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PASSION FRUIT AND FISH

THE HISTORY OF AN ISLAND

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Abstract

Ukata is a boy growing up on the Island Nayra, where his ancestors lived for centuries. The islanders used to live a life with strong relation to nature and without major influence of other cultures. In the course of time, the island suffers from sea level rise and a decreasing population of fish. After aid workers from Betterland come to Nayra, the population learns about climate change and tries to face its problems.

Keywords

Island – Culture – Environment – Imperialism – Climate change

Preface

This piece of work is part of a seminar on environmental anthropology, which was held with students from various disciplines. The courses aim was to introduce the wide field of anthropology to the students. A major content of the course was the interaction of humans and nature which together can describe a certain environment.

In order to vividly depict the special relationship between people and nature, it was decided to write a fiction that could be seen as **an excerpt from a diary**.

The stories starting point is the fictitious island Nayra, where the young boy Ukata grows up and tells from his everyday life in times of climate change. It was decided not to mention any real location or point in time to avoid making misleading statements. In fact, many places like Nayra exist. Each and every one has its own history, problems and interactions with developed countries. Worldwide the sea level has risen by an average of twenty centimetres since the beginning of the twentieth century (Dürfeld 2018) and it could reach another sixty-five centimetres more until the end of the century (Nerem,

Beckley et al. 2018). The effects are already being felt in many Pacific island states. According to calculations by the London School of Economics, up to 1.7 million people will have to leave their homes by 2050 in the Republic of Fiji, which consists of over 300 individual islands (ESKP 2017). Also countries like Kiribati, Vanuatu or the Maldives are affected.

The main problem of climate change may be a scientific one, but social issues also need to be taken into account. This story deals with topics such as environmental imperialism, the perception and appreciation of food, and the question of environmental justice. It faces some of the environmental struggles that might not be seen in the global north. Climate change as a global challenge leads to the question, how the world community will treat climate refugees. With an estimated number of up to 200 million climate-related migrations (Stern 2007), the question of a fair refugee policy can be considered in general.

This short story was written under the influence of various scientific and documentary media. Diverse topics, such as the human relationship to nature, a changed way of life as a result of imperialism or the perception of the environment, were addressed in the seminar on environmental anthropology. The films of Sara Penrhyn Jones, who appeared as a speaker for the Lunchtime Colloquium of the Rachel Caron Center in January this year, can also be mentioned as inspirations for the story. The short films mentioned are characterized by the fact that, in addition to wide-ranging images, they also show the interpersonal problems of an interdisciplinary subject. This approach has also been followed in the present fiction, with the result that not only the actual topic but also the problems of everyday life are dealt with.

Chapter 1: Home

The wind is blowing around my nose. When I look forward I cannot see anything, but water and the front of the ship. I think they call it bow. If I look behind me: water and nothing but water, as far as the eye can see. But there is more. In the distance I can see the silhouette of Nayra. My beloved home island, which changed recently. In the middle is the town centre with its houses, trees and the school. A glance to the left there is the harbour with some abandoned ships. We used to play there and waited for incoming ships. This time we did not play. We had to leave the place. Both my mother and my sisters cry. I wonder why my eyes stay dry.

Nayra, the place I am talking about, used to be ours. For centuries, my ancestors were living there. They established a well working community and my grandfather served as the tribal leader for the last twenty years. My name is Ukata. I am fifteen years old. Nayra used to be one of the few places that had not been colonized in the past. This is how our culture could remain unique without forcible outside influences. We used to live in contact with nature. For us, however, this is a matter of course. Nayra was everything to us. We only took as much as the island could regrow itself. People in Betterland call it Sustainability; what a strange word for something I never questioned. I mean, is it not self-evident? If I cut down all of the trees, all the trees will be gone. If I eat all of my fishes at once, the fishing boats will return with empty nets. It is so simple; every child can understand the logic behind it. On Nayra we always lived peacefully. Our fathers went out on the sea to catch fish and other things to eat. Our mothers used to take care of the house, cook and also collect fruits and berries. Me and my friends always learned new things. Boys mostly got taught how to catch fish with nets and knives; and the girls learned everything from their mothers. In the evening

we used to sit together, eating and telling each other stories of our daily adventures. My favourite dish was grilled fish and fresh passion fruits. From time to time there were some ceremonies, where the whole island met in the central square of the village, shared plenty of food and danced in the light of the disappearing sun. My grandfather always was the one in charge of the huge bonfire. As a spiritual and organisational leader he had a lot of interesting challenges. He always kept in touch with the families and asked if they had enough food, wood and other necessary goods. When someone had to build a new house, he organized the construction site. I really loved construction sites. Many men helped to cut the trees into the necessary size and form, while the women prepared the cords which were used to mount the building. My grandfather often told me that I am going to be his successor at some point. From time to time he explained to me some important issues I would have to consider in the future. Sometimes I wondered, how it was decided that my family provides the line of tribal chiefs and why my sisters Thuru and Suma cannot be his successor. Then grandfather used to say that the legend tells we are the governing family and that I should see this as an honour. He taught me everything I know about life on and beyond our island. He said that some decades ago for the first time in history a foreign ship came to Nayra. The ship's crew were some men speaking a strange language. They must have been good people, as they brought gifts from their place. They only spend few days here and have been really curious about our way of living. After they left again we did not see them for a long time. I really liked Grandpa's stories and somehow I also liked the idea of being important for our people, but on the other hand the other children had much more time to play instead of listening to old stories. My play-mates were also envious of me to a certain extent and enjoyed every single piece of history I shared with them.

