VANISHING AND RETURNING HEROES: AMBIGUITY AND PERSISTENT HOPE IN AN UNEA ISLAND LEGEND

Jennifer Blythe
McMaster University

Abstract: Throughout Melanesia, there are stories of creative heroes who leave their people. The tale of Mataluangi is told in Unea, an island in West New Britain, Papua New Guinea. The legend of the snake hero is related to its ethnographic context and the story is analyzed to show its conformity to a type of origin myth, *vuvumu*, that is prevalent in Unea. It is suggested that the structure of this well-known legend and other *vuvumu* stories influence contemporary politics in Unea as well as how Islanders perceive their history and possible future.

Résumé: Dans toute la Mélanésie, on retrouve des histoires de héros créateurs qui abandonnent leur peuple. Le conte de Mataluangi est originaire de Unea, une île de l'archipel de Nouvelle Bretagne Ouest, en Papouasie, Nouvelle Guinée. L'auteur de l'article replace la légende du héros-serpent dans son contexte ethnographique; puis analyse l'histoire afin de montrer sa conformité à un certain type de mythe de la création, *vuvumu*, que l'on retrouve partout à Unea. L'auteur suggère que cette légende très connue, ainsi que d'autres histoires *vuvumu* influencent la politique contemporaine à Unea, ainsi que la façon dont les insulaires perçoivent leur histoire et leur éventuel avenir.

Throughout Melanesia, there are stories of creative heroes who leave their people. Peter Lawrence (1964, 1988) traced the development of such stories in Northeastern New Guinea and investigated the political implications of the persistent belief that their heroes will return. This article follows Lawrence in exploring the story of a hero who left and who, like Manup and Kilibob in Lawrence's (1964) account, became the focus of millenarian beliefs. The hero is Mataluangi and his former home is the island of Unea, the most densely populated of the Vitu Islands, a group located northwest of the Willaumez Peninsula in Northwest New Guinea. The article briefly describes the island and local ideas about the cosmos so that the story can be placed in a wider

Anthropologica XXXVII (1995) 207-228

epistemological context. Then it discusses a type of legend, *vuvumu*, and analyzes the story of Mataluangi, a representative of this narrative type. I suggest that through their local connotations, structural patterns and symbolic significance, legends act as templates on which the Islanders construct versions of their past and future.

The Island and Its People

Unea is a rugged island approximately six miles in diameter. Three mountains, Kumbu, Tamongone and Kumburi, rise from within an encircling crater wall. The steep upper slopes of Kumbu and Tamongone are covered with primary forest, but the population has risen rapidly in the past 30 years and gardens and coconut plantations now cover Kumburi and encroach on the upper slopes of the other mountains. At lower elevations, the soil is fertile but there are also cliffs, precipitous slopes and lava flows that cannot be cultivated. Stones and boulders protrude from the undergrowth, stand beside paths and adorn settlements.

The principal garden crop is the yam, but bananas are important and in the past taro was grown. Before the extensive planting of coconuts and cocoa led to a seasonal dependency on imported rice, plentiful tree crops supplied food for the lean period preceding the yam harvest and provided dietary variety. Unea Islanders are nostalgic about the fruit trees, not only because they provided food but because they distinguished Unea from the mainland which, they claim, is covered with "useless trees." Despite the size of the island, there was once a division between seaboard people who specialized in fishing and inland people who hunted wild pig. There was both formal and informal exchange of these specialties. Now the distinction between fishermen and hunters is blurred, because most people catch fish occasionally and there are no more wild pigs.

Before contact, Unea was divided into four or more regions, each consisting of several seaboard and inland parishes linked by intermarriage. Parishes were divided into hamlets occupied predominantly by patrilateral extended families. This settlement pattern changed when the Australian administration insisted that large villages be built, but families are now returning to old settlement sites. Women usually move to their husband's residence on marriage but descent is cognatic, so children do not lose their rights in maternal land. The majority of men are locally affiliated with their father's groups, but some use their mother's land and most give labour to both parental groups.

Unea lineages are between six and sixteen generations deep. An individual claims membership in several, tracing relationships through all four grandparents. There is a preference for a man to marry a member of one of his own lineages, particularly the descendant of an outmarried women of his local lineage. The rationale is that lineage members should be able to use their own

land. Occasionally a man offers a distant lineage mate land, if he marries his daughter and lives uxorilocally. Lineages are internally ranked with seniority passing through a line of first-born children. If the child of a first-born woman were to return to his mother's land, he would theoretically outrank her brother's children and have authority over them. Today achieved leadership is more important than inherited rank, but both have always played a role in Unea politics.

The Unea language is closely related to the languages of the Nakanai area and the Willaumez Peninsula (Chowning 1969). Nevertheless, the Unea people believe that they originate from West rather than East New Britain, and a validating myth tells how Unea floated away from the mouth of the Aria River in Kaliai where it was previously anchored. More recently, though still in the distant past, stories tell of individuals and groups from the mainland who settled on the island. Unea Islanders traditionally visited various settlements from the Willaumez Peninsula to Kilenge for trade and social reasons, and occasionally married into mainland communities.

The Unseen World

Today the majority of Unea Islanders are Roman Catholics; some are Seventh Day Adventists; others follow the syncretized version of the traditional religion associated with the Perukuma Company, locally known as "the Cargo Cult." Yet none of the Islanders have abandoned the pre-Christian world view. To Unea Islanders, the visible world is only one aspect of a wider reality. Outside the village, they are constantly listening for clues from an unseen world. The farther they get from the village and the wilder the environment, the more conscious they are of sapient beings which share the world with humans. At night or in areas associated with powerful entities, they are even more alert. Among these usually invisible presences are the *vuvumu* (origin beings) and the dead.

Walking through the bush, Islanders are always aware of *vuvumu*. They take many forms and there are a great many of them. In the human world they appear as stones, plants or animals. In their own dimension, they are persons living in their own society. Some large stones, carved or natural, clumps of tankets and groves of bamboo are thought to be *vuvumu.* Others are said to be *vuvumu* residences. Features of the landscape are believed to have been moulded by *vuvumu* in the course of early adventures and some people own stone artifacts that they left behind. Altars and groves where offerings were once made also remind Islanders of their presence.

