The Mythology and Oral Literature of Taiwan’s Indigenous Peoples

Terence C. Russell

Accept, to begin, that tradition is the creation of the future out of the past.

Henry Glassie

This issue of Taiwan Literature is devoted exclusively to the rich tradition of mythology and oral literature of Taiwan’s indigenous peoples. A previous issue of Taiwan Literature introduced indigenous writing in general (Issue 3), while another has treated Taiwanese folk literature (Issue 9). Both earlier issues overlap with the content of the present one. However, we feel that recent work with the oral traditions of indigenous peoples in Taiwan and elsewhere in the world has opened significant new avenues toward a fuller understanding of the importance of mythology and oral literature in indigenous societies. The nature of indigenous societies themselves, both in traditional settings and in contemporary Taiwan, has also received much greater attention since the end of martial law in 1987. It is therefore an opportune time to take a closer look at the traditions of Taiwan’s indigenous oral literature, both as we know them from historical transcription, and as the literature is adapted and transposed into the post-literate media of the present.

In proposing this volume we had no illusions about our ability to treat the many issues pertaining to Taiwan’s indigenous mythology and oral traditions in anything but the most superficial fashion. After spending time gathering and organizing material that seemed worthy of inclusion in such a collection, the richness, complexity and depth of this material became even more apparent. Thus, what we have ended up compiling should best be viewed as only a rough sampling of the available texts organized into a number of equally rough categories. In making our selections and in devising categories it has further been necessary to focus on a limited number of issues that seem to warrant particular highlighting. In this latter respect, we have been guided by scholarly discourse on indigenous mythology and oral literature ongoing in Taiwan and elsewhere, especially in North America. This discourse has shifted the focus away from that of early European studies that attempted to universalize mythology and seek in it universal humanistic values, or psychological archetypes that in turn might be seen as the substratum of all art, and even civilization itself. Such discourse often demonstrated little interest in the distinction between oral and chirographic (written) literature. (Ong 1982) The actual context within which the original oral versions of myths and legends were created and performed was also seldom considered.

It was probably Walter Ong’s Orality and Literature (1982) more than any other single work that pointed a new way to understanding the oral mode in literary creation as fundamentally different from the written mode. In studying the relationship between orality and writing as distinct methods of expression, Ong also touched upon the psychological changes that take place as people begin to rely upon writing as their preferred means of recording ideas and information, going so far as to speculate that, “Both orality and the growth of literacy out of orality are necessary for the evolution of consciousness.” (172) This was not intended to imply the superiority of written expression, or to create a hierarchy of consciousness in which the “primitive” mind, which relies primarily or exclusively on orality, is superseded by the “civilized,” literate mind. Rather, it was in many ways the
opposite, for it leads us to look more closely at the unique encodings that have grown within the many traditions of oral literature over the many millennia when it was not just the “primary” form of literature but the only form.

Our understanding of the special role of oral literature within the context of indigenous cultures has also evolved considerably over the past few decades. Through the work of Dell Hymes, for example, we have gained a far more nuanced picture of oral literature as performance, a fact that forces us to evaluate it in ways qualitatively different from the ways we approach written texts (Hymes 2003). We may thank Hymes for creating a new field of study for oral literature, a field he describes as “ethnopoetics.” Perhaps what Hymes and others who have worked with indigenous literature most wish to impress upon us, is that the traditional myths and legends that are the substance of oral literature are far more than an unchanging set of stories that may be told to children. They are “ways of making sense of the world” in which the storyteller authors “bring both their own experience and mastery of form” to their performances of the stories (Hymes preface x). Thus we may understand preliterate myths and legends as a dynamic body of literature, constantly being recreated by skilled performance artists.

These elements of creativity, individual experience, and artistry have also been demonstrated by Robert Bringhurst in his wonderful translations of a series of oral performances by the Haida storyteller, Skaay (2001). Bringhurst sets a high standard for fidelity and insight in the presentation of oral literature in translation. His accompanying study of the story cycle and the manner in which the storyteller recreates the drama, tension and humor implicit in that cycle points out that we cannot truly appreciate oral literature without taking into account the fact that it is performed in a particular place at a particular time by a performer of unique endowment. The spirit of Bringhurst’s renderings of Skaay’s recitations has guided and inspired me as I have brought together and edited the translations of Taiwan indigenous oral literature contained in this volume.

