THE LIVING ARCHIVE
EXTINCTION STORIES FROM OCEANIA

STORY DETAILS

Title:
Storied Extinction

Author:
Sandra Laight

Publication date:
October 1, 2019

Place:
Solomon Islands

Summary:
A reflection on teaching and learning in the Solomon Islands, and the entanglement of processes of extinction and colonialism.

Author bio:
I am a writer, filmmaker, teacher, conservationist and volunteer who regularly visits the Solomon Islands. For more information please visit https://sandralaight.com.

Publication information:
This story was originally published on the website of the *Living Archive of Extinction Stories from Oceania*. This archived version is available from www.thomvandooren.org/extinctionstories.

STORIED EXTINCTION

The word implies violence. It explodes from the mouth like an asteroid from outer space hitting the Earth. The fricative sound of the /eks/ and the plosive sound /tink/ hiss out of our lips like the sound of rising seawater washing against wooden huts. The word evokes images from childhood; books of coloured illustrations of a brightly coloured dodo or pterodactyl. The word is sepia-toned and has an antique feeling.

Extinction however is not a backward-looking word. It is, one could argue, the most hyper-present word of our time. Extinction is now. We are the cause and we are going to be affected by it. It is coming and it is where we are going. It is us.

The South Pacific is very much at risk in terms of extinction. Marovo lagoon is in the Western Provinces of the Solomon Islands. It is a remote 700sqm lagoon protected by a double coral reef system. It is idyllic enough to have been called the eighth wonder of the world by writer and explorer James A. Michener. The low-lying coral atolls and islands are at risk of sea level rise and its many species are at risk of extinction. On land, the many species of endemic bats and flying foxes are endangered due to foreign logging of their rainforests.

Since 2012, I have visited the Solomon Islands regularly as a volunteer teacher-trainer and teacher at a remote boarding school high up a mountain in the jungle. On one of my earliest trips, I asked the young students if they wanted to tell me about a kastom story. Kastom stories are cultural stories relating to the significant animals and places of their home islands and reefs. The students were very excited for this assignment and they all wrote steadily for about 45 minutes. Their pens scratched through the damp paper in the tropical heat and I wondered if the documents holding these stories would survive the two weeks I would be there.

That afternoon, I settled in to read them with anticipation. My love of sharks was hoping for some good kastom shark tales from different parts of the lagoon from back in the times when sharks were still worshipped around the many islands. I pulled the first one out and discovered a story about a fox and a dog. There was another about an owl. I read another about a bear. One about a lion and more followed with more foxes and more bears. These stories took place far away in a land the students had never seen and likely never would. I was holding extinction in my hands.

Extinction today is not a sudden catastrophe that comes from another realm or from the sky – it is not an instant flood sent to punish us or an asteroid from outside our atmosphere. These stories of how we will all end are as foreign to our current reality as stories of foxes and bears are to people living on tropical low-lying islands. Extinction is a slow dismantling, a pulling apart of threads. It is an unravelling of the

stitches that hold the web of life together. These children had been largely untethered from the traditional stories of their land. They live in an in between place, shaped by the ruptures of colonisation and globalisation, a world where the animals they see every day no longer have the same philosophical or spiritual significance in their story web that they once did.

I had at first hoped in vain that these students were being protective of their cultural material and were not willing to share their kastom stories with me that is of course their right. This unfortunately does not seem to be the case. I have encountered the same types of stories on other trips.

The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages. According to AIATSIS, The Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, more than 250 Indigenous Australian languages including 800 dialectal varieties were spoken on the continent at the time of European colonisation and settlement in 1788. Only 13 traditional Indigenous languages are still acquired by children. Approximately another 100 or so are spoken to various degrees by older generations, with many of these languages at risk as Elders pass away. In a world where indigenous languages, especially in Oceania, are struggling and sometimes dying out and resource extraction from Indigenous land is accelerating to feed the ever-expanding appetite (often of outsiders), these languages are needed more than ever in order for these people to be able to tell their own stories in their own ways.

The Solomon Island is one of the most linguistically diverse places on Earth with over 60 languages spoken. Nevertheless, the import and establishment of Pijin, the hybrid language of trade from Queensland in the 1870s, has become their defacto lingua franca. What many argued had created unity and nationalism in such a geographically isolated and linguistically diverse population, may have in fact created economic and intellectual isolation. Two of the teachers I worked with on my most recent volunteering trip expounded on this idea. They were both highly trained and had over 30 years teaching experience, yet they lamented that Pijin has left the population feeling a lack of confidence in their ability to communicate in English and has held them back.

One could argue that a language born solely of commerce and trade imported for a smoother process of resource extraction by foreign forces could and would never benefit the populations who received this burnt offering. So now, the Solomon Islanders are working to regain their languages, their stories and their resources. They need to regain their rightful voice, now more than ever, to discuss and contest the many ways in which their worlds are coming apart.

Chubikopi Village

At the railing of his wooden home
In white soap war paint
His wife bathes him
Standing straight and proud

Clear, high-pitched as a bird-call
“Hello?” “Teacher, Hello!”
A voice calls out
We know we are its target

Lean and hungry for company
Ocular hands reach out
Into his own abyss
“Teacher, how are you?”
Is sung into his darkness

His wantoks twitter like chicks
Embarrassed
“Fine. How are you?” I sing back
But our host has already led us away
My reply is lost to the jungle

The tide line is higher
And the youth wander
Nothing for them to do
But wait for what

I look back to him
Knowledge and power stripped by age
And eyes robbed
By imported Chinese rice

This chief standing guard
Over his invisible community
Who watch over him
From the gathering gloom

tracy's vigil

so we all sit
together alone
silent in vigil
on the deathbed
of everything

i keep quiet
but awake
to the last of our fate
and watch each candle
surrender to the dark

tracy walks through
the shallow waters
of Gutharraguda /
Shark Bay

she is here
to say goodbye to them
the long green blades
of Sea Grass

the tips of her fingers
trail the water as she walks
lightly strumming
the blades of grass
playing them

the empty stomachs of the
Dugongs and Turtles and Sharks
are beaten to sound the drum
of this funeral procession
this ending

the Sea Grass is dying
taking the Dugongs
and Turtles
and Sharks
with it

tracy sits on the beach
at Gutharraguda
in vigil with the Seagrass
taking its final swaying bows
in the rising Indian Ocean

tracy will stay there she says
holding vigil
being witness
not forever
just to the end