot but tasty. So Temezakba wanted to know how Alemba came by the meat, to which he replied, "After you left me alone in the jungle, I happened to come across a deer which was moving his bowels. So I put my hand inside him and pulled out his innards which I brought home. The curry was made of that."

When Temezakba heard this, he thought that it was a novel way of obtaining meat and that he should also try his luck. So the next day he set out for the jungle. He roamed far and wide, and by afternoon, almost gave up his plan because he could not locate any deer. When he was returning home, by sheer chance, he spotted a deer moving his bowels, and remembering Alemba's account, he put his hand inside. But the deer, who was surprised at a most delicate moment, leapt high. With Temezakba's hand stuck inside, the deer dragged him all over the countryside. According to the story, the deer dragged Temezakba over *tekong semra* meaning thirty different locations. Temezakba was bruised and exhausted but he could not extricate his hand from the deer's guts. At long last, in mid flight, he spotted a tree called *Merangsung*, a type of hard wood. Temezakba caught hold of a branch with his free hand and cried out to the tree,

Merangsung na merangang

Nia merangdi

(Merangsung you too try

I shall also try)

He held on to the tree and tried to pull out his hand stuck in the deer's body. After much struggle, the hand came free and Temezakba fell down on the ground. When he examined his hands, he found that tiny pieces of meat

were struck to his fingertips from the liver, lungs, heart, spleen and kidney of the deer. He scraped them on to a leaf, made a tiny parcel and set off for home, a very battered, bruised, but wisened man.

When he reached home, he discovered that there was no fire in the hearth. (Being still a bachelor, he lived alone.) So placing the parcel on one of the hearth stones, he called a chick and told her to watch over it while he went to the neighbour's house for a bit of fire.

A rat, who was nearby, heard this, and when the man went out, he approached the parcel. When the chick shooed him away, it took a fistful of ash and threw it in the chick's eyes. While the chick was crying out in pain and rubbing her eyes the rat snatched the parcel of meat and vanished.

When Temezakba came back with the fire the chick told him, "Grandfather, a rat came and threw ash in my eyes and ran away with the meat." The man got very angry and decided to track down the rat and kill it. So he went in search of it and found the hole through which the rat had disappeared. He began to dig. He dug and dug and dug and at last found the rat's warren. There he found the rat huddled in a corner, holding a whet-stone as though it was a baby, and singing a lullaby.

O Kenu aao

Kenu rilang aao

Atane asa nu

Acha khiru

(Oh my sister o,

my sister o,

your sister with meat

Will feed you rice.)

When the rat saw the man, it began to plead with him saying, "Grandfather, if you spare me, I will show you the source of a certain food, which will feed you and your race for all time to come."

The man also thought that for the measly pieces of meat, though acquired through so much pain, he should not miss the chance of gaining this source of

food. So he agreed that if the rat could really keep her promise, he would forgive her and spare her life.

Accordingly, he followed the rat to a great body of water described as Molu Tsuyem. (In Ao folklore of Changki, the river Brahmaputra is described as Phonotsu and it is said that Molu Tsuyem is much bigger than the Phonostu). When they reached the shore, the rat told the man, “Grandfather, please wait here. I will swim across and bring you this food.” Saying so, he swam across and brought back some rice-stalks with grains on it. It made several trips and brought several varieties of rice and gave them to the man.

This is how, the Aos believe, man acquired rice from the rat.

Why Rats Eat Rice First

After acquiring rice, man’s lifestyle improved. He became prosperous, lived in a grand house, and had many granaries full of rice. Not only in life, but in death too, man’s prosperity was evident. Elaborate rituals, feasting, etc., marked a rich man’s funeral.

Seeing all this, the rat thought that it being the agent through whom man gained his wealth, if not in life at least in death it deserved to be shown due respect. So one day, it went to man and said, “Look, now that I have shown you this great source of sustenance of wealth, I want something in return from you.” Man became suspicious, but the rat quickly added, “No, no, I do not want any of your wealth. But I want you to promise me that when I die, you will show me respect by giving me a grand funeral.” Man was relieved to hear this and readily promised that he would certainly give the rat a great funeral. The rat was satisfied and went its way.

Some years passed. One day the rat thought to itself, “I am getting old, and so I must find out if man can be trusted.”

