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CONTENTS

Notes and News 333

Articles

RICHARD WALTER and MICHAEL REILLY
A Prehistory of the Manganian Chieftdom 335

Shorter Communications

ANNE DI PIAZZA
*A Reconstruction of a Tahitian Star Compass based on Tupaia's
"Chart for the Society Islands with Otaheite in the Center"* 377

ARTEM KOZMIN
Tree of Rata: Towards a Reconstruction of a Proto-Polynesian Text ... 393

JOLIE LISTON and TIMOTHY M. RIETH
Palau's Petroglyphs: Archaeology, Oral History, and Iconography 401

Reviews

Craig, R.D.: *Handbook of Polynesian Mythology*. JIM WILLIAMS 415

Langdon, R.: *Kon-Tiki Revisited*. FRANK R. THOMAS 416

Publications Received 419

Publications of the Polynesian Society 421

TREE OF RATA: TOWARDS A RECONSTRUCTION OF A PROTO-POLYNESIAN TEXT

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The story of Rata (Laka etc.) is one of the most famous oral tales about Polynesian mythological heroes. The name of the hero is attested in Tonga, Niue, Sāmoa, Tuvalu, Tokelau, Pukapuka, Mangaia, Societies, Tuamotu, Mangareva, New Zealand and Hawai'i. Various versions of this tale contain similar Proto-Polynesian plot elements of undisputed origin. Below I will try to demonstrate that strong similarities are present on the textual level as well and suggest a reconstruction of some fragments of a Proto-(Nuclear)-Polynesian text about Rata.

The problem of reconstruction of textual fragments in a proto-language was brought up soon after the rise of historical linguistics, in the well-known work of Adalbert Kuhn covering the *imperishable fame* formula in the Indo-European poetic tradition (see Watkins 2001). Applying this method to the study of folklore, we may try to achieve a deeper understanding of the historical transformation of a given oral tradition. The existence of poetic formulae (*imperishable fame, kill the dragon*), which can survive in various daughter traditions after the dissolution of the protolanguage, tells us much about mechanisms of transmission of folklore genres. The purpose of this paper is to show that a similar case can be established on Polynesian grounds.

The motif structures of Rata legends and their areal distribution have been discussed already by a number of researchers (see, for example, Elbert and Kirtley 1966, Luomala 1986: 161), so I will not go over the entire story here. Only one episode of these tales will be the subject of this note.

Rata decides to build a canoe and goes to a forest to cut a tree. However, when the tree is cut down, an antagonist of the hero (a spirit) restores it, using an incantation (motif D1602.2. *Felled tree raises itself again*, Kirtley 1971). Here are two examples from different areas, the Outer Reef Islands and Rarotonga (in this edition, the text of the tale except the incantation itself is given in English). In the first tale, the incantation acts effectively, in the second, gods cannot restore the tree.

Pileni (Outer Reef Islands) story

Original text.

Koi tuhia te puke ko ino, koitua koi mutuia na ulu, koitua foeia na paku koia ko hano nghauta. Ko Sinota ko henange koi kutea te puke. Koi takua po: "Koi koi tuhia te puke oku nei?" Ko foloto, ko lelea, i te puke ona, ko lekange ko tuu ange i na tahito. Koi takua po: "Vihi mai na laa ke tuu! Vihi mai na lau ke tuu! Vihi mai na ulu ke tuu! Vihi mai na paku e pili! Vihi mai na malaamala ke tuu!" Koi takua po e: "Oo, te vaka o Sinota kee tuu!" Ne ilange na o te vaka ko tuu. (Elbert and Kirtley 1966:356)

Translation.

He cut the tree and (it) fell and he cut off the top and peeled off the bark and went towards the lagoon. Sinota (the stock dupe) came along and saw the puke log. He said: "Who cut down my puke tree here?" (He) was angry and spoke as though the puke log was his, and went and stood at the base. He said: "Come up branches and stand! Come up leaves and stand! Come up tree top and stand! Come up bark and cling! Come up chips and stand!" And he said: "Sinota's ship, stand!" And (he) looked and the canoe stood (the tree was back as before). (Elbert and Kirtley 1966: 358-59)

Rarotonga

Rata went to the forest and commenced to hollow out the canoe, and when night came on he hid under the branches he had cut off. He had not been long in his hiding-place when the gods, Atonga and Tongaiti-matarau, appeared, and called upon the tree to resume its natural position and state; these are the words they used:—

*"Piri mai, piri mai taku māiēti, taku māiēta,—
Tū, tū te rau tu."*

"Join together, come together,
My beloved, my cherished ones—
Rejoin your parents, O leaves."