We must also recognize that myths and legends, the material of oral literature, cannot be fully appreciated except in terms of the many social, historical, and religious factors surrounding their production. Myths and legends are the history of a preliterate people. They are the means by which a community conveys its store of knowledge about existing in the world from one generation to another. Recent efforts to formulate a workable model for ethnicity and identity in indigenous communities have led scholars to realize the interrelatedness of language, sacred (oral) history, ceremonial cycles and land (Holm, et al.). Who the people are, where they live and how they relate to the super-human elements of their environment are all given form, and passed to successive generations through the medium of orally transmitted myths and legends. Cynthia Carsten, in speaking of the Pueblo novelist, Leslie Marmon Silko’s, presentation of the role of oral traditions in her native community of Laguna, puts it most succinctly: “Growing up at Laguna, Silko learned that her community, their stories, and their religious traditions are inextricably bound to the land.” (122)

There has long existed a romantic notion of the intimate relationship that indigenous peoples share with the natural world, a notion that has not necessarily advanced any genuine understanding of the realities of indigenous life (Berkhofer Jr., Deloria). Recent research on orality that recognizes the historical and cultural factors surrounding the production of oral literature holds considerably more promise for uncovering the true qualities of the connection between indigenous peoples and the land they live on. It may also help us understand the significance of oral literature in shaping and sustaining the cultural ecosphere of indigenous communities.
It is possible to question the usefulness of invoking the findings of research on North American indigenous oral literature as a means of understanding the myths and legends of Taiwan’s indigenous tribes. However, as may be observed from a number of the selections that we have translated in this issue, there are many close parallels between the situation of North American and Taiwanese indigenous peoples in relation to their oral literature. For example, in Pasuya Poiconu’s article discussing the manner in which the Truku people of Hualien use their traditional mythology to mediate their encounter with ethnic Chinese culture in Taiwan, he notes, “The function of myth is to integrate living individuals into the cycles of their lives, and harmonize them into the surrounding life environment.” (Abstract) In his preface to Tseng Chien-tse’s collection of historical legends of the Puyuma people, Sun Dachuan also points out that the stories of the Puyuma people, despite being non-textual, were yet historical records that spoke through “poetry and prose, people and nature, reality and fantasy” (Preface) rather than prose narrative. The compilers of contemporary renditions of indigenous myths in Taiwan, such as Tseng and Jin Ronghua, are also aware of the importance of the performative aspect of oral literature and supply us with information about the storytellers and the circumstances of their performances.

In keeping with the traditions of Taiwan Literature, we have endeavored to select a variety of styles of writing that fit within the five categories presented in each of the previous issues of the journal. These comprise critiques, fiction, prose essays, poetry and academic studies. However, because of the nature of oral literature, it has been necessary to make certain adjustments to the usual categories. For example, while there are many “studies” of indigenous oral literature from which to choose, traditional oral literature simply does not include the composition of “essays” in any conventional sense. Nor is “fiction” an especially apt or useful description of traditional myths and legends. On the other hand, prosody is very often an integral part of oral literature, though we might question whether such prosody is qualitatively the same as our contemporary understanding of poetry. Despite these qualifications, we have made every effort to present as many different aspects of our material as possible.

In addition to our efforts to present our material within the categories mentioned above, our selections have been guided by two overarching considerations. In light of revisions in our understanding of the function and nature of myths and legends, as well as of their oral performance in real village settings, we have attempted firstly to make selections that somehow reflect the origins of the pieces as unique performances by individual storytellers. In this respect, we hope that our readers may be impressed with the notion that myths and legends are not finished products, like novels, that have been created and recorded at a particular time in history and have no potential for legitimate change thereafter. Quite the contrary, we understand myths and legends very much as open codes that can be shaped and transformed by the storyteller to suit the specific time and circumstances of their telling. Unfortunately, due to the nature of our actual sources, achieving this goal has been extremely problematic. To begin with, all of our pieces come to us through the sterilizing and distorting filter of second, and sometimes third language translation. These translations we have then subjected to yet another layer of rendition. All of this filtering inevitably leaves a weakened solution that perhaps offers only a distant memory of the original. But at least there is the memory.

