

# South Sea Tales: Happiness

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Long ago, a truly miserable man lived on this island. I cannot say exactly how old he was since the unnatural custom of counting people's ages did not exist among the islanders. Nevertheless, I can say with certainty that he was not young.

He had neither frizzled hair nor a snub nose. As a result, his ugliness was the target of everyone's contempt and laughter. To make matters worse, he had thin lips and his complexion lacked that fine ebony gloss considered to be an indispensable ingredient of a beautiful appearance. He was probably the poorest man of the island. The unit of currency of Palau is a kind of shell jewelry, like our *magadama* stones, and is called the *udo-udo*. It goes without saying that this man possessed not a single *udo-udo* and consequently he had no way to obtain a wife, who could only be purchased by such means in the first place.

He lived all by himself in the corner of a storage shed that belonged to the tribal chief, whom he served as the most menial of servants. The meanest tasks of the household were imposed on this man alone. On this island filled with lazy good-for-nothings, he was the only one with no time to be idle. In the morning, he rose even before the birds began to chirp in the mango trees and went out to fish. Once he missed spearing a giant octopus with his lance and the creature fastened its tentacles on his breast and belly so that his whole body swelled up. Another time, he was pursued by a gigantic *tamakai* fish and made a narrow escape by climbing into his canoe just in the nick of time. He nearly had his foot severed by an *akimu* clam as big as a bathtub. In the afternoons, when everyone else on the island napped on bamboo bedding at home or under the trees, this man was so busy that it made your eyes spin just to watch him—doing the housecleaning, building a shed, drawing coconut milk, thatching the roof, twining palm rope, or fashioning different articles of furniture. Like a field mouse after a squall, he was always dripping with sweat. He was solely responsible for every single task in the village except tending to the taro field, work that ancient custom decreed to be the exclusive province of women. When the sun sank into the western sea and the large bats flew about the tops of the breadfruit trees, at long last this man was treated to a meal of taro ends and fish offal, food suitable for dogs and cats. After his meal, he lay his exhausted body down on the

hard bamboo floor and fell asleep—that is, as they say in Palauan, he became a stone (*mo bazu*).

His master, the chief elder, was one of the richest men in the archipelago of Palau, which stretches from this island in the north all the way to distant Peleliu in the south. He owned half of the island's taro fields and two thirds of its palm groves. In the kitchen of his house, the finest tortoise shell plates were piled up all the way to the ceiling. Every day he stuffed himself with delicacies such as turtle fat, piglets roasted on hot pebbles, mermaid foetuses, and steamed bat eggs, and his fleshy belly bulged out like that of a pregnant sow. His house counted among its treasures a javelin that one of his distant ancestors had used to kill the enemy chieftain during an ancient war with Kayangel Island. The *udo-udo* in his coffers were as numerous as the eggs laid by the turtles on the beach. As for his *bakaru* jewel, the most precious of all the *udo udo*, it was invested with such power that even the saw-sharks that bobbed about in the waters beyond the reef scattered from fright and astonishment when they caught sight of its radiance. Thanks to the wealth and power of this chief, the island boasted a massive assembly hall located in the middle of the island that featured a curved roof decorated in the form of a bat soaring triumphantly and a great scarlet war-canoe decorated with a snakehead, a source of pride to all the islanders. Officially, he only had one wife, but in fact the number of his consorts was limited only by the taboo concerning sexual relations with close relatives.

This pitiful, ugly and solitary man who was a servant of such a powerful chief was of such an inferior social status that he was not permitted to remain upright and to walk when he passed in front of any of the village headmen, let alone his master, the chief elder. He was obliged to crawl by them on his hand and knees. If one of the headman's boats drew near his canoe at sea, he was expected to dive immediately from his canoe right into the water. It would be the epitome of rudeness if he remained seated in his canoe and exchanged greetings and such an offense would be severely punished. Once, finding himself in such a predicament, he was just about to dive into the water when he noticed a shark. When the attendants of the chief saw him hesitate, they were enraged and hurled a spear at him, wounding him in his left eye. Since he had no choice but to obey, he meekly dove into the water where the shark was swimming. If that shark had been a few feet longer, he would probably not have gotten off so lightly, losing only three of his toes.