The fallen tree did not respond to the command, so again these gods called:—

*"Piri mai, piri mai taku māiēti, taku māiēta;—
Tū, tū te rau tu."*

"Join together, come together,
My beloved, my cherished ones—
Rejoin your parents, O leaves." (Savage 1910:148)

Similarities between the two incantations from the two archipelagos are obvious and more parallels can be adduced from different regions of Polynesia (here I do not consider the non-Polynesian, Oceanic version of this motif [Lessa 1961: 67-73]). In order to produce a reconstructed proto-version of the incantation, I arranged the collected texts in various languages below. Underlined words have etymological cognates in versions in other languages. Orthography and translations are those of the original editions, with the exception of the Rarotongan and Samoan versions where I have translated the texts more literally. I have also modernised the Samoan orthography.

1. *Vaitupu*

“Lele mai malamala makea pili.” Pili.

“Lele mai te kaula makea pili.” Pili.

“Lele mai te taulu makea pili.” Pili.

(Kennedy 1931: 211).

“Let the chips fly hither and adhere!”

They adhered. “Fly hither the branches and adhere!” They adhered. “Fly hither the severed head and adhere!” It adhered (Kennedy 1931: 214).

2. *Pileni*

Koi takua po: “Vihi mai na laa ke tuu!
Vihi mai na lau ke tuu! Vihi mai na ulu ke
tuu! Vihi mai na paku e pili! Vihi mai na
malaamala ke tuu!” Koi takua po e: “Oo,
te vaka o Sinoto kee tuu!” (Elbert, Kirtley
1966:356).

He said: “Come up branches and stand!
Come up leaves and stand! Come up tree
top and stand! Come up bark and cling!
Come up chips and stand!” And he said:
“Sinota’s ship, stand!” (Elbert and Kirtley
1966: 358-59).

3. *Samoan*

‘Inā pipi‘i e le lau i‘inā tatau tūla‘i mai o si
o‘u ‘au o a‘u (Stuebel 1896: 231).

Let the leaves adhere, let my canoe keel
stand.

4. *Tuamotu*

Rere mai, rere mai te kamara o taku rakau!

I ko mai iho ti!

I ko mai iho ta!

Rere mai, rere mai te vai-toto o taku rakau!

I ko mai iho ti!

I ko mai iho ta!

Tu te rakau, tu!

Fly hither, fly hither the chips of my tree!

Right here to cling,

Right here to fall into place!

Fly hither, fly hither the sap of my tree!

Right here to cling,

Right here to fall into place!

Fly hither, fly hither the inner-bark of my tree!

4. *Tuamotu* – continued

<u>Rere</u> mai, <u>rere</u> mai te kiritama o taku <u>rakau</u> !	Right here to cling,
I ko mai iho ti!	Right here to fall into place!
I ko mai iho ta!	Fly hither, fly hither the leaves of my tree!
<u>Rere</u> mai, <u>rere</u> mai te kiripaka o taku <u>rakau</u> !	Right here to cling,
I ko mai iho ti!	Right here to fall into place!'
I ko mai iho ta!	Fly hither, fly hither the gum of my tree!
<u>Rere</u> mai, <u>rere</u> mai te <u>piripiri</u> o taku rakau!	Right here to cling,
I ko mai iho ti!	Right here to fall into place!
I ko mai iho ta!	Fly hither, fly hither the leaves of my tree!
<u>Rere</u> mai, <u>rere</u> mai te <u>raurau</u> o taku <u>rakau</u> !	Right here to cling,
I ko mai iho ti!	Right here to fall into place!
I ko mai iho ta!	Fly hither, fly hither the life of my tree! :
<u>Rere</u> mai, <u>rere</u> mai te mauri o taku <u>rakau</u> !	Right here to cling,
I ko mai iho ti,	Right here to fall into place!
I ko mai iho ta!	Up with the tree, up!
Tu te <u>rakau</u> , tu!	Up with the tree, up! (Stimson 1937:122-23)

