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HIGHLANDS SUNG TALES: Interdisciplinary Research on a Distinctive Art Form

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ABSTRACT
In parts of Southern Highlands, Enga, and Western Highlands Provinces of Papua New Guinea, interdisciplinary research has been undertaken on a form of storytelling that appears to be unique to that region. While stories are commonly told throughout the country, the forms considered here are presented in a manner quite atypical of ordinary speech. Linguists, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists have collaborated to consider various aspects of these forms, each approach providing valuable insights into their performance. This article overviews the most recent work on this genre and appeals to linguists to engage in other such collaborative projects.

Keywords: sung tales, Papua New Guinea Highlands, music, stories

This article focuses on a particularly interesting performance genre that researchers have come to call "sung tales," "chanted tales," "sung narratives," or "ballads." But while the genre is fascinating itself, our understanding of it in the Papua New Guinea Highlands, imperfect as it may be at present, has really only been brought about by interdisciplinary research.

This interdisciplinary research has been undertaken by a number of researchers, and some of this work has resulted in a book called *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands: Studies in Form, Meaning, and Sociocultural Context,* edited by Alan Rumsey and me (Rumsey and Niles 2011; figure 1). It has just been published by ANU E Press and was launched online on 9 August 2011. Like all ANU E Press publications, it is available for free download. The site for our book is: http://epress.anu.edu.au/sung_tales_citation.html. Also online are a supplementary PDF file, twenty-two audio files, and a short video, thereby providing multimedia access to most of the performances discussed in the book. I feel that such accessible publications are certainly the future of most academic publishing.

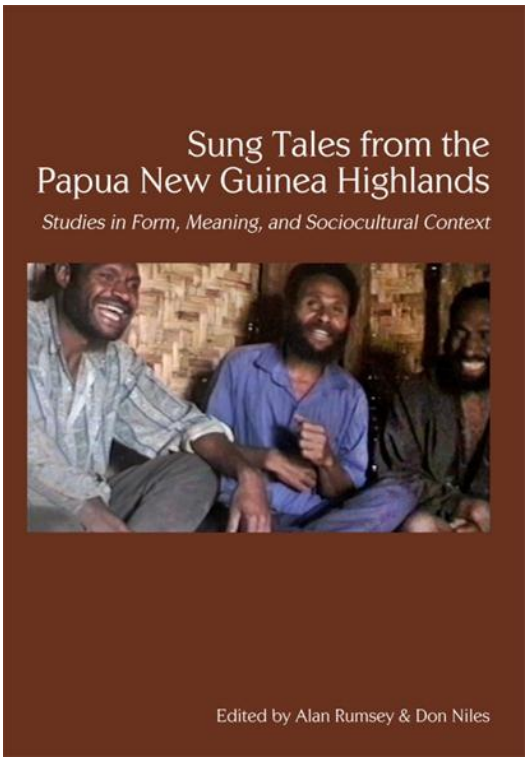

Figure 1: Front cover of Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands.

The printed book was launched on 28 September, 2011, at the conclusion of a conference celebrating sixty years of anthropology at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra. It was launched by Professor Nicholas Evans, Department of Linguistics and Anthropology of the College of Asia and the Pacific at ANU. Ms. Jacinta Warakai-Manua, Deputy Papua New Guinea High Commissioner, also spoke at the launch. We plan to have another launch of the book at the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies in the near future. The Institute will also be selling copies of it. The following overview draws liberally on the contributions found in the book. Readers interested in learning more about this genre should definitely consult that source.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

While there is considerable variation regarding sung tales in different parts of the Highlands, the genre often has characteristics such as the following:

- sung tales are entertainment (and often educational, but not esoteric) told at night by a seated, individual performer, often indoors
- the tales are "sung" to a melody that is quite different from normal speech, with phrases marked by melody, vocables, etc.
- they are usually told by men, sometimes women
- the storytellers are poets, who create their tales in performance. This is a highly valued skill
- no dance or instruments accompany the telling of such stories
- there is frequent use of poetic expressions, archaic language, and various types of parallelism
- the stories are often well known to listeners and can often be told in normal speech as well
- there is seldom a special term marking the genre of "sung tales"; instead, the word for "story" is used (which includes tales told in a normal speaking voice as well)
- the performer is usually paid for the performance

