

Part III

Oral tradition

To form Grillo's Introduction to the collected vernacular texts?



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ORAL TRADITIONS OF THE ORIGIN AND MIGRATIONS OF THE GILBERTESE ANCESTORS.

Introduction

I have had some doubts as to the best way of setting out ^athe series of oral traditions, ~~contained in this paper~~. The most clean-cut method - if it were possible - would be to arrange the material under the separate headings of myth, legend and plain narrative. But the success of such an arrangement would depend upon the accuracy with which the lines between the different types of story could be drawn. The difficulty with Gilbertese traditions is that myth and legend are therein so closely interwoven that it is often impossible to discover exactly where the one ends and the other begins. To dissociate this from that would not only distort the story as given by the teller: it would also rob the historical facts of the light shed upon them by their setting.

Furthermore, there is danger of error in attempting to distinguish too finely between myth and history. The ^eEuhemerist concept of myth has at least this support in the Gilbert Islands - that history is sometimes presented by the native teller in a form so figurative that it might well pass for myth, and be classified as such, but for some lucky accident of further discovery. As an example, I quote the following tale, taken from the mouth of an old man on the ~~Northern Gilbert~~ ^(C) Island of Tarawa.

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The tale of the Tree of Samoa.

Samoa was the first land. On the first land grew the first tree, and this was the manner of its growing. When Na^fAreau (Sir Spider) had lifted heaven from the face of the earth, he planted his staff in the land of Samoa. And behold! the staff threw out branches: it became a tree. That was the Tree of Samoa, even Kai+n+tiku+aba.

In the crest of the Tree grew Auriaria, and Te^tTake (the Tropic Bird), and Nei Te+koroua+ngutu+ngutu (the Yellow-billed Tropic Bird). And Taburimai sprang from a crack in the trunk; and Te^uUribaba sprang from the surface root, and Te^{i m}Mone from the taproot; and

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Teimone

from the lower branches sprang Nei Tituabine, and Nei Teveneï, and Tabu^uariki.

Auriaria was king of the crest of the Tree, and Te^uŪribaba was king of the land beneath, for he was the child of the ground root. And Te^uŪribaba was angry because the people of the branches polluted the ground beneath the Tree, whereof he was king; but he hid it within his heart, and spoke not.

There came a time when a porpoise was stranded upon the beach of Samoa, and the people of the Tree went down to cut up that porpoise and divide it into shares. But Te^uŪribaba was not present when the division was made, so they forgot his portion. When he returned to that place, the feast was done, and there was no portion left over for him. Then he was angry and no longer held his patience. He arose and broke the Tree of Samoa, and burned it with all its branches. So the Tree no longer stood upon Samoa, and none grows there to this day.

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It was a lucky accident that furnished me with the hidden meaning of the story. Collecting at Little Makin, an island over a hundred miles distant from Tarawa, I was fortunate enough to chance upon the three old men who gave me ^a the series of tales ^{which I published} ~~set out~~ ^{in 1934.} ~~immediately after this section.~~ ^{for a previous publication} ~~The most cursory glance at the Little Makin series will suffice to show that they are but another rendering of the above story.~~ ^{The Little Makin series} Therein, in concrete form, are exposed a succession of facts which, for a reason ~~which will~~

presently^{to} appear, were related in cryptic form by the Tarawa authority. The Tree of Samoa is shown to be the symbol of a group of sibs; the "breaking and burning" of the Tree was the upheaval of a people; the quarrel about the division of a so-called "porpoise" was a war connected with the killing and eating of human beings. The figure of a marine creature, representing the bodies of slain men, was chosen for the reason that the victims were brought to Samoa from overseas. Thus far does symbolism go in the histories of the Gilbertese.