5. *Tuamotu*

<u>Rere</u> mai, <u>rere</u> mai,	Fly hither, fly hither,
Te 'ama'a ta'u <u>ra'au</u> !	Branches of my tree!
Homai heti, homai heta,	Come gently, come enraged,
<u>Rere</u> mai, <u>rere</u> mai!	Fly hither, fly hither!
Te vai toto o ta'u <u>ra'au</u>	Watery sap of my tree,
<u>Piripiri</u> tapau, <u>tū</u> –	Adhesive gum, stand–
<u>Tū</u> te <u>ra'au</u> <u>tū</u> e!	Stand the tree erect! (Henry 1928: 499)

6. *Tahitian*

E Ihu-ata ē, e te mano 'o te atua!	O Ihu-ata, O, thousands of gods!
Te atua i te aivi e, a pou!	Gods of the cliffs, come down!
Te atua i te fā'a e, a pou!	Gods of the valleys, come down!
Te atua tapotu ē, a pou!	Gods flying over each other (of the air), come down!
A pou, e fa'ti'a tatou i te <u>ra'au</u> mo'i nei, na pohe, ua tua hia e Rata!	Come down, and let us raise this king tree, which is stricken, chopped down by Rata! (Henry 1928: 484).

7. *Maori*

Ko Rata, ko Rata a Wahie-roa,
 Tuatuaaina makuaretia e koe
 Te wao tapu o Tane.
 Kihu maota o Tane;
 Ka rere te maramara ra ki te puhaka
 (putake),
 Ka rere te maramara ra ki te kauru,
 Koia e piri,
 Koia e tata,
 Koia tautorotia.
 E tupa waia (White 1886, I: 61).

Leave it, leave it, O Rata—Rata, of Wahie-roa!
 You have cut it ignorantly—
 The sacred grove of Tane.
 The chips fly,
 The root flies.
 They are near,
 They are sticking.
 O unavailing! follow on
 (White 1887 [I]: 74).

8. *Maori*

Ko Rata, ko Rata, ko Rata,
 Nana i tuatua te wao tapu o Taane.
 Ihu maota e Taane,
Rere maota mai e Taane,
Rere mai nga kongakonga o Taane,
 Koia piri koia tau,
 Rere mai nga maramara o Taane,
 Koia piri koi che tau.
Rere mai nga rara o Taane,
 Koia piri koia tau.
 Torotika, e tū te maota,
 Whakaarahia, e tū te maota
 (White 1886, III: 4).

It is Rata, Rata, Rata,
 Who felled the sacred forest of Tane.
 Small chips of Tane,
 Chips of Tane flying,
 Flying scraps of Tane,
 Adhere and come together.
 Fly hither, the chips of Tane,
 And come together, adhere.
 Fly hither, the ribs of Tane,
 And come together, adhere.
 Be straight, and be erect, O chips!
 Lift thee up. O chips! be erect.
 (White 1887, III: 2).

9. *Rarotongan*

Piri mai, piri mai taku māieta, taku māieta;— Join together, come together, My beloved,
Tū, tū te rau tu. my cherished ones—
 Stand, stand, stand leaves. (Savage 1910: 148)

Commentary

In Text 6. Ihu-ata—assembly of spirits connected with craft activity.

In Text 8. Tāne is a Māori god associated with vegetation. The marker of inalienable possession /o/ entails that maramara o Taane (chips of Tāne) literally means ‘the chips which are parts of Tāne’s body’.

The semantic structure of these texts is more or less similar; it includes an order to the tree parts to join back together. As a result, the tree should stand again. The Tahitian text differs from the others because, in it, the responsibility for coming and restoring the tree is put upon the spirits. In turn, the restored tree is used as a canoe.

