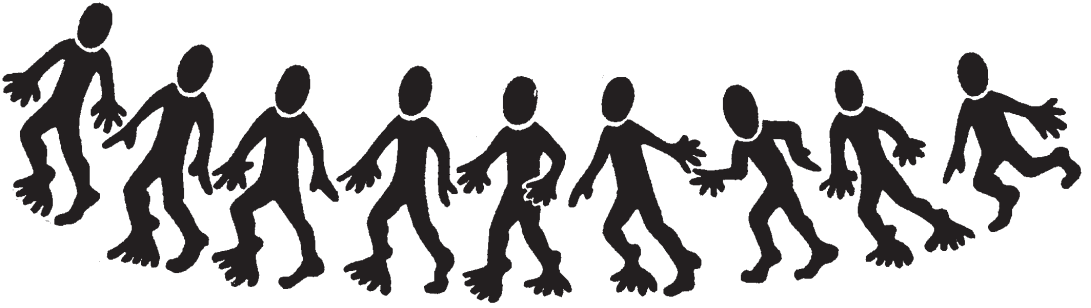




The Lebon Brothers

Ink on paper, 1995, 40 cm x 27 cm



Detail from *The Lebon Brothers*, by Ralph Regenvanu. 1995.

The Lebon Brothers

Told by John Regenvanu of Emil Bweterial and Emil Periv

This is a story about ten brothers, known as Lebonsangavul, meaning there are ten of them. Each brother had built and lived in his own house.

One day, a young girl went out on the reef looking for fish and shellfish and while she was still on the reef it rained very heavily and she got very wet. She was shivering with cold. She then ran ashore to find a shelter. She wanted to get inside the house of one of the brothers for shelter but, one by one, beginning with the oldest brother, the brothers told the girl a lie, saying, “Oh, my house is not good—it is not safe, it’s all flooded—except for a very small space where I am able to be safe and it is just big enough for me.” She asked each of the brothers in turn but she got the same answer back from all of them, until she came to the house of the youngest brother. He said to the girl, “My house is alright, nothing is wrong with it. Please come on inside.”

Once inside the house, she and the boy made a big fire and the girl warmed herself by the fire. They stayed together in the house until the evening and together they cooked their dinner. Meanwhile, the eldest brother went to get fire from another of his brothers to cook his dinner, but that brother had no fire. He then went to his youngest brother to ask for fire. His youngest brother said to him, “Come on in, there is fire inside.” The youngest brother then opened the door for him. The eldest brother looked inside the house and saw the young girl warming herself at the fire. When he went out again, he went to his other brothers and said, “What a stupid thing we’ve all done, not to have allowed the young girl into our houses to warm herself from the cold after she got wet out in the heavy rain. Go and see for yourselves. She is now in the house of our youngest brother.” On hearing this, the rest of the brothers each went in turn to see the girl in the house of the youngest brother.

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When they had all visited and seen the girl in the house of the youngest brother, they came together and said, "What shall we do now? The worst and the youngest of us has taken the most beautiful girl for his wife." They then made a plan together, saying, "We shall do this. When the sea becomes very calm, we shall take our youngest brother with us in a canoe and paddle out to look for clam shellfish. When we see a clam opening itself, we shall each dive down to it and pretend that we have kissed the open clam with our tongue. When each of us has had his turn, our youngest brother will be the last to kiss the open clam with his tongue. He will then actually put his tongue into the open clam, thinking that we've all done the same before him. Then the clam will close up on him and he won't be able to swim away. He will instead die from running out of breath and swallowing water."

Soon, on a very calm day, the ten brothers went out in a canoe and came across a clam with a wide-open mouth. As planned by the nine brothers, each one of them dived down in turn and pretended to kiss the open clam. When they had all had their turn, the youngest went down. He did what he thought every one of his nine brothers had done. He poked his tongue right into the mouth of the open clam. The clam of course suddenly closed up its shell very firmly.

The rest of the brothers waited in the canoe for their brother to swim back to the surface. They waited until it got past the time when he should have returned. Then they knew that the clam had held on to their brother with its closed shell and killed him. They then paddled their canoe hastily to the shore and ran over to the house of the youngest brother to tell the girl that the clamshell had killed their brother.

But the boy and the girl had become suspicious that the other brothers had a plot to kill him and had made their own plan in the event that something happened to the boy. The brothers gathered around the girl, wondering which one of them was going to take her for his wife. Meanwhile the tide began to come in and, as the level of water steadily rose, the clam opened up its shell. In doing so, it released the boy from its grip and the boy floated ashore. When the girl saw him floating toward her, she picked up a piece of cane that had been washed ashore and with it she struck the boy. Suddenly the boy became alive again. The rest of the brothers, seeing what had happened, ran away in all directions. Then the boy took the girl back to his home.