

SHORT NOTE

Polynesian traditions explain why some birds are red or black

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In Polynesia, narratives were passed on orally from generation to generation for centuries before they got recorded in writing and published from the end of the 18th century, mostly by ethnographers, travellers, government officials and missionaries.¹

On almost every Polynesian island, these oral stories featured the same central characters, such as Māui, Sina/Hina/Hine and Tinilau/Tinirau, or Tāwhaki, who were talked about in “hero-cycles” (Luomala 1940). Birds appear in hundreds of these stories (Richter-Gravier 2019), some of which

account for the physical characteristics of a given species, thereby showing that Polynesians’ own bodies of belief explained a bird’s appearance. This was especially the case with some species’ red or black feathers, bill, or legs.

People throughout Polynesia placed great value on the colour red, which was considered sacred; the word *kura* ‘red’ and its cognates *kula*, ‘*ura*, ‘*ula*, *ku’a* conveyed on many Polynesian islands “meanings connoting excellency and sacredness” (Handy 1927). Interest in this colour is apparent in the many stories that explain why some species of birds have a red plumage, a red bill, or red legs. For instance, the red colour of the bill and frontal shield of the pūkeko (*Porphyrio melanotus*) was accounted for by Māori in various narratives, all of which revolve around blood and involve culture heroes such as Tāwhaki or Māui.

One such tradition (from Te Tai Tokerau/Northland) has it that Tāwhaki, on his long journey

¹ For an overview of the history of the recording of oral traditions in Polynesia from the late 18th century to the present, see Craig (2004). A list of publications containing traditional Polynesian narratives was furnished by Kirtley (1971).

up to the heavens, met the pūkeko coming down (Keene 1963). The bird brushed against him with his wings in a very rude fashion. Outraged, Tāwhaki seized him by the bill (of a dull, nondescript colour), which he pinched so hard that it bled. It has been of a brilliant red colour ever since.

Another tradition uses blood to account for both the red bill of the pūkeko and the red spots on the head of the kākāriki (red-crowned parakeet, *Cyanoramphus novaezelandiae*) (Ariki-Tama-Kiniti 1927). While she was bathing in the sea, Māui's wife was sexually assaulted by Tuna-rua, a giant eel. She then told Māui, who decided to devise a plan to kill it. Accordingly, she went back to the spot where she was assaulted, and lured the creature to the shore while Māui hid nearby. As soon as it was out of the water, he rushed out upon it and attacked it with his *toki* (axe). He cut off its tail and threw it into the forest, then he cut off its head and threw it into the sea, before rolling its huge trunk into a stream. A pūkeko, frightened at the noise of the fight, ran away, but in passing, his bill and legs got splashed by the creature's blood. The blood also splashed onto a kākāriki sitting in a tree nearby, staining his head, which has remained red to this day.

Similarly, in a Moriori story (from Rēkohu/Chatham Islands), blood stained the bill of another species of bird, the *parea* (Chatham Island pigeon, *Hemiphaga chathamensis*). When the culture heroine Hine was pregnant, her husband Tinirau forced her to stay in a house throughout her pregnancy (Shand 1896). When she went into labour, the fog settled, and with it came a flock of *parea*, who helped Hine deliver her child and got stained by her blood in the process, hence their red bill.

In a story that explains how the birds of Taumako (a Polynesian Outlier in the Solomon Islands) acquired their distinctive markings, it is not the blood of a woman in labour or that of an eel that is smeared on birds, but that of a pig (Davenport 1968). Taumako was home to a man-eating pig named *Vailape*, and a *pakola* (ogress), who ate so many people that the survivors decided to leave the island altogether. However, a woman named Kahiva, who happened to be pregnant, was left behind. She dug a hole to be safe from *Vailape* and the *pakola*, gave birth to twin boys, *Lauvaia* and *Hemaholuaki*, and raised them in the hole. The two boys eventually ventured out of the hole and managed to kill the *pakola*, and then the pig, which they butchered before carrying its meat back home for their mother to cook.

The boys then called all the birds of Taumako and ordered them to fly to Pileni (another Polynesian Outlier in the Solomon Islands, about 100 km west of Taumako) and tell the people of Taumako who lived there that *Vailape* and the *pakola* were now dead. First, they chose the bat

(*peka*) as their messenger, putting the pig's bristles on his back so that it would be recognised, and told him to fly right inside the house where men gathered and to answer their questions by fluttering his wings to answer yes, and by staying still to answer no. However, the bat soon got tired and returned to Taumako. Then, the two boys chose the *mihi* (cardinal myzomela, *Myzomela cardinalis*), whom they smeared with the pig's blood; they gave him the same instructions. He went further than the bat, but became tired and returned. Next, they selected the *lenga* (palm lorikeet, *Vini palmarum*), whose legs they painted with the pig's cooked blood. The *lenga* went further than the *mihi*, but also tired and returned. The same happened with all the different species of birds of Taumako. Finally, *Lauvaia* and *Hemaholuaki* asked the *vili* (coconut lorikeet, *Trichoglossus haematodus*), and smeared his bill with dark blood. He flew straight to the men's house belonging to the Taumako people in Pileni. They understood that both *Vailape* and the *pakola* were dead and that Kahiva wanted them to return to Taumako. They all went back to their island.

