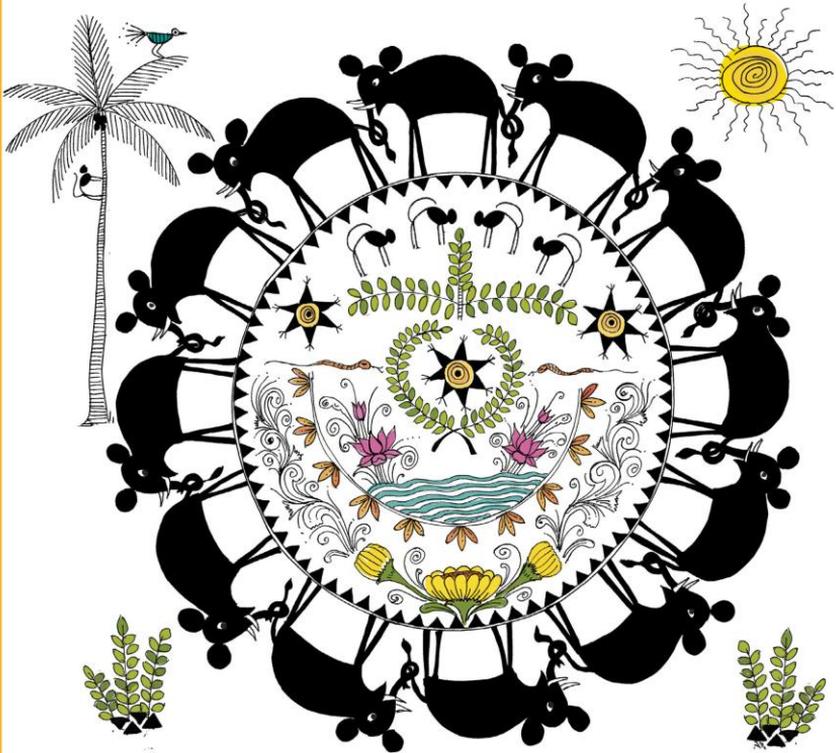


Nyago's Penance

Remixed Story by Priya Narayanan



The village of Yingli was facing the worst drought in its history. The mighty Yeoling River that once rushed past the village in its youthful arrogance was now thin as a sewing thread – *cut to size*, as a cynic would say. Ponds, big and small, that had abounded with fish and frogs now lay parched.

There was a time not so long ago, when mothers in the village sang lullabies to the accompaniment of frogs croaking under moonlit skies, to hush their little ones to sleep. Not anymore. It was as though the frogs knew what was to come and had packed their bags and left Yingli before the sun scorched the land and sipped away every drop of water from its core.

The fish, however, were not so lucky. They died one by one and were left to rot on the cracked beds of the ponds and river, with the villagers not willing to even make a meal of them fearing them to be harbingers

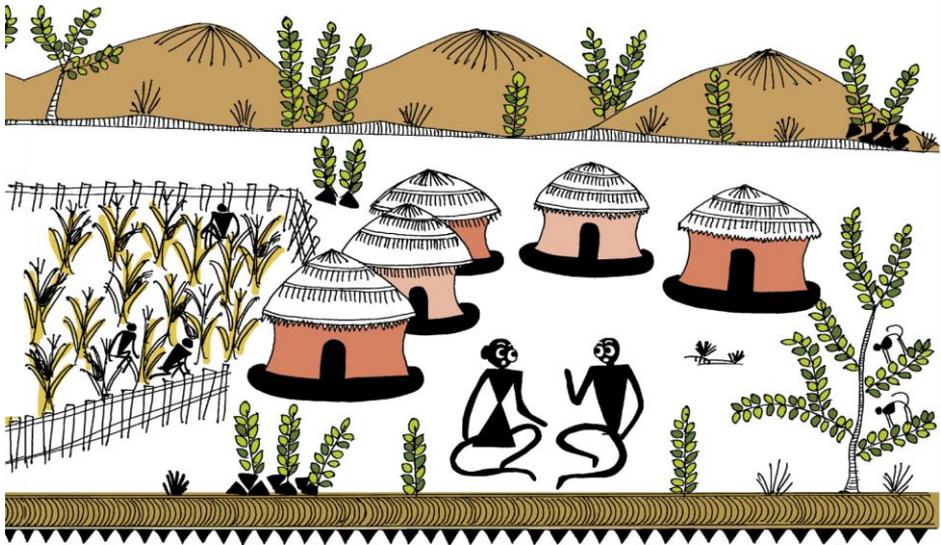
of ill omen. The same could not be said of the vultures that flew overhead though. They swooped down on the open burial grounds and sank their delighted talons on the dead fish - uninvited guests at a wedding feast.