Other aspects of sung tales are more variable:

- the composition of the audience may be all male, all female, or mixed
- the verbal responses of audience vary between silence, one syllable, or more extensive questions and/or comments
- vocables may be all but absent to quite extensive
- performances can last from several minutes to several hours

As this is a complex art form, interdisciplinary research has been absolutely essential to our research on it. The work has involved consideration of the:

- language (linguistics)
- story (folklore)

- music (ethnomusicology)
- context (anthropology)
- new uses (theology, political science)

My presentation of this subject at the meeting of the Linguistic Society of Papua New Guinea was addressed to an audience of linguists and others interested in language, appealing to them to involve researchers from such other disciplines in their own work where necessary. While my own focus has been music, my work on sung tales would have been quite inadequate without the assistance of researchers considering other aspects of these performances.

The study of sung tales has been undertaken by individuals sporadically since 1969; researchers such as ethnomusicologist Vida Chenoweth, historian Roderic Lacey, anthropologist Andrew Strathern, and linguistic anthropologist Alan Rumsey have written about the subject in passing or in considerable detail. However, this work was usually highly focused ethnographically or on one or another aspect of sung tales.

Consideration of the genre over a much wider area involved a larger number of researchers. This study really began in 2003 with an interdisciplinary research project funded by the Australian Research Council, led by Alan Rumsey. Alan coaxed me to be a partner investigator, but as I was involved in a number of other activities, I imagined my participation to be more one of support rather than particularly active. However, the combination of this fascinating genre coupled with Alan's enthusiasm, scholarship, and interest in collaboration drew me into the project in profound ways, further encouraging my own more general interest in sonic expression in the Hagen area (one of the regions where sung tales are performed), where I had first done research twenty years earlier.

Participants ranged from established researchers to beginning students, involving linguists, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, historians, performers, and knowledgeable elders – all becoming involved in various aspects of the research project. In 2004, a workshop was held at the University of Goroka, and a second and final one in 2006 at Kefamo, also in Eastern Highlands, involving fourteen researchers from seven different universities and research institutions around the world. The resulting book, very much growing out of the research and workshops held previously, contains thirteen chapters, written by fourteen authors; the book is accompanied by audiovisual examples of many of the performances discussed in it.

This paper celebrates the accomplishment of that project and its culmination in the publication of the book, a result that was only possible through interdisciplinary collaboration that had very fruitful results. I

very much hope that this project will encourage other linguists to seek interdisciplinary collaboration opportunities, for the synergy of collaborative research is truly an advantage.

The genre of sung tales as so defined is confined to certain parts of the Highlands. Figure 2 shows the distribution of genres that we have considered sung tales, stretching from Bogaya, Duna, and Hewa in the west of Southern Highlands, including Huli and the Angal languages in that province, with most of the languages of Enga, and the western part of Western Highlands.

