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Abstract

There is nothing but silence. She is having her breakfast in the thatched and weaved sago construction, which serves as a kitchen. A similar adjoining structure houses her personal belongings and a mat for a bed. The floor of the building is covered with smooth pebbles collected from the seashore. The smoke rising from the fire in the centre of the hut creates a haze, slowly crawling up the walls, and then slipping out of the roof like a lazy snake into the early rays of daylight. The figure, so old and frail, sits in silence. Only her mind moves in and out of pictures that engulf her vision.

MATHILDA PARAU

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Her eyes focus on the breadfruit and grubs she set before her. The crushing motion of her mouth and the beat caged in her breast is simultaneously slow. There is no other noise in the yard, except the waves breaking on the shoreline, the birds whistling in the treetops, and the sound of the forest.

‘Keduluma, good morning! What are you eating?’ a familiar masculine voice asks.

The old woman turns her head in the direction of the doorway, which lies adjacent to the main track. There in the distance is a young man. He seems to smile. He walks down the pathway. A stone-edged axe rests upon his shoulders.

She smiles back. The scars of burns hide the wrinkles and the joy she wish he could witness. They bar every expression into her soul. Her joy and laughter could only be echoed through her eyes. Now they are twinkling with delight. Then a voice so soft and very gentle leaves the lips of an aged disfigured face with a tone of affection and welcome so enticing.

‘Aiyoi! Natu’we you have come. It is sunshine that you bring to my home. I have not been expecting to see you so soon. Is it good news or bad? You know very well that it is bad news when the hawk comes back to its nest before it is even expected.’

‘It’s nothing,’ Ulam replies.

With a smile playing on his face, he adds, ‘I only wanted to come around, to enjoy what is left of the rest moon’.

After embracing, they walk hand in hand into the little hut. Hina Keu starts to prepare another plate for her nephew. Despite his marriage to a clan further to the north, he has always made time to share with his aunt.

The area from which they are descended is of matrilineal tradition. He has found that being married he can only visit once in a while. Most of his time is spent labouring in the fields of his in-laws and that of his wife. Every new moon means a visit for the old woman. Last night, however, the moon was just in its full phase. This visit sends a sensation of discomfort to her soul. The dilemma in

her head starts to show in her anticipatory silence. She is fidgeting, but not a sound comes out of her lips.

‘Hinau’we, there is nothing to worry about. As I have said before, I came here to enjoy the rest season. I came because my hands have completed the work of my in-laws. We cleared all the gardens of the women and Hiwoileles’ too.’

As if he had read what she is about to ask he concludes, ‘she and the children are well. And if you are going to ask if she is giving me a hard time, she has treated me well enough.’

Whether this answer has set the old woman’s heart at ease or that she has chosen to ignore the comment, Ulam is happy she does not pursue the matter.

The subject changes then to all other issues needing immediate attention. These range from the palouma women who had been blamed for the missing family who went fishing at the end of the last moon. Most families realise that these palouma women could jeopardise the harvest because of the accusations brought upon them. Morally it is more of an obligation to justify the supernatural with the doings of the paloumas than with those of the spirits of the dead or even of physical violence and fate itself. Eventually they find themselves chatting about the harvest that is to come after the next two moons.

‘Did you know that Aidina gave birth last moon?’ the old woman asks.

‘No. I didn’t.’

‘Well, it’s a boy.’

‘Guess who she named the child after?’

‘Surprise me. After all, her father’s been moping about his children neglecting him all these years.’

‘Oh. She’s a nice girl. Opps!’ Hina chuckles. ‘...a nice woman. Anyway, she had the decency to name her first child after Lebom. He won’t be complaining now.’

‘Yeah. He should be overwhelmed. Aunt, the harvest soon coincides with her Sipupu, doesn’t it? Now he has a handful of things to worry about.’

‘Look he is well off. His gardens stretch twice as far. He’ll be able to meet the requirements of the feast.’

‘I can imagine.’

The monsoon winds have come and gone. The dry season is in sight and so is the harvest. It is one of the most spectacular events of the year. Each woman displays the best taros and yams her family have sown at the festival of Mother Earth. Everyone is excited. But Hina Keu is an old woman now. Her strength has left her long ago. She can only hope for help from her nephew.

