

The Symbolic, the Real, and the Imaginary between Legend and Tale

Nourhan A. Kassem

Abstract:

Storibuk Pairundu: Tales and Legends from the Kewa (Southern Highlands, Papua New Guinea), collected by Alex Yapua Ari and edited by Holger Jebens sketches a unique combination of tales and legends narrated by the indigenous people. Given several previous fieldworks in Papua New Guinea, this book frames in its introductory remarks the past ethnographic and anthropologic efforts in analysing fairy tales. Additionally, this volume features some facsimiles of Alex's handwriting. In order to make the stories more accessible to the reader, Jebens augments his work with a group of photographs that depict different aspects of the people of Pairundu, such as clothes, food, and cultivating.

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Jebens, Holger (ed.): *Storibuk Pairundu: Tales and Legends from the Kewa (Southern Highlands, Papua New Guinea)*: Collected by Alex Yapua Ari. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2015. 356 pages, 49 Euro. ISBN: 978-3-496-01549-9

Despite the large distance separating Guinea from New Guinea, a similar, African accent has prevailed in the region of Kewa, North Australia. Faced with understanding cultural otherness, the anthropologist Holger Jebens has granted the reader experience of living such an extraordinary atmosphere in this, part of a strong and prosaic genre. Having a thing for his field work, the editor entitled the monograph in the Neo-Melanesian Pidgin English (Tok Pisin). The present volume concentrated knowingly on language and its role in shaping people's cognition through tales and legends. In doing so, Jebens reflected on his predecessors' work in linguistic anthropology, explaining its shortcomings while himself trying to overcome them.

Motivated by the warm hospitality of Pairundu's people, Holger Jebens did not hesitate to get help from one of them, Alex Yapua Ari. The young co-author helped in establishing a preliminary criterion to classify the selected stories. He differentiated between two kinds of them; 'iti' and 'rema'. Alex explained that "an iti, people in Pairundu had told me quite early on, has been handed down by the ancestors" (p. 3), while a rema "is new, which means that it tells of a more recent past or the present" (4), he added.

With densely symbolized myths, and adopting the 'emic' perspective of an outsider (15), this volume lets the reader delve into the core of Kewa's culture, one in which people believe that they are cut off from the outside world (5). Although that might seem correct to some extent, the coming of westerners, especially Catholic and Adventist Christianity preachers, had a significant influence on creating such narratives. In a step towards accepting the newcomers' civilization and forging reconciliation with it, Papua New Guinea's inhabitants tried to engulf such new lifestyles in their narratives by symbolizing some of the western products. Nevertheless, that did not pass peacefully, in many accounts; there was a clearly violent collision between very old traditions and modernity (100, 147-149, 187, 242). And maybe such incoherence was the reason behind keeping the editor himself away from intervening to re-categorize or thoroughly edit those accounts (3, 12-15).

In other words, the available collection starts with narrating the daily life of people from Pairundu which is characterized by its simplicity; catching possums, raising pigs, preparing meals,

fighting, and following lust. In the first fairy tale, a man and his three wives were engaging in preparing a certain type of food, “expressing culinary preferences”, yet with the absence of any ethical framework ruling the way of satiation (31-32). From this point on, one could notice specific episodes reflecting their perception of how humans came into being. However, this did not appear through symbolizing the idea of transcendence at this level, but is rather what anthropology would call “regenerative transformation”. According to these accounts, a substance is concealed somewhere and then a human being came out of it (40).

One of the main topics that remained mysterious to Kewa’s community is the sexual issue. From the early beginning, it was this sphere where the symbolic, real, and imaginary were interacting simultaneously. Sexual connotations were represented to mirror different aspects irritating those people’s minds; e.g. representing omnipotence with a “cock as long as a snake [...] to harm all the wives of other men” (48), or the assumption that the sinful woman only cared about her desire when “all the time [...] she went [and] slept with bush spirit” (88); or eventually sort of cannibalistic tendencies, while focusing on genitals: “[t]he two old women took this cock of their child, cooked it and ate it” (219).

Under the weight of the transcendent, Alex’s collection gathered a wide spectrum of representations denoting the (un)seen power that governs the universe. A careful screening depicts a swaying motion from sorcery, which was a tribal way of detecting guilty people and punishing them, passing through rivers and lakes as traditional spheres of the supreme, reaching the concept of God at the near end of Alex’s collection.

The arrival of the westerners made a mark on some of Papua’s legends and tales, presenting the “white” spirit as a signal for the advent of the colonization era in some legends. However, that was unusual since “Westerners were rather regarded as ancestral spirits” (214). Here it is to be emphasized that receiving a new, cultural-religious framing such as Christianity was not an easy task. As expected, the inhabitants there tried to incorporate their new faith into their tales and legend. Ironically, the first and last time “God” was mentioned was in a passage or *iti* by the end of Alex’s recorded stories (269). As mentioned before, an *iti* refers to a very old narrative, which makes its inclusion in such a modern belief questionable in old tales.

In conclusion, Holger Jebens sets out an ambitious agenda of tracing “the indigenous appropriation of Catholic and Adventist Christianity” through legends and tales (6). Obviously, the recorded collection depicts a wide range of aspects to be scrutinized in its relation to religion in general and Christianity in particular. Having alluded to the African relation to Kewa’s people, Jebens could have also reflected on the African diaspora in this regard. Such a multi-level analysis seems to match the nature of the anthropological phenomenon, which is regarded as multimorphic. In that sense, examining the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary could be a promising venture of research to explore what Christianity provided, what still remains, and what is currently developing.