

Chanted Tales

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My first experience of hearing a Chanted Tale in the Papua New Guinean Highlands was in 1973 when I was new to the country, and people in the community where I was residing (in Paiela, near Porgera in the Enga Province) asked if I would like to hear a traditional story.

They took me at night through the rain, down a slippery track to a pandanus leaf-thatched house where there were about 20 people assembled around a rather smoky fire.

At least it seemed like 20 people – there may have been more as the light from my hurricane lamp could not penetrate the far corners from where I heard the occasional cough.

After introductions and sharing of pandanus nuts roasted on hot stones from the fireplace, one of the men cleared his throat and started into what turned out to be a chanted tale. People followed attentively as the recital advanced, adding an affirming “ee” or “enene” to show their approval when the performer paused for breath.

Not knowing the local language I tried to make myself comfortable, despite the occasional flea bite, and let the rhythm of the chanting flow over me. The recital lasted about an hour.

I dared not disturb matters by asking what it was all about, but afterwards it was explained to me that the tale was one well known in the region -- about a boy called “Kaunala Tape” (Little snake eater) – a young boy who, with the assistance of a mythical woman grows up to be a mature man.

He marries her and eventually they ascend to the sky from the peak of one of the local mountains well known to the audience.

Apart from the story, I was fascinated by the skill of the performer, cha
telling the story for an hour with only an occasional pause to catch his breath.

My hosts were obviously fascinated by the story, which no doubt they had heard on previous occasions, and were happy that I could somehow participate in the event.

Similarities and differences

At the time, I was not aware that chanted tales are a common feature in at least six different language groups of the Highlands: the Enga and Ipili tindi pii, the Duna pikono, Huli bi te, the Karinj enj, the Melpa kang rom and Ku Waru



tom yaya kange – extending from the far west of the Southern Highlands through other parts of the province, Enga, and part of the Western Highlands.

The similarities and differences in the performances in these areas parallel the common features and diversity of the cultures in these three provinces.

There are certain performance features which are shared amongst all these groups. Chanted tales are intoned in a way that their performance provided a distinct contrast with ordinary speech.

In the Western Highlands the ideal is to overwhelm the listeners with a continuous flow of sound, interrupted by pauses only as necessary for breathing.

In other places there are usually pauses where listeners may respond with words of encouragement. They are performed not by a group, but by an individual. The performance is usually in the house after the evening meal.

Everywhere, the performer sits or lies down to tell their story without any musical instruments. The performer is usually male, but in some regions there are also outstanding female performers.

Exquisite skills

While the basic plot of the stories may be known to the listeners, the performer creates the tale during its telling – not an easy task – demanding skills of a poet and composer while performing.

Skilled use of language is highly valued in the Highlands. Chanted tales illustrate these skills in special ways.

The performer is called upon to employ examples that stimulate the imagination of the listeners, for example, saying how the offspring of a couple were “as numerous as the toes on a litter of piglets”.

Not only must the performer fit each line into a melodic pattern, but often expressions require the use of a specialist vocabulary.

Duna tales and to some extent Huli and Enga tales include “praise names” for features of the local environment and poetic terms for objects or animals.

Not only will the accomplished performer use special vocabulary, but there may also be reduplication of terms mentioned in different contexts. Metaphors or “tok bokis” (“bent speech”) are common, all of which encourage the listeners to pay attention.

Growing interest in chanted tales

I was so impressed by the tales I heard in Enga that I made them the topic for my MA thesis, entitled, “Kaunala Tape: Towards a Theological Reflection on a New Guinea Initiation Myth” (Catholic Theological Institute, Chicago, 1978). That was a long time ago.

In this article my intention is to focus on recent findings relating to the anthropological and performative aspects of chanted tales throughout a wide region of the Highlands.

Much of what I include here comes from articles by Alan Rumsey and Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern in a recently-published book, *Expressive Genres and Historical Change* (Eds. Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern, Ashgate Publishing, 2005). I will also include insights from Don Niles of the Institute of PNG Studies, Port Moresby.

There is growing interest in these chanted tales in academic circles and there have been two workshops on the topic in recent years: An initial workshop was held at the University of Goroka on Feb 14-15 2004, with another at the Kefamo Conference Centre, Goroka, in June 2006.