The onset of the draught left people of Yingli flustered. They could not fathom why, despite their simple ways of life, their village was the target of nature's ire. After spending months waiting in vain for the clouds to relent, many of the younger folks packed their belongings and marched out of the village, in search of greener pastures. They would have to walk for days together, even weeks, before reaching the neighbouring province and even then, there was no assurance that the draught had spared that region. They decided to go nevertheless.

The older folks however, cared for Yingli much too far to even contemplate abandoning the village at its time of need. Nyago was one such village elder. But what set him apart from the others was his tenacity to find a solution to their predicament, while the others had given in to their fate.

One morning, Nyago sat his wife of forty years, Timiya, next to him. Fondly caressing the ground next to him with the palm of his hands as one would his infant child, he looked into Timiya's eyes. "Dear," he said "We have waited long enough for the rains to pour down and wash away our sorrows. It is time now for me to set out to seek the wisdom of the forests before the last stalks of grain wither and die on our fields.



Timiya knew what this meant. Nyago would have to walk into the womb of the forest bordering Yingli and do a penance for thirty-six days without food and water. If he survived the days spent amongst some of the most ferocious animals she'd only heard of, the spirit of the forest would whisper to him the mantra to invoke rains. Timiya loved her husband and was proud of his decision. But her eyes welled up as she stood at the threshold of their cottage, watching him vanish into the barren horizon.

Nyago's feet scraped the parched land as he walked towards the forest. He did not have to atone for the sins of the entire village that had knowingly or unknowingly hurt the fragile balance of nature, bringing the devastating draught upon it. But Nyago owed it to his land that had brought much joy and prosperity to him and his family in the past.

Whilst Nyago made his way to the forest, Timiya rushed to the village square. She had to make sure that Nyago returned home safe after his penance. It was a fiery afternoon and the winding lanes of Yingli bore a



deserted look. Timiya's fingers trembled as she stood under the lifeless Karumba tree and feverishly beat the announcer's drum. Hearing the drumbeats, the village folk, who had huddled within their homes to avoid the glare of an angry sun, dragged themselves out. *'Who ever could it be at this time of the day?'* they wondered. As the villagers gathered at the square, they were surprised to see Timiya in such distress.

Soon as the village head stepped forward to place a reassuring hand on her shoulders, Timiya put down the drum and disclosed Nyago's decision. The entire village was in awe of Nyago's resolve. Chiding themselves for having resigned to their fate without putting up a fight, the villagers deliberated for a while before deciding that every able-bodied person in the village would take turns to keep vigil on Nyago so that no harm came his way. It was true that the draught had sapped the

vigour out of the many animals that inhabited the forest, but one would never know what a desperate beast would do to an unarmed villager.

Thus passed the next thirty-six days, with Nyago sitting in deep meditation in the middle of the wasting forest and one villager after the other perching himself nearby, scaring away the wild animals that strayed in his direction.

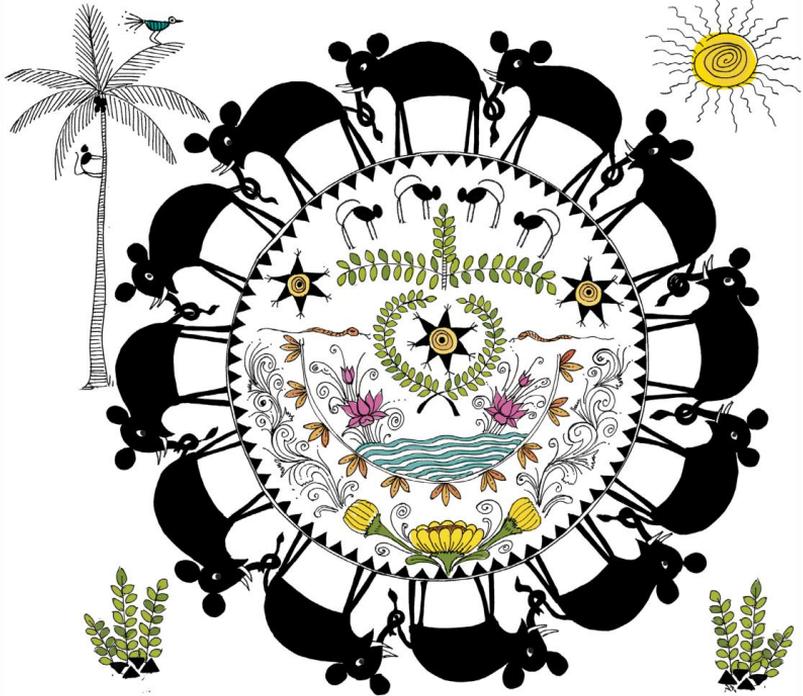
On the thirty-seventh day, Nyago hobbled back to the village wearing a contented smile on his shrivelled face. Standing at the village square, he announced in a feeble but unwavering tenor, “Hear everybody . . . the spirit of the forest has whispered to me! Let us not lose any more time and prepare for the ritual to invoke the rains.”