Vuvumu vary in their attributes and interests and some are more important than others. Some of the most powerful can take human form though they may appear as animals as well. Sometimes they own "pigs" or "dogs" which humans perceive as opossums or rats. Other *vuvumu* have no human attributes

and are supernaturally powerful birds, rats, snakes or sharks. Some have powers over fertility. Others were once invoked to do harm to enemies or empower the communal love magic worked by men against women of other villages. Offerings were made to ensure success in the construction of ceremonial men's houses (*rogomo*) or racing canoes. Today *vuvumu* still manifest themselves to warn of death among their human neighbours. Bamboo groves make explosive sounds; birds shriek. Sometimes the mere sighting of a *vuvumu* presages death. Most frequently they are glimpsed as they slip through the bush, harmlessly pursuing their own business.

Lawrence and others (see Lawrence and Meggitt 1965) make a distinction between Melanesian religions, where ancestors are important, and those where gods or spirits are the foci of religion. In Unea, the distinction between ancestors and non-human spirits is not clear-cut. Most *vuvumu* are not human ancestors, but they have an indirect kinship with the humans that share their land. A few *vuvumu* have closer ties, and are both spirits and ancestors. Islanders say that in the distant past there were no humans, only *vuvumu*. Eventually, some *vuvumu* had human children or married humans and gave rise to modern human lineages. *Vuvumu* ancestors did not die. Usually they disappeared or underwent a transformation at the end of their sojourn with their human kin and returned to a spirit dimension that over time has become increasingly isolated from the human realm. When humans die, they also enter the *vuvumu* dimension and, though they are less powerful, they too may appear as animals and have power over fertility. Human as well as *vuvumu* ancestors were once honoured with offerings, and it is likely that some came to be regarded as *vuvumu*.

Many lineages can trace their ancestry genealogically to their founding *vuvumu*, but there is often disagreement about precise links and "correct" versions of genealogies may be kept secret for reasons connected to land claims. Some lineages cannot be traced to *vuvumu* ancestors. Members say that those that knew the links died or that the *vuvumu* lived so long ago that descent lines have been forgotten. Nevertheless, they do know the names of *vuvumu* who live on their territory. Before missionization, children were committed to the protection of ancestral and local *vuvumu* at their naming ceremony and at the various "first-time" ceremonies" that followed. Now this knowledge is acquired less formally when children accompany their elder kin through the bush. Even young people know the names, powers, habits and locations of local *vuvumu*. This knowledge validates land rights even when genealogies are forgotten.

Vuvumu as Story

Vuvumu refers not only to supernatural entities but also to stories that describe the founding of major lineages. These stories are widely known and are told

together with other tales as evening entertainment. However, members of the owning lineages do not publicize all details of the stories and privately pass on authoritative versions to descendents. Together the stories are the texts of Unea religion. They link the distant past to a present where the *vuvumu* still exist and a future, emergent from continued interaction among humans and *vuvumu*.

All *vuvumu* have similar characteristics. First, they are strongly rooted in the environment. Actions in the stories occurred in specific areas. Islanders see physical evidence of supernatural activity in the landscape itself. Secondly, all *vuvumu* have a common narrative structure that gives them a homogeneity that encourages a belief in the consistency of human/*vuvumu* relationships. Thirdly, these stories share symbols that structure and reflect ideas about the cosmos.

The Story of Mataluangi

In this article, I analyze the story of the snake *vuvumu*, Mataluangi. This story is intrinsically appealing because it is symbolically rich and includes elements of pathos and drama. In addition, the majority of Unea Islanders claim kinship with Mataluangi. Major lineages at Kumburi and on Mount Kumbu accept him as an ancestor, and a lineage from Penata village traces kinship to Takaili whose adventures resemble those of Mataluangi so closely that he seems to be the same person. While I have collected genealogies that purport to connect living persons to Mataluangi, most people claim that he lived too long ago for an accurate genealogy to be extant. Mataluangi is one of the few *vuvumu* known island-wide. Even those who make no claim to kinship know the outlines of his story and regard him as a hero who belongs to Unea as a whole.

I begin my analysis with a synopsis of the story. Later in the article, I offer a preliminary analysis of the story, considering its environmental context, its structural characteristics and some cultural and social implications. The tale falls into four episodes.

Synopsis

I

Talaupu lived with his parents, Puruele and Gilime, and his siblings at Niparara on Mount Kumbu. His elder brothers were married but none of them were comfortable living with the older generation or with one another. Accordingly, their father, Puruele, divided his land among them and sent them to different places. His only daughter, Baru, went to live at Lovanua, a neutral area, where no fighting was allowed. Talaupu, the youngest brother, went to live below her at Tanekulu.

Talaupu was a man above the waist and a snake below. He grew up almost immediately and his mother Gilime decided that he should have some work to do. So at Tanekulu he changed his name to Mataluangi and took up residence near the Path of the Dead and the Path of Trees. He gave food and new bodies to the dead and escorted them to the two ships of the dead. He also used his power to ensure that tree crops and other food were plentiful.

II

In spite of Mataluangi's assertion that snakes should not marry, Gilime found him three wives, Galiki, Peburuburu and Poi, a woman from Kaliai. Mataluangi supernaturally ensured that his gardens bore plentiful crops, but he hid in his house and ordered his wives to signal by striking a tree trunk when they left or returned home from the gardens. While they were away, he would come outside, coil himself onto a large woven plate (*tika*) and bask in the sun. One day, despite Galiki's objections, the two junior wives spied on him and discovered that he was not human. He realized that they had seen him and was ashamed. When they returned, he announced that he was leaving. They could stay on the island and starve. He travelled round the island, pausing at each headland, looking for a new home on the mainland or one of the other Vitu Islands. Galiki followed, begging him to return. Finally he reached Damanimara at Kumburi, and, despite Galiki's pleas, rose in the air and departed for Mount Vanguri. Galiki returned home and, according to some versions, killed the treacherous wives.

