

Mekeo Stories (Isonioni)

The story of how Egret's mother Cuscus was eaten

Egret built a house for his mother Cuscus; and along with Egret lived his sister Waterhen. When the house was finished, before placing his mother inside, he made walls (or protective partitions) for her, in all six layers. After making the walls, and putting his mother inside, he went on a foraging expedition; he went to Gulf Province to eat sago. He went to Gulf Province, and heavily burdened he travelled. Now Waterhen thought her brother had died and she covered herself with black ash. She sang the following song:

*Aifuihui kunokunoa wawakoe
oanionu oanionu wawakoe
kuno kunonie kunonie,
Aifuihui kuno kunonie.*

As for Egret, he stayed in Gulf Province. Meanwhile his mother stayed in her house, and she also struck up this song.

*Aifuihui kunokunoa wawakoe
oanionu oanionu
waioku kuno kunonia kunonia
Aifuihui kuno kunonia.*

She went on living there, but now Eagle came down and began to chop at the first wall. Egret's mother heard Willywagtail'sⁱ song and she called out: "Who is that who is singing?" she said; and the bird replied: "It is Willywagtail who is singing." Egret's mother addressed Willywagtail and said: "My child, since your elder brother Egret has gone to Gulf Province, you should go there too, you should speak to him and say: 'While you remain here, Eagle has come down and he is chopping away at your mother's walls and soon he'll eat her,' that's what you should say." And Willywagtail flew off but he spotted some ufua fruit, and didn't go any further, he didn't tell Egret the news, and the old woman just stayed there and nothing happened. She waited a while more and Epea (another bird) came along, and she spoke to him as she had to Willywagtail and Epea flew off, but he spotted some aupua fruit and he didn't go any further and nothing happened. Egret's mother waited a while more and Keke (another bird) came and perched on top of the house. Cuscus raised her voice and addressed him and when she had said her piece, Keke flew off and did exactly what the previous two birds had done. When Keke had flown away, the old woman struck up this song:

*Aifuihui kunokunoa wawakoe
oanionu oanionu
waioku kuno kunonia kunonia
Aifuihui kuno kunonia.*

The old woman sang like that and Kekeaufa'a [another bird] came along and raised his voice on top of the house. "Who are you?" she said. And he spoke saying: "I am Kekeaufa'a". "Ah, you must go, your elder brother has gone to Gulf Province, he went there on a foraging expedition, you must tell him: 'Eagle has come down and chopped and chopped at your mother's walls and soon he will eat her,' that's what you must say." Kekeaufa'a flew off but as soon as he spotted some aupua fruit he started to eat it and didn't go any further. The old woman stayed where she was and struck up her song again.

Aifuihui kunokunoe wawakua
oanionue oanionue
wawakue kunonia kunonia
Aifuihui kuno kunonie.

Cuscus slept and in the evening of the following day Eagle flew to the top of a huge apanii tree nearby. "Kekekeke," he sang, and he said: "I will eat your mother, I will eat your father." Then he slept and the next day he descended and attacked the walls again. Panguako (another bird) came along and cried out on top of Cuscus's house. Panguako raised his voice in song. "Who are you?" said Egret's mother. Him he said "I am Panguako." "Ah, lad, you must go and say to your elder brother and say: 'Now the walls are nearly destroyed and soon Eagle will be eating your mother,' that's what you must say." Panguako flew off but he spotted some coconuts and started to eat them, and he ate them and didn't go any further. The old woman remained as before; nothing happened and she slept. Eagle, now perched on top of the apanii tree, sang: "Kekekeke, I will eat your mother, I will eat your father." Egret's mother slept again and in the evening of the following day Eagle descended and again chopped at the walls. Now Evinongo (another bird) came along and perched on top of the house and raised his voice in song. "Who are you?" said Cuscus. He said: "I am Evinongo." "Ah, lad, you must go and talk to your elder brother and say to him: 'While you stay here and forage for food, Eagle has finished all the walls, now he is biting the very last one, I've come to remind you of that.'" And Evinongo, that rogue, he flew away; he flew and flew, and he perched on Egret's canoe-pole in Gulf Province and told him the whole story. Egret lifted his canoe-pole and he poled and poled and finally he arrived; he poled into the mouth of the river, he poled upstream, and he arrived at his mother's place. Now, Eagle flew up and perched on top of the apanii tree. He sang: "Kekekeke, I ate your mother, I ate your father." Then Egret knew that his mother had already been eaten. He went and plucked areca nuts, and he called all the birds together, and when they had come he gave each one a hand of areca nuts. He addressed them and said: "Since Eagle has eaten my mother, I want you to kill him. I have plucked areca nuts for you." After that all the birds tried to kill Eagle. They tried but they didn't succeed. So Egret plucked more areca nut and he went and gave them to Vaisapu (a huge bird) and Mingumingu (a tiny fly). He addressed them both and said: "Since Eagle has eaten my mother, I want you to kill him." Vaisapu and Mingumingu both simply replied: "Go and we'll follow you." When they arrived at the apanii tree all the other birds spoke to Mingumingu and said: "we found the tree and we made an attempt on Eagle but we didn't succeed." Then Mingumingu and Vaisapu those two rose up. But those two didn't fly straight up like all the other birds, who hadn't succeeded. Mingumingu and Vaisapu circled around and around the apanii tree, and that way they succeeded in reaching the top. They flew higher and higher, and then, while Mingumingu was distracting Eagle's attention, flying first this way and then that, Vaisapu struck him. Eagle fell to the ground and was beaten to death by all the other birds. Then Egret made a feast and there was a gathering. Because of all this Phalanger now lives (as we know), but we can see that there is little flesh on his back. And as for Waterhen, because she painted herself with black ash to mourn for her brother, her feathers are black.