With these words, Nyago sent a handful of villagers into the forest to round up twelve elephants. Another set of villagers were given the task of coaxing a troop of four monkeys and two snakes to the village square. Finally, he instructed the womenfolk to draw on the parched

earth, a giant pattern depicting a water pond surrounded by the elements of nature. Everything had to be done just the way the spirit of the forest had ordered – there was no room for error.

The villagers got down to their tasks in earnest. A group of men and women marched to the forest, drums and trumpets in hand, to drive the lazy, emaciated elephants into the village. Another group amassed whatever bit of fruits they had managed to save until then to woo the stubborn bunch of monkeys to the square. The snakes were easier to persuade. All that had to be done was to leave a trail of dead rodents all the way from the forest to the village square. And dead mice were in abundance in Yingli ever since the onset of the draught.

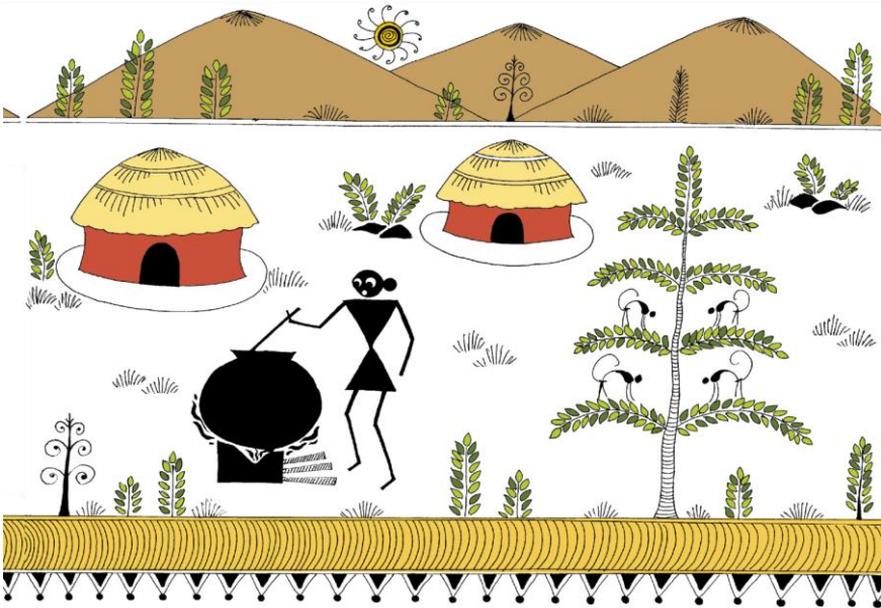


It was late in the evening when the womenfolk were done with drawing the pattern. Nyago ordered the elephants to be arranged in a circle around the pattern and the monkeys and snakes to be positioned within the circle –*one elephant for each month of the year, one monkey for each of the four seasons and one snake for each half of the day*, the spirit had whispered to Nyago.

Nyago then asked for a big pot of water to be placed on a pile of burning firewood. As he stood in the middle of the pattern chanting the mantra whispered into his ears by the spirit of the forest, Timiya churned the water in the pot with a tall ladle and the villagers drummed their drums and blew their trumpets, working up a fervent, hypnotic rhythm.

The ritual continued through the night, with no one stopping to as much as wipe the sweat off their bodies. Even the animals, sensing that they

were in the midst of something important, stayed put at their places swaying to the rhythm of the chants.



Slowly but surely, tufts of rain clouds rose out of Timiya's pot and made their way to join the silvery moon in the skies high above.

When the sun replaced the weary moon the next morning, the skies above Yingli were filled with rain clouds. The villagers danced and sang as the first drops of rain sizzled on the hot earth and rose up in smoke after which the clouds poured out their contents for the first time in two years. Soon, ponds and rivers filled up again and trees greedily licked up the raindrops that touched their parched leaves.



As the story of Nyago's penance spread far and wide, villagers who had left Yingli in desperation started returning home. Animals were back to their frolicking ways along the riverside and soon, fish would start flourishing too. Only the vultures, sitting silently atop the tall Bomkoya trees, surveyed the ground beneath them and mourned the return of the rains.

THE END

