



The Goddess of Hunting

Nu People – China and Myanmar

A young hunter was roaming the Gaoligong Mountains in search of some game to take back to his village. But it had been raining non-stop since dawn. He was soaked, and potential prey seemed to detect him from a distance that day. There were no daylight hours left, especially in the depths of the forest, so he set off for the nearby Miluyan Cave, intending to spend the night there and try hunting again the next day. Before settling down in the cavern, however, he decided to set a trap not far from the entrance, to see if the god of hunting would finally be favourable to him and he could at least have a good dinner that night.

He lit a fire to warm himself and dry his clothes and, from time to time, he went quietly out to the entrance of the cave to see from afar if any animal had fallen into the trap.

On one of these outings, he thought he saw the nearby bushes moving as he looked in the direction of the trap, so he kept his eyes sharpened. Suddenly he spotted a brown muntjac leap out of the bushes and land directly on the trap.

Drawing his long knife from his belt, the young hunter dashed off like an arrow in the direction of the place where he had set the trap.

'The god of hunting has been kind to me at last,' he was muttering to himself as he dodged trees and leapt over bushes with his machete raised.

But when he reached the trap, there was no sign of the muntjac.

‘What has happened?’ he wondered aloud, as he looked around for the animal.

He had seen it with his own eyes! And it had fallen into the trap! He was sure of that! What could have happened?

‘It must have got loose somehow,’ he said to himself at last, disappointed.

He then crouched over the contraption and reassembled it, this time making sure that everything was in order so that, if the muntjac returned, it would be unable to escape again.

By the time he had finished, it was almost dark, so he returned to the cave, ate the few supplies he had brought with him and slept by the fire all night.

He awoke before sunrise as soon as the mouth of the cavern turned into a gate of light and, as soon as he became aware of where he was, he jumped up and went to see if the muntjac had returned and, this time, was caught in the trap. But, when he looked in the direction of the spot, he could not believe his eyes: a takin with huge horns had fallen into his trap!

Drawing his machete from his belt once again he did not run towards his prey this time.

‘That takin must weigh as much as five men put together,’ he thought, considering how to approach and kill it.

Finally, still not sure how he was going to approach the animal, he set off at a brisk pace towards the trap.

‘There’ll be food for the whole village,’ he said to himself, ‘but someone will have to come and help me carry the meat.’

However, his dreams of becoming a local hero were dashed when he arrived at the trap.

‘Where has the takin gone?’ He stammered in surprise, ‘It was here! I saw it!’

The young hunter thought he was losing his mind, that he was seeing things that were not real. However he noticed that, next to the trap, there were indeed taken tracks.

‘Is the god of hunting teasing me?’ he asked himself with a frown.

Without wasting any more time, he set up the trap again. This time he decided to hide among the bushes to see who it was, human or spirit, that was releasing his prey.

He waited for a long time until, at about midday, a dwarf musk deer fell into the trap and, just a moment later as if out of nowhere, a young woman bent over the deer, released it from the trap and, taking it in her arms, slipped back into the bushes.

The young hunter could not believe what he had witnessed, but it did not take him long to react. Leaping out of his hiding place, he swiftly set off in pursuit of the young woman with the deer in her arms. However, no matter how fast he ran, he could not catch up with the girl who, with astonishing agility, was dodging trees and undergrowth, and leaping over bushes as if she had wings on her feet.

The young woman came out of the tree forest and entered the bamboo forest, and the hunter came out of the tree forest and entered the bamboo forest. The girl came out of the bamboo forest and crossed the valley, and the hunter came out of the bamboo forest and crossed the valley. But he could not catch up with her which surprised him greatly.

Lastly, the girl hurried up the side of a mountain, on the top of which there was a very old tree with a large hole in its roots. Seeing that she could not outrun the hunter, she rushed through the entrance of the hole.

But the hunter was still in time to see one of the girl’s feet poking through the hole in the huge tree so, without a second thought, he too slipped through the hole and suddenly found himself in a spacious place.

‘The girl must live here,’ thought the hunter.

The young woman, with the dwarf deer in her arms, watched him silently from the depths of sort of living cave. He waved his hand as if to

tell her not to be afraid, that he was not going to hurt her. But her eyes showed no sign of fear.

The hunter, amazed by the place in which he found himself, set about contemplating what the dim light coming in through the hollows of the roots allowed him to observe. On the walls and floor were hemp mats, and there were also hemp ropes hanging here and there from which utensils of all kinds were hanging. He saw a kind of pallet, and on it something like a feather-blanket. Feathers with bright colours and exotic shapes hung everywhere.