Koror Island, the cultural center of the archipelago situated far to the south of this island, had already been invaded by evil diseases spread by people with white skin. These diseases were of two types. One was a strange illness that impeded the performance of the sacred and mysterious rite given us by the gods. In Koror, it was called the "man's disease" when it attacked a man and the "woman's disease" when it attacked a woman. The other was more a more insidious kind of illness which was far harder to diagnose: first the patient would have a slight cough, grow pale, get tired, and start to waste away, and before you even noticed what was happening, he would drop dead. Some victims coughed up blood, but others didn't. The pitiful man who is the hero of my story had apparently contracted this second type of disease. He always had a dry cough and felt worn out. He drank crushed *amiaka* sprout juice and infusions of *pandanus* roots to treat the disease but neither remedy had the slightest effect. His master noticed his illness and reflected that it was perfectly appropriate that a miserable servant should catch this horrible disease. As a result, he kept piling new tasks on top of the old ones to add to his servant's work.

In fact, this miserable servant was also a very wise man, so he did not find his own fate particularly hard to bear. No matter how cruelly he was treated by his master, he was still grateful that no one could stop him from seeing, hearing, and breathing. No matter how many jobs were imposed on him, he consoled himself that he was exempted from cultivating the taro fields, the sacred vocation of women. He admitted that it was a misfortune to dive into shark-infested waters and lose three of his toes, but he thanked the heavens that his whole leg had not been bitten off. Although he had contracted the tiring sickness and was plagued by a hacking cough, he reflected that others were afflicted with both the tiring sickness and the “man’s illness” whereas he had at least been spared one of them. Doubtless, he suffered a fatal flaw in that his hair was not frizzled like dried seaweed but he knew other people who were as bald as a barren hill of brown clay. He was, of course, terribly ashamed that his own nose was not flattened like a frog trampled to death in a banana field, but there were two men he knew in a neighboring island who had lost their noses to the “rotting” disease.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, even this man who made such a virtue of finding contentment in his circumstances sometimes felt that it was better to have a light illness than a serious one and more enjoyable to nap in the shade than to slave away under the direct rays of the midday sun. Even this miserable, wise man sometimes prayed to the gods. “Please mitigate the agony of my sickness and lighten the burden of my labor. I realize that I am being a little too greedy in making this request, but I pray to you all the same.”

He prayed and offered up taro roots at the shrines consecrated to the purse crab Katasus and to the earthworm Uras, both famous as powerful divinities of evil. In Palau, people hardly ever make offerings of food to the virtuous gods since they know well that such gods won’t cast evil spells even if people neglect them. By contrast, the evil gods are worshipped most reverentially and given offerings of food since people believe that their anger can cause rough seas, storms, and contagious diseases to occur. We will never know whether the purse crab or the earthworm gods heard the prayer of this miserable man. Nevertheless, after some time went by, the man had a strange dream one night.

In his dream, the miserable servant became the chief elder but he had no idea how this had come about. He sat in the seat of honor where the head of the household was supposed to sit, located in the center of the main room of the house. Everyone was eager to do his bidding, as though they feared to spoil his good mood. He had a wife. Many servants busily prepared his meals. The table right in front of him was piled high with roasted pigs, mangrove crabs boiled bright red, and turtle eggs. He was totally astonished. Even though it was a dream, he doubted whether it was just a dream. He couldn’t help but feel a vague disquiet.

Next morning, when he opened his eyes, he found himself lying as usual in the corner of the same old storage shed, with the same leaky roof and crooked pillars. Unusual for him, he had overslept, not noticing the chirping of the birds, and he received a cruel beating by a member of the master’s household.

The next night, he was once again the chief in his dream. This time he was not as surprised as he had been the previous night. He became highhanded and ordered his servants around in a more arrogant tone than he had used the previous night. This time

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<sup>1</sup> i.e., syphilis

too, his dinner table was piled high with rare, exquisite delicacies. His wife was a perfect beauty, powerfully built and healthy, while the new matting woven from *pandanus* leaves felt pleasantly cool and comfortable against his skin. In the morning, he woke up in the same dirty shed as before. As always, he was worked to exhaustion all day long and only treated to a meal of taro ends and fish offal.

This miserable servant was transformed into the chief elder in his dreams the following two nights and then every night afterwards. Bit by bit, he grew to feel comfortable behaving like the chief. Now when he laid eyes on the fine foods, he no longer longed to devour them with the desperate greed he felt when he started to dream. He argued with his wife often. Some time ago, he had learned that he could make passes at women other than his wife. He treated the islanders haughtily, ordered that a boathouse be built, and officiated in all of the island's rituals. When the islanders saw him walking solemnly toward the shrine beside the *karong* priest, they were filled with wonder and amazement just as if they were seeing an ancient hero who had come back to life.