At the 2006 workshop, five expert performers demonstrated their extraordinary creative abilities.

Paul Palam performed the well-known Melpa kang rom story of Miti Krai, who goes to court a beautiful young woman named Ambra Amb Rangmba.

Josep Haip’s amusing enj from the Karinj area included

gestures to highlight a story about a man equipped with an outrageously elongated penis that eventually is cut down to manageable size. Two Ku Waru men performed tom yaya kange.

Paulus Konts cast himself as the main character of his story, while Peter Kerua described the history of tribal fighting that has plagued the Nebilyer valley since last year.

Finally, Pita Tapuli eloquently presented a Huli bi te concerning a handsome young man who outwits a cannibalistic male ogre and in the end ascends to the paradise-like sky world with the help of a beautiful sky woman.

Those attending the workshops were left with no doubt that the tradition of chanted tales is a significant and rich aspect of PNG highlands culture which merits further study and which hopefully will survive the impact of modernisation and globalisation that have already affected many aspects of traditional culture.

Story lines and plots

Plots in the stories vary throughout the region. Strathern and Stewart have identified a number of themes commonly found in Melpa tales.

They include the following:

1. A woman takes a netbag of goods when she leaves her home to go away with her husband, the hero of the story.
2. Cleansing the body before undertaking a journey.
3. Pig killing; the spirit of the pig running away, dealing with the blood of the animal, and butchering the meat for distribution.
4. Gathering of food for feasts.
5. Description of scenery: mountains, rivers, plains, etc.
6. Smoke columns being seen in distant places which the hero of the story investigates.
7. Women moving to live in the village of their husbands and descriptions of the trials of living in a new home and leaving a known world behind.
8. Wives-to-be seen for the first time at the garden place, which represents fertility and reproduction just as the woman does.
9. Things not being what they seem to be on the surface. The inside of something being very different from the outside.
10. People travelling through time and space and across social and geographical boundaries.
11. Facing death-dealing situations
12. Skill in moving the audience emotionally through the narrative and way of presentation.
13. Taking revenge on wrong-doers.

Among the Duna a common theme has a hero, assisted by a spirit woman, fighting against cannibal giants to establish the rights of humans. The Female spirit has a mystical marriage with the human male hero thus giving him magical powers.

Huli tales often tell of a journey and include a cast of characters, including sky beings and a cannibalistic ogre figure with whom the hero must contend.

Enga tales include human heroes and spiritual figures such as sky beings Kimala (male) and Tapu Enda Ipalye (female). The spiritual figures assist the human heroes to overcome challenges and grow to be mature persons capable of fulfilling their obligations in society. Another theme common throughout the Duna, Huli and Enga regions are tales of 10 brothers -- nine of whom are killed by a cannibalistic giant. The story details how the youngest brother's attempts to avenge the deaths of his elder brothers.

In the Enga version the boy turns into a mosquito which is inadvertently swallowed by a beautiful young woman who thus becomes pregnant and bears the hero in a new form not recognised by the pututuli demon.

Thus he is able to discover where the demon hides his heart, kills it, finds the jaw bones of his brothers, and using the power of the sacred lepe plant brings his brothers back to life.

Often stories tell of a journey by a hero to a distant land to encounter a young woman. Sometimes the stories end happily, sometimes not.

They are primarily for entertainment, but at the same time they communicate elements of mythical knowledge and traditional values.

Some performances may last only a few minutes, others might last throughout the night and listeners may remain either totally silent or, in other areas, make short comments. Everywhere, an expert performer of sung tales has listeners hanging on every word, describing the adventures during travels, and encounters with human and non-human characters.

In many parts of PNG people distinguish between stories that are mythical and those that are factual.

Enga see a difference between *tindi pii* (myths) and *atome pii* (stories about historical events). The Ku Waru in the Western Highlands makes a similar distinction between *kange* and *temani*.

However, as researchers Alan Rumsey and Francesca Merlan point out, the difference between these opposing types has to do with the kind of relationship which is set up between the world of the events in the tale and the here-and-now world from which they are being narrated.

Neither *kange* nor *temani* present a world that is "factual", but the world of *temani*, is presented in ways that invite the audience to imagine it as somehow continuous with the here-and-now, while that of *kange* is presented as very dif-

ferent from the world people are in here and now.