And here is the 'meaning' of the chant (or spell):

Egret you are there on a foraging expedition,
you go hither and thither,
but as for me, Eagle will eat me.

The story given above in English was collected in the East Mekeo (also known as “Mekeo” or “Central Mekeo”) dialect in 1980, at Mainohana High School, just outside Bereina, in Central Province, Papua New Guinea. It was told by Ongongo Aeongai and it was taped in the village and written down by Andrew Aopai.

Above I have given a fairly free translation of the story into English. Below this note there is a line-by-line (but not morpheme-by-morpheme) translation of the original Mekeo, which will no doubt be of interest to Mekeo readers as well as to linguists and anthropologists. I have added morpheme breaks, based on my 1994/1998 analysis of Mekeo grammar (Jones, 1998)ⁱⁱ and inserted the glottal stops, a sound which Mekeo writers do not normally recognize. In fact the glottal stops are often pronounced very weakly, a process no doubt hastened by the habit of ignoring them in writing.

This story is, on the surface, a kind of fable and a just-so story, in which all the characters are birds (and one small fly). However, many important themes from Mekeo culture are reflected in the events related, which are echoed in other stories and myths.

This text is interesting linguistically for a number of reasons. Although in Mekeo it is usually an actor and agent that is foregrounded (and that is the subject of the verb), this text illustrates two ways in which an actor/agent may be deleted and the patient foregrounded. The title illustrates actor-deletion, a strategy that assumes the recipient can interpret the text correctly, mentally supplying the non-salient actor. Further along, the text illustrates a type of “passive” in which a nominalised verb has patient-focus: **ipako i-s-ani-na e-lao** [sago its-being-eaten he-go] or *He went to eat sago*.

Foe inā Aifuifu e-ani-a isonioni-na *The story of how Egret’s mother Cuscus was eaten*

Foe inā Aifuifuⁱⁱⁱ enga eʔa e-kapa-i-s-a;
Egret built a house for his mother Cuscus;

ke Foe isafa ma isa avakuā, avakuā Ailema,
and along with Egret (was) his sister, his sister Waterhen;

eʔa e-fua aisama, inā e-pangu-a-koko kai,
when the house was finished, before placing his mother inside,

enga pou^{iv} e-ʔa-nini-a,^v nini mao-ai-mo imangea.
he cut walls for her, in all, six layers,

Pou e-a-nini-a e-fua aisama, inā engae e-pa-angu-koko kai,
After cutting the walls, and placing his mother inside there,

isa anima-ai,^{vi} Lokou e-lao, ipako i-s-ani-na e-lao.
he went on a foraging expedition, he went to Gulf Province, he went to eat sago.

E-lao Lokou-ai aunga ngafa-mo e-lao-lao.
He went to Gulf Province, heavily burdened^{vii} he travelled.

Pau Ailema aunga e-opolanga isa avakuā e-mae e-oma puo,
Now Waterhen, she thinks he her sibling (Egret) has died, (and) since she thinks (that),

Ailema umu e-pua.^{viii}

Waterhen covers herself with black ash.

Aifuifui kunokunua wawakoe
oanionu oanionu wawakoe
kuno kunonie kunonie,
Aifuifui kuno kunonie.

Foe isa Lokou-ai e-angu-a e-anima kai, isa inā Aifuifui aunga isa enga eʔa-ai e-angu kai,
Egret him although he travels (and) stays at Gulf, his mother, her, she stays in her house but,

mauʔu inae e-aunia.

