

# Reconstituting Indigenous Oceanic Folktales

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Indigenous communities in Oceania have always used folktales to explain their social, psychological, political, and cultural environment. This tradition continues today in the cultural productions of many Pacific writers, artists, and filmmakers. Their “texts” are often saturated with social and political discourses that challenge ideology, tradition, and power. I explore how scholars in various discursive traditions have used folktales as structures for viewing culture, society and events, and I do so in order to re-view folktales within an indigenous cultural production in Oceania.

## **Folktales as Social Cultural Texts**

If we are to see folktales as “text” then we need to consider the definition of “text” as a social cultural production of society. We need also to attend to the specific demands of theory that address the existence of “text” as a constituting product of social and cultural imaginings. The first place to begin this inquiry is to consider text as a structure of feeling or experience as expressed by Raymond Williams in his discussion of the various discourses we produce in society to explain our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, utterances, and experiences. According to Williams, “...a ‘structure of feeling’ is a cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand such elements and their connections in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively, to such evidence” (1977, 133). As a cultural text, folktales include “unusual anecdotes, initiations, wonder stories and animal tales” (Zipes, 2022, 28). They are affective in nature and cannot be reduced to belief systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships. As “structures of feeling,” folktales encompass much more than this, including elements of social and material experience not covered by concepts like ideology or worldview (Williams 1977, 133). Folktales contribute to the general folklore of a kindred group or people in a given time and space, where folklore is taken to mean stories of a kindred group or people who share at least one thing in common.

Folklore consists of artistic expressions that are “heavily governed by the tastes of the group” that performs or represents them (Toelken 1996, 266). In folk performances we see “a continual tableau or paradigm more revealing of cultural worldview” that it is possible some of these expressions were created independently by their creators: “Nonetheless, as students of culture have shown, in terms of world view the distinctions between formal culture and folk culture are not as sharp as one would have imagined; apparently, little is exempt from functionings of cultural worldview” (Toelken 1996, 266). Independent emergence of folktales allowed the existence of distinct repertoire of folktales in Oceania. Our discussions will consider some of these folktales told within certain groups, but not in other groups, as is the case in a number of societies in Oceania.

The second consideration here is to think of folktales as texts in the Bakhtinian sense of it as an unending object of possibilities, with its own internally constructed structures of producing and reproducing meanings that are themselves open to further possible interpretations of meaning. Thus we have to consider folktale texts as

existing within the social and political sphere of heterogenous commingling of worlds and peoples, of ideas and perspectives, of beliefs and experiences, of private and public discourses, and of new and old ways of knowing. A folktale text is a “subjective reflection of the objective world” and it is “an expression of consciousness” out of which we hold our reflection of the world as our reality (Bakhtin 1996, 113). It is through the notion of text that we take our departures in our various kinds of knowledge productions: “Proceeding from the text, they wander in various directions, grasp various bits of nature, social life, states of mind, and history, and combine them—sometimes with causal, sometimes with semantic, ties—and intermix statements with evaluations” (Bakhtin 1996, 113). We could also relate this view of texts to Julia Kristeva’s notion of text as a “mosaic of quotations” and by which she means: “any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva cited in Hafstein 1996, 307). Kristeva’s notion of text is closer to Roland Barthes’ “conception of the text as plural, where the text is “woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (which language is not?), antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony” (Kristeva 1977, 160; Hafstein 1996, 307). The evocation of Kristeva and Barthes in this discussion is to highlight the easily recognizable link of the notion of text to their various discussions on text and intertextuality around objects of cultural analysis such as folklore in their written as well as verbal forms of utterance. Thus, folktales are also the final product of a mosaic of utterances and various co-mingling of texts and meta-texts that are ever present in different societies.

Indigenous authors, artists, scholars, and filmmakers have constructed contemporary works firmly within the influence of their own indigenous oral traditions. The European difference and separation between high and low cultures is absent in Oceania in as much as folktales have remained very much part of the cultural knowledge system of the people. But this does not make folktales any less structural, contextual, and necessary in Oceania than elsewhere. It does, however, call to mind the need to be clearer about where folktales fit into the generic term folklore. Toelken makes clear the distinctions by dividing folklore into three categories: “Verbal folklore (that is, expressions people make with words, usually in oral interchange), material folklore (expressions which use physical materials for their media), and customary folklore (expressions which exist through people’s action” (1996, 9). Our interest is to consider verbal folklore, which “includes genres like epics, ballads, lyric songs (lullabies, love songs), myths (stories of sacred or universal import which people, cultures, religions, and nations believe in), legends (stories of local import which people believe actually happened but they learnt about from someone else), memorates (culturally based first-person accounts and interpretations of striking incidents), [and] folktales and jokes (fictional stories which embody cultural values)...to name only a few of the most common” (Toelken 1996, 9). As stories that embody cultural values folktales occupy the central textual function in the contemporary literature of Oceania.