After scanning the place, the hunter looked at the young woman who, impassive, seemed to be waiting for him to make his intentions clear. She was slim but sinewy, with long, shiny hair. She wore a blouse and a short skirt of woven hemp. She was adorned with a fine necklace and bracelets of small topaz beads. Seeing her up close, the young hunter was stunned by her beauty.

However, the attraction was mutual. Feeling that there was nothing to fear from the young hunter, the young woman relaxed and set the dwarf deer down, giving it a little pat to get it out of the cave and back into the forest. Of course, the young hunter did nothing to stop it.

‘It’s not right to set these terrible traps in the forest,’ said the young woman once the deer had left, ‘Don’t you realise how much suffering you cause the animals until you find them and kill them?’

‘I need to eat!’ he answered in justification. ‘And I also have to bring food to the people I love who are waiting for me in the village’.

‘I understand that you need to eat,’ she replied, ‘but to eat, you don’t need to cause so much suffering! You can do things in other ways’.

‘Yes? How?’ he answered, sincerely interested.

Thus began a friendship that would end in marriage.

For a while they lived in the tree hole until, one day, the young hunter asked the forest girl to live with him in the village, as he had to take care of his parents’ needs. So they went to the village, cleared an area of forest and built a house out of bamboo for themselves. Then they

cultivated a piece of land and looked after a few chickens. They made do on little but they were happy.

One day they got word of a visit from a guest who the young hunter wanted to treat in the finest way possible. The customs of his people demanded that a pig, a sheep or a calf – a chicken was not enough – be slaughtered to honour an important guest.

‘What can we do?’ the hunter said to his wife. ‘Maybe I should go hunting’.

‘Wait a moment,’ she said.

She went out of the house and, a few moments later, returned.

‘Take this,’ she said, handing him a peeled stalk of hemp, ‘and plant it in the ground behind the house’. And he did as she instructed.

The next day, when the cock crowed for the second time, the mountain girl woke up the hunter and said to him:

‘Hurry, go and get the prey! You have a muntjac by the hemp stalk!’

The hunter, not understanding what could have happened while they slept, did as his wife instructed and returned with a muntjac that was perfect to honour his guest. She prepared rice to go with it, and they both entertained the visitor as required by the social customs of their community.

After a while, a new visit was announced, and the hunter asked his wife if she had another peeled hemp stalk like the one used before the previous visit.

‘Don’t worry,’ she replied. ‘Tomorrow morning, stay home and cook rice. I’ll bring the meat for the guest’.

The next day, the woman left the house before dawn and went into the woods. By the time the cock crowed for the second time, the hunter heard a sharp knock coming from the backyard of the house. Going there to see what was happening, he found that the mountain girl had just dropped the carcass of a wild boar.

‘Here’s the meat for your guest,’ she said, only to add impatiently, ‘But have you not steamed the rice yet?’

And, of course, the guest left their home that day, deeply satisfied.

So they lived happily for several years and even had a son. When the child began to walk and talk the mountain woman said to her husband:

‘Our son is already walking, eating on his own and talking. Now you have chickens, pigs, sheep and cows. So you can have a decent life without me’.

The hunter could not believe what he was hearing.

‘Are you going to abandon your son and me?’ he asked with a pounding heart.

‘I have to go back to the mountain, to the forest,’ she said, stroking his cheek. ‘You can survive now, but the animals in the forest have no one to take care of them. I have to go back to them’.

The hunter lowered his head sadly, understanding his wife. The years he had lived with her had allowed him to understand her vision of things, of life. They had made him understand that human beings are no more important than other animals and that, although it is sometimes necessary to kill an animal to eat and preserve one's own life, wild animals also deserve care, attention and love.

‘Please take good care of our boy,’ she continued, her eyes misty with tears, ‘I’ll come to visit you several times a year and I’ll bring you some game’.

And, after hugging the child and kissing him, she embraced her husband, kissed him tenderly and left the house in the direction of the mountain.

The days went by and the hunter fell into a deep state of sadness. He missed the woman he loved and only the sight of the child brought him any comfort, for he saw in his eyes the eyes of his mother. Day after day he lived in the hope of seeing her coming back from the mountain. He would then ask her not to leave again or, in the worst case, come to some kind of agreement with her. He was even willing to go back to the hollow of the tree – he missed her so much!

