The Cultural Significance of the Flying Fox in Samoa: A Legendary View

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Long before the arrival of the first Samoans several thousand years ago, bats were the sole terrestrial residents on our island. In a sense, humans have been their guests for more than three millennia. In Samoa the flying fox has always been an integral part of both the physical and cultural landscape. Thus, the flying fox soars along the ridges and through the plantations of our history and consciousness.

To appreciate the cultural role played by flying foxes in history, look at the earliest cultural record of these fascinating creatures. In an ancient society like Samoa, oral tradition of cultural expression still predominates. Early records reside largely in oral narratives, such as legend and mythology. The question then arises: How best to assist and interpret such information in a manner that reflects the cultural matrix from which it arose in the first place? This essay offers a folkloric perspective that addresses the relation between oral lore and cultural reality. The discipline of anthropological folklore examines traditional oral and material cultures of people in order to better understand what those people hold significant. One unusual aspect of folklore is that its analytic methods can be focused on most aspects of a society, including bats.

For example, one of the best known Samoan legends about the flying fox is the story of Leotogitupatier, a Samoan maiden in distress:

Leotogi was married to the Tuipaga, the King of Tonga. The king had two wives—Leotogi, who was Samoan, and another, who was Tongan. After some time the Tongan wife had a child, but Leotogi remained childless. Her jealousy over the Tongan wife’s new status was increased because the Tongan wife constantly teased her about it. As a result, Leotogi spent much time alone in the woods, and when the king and his friends planned to hunt flying foxes she would warn the bats in order to spare her husband. Thus, the flying fox came to recognize the unhappy Leotogi as their friend.

After a time, Leotogi resolved to get rid of the child. One day the wives went together to their bathing place, and the Tongan wife asked Leotogi to hold the child while she bathed first. As soon as her rival was out of sight, Leotogi seized the moment to kill the infant. The Tongan wife, hearing the sudden wild cry of her child, returned, but the baby was already dead. When the king heard of this evil deed, he became so angry that he ordered that Leotogi be burned alive.

The handsome woman was dragged by her men into the bush and bound in the fork of a fenua tree. Soon a tall heap of dry wood surrounded her. Then the people set fire to it, and, not wishing to hear Leotogi’s screams, they returned to the village. But so soon as the flames began to rise, something truly extraordinary took place—thousands of flying foxes came out of the jungle and extinguished the fire by urinating on it.

When the king’s attendants returned, they found Leotogi still alive and the fire out. They were very surprised and hurried back to tell the king what had happened. Next, Tuipaga ordered that Leotogi be taken and abandoned on a barren, uninhabited island. This island was haunted by a demon named Leat, and the king, who knew this, was certain that Leat would soon kill Leotogi. Leot, however, did not touch her because he thought she would soon die for want of food and water. So he simply sat down to wait and watch her die.
Great, therefore, was Lesi’s surprise when the next day he saw a multitude of flying foxes, each bringing some kind of food to Lesitog. The bats continued in this way to feed her for days as Lesi looked on amazed.

After some time, the Fijian Tuivasa happened to pass in the same way, and Lesitog called out to him and begged him to take her along with him. This he did gladly, and, as she was a very good-looking woman, he married her and in due time she bore him a son (Henry 1983; Fitisemanu n.d.).

We stream-lined the legend somewhat in this version. The narrative is still significant because the context of such stories suggests underlying beliefs, social understandings, and historical contexts. For example, two central motifs are in this tale that are truly exceptional in Polynesian legend—a protagonist saved by urination and also saved by抗拒d foxes.

Investigators in any discipline compile and study masses of data, looking for the patterns that are the field context and for the exceptions to the patterns that offer the communicative context. To a folklorist, these two unique Polynesian motifs signal that something special is happening here, and the agent in both instances is the flying fox.

In both of these significant motifs the message is that flying foxes are indigenous associated with fertility and fecundity. The second motif is the best obvious: A barren, unchildable, demon-infused island is made viable through the agency of flying foxes; the monster of sterility is defeated. The first motif delves more deeply into the erotic sub-conscious, but it directly associates flying foxes with fertility and survival. In a fuller version of the legend, Lesitog, still tied in the feiku tree after the bats have extinguished the fire, says to the Tuivasa’s man who lives on a Samoan proverb: “Tu tauta, feiku, i le mangaii feiku.—‘We meet under the feiku tree while yet full of life’ (Henry 1983).