### **Indigenous Oceanic Folktale Structures**

For a long time I have been influenced by folktales, especially those that I learned as a child and read over the years. As a child growing up in an oral society the stories I heard were folktales from my Nagum Boiken society in Papua New Guinea. One of my favorites was the folktale on Lomo’ha, who unplugs a rock that is the doorway to the world of the spirits. The doorway opens into a passage leading to the spirit world.

Lomo'ha follows this passage. He travels deep into the spirit world. In the spirit world Lomo'ha was treated with the highest honor, learnt their language, and returned some years later to his people. By this time Lomo'ha had lost his human language. He was unable to communicate with his people. It took the whole village to perform a ritual that lifted the spirits' influence and brought him back to human society. I used this folktale as the structure of my poetry.

I explored the Nagum Boiken culture hero, Lomo'ha, in my poetry collection, *Lomo'ha I am in Spirit's Voice I Call* (1991). I used one among many folktales from my own society to explore, reframe, and restructure the experiences of journeys outside of the village. The Lomo'ha folktale is used to capture the experience of journeys out of the village, learning European language, manners, behaviors, and culture. The loss of voice to the spirits meant Papua New Guineans have lost their cultures, languages, and attitudes to those of European cultures. In my exploration of Lomo'ha in my poetry I discovered that I could use the folktale structure to view my experiences and those of others.<sup>1</sup> The folktale structure served the purpose of framing experiences that involve the life of being born in a forest society, journeying into the depths of the western world, gaining education, and participating in intellectual engagement where I discovered the source of inspiration was always the experience of growing up in a world rich with folklore and mythology.

The use of folktale as poetic structures and frameworks for constructing literary works is not unique to my work. Other Pacific writers have also used folktale structures in constructing their writings.<sup>2</sup> Literary reproductions of Oceanic folklore proliferate in the writings of many Pacific Islanders. Pacific writers such as Patricia Grace, Caroline Sinavaiana, Sia Figiel, Robert Sullivan, and Haunani-Kay Trask have used Indigenous culture hero or heroine models to structure their own creative oeuvre. Grace makes references to female mythical figures such as Papatuanuku, Hine-Nui-te-Po and Mahuika in her novel *Potiki* (1986). Sinavaiana evokes the goddess Nafanua to restructure her experiences in *Alchemies of Distance* (2001). Robert Sullivan retells the stories of Maui, Tane and Hine Titama, Tawaki, Rata, and Kupe in his book *Weaving Earth and Sky: Myths and Legends of Aotearoa* (2002), Sia Figiel, like Sinavaiana, also approaches the Samoan war goddess Nafanua as a role model to capture the experiences of young Samoan girls growing up in a male dominated society. Haunani-Kay Trask invokes the volcano goddess Pele to capture the burden of her experience. The active presence of culture heroes or heroines in the work of these writers attests to the influence of folklore structures in the writings of Pacific Islanders.

From the early writings of Pacific Islanders to the present transfigurations of Pacific stories in films, myths and folktales have remained an important element, creating a "dialogue between the oral and written traditions in Pacific discourse" (Keown 2007, 182).<sup>3</sup> The folktales transferred to the written form are either translated from vernaculars or are infused with other Pacific folktales and with "Western mythologies and ontologies, exploring the syncretic nature of postcolonial subjectivities" (Keown 2007, 183).<sup>4</sup> In transferring folktale narratives to the literary form writers use folktales as the frame of reference to reconstruct their experiences in a complex world with its postmodern tensions and anxiety.<sup>5</sup> The incorporation of Oceanic folktales in writing, art, or film makes Pacific Islanders view themselves through their own lenses. Through folktales Oceanic peoples view their histories, learn their cultures, and

maintain a conscious link to the past, to the traditions of their ancestors, and to the geographies of their psychology, landscapes, and peoples.<sup>6</sup>

If in imaginative literary or artistic works from all over the world, writers, artists, and filmmakers have drawn inspiration from “folk-tale motifs in the formation of enduring cultural creations” (Zipes 1979, 9), in Oceania folktales have been infused with other texts to produce multifaceted literary, artistic, and cinematic representations, the frameworks of which are drawn from Oceania’s folk motifs. From major writers such as Albert Wendt, Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace, Vilsoni Hereniko, Epeli Hau’ofa, Russell Soaba, and John Kasaipwalova to little known writers such as Ambrosyus Waiyin and Paschal Waisi the influence of the folktale motifs in their literary works is undeniable.

