

## The Glorious Pacific Way

"I HEAR YOU'RE COLLECTING oral traditions. Good work. It's about time someone started recording and preserving them before they're lost for ever," said the nattily dressed Mr. Harold Minte in the slightly condescending though friendly tone of a born diplomat, which Mr. Minte actually was.

"Thank you, sir," Ole Pasifikiwei responded shyly. He was not given to shyness, except in the presence of foreigners, and on this sultry evening at a cocktail party held in the verdant gardens of the International Nightlight Hotel, Ole was particularly reticent.

Through the persistent prodding of an inner voice which he had attributed to that of his Maker, Ole had spent much of the spare time from his job as Chief Eradicator of Pests and Weeds collecting oral traditions, initially as a hobby but in time it had developed into a near obsession. He had begun by recording and compiling his own family genealogy and oral history, after which he expanded into those of other families in his village, then neighbouring settlements, and in seven years he had covered a fifth of his island country. He recorded with pens in exercise books, which he piled at a far corner of his house, hoping that one day he would have a machine for typing his material and some filing cabinets for their proper storage. But he had no money for these luxuries, so he kept to his exercise books, taking care of them as best as he could.

His work on oral traditions attracted the approving notice of the Ministry of Environment, Religion, Culture, and Youth (universally dubbed MERCY), a high official of which, who was also an intimate of Ole's, had invited him to the cocktail party to meet the diplomat visiting Tiko on a project identification and funding mission.

"Perhaps you could do with some financial assistance," Mr. Minte suggested.

"That'll help a lot, sir."

"We have money set aside for the promotion of culture preservation projects in the Pacific. Our aim is to preserve the Pacific Way. We want to help you."

"Very generous of you sir. When can I have some money?"

"After you've written me a letter asking for assistance."

"Do I have to? Can't you just send some?"

"Obviously you haven't dealt with us before."

"No, sir."

"Things are never quite that simple, you know. We have the money to distribute, but we can't give it away just like that. We want you to ask us first. Tell us what you want; we don't wish to tell you what you should do. My job is to go around informing people that we want to cooperate for their own good, and people should play their part and ask us for help. Do you get me?"

"Yes, sir. But suppose no one asks?"

"That's no problem. Once people know that they can get things from us for nothing, they will ask. And besides, we can always send someone to help them draw up requests. By the way, who's that jolly chap over there?"

"That's His Excellency the Imperial Governor."

"My God. I have something very important to tell him. I must see him now before he leaves. Come and see me tomorrow morning at ten at the MERCY building. Think of what I've said and we'll talk about it then. I'm pleased we've met. Good night."

Shortly afterwards Ole left for home, disturbed and feeling reduced. He had never before asked for anything from a total stranger. If Mr. Minte had money to give, as he said he did, why did he not just give it? Why should he, Ole, be required to beg for it? He remembered an incident from his childhood when a bigger boy offered him a mango then demanded that he fall on his knees and beg for it. Hatred for Mr. Minte surged in his stomach to be mixed with self-hatred for his own simplicity and for his reluctance to ask from a stranger while everyone else seemed to have been doing so without compunction. He needed a typewriter and some filing cabinets, not for himself but for the important work he had set out to do. Yet pride stood in the way. The Good Book says that pride is the curse of man. The Good Book also says, "Ask and it shall be given unto you." One should learn to ask for and accept things with grace. But he could not sleep well that night; his heart was torn—it was not easy to ask from a stranger if you

weren't practised at it. He must do it nevertheless. There was no other way of acquiring the facilities he needed. Anyway, he supposed as he drifted into sleep, it's like committing sin: once you start it becomes progressively easier.

At ten the following morning Ole entered the MERCY office where Mr. Minte was waiting.

"Good morning, Ole. Have you made up your mind about seeking help from us?"

"Yes, sir. I'd like to have a typewriter and some filing cabinets. I'll write you a letter. Thank you."

"Now, Ole, I'm afraid that's not possible. As I said last night, things aren't so simple. We don't want to tell people what to do with the money we give, but there are things we cannot fund. Take your particular request for instance. My Minister has to report to our parliament on things people do with the money we give. Once politicians see that we've given a typewriter for culture preservation they will start asking embarrassing questions of my Minister. What's a civilised typewriter to do with native cultures? The Opposition will have a field day on that one. Most embarrassing. That won't do. . . ."