Good story tellers weave known place names, mountains and rivers into their tales so that the familiar landscape becomes "coded" into the narrative.

One way the Ku Waru bring listeners into the tale is to draw parallels between the characters and places in the story and familiar ones from the local scene in which the narrator is telling it:

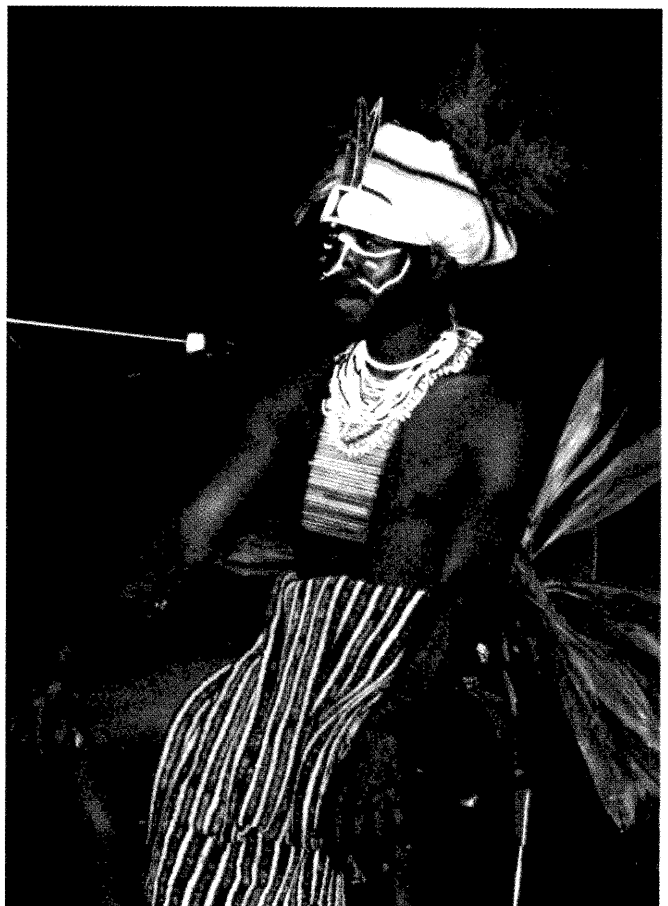
"Once there were two brothers, just like my sons Dani and Pita"; "They came to a little hill, like over there at Ambukl", etc. In this way the listeners are invited to imagine themselves as part of the world of the tale.

Changing traditions

Chanted tales are traditional in a sense that they pre-exist the arrival of Western influence in the Highlands.

Yet, in some ways the tradition has been able to adapt to the changing situation today. Unlike my open invitation to visit the pandanus leaf thatched house in Porgera 33 years ago, in Porgera now people might be charged admission to performances.

Images will change, such as likening the head of a man-eating monster to the transparent dome of a helicopter cockpit (Duna).



In the Western Highlands plots may change. Alan Rumsey tells how Paulus Konts from the Nebilyer Valley chanted the story of a trip to the coast to buy betel nut to bring back to sell in the Highlands.

He gets on a new bus which takes him first to Mendi, where he spends the night, and then back to Mt. Hagen, from where he gets another bus to Lae, then a boat to Finschhafen.

There he buys a thousand kina's worth of betel nut and takes it back with him on the bus to Wabag in the Enga Province.

When he discovers that there is already an ample supply of betel nut in the Wabag markets, he continues west to Porgera where the prices are higher and more cash on hand because of the Porgera gold mine. He sells his betel nut at a huge profit and returns triumphantly home. Despite the contemporary subject matter the story was chanted in the five beat rhythm of the classic sung form, and he includes standard kange motifs such as picturing himself dressed splendidly in a woven belt hung with cordyline leaves.

The trip in the bus is said to start with a puff of smoke from the exhaust pipe – an image similar to the more standard ones in which the beginnings of journeys are associated with clouds of smoke – a sign of a feast or purposeful human activity.

Duna and Huli tales normally do not include such modern images.

Paul Pepa was a master of bringing linking traditional forms and contemporary themes. Rumsey tells how in the lead up to the 2002 elections Pepa composed a tale for Paias Wingti cast in terms of the traditional theme of a man courting a woman to marry her, but here having Wingti “court” the vote.