### **Reconstituting Oceanic Folktales**

Through the creative reconstitutions of culture heroes like Maui, Pele, Nafanua, Sina, or Kulubob, Manup, and Lomoha, Pacific Islanders are able to reclaim their authority through framework of discourses generated by the mythical heroes in Oceania. Patricia Grace blends the elements of the Maui myth with the life of Jesus Christ to constitute the experiences of Maori struggles to maintain their identity and land under pressures of modernization and acculturation in New Zealand (Keown 2007, 179). Similarly Witi Ihimaera explores the whale rider mythology with contemporary others in urban Maori societies (see Ihimaera 1987; Niki Caro 2003). I have discussed such themes elsewhere thus will avoid repeating such analysis here. However, I wish to look at certain aspects of the film *Pear ta ma'on maf: The Land Has Eyes* as an example of the cinematic use of the folktale motif (Hereniko 2004; See Allan Howard 2006, 74-96).

Retelling the story of Tafatemasian the mythical warrior woman goddess, Hereniko drives the narrative of Viki, the young Rotuman girl through the rite of passage, her growing up in a society fractured by age old sibling rivalry, the colonial history, and postmodern inroads in the lives of ordinary Rotumans rooted in the land of their ancestors. *The Land Has Eyes* is about the Rotumans or by extension other Pacific Islanders’ deep connection to land, which they claim through the telling of myths and folktales about their ancestors. Rotuma, as a storied place symbolizes the eyes of the ancestors, spirits, and the peoples of Rotuma. The evil deeds, the injustices, denials and the difficult times faced by people are all recorded through the eyes of the spirit of the warrior woman. The male brothers abandon the warrior woman on the island of Rotuma. In the absence of the male structures of authority and power, the warrior woman weaves her own world and gives birth to a community that responds through the feminine maternal schema. That is, Rotuma, is a creation within itself, and through that imagery, the soul and heart of every Rotuman is discovered. Not through lies, deceits, and betrayal, but through hard work, independent spirit, and socially productive relations cultivated with the land, the social relations, and the community.<sup>7</sup> *The Land Has Eyes* “is significant for the many ways it attempts to make invisibles visible, to show the deceased, weather, sea, and land, can be conscious participants in everyday Rotuman life” (Houston 2008, 170).

### **Folktales and Fables of Oceania**

The image of the young protagonist diving into the sea to discover her warrior goddess, in *The Land has Eyes*, reminds us of the image of turtles and their symbolic

power within island communities. In *Folk Tales and Fables of the Americas and the Pacific*, Robert Ingpen and Barbra Hayes retell the Fijian story of the Giant Turtle. The story is told by Fijians to explain how people from Tonga came to live among them. A fisherman from Samoa named Lekabai saved from drowning in the rough sea had managed to climb a rock into the realm of the Sky King. The Sky King helped Lekabai return to earth on a turtle:

“Lekabai thanked the Sky King. He was climbing on to the back of the huge turtle when the Sky King added. ‘If you wish to thank me, give the turtle a coconut and a mat woven of coconut leaves to bring back to me here in the sky. We have no coconuts and I have heard that they are delicious. Send me one and we will grow trees. Send me a mat and we will learn to weave our own by copying yours.’”

At that Lekabai left with the mighty turtle back to Samoa with the instruction that he is not to open his eyes at anytime. Through the journey to Samoa Lekabai was teased by dolphins and sea birds for being foolish in closing his eyes. This was the instruction from the Sky King. A feast was staged to celebrate Lekabai’s return from the dead. Hungry fishermen speared the turtle when it returned to the reef to feed after it got tired of waiting for Lekabai. On learning this Lekabai told the villagers that they would be punished. The villagers got scared and buried the turtle in a deep hole with a coconut and a mat of woven coconut leaves. In the process the Sky King sent a bird to find out what was happening. The bird touched a young boy called Lavai-pani, who would live in perpetual youth for generations to tell the story to a group of young men from Tonga sent by their king to find the shell of the turtle. The Samoans laughed at the Tongan men and said, ‘We all know that old legend,’ smiled the Samoans, ‘but it is only a legend. No one knows where the turtle was buried, or if there was a turtle at all!’