III

In some versions, Mataluangi's mother and Goropo, his cross-cousin, also followed him to Damanimara but arrived too late. Mataluangi's mother's brother, Piri, arrived even later. Men from Kumburi told Piri where his nephew had gone, and Piri arranged to travel to the mainland with them. Out at sea, the rowers sang a song that included the name of Mataluangi's mother, Gilime. Taking this as an insult, the furious snake rose in the air and swooped down, killing one member of the crew after another. Piri escaped by hiding under the canoe and, despite repeated attacks, managed to reach the shore.

IV

Playing his panpipes, Piri climbed Mount Vanguri in search of Mataluangi. The latter heard him and was irritated by the music. He sent ants and vermin down to attack Piri and vowed that, if the latter removed them from his body, he would kill him. But Piri suffered the assaults passively and finally Mataluangi himself went down to investigate. He surrounded Piri with his coils but again Piri did not resist. Mollified, the snake asked about his kin on Unea. Finally he asked about his uncle Piri, and Piri introduced himself.

After Piri had stayed for a time, Mataluangi asked him if he wanted to go home. Piri protested he had no transport. Mataluangi made a model boat and magically caused it to grow to full size. Then he hid and, taking a rib from his body, gave it to Piri to plant as a banana. He also instructed him in the use of his fertility stones. He transformed areca nut flowers into mature nuts and gave them to his uncle to chew on the voyage. Finally he attached coconut leaf midribs to the prow and stern of the canoe so that it took Piri to Unea without his having to row.

The Environmental Context

In Unea, historical events constantly impinge on people's consciousness because they can be traced in the landscape. Evidence for the adventures of Mataluangi can be found throughout the island. The story begins at Niparara where there is a shrine to Puruele, Mataluangi's father. It is located in a grove where dense vegetation provides a numinous atmosphere. In the clearing are two stone tables, one of them being an altar which members of Perukuma decorate with brightly coloured leaves. Below at Vunakambiri, an impressive double line of stone tables are reputed to belong to Puruele's sons. A clearing between the two areas belongs to his daughter Baru, and nearby stands a stone that the family bequeathed to their descendants. Lineage members believe that, if they knock it from its pedestal, they can cause the death of a designated enemy.

The people of Mount Kumbu regard Puruele and his family as ancestral not only to the various Kumbu lineages but to all Islanders. Some people from other communities do not agree. However, the hereditary leader of the Vunakambiri area did have considerable authority. Modern Islanders sometimes use the word "king" to describe them. The ceremonial house (*rogomo*) built at Vunakambiri was pre-eminent and the ceremonial cycle started there.

At Tanekulu, there is a pile of boulders representing Mataluangi's house. Close by is *Vatu Vitolongo*, the Stone of Hunger and Mataluangi's collection of fertility stones, some of which resemble the crops that they cause to grow. For example, a sea-smoothed piece of coral is reminiscent of breadfruit. Like other Unea fertility stone collections, it contains unworked stones of various geological types as well as old axe heads, parts of pestles and mortars, bark cloth pounders and other ancient artifacts. Mataluangi's tankets and his bamboo grove for making panpipes are near by and his *vuvumu* opossum, Meriau, lives in the vicinity. From Tanekulu, Mataluangi's tracks run down to Koa Bay where even today the ships of the dead, Vanga Veru (Canoe with a deck) and Vanga Molu (Black canoe), are frequently seen, glowing in the sunset, appearing and disappearing suddenly.

The people of Kumburi claim that the incident in which Mataluangi deserted his wives happened at Kumburi rather than at Tanekulu, and there are

memorials associated with him there too. The headland Damanimara is sacred to the snake, and a double line of stones set across the path warns women to keep out. Inside the boundary there is a set of stone platforms and mortars said to be his chairs and table. There is a hibiscus tree, from which he is said to have made his sling shots, and a bamboo clump for his pan pipes. Near the beach is his yam stone, used to ensure a plentiful harvest. Cut into a nearby rock are two depressions, one his "mirror" and the other a "plate" for his food. When he departed, he left other *vuvumu*, an opossum called Vakea, a butterfly Kambeke and two lizards of different species called Kareulele and Piri. The latter is not associated with Mataluangi's uncle in this community. The snake is said to have a house and other stones at Penata, but my knowledge of this community is limited.

Various paths are associated with Mataluangi's travels, but there is a lack of agreement about the exact route he took around the island. In some versions, he climbed to the summit of each mountain rather than following the beach. All versions agree that he left the island at Damanimara, where a crack in the rock is thought to have been made by the snake's tail.

The profusion of memorials provide a context that gives authenticity to *vuvumu* legends and also explains the continued appearance of *vuvumu* at particular sites. Islanders claim that, after his reconciliation with Piri, Mataluangi returned periodically to Unea. Sometimes he took the form of a small snake which lineage leaders occasionally found resting in their baskets. Sometimes he appeared as a large patterned snake. In the 1920s, Bali Plantation expanded its coconut plantation onto land belonging to the snake, and a house was built there. According to local residents this annoyed Mataluangi and workers heard him moving around at night, angrily scraping his lime stick against his lime container. He also sent a plague of snakes to annoy the builders. A more friendly encounter with lineage members occurred during World War Two, when he is said to have appeared to announce that all their kinsmen fighting with the allies were safe. These interactions show that, until recent times, Mataluangi, like other *vuvumu*, has remained a strong presence for the Islanders.

Structural Considerations

The integration of the story into the landscape reflects the proprietary interest that Unea Islanders take in Mataluangi. However, episodes in his tale are not unique to Unea. Variants of the same episodes occur in hero tales throughout Northeast New Guinea and West New Britain. The synthetic work by Reisenfeld, *The Megalithic Cultures of Melanesia* (1950), shows that they are found widely throughout Melanesia. A recent collection (Pomponio 1994) illustrates their prevalence in Northeast New Guinea and West New Britain. Folk tales and myths draw from a pool of narrative sequences and occur in different

combinations in various cultures. Each culture puts together elements to construct stories that have local meaning.