A few days later, the rat pretended to be dead and lay in the path of man on his way to the field. Man, on seeing an apparently dead rat, said to himself, “Aha! So that rat is dead. Now that he is dead, why should I waste my wealth

for his funeral? I shall simply throw him away.” Saying so, he began to poke at it with a stick and was about to throw it away into the forest whereupon, the rat jumped up and exclaimed, “What an ungrateful creature you are! I gave you rice that sustains your race but you have forgotten so soon your promise given to me. Because of your perfidy, I will take revenge on you. You may reap and gather as much rice as you can, but you will never get to eat it before I have had my fill and have left my droppings in your portion.”

Because of man’s ingratitude, the Aos say, rats continue to take revenge on man by invading his granaries and leaving their droppings on the rice-grains. It is also said that while eating the rice, rats sing this.

Kejakjemko ni mapuru

(In my rice-basket, I am enjoying.)

How the Aos Discovered the Secret of Wine Making

Once upon a time, there was an orphan boy who was sorely ill-treated by his stepmother. He had lost his mother while he was very young and his father married again so that he would have a helpmate to bring up his young son and also help him cultivate his fields.

Soon a son was born to the stepmother and she became even more cruel in her treatment towards her stepson. As soon as the boy became old enough to accompany the father to the fields, she made him work there everyday. Not only that, even when the father was busy otherwise she made the little boy go to the fields (which are usually not less than five miles away from the villages) on his own.

The Ao custom is to have a mid-day lunch break for the workers and for this purpose food is packed by the women in the morning and carried by the people going to the fields.

When the boy went alone to the fields, the cunning stepmother packed stale and rotten rice for him. On opening his lunch pack, the boy found that the food stank and so he re-tied his bundle and hung it in a nearby bush. The boy thus went hungry on that day.

This went on for some time. One day while the boy was sitting near the bush dejectedly, he smelled a delicious scent coming out from something nearby. On searching for the source, he discovered that it was the discarded rice-packs which were smelling so good. So he opened one of them and tentatively tasted a fistful of the fermented rice. He found it extremely tasty and that day he ate a mid-day meal to his heart's content.

He kept the discovery to himself and continued to carry the pack of rotten rice given by his stepmother and hung the bundles carefully on the bush. From this time onwards, he never went hungry for his mid-day meal and soon, his health, which had begun to fail, once again became robust and his complexion too began to take on a rosy hue. On the other hand, the stepmother's son, who ate the best tit-bits and did not labour at all, looked puny and pale in comparison to his elder half-brother.

The cunning stepmother noticed this, and decided that the elder boy was up to some mischief and was stealing food from somewhere. So she confronted him and accused him of eating stolen food. The boy denied vehemently about having stolen anything from anybody. But the stepmother would not leave it at that. She brought up the matter before the husband.

On being ordered by his father to tell him the secret of his robust good health, the boy narrated the whole story to his father. The father was very angry with his wife for her ill-treatment of his son and soundly scolded her and even threatened to send her away.

But the cunning woman pacified her stepson and accompanied him to the field to see for herself what this magic brew was. She found that it was indeed good. So she brought back a portion of the fermented rice home and began preparing the brew at home. Gradually, the process of distilling wine from this fermented rice was perfected. The husband too was soon pacified when the wife offered this delicious drink to him regularly. This is how the secret of brewing wine was discovered, and to this day, the Aos prepare what is popularly known as rice-beer in their homes.

How Man Learned to Laugh

It is said that in the beginning, man did not know what laughter was nor what caused it.

All this business about laughter, it seems, began in this manner.

One day, a man was trying to kill a pig single-handed. He had caught it after a long chase, and had pinned it down on the ground by pressing on its side with his knee. Holding the pig in this position, he was trying to stab it with his spear in order to kill it.

The pig being subjected to this treatment was squealing loudly in fear and protest. A group of bystanders had gathered in the meantime to watch the proceedings. Because so much pressure was applied to its side, every time the pig squealed, the people saw its red rectum come out as though it was a flower.

After this went on for some time the bystanders found that small squeaks were coming out of their own mouths and eventually they all broke into peals which later came to be known as laughter.

So this is how the first Aos learnt to laugh!