"But in my case it has everything to do. . . ."

"You have to ask for something more directly relevant, I'm sorry. Relevance is the key that opens the world," Mr. Minte said, and paused to savour the profundity of his remark before turning on an appearance of astounding generosity.

"Look, we can give you \$2,000 a year for the next five years to publish a monthly newsletter of your activities. Send us a copy of each issue, OK?"

"But I still need a typewriter to produce a newsletter."

"Try using a MERCY typewriter. You will have to form a committee, you know."

"A committee? What for? I've been working alone for seven years and no committee has been interested in me."

"Oh, they will, they will when good money's involved. The point, however, is that we don't give to individuals, only to organisations. You form a group, call it the Oral Traditions Committee or something, which will then write to us for assistance. Do you follow me?" Mr. Minte looked at his watch and lifted an eyebrow. "I'm sorry, I have to go now to talk with the National Women's Association. Don't you know that your women are more

forthcoming and efficient than your men? When we tell them—sorry—suggest that they form a committee, they do so immediately. It's a great pleasure handling them. Their organisations have tons of money from us and other helpers. Think about it and come again tomorrow at the same time. See you then." Mr. Minte went out and disappeared into a black official limousine.

Ole remained in the office keeping very still, as was his habit when angry, breathing deeply until he had regained his equanimity. Then he rose and walked slowly to the office of his intimate, the high MERCY official, who sat quietly and listened until Ole had poured out his heart.

"The trouble with you is that you're too moralistic," Emi Bagarap said thoughtfully. "You're too proud, Ole."

"It's no longer a matter of pride, I've seen to that; it's self-respect."

"Self-respect is a luxury we can't afford; we have no choice but to shelve it for a while. When we're developed, then we will do something about dignity and self-respect. . . ."

"What if we are never developed?"

"We will develop! There's not a speck of doubt about that. You must cultivate the power of positive thinking," said Emi Bagarap looking wise, experienced, and positive.

"You must keep in mind, Ole, that we're playing international games in which the others have money and we don't. Simple as that. They set the rules and we play along trying to bend them for our benefit.

"Anyway, those on the other side aren't all that strict with their rules either. Take Mr. Minte, for instance. He offers to give you \$2,000 a year for five years and all he wants is for you to form a committee and then the committee writes a letter asking for the funds and produces a newsletter regularly. But he didn't say anything about how the organisation is to be formed or run. See? You can get three or four friends and form a committee with you as chairman and treasurer and someone else as secretary. Get only those who're neither too interested nor too knowledgeable. That'll give you the freedom to do what needs to be done.

"Again, the letter asking for help will be from the Committee and not from you personally. Your self-respect will not be compromised, not that it really matters, mind you.

"Furthermore, Mr. Minte didn't say anything about the size of your newsletter, did he? Well. You can write it in a page or two taking about

half an hour each month. And you don't have to write it in English either. And if you so wish you can produce two copies per issue, one for your records and one for Mr. Minte. I'm not suggesting that this is what you do; that would be dishonest, you see. I'm only pointing out one of the many possible moves in this game.

"Most importantly, Mr. Minte didn't say what you should do with the rest of the money. So. You pay, say, two dollars a year for your newsletter and with the balance you can buy a typewriter and four filing cabinets every year for five years.

"You see, Mr. Minte is very good and very generous; he's been playing international games for a long, long time and knows what's what. He wants you to have your typewriter and other things but won't say it. Go see him tomorrow and tell him that you'll do what he told you.

"But you must remember that in dealing with foreigners, never appear too smart; it's better that you look humble and half-primitive, especially while you're learning the ropes. And try to take off six stone. It's necessary that we're seen to be starved and needy. The reason why Tiko gets very little aid money is that our people are too fat and jolly. I wish the government would wake up and do something about it."

And so, Emi Bagarap, whose self-respect had been shelved for years, went on giving his friend, the novice, the benefit of his vast experience in the ways of the world.

When Ole left the office he was relieved and almost happy. He had begun to understand the complexities of life. Give me time, O Lord, he prayed as he headed towards the bus stop, and I'll be out there with the best of them.

"A word with you, old friend," Manu's voice checked him.

"Oh, hello Manu. Long time no see. Where've you been?"

"Watching you lately, old friend. You have that look on your face," Manu said simply.