In terms of the context of the production of our myths and legends, the more sensitive and diligent field researchers have done their best to convey as much information as possible under the circumstances. Therefore, we sometimes know who the original storytellers were by name, tribal group, age and social position. We also occasionally are informed as to where they told their stories. Some of the translators also have attempted to
convey something of the idiosyncratic texture of the storyteller’s language in their renderings. Beyond that, we are effectively unable to reflect or reconstruct the ambience of the venue, or the dynamics of the actual performance. Ultimately, perhaps the best we can hope for is that our readers may pick up hints from the translations and use their imagination to recreate how the stories may have been recounted by the storytellers themselves.

Our second consideration was to present myths and legends as history. In this respect we feel we have been somewhat more successful. What is meant by history is further subdivided into two categories: the history of the study of indigenous oral literature, and oral literature itself as history. In pursuit of the history of the study of indigenous myths and legends, we have looked back to the pioneering work of Japanese anthropologists who, in the service of the Japanese colonial administration, travelled into the central and eastern regions of Taiwan in the early twentieth century to study the culture of indigenous peoples and to record their myths and legends. The work of researchers like Suzuki Sakutarō and Ogawa Naoyoshi is an invaluable source for our understanding of indigenous cultures before they were heavily disrupted by colonial government and industrialization. Naturally, it is essential to recognize the background of this research as well. Suzuki and Ogawa were both working on behalf of a regime that had control and eventual assimilation of indigenous peoples as its ultimate motive. They viewed indigenous culture as “primitive,” if in many ways fascinating, and felt that bringing the “light of civilization” to indigenous people was a noble cause. Considering the state of anthropology during the 1920’s and 30’s, it was probably inevitable that such attitudes should be in play, but we must still exercise special caution in using the products of their fieldwork.

For the purpose of providing further historical perspective on the study of mythology in Taiwan, we have also presented one article by renowned anthropologist, Li Yih-yuan. This selection may seem out of place as it does not actually treat indigenous myths themselves, but rather discusses a number of Chinese myths. However, apart from wishing to include an article by Prof. Li on the basis of his contribution to the study of indigenous peoples in Taiwan generally, the reason for choosing this particular piece is that it represents a good example of the structuralist understanding applied to the function of myths in their cultural context. This approach is no longer as popular as it once was, but it represents an important stage in the development of theoretical understandings of mythology and oral literature generally. It thus provides a bridge between work done during the Japanese colonial era and that being done most recently.

Myths and legends are the reflection of a people’s historical experience. They seldom constitute organized historical narratives in the manner of many literate cultures, but they are history nonetheless, in function if not form. As Sun Dachuan points out, indigenous myths and legends operate through a different modality than the textual history produced in literate cultures:

“In [indigenous oral literature], poetry and prose, people and nature, reality and fantasy are inalienable parts of the “history.” The relationship between past, present and future is no longer a matter of placing things before and after in sequential order, but rather of the logical narration of all manner of existential experience and situations.” (Footsteps of the Ancestral Spirits: Orally Transmitted Historical Records of the Shisheng Branch of the Puyuma Tribe, p.4)

Many of the legends presented in this issue have strong historical value. Some, like the legend of Lhikolao, the cloud leopard, who is the totemic protector of the Rukai people
of Kochapongane village, or the story of the Taos flying fish season rites, are central to the
cultural identity of the people who pass them from generation to generation. Others, like
stories about encounters with ghosts, or odd accounts explaining the origin of monkeys, or
why dogs cannot bark, may appear quaint and of largely entertainment value, but the fact
that they have been passed down for many generations indicates that they have struck a
chord that continues to resonate at the level of deep cultural experience. Through allegory
and intuitive logic they instruct people how to continue their survival in a specific environment,
an environment that may support human life only precariously.