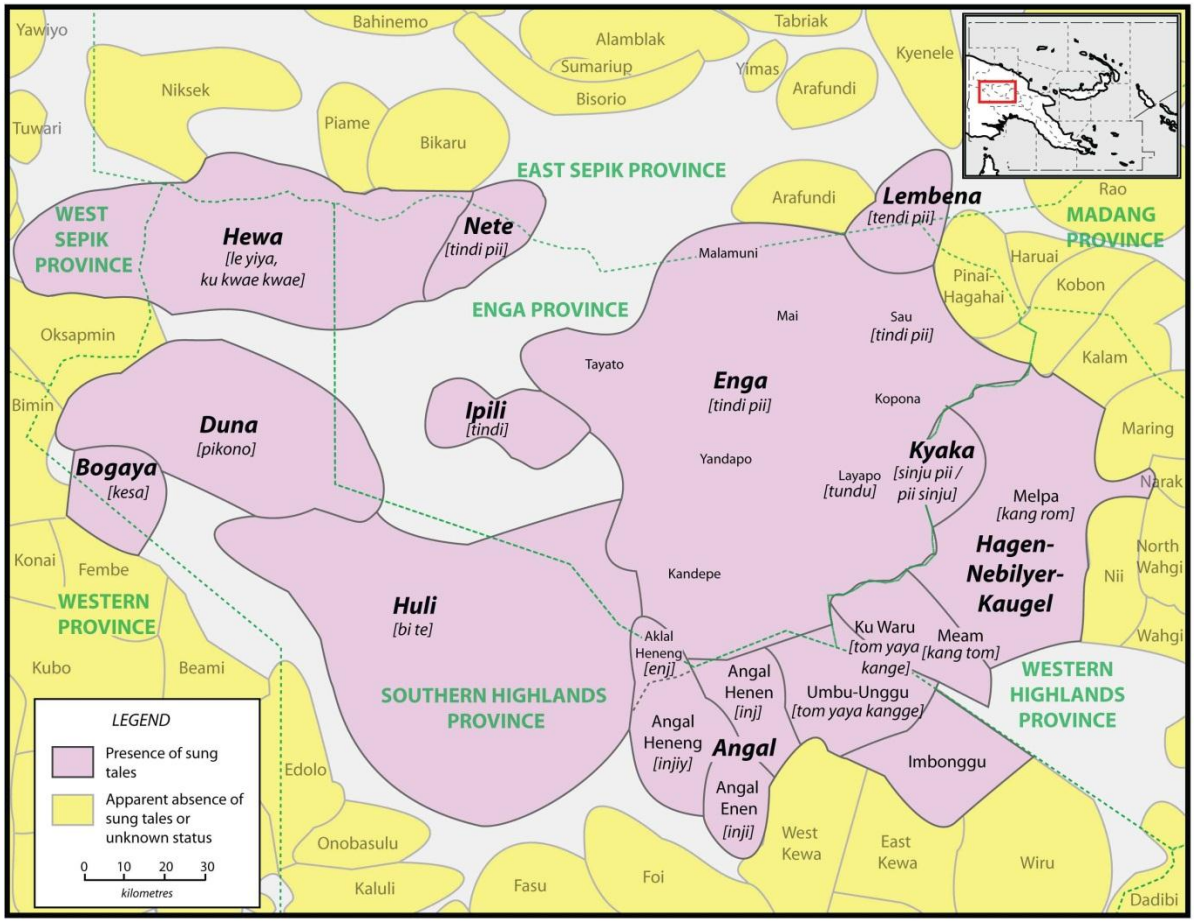

Figure 2: The distribution of sung tales in the Papua New Guinea Highlands. Purple shows presence, yellow their apparent absence. Language borders and names are based on maps of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (http://www.pnglanguages.org), with modifications by Alan Rumsey and Hans Reithofer (from Rumsey and Niles 2011:3, fig. 2).

Note also where there are absences: the southern parts of Southern Highlands, from Bosavi east to Wiru, the Wahgi languages further to the east, and north of Enga. While we are quite certain of some of these absences, in other regions lack of information remains a problem. We look forward to learning more about the distribution of sung tales in this area.

DUNA *PIKONO*

Moving from west to east, I will now very briefly overview some of these genres and their characteristics as discussed in *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands.* Duna *pikono* are considered in articles by Kenny Yuwi Kendoli, Kirsty Gillespie and Lila San Roque, and Michael Sollis. As identified by Gillespie and San Roque in *Sung Tales*, the melodic shape of *pikono* phrases is significant, consisting of a descent followed by a "ground" or mostly level area. This ground at the end of sung phrases is where the presentation of "praise names" or *kẽiyaka* occurs. These are a special esoteric vocabulary of words. In the ground section of the melody, such terms are presented as part of a sequence, hence an example of textual parallelism.

During a performance of *pikono*, the audience may ask questions or comment on the story, thereby influencing the performer's composition. Here, performances lasting three or more hours appear to be fairly common.

HULI *BÌ TÉ*

In the Huli area to the southeast of the Duna, sung tales are called *bì té*. In *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands,* they are discussed in articles by Gabe C. J. Lomas and Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan. *Bì té* are not infrequently performed by women. The storyteller often begins by instructing the listeners: "You say *è* [yes]" or even "You say *è*, or my parents will die." This ensures a regular interjection of the word *è*, chanted on a level pitch by at least one of the listeners, telling the performer that the story is not being wasted on a sleeping audience in the dark. It also serves as a prompting device to help the performer continue with the development of the story.