But months passed by and the woman of the forest did not return. The man searched for her in the mountains and in the woods. He even went to the house in the hollow of the tree to see if she was sheltering there from the harsh weather, but all to no avail.

The man never gave up looking for her, while caring for the child and giving him all the love he could muster. Every year, between summer and autumn which was the time when she disappeared, the hunter went into the mountains to look for her, spending days, even weeks, searching for her. Strangely enough, he always came across a herd of takins by a spring that his wife had once shown him. From there he always returned home with one or two takins.

Over time it came to be said in the village that the hunter's wife had been an incarnation of the Goddess of Hunting, who had come to this world to teach her husband, and the rest of society, how to capture wild animals with as little suffering as possible, how to tame and raise poultry and farm livestock. It is said that she also taught them how to use hemp, how to spin and weave flax.

And legend has it that, although she had to leave her husband, the Goddess of Hunting never failed to love him, and never failed to protect him whenever he went into the woods. They say that all the takins the hunter caught in the mountains were gifts from her, for he always saw the footprints of a woman next to the tracks of the herd. They also say that both the hunter and his son felt her presence when she came to visit them, although they could not see her. In fact, she often visited them for they often saw her footprints in the backyard of the house.

The Nu People are certain that they are the descendants of that hunter and the Goddess of Hunting. They say that, even today, when the hunters go up the mountain and catch a takin, they always see the footprints of a woman among the tracks of the herd ... but they know that they cannot make the game suffer more than is strictly necessary, just as the Goddess of Hunting taught them. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda and Xueping Luo (2022).

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Comments

The Nu People whose numbers, according to most recent estimates, do not exceed 30,000, are distributed mainly between Yunnan Province in China and Kachin State in Myanmar. They inhabit a region of high mountains, deep ravines and narrow gorges, with temperate forests of pine and spruce at higher elevations and primary subtropical rainforests at lower altitudes. This makes the region a paradise of biodiversity, a haven which is unique in the world and home to leopards, tigers, bears, deer of various kinds, gibbons, macaques, lorises, giant falcons, pheasants and, as the story goes, muntjacs and takins.

In the Gaoligong Mountains World Biosphere Reserve alone, there are an estimated 205 species of wild animals, 525 species of birds and 2,514 species of plants, 318 of which are endemic to the Gaoligong Mountain (Gaoligongshan National Nature Reserve, 2022).

However, the region faces significant challenges due to increasing human activity. Threats to biodiversity include the increasing use of chemical fertilisers, expansion of agricultural and grazing land, logging and forest fires.

But perhaps of most pressing concern in recent years is the proposed construction of 13 large dams by the Huadian hydropower company along the middle and lower reaches of the Nu or Salween River. This river is home to more than 80 endangered species (Hays, 2015). In 2004, pressure from Myanmar and Thailand, where the waters of the Nu River reach, together with complaints from environmental groups and international media, led the Beijing government to impose a moratorium on the project. But climate change and decarbonisation policies in China have provided the perfect excuse to reactivate the initial plan for hydropower generation (Si, 2011). This time, however, it will be more difficult for Chinese and international environmental groups to help stop the disaster. As journalist Michael Standaert pointed out from a 2020 Yale University website:

Many environmental NGOs are being sidelined due to policies that require them to be sponsored by government institutions. And international NGOs, which were helpful in magnifying the work of those domestic organizations, have been effectively silenced under the country's Foreign NGO Law. Enacted in 2017, the law requires

international organizations to register with provincial or national security bureaus and to be affiliated with a domestic institution. (Standaert, 2020)

This being the case, we fear that the wonderful regions where the Nu People live in China, along the Gaoligong Mountains and the Nu River basin, will eventually lose their rich biodiversity, with dozens of unique species becoming extinct in the process. This is unless the Beijing and regional governments display the extraordinary common sense and ancient wisdom of the Chinese people and take appropriate measures to prevent this catastrophe.

The Earth Stories Collection is deeply grateful to Xueping Luo, a master's student at the United Nations University for Peace, for her dedicated work, since 2020, in researching and selecting stories for the Collection. This story is one of many she has found in the rich store of China's 56 ethnic cultures.

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 15b: Protect wild animals from methods of hunting, trapping, and fishing that cause extreme, prolonged, or avoidable suffering.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Preamble: The Challenges Ahead.- We have the knowledge and technology to provide for all and to reduce our impacts on the environment.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

Principle 2: Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

Principle 14: Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life.

Principle 15: Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.