Among the lowly menservants who attended him, there was one who resembled the chief elder, his master during the day. He found the fearful face that this man turned toward him almost comical. He ordered this servant to do all the most onerous chores just to amuse himself. Sometimes he made him go fishing and at other times he made him draw coconut milk. One time this servant was even forced to dive into shark-infested waters from his lonely canoe because his master happened to pass by in his boat. He felt enormous satisfaction when he witnessed the fellow's confusion, fear, and nervousness.

He no longer heaved a sigh of despair because he found his work hard and his treatment cruel during the daytime. Nor did he need to console himself with the wise counsels of resignation. When he thought of the pleasures of the night, the ordeals of the daytime faded into insignificance. Although he was completely exhausted from a day of backbreaking work, he rushed to lie down on his filthy bed beneath the creaking pillar, smiling happily when he thought of the glorious dreams he would dream. In fact, lately he was visibly putting on weight, perhaps because of the rich foods he was devouring in his dreams. His complexion looked healthier and then, one day, he stopped coughing. He looked full of life, the picture of youth restored.

At exactly the same time that this pathetic, ugly, and unmarried servant began to dream in this manner, his master, the wealthy chief elder, also started to have strange dreams. In his dreams, he became a poor and miserable servant. Every kind of task was imposed on him—from fishing, drawing coconut milk, and twining coconut rope, to picking the breadfruit and building canoes. Even if he were to grow as many arms and legs as a centipede, he felt he would still not be able to perform all of them. The master who was tyrannizing him was the man who during the day was supposed to be his lowliest servant. Worse yet, this man, out of pure perversity, made one impossible demand on him after another. He was trapped in the tentacles of a giant octopus, his foot got caught in the jaws of a giant *akimu* clam, his toes were bitten off by a shark. All he was given to eat were taro scraps and fish remains. Every morning, when he woke up on his luxurious mat in the center of his main house, he felt totally worn out from his night-long labors and felt a throbbing pain in all his joints.

As he continued to have the same dream every night, the chief elder found that his skin was gradually losing its smooth luster and that his protuberant belly was slowly deflating. In reality, any person who subsisted on a diet of taro ends and fish scraps was

bound to lose weight. By the time the moon had completed its third cycle, the chief elder had become a wretched weakling and even started to be wracked by a dry cough.

Finally, the chief elder could no longer contain his fury and ordered that his servant be summoned before him. He had made up his mind to inflict the most drastic punishment on this odious man who cruelly persecuted him in his dreams. But the servant who stood before him was no longer the timid coward of the past, his wasted body wracked by a dry cough and trembling with fear. In no time the man had grown plump and his robust face emanated energy and health. Furthermore, he struck such a self-confident pose that, his deferential form of address notwithstanding, it was impossible to imagine such a man allowing himself to be ordered around under any circumstances. At the mere sight of the calm smile playing on his face, the chief elder was absolutely overwhelmed by the other's sense of superiority. The terror his oppressor inspired in him in his dreams came back to life, making him cower in fear. All of a sudden, his mind was grazed by doubt: which was more real, the world of dreams or the daytime world? How could a wasted specimen like myself, he thought, even dare to raise his voice, between coughs, and to rebuke such a splendid man.

Using such a polite form of address that he himself was taken aback, the chief elder turned to his servant and asked him how he had recovered his health. The servant then gave him a detailed account of his dreams: how every night he was sated with the rarest delicacies, how he wallowed in a life of idleness attended by an army of servants and slaves, how he had tasted all the pleasures of paradise in the arms of his countless wives.

When he had heard his servant's story to the end, the elder was astonished. How was it possible that his dreams and those of his servant were in such astounding correspondence? Did dreams have such a miraculous influence on our bodies that a dreamer could be nourished in the waking world with the food he had eaten in his dreams? He no longer had the slightest doubt: the world of dreams was no less real, and perhaps even more real, than that of waking life. Swallowing his pride, he made a confession of his nightly dreams to his servant: how he was forced to do onerous tasks every night and how he had to content himself with only taro ends and fish scraps.

The servant was not the least bit surprised when he heard the chief's story. Finding the story perfectly natural, he wore a satisfied smile on his lips and nodded patronizingly as if he were merely hearing confirmation of something he had long suspected. In fact, his face glowed with the supreme happiness that a well-fed eel must feel when it stretches out in the mudflats at ebb tide. Probably, he already knew that dreams were more real than waking life. Heaving a deep sigh, the rich, unhappy master gazed enviously at the face of his poor, wise slave.

The foregoing is an old legend from the Oruwangal Island, an island that no longer exists. About eighty years ago, Oruwangal Island suddenly sank into the depths of the sea along with all its inhabitants. Ever since, people say that no man in Palau has dreamt such happy dreams.