Three different pitches predominate in the performance of *bì té*. These pitches and the resulting melodic movement have been identified by Pugh-Kitingan as being related to the pitches used for the Huli language. Here, speech tone largely determines the melodic shape of the performance. The three pitches are combined to reflect the low-rising, high-falling, and mid-level word tones.

In another *bì té* performance considered in *Sung Tales*, linguist Lomas feels that the tones of the language are often greatly affected by performance. Lomas's focus, however, has been on the presentation of syntactical constructions of the language, and how they are affected or not in *bì té* performance. His long and deep association with the language has made him particularly aware of and sensitive to these changes.

IPILI *TINDI*

In *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands,* Ipili *tindi* are discussed in articles by Terrance Borchard and Philip Gibbs, and Frances Ingemann. Parallelism abounds in Ipili *tindi*, as is also apparent in sung tales from many other areas. In Ipili *tindi*, parallelism can be brought about by word substitution;

the repetition of line-final vocables, words, or various types of medial and final verbs; and the use of speech or sense orienters. The melodic contour of phrases often follows an initial rise, followed by a slow descent to a fairly level area, and concluding on the level-pitch region or an ascent.

ENGA *TINDI PII*

In *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands,* Enga *tindi pii* are considered in a contribution by Philip Gibbs. Here, the performer is a sole man or woman, and while the primary purpose is entertainment, types of esoteric knowledge are also transmitted. Although they have become less common today, they continue to be performed in the western part of the province. The performance of *tindi pii* requires from the storyteller great creativity and facility with the poetic form. While the beauty of the language and the melodic setting appeals to listeners, the skilful storyteller also reflects on the human condition in an imaginary world, simultaneously based on the real world, but also contrasting with it.

KARINJ *ENJ*

Moving further to the west, in the Karinj part of the Angal Heneng or West Mendi language, Josep Haip performed an *enj* during our 2006 workshop held at Kefamo, just outside of Goroka. Performances of *enj* are discussed by Hans Reithofer in *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands.*

Enj are divided into non-metrical lines of varying length, but with a regular melodic shape. Lines are clearly identifiable on melodic grounds, but also by line-final vocables such as *e*, *la e*, *la*, *la o*, *la la o,* or formulas such as *inji* (‘it’s been told’). Lines are grouped into melodic units or cycles that have relatively fixed pitch contours, but may vary according to the performer. It seems that each melodic unit comprises a scene or episode of a story and typically ends in phrases that prompt the audience to respond with a melodic *ehe* (‘oh yes!’). Here also the response is considered important to the continuation of the story.

Haip frequently commands different melodies to tell his story, something that Reithofer suggests enhances the interest and attention of listeners. In the excerpt included in the book, the initial, repeated melody is followed by a melodically unclear line, before Haip shifts to a new, higher range. The new melody exhibits a strict alternation of phrase endings: While all lines end on the formula *inji* (‘it’s been told’), Haip ends the two syllables of this word on one pitch in one phrase, and on a pitch a step higher in the other.

This strict alternation of different phrase ending pitches is very distinctive and might be seen as having some sort of structural similarity to Hagen performances discussed next, where a continually repeated melody is divided into two half-melodies, with many of the notes of one half-melody being separated by a step from the other half-melody.

MELPA *KANG ROM*

The co-editor and the primary motivator for the project on this genre, Alan Rumsey, has summarised a typical story of a sung tale in the Hagen area, known as *kang rom* in the Melpa language:

> a young man sets out from his home to court a young woman he has heard about in a far-away place, encounters obstacles, overcomes them, wins her hand, returns home with her, sometimes living happily and prospering with her help, and sometimes not. (Alan Rumsey 2005)

The performance of Melpa *kang rom* is considered in articles by Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart, and myself in *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands.* One very important recording of this genre was made on Monday, 17 November 1980 at Radio Western Highlands. The performer was Paul Pepa, when he would have been about twenty-one years old.

This *kang rom* concerns the story of a man named Miti Krai and a woman Ambra Amb Rangmba. His recording was broadcast many times in the 1980s and has become a benchmark against which other performers are measured.