International tales cannot be interpreted only in terms of specific cultures. The power of tales such as that of Mataluangi result from their multiple levels of meaning, some of which have significance for humanity and some only for local audiences. To understand the local meaning in full it would be necessary to explore each symbol—areca nut, basket, ant, etc.—in terms of its ecological, social and metaphorical connotations. Furthermore, motifs take colour and significance from their occurrence in other stories known to the local audience. In this article, textual analysis will be limited to a broad structural analysis and a consideration of aspects of snake symbolism that are meaningful in Unea but not unique to the island. The intention is to suggest why tales about Mataluangi and other *vuvumu* have power to affect peoples' thoughts and actions.

In his analysis of the Russian fairy tale, Propp (1968) noted that all such stories were variants of a single plot. Though in any given story specific elements (functions) might be missing or sequences of functions repeated within the larger structures, morphological units always occurred in the same order. Dundes (1965) analyzed North American Indian mythology in a similar way. His corpus too could be subdivided into structural types whose functions (motifemes) occurred in the same order in superficially different stories. A striking attribute of *vuvumu* stories is that, like Russian fairy tales, their narrative structure is consistent. Heroes have different names and attributes but, at the structural level, plots are similar. All *vuvumu* stories conform to the following sequence.

1. Initial situation.
2. Successful courtship through trickery or persuasion.
3. The hero/heroine marries.
4. An interdiction is made.
5. The interdiction is violated (or upheld).
6. The hero/heroine leaves.
7. The hero/heroine is pursued.
8. The hero/heroine undergoes a change of state (rescue, death, or transformation).
9. A reconciliation occurs.
10. A benefit is given or a taboo imposed.

As in Propp's fairy tales (Propp 1972:29), transformations of elements such as reduction, inversion, intensification, weakening and substitution occur. For example, an interdiction in one story may become a positive order in another. Elements of a tale also may be elaborated or reduced to the point of elimination.

In *vuvumu* stories, the initial situation (1) usually involves the hero/heroine living with his/her parents. Later he or she meets his or her future spouse, but

the courtship is difficult because one of the partners is unwilling to marry. Women usually persuade their reluctant lovers to marry them through dogged persistence. Men also make use of magic snares, traps and brute force (2). The marriage (3) often involves a stipulation that a particular rule must not be broken, although this is not always explicitly stated (4). Eventually the rule is broken (5), and the spouse immediately leaves (6). The deserted partner follows (7), but arrives too late to retrieve the spouse who either transforms his/herself into some non-human form or travels to an exotic destination (8). The last functions (9, 10) are not always present. In some cases the spouses are reunited, but often the deserter never returns. Since the *vuvumu* is valued by the spouse and because s/he is a creative and powerful being, the disappearance is a considerable loss. Sometimes a compromise is reached with the *vuvumu* granting a boon to descendants and/or instituting some kind of taboo. It would be interesting to ascertain whether this pattern exists beyond Unea. Certainly the violation, desertion, pursuit sequence occurs elsewhere in New Guinea (Pomponio 1994).

The story of Mataluangi conforms completely to the *vuvumu* structural type. Its complexity results from the repetition of sequences of functions as the hero pursues his adventures. Propp (1968) calls these sequences "moves," and, in the story of Mataluangi, they equate with the episodes described in the synopsis. The complete structure is represented in Table 1.

Table 1
Structure of the Story of Mataluangi

Episodes	1	2	3	4	5
1. Initial situation	1				
2. Courtship	2	2			
3. Marriage	3	3			
4. Interdiction	4	4	4	4	4
5. Violation	5	5	5	5	5
6. Hero leaves	6	6	6	6	6
7. Pursuit		7		7	7
8. Transformation	8	8			8
9. Reconciliation					9
10. Gift					10

The first episode of the story, the dispersal of Puruele's children, presents a weak version of the typical *vuvumu* sequence. Initially Mataluangi lived with his parents at Niparapa (1). The reason why Mataluangi and his siblings felt so much shame was because some of the brothers were married (2, 3). The sexual inhibitions that they suffered resulted from their profound respect for elders who were their superiors in the ranked Unea society. The implied interdiction in this episode was against sexuality in general (4). The violation motifeme is

inverted since the siblings obeyed the prohibition too well (5). Their motivation for leaving is weakened to social discomfort due to excessive compliance rather than a quarrel resulting from violation (6). A transformation (8) occurs when the snake child changes his name.

The episode detailing Mataluangi's marriage is a clearer example of the *vuvumu* structure. Gilime persuades her reluctant son to marry (2, 3) and provides him with three wives. An interdiction is made when Mataluangi prohibits his wives from seeing him and orders them to signal their passage to and from the garden (4). Two of the wives deliberately disobey and spy on their husband (5). He then flees (6) and is pursued (7). His flight over water to Vanguri can be said to indicate a transformation (8), since in the process he changes from a benevolent provider to a killer. No reconciliation occurs.

The third episode involves an implied interdiction (4) against uttering the name of Mataluangi's mother. The voyaging Kumburis violate this and are killed (5) and the hero (Piri) who is travelling with them (6) is pursued to the mainland. In this episode, the previous hero, Mataluangi, has become a devouring monster. The transformation of hero into monster is not unusual in Melanesian myth. The situation is similar to the pursuit of Aikiukiu by Moro (Counts 1982:204).

The final episode begins with an interdiction against making a noise near Mataluangi's menshouse (4). Unea bigmen *(tumbuku)* expected people to keep silent in their presence, and the snake interpreted his uncle's music as disrespectful (5). Piri makes his way up the mountain (6), but soon a kind of double pursuit develops (7): Piri is looking for Mataluangi while the snake is considering killing his visitor. Mataluangi imposes a second interdiction (4). This is not violated and, when Piri passes the snake's test and does not resist the ants, a turning point occurs in the story (5). Mataluangi pursues Piri once more (7), but, for Piri, the result of Mataluangi's attack is a change of state through symbolic death (8). Due to Piri's obedience to Mataluangi, the harm done by the disobedient wives in episode 2 is negated and reconciliation (9) occurs together with the giving of a gift (10).

Cultural and Social Implications

One of the practical uses of uncovering parallel structures in folk tales is to isolate units for analysis and comparison. The various episodes can be expected to relate to one another in a way that is both consistent and meaningful for members of the society in which the tale is told. When cultures change or when stories are created or imported, alterations will eventually be made to eliminate anomalies. Well-established tales are not series of randomly juxtaposed episodes but contain messages reflecting attitudes or beliefs.