There are a number of etymologically related words in these texts, although the fragments are rather short (especially considering the refrains). Also it is necessary to mention that six of seven isoglosses connect Western and Eastern Polynesian traditions. The absence of Tongan or Niuean examples in the data does not allow us to place the reconstructed text on the Proto-Polynesian level but only on the Nuclear Polynesian (assuming we accept primary division of Polynesian languages into Tongic and Nuclear Polynesian branches). However, the chronological depth of the disintegration of Nuclear Polynesian alone is not less than two millennia.

It is possible to present an invariant of the texts using the etymological cognates found in different versions. The following words with Proto-Polynesian etymology occur in different texts above. The forms are cited from Pollex (Biggs and Clark 2000):

- **lele*: Fly, run, leap—Vaitupu, Tuamotu, Māori
- **pili*: Adhere to, be joined to—Vaitupu, Pileni, Tuamotu, Māori, Rarotonga
- **mala*: Chip, splinter, fragment—Vaitupu, Pileni, Māori
- **lau*: Leaf—Pileni, Sāmoa, Tuamotu, Rarotonga
- **qulu*: Head, hair (of head)—Vaitupu, Pileni, Māori
- **tuqu*: Stand, be upright—Sāmoa, Tuamotu, Rarotonga
- **raqa-kau*: Wood, tree—Tuamotu, Tahitian.

On syntactic and compositional levels the texts also are similar. Numerous repetitions of imperative constructions of the type *V + mai* are used. However, phrases of such type can be very often found in Polynesian folklore texts, so their use cannot be a marker of a specific proto-text.

When we deal with cases of textual similarities in cognate traditions two questions always arise. First, can we dismiss them as a case of recent borrowings? For example, the translations of the Lord's Prayer in different Polynesian languages are obviously similar, but this is a result of recent cultural contacts. I regard it highly improbable that the texts about Rata could be recently transmitted from the Reef Islands to the Māori tradition. Possible borrowings might have taken place only through the communicative

network in Western Polynesia before the peopling of Eastern Polynesia (i.e., before the end of the first millennium AD) because later contacts between these two regions were rare and sporadic (see, for instance, the recent observations that long-distance contacts in Polynesia were unlikely [Anderson 2008]).

Secondly, similar textual structures may be the outcome of similar *ideas*, not similar oral texts. For example, if a story about a magic tree is told, the etymologically identical word for ‘tree’ will be used in related languages. In this case the existence of a specific proto-text becomes doubtful. However, here we are dealing with structurally coherent incantations which must have had a textual prototype, and this can be proven with the following arguments.

First, the versions of the spell are integrated into a certain story which itself has obvious Proto-Polynesian origins; the spell has a frame story that may serve as a “vehicle” for folklore transmission. Second, from the point of view of lexicon, the use of *piri/pili* is also an indicator. Polynesian languages have a number of words capable of expressing the meaning ‘adhere, join, etc.’. In Pollex (Biggs and Clark 2000) seven lexical items have such semantic meanings: *qopo: Put things together in contact with each other; *tuqu-taki: To join together, meet; *kaapiti: Unite, join, combine; *soko: Join; *hega: Joint or that which is joined on. Nevertheless, the texts use *piri/pili* alone, which suggests common origin.

Proto-forms put in logical order constitute the proto-text (on Proto-Polynesian word order and syntax in general [see Clark 1976]):

Reconstructed text :	Translation :
* <i>Lele mai nga lau</i>	Fly the leaves,
* <i>Pili nga mala</i>	adhere the chips,
* <i>Tuqu te ra'akau</i>	stand the tree!

Of course, this reconstruction should be perceived with caution because it does not cover, for instance, repetitions. Compared texts are longer, and the prototype could be longer too, but it allows us to see a possible surface form of the incantation which might have been in use a thousand years ago. If so, it can be added to the repertoire of reconstructed traits of the Proto-Polynesian culture (Kirch and Green 2001).

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ABSTRACT

Many Polynesian folklore traditions have stories about Rata and a felled tree, restored by a demon by means of a magical incantation. A reconstruction of a Proto-Polynesian text of this incantation is proposed. The main conclusion is that oral texts can be preserved without significant changes for a very long time.

Keywords: folklore, reconstruction, Proto-Polynesian, incantation, Rata