The Tongan men returned home, only to be sent back by the King. It was Lavai-pani who helped them dig up the turtle shell. They found thirteen turtle shells, but gave only twelve turtle shells to the King. The King sent them back to Samoa to get the thirteenth shell. The young men set sail again, but decided against returning to Samoa, so they set sail until they arrived in Kadavu, one of the Fiji Islands, which was then ruled by King Rewa. He was kind to the weary young men and gave them land on which to live. They built houses and took wives and were happy. These were the first people from Tonga to settle in Fiji (1994, 78-83).

This folktale reflects the relationships between Tongans, Samoans, and Fijians, as well as those between humans and their supernatural worlds. The volatile relations, the differences between various groups, and their historical indifference or friendship to one another are highlighted. Inter-island travels and cultural items of value like coconut and mats woven with coconut leaves are items featured in this folktale. This is a remarkable folktale that resembles those told from elsewhere in Polynesia, but features turtles, coconuts, coconut strewn mats, whales, dolphins, and sea birds. In documented evidence, the oral literature of western Polynesia supports the Fiji-Tonga-Samoa-Futuna-Uvea interconnection: “Interaction continued even when people had acquired a sense of Island-centred identity, as oral literature shows occurred” (Scarr 1990, 66).

Elsewhere in the Pacific, say in Melanesia, the story of turtles take on a different role and function. Imanuel Nigira writes a folktale about a turtle and eagle in the Zia language group of Waria River in the Morobe Province of Papua New Guinea. The story involves a young girl tricked and abandoned to die out in the sea. She swam to an island. To survive she ate fruits and nuts on the island. One day she hit her hand with a stone when attempting to crack beach almonds. Blood came out from her. She collected the blood in a shell and covered it with another shell. From the blood two eggs were formed until they hatched, giving birth to an eagle and a turtle. She looked after the eagle and the turtle until they matured. The turtle and the eagle helped her catch fish, bring fire, clay pot, and a house to the island. The eagle brought the first and second items. The third item was carried on the turtle's back to the island where the woman lived. The shared relationship between the first man or woman and animals in the folktales are the bond that ties them together in a symbiotic relationship. Usually in this type of relationship the animals serve as the link between the human world and the spirit world.

The turtle and the eagle feature prominently in the two folktales presented above. Blood from a cut from the woman in the Waria story gives birth to the eagle and the turtle, legitimating her as the original birthing human spirit. Kamene writes that to the Zia of Waria River "living means being aware of, and having knowledge of, and the ability to manipulate the relationship between other living persons, the dead (the spirit world) and the eco-and aqua-systems of the surroundings thus reassuring the renewal or continuation of life. The significance of the interdependence of part and whole of the cosmos is clearly manifested in the social structure of the Zia community" (1995, 87-88). As in the folktale given above, the eagle features as a totemic symbol of one of the tribe. In his explanation of the four totem names used in Zia, Kamene has this to say: "The *bego* is associated with the hornbill, the *yewa* the bird of paradise, the *sakia* with the white cockatoo, the *wapo* with the eagle. These clans form the recognizable social badges that cement the extended kin affiliations of each village, which in turn gives its distinct communal sense. This thus gives rise to mutual and reciprocal respect between villages and within individual members which enhance and furthermore, maintain internal social cohesion and harmony in the Zia community" (1996, 88). The Zia are also centered on the community (*dubu*) and work at strengthening the interdependent relationship through various social activities such as fishing, gardening, feasting, dancing, and storytelling.

It is worth mentioning that various Indigenous Pacific writers and scholars have used folktales to tell their own histories by tracing the link to the past. Among these Indigenous writers and scholars are John Puhia tau Pule, Kauraka Kauraka, Teresia Teaiwa, Nora Vagi Brash, Rexford T. Orotaloa, and Vincent M. Diaz.<sup>8</sup> History, culture, art, and the study of these are launched from a particular perspective: "History and culture—historiography and ethnography—can be conceptualized in different ways... One always sees only a slice, at a given time, from a particular vantage point, of a fluid and uncontainable history or cultural practice" (Diaz 2000, 143).

