

Nakaa and the forbidden tree*

Nei Tearia†
Arthur Grimble‡

This is a creation myth of the Banaban people from Banaba island, Kiribati, in Micronesia.

In the beginning were born Tabakea and his sister Tituabine from the rubbing together of heaven and earth. And as yet it was all a black darkness, for heaven and earth were not yet separated. From the overside of heaven, as it lay upon earth, sprang Banaba. This was the navel of *Tebongiro*, which is to say, the multitude of islands that were in the darkness of heaven and earth.

Then Tabakea lay with his sister Tituabine on Banaba, and she bore him children. Firstborn was a son, whose name was Nakaa the old one. After him were born many others, both men and women. They all lived on Banaba, and Nakaa was chief of them all, for he was the firstborn.

But in those days, the people were innocent. The men knew not the women. So, the brothers of Nakaa lived with him on the north-

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† Nei Tearia (fl. 1920s) was a female elder from Tabiang village, Banaba. Lady Tearia is one of the main sources of Banaban oral history recorded in writings by Arthur Grimble, H.C. Maude, and *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*.

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west side of Banaba, in the place called Bouru. And the women, their sisters, lived apart from the men, on the southeast side of Banaba.

In Bouru, the place of the men, there was a fish trap by the shore, where the fish might never be exhausted. And yet, there was but a single fish in the trap at a time. But, when it was taken out, another took its place right away. In Bouru, there also grew the coconut tree whose fruit was inexhaustible. Yet there grew but a single coconut on the tree at a time. But when it was plucked, another grew right away on the same stalk. The name of that tree was *Tarakaimau*, the Tree of Life.

In the place of the women on the southeast side of Banaba there also stood a Tree, whose name was *Karikibai*. That Tree was a woman, and all the brothers of Nakaa were forbidden to approach her.

One day, Nakaa said to his brothers, 'I go on a journey. See that ye pluck not the flowers of the woman called *Karikibai*.' So, he left them, and for a while they remembered his judgment. But the wind bore them the scent of the woman's flowers, and their hearts were full of desire. They said one to another, 'Let us go and see for ourselves; perchance some good thing may happen that Nakaa begrudges us.' So, they went and plucked the woman's flowers and disported themselves with her.

When Nakaa returned from his journey, he looked upon the faces of his brothers and knew that they were no longer children. He was aware of a sweet smell in the air, and knew that it was the smell of the woman's flowers in their hair. He seized hold of them one by one and searched the hairs of their heads. Behold, their hair was beginning to turn grey. And he went to the women of the Tree in the East, and it was the same with them.

So, Nakaa was full of anger and said, 'Fools, that could not abide my word! Old age and death are come among you!'

And he knew that their eyes were blinded, and their hearts darkened with un wisdom. So, he led them to the Tree of Life, and he led them again to the Tree of the Woman, saying, 'Choose, ye fools, between the two Trees, and I will take away with me the Tree that ye choose not.' This he did to try them. And lo, they chose the

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Tree of the Woman, that is also called *Tarakaimate*, the Tree of Death. And Nakaa arose to leave them, taking with him the Tree of Life.

But before he left them, he flung at them a handful of small insects that he had made, wrapped in the leaves of the pandanus tree. And the insects settled on the backs of their heads, and never again left them, nor their children, nor their children's children, until today. And they began to bore at the base of their skulls, until the life was eaten out. And so, men came by their death. And because of the pandanus leaves in which the death-insects were wrapped, we enshroud our dead in a winding-sheet of pandanus leaf matting even to this day.

As for Nakaa, he took away with him the Tree of Life and the fish trap that is never empty. He departed to the western horizon, and there he sits in the heavens awaiting the souls of dead mortals. He faces north, forever weaving nets. And when a soul comes to him, he catches it in the flying strand and laughs with scorn, saying, 'Child of the Woman, thou art come back to me, for my word was a hard word in Bouru.'

Then with jibing words he gazes upon the soul, and if it is of a comely appearance his heart is softened, and he says, 'Pass on to the Tree of Life.' But if the soul is of an unpleasant shape, he throws it into the midst of a struggling heap of souls that are condemned to writhe in everlasting entanglement. The name of that heap is *Te Rekerua*.