In contrast to what usually happens in the performance of *kang rom,* Pepa begins the recording with a courting song (*amb kenan*). While this is totally unprecedented, considering the story involved, it might be considered appropriate. In 2004, Pepa also demonstrated his performance of this *kang rom* dressed as if he were courting (figure 3).

The courting-song performance is typical of the genre and of most types of Hagen music in that a melody is used that is divisible into halves, with most of one half-melody being sung a step lower or higher than the other half-melody. The text of the song is combined with vocables (nonlexical syllables) to fill the melody that is repeated over and over. Hagen courting songs are sung unaccompanied, but are typically performed by a group for the *amb kenan* dance (Tok Pisin *tanim het*).

After three repetitions of the entire melody, Pepa immediately enters the sung tale (*kang rom*) performance itself. In contrast to the relatively slow pace of the courting song, the *kang rom* is performed very quickly. In spite of the great speed of the performance, Pepa repeats the same melody over and over to present his story. Here each line of 5 beats consists of text ending with a vocable or extended vowel. Eight lines combine to form a complete melody.

This canonic performance lasts about sixteen minutes, involving 780 lines of text, requiring over ninety-seven repetitions of the melody. In contrast to the other examples we have heard, here the audience is silent, focusing on the text. Indeed, I suggest that the repeating melody enables the audience and performer to concentrate on the text.

Even today, Pepa's 1980 performance is greatly admired for its poetry, precision, and clarity. While the story is well known, Melpa speakers still delight in hearing his version of it, told by a truly master storyteller.

At our first workshop on this genre (2004), Pepa was one of the performer/participants (figure 3). Although he was twenty-four years older, he could still demonstrate his superb command of this art. But he had not been idle over the quarter century. In recent years, he had been hired by politician Paias Wingti to perform *kang rom* in support of his candidacy in the national elections. Instead of a male suitor travelling throughout the area, Wingti was portrayed as seeking votes. Hence, Pepa's performance of *kang rom* at an academic conference was perhaps just another contextual modification for his performances. As we had planned much more work with Pepa, we were all shocked to hear of his death in 2005.

Pepa's performance style influenced a number of other performers in the region and one of them has been studied over a number of years by Rumsey. In addition to considering his poetic storytelling, he has also looked at how tonal features of the language in the related Ku Waru area are reflected in performance using a repeating melody. While Rumsey and I feel that further work needs to be done on this question, microtonal variations in the melody do appear to reflect such tones.

Figure 3: Decorated as if for courting, Paul Pepa performing kang rom at the 2004 workshop (photo: Don Niles).

KU WARU *TOM YAYA KANGE*

The Ku Waru live to the southwest of the Melpa, speaking a dialect of what has been called the Bo-Ung language. While Pepa's performance style has been followed by some performers, it appears that the traditional performance of sung tales in this region is different in some aspects. In *Sung Tales from the Papua New Guinea Highlands*, Ku Waru *tom yaya kange* are discussed by Alan Rumsey and Don Niles.

The performance of a *tom yaya kange* by Peter Kerua also uses a repeating binary melody in a highly metric performance. Like Pepa's, Kerua's melody also consists of eight lines, but each line consists of eight beats. Instead of a vocable occurring on the final beat of a line, as in Pepa's performance, here it occurs on beats 7–8, but there is also an insertion of a midline vocable on beats 4–5.

To give some idea of what such a performance looks like in a more traditional setting, a short video of Kerua performing at Kailge in 1997 is included amongst the online examples (no. 18). Of particular interest are the reactions of the two men sitting on either side of him. In spite of the brevity of the video, the entertainment aspects of such performances are readily apparent. An excerpt from this video provides the photo used on the cover of our book (fig. 1).

PLEA

The nature of this genre, perhaps, demanded an interdisciplinary approach to its study. I think the results offer a fascinating insight into a performance genre that is little known outside of the Highlands. All the contributors very much hope that our publication will bring some attention to the richness of this tradition.

I do want to emphasise again, however, that such interdisciplinary collaborations should not be restricted to this genre. Genres such as courting songs, dance songs, call languages, instrumental communication systems, and oratory are fascinating subjects for linguists, but they are fascinating for researchers in other disciplines as well. Collaborative research will help us better understand such expressive riches in this country.

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