### **Re-conceptualizing Indigenous Folktales**

The re-conceptualization of a folktale in indigenous spaces has intrigued scholars to investigate the phenomena in new ways. For example, the cassowary woman story is not entirely unique in Papua New Guinea, as it occurs elsewhere in the world. In this

framework the anthropologist Donald Tuzin (1997) investigates its powerful religious political influence in an indigenous community in Papua New Guinea. Tuzin's study of the cassowary woman Nambweapa's story in Ilahita village of the East Sepik Province makes interesting connections of this story to a universal folklore motif of the "*swan maiden*", which is said to be the oldest and earliest known love story on earth (Tuzin 1997, 71; Lessa 1962, 16). In Asia Pacific folklore this motif proliferates in many communities. Scholars such as Dixon (1916, 1964) and Lessa (1961) trace thematic similarities and known historical contacts of folktales and fairy tales as they appear in the Asia Pacific region: "Swan maidens are found in cultures of Philippines and Micronesia; along the north coast of New Guinea; in Vanuatu, New Caledonia, southern and Eastern Australia; and in New Zealand, Samoa, and elsewhere in central Polynesia (Tuzin 1997, 73). Considering the diffusion of this folktale in Oceania as extensive it is useful for our purpose to consider the possibility that other folktales have also emerged elsewhere in the Pacific. Some of these may have independent emergence while others may have a long genealogy of diffusion around the world.

As in Europe where the folktales and fairy tales preceded Medieval period, the telling of these tales in Oceania preceded the contact period, and soon after some of these tales were written down (Silva 2007). Even when education and literary culture in Oceania had established itself many of these societies continue to transmit their traditions through verbal performances, oratory, storytelling, artwork, craft, canoe prows, totem poles, and through song and dance. There is "recovery and reimagining of traditional oral storytelling forms, not just in high literary but in more popular modes of creation and distribution" (Wilson 1999, 6). For example, a conference on "Reimagining Oceania" dovetailed the Pacific Artists and Writers' Festival held in Suva at the University of the South Pacific campus. The conference began with a high key address from Subramani touching on some of the developments and challenges Oceania writers, artists, scholars, and filmmakers face: "A kaleidoscope of oceanic cultures, tracing diverse and complex forms of knowledge—philosophies, cartographies, languages, genealogies, repressed knowledges—blurring the usual disciplinary boundaries, including the divisions of oral speech from written materials, visual imagery from music and performances, and juxtaposing the popular, commonsensical and personal with the scientific would certainly make this a mammoth project." Oceania is treated as a complicated palimpsest to "reinscribe the new epistemologies, our epistemologies" (Subramani 1999, 3). Indeed seven years later, after this discussion another conference on Indigenous epistemologies of Oceania was organized at the University of the South Pacific again to reinforce the ongoing scholarship and new developments in the visual and artistic arenas around the Pacific. By this time a number of indigenous film makers such as Vilsoni Hereniko and Urale were present to discuss the use of indigenous knowledge of Oceania in their films.

### **Political Functions of Folktales**

The political element of folktale is how it affects the thoughts of listeners and how they acted upon it. The respect accorded to folktales in Oceania says a lot about the importance of locally specific stories. The performance of a folktale "exemplifies how, consciously and not cultural actors engage with modified myths and other folktales and how contingent circumstances can move cultural actors to defend against or preempt that which is foretold" (Tuzin 1997, 98). This is a factor that inspires the reproduction through performance of a folktale in its varied and modified

form that is easily misunderstood by scholars or outsiders encountering the folktales of Oceania. This is the observation reflected in Tuzin's study of the cassowary's revenge in the Ilahita society of Papua New Guinea: "The vicissitudes of belief and action that surround myths, their varied and changeable significances, are often overlooked by anthropologists and folklorists, who, following their own habits of inquiry generally take these tales as they are, as things to collect and exhibit, as butterflies of culture" (Tuzin 1997, 98). A tacit consideration of folktales is that the form it takes at the time of performance is influenced both by time and social cultural environmental change that tend to influence the content. The social cultural space fills its content.

Space influences the way in which power is constructed within cultural frameworks and social interactions. We can analyze space as a social cultural factor influencing the operation of power through temporal and spatial structures (Diamond 2008, 100). These are, as some would have it, the foundations for the emergence and consolidation of Indigenous epistemology and Indigenous knowledge. David Gegeo explores the Kwara'ae case in point: "In adopting and modifying practices and knowledge from the outside, Kwara'ae people theorize about rural development and integrate traditional knowledge with introduced knowledge, thereby creating a new form of knowledge." Gegeo explains further that epistemology emerging out of the indigenous societies "refers to a cultural group's way of thinking and of creating and reformulating knowledge using traditional discourses and media communication (e.g., face-to-face interaction) and anchoring the truth of the discourse in culture" (2000, 65).