Consistency with local beliefs is evident in the Mataluangi story. The New Guinea and New Britain versions of the hero's adventures frequently begin

with an episode in which the hero commits adultery with the wife of a close kinsman (Counts 1994; McSwain 1994; Pomponio 1994; Thurston 1994). In Unea, I collected only one version of this story. It replaces the first episode of the synopsis above and can be interpreted as a structural inversion of it. It provides an alternative reason for why Mataluangi left Niparara. Here the snake *vuvumu,* first known as Vorovoro, is the unmarried younger brother of Puruele (1). After a period of courtship (2), Vorovoro commits adultery with his sister-in-law, Gilime (4, 5) and Puruele chases him from Niparara to Tanekulu (6, 7) where he changes his name to Mataluangi as a means of concealing his identity from his angry brother. With the exception of the narrator, Islanders with whom I discussed this episode regarded it as erroneous, because they were convinced that it was not the snake's nature to engage in sexual activities. Moreover, the local message of the tale requires a celibate hero. The first episode of the Mataluangi story represents a transformation of the adultery episode which hints at the dangers of sibling-in-law relations but does not portray it. Although it was rejected as a component of the Mataluangi legend, the adultery story is well known in Unea and occurs in another *vuvumu* story about rival brothers called Bito and Takaili. A similar dichotomy is evident in West New Britain where Aikiukiu is identified as a chaste hero and Moro as an adulterous one (Counts 1982).

Before further consideration of the relationship between episodes in the Mataluangi story, it will be useful to examine the symbol of the snake in mythology, since this is the key to Mataluangi's sexual nature and provides a basis for the interpretation of his story. Snake symbolism is complex and paradoxical, and has connotations of immortality, death and both sexual and asexual reproduction. Frazer (1984:72) commented extensively on the mythological associations between skin-shedding snakes and ideas about immortality and human death, and showed that in Africa, the Middle East and Melanesia it was often the serpent which deprived humanity of eternal life. According to Reisenfeld (1950:273), Pango and Moro, both of whom have snake attributes, were responsible for the origin of death in Northwest New Britain. Another theme in Melanesian myth is that long ago humans regenerated themselves by shedding their skin like snakes, but that for various reasons they lost that ability. In some cases the snake steals it (e.g., Wagner 1972:30). However, Melanesian snakes are not always the enemies of humanity. Their regenerative ability also makes them mediators between life and death, hence their frequent association with both healing and the care of the dead. In addition to associations that arise from skin-changing, the snake has connotations of sexuality and reproductive fertility that result from its phallic shape.

As regeneration and sexual reproduction represent incompatible means of reproducing life for humans, the snake symbol is paradoxical. The theme of reproduction versus immortality also occurs in the Genesis story where God

exiles Adam and Eve from Eden after they have eaten from the tree of knowledge. Frazer (1984:77) noted that one interpretation of Genesis 4:22 was that God feared "lest man who has become like him in knowledge by eating of the one tree should become like him in immortality by partaking of the other." In Melanesia, the ambiguous nature of snake heroes as both philanderers and celibates results from the tension between the oppositions—life and death, regeneration and reproduction, and the ambiguous relations among the various elements inherent in snake symbolism. Melanesian stories differ from Genesis, but there is a similar logic at work and perhaps a certain amount of recent syncretism.

In Melanesia, snake heroes cause social disruption because of their sexual proclivities. Heroes are either excessively sexual, for example, Kilibob (Lawrence 1964) or Moro (Counts 1982), or excessively chaste, such as Mataluangi or Aikiukiu (Counts 1982). Both extremes cause trouble, and episodes about adultery are inversions of sequences involving chastity. In either case, the hero disobeys the social norms for the reproduction of society and the result is his departure.

The Mataluangi story stresses the asexual side of snake nature. Mataluangi is the guardian of the dead whom he supplies with new bodies. He also is responsible for crops that reproduce through regeneration. Fruit trees renew their crops regularly while yams regenerate from old tubers. In contrast, the snake's phallic, reproductive side is repressed. He remains celibate and refuses to see his wives. As an ancestor, he as a problematic figure. He is the founder of a lineage, yet rejects sex. In *Structural Anthropology* (1963) Lévi-Strauss analyzes the Oedipus myth in terms of tensions between the autochthonous origin of man and its denial, specifically the dilemma of "born from one or born from two" (Lévi-Strauss 1963:212). The Mataluangi story can be analyzed in terms of a similar dichotomy between sexual and asexual reproduction. At the end of the tale, a reconciliation is made between these oppositions, at least in terms of Unea social structure.

Mataluangi's family is headed by Puruele, a shadowy figure whose name was once rigidly taboo. Puruele's married children are ashamed in the presence of their siblings-in-law and the older generation. The implication was that sexual activity leading to reproduction causes dissension between generations. Perhaps the sexual activities of the junior generation imply the death of the senior one. Respect relations between generations and between affines exist in contemporary Unea society, but according to Islanders was even more pronounced in the past. Tensions could best be alleviated by separation. Settlements in pre-contact Unea society were small and fission was common. This episode may be considered a sort of charter for Unea social process.

Puruele gives his children jobs when he sends them away. Lineages in Unea traditionally specialized as gardeners, feast-givers, peacemakers, warriors and

builders. Today the people of Tanekulu think of themselves as providers, the people of Lovanua as mediators and the descendants of Pulata, the eldest brother who lived in Vunakambiri, as feast-givers.

Unlike his brothers, Mataluangi is still unmarried when he leaves Niparara. In Tanekulu his jobs are to guide the recent dead and to ensure the fertility of the island. Both jobs are congruent with his snake-like attributes. As guardian of the dead he regenerates the dead by supplying them with new bodies and sending them on their way. He is not the only snake-god of the dead in Melanesia. Ndengei had this role in Fiji (Thomson 1895), and so did Sumua in Nakanai (Valentine 1965). As a fertility deity, Mataluangi is associated with vegetal reproduction. He is responsible for the periodical fruiting of trees and for yams that regenerate themselves from pieces of old tuber, i.e., for asexual reproductive processes. When he tells his mother, "I am a snake. I cannot marry," he is asserting his celibate nature.