History, whether written or orally transmitted, is not just the record of events from
the past, or instructive allegories about the modes of survival. It is also the memory that we
have of our very identity and uniqueness as a people. For indigenous peoples, their orally
transmitted myths and legends are the lessons that children were taught about what it
meant to belong to their nation, their village, their clan. Thus, in our selections for this issue
we have striven to present a number of examples of identity legends. There are stories that
speak of cultural heroes who provide role models for the members of a given tribe and
embody the tribe’s cultural ideals. The Atayal legends of Halus, and Amis legends of
Alikakay are excellent examples of this mode of oral literature. There are also stories of
cultural modality, like the legend of how the practice of headhunting originated among the
Tsou people, or why there is a Rukai taboo against killing crows. Such stories may not
satisfy the scientifically minded ethnographer as representing historical fact, but they
satisfy the needs of successive generations in the respective tribes for intuitively
reasonable explanations of their unique cultural practices.

The pieces of verse that we have translated under the heading of “Poetry” are of
very diverse style, but they share the common characteristic of being originally performed
as songs. Some of the pieces are love or courtship songs that provide a model for the
conduct of amorous affairs within the tribe. Others are ritual songs that would be performed
on specific ritual occasions, such as at the beginning of a hunting expedition. We are
epecially happy that we have been able to include a series of Pazih songs because Pazih
is a language that has very nearly disappeared. The fact that we have a textual record of
these ritual songs is evidence of the positive role that modern researchers can play in
helping to preserve what would in the past have been lost forever. It is also at least partially
due to the efforts of Li and Tsuchida that members of the Pazih nation and others have
begun efforts to revive this language.

Finally, it is our strong desire that this collection of indigenous myths and legends in
translation can draw some attention to the realities of contemporary indigenous life and the
process of cultural recovery and reconstruction ongoing among Taiwan’s Austronesian
indigenous peoples. Writers such as Auvinni Kadreseng, Syaman Rapongan, Husluman
Vava and Yaronglong Sakinu have devoted much attention to understanding the manner in
which oral literature binds their people to their culture and to their past. Because they are
heirs to that culture and past, their own work must be seen as a continuation of the tradition.
This is so even when, as in the case of Sakinu’s “The Monkey King,” the stories are not
retellings of stories passed down from the ancestors, but rather evocations of the writer’s
own experience. To a very great extent these contemporary writers are our best guides to
gaining an awareness of how mythology relates to real life and real time. As artists and
community leaders these writers are the modern incarnation of storytellers and shamans,
who have for millennia assumed responsibility for conveying the uniqueness and
particularity of their traditional ways to the younger generations. As they move forward into
an increasingly globalized world of the future, a world wherein the values of the ancestors
find little sympathy, the work of these artists in framing their cultural heritage within the realities of the present is all the more urgent and necessary.

We have done our utmost to bring respect and clarity to our translations of Taiwan’s indigenous oral literature. Unfortunately, there are many practical limitations to our ability to do so. Although native language versions exist for some of the material that we have translated, none of our translators have been able to make more than cursory use of that material. Everything has been rendered from either Chinese or Japanese translation. In two cases we have actually worked from Chinese translations of Japanese translations. This is a very significant and fundamental drawback. However, since even indigenous people themselves now approach much of their own traditional oral literature via the medium of Chinese language translations, working from these latter versions is a practical necessity that should not stand in the way of its presentation to English language readers.

The myths and legends of Taiwan’s indigenous peoples represent a lively and impressive corpus of creative work. They stand as a gateway to our understanding of indigenous culture and history, and hence of Taiwan’s culture and history in general. More than any other form of literature, it is the product of Taiwan’s mountains, plains and the great ocean that surrounds the island nation. In many ways we might claim that indigenous myths and legends are the bedrock of Taiwan literature and the roots from which a truly unique and inclusive national culture may grow. We therefore feel it most appropriate and timely that a special issue of *Taiwan Literature: English Translation Series* be devoted to this wonderful corpus of work.

Sources Cited


