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An Ethnobotanical Folktale of the Ao Naga in India

Abstract

The Ao Naga of Nagaland in India have a rich store of orally transmitted wisdom. Reproduced here is the legend of Champichanglangba, a man with great magical powers, who married the daughter of the god Lichaba. Lichaba wished to determine the powers of his son-in-law and thus put him to several tests, all of which the latter passed. After seeing that Champichanglangba was indeed a wizard, Lichaba plotted to put him to death. However, all his efforts were cleverly thwarted by Champichanglangba. The fame of Champichanglangba's strength and magical prowess spread even to the plains of the Ahom kingdom. The Ahom king invited him to his court, where he was tested in various ways. Even there Champichanglangba proved his cleverness and power. However, he was wounded, so that his powers declined. When his enemies tried to kill him he hid himself in a crevice of an agalloch tree (*Aquilaria agallocha*). The Assamese tried to find him but could not. Later he flew up to the sky and turned into the Longcha peti (the polestar).

Key words: Ethnobotany — folktale — Champichanglangba

INTRODUCTION

TRIBAL peoples, lacking a written language, rely on oral traditions to transmit their history and accumulated experience from one generation to the next. These oral traditions, with their associated beliefs, legends, and folk practices, provide the anthropologist with invaluable information on the origins, migrations, and sociocultural lives of the people. Furthermore, the beliefs and practices of a tribal people often reflect a scientifically sound understanding of humanity and its place in the cycles of nature, while their various religious and cultural sanctions and taboos frequently contribute to the maintenance of the ecological balance in ways that amaze the modern observer. Tribal lore has also proved to be a treasure trove for the ethnobiologist, since many beliefs and practices are associated with plants and animals.

The folklore of the Ao Naga of Nagaland in India contains a great store of such orally transmitted wisdom. The example reproduced below tells of the legendary Champichanglangba, a hero with great magical powers. His magic is believed to have imparted healing properties to a certain plant called the *sungza sung* (*Aquilaria agallocha*; common name, agalloch or eaglewood). The essential oil obtained from the wood of this tree is highly valued commercially for its use in the manufacture of such things as medicines and perfumes. The local people soak agalloch chips in water and drink the resulting solution as an appetizer and as a remedy for stomach disorders. Logs are hewn into sleeping benches, and the white inner bark is used for making belts (compare MILLS 1973, 322-28).

THE LEGEND

There once lived in Nokpo-yimchen village a man named Champichanglangba who was very skilled in magic. Champichanglangba married the younger daughter of the god Lichaba and went to live with his father-in-law.

Lichaba lived in a village and farmed as men do. Once, wishing to test his son-in-law, he told him to catch a large wild boar and, while holding it, split some cane (*Calamus acanthospathus*) to tie the animal up. Champichanglangba managed to catch the boar, but was unable to split the cane. His wife, who was pounding rice at that time, knew that her father was testing her husband and dared not to help him openly. She managed to split one end of the cane, however, enabling her husband to hold down the boar with one hand, tear strips off the cane with his teeth and free hand, and tie the animal's legs.

Lichaba tested Champichanglangba in many other ways. After seeing these further proofs of his son-in-law's wonderful power and knowledge, he decided that such a great wizard was best not allowed to live and set about plotting his death. First, during the slashing of the *jhum* fields, Lichaba gave Champichanglangba an unsharpened *dao* (machete) with no handle and asked him to lop off the top branches of a tree covered with the prickly climbing plant *Mezonevrun cuculatum*. Champichanglangba climbed the tree and the branches fell off by themselves without being touched by the *dao*. Next Lichaba, hoping to burn his son-in-law to death, set fire to the jungle and ran away. Champichanglangba, unseen by his father-in-law, took a prodigious leap into the middle of a grove of wild plantains (*Musa paradisiaca*), where the flames could not touch him. From there he returned to the village by another path. Once again Lichaba tried to kill him, this time by offering him pieces of pork into which he had inserted thorns from the *Calamus acantrospathus*. Champichanglangba ate the meat with gusto, all the while cleverly collecting the thorns inside his cheek. Then, in front of Lichaba, he spat them into the leaf of a *kapu-am* (*Macranga indica*) and said, mockingly, "Look, Lichaba, you cannot kill me no matter how hard you try." It is said that since then the leaves of the *kapu-am* have never been without holes. After this Champichanglangba left Lichaba's house and went back to Nokpo-yimchen village.

One day Champichanglangba found a sword-bean creeper (*Endada perseatha*) as thick as a man's body. He cut off a length with single strokes above and below and kept it in his house until it shrank to the thickness of a man's leg. He then threw it into the Tsurang (Desai) River, where it swelled up again to its original thickness and floated downstream to Assam. There it was brought to the Raja (Ahom king), who marveled that any man could be strong enough to sever a log of such size with one stroke. He asked to see this wonderful fellow, but Champichanglangba replied he would go only if the Raja placed a *chabile*¹ in the ground at every step from Nokpo-yimchen to his palace. So much did the Raja wish to meet him that he granted even this re-

quest. Champichanglangba thereupon walked the entire way to the palace by stepping from *chabile* to *chabile* like a bird. When he arrived, the Raja asked to see the *dao* with which he had cut the creeper. Champichanglangba not only showed him the *dao* but cut through the creeper once again with a single stroke.

The Raja then arranged a series of contests between Champichanglangba and the Assamese. First they tried to see who could get the other's mouths to water. The Assamese ate all sorts of delicacies in front of Champichanglangba, but he did not salivate. When it was Champichanglangba's turn all he ate was a single bunch of sour *tangmu* berries (*Rhus semialata*). When the Assamese saw him eat the sour fruits they couldn't stop their mouths from watering. Thus Champichanglangba won this contest.

After this Raja tested him by making him build bridges, eat Assamese food cooked in poison, and dance on the edges of knives, needles, and, finally, axes. In doing so Champichanglangba received a slight scratch that bled copiously. All the Assamese rushed up and smeared themselves with his blood, so that their magic power increased while Champichanglangba's declined. With the courage of their new-found strength they tried to kill him, but he turned into a lizard, climbed an *aku tong* (*Ficus bengalensis*), and hid himself in a folded leaf. The Assamese shot off every leaf with their bows and arrow except for the one in which he was hiding, whereupon he turned into a cricket, flew to an agalloch tree, and hid in a crevice. The Assamese chopped down the tree and split it up, but failed to find his hiding place in one of the pieces. Later an old Assamese woman picked up this piece and took it home for firewood. When she put it on the fire it burst with a loud roar, and Champichanglangba flew up into the sky to become the bright star known as Longcha peti (the polestar). Some of his magic remained in the agalloch, however, which, according to the Aos, is why the Assamese are to this day still so eager to collect this wood from the Tsurang Valley.

NOTE

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1. A harpoon-shaped piece of iron that was used as currency by the Ao Naga.

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