In the 1997 election Wingti had lost, due in part to loss of support in the Baiyer electorate which had helped to vote him in, and then felt neglected by him in office.

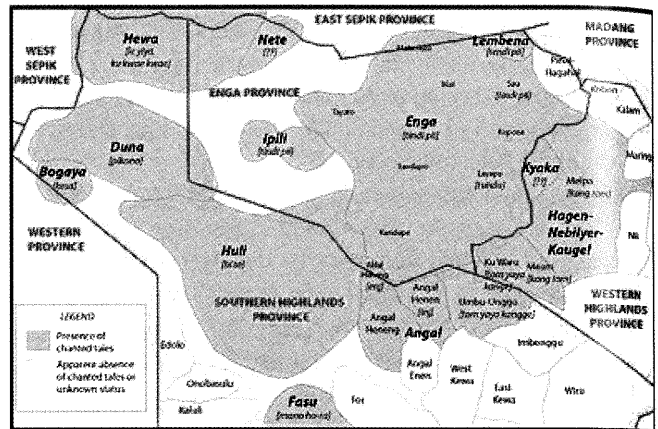
In the tale, Wingti is described as travelling to the Baiyer in his wide-bodied turbo-charged, Toyota Land Cruiser to try to win back a woman who had been married to him already, but left him after being mistreated.

Won over by his charms, she agrees to come back to him, but this time brings her brother with her to look out for her. The allusion readily apparent to Pepa's listeners familiar with the local political scene, is to a deal whereby Wingti secured a commitment for the votes in the district to be delivered to him, on condition that he take on as a running mate a man from the district.

During the campaign, a recording of Pepa's performance of this tale was played from a PA system on a truck.

Wingti won and brought the man from Baiyer into office along with him. How sad that Paul Pepa died last year of

malaria. One could only imagine what kind of tale he might have created for the next elections.



Chanted Tales in the Papua New Guinea Highlands. Language borders and names based on maps found at the website of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, Papua New Guinea Language Resource (<http://www.pnglanguages.org/>), with modifications by Alan Rumsey and Hans Rindler-Schjerve.

The impact of Christianity

The coming of Christianity has also left an impression on the chanted tales tradition. Some churches actively discourage such traditions. Others encourage it.

The Catholic Church in the Tari District has developed a form of worship using expressions and melodies from the Huli bi te.

This author, with the assistance of older men familiar with the Enga tindi pii and related sangai titi pingi traditions, developed chanted forms of prayers for Christian services employing traditional word forms and imagery.

Used at Par parish in Enga in 1988, some of the young people, not being familiar with the mythical references, were puzzled by traditional expressions used, but many of the older people had tears of joy and wonderment in their eyes hearing chants and imagery that they did not expect to hear in the context of lotu.

In 1997 at Alkena, a community based around a Lutheran mission in the upper Kaugel valley, Rumsey recorded a performance, by a man named Ok Pugluyl, which told of the life and death of Jesus.

Ok characterized his story as a temani rather than kange to emphasize the continuity of the events in the Jesus story with the here and now and the implications of the gospel for everyone in the present.

Ok said that he had received this temani from one of his classificatory mothers, to whom it had come in a dream given to her by Jesus himself.

A challenging future

Chanted Tales have a fascinating future. Rather than remaining as museum pieces understood only by the older generation, it seems that enterprising people today are finding ways to adapt the tradition to new circumstances.



politicians may commission tales similar to the example given above referring to Paias Wingti. In some places one hears tales recorded in the men's house or off the local radio and played in trade stores. In the Southern Highlands educated youth are taking notes in order to learn and also to legitimate claims to ground. Some churches, in efforts towards inculturation of the Christian Good News, will surely try new ways of telling the Gospel in the form of Chanted Tales. A major challenge is how to encourage and assist new gen-

erations to be interested and involved in the development of their language and traditions so that they can understand not only the reanimation of old stories with links to the here and now, but have the motivation and facility to re-imagine new experiences in terms of traditional forms. Times change and traditions develop, but efforts to adapt to the modern world, if they are to attain any depth and appeal will surely rely on creative individual performers who are steeped in the knowledge and forms of the traditional Chanted Tales.

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