"What look?" asked Ole in puzzlement.

"Of someone who's been convinced by the likes of Emi Bagarap. I'm worried about you. I know you and Emi have always been close, but allow me to tell you this before it's too late. Don't let him or anyone like him talk you into something you . . ."

"No one talks me into anything. I've never allowed anyone to do that," Ole cut in with visible irritation.

"You're already into it, old friend; it's written all over your face. Beware

of Emi; he's sold his soul and will have you sell yours if you don't watch out."

"That's ridiculous. No one's sold his soul. We're only shelving certain things for a little while until we get what's good for the country."

"No, no, old friend. You're deceiving yourself. You're not shelving anything; you're set to sell your soul no less. Do it and you'll never get it back because you will not want to."

"You're wasting your time and mine, Manu. You belong to the past; it's time to wake up to the future," Ole snapped and strode away.

Next day when he met Mr. Minte he was all smiles. The smoothly seasoned diplomat raised an eyebrow and smiled back—he was familiar with this kind of transformation; it happened all the time; it was part of his job to make it happen.

"Well, Ole, when will you form the committee?"

"Tonight, sir."

"Congratulations, Mr. Chairman. Get your secretary to write me a letter and you'll get your first \$2,000 in a month's time."

"Thank you very, very much, Mr. Minte; I'm most grateful."

"You're welcome. It's been a pleasure dealing with you, Ole. You have a big future ahead. If you need anything, anything at all, don't hesitate to contact me. You know, if we had more people like you around, the Pacific would develop so rapidly you wouldn't see it."

They shook hands, and as Ole opened the door Mr. Minte called out, "By the way, INESCA will soon hold a workshop in Manila on the proper methods of collecting oral traditions. It'll do you good if you attend. I'll let you know in a few weeks."

"Thank you again, Mr. Minte."

"Don't mention it. I'm always happy to be of assistance. Goodbye for now. I hope you'll soon get a typewriter and the filing cabinets."

Ole whistled his way home, much elated. That evening he formed the Committee for the Collection of Oral Traditions with himself as chairman and treasurer, his youngest brother as secretary, two friends as Committee members, and the district officer as patron. The Committee immediately set to work drafting a letter to Mr. Minte which was delivered by hand the following morning. Within a month Ole received a cheque for \$2,000 and an invitation to attend a six-week training course in Manila. He went, leaving his house in the care of his elderly aunt, who did not understand what he was doing.

He found the course too confusing, but the throbbing nightlife of Manila more than compensated for its uselessness. He enjoyed himself so much that in the third week he received a shot of penicillin and some friendly counsel from an understanding physician.

On his return journey he bought a duty-free typewriter in Sydney, where he also ordered four filing cabinets to be shipped home. He was much pleased with his speedy progress: he had secured what had only recently been a dream. One day, he told himself as the aircraft approached the Tikomalu International Airport, he would take over the directorship of the Bureau for the Preservation of Traditional Culture and Essential Indigenous Personality. Both Sailosi Atiu and Eric Hobsworth-Smith were getting long in the tooth.

When he finally arrived home his aged aunt greeted him tearfully. "Ole, Ole, you're safe. Thank God those heathens didn't eat you. You look so thin; what did they do to you?"

"Don't worry, Auntie," Ole laughed. "Those people aren't heathens, they're mainly Catholics, and they don't eat people. They only shoot each other."

"You look so sick. Did they try to shoot you too?"

"I'm perfectly healthy . . . except that I stubbed my big toe one night," and he chortled.

"You should always wear shoes when you go overseas; I told you so, Ole. What's the matter? Why are you giggling?"

"The house looks so neat," Ole deftly changed the subject. "Thank you for looking after it; I know that I can always depend on you."

"Oh, Ole, I cleared and scrubbed the whole place from top to bottom; it was in such a mess. You need a wife to clean up after you. Why don't you get married? Yes, Ole, you were always messy, leaving things all over the place. You haven't changed, really you haven't." She paused to dry her face. "I threw out so much rubbish," she said in a tone that alarmed Ole.

"You did, did you? And what did you do with my books?"

"Books? What books?"

"Those exercise books I stacked in the corner back there."

"You mean those used-up filthy things? Oh, Ole, you shouldn't have kept your old schoolbooks. They collected so much dust and so many cockroaches."