In fact, a simplistic version of this association of the flying fox with rain lives on in a Samoan children’s song still sung today, similar to our American nursery rhyme, “Rain, rain, go away”:

Le pela, le pela, o manu lau ‘o leva
‘Aga ‘a le lelua ‘a le mata’o eva
Tuii’si e na lai ‘o le laite.

Flying fox, flying fox, take your burden far away
Don’t rain, so we can play
Tuii’si, cry immediately the rain stops
(Milne 1983).

To a folklorist, another feature of this legend is its associations of liminality. Liminality is a term coined and elaborated on by anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner to describe the state of being “in-between” categories, marginal, anomalous, “another fish nor bird.” Lesitog, for example, the hero of this tale, is a liminal person—a Samoan woman in a Tongan household, which, incidentally reflects the reality of a historical period when Samoa was to some extent subjugated by neighboring Tonga. She befriends and is befriended by a liminal species, the flying fox, which was considered clean, and thus able to urinate effectively, also flies, unlike other mammals. Such overlapping categories of existence often occupy a unique and significant niche in the worldviews of indigenous people (Mary Douglas 1966). Often, as in the case of Lesitog and her bat-servitor, liminality comments a kind of supernatural sanction exacting its influence on human affairs from some Olympian vantage point. To the folklorist, such liminal characters found in traditional lore signal something significant going on in the cultural belief system, which expresses itself metaphorically through legend and mythology.

Samoa is the eastern boundary of the flying fox’s natural habitat, but strangely enough, it is not the eastern boundary of Polynesian lore about giant bats. Great, often man-eating, bats are found in Hawaiian, Maori, and Micronesian traditions (Grace 1907; Shimaz 1957; Beckwith 1940). Hawaiian legend even includes an eight-eyed bat (Thuram 1923; Beckwith 1940). It is interesting that giant bat stories have persisted in these “flying-fox-less” societies, which evolved from western Polynesian cultures where flying foxes had been prevalent.

It is in flying fox country, however, western Polynesia—Samoa, Tonga, Niue, Fiji, and the outliers—where the most integrated flying fox traditions are encountered. We find bats as gods in both Tikopian and Tongan myths (Colloot 1921; Gifford 1954), and in Fijian lore a giant white vampire bat acts as a messenger (Fison 1904).

In a rather complex Nisei narrative about a war between the birds and the beasts, we again encounter the flying fox’s inherent liminality. Here the bat’s nocturnal and aloof habits are explained as a result of its being scorned by both the birds
and the beasts because during the mythic war the flying fox played politics, switching from side to side as the fortunes of war waxed and waned, dealing upon its double nature (Loeb 1925). And in Tikopian legend we have the Polynesian prototype for Hauke Wayne (Hawaii), a creature who is sometimes bat and other times man (Firth 1981).

But what do each local legends and myths contribute to our understanding of the contemporary cultural significance of the flying fox? A series of recent interviews with Samoans in Samoa revealed a continuity between traditional and contemporary attitudes toward flying foxes. Most striking of these is that flying foxes still occupy a liminal position in the Samoan view of nature. While the pē's is identified and appreciated as an integral and highly valued part of the traditional Samoan forest, during fruit harvesting season it may be viewed as a pest as it competes with farmers for the fruit crop.

A traditional story about a bat tricking a bat out of his wings (Kramer 1925) is still told and reveals this ambivalence. Also, the most common method of hunting flying foxes before the arrival of fire seems indicates a type of pest control. The barbed branches of a creeper vine were tied to a handle, and the hunter would try to catch the bat, tearing its wings, as it fed upon flowering banana plants in the plantation (Hisco 1930).

Although their flesh is still prized as a delicacy, it is not considered “fast food,” and the hunting of flying foxes is almost universally frowned on. We have never seen flying foxes for sale in Samoa, either in the farmers’ markets or elsewhere. The actions of individuals in recent years to harvest and export Samoan flying foxes are commonly seen as criminal activities—greedy and shameless behavior. The flying fox has never been a staple of the Samoan diet. Most often when it is taken, the one or two bats are offered to elders or other ranking family members as an in-group delicacy gift.

Our survey revealed the vast majority of Samoans questioned support recent efforts to protect the pē's (Pteropus samoensis) and pē's fuliginosus (Pteropus fuliginosus). Older Samoans are shocked by the dwindling number of flying foxes, and in both American and Western Samoa villagers respect local restrictions on bat hunting. The general attitude is that the flying fox is a part of the forest, a part of Samoa, and while limited hunting of flying foxes should still be allowed, care must be taken to preserve them for future generations.

References