She strikes up this chant.^{ix}

Aifuifui kunokunua wawakoe
oanionu oanionu
waioku kuno kunonia kunonia
Aifuifui kuno kunonia.

E-angu e-lao pau Foi e-ake pou nini angao e-anga-i-s-a alongai,
She continues living (there), (but) now Eagle descends (and) while he chops the first wall

Aifuifui Ikelekele e-pai-n-i-a.
Cuscus addresses Willywagtail.

"Oi kai lo-anga-anga" e-oma aisama; e-inaka "Lau Ikelekele la-anga-anga" e-oma.
Who are you who cries?" she says; (and) he says, I am Willywagtail who cries," he says.

E-pai-n-i-a e-inaka, "Ah ngau-u aa-nga-ai fo-lao,
She addresses him and says, "My child, you should go up on top [i.e. to Gulf Province]

a-mu e-lao Lokou-ai puo, fo-pai-n-a fo-inaka:
since your elder brother has gone to Gulf, you should address him and say:

'Oi, ina-mu, lo-angu-e kai, foi e-ake,
'You, your mother, you stay (here) but, Eagle he has descended,

ina-mu enga pou e-anga afanga-mo ange-ani-a' fo-oma."
he is chopping your mother's walls (and) soon he will eat her,' you should say".

Ikelekele, isa e-lao, ufua e-isa aua a-e-la
Willywagtail, him, he goes (and) he sees (some) ufua [fruit], (and) he doesn't go further,

Foe a-e-pai-n-i-a mo, papie-apaonga e-angu-angu-mo laimo e-mia.
he doesn't tell Egret, (and) the old woman just stays on there (and) nothing happens.

E-angu e-lao ke Epea e-mai ke Ikelekele e-pai-n-a i-opo-nga-mo e-ifa
She waited a while more and Epea [bird] came, she addressed him saying the same as she had to Willywagtail,

Epea e-lao aupua e-isa a-e-lao-mo laimo e-mia.
(and) Epea went (and) he saw (some) aupua [fruit] (and) simply didn't go (and) nothing happened

E-angu e-lao ke Keke e-mai enga eʔa laa-nga-ai e-iʔo-au puo,
She waited a while (more) and since Keke [bird] came (and) perched on top of the house,

e-ifa-au-kae e-pai-n-i-a ifa e-ifa-n-i-a aunga mo e-ifa-n-i-a ke Keke e-lao,
she raised her voice (and) addressed him (and) when she had said her piece, Keke went,

inei auni?i ke-kapa aunga mo e-kapa-i-s-a.
(and) did what the (previous) two birds did.

Papie pau Keke e-kai-lai aisama, papie-apaonga enga mau?u e-au-n-i-a.
The woman now, when Keke had gone, the old woman struck up the chant.

Aifuifui kunokunoa wawakoe
oanionu oanionu
waioku kuno kunonia kunonia
Aifuifui kuno kunonia.

Papie-apaonga enga e-oma, ke Kekeaufa?a e-mai, enga e?a laa-nga e-ifa-au-kae.
The old woman sang like that and Kekeaufa'a [bird] came (and) raised his voice on top of the house.

"Oi kai-s-au" e-oma.
"Who are you?" she said.

Ke isa e-inaka "Lau Kekeaufa?a" e-oma.
And him he spoke and said "I am Kekeaufa'a".

"Ah fo-lao, a-mu e-lao Lokou-ai, pau lai e-lao engae e-animai, fo-pai-n-a
"Ah you must go, your elder brother has gone to Gulf Province, now lai (?) he went there on a foraging expedition, you must tell him,

'Foi e-ake pou e-ngani-na afanga-mo ange-ani-a' fo-oma" eoma.
'Eagle has descended (and) chopped the walls (and) soon he will eat her,' you must say," she said.

E-lao, engae aupua e-isa ma aupua e-ani-a a-e-lao.
He went (but, as soon as) he saw aupua [fruit] there, he ate it (and) didn't go.

Papie-apaonga isa e-angu enga mau?u e-au-n-i-a.
The old woman, she remained (there) (and) struck up her chant.

Aifuifui kunokunoe wawakua
oanionue oanionue
wawakue kunonia kunonia
Aifuifui kuno kunonie.

E-feu e-ngani e-ngapi aisama e-ngopo e-lao apani?i oni-na-ai enga ni-ai e-i?o kai,
She slept (and) in the evening of the following day (Eagle) came flying, and when he had perched in a nest on top of an apani'i tree

kekekeke e-oma kai, e-inaka: "Ina-mu la-ani-a, ama-mu la-ani-a"
kekekeke he said, then he said "I eat your mother, I eat your father."