But Mataluangi does marry and he tries hard to maintain his celibate state by hiding from his wives. At Niparara the tension was between adjacent generations. In Tanekulu, Mataluangi tries to ensure that there will be no next generation. He feeds his wives as a good husband should but neglects his sexual obligations. An account of the hero's betrayal by his wives also occurs in New Britain versions of this story (Counts 1982; Reisenfeld 1950), but it is the central episode of the Unea tale and the best known. There are usually three wives. Their names, Galiki, Peburoburo and Poi, are conventionally given to wives of heroes in Unea folk tales. Since they are not ancestresses, their names and numbers are not socially important. Sometimes the third wife, Poi, instigates the betrayal of Mataluangi. Since she is said to come from Kaliai, her disobedience may be attributed to her foreign origin. In contrast, the native-born Galiki is the ideal, obedient wife. Obedience is highly prized in Unea in the relationship between junior and senior and between men and women. It reflects the hierarchical nature of a social organization in which status is the result of birth as well as ability. Galiki is praised for her loyalty—the loyal wife is a stock figure in Unea myth—but in the end she is no better off than her co-wives, because Mataluangi, by his nature, cannot be a true husband. On the other hand, had the other wives resembled Galiki, the Islanders would never have lost their hero—nor perhaps their immortality.

While his wives are at work, Mataluangi suns himself. The hero's intuition that his wives have broken the interdiction is a common motif in *vuvumu* stories and precedes the hero's flight. The motivation for flights is always the shame that results from the public recognition of the *vuvumu*'s non-human nature and the incompatibility of marriage between *vuvumu* and human. In the Mataluangi story, this incompatibility is intensified by the impossibility of sexual relations. Disobeying a spouse's interdiction is a motif that *vuvumu* stories share with European folk tales, e.g., Bluebeard, Beauty and the Beast.

However, unlike the heroes of these stories, the *vuvumu* who makes the condition always feels shame when the interdiction is broken. Like Mataluangi, they usually run away, singing a sorrowful song. The hero's song serves to heighten the pathos of the situation. In performance, it also gives the audience a chance to participate by singing along with the narrator. These songs are often untranslatable but usually contain the name of the singer. The name Motaliu, mentioned in the snake's song, is an alternative name for Mataluangi. Fleeing *vuvumu* stop periodically to sing, while a distraught spouse follows, calling out the name of the runaway. *Vuvumu* women usually return to their parental home, while men move to some new site where the scene of their humiliation is not visible to them.

Like the first episode, the story of Mataluangi's marriage is an inversion of the adultery theme. However, an association with this rejected element can be seen in Gilime's pursuit of her son. It is intriguing that even people who identify Gilime as Mataluangi's mother rather than his sister-in-law sometimes claim that she was not his birth mother but just a wife of Puruele. She hovers uneasily between mother and lover. Nevertheless, it is not necessary to assume that Mataluangi has an incestuous interest in Gilime. Snake heroes tend to have dependency relations with their mothers, and the latter sometimes accompany them on their travels (Counts 1994; Harding and Clark 1994; Reisenfeld 1950). There is ample evidence of Mataluangi's close relationship with Gilime. He kills those who insult her and some Islanders believe that, after he left Unea, she rowed across to Vanguri, singing a song that protected her against his violence, and went to live with him. In Melanesian legend, the snake-hero's mother or foster mother often carries her child in a food basket (e.g., Counts 1994; McPherson 1994), and associations could be drawn between the production of babies and food crops. The carrying motif is not an element in the Mataluangi story, but the snake does sleep in a basket, a hint perhaps of his immature sexual state. The other connotation of the basket is as a container for vegetable food, usually in a ceremonial context, which again allies the snake with asexual reproduction.

In the third episode, Mataluangi takes on another persona. Having tried the roles of son and husband, he now becomes an aggressive loner, denying his kinship with anyone. He does not consciously recognize his uncle Piri when the latter comes in search of him. He kills his fellow Islanders for mentioning his mother's name and almost kills his uncle. The story of the attack on the canoe occurs in another Unea folk tale, where a cannibalistic, flying *garinoi* or sea ghost is the aggressor. In crossing the sea, as the dead do, and in denying his kin, Mataluangi has symbolically died, and so the structural equation with a ghost is not coincidental.

The mythological theme of rivalry between father and son is worldwide. It may be Oedipal in type, inasmuch as the heroes are closely attached to their

mothers, but there is also the inevitable replacement of one generation by another. In Greek legend, Kronos tries to stop time by swallowing his children as they are born. Images of violence or incorporation between father and son in stories analogous to the Mataluangi legend may reflect tension between immortality and reproduction. Moro tries to kill his son. Aikiukiu eats his father's liver and allows him to die (Counts 1982:204). Ambogim crawls into his father's skin (Ploeg 1994; Pomponio 1994). In the Mataluangi story, father-son conflict is less pronounced. The snake's father simply sends him away. Instead of asserting himself against his father, Mataluangi turns his hostility against his mother's brother. This local variation can be related to Unea social organization. It is among their maternal kin that men ideally find their wives, and a mother's brother is ambiguously a cognate and an affine, a man whose female kin a man should marry and have children by. For Mataluangi, who has cut himself off from affines and certainly from marriage, Piri is a very unwelcome visitor.

In the fourth and final episode, the story reaches its resolution. Mataluangi's testing of Piri has interesting symbolic connotations. As god of the dead, the snake can command the ants which, in the Pacific, swarm over corpses and other decaying matter. When Piri submits to the assaults of these insects, he suffers a symbolic death. If Piri is the *vuvumu* lizard of Kumburi, then he, like a snake, can change his skin. But the Unea Islanders cannot confirm this. Mataluangi revives his uncle who has now entered Mataluangi's world of the dead.