In contrast, according to a tradition from West Futuna (a Polynesian Outlier in Vanuatu), the head of the cardinal myzomela was tainted red not by pig blood smeared on him, but by the blood of an ogre's anus (Keller & Kuautonga 2007). An ogre (*ta pasiesi*) had eaten all the people on the island, except for a few children that he saved for later meals. Led by the culture hero *Majihjiki*, the children eventually escaped and were pursued by the ogre. As the ogre was trying to climb up a tree to reach his victims high in the branches, he fell to his death. The children, however, were too scared to climb down, so they sent various animals to check if the ogre was really dead, including a black ant which bit him on the legs, arms and eyes, but the ogre did not make a move. A fly buzzed in his ears, but again the ogre stayed motionless. Still unconvinced, the children sent all the other animals, until only one animal was left, the *manumea* (cardinal myzomela).² The black bird told the children that he would find out for sure whether the ogre was dead or still alive, and he flew into his mouth. When his head emerged from the ogre's anus, it was all red. This is why the head of the *manumea* is red today, unlike the rest of his body which is still black. Incidentally, the children now truly believed that the ogre was dead, so they climbed down the tree, and resettled their original villages. A similar story is found in neighbouring Tanna (of a distinct Melanesian culture) (Guiart 1956).

² In West Futuna the *manumea* is the cardinal myzomela, whereas in Sāmoa this name designates the tooth-billed pigeon (*Didunculus strigirostris*).

In Mugaba/Rennell Island (a Polynesian Outlier in the Solomon Islands), the culture heroine Sina was rubbing her turmeric (*ango*) when the birds came, asking her to colour their feathers with it (Elbert & Monberg 1965). First came the *suusuubagu* (Rennell white-eye, *Zosterops rennellianus*), but Sina declined his request. He nonetheless stood there and some turmeric spilled on him, so his skin turned yellow. Then came the *baghigho* (cardinal myzomela); Sina took him in her hand, so he became red. She took hold of the legs of the *gupe* (Pacific imperial pigeon, *Ducula pacifica*), and they became red as well. She grabbed the abdomen of the *higi* (silver-capped fruit dove, *Ptilinopus richardsii*), and it turned red. After grating her turmeric, Sina rubbed a tapa with the cord of the turmeric. The *sibigi* (yellow-bibbed lory, *Lorius chlorocercus*) came and had his body rubbed with it by Sina (for a study of the aesthetic, cosmetic and ritual uses of the pigment produced from the roots of this ancient cultivar in the Polynesian Outliers, and of the connection between turmeric and sexuality, see Bayliss-Smith 2012). She removed her morinda (*Morinda citrifolia*) flower necklace and put it on the lory's neck. Then, she mixed water with resin to tattoo the *ligobai* (barred cuckooshrike, *Coracina lineata*). She also tattooed the *manutangionge* (shining cuckoo, *Chrysococcyx lucidus*), the *kaageba* (long-tailed cuckoo, *Eudynamis taitensis*) and the *taba* (brown goshawk, *Accipiter fasciatus*). Finally, the *ghaapilu* (Rennell starling, *Aplonis insularis*, or singing starling, *Aplonis cantoroides*) came, but Sina did not tattoo him: she chose to cover him in black, which is how he acquired that colour. After being coloured thus by Sina, all the birds flew away.

Finally, other stories explain how Māui was responsible for inflicting red or black marks on some birds when he was trying to make fire: in Hawai'i, he rubbed the top of the head of the *'alae* (common gallinule, *Gallinula galeata*) with a fire stick, and in Manihiki (Northern Cook Islands), he singed the corners of the eyes of the *kakavai* (white tern, *Gygis alba*) with it.

The *'alae* were the keepers of the fire in Hawai'i (Forbes 1879). Every time they saw Māui-mua approaching them, they put out the fire and flew away. Māui-mua and his three brothers could only see the fire when they were out at sea fishing; by the time they reached the shore it had been put out. Knowing that there were four of them, the birds would only light the fire when they could see four men in the canoe. Māui-mua instructed his brothers to put a tall calabash in his place in the canoe, which fooled the birds, who then proceeded to light their fire to roast bananas. Māui-mua leapt on one *'alae* with the intention of killing him because the birds had been hiding the fire from him, but the *'alae* promised to let him have the fire if he spared his life; otherwise the secret of fire would die with him.

He then told Māui-mua that the fire was in the leafstalk of the *'ape* (giant taro, *Alocasia macrorrhizos*), and then in the leafstalk of the *kalo* (taro, *Colocasia esculenta*), but when Māui-mua rubbed the leafstalks with a stick no fire came out. Then the bird told Māui-mua that he would find the fire in a dry stick, with which Māui-mua eventually made a fire. But, angry with the bird for the deception, he rubbed the top of the head of the *'alae*, which became red with blood.

In Manihiki, Māui-pōtiki asked his grandfather Tangaroa-tuhi-mata ('Tanga roa-with-the-tattooed-face') to give him fire so he could cook food (Kauraka 1988). Tangaroa called two *kakavai*, his pets, to press down the fire-making stick, which he rubbed with another stick. When fire was produced, he gave the stick with the fire to Māui, but Māui put it out and asked for another stick. Tangaroa made fire again with two sticks, but Māui singed the corners of the two terns' eyes with the hot end of the stick, so the birds flew away, never to come back again. The descendants of these birds, with their distinctive black stripe extending from the eye to the nape, have been called *kakavai Māui* (*Sterna sumatrana*) in Manihiki ever since.

As is illustrated by these examples, traditional Polynesian narratives were used to explain the appearance of all the birds of the same species in terms of a given ancestor's behaviour. These stories recount events that brought about a change in a bird's appearance that became permanent.

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