Artem Kozmin (JPS 119 (4): 393-400) provides the texts and translations from nine Polynesian locations of an invocation relating to the mythical encounter between the Polynesian hero Rata and tree spirits, noting that the languages of the ritual formulae are sufficiently close to allow the reconstruction of a proto-text. Common to these accounts is the success of the spirits’ incantation: the tree rises. At least one further text exists which contrasts with the flow of his reconstruction. That text is from Takū, an Outlier situated within Papua New Guinea political territory, and was recorded in 1963 by Samuel Elbert from Aitä Terupo. Its significance lies in both its similarity and dissimilarity to those provided by Kozmin.

The text of the Takū incantation includes cognates of three of the seven Proto-Polynesian terms Kozmin identifies in the other versions—*lele (TAK rere) ‘fly’, *pili (TAK ppiri) ‘be joined to’ and *mala (TAK maramara) ‘chip’—and the structure of the incantation is also similar to those provided by Kozmin. However, this same Takū text also identifies a situation diametrically opposed to all the others; it is not Rata but those spirits who, after first succeeding, are unable to right the fallen tree when Rata fells it a second time, and it is Rata himself, and not the spirits, who carves his own canoe. (Aitä’s narrative makes no mention of an incantation to right the tree after the first felling.) The narrative text immediately before and after the incantation, which is repeated once, is as follows:

\[
\text{Moe ilō nā, nā tipua te lākau nā ku masikessike i te pō. E moe ki mmata ia i nā ō ake nā tipua. Ō ake ilō koi no mē ake lokoi, Ko aī te tama e tātia te lākau te vao Sinata nei? Ko nau e lā ni vevere lā.}
\]

While [Rata] slept, the spirits of the tree arose at night. He slept there to see the activities of those spirits. They came and said, Who cut down Sinatra’s forest tree? [Rata replied] It was me, I was merely weeding.
Note also the inclusion of the name Sînata, which Aitä does not specifically identify, but which designates an open space within a tightly growing grove of trees, believed to be the residence of a spirit of the same name. Among Kozmin’s texts, the cognate form Sinota (also Sinoto in the same text, presumably a typographical error) occurs in the Pileni account (Kozmin 2010: 394), but is translated by Elbert and Kirtley (1966: 358-59) as “the stock dupe”, an institution apparently absent from Takû’s own oral tradition.

Ironically, the tree itself, identified in Aitä’s narrative as natu (Madhuca obovata), is one which, at least during the historic period, has not been used for canoes because of the sacredness associated with the former use of the wood to carve the figures of clan progenitors.

What to make of this apparent aberration? One possibility is that Aitä made an error in her narrative, then repeated that error and resolved the narrative’s episode smoothly: the spirits retreat and hide themselves, allowing Rata to carve his canoe. This possibility cannot now be tested because the narrative is no longer in the community’s repertoire of oral tradition and, indeed, nobody
on the island during my own fieldwork period (1993-2010) recognised Rata as being, or having been, part of that tradition.\footnote{Te Vao o Rata ‘Rata’s Forest’ is an area at the centre of Takū island, residence of the spirit Rata, but no residents linked the location to any local mythology.} Another possibility is that she faithfully recounted the long narrative as she had learned it,\footnote{The Takū text runs to more than 2500 words; that text and a parallel translation are included in a forthcoming volume on Takū ritual and belief (Moyle: in prep.).} which would suggest that the apparent reversing of the personnel occurred earlier in the atoll’s history. That possibility also cannot now be tested because no audio recordings of oral tradition from Takū predate those of Elbert and no published or manuscript version is known to exist. As Takū themselves say, Mātou ku sē iloa koi ‘We simply don’t know’.

NOTES

1. Te Vao o Rata ‘Rata’s Forest’ is an area at the centre of Takū island, residence of the spirit Rata, but no residents linked the location to any local mythology.
2. The Takū text runs to more than 2500 words; that text and a parallel translation are included in a forthcoming volume on Takū ritual and belief (Moyle: in prep.).

REFERENCES

Mōteatea (sung laments) are at the heart of mātauranga Māori. They are the central strand of Māori poetry and song, a source of knowledge about tribal history and whakapapa, and a living art form. This book introduces Sir Apirana Ngata’s classic four-volume collection of mōteatea, discussing the power and meaning of these traditional Māori songs. With dual text in English and Māori, and illustrated throughout, Ngā Mōteatea: An Introduction He Kupu Arataki provides an accessible entry point into a great Māori art form.