After his reconciliation with Piri, Mataluangi reasserts his connection with his kin, asking how everyone is and whether the island has enough food. Ultimately he reaches an accommodation between his obligation to ensure the continuity of his kin and the celibacy which is a consequence of his association with regeneration and vegetal reproduction. He does not reproduce offspring himself but looks after his people's food supply, allowing them to have children. He tells Piri how to use his fertility stones. His gift of the phallic banana is interesting. It suggests an equation between semen and food as a male contribution. The relationship between food and bodily substance is also evident, because the banana is actually the snake's rib. He effectively gives his own body to feed his people. His own close lineage mates cannot eat the banana because it is their own substance, but their affines can. It is notable that some versions of the story state that the reason that Piri followed Mataluangi to Vanguri was that his daughter Goropo was distraught over the defection of her cross-cousin and would not eat. It was to Goropo that Mataluangi sent the banana and the secret of the fertility stones, and it is from her that the lineage of Mataluangi actually descends. By his actions, Mataluangi effectively resolved the conflict between his need for celibacy and his role as ancestor. The price of this compromise was residence apart from his people, but his presence as a mediator between life and death was again possible.

While Mataluangi's compromise provides the story with closure, the Islanders' requirement that descendants of outmarried kin should return to be reincorporated in the lineage is very strong. Hence there is an addendum to the legend. Unea people believe that a descendent of Mataluangi later married back to Tanekulu. Gilime, named for her ancestor, was either the child or grandchild of Mataluangi. Significantly, she was not the child of a human woman but of a tree that produced her as a fruit. In the story, Mataio, a young man, was blown off course and landed near Mount Vanguri (1). He collected areca nuts and put them in his canoe. Hearing a noise behind him, he turned to find that one of the nuts had turned into a young woman who complained that he had taken her from her mother (2). Back in Unea, they married (3) but one day a relative of Mataio taunted Gilime's son about his mother's origins (4, 5). She cursed Unea with famine and returned home (6). Mataio's uncle followed her (7) and negotiated with Mataluangi for her return. He was successful (9) and fertility returned to the island (10).

Mataluangi and the Cargo

It is interesting to speculate on the relationship between the often-repeated tales of *vuvumu* and the ethos of present-day Unea society. One of the characteristics of living myths is that people apply the principles found in them to current problems. Lawrence (1964) demonstrated that the rationale for much of the political strategy pursued by "cargo cultists" on the Rai Coast could be related to the Manup/Kilibob stories. In the manner of folk tales, the structure of these stories remained constant, but the contents of the story changed as people tried to adapt their new experiences to old ideas. Firth's earlier study (1984) of the development of a Tikopian myth (itself a structural analogue of the Manup/Kilibob story) explicates similar processes. These and many other stories, which involve the loss of a hero and are used to validate millenarian movements, demonstrate the dynamic relationship between sacred narrative and fundamental culture change.

For Unea Islanders, *vuvumu* stories are religious and historical texts. Like myths worldwide, they represent structural stability and a superficial diversity that reflects both random variation and structural change. At the structural level, *vuvumu* stories have to do with the departure and return of culture heroes. Being immortal, the ancestral *vuvumu* must ultimately leave their human kin. Usually the break is not absolute. The chance of reconciliation, of the restoration of harmonious relations between *vuvumu* and human, which is implied in the narrative of all *vuvumu* stories, reflects the way that Unea Islanders see their relationship with the supernatural.

The story of Mataluangi involves reconciliation. The hero did not return to the island but continued to care for its fertility and to visit. In Kumburi, a special garden was made every year for Mataluangi to make fertile, and in both

Kumbu and Kumburi his fertility stones remained in use until the establishment of Roman Catholicism on the island.

Despite Mataluangi's reconciliation with his people, some believe that he has left them again. As contact intensified, the world began to look different to the Islanders and their relations to their *vuvumu* changed. Today people still see *vuvumu* and sometimes interact with them, but they also feel that they have withdrawn in order to make way for Christianity. A senior man of one of the Kumbu lineages claims that his mother received a prophecy from Mataluangi foretelling the coming of the Catholic Church. He also told her that when the missionaries arrived he would leave, returning only at the end of the world.

During the first years of missionization, Islanders enthusiastically embraced Catholicism. Later some people became disillusioned. Some became Seventh Day Adventists. Others began to search for a way of integrating the new and old religions. The first so-called cargo cult to affect Unea, the Batari movement, flourished there briefly just before the Second World War, and did not concern *vuvumu.* The second movement, Perukuma, began in 1964.

Perukuma began as a secular, copra-buying organization, founded by Dakoa Takaili. For the first few years the organization was extremely successful, but, by 1968, Dakoa's business was in debt. Circumstances too complex to discuss here had politicized it and spawned an organization that both opposed the newly created Local Government Council and offered an alternative to it. A new political/economic ideology was strengthened by the revival of the old religion, now modified by elements borrowed from Catholicism and Seventh Day Adventism. Saints were equated with *vuvumu* and both were regarded as subordinate to God. The other world, the land of the dead, was equated vaguely with distant lands over the sea, such as Japan, America and Israel. The *vuvumu* and the saints were mediators who existed in both dimensions, and Perukuma members believed that they would one day make available the bounty of the other world. All *vuvumu* were implicated in the Perukuma religion, but Mataluangi was prominent. His story was modified in a way that described both why Islanders, and in particular Perukuma members, gained so little despite their hard work, and why people in the developed world lived in affluence. It also suggested to them that improvement was possible.

New episodes that deal with Mataluangi's defection to America were imported from West New Britain. These episodes tell how Mataluangi, now known as Moro/Aisipel, travelled along the coast from Bulu to Siassi, and from there to America or Australia. They resemble the story reported by Counts (1982). Since the action took place in New Britain, the Islanders are less interested in the precise details of the story than in the fact that he had left. The stories always involve disagreements (interdiction-violation, 4, 5) followed by departures (7). Ultimately the snake settles in America, where he creates an advanced culture. The reconciliation that ends the traditional story

is negated by the snake hero's exile. Some dispirited cultists even suggest that the Americans have killed him to prevent his bringing benefits to his people.