E-feu e-ngani ke e-ake pou e-anga-i-s-a pungu.
He slept (and) the next day he descended (and) attacked the walls again.

Panguako e-mai e?a laa-nga-ai e-anga-anga, Papiauko e-ifa-au-kae.
Panguako (bird) came (and) cried out on top of the house, Panguako raised his voice.

"Oi kai-s-au?" e-oma, ke isa e-inaka: "Lau Panguako," e-oma.
"Who are you?" she said, and him he said "I am Panguako," he said.

"Ah Ako fo-lao a-mu fo-pai-n-a:
"Ah, lad, you must go (and) tell your elder brother:

'Pau pou e-anga alongaina afaanga-mo ange-ania' fo-oma" e-oma.
'Now the walls are chopped away (and) soon he will eat her', you must say," she said.

E-lao engae konga aupua-ʔi e-isa-ʔi e-ani-a a-e-lao-mo,
He went there (and) saw coconut fruits (and) ate them (and) simply didn't go (further).

Papie-apaonga e-angu-angu mo laimo e-mia mo e-feu.
The old woman simply remained (there)(and) nothing happened (so) she slept.

Foi isa pau apanii oni-na-ai, "Kekekeke, ina-mu la-ani-a amamu la-ani-a" e-oma.
Eagle, him now, (perched) on the top of an apani'i tree, (and) "Kekekeke, I will eat your mother, I will eat your father," he said.

E-feu e-ngani ke e-ake-pungu pou e-anga-is-a.
She slept (and) in the evening of the following day he (Eagle) descended and chopped the walls.

Evinongo e-mai eʔa langai e-iʔo e-ifa-au-kae.
Evinongo came (and) perched on top of the house (and) raised up his voice.

"Oi kai-s-au" e-oma, ke Evinongo e-inaka "Lau Evinongo" e-oma.
"Who are you?" she said, and him he said "I am Evinongo," he said.

“Ah Ako fo-lao a-mu fo-pai-n-a fo-inaka: 'Oi inae lo-animai kai,
"Ah lad, you must go and address your elder brother and tell him 'While you stay here and forage for food,

Foi pau pou nini maʔo-ai mo e-ʔafe-ai-na, pau angao-mo e-anga-anga kai,
Eagle has finished all the walls, now he is biting the last one,

Lau la-mai puo lo-opolanga fo-oma" e-oma. Evinongo au apala e-la.
Because I have come I want you to think of that' she said. Evinongo, that bad fellow, he went.

E-ngopo-ngopo, Foe enga nganga i-ʔou-nga e-iʔo-au kai, ifa-opu e-pai-n-i-a,
He flew and flew, (and) after perching on Egret's canoe-pole, he told him the whole story.

Foe i-ʔou e-fua-au-a e-ʔou-lai-s-a e-mai
Egret raised his canoe-pole (and) poled (and) poled (and) came,

ake-ake-i e-ʔou-koko e-ʔanga-au-kae e-mai.
he poled into river-mouths, he went up (and) came (to his mother's place).

Pau Foi e-ʔanga-au-kae apaniʔi oni-na-ai e-iʔo kai, kekekeke e-oma,
Now, after Eagle had ascended and perched on the top of the apani'i tree, "Kekekeke", he said,

"Ina-mu la-ani-a, ama-mu la-ani-a."
"I ate your mother, I ate your father."

Enga aisama Foe e-longo inā pau e-ani-a e-fua.
At that time Egret knew that his mother had by now been eaten.

E-mai mafe e-ʔai-n-i-a inei maʔo-ai-mo e-ifa-n-i-ʔi ke mai,
He came, he plucked areca nut, he called all the birds,

mafe aina angoango e-peni-ʔi.
(and when) they came, he gave each a hand of areca nuts.

E-pai-n-i-ʔi e-inaka:
He addressed them, he spoke:

"Foi ina-u e-ani-a puo, fo-au-pungu-a la-oma, mafe la-ʔai-n-i-a."
"Since Eagle ate my mother, I want you to kill him, I have plucked areca nut (for you)."

Inei maʔo-i kenga-au-nga ke-oma ke-opo-i-s-a a-e-kai-n-i-ʔi.
All the birds tried to strike [= kill] him, they tried it (but) they did not succeed.

Ke mafe mo e-ʔai-n-i-a elao, Vaisapu,^x Mingumingu, auniʔi e-peni kai,
And he broke off more areca nut (and) went (and) gave it to both Vaisapu and Mingumingu.

E-pai-n-i-ʔi e-inaka, "Foi ina-u e-ani-a puo, fo-au-nga la-oma."
He addressed them and said, "Since Eagle ate my mother, I want you to kill him."