There is a definite reason for this figurative rendering of facts, which is traceable to the peculiar local authority of a certain Gilbertese clan, or totem-sib, called Karongoa[#]-n[#]-Uea (Karongoa-of-the-Kings). Karongoa claims and is admitted to be the only clan ^{that} which holds the authentic history of the race covering the period when the ancestors were living in Samoa. This was by no means the only totem-sib ^{that} which took part, between ^{twenty} 20 and ^{thirty} 30 generations ago, in the migration from Samoa to the Gilbert Islands. Presumably, therefore, other clans were at one time as well aware as Karongoa of the circumstances of the migration and of the reasons which compelled it; but from the earliest days they appear to have conceded to Karongoa the unique right of authoritative utterance on the subject.

^{In support of the} ~~The~~ ^{vital} ~~most~~ interesting position of the Karongoa clan in the Gilbertese social organisation, ~~and the mass of evidence which indubitably links it with a very early sun-cult, must be reserved for discussion in a more fitting place.~~ ^{It} is ~~here~~ pertinent to state ~~only~~ that the people of this totem group trace descent, through the male line, to ancestors who are stated to have been "holy kings" (uea-ni-kamarai) in Samoa. The accidents of history have by now deprived them on most islands of any shadow of temporal kingship, but they still remain "holy" in the sense that, for certain

purposes, their authority may not be questioned or their word contradicted. This applies particularly to their functions as historians. It was formerly believed that to question the authenticity of a Karongoa man's rendering of Samoan tradition, or to "take the word from his mouth" (i.e., to suggest additions to, or alterations of, his story) was to risk death by visitation from the Sun, in the form of a beam piercing the navel.

There seems to be no doubt that the Karongoa clan represents the remnant of a royal, and possibly priestly, caste whose function it was to preserve the traditions of the race. The affinity with the Maori wharekura and analogous Polynesian institutions is evident, but whereas these bodies seem to have performed the office of public genealogists in a very wide sense indeed, Karongoa is not interested in modern generations. It stops short at the migration from Samoa: that is to say, while pretending to absolute knowledge of the ancestors of all the clans which took part in the migration to the Gilbert Islands, it does not claim to be an authority upon the generations locally descended outside its own group. This may be due only to the scattering of the clans piecemeal over sixteen islands, which was the immediate result of the migration. The function of public genealogist on any general scale would be clearly impossible to fulfil under such conditions.

It is remarkable, in the circumstances, that the authority of the clan in matters pertaining to Samoan tradition has been so tenaciously maintained. The only possible inference is that its sacred prestige was so great at the time of the migration that, for the first few generations thereafter, the other clans continued to concede to it the sole prerogative of "lifting the word" and "telling the generations" of Samoa. This complete surrender of initiative would obviously breed quick forgetfulness among the general mass of the people, and the consequence would be that Karongoa would soon be left with the monopoly of Samoan tradition. The clan would thus keep in its hands the means of maintaining, throughout all subsequent loss of temporal power, its authority

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The monopoly has been jealously guarded - so jealously, indeed, that even within the clan itself the precious knowledge has been handed down through a few senior lines only. The bulk of Karongoa folk, though enjoying the prestige of their caste, know but little more than the rest of the people. To them are given only those garbled or symbolic renderings of Samoan tradition, of which the Tarawa story exhibited above is a good example.

These renderings, shorn of genealogical detail, represent the maximum of information concerning Samoa that may be "squandered" (bakataeaki) by a Karongoa man when he is questioned by the serious-minded representative of another clan, but even in such cryptic form they are not considered meat for the general public. The usual story given away outside the clan consists of a bare statement that So-and-so was an ancestor, who sprang from the Tree of Samoa, and migrated, after the breaking of the Tree (in a manner unspecified to one or another island of the Gilbert Group.

The deliberate concealment of history under a cloak of symbolism being so very much the practice of native story-tellers, it would be obviously dangerous to attempt any hard and fast classification of their tales under such heads as 'Myth' and 'Legend.' ~~HHHH~~ ^{I do} ~~not propose to make the attempt.~~ The traditions ~~which I have~~ ^{are} selected for publication ~~will be~~ set forth - myth, legend, trickster story, and genealogy intermingled - exactly in the order and manner related by my authorities. This ~~will~~ certainly involves some few repetitions, and ~~will~~ necessitates the display of a good deal of material not pertinent to ~~my main subject~~ the migrations of the Gilbertese ancestors; but it ~~will~~ preserves the native form and atmosphere of the tales, and in so doing ~~will~~ afford the best idea of the general quality of ~~my~~ ^{the} evidence. It is hoped also that the rather variegated sample of material exhibited may prove valuable to those whose chief interest lies in the direction of comparative mythology.