‘Ulam natu’we, I am too old now to climb hills. They have turned into mountains. I have grown tired of setting my feet on the pathways. They have grown too long for me to travel. The river has become too deep for me. I cannot bend over to fetch water for fear that I might fall in and drown.’

‘Many years ago, I was the child who looked after the household of many but I have lost those limbs to the wrath of sorcery. Now I live like a monster in a den.’ She adds sourly.

It is natural to speak in riddles or parables at least to ask a favour. The Tawala people, as is the case for most other Milne Bay areas, are known for this type of talk.

‘What is it then that you ask for hinau’we? I have but only two daughters. They are only just women. Their mother and her kinsmen will be very upset if I take any one of them away. You should know by now the consequences of these things you talk about. We will be in serious trouble with the elders and bring disgrace to the name of our clan.’

‘I am aware of this natu’we. I hope you will understand. I really do believe that I need a hand and extra pair of feet to ensure that all the chores are carried out before the rest season. I also need someone to gather the food during harvest for the Festival of Mother Earth.’

‘I can understand that perhaps company is what you need. The job of the gardens has been left to my care for a long while. Do you feel that I have not fulfilled my duties?’ A hint of hurt emerges with the last lines of Ulam’s outburst. ‘Without failure I have attended to your needs. By asking for my woman folk you are bringing shame to my name. My in-laws will insist upon a feast for which I have no pigs to tie and no family to help me.’

The old woman’s mouth twitches but not a word leaves her lips. She feels helpless. She realises the sadness she has just woven. The implications that she tried to bring up are unnecessary. There are many obstacles for him if he tries to do what she asks. What would be more embarrassing is to put dirt upon the name of the clan and the family, which she belongs to. Of course, if Ulam tries to ask his kinsmen for help they will abandon him upon realisation of its severity on the dignity of the clan. Ashamed she bows her head. He is right.

The mention of the past and family brings in so much pain and sorrow. The very freshness of hardship and pain are buried in his words. A picture of a man struggling to keep his family together floods her mind. Tears fill her eyes and she is back in Lilihi — as a child.

The moon has risen over the mountaintops and the fresh breeze that smells of the ocean and the fish drifts into the hut. Her long Afro hair sits upon her head like the crest of a cockatoo. She is in the midst of a gathering. One in which her father is usually the master of ceremony. He is rather tall for his contemporaries. He has a masculine figure, which stands out in the crowd. Men from all around the nearby villages fear him. He could catch the most ferocious boar with his bare hands and strangle the biggest python without being tangled by its own grip. He is almost a phantom — a Yaubada. But that was long ago.

Ulam’s voice seems to cut through her dream as he points out that there is a hole in the roof. Hina laughs almost to her self and gets up to shift from the position she is in. The ray of the sun starts to play on her face through that hole in the roof. *It’s days like this when I really just want to be back in my child self again*, she thinks grimly.

Ulam stands up to go outside after chewing a betel nut. He plans to fix the roof. The old woman is more than happy to be left alone. She just lies down by the window facing the ocean as if to recall what she had been thinking.

Ulam walks out into the sunlight and sits sharpening his axe. The heat of the sun forces sweat out of his body, down his face, and back. His armpits smell of stale sweat too. 'I wish I had washed on my way down here,' he mumbles to himself.

The old woman must have heard him. She asks him to repeat what he has said because she cannot understand his whinging. He tells her that she must have been dreaming. They both laugh, but the sound of their laughter seems forced. This morning feels different. There is a feeling of uneasiness. Some invisible force seems to threaten their relationship. The only problem is he has no idea what it could be.

Hina Keu snores into her childhood as Ulam walks into his own space in the bush.

GLOSSARY

Aiyoi!: An exclamation of emotion usually expressing delight.

Hinau'we: Hina[u]: mother; Children of the same kinship use this expression with the women of their clan and not with those married into the clan.

Natu'we: Natu: child; the possessive pronoun suffix 'we' indicates singular, hence natu'we: my child.

Palouma: witchcraft, sorcery, black magic

Sipupu: initiation into womanhood, includes witchcraft.

Yaubada: The title traditionally attributed to greatness or heroic figures in origin stories or legends. However in recent times this title is superficially and only located in Christian teachings.