How are folktales used as texts to represent the worldviews, local perspectives, and responses of indigenous peoples to social change and political development? A notable example of how folklore influences the political decisions of the colonized world in Oceania is the experiences of the West Papuan society in Indonesia. Under the Indonesian rule bloody conflicts emerged partly as a result of militarization and the policy of Javanization in that province. In the effort to promote the 'Irianese' provincial culture, Jakarta instituted the creation of a museum, which saw Arnold Ap, a New Guinean, in charge. Ap on the other hand used the opportunity to document and promote Papuan folklore, songs, and culture as a way of differentiating Papuans from Javanese peoples and culture. He recorded songs and folktales from various tribes and played these on radio in Papuan languages, rather than in Bahasa Indonesia. The project was equally powerful in making Papuans become aware of themselves more as they wrestled with the 1963 Referendum that saw them clustered with Indonesia. Ap's position was viewed by the Indonesian military as supporting the anti-Indonesian guerrilla organization, Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM) (Anderson 1983, 173). To sabotage Ap's work, the military kidnapped him, took him to the Freeport Copper Mine site and executed him. The elimination of Ap meant the Indonesian authorities could continue to control and force Papuans to accept the Indonesian state control and colonization. The execution of Ap, however, added salt to the wound experienced by Papuans as people colonized by people different to them in culture, language, and racial composition.

### **Folktales and Nationalism**

During the period leading up to Papua New Guinea's Independence in 1975 students used folktales to enforce the agenda of nationalism. Institutions such as the University

of Papua New Guinean, the Administrative College, the PNG University of Technology, and the Goroka campus of University of Papua New Guinea were hubs of cultural and political consciousness. Students at the University of Technology in Lae contributed their folktales to the student yearbook called *Nexus* between 1970 and 1971. Seven years later in 1978, Donald Stokes published a representative of these stories as retold by Barbara Ker Wilson in *The Turtle and the Island*. Oxford University Press published a later edition as *Legends from Papua New Guinea: Book Two* (1996).

These young writers heard their Indigenous folktales as they grew up in their villages. To negotiate with others they used stories from their own societies to explain their cultural background and explanations of the world. They also learned from each other the importance of cultural diversity, cross-cultural fertilization, and multiple explanations of the world. The students wrote their stories from memory. These stories give explanations, moral lessons, and descriptions of the natural beauty of landscapes, cultural values, explanations of the mysteries of nature of things, and about the intricate relationships humans have with the natural, physical, and spiritual environment.

As role models and future leaders these students realized the importance of cultural maintenance, self-explanations, and collective consciousness made up of different cultural and language backgrounds. If they are to live together as a society they need to teach each other their own cultures. Cultural nationalism begins when those who comprise it consider it important enough to privilege it against the dominant culture. In Papua New Guinea these students recognize the need to provide their own cultural explanations of the world, their social relationships with each other, and to the natural and spiritual environment inherited from their ancestors.

One of the stories in *Legends from Papua New Guinea* is of interest to this discussion. "The Great Flood" written by Adam Amod, from Ali Island near Aitape, in the Sandaun Province explains how the Ali Islanders settled on the island and their relationships to Tumeleo and the mainlanders of Aitape (1996: 95-99). The flood story had survived the test of time and has spread across the Sepik region, though the flood myth is also a universal one. The Ali Island version begins with the villagers killing a talking eel who had warned the villagers to remove the fish poison (*Walamil*) used to kill fish for a mortuary feast in the village. The eel was carved up and distributed among the villagers. The head part of the eel was given to a young boy. The head of the eel warned the boy not to eat it and instructed him to tell his parents what to do. The father planted the eel's head near a tall coconut tree, dug a hole near the tree so that the boy and his mother can take shelter from the flood commanded by the eel. The flood destroyed the entire village, except for a neighboring village tribe known as Yini Parey, on the way to the feast, who were swept away by the flood on a breadfruit tree, ending up on a reef that became known as Ali Island. The boy's father had climbed the coconut tree as instructed by the eel. The boy and his mother remained sheltered in the pit near the tall coconut tree. The father, Kairap, ate coconuts to remain alive in the tree. To see if the flood had receded he threw three coconuts down from the tree. The first two coconuts sank into the water. The third coconut touched the hard surface of the earth. The smoke rising from the pit where the boy and his mother took shelter confirmed that the flood has subsided.