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Every exhibit now published is the translation of a vernacular text in my possession. Whenever possible, I took down the story myself, word for word in Gilbertese, as related by my informant. The Little Makin series ^{already mentioned} ~~which forms my first exhibit~~ was recorded in this manner. In other cases, I received a written version dictated by the aged teller to some younger but trusted member of his household. Examples of this kind of text are the Beru and Nui series, ~~which form my second and third exhibits.~~ Yet a third class of records - perhaps not so valuable as the first two - was made, at the dictation of native authorities, by a clerk whom I trained for the purpose. As this collector was not of the Karongoa clan, it is clear that the material communicated to him could consist only of versions "disguised" in the manner ~~which~~ ^{which} I have described.

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The monopoly has been jealously guarded - so jealously, indeed, that even within the clan itself the precious knowledge has been handed down through a few senior lines only. The bulk of Karongos folk, though enjoying the prestige of their caste, know but little more than the rest of the people. To them are given only these garbled or symbolic renderings of Samoan tradition, of which the Tarawa story exhibited above is a good example.

These renderings, shorn of genealogical detail, represent the maximum of information concerning Samoa that may be "squandered" (bakataeaki) by a Karongoa man when he is questioned by the serious-minded representative of another clan, but even in such cryptic form they are not considered meat for the general public. The usual story given away outside the clan consists of a bare statement that So-and-so was an ancestor, who sprang from the Tree of Samoa, and migrated, after the breaking of the Tree (in a manner unspecified to one or another island of the Gilbert Group.

The deliberate concealment of history under a cloak of symbolism being so very much the practice of native story-tellers, it would be obviously dangerous to attempt any hard and fast classification of their tales under such heads as Myth and Legend. ^{I do} ~~HHHHH~~ not propose to make the attempt. The traditions which I have selected for publication will be set forth - myth, legend, trickster story, and genealogy intermingled - exactly in the order and manner related by my authorities. This will certainly involve some few repetitions, and will necessitate the display of a good deal of material not pertinent to my main subject, the migrations of the Gilbertese ancestors; but it will preserve the native form and atmosphere of the tales, and in so doing will afford the best idea of the general quality of my evidence. It is hoped also that the rather variegated sample of material exhibited may prove valuable to those whose chief interest lies in the direction of comparative mythology.

Every exhibit now published is the translation of a vernacular text in my possession. Whenever possible, I took down the story myself, word for word in Gilbertese, as related by my informant. The Little Makin series which forms my first exhibit was recorded in this manner. In other cases, I received a written version dictated by the aged teller to some younger but trusted member of his household. Examples of this kind of text are the Beru and Nui series which form my second and third exhibits. Yet a third class of records - perhaps not so valuable as the first two - was made, at the dictation of native authorities, by a clerk whom I trained for the purpose. As this collector was not of the Karongoa clan, it is clear that the material communicated to him could consist only of versions "disguised" in the manner which I have described.

I have made no attempt to garnish the style of the text in translation. My efforts have, indeed, tended in the contrary direction - for fear of falling into temptation. The native tongue possesses untold riches of diction. Scores of generations of poets have created in the race a very strict sense of fitness in the use of words; the making of a poem is itself controlled by a rigid technique; there are definite literary standards; the search for beautiful speech is conscious and critical. The result is a subtlety of phrasing and a wealth of idiom that places the language very high in the aesthetic scale. The temptation which I have tried to avoid in translation has been that of subordinating the scientific to the literary value of these traditions. It may be that, in the result, I have erred too far on the side of crudity. Great pains have, however, been taken to give each Gilbertese word and phrase its exact value (apart from literary considerations) in the English version. That the translations have, on the whole, a Biblical savour is the result of no considered plan, but of the genius of the Gilbertese thought form.