

Sharks in Pacific Folklore

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 12 May 2003

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Nigel Price — 12 May 2003, 14:02

Curious to know more about the background to Wolfe's story "The Tree is my Hat", I dug around in the back of the upstairs storage cupboard until I finally found my long lost copy of Roslyn Poignant's little book on Pacific folklore, *Myths and Legends of the South Seas*. (I also recovered our copy of *Favourite Maori Legends*, whose title always used to make me wonder whether there was a companion volume somewhere entitled *Less Popular Maori Legends*...A bit like a boring old book I've got entitled *What Baptists Stand For*. I've spent years searching fruitlessly for the allegedly far more interesting companion volume, *What Baptists Won't Stand For* ...But I digress...)

Myths and Legends of the South Seas contains three sections: one on Melanesia, one on Micronesia, and one on Polynesia. I searched the index and skimmed through the whole book, hoping to discover something about Hanga the Hammerhead and his flooded temple, but found nothing. Lots of stories of ghosts, though, some quite bizarre. The North Point ghost story thread in Wolfe's story would be quite typical of the islanders' beliefs, though I gather that it is more common for the ghosts to travel west rather than north in search of their final resting place.

Anyway, I did find this section on sharks, albeit in the Melanesian rather than the Polynesian section of the book. I'm quoting here from p57-58 of the Hamlyn paperback edition:

"The islanders asserted that the shoals of bonito came from across the strait, sent by the *Maids of Bonito*, from their homes amongst the reefs and bays of Kela, the southernmost district of Guadalcanal. The spirits of the dead also lived in Kela in villages, invisible to all except those who, choosing to see them, dabbed their foreheads with lime before they went ashore.

"Sometimes, however, the souls of the dead entered other creatures; for instance, certain famous bonito fishermen and chiefs were said to have been reincarnated in sharks who became guardians. Every landing stage had its own guardian shark who was invoked to protect the honour of the family, defend the canoe house, keep rogue sharks away and escort the bonito. There was also a special shark deity, *Sautahi-i-matawa*, the Bonito-who-fled-out-to-sea, who was the protector of all Ulawa and famed for his defeat of the winged serpent from Malaita. *Sautahi* was the incarnation of a still-born baby who had emerged from the top of his mother's head. His lifeless body was placed in a canoe, and no sooner was it set afloat than he turned into a shark and swam away. In a similar way the relics of great chiefs were set afloat, sealed in a hollow wooden swordfish. The first creature that approached, usually a shark, was recognised as the chief's incarnation.

"A living man could also have a shark familiar who shared his soul-substance and his name. Such a shark was tame in his presence and would rub against his legs in the surf and let him ride on his back."

Not an exact fit with Wolfe's story, but highly suggestive, and certainly the basic details of the

shark guardian are there. I don't know what reference works GW used in writing this story, but he may well have read something similar to the above.

After the passage quoted, there follows the story of the magical child the Lord Mweo, whose two grandmothers were shark guardians and who had himself "a shark familiar who always stayed near him in the sea beyond the landing stage." Again, the story is not really anything like Wolfe's, but it has got sharks and coconut palms in it. In summary, it goes like this.

The child Mweo is thirsty and drinks the milk from all his uncle's coconuts. When his uncle comes home and finds all his coconuts emptied, he curses Mweo and condemns him to go to Kela, the land of the dead, and to bring back the coconut tree belonging to Takiepu, a chief who lives there. Mweo's grandmother sharks accomplish the mission for him, going to Kela to get the coconut tree. Takiepu won't go near the water, so they make eight huge waves which knock him off his feet into the water and uproot his coconut tree. The grandmother sharks bite Takiepu's head off, and swim back to the wicked uncle, one carrying Takiepu's head in her mouth and the other carrying the coconut tree, which they display to all the villages they pass. When they finally get home, they spit up the head and the coconut tree at the amazed uncle's feet.

The tree is my trophy, rather than my hat, but there you go!

Incidentally, the quibble in Hanga's reply to the narrator question about palm leaf hats seems to be, literally, along the lines of, "No, the leaves are not my hat, even though you can make hats out of them. The whole tree is my hat." As I mentioned earlier, I think that this means that Hanga's body is buried at the foot of the tree, though it is conceivable he means only that the tree grows over and shades the bay where he lives in the sunken temple. In my view, the first interpretation remains preferable.

Nigel

Che Monro — 12 May 2003, 17:08 · follows Nigel Price

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Nigel

Wise Ones,

Although it's certainly not an issue of truth or falsehood (Unless you believe in the highly controversial truth-in-text theory), my impression was that at the end of the story Hanga was swimming along beside the plane in mid air in shark UFO form.

Second, "The Tree is my hat" My God... I received the image of Hanga as the island here, the entire island, with the tree growing on his head. So I didn't see the meaning of it being either where his body is buried, or shading his temple, although these are perhaps more plausible and less fantastic interpretations of the idea.

Finally, I've read the North Point legend before, in a book of stories from the islands. It was many years ago and I can't remember who wrote it, but it's possible that you may find a similar

legend recounted by Robert Lewis Stevenson if you look for it. If not, well "The Bottle Imp" is a wonderful story and I bet Wolfe has read it. ;)

Che

Ché Franz Joseph Monro -- <http://www.chemonro.com>
che at chemonro.com -- flirt at technologist.com

Fernando Q. Gouvea — 12 May 2003, 17:23 · follows Che Monro

On Tue, 13 May 2003, Che Monro wrote:

Second, "The Tree is my hat" My God... I received the image of Hanga as the island here, the entire island, with the tree growing on his head. So I didn't see the meaning of it being either where his body is buried, or shading his temple, although these are perhaps more plausible and less fantastic interpretations of the idea.

That was how I read it too. It seemed to me that in some sense Hanga was the island. And I at least considered the possibility that the island was what he was seeing from the plane.

I've been fascinated by what you all have had to say about this one. I should go re-read it.

Fernando

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===== Fernando Q. Gouvea Dept. of Mathematics Editor, FOCUS and
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F: When into a room I plunge, I
Sometimes find some VIOLET FUNGI.
Then I linger, darkly brooding
On the poison they're exuding.
--The Roguelet's ABC

John Barach — 12 May 2003, 17:51 · follows Fernando Q. Gouvea

Che writes:

my impression was that at the end of the story Hanga
was swimming along beside the plane in mid air
in shark UFO form.

Fernando writes:

It seemed to me that in some sense Hanga was
the island. And I at least considered the possibility that
the island was what he was seeing from the plane.

Was it on this list or in my imagination or elsewhere that someone floated the idea that what is seen at the end of the story (Hanga in shark form swimming along beside the plane in mid-air) is a reflection of the man looking out the window?

John