How Head Hunting Began

The age old wisdom of the Aos as enshrined in their oral tradition declares that the first enmity among men began when they became greedy for more land and began quibbling over it.

The quibbles turned into quarrels and the quarrels into fist-fights and physical encounters. Use of weaponry during fights came much later. And even then, the practice of head-hunting was still unknown to the people. The following account tells us how the Aos learnt this art from the ant!

One day, a warrior was resting by the road on his way home. He noticed that the spot where he was sitting was swarmed with ants and they seemed to be engaged in a frantic affair. He watched them keenly and discovered that in fact the ant groups were having a fight.

After some time, the activities of the ants became less frantic - and he could see only a few of them. As he continued watching these few, he discovered, to his great amazement, that these few were engaged in a peculiar activity. They were beheading the slain ants and were carrying off their heads!

He surmised that these were the victor ants and that they were carrying off the heads of their slain enemies! He also reasoned that this was an easier way of carrying home the trophies of victory in warfare.

He came back to the village and disclosed his findings and the villagers also agreed that, indeed, carrying off the head only was definitely much easier than carrying the whole body of the slain enemy to display before the public as evidence of military valour.

So, this is how, the Aos say, the practice of head-hunting began among the people during times of inter-village and even internecine warfare.

** The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition by Temsula Ao. Bhasha Publications, Baroda.*

What is True Civilization?*

M.K. Gandhi

I believe that the Civilization India has evolved is not to be beaten in the world. Nothing can equal the seeds sown by our ancestors. Rome went, Greece shared the same fate; the might of the Pharaohs was broken; Japan has become Westernized; of China nothing can be said; but India is still, somehow or other, sound at the foundation. The people of Europe learn their lessons from the writings of the men of Greece or Rome, which exist no longer in their former glory. In trying to learn from them, the Europeans imagine that they will avoid the mistakes of Greece and Rome. Such is their pitiable condition. In the midst of all this India remains immovable and that is her glory. It is a charge against India that her people are so uncivilized, ignorant and stolid, that it is not possible to induce them to adopt any changes. It is a charge really against our merit. What we have tested and found true on the anvil of experience, we dare not change. Many thrust their advice upon India, and she remains steady. That is her beauty; it is the sheet-anchor of our hope.

Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves. The Gujarati equivalent for civilization means “good conduct”.

If this definition be correct, then India, as so many writers have shown, has nothing to learn from anybody else, and this is as it should be. We notice that the mind is a restless bird; the more it gets the more it wants, and still remains unsatisfied. The more we indulge our passions

the more unbridled they become. Our ancestors, therefore, set a limit to our indulgences. They saw that happiness was largely a mental condition. A man is not necessarily happy because he is rich, or unhappy because he is poor. The rich are often seen to be unhappy, the poor to be happy. Millions will always remain poor. Observing all this, our ancestors dissuaded us from luxuries and pleasures. We have managed with the same kind of plough as existed thousands of years ago. We have retained the same kind of cottages that we had in former times and our indigenous education remains the same as before. We have had no system of life-corroding competition. Each followed his own occupation or trade and charged a regulation wage. It was not that we did not know how to invent machinery, but our forefathers knew that, if we set our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fibre. They, therefore, after due deliberation decided that we should only do what we could with our hands and feet. They saw that our real happiness and health consisted in a proper use of our hands and feet. They further reasoned that large cities were a snare and a useless encumbrance and that people would not be happy in them, that there would be gangs of thieves and robbers, prostitution and vice flourishing in them and that poor men would be robbed by rich men. They were, therefore, satisfied with small villages. They saw that kings and their swords were inferior to the sword of ethics, and they, therefore, held the sovereigns of the earth to be inferior to the Rishis and the Fakirs. A nation with a constitution like this is fitter to teach others than to learn from others. This nation had courts, lawyers and doctors, but they were all within bounds. Everybody knew that these professions were not particularly superior; moreover, these vakils and voids did not rob people; they were considered people's dependants, not their masters.

Justice was tolerably fair. The ordinary rule was to avoid courts. There were no touts to lure people into them. This evil, too, was noticeable only in and around capitals. The common people lived independently and followed their agricultural occupation. They enjoyed true Home Rule.

(Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule, Page 52-54)

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