The flood myth is about the arrogance and foolishness of villagers in observing the link between humans, the natural world, the animal kingdom, and the spiritual worlds. Knowing and respecting this link is the key to a balance in nature and the world. Human carelessness and lack of respect of nature lead to ecological catastrophe in the world. Another key element in this story is about the genealogies of a people and the migration of people across vast land, sea, and rivers. In the Ali Island version, we come to see how the Ali Islanders had moved from the mainland to settle on the Island. It also tells the story of how the survivors of the flood had come to form the basis on which generations of people from this ancestral place had come about. The myth is told with the intent to instill in younger generations about cultural taboos, their cultural heritage, and the foundational principles and rules younger generations have to follow. The eel symbolically represents the ancestral wisdom and spiritual forces that guide and direct people's lives. Finally, the flood myth is the exploration of the metaphor on human's relationship with nature and through which the complex relationship of man against nature and nature against man occurs.

Using folktales to define their identities Papua New Guinean students successfully carved out a sense of nationalism. Regis Stella discusses the proliferation of literary productions based on folklore during the early years of Papua New Guinean writing: "The importance of indigenous tradition, culture, and identity for Papua New Guineans, and particularly shared custom (*kastom*), is highlighted through the incorporation of orature into textual discourse. Oral literature has always been an integral part of traditional Papua New Guinean cultures in rendering myths, chants, poetry, song, and dance, and drama" (Stella 2007, 176). To prove this point Stella considers Arthur Jawodimbari's place *The Sun* as an example of how a folktale was used to highlight the issue of nationalism and independence: "In the play, the incorporation of a legend validates the people's cultural values and connection to place, while at the same time the use of orature provides cultural authority....Like many stories in Papua New Guinea, the legend of the sun represents the ideals of communality and sharing in Indigenous cultures" (Stella 2007, 177).<sup>9</sup> Cultural narratives and use of indigenous folktales serve as the backbone of national narratives in a postcolonial society.

### **Translation and Power in Folktales**

In the process of working with folktales during my study of Nagum Boiken medicinal knowledge system I encountered another important relationship between translation and power. I had collected a version of a folktale earlier in my research, but on further analysis, I was told that the version I collected earlier was "not a serious version" to the one my collaborator wanted me to collect. At that time, without knowing the complex nature in which various versions of folklore texts are structured and layered in terms of their power and authority, we disagreed. What did we disagree on? First, we disagreed because the version I had collected earlier was the popular version. My collaborator argued that my research lacked any seriousness. The popular version is heard and performed in public for a general audience. The version which he wanted me to collect was a sacred version. He is the only person to know the sacred version. He felt it was time for me to know the sacred version and wanted me to document both the sacred and popular versions.

So what does this tell us about folktales, translation, and power? Within different societies there are different texts lodged at different levels within a culture. Each

society views public and sacred texts or folktales in different ways. My collaborator held the view that the sacred texts itself is the source of his power and authority. He refused to surrender it through the process of translation from the primary oral culture to the secondary print technological culture. His insistence on maintaining two versions of the same folktale meant he could maintain his control and power of the sacred version over the popular version. This lesson has taught me to consider folklore texts, whatever they may be, as existing in two different levels of power in the indigenous knowledge world.

The first level is that power is sanctioned by the rules governing the performance and recitation of sacred texts. Denying access to the sacred knowledge constituted within the magic utterances and narratives in the sacred text is a refusal to transact any powers outside of the rules that govern performance of sacred texts. Power is maintained within the jurisdiction of sacred texts. The second level is the authority to perform or narrate folktales. One gets to be an authority on performative narratives and magic utterances through inheritance or through a long process of learning under the influence of great elders and authoritative mentors in a society. Individuals with such authorities are considered powerful in Nagum Boiken societies.

The Nagum Boikens have two mythical figures named as Haiwanga and Yarawali. Most magic utterances evoke the names of Haiwanga and Yarawali. The two culture heroes began the *wali kombo* (spirit illness) among other magic utterances. The folktale of the two brothers is dispersed in the northern New Guinea mainland. The two brothers are either seen as gods or friends. Lipset discusses the myths of the two brothers as the genesis of “geography, male agency and Austronesian hegemony in north coast cosmology” (Lipset 1997). Lipset links the theory to an earlier work by Hogbin that concludes among other things the emergence of conflict over powers between two brothers in “the magico-religious” world. The two brothers mythology appears as Manup and Kulubob myth in the Rai Coast area or as Andena and Arena in the Murik society. The myth is narrated to explain sibling rivalry, the “material knowledge” and the “masculine contests for authority and control” (Lipset 1997). The latter is questioned in relation to the female agency of such contests. The folktale of the rivalry between the two brothers has implications in the ways in which we view the closely connected tribal or ethnic groups in Papua New Guinea, and elsewhere in Oceania. Looking at this folklore more critically we uncover the construction of male authority and power in societies where this folktale appears (Winduo 1998).