"They're the most important things in my life. I cannot live without them," he declared and went looking for his books.

"They aren't here. What have you done with them?" he demanded rather crossly.

"Sit down, Ole, and let's talk like good Christians."

"No! Where are they?"

"Ole, you've always been a good boy. Sit down and have something to eat. You must be starving. What have they done to you?"

"Never mind that, I want my books!"

"Sit down and don't scream at me. That's a good boy. We're poor, you, me, the neighbours. And food is so expensive."

"Where are my books?"

"Toilet paper is beyond our reach. It used to be ten cents a roll."

"Yes, but what has that got to do with my books?"

"You didn't leave me any money when you went away, Ole. I had to eat and keep clean, and things are so expensive."

"I'm sorry, but where are my books?"

"Don't keep asking me that question, Ole, I'm trying to explain. I'm your only living aunt. And I'm very old and ready to go to Heaven. Don't hasten me along, please. Don't you think that I'm more important than any old book?"

"What did you do with them? Where are they?"

"Ole, I had no money for food; I had no money for toilet paper. I had to eat and keep clean. Stop looking at me like that. You frighten me so." She sniffed, blew her nose, then continued in a subdued tone. "I used some and sold the rest cheaply to the neighbours. They're poor, Ole, but they also have to be hygienic."

Ole stared at his aunt in disbelief. "No, no. You're pulling my leg: you didn't really sell my books for toilet paper. . . ."

"I did. Yes, yes, I did. I'm sorry but how could I have known they were so important?"

"Oh, my God!" Ole choked in anguish. He sat very still, breathing deeply, trying desperately to stop his arms from lashing out. Then slowly, very slowly, he mumbled, "Seven years' hard work down the bloody drain; shit!" Almost immediately the import of what he had uttered sank in and he burst into hysterical laughter, tears streaming down his cheeks. It was also then that the brilliant idea occurred to him. He reached out and embraced his aunt, apologising for his rudeness, promising never to do it again, and the old lady was so surprised at the transformation that she sobbed with tears of joy.



He recalled that he had Mr. Minte's government committed to \$10,000 over five years. That was to be the start; he, Ole Pasifikiwei, whose books had gone down the drain, would henceforth go after the whales of the ocean. If he were to beg, he informed himself, he might as well do it on the grand scale. He therefore sent Mr. Minte an urgent letter and was soon rewarded with the arrival of Dr. Andrew Wheeler, a razor-sharp expert upon whose advice Ole instituted the National Council for Social, Economic, and Cultural Research, bagging chiefs, ministers of state, top-flight clergymen, wives of VIPs, and his old friend, Emi Bagarap, into honorary officeholding positions, with himself as full-time secretary. Then Dr. Wheeler devised a comprehensive four-year research programme and despatched professionally worded letters to INESCA, the Forge Foundation, the Friends of South Sea Natives, the Third World Conservation Commission, and the Konshu Fish and Forestry Institute for \$400,000 funding.

A little later, and again with the skilled connivance of his indispensable Dr. Wheeler, Ole expanded by creating eighteen other national committees and councils with specific, aid-worthy objectives, and designed irresistibly attractive projects and schemes to be funded from international sources. And he capped it all by succeeding in getting his groups placed by the Great International Organisation on the list of the Two Hundred Least Developed Committees—those in need of urgent, generous aid.

After six years Ole had applied for a total of \$14 million for his organisations, and his name had become well known in certain influential circles in Brussels, The Hague, Bonn, Geneva, Paris, London, New York, Washington, Wellington, Canberra, Tokyo, Peking, and Moscow, as well as in such regional laundry centres as Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Suva, and Noumea.

And the University of the Southern Paradise, whose wise, wily leaders saw in the man a great kindred talent that matched their own, bestowed upon him honorary doctoral degrees in Economics, Divinity, and Philosophy, although that learned institution had no philosophy of any kind, colour, or creed.

With fame and honour to his name, Ole Pasifikiwei immersed himself totally in the supreme task of development through foreign aid, relishing the twists and turns of international funding games. He has since shelved his original sense of self-respect and has assumed another, more attuned to his new, permanent role as a first-rate, expert beggar.

Note

This story appeared first as the final piece in the collection *Tales of the Tikongs* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1983). Later the book was published by Penguin (1988); Beake House (Suva, 1993); and University of Hawai'i Press (Honolulu, 1994).