Vaisapu, Mingumingu, auniʔi ke-inaka mo, "Fai muni-mu-ai anga-fai," ke-oma.
Vaisapu and Mingumingu both just said, "Go there and we'll follow you," they said.

Ke-mai aisama inei maʔo-ai-mo Mingumingu ke-pai-n-a ke-inaka,
When they arrived all the birds addressed Mingumingu, they said,

"Lai oi e-mu au koa ia-i-ʔi kai,[uncertain] a-opo-i-s-a a-e-kai-n-i-mai."
"We, though we found your tree, we tried it (but) didn't succeed."

E-fua, Mingumingu Vaisapu auniʔi ke-ʔanga-au-kae.
Then Mingumingu and Vaisapu, the two of them, went up.

Isa auniʔi aunga a-ke-ʔanga-au opoaimo kai,
Those two, although they didn't go straight up,

inei isa-i aunga ke-anga opoaimo puo, a-e-kai-n-i-ʔi,
the other birds went straight up (and) they didn't succeed,

kai Mingumingu, Vaisapu, auniʔi aunga, apaniʔi ke-foi-s-a puo, e-kai-n-i-ʔi.
but Mingumingu and Vaisapu, the two of them, because they circled around the apani'i [tree], they succeeded.

Ke-anga-au-anga-au-kae, engai aisama,
They climbed and climbed, (and) then,

Mingumingu Foi ango e-lao-ai-na e-mai-mai-s-ei-na kai,
while Mingumingu was distracting Eagle's attention going this way and that,

Vaisapu Foi e-au-n-i-a; e-ʔua-lai laʔa-fou-ai-ai e-au-n-i-a.
Vaisapu struck Eagle; he fell on the crowd (below) (and) they beat him (to death).

Engaina kina-nga-ai Foe ngaku elele e-kapa-i-s-a laʔa-fou e-mia.
At that time Egret made a small feast and there was a (big) gathering.

Enga puo Aʔo pau a-longo aunga e-angu kai afa pikio-nga laai a-lo-isa
Because of that, Phalanger now lives (as we know) but you'll see only little flesh on his back

ke Ailema isa umu e-pua puo-nga-ai fanga umu-nga.
and Waterhen, because she painted herself with black ash, her skin is black.

Ke mauʔu inae aunga enga 'meaning' aunga:
And the chant is here, this is its 'meaning':

Foe oi engae lo-animai lo-lao lo-mai,
Egret you are there on a foraging expedition you go hither and thither,
kai lau Foi angeaniau,
but I, Eagle will eat me,

mauʔunga.
its chant.

ⁱ Willywagtail translates Mekeo **Ikelekele**. Apart from Egret (for **Foe**), Waterhen (for **Ailema**), and Eagle (for **Foi**) the bird-names cannot be reliably translated at this time.

ⁱⁱ Jones, A. (1998). *Towards a Lexicogrammar of Mekeo: An Oceanic Language of Western Central Papua*. Canberra: Australian National University, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies; 1998. xx, 601 pp. (Pacific Linguistics, Series C; v. 138).

ⁱⁱⁱ **Aifuifu** refers to the female and "**ung**"**ungo** to the male of the phalanger, a kind of long-tailed marsupial. Phalangers have the generic name **Ao** (or **Aʔo**). This is a staple bush meat in many areas.

^{iv} **Pou** in EMek, like **bou** in Kuni, can mean wall or door; it is essentially a woven mat.

^v This should be **ʔa-nini-a** according to Fr Desnoës, who gives NMek (Amoamo) **ka-nini-a**.

^{vi} The term **anima(i)** denotes a traditional type of expedition that was undertaken in search of food. It is probably cognate with Motu **sariva**.

^{vii} This sense of **ngafa-mo** (< **ngafa.nga-mo**?) is suggested by entries in the Desnoës dictionary (= aimlessly?).

^{viii} This is one of the mourning customs of close relatives of the deceased person.

^{ix} **Mauʔu** is described in the Desnoës dictionary as a spell for trapping game (with North Mekeo **mauku**). The following example of a **mauʔu** is given there:

*Kupa kaiiau olanga pa-nini-apua
Kupa kaiiau olanga pa-kene-apua
Nini-apu, nini-apuia e! pa-nini-apuia!
Kene-apu, kene-apuia e! pa-kene-apuia!*

^x **Vaiapu** is defined as *pigeon bleu* (i.e. blue pigeon) in the Desnoës dictionary, but in the English version of the text (that I collected along with the Mekeo version) it is translated as "huge bird".