There are folktale models that are universal in occurrences, but are also indigenous to the region. Specific elements in Oceanic folktales can be teased out and their functions in socio-cultural and political development explained in detail. Translations of folktales have political potential as well as challenges in defining power. Power is constructed in folktales by those who recite or perform the unique local folktale. Various models of power often constructed in folktales are adequate enough as models of social political articulations. Members of a society use folktales to reinforce socially productive relations in society.

## **Conclusion**

Translations of folktales, viewed from the perspective considered here, relate to the ways in which we read and study the traditions within the social cultural contexts and of such texts in the magico-religious world of Oceania. We are concerned with power

embedded within the text and its performance as defined within the limits of sacred and secret knowledge. We also considered the literary and scholarly interpretations of Oceanic folktales in their appearance as cultural motifs infused into literary constructions. The folktales and their motifs serve the function of grounding the literary, artistic, or cinematic work within a localized concrete Oceanic space. It also consolidates the expression of feeling of a people at the highest level of expression in Oceania. The final issue is whether the process of translation from one language to another or from one medium to another affects the authenticity of the original folktale. Every performance, every translation, or every transfer of oral folktale is different from the last time it was performed, told, sung, translated, or transferred. It does lose its originality, but then it also gains its popularity and acceptance. The folktale survives because of the renewed interests it gains through new performances, new literary translations, and transfusion in literary works, and its transfer from one medium to another powerful medium such as novels, theatre, and films.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See interview with Wood, Briar. "In Spirits' Voices: An Interview with Steven Winduo", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 42: 1 (May 2006): 84-93.

<sup>2</sup> See Keown's discussion on the influence of culture heroes and heroine, Keown, Michelle. 2007. *Pacific Islands Writing: The Postcolonial Literatures of Aotearoa/New Zealand and Oceania*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press., 181

<sup>3</sup> Robert Sullivan. 2005. "The English Moko: Exploring a Spiral" in *Figuring the Pacific: Aotearoa and Pacific Cultural Studies*. Ed. Howard McNaughton and John Newton. Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 12-28.

<sup>4</sup> See also Subramani .1985. *South Pacific Literature: From Myth to Fabulation*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies; Paul Sharrad. 2003: *Albert Wendt and Pacific Literature: Circling the Void*. Auckland: Auckland University Press; Sina Vaai. 1999. *Literary Representations in Western Polynesia: Colonialism and Indigeneity*. Apia: The National University of Samoa.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Winduo. "Unwriting Oceania: The Repositioning of the Pacific Writer Scholars within a Folk Narrative Space." *New Literary History* 31: 3(Summer 2000): 599-613).

<sup>6</sup> Cristina Bacchilega's book *Legendary Hawai'i and the Politics of Place: Tradition, Translation, and Tourism* (2007) highlights how such traditions have been

used to market a certain image of Hawai'i to Americans, but also how Hawaiians continue to draw intellectually, creatively, and politically on them.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Howard. 2006. Presenting Rotuma to the World: The Making of the film *The Land Has Eyes*. *Visual Anthropology Review* for further details on how the movie was made and the reasons for making such a movie.

<sup>8</sup> See Teresia Kieuea Teaiwa. 1995. *Searching for Nei Nim'anoa*. Suva: Institute for Pacific Studies; John Puhiaata Pule. 1992. *The Shark That Ate the Sun*. Auckland: Penguin Books; Kauraka Kauraka. 1989. *Oral Tradition in Manihiki*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies; Nora Vagi Brash. 1996. Taurama. *Which Way Bigman*. Port Moresby: Oxford University Press, 42-85; Rexford T. Orotaloa. 1996. Raraifilu. In *Nuanua: Pacific Writing in English Since 1980*. Ed. Albert Wendt. Auckland and Honolulu: Auckland University Press and University of Hawaii Press, 343-349; Diaz, Vincente M. 2000. Simply Chamorro: Telling Tales of Demise and Survival in Guam. *Voyaging Through the Contemporary Pacific*. Ed. David Hanlon and Geoffrey White. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 141-170.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Jawodimbari. 1980. The Sun. In *Voices of Independence: New Black Writing from Papua New Guinea*. Edited by Ulli Beier. New York: St. Martin's Press, 113-128.

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