The structure of all *vuvumu* stories presents the possibility of return and encourages Islanders to believe that they can make use of *vuvumu* to forge a link between the human world and that of the dead. The symbolism of the Mataluangi story makes him a prominent hero. As a guide to the dead, he specialized in the mediation between the worlds, and, because he is traditionally a provider for his people, he is the obvious candidate to supply them with wealth. In Unea legends, endings in which the *vuvumu* does not return are commoner than those in which they do. Even when protagonists refuse to come back, contact is maintained and a gift is given. So Perukuma members still hope to complete the myth in the future with a reconciliation that will bring the hero triumphantly home. In 1975, a huge carved wooden image of the snake was made as part of a ritual encouraging him to return with goods from the other world.

Part of the power of Mataluangi rests in the ease with which his stories can be syncretized with those of Christianity. Sometimes, when people discuss this *vuvumu,* they compare him with God or Christ. In his story, parallels with the expulsion from the garden of Eden are a consequence of a similar incompatibility between sex and immortality, though here it is the deity and not the humans who leave. Members of Perukuma sometimes suggest that they but not the whites have been cast out of Paradise. In another story, Mataluangi is portrayed as the creator god and ancestor of humanity. He ordered red and white ants to take his bones after his death to a place where there was a great flood. The black ants let his bones fall into the water and lost them, but the red ants took his bones far away. The black ants' bones turned into black men. The bones of the red ants turned into white men who sprang up like areca palms. There is also some syncretism between Mataluangi and Christ, another millenarian hero. Mataluangi is betrayed by those closest to him and killed by his enemies.

Conclusions

In Unea, *vuvumu* are part of daily life. They are present to Catholics and Seventh Day Adventists as well as to Perukuma members. Their past deeds are enshrined in the landscape, and their contemporary comings and goings have as much validity as that of fellow villagers. Although their assistance is now rarely requested, they remain powerful allies and capricious enemies. Their stories are political currency. They encode powerful symbols, and their structures reflect and influence the way that Islanders contemplate life. All *vuvumu* stories have a similar structure. Heroes stay for a while and depart, leaving their unhappy kin to mourn. Occasionally they return; more often there is a compromise. Mataluangi is a prototype hero whose memorials are found all

over the island. His adventures touch on cosmic themes, and the political and religious future of Unea is given profundity by linking it to his story. Unea people are persistent. They work very hard to meet their goals, and, if things go wrong, they accept failure with dignity. Later they adopt a new plan and try again. This persistence is evident in Perukuma. For over 20 years, members have invoked Mataluangi, the other *vuvumu* and the saints through many diverse rituals. Despite opposition both from the administration and from rival groups within the island, followers of the snake have continued to plan and hope for results. In creating stories of *vuvumu*, a successful outcome cannot be guaranteed, but it is always worth attempting to bring about the return of the hero.

Acknowledgment

Research was conducted in the Vitu Islands, Papua New Guinea, in 1975-76 and 1986, and was supported by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

References Cited

Bascom, W.
1984 The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narrative. *In* Sacred Narrative, edited by Alan Dundes, pp. 5-29. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Blythe, J.
1992 Climbing a Mountain without a Ladder: Chronologies and Stories. Time and Society 1(1):45-50.

Burridge, K.
1960 Mambu: A Study of Melanesian Cargo Movements and Their Social and Ideological Background. New York: Harper & Row.

Chowning, A.
1969 The Austronesian Languages of New Britain. Pacific Linguistics, Occasional Papers, Series A., No. 21:17-46.

Codrington, R.H.
1972 The Melanesians: Studies in Their Anthropology and Folklore. New York: Dover Publications.

Counts, D.A.
1982 The Tales of Laupu. Boroko: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies.
1994 Snakes, Adulterers, and the Loss of Paradise in Kaliai. Pacific Studies 17(4):109-151.

Dundes, Alan
1965 Structural Typology in North American Indian Folk Tales. *In* The Study of Folklore, edited by Alan Dundes, pp. 206-216. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Firth, Sir Raymond
1984 The Plasticity of Myth. Cases from Tikopia. *In* Sacred Narrative, edited by Alan Dundes, pp. 207-216. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Frazer, Sir James G.
1984 The Fall of Man. *In* Sacred Narrative, edited by Alan Dundes, pp. 72-97. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Keesing, R.M.
1982 Kwaio Religion: The Living and the Dead in Solomon Island Society. New York: Columbia University Press.
Harding, T.G., and S.A. Clark
1994 The Sia Story of Male. Pacific Studies 17(4):29-51.
Lawrence, Peter
1964 Road belong Cargo. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
1965 The Ngaing of the Rai Coast. *In* Gods, Ghosts, and Men in Melanesia, edited by P. Lawrence and M.J. Meggitt, pp. 198-223. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
1988 Twenty Years After: A Reconsideration of Papua New Guinea Seaboard and Highland Religions. Oceania 59(1):7-27.
Lawrence, P., and M.J. Meggitt, eds.
1965 Gods, Ghosts, and Men in Melanesia. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
Lévi-Strauss, Claude
1963 Structural Anthropology. New York: Basic Books
McPherson, N.
1994 The Legacy of Moro the Snake-man of Bariai. Pacific Studies 17(4): 153-181.
McSwain, P.
1994 Kulbob and Manub: Past and Future Creator Deities of Karkar Island. Pacific Studies 17(4):11-28.
Ploeg, A.
1994 Mala among the Kowai. Pacific Studies 17(4):73-107.
Pomponio, A.
1994 Namor's Odyssey: Mythical Metaphors and History in Siassi. Pacific Studies 17(4):53-91.
Propp, Vladimir
1968 Morphology of the Folktale. Austin: University of Texas Press.
1972 Transformations in Fairy Tales. *In* Mythology, edited by Pierre Maranda, pp. 139-150. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Reisenfeld, A.
1950 The Megalithic Cultures of Melanesia. Leiden: Brill.
Spiro, Melford
1982 Oedipus in the Trobriands. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Thomson, B.
1895 The Kalau-Vu (Ancestor Gods) of the Fijians. Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain 26:340-359.
Thurston, W.
1994 Legends of Titikolo: An Anim Genesis. Pacific Studies 17(4):109-152.

Valentine, C.
1965 The Lakalai of New Britain. *In* Gods, Ghosts, and Men in Melanesia, edited by P. Lawrence and M.J. Meggitt, pp. 162-197. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Wagner, Roy
1972 Habu: The Innovation of Meaning in Daribi Religion. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.