Chapter 2: Changes

Thuru and Suma just stopped crying. I do understand their sadness. However, the situation is hopeless. There is nothing we can change. We had to leave. It all began seven years ago.

My father came home late from fishing. He was really exhausted and somehow seemed sad. He gave Mommy four small fish and went straight to Grandpa. The next day Grandpa told me that there are some changes in the ocean. Somehow it seemed like there suddenly was less fish, but more water. I could not really understand. He told me not to be afraid, but to use my intellect and what I learned to observe the changes carefully. In only two years the sea level rose some sixty centimetres, which did not affect our life from one day to the other. One of the consequences was that the soil became wetter, building shacks was much more difficult and some trees were destabilised and uprooted. First we just adopted our lifestyle to the circumstances. Our fathers changed the construction of the houses and double fixed everything. They also built some small walls out of sand at the beach. Me and my friends helped as much as we could. We also found an interesting way of catching fish by constructing water channels, which ended in small basins, so that you could just pick up the fish with your hands. But with the time passing we found less and less fish and the ones that ended up in our basins were too small to eat. Sometimes we even decided to throw them back into the water.

One day, our fathers came home from fishing quite early. They had been excited and brought back more fish than usually. Something urgent must have happened as Father did not speak to Grandpa before, but directly spoke to the people. He said that they saw a boat, which was similar to the one visiting our island decades ago. They could not speak to the boats crew

but they tried to communicate that we were having problems on our island and needed help. No one new, if they really understood anything. But they seemed to be nice and even gave some fish to our fathers. The whole town was excited and some started to sing and dance for a while. Only Grandpa was sitting close to our house, watching the wind and the waves. I asked him, if he was feeling bad. He denied and told me that this day's events could bring about great chances for our future. That night I was really enthusiastic and I almost could not fall asleep.

Just one week later a ship came close to Nayra. I had never seen such a big ship before. All the children of the island ran to the beach and watched excitedly, how a bunch of people packed several things on a smaller boat and sailed towards us. I immediately ran to get my grandfather and he came with me. The foreign people already reached the beach and tried to communicate with some of the children. I counted six really tall people, three men and three women. One of the men directly came to Grandpa, when he saw him arriving. He seemed to be the oldest. Due to a lack of understanding, my grandfather just shook their hands and took them to the town centre. Everyone helped to carry their packages. They later showed us that they also brought food. Nobody really knew what would happen now. Grandpa informed some of the other old people from Nayra. They met with the foreigners in a solitary shack. I think they tried to talk to each other, in order to understand what they would want. After a certain time, they came outside and seemed quite happy. Grandpa explained to us that they are new on our island and that they want to help us in our situation. For now, they would live in the solitary shack, but together with our help, they would build a new house for themselves. He also said that in future it might be possible that some more ships and people come to our place and that we should be kind to them. The strangers seemed to be really satisfied, even if they sweated a lot in their

clothes, which stretched from the feet to the neck. In the course of the afternoon they were walking from house to house and saluted everyone. They brought some snacks which they gave to us children. It was packed in some shiny paper, which felt weird. It was incredibly sweet. So sweet that my face contracted and I had to laugh immediately. Wonderful.

The next day they already started to build their new houses. The older boys and girls and some of our parents helped to bring some trees and prepare cords. By themselves they brought some special sand that was mixed with water and afterwards hardened really fast. They put this paste into the corners and on the floor of the buildings. I think it was to make sure that water cannot get inside. It was two beautiful houses. One had a lot of rooms and an oven to cook on. The other one was almost the same size, but only one big room with nothing inside.

The foreigners quickly settled in our place. Their names were Anna, Charlie, Elisabeth, Mike, Kevin and Chris. It turned out that the building with the room is where they sleep and live. The other one was turned into some kind of assembling hall. There they met almost every day and welcomed us islanders. They gave us tea to drink and learned us to speak their language. I think every child of the island loved that and went there as often as possible. It was also kind of exciting, because we learned all together the same things instead of fishing and cooking separately. We learned their language really fast and it was a lot of fun. Also some of the grownups, even my Grandpa, came from time to time to listen to our new teachers. They somehow could not learn that fast. We sometimes made jokes about this, which they did not like. In addition to the language course the teachers introduced us to their own culture. They showed us pictures, which they called photographs. Those pictures looked somehow extremely realistic, but the things on the pictures did not. It was full of ships with wheels that drive on dark surfaces. They also

seem to have really huge houses. But somehow they do not have forests. One picture showed a so-called park. It was a green space with only few trees, but a lot of grass. Somehow the grass was really short and children could play there easily without any danger. They somehow looked happy in their colourful clothes. We also learned about the new instruments and devices people have there. They can make photographs with a camera, even moving pictures are possible. And they are able to communicate with devices called mobile phones. Our teachers also had these devices and showed it to us from time to time. That was really fascinating.

The biggest change that happened after our new friends came, was the amount of ships arriving. Now almost every ten days a new ship came and brought things. They brought big boxes full of food. It had "Made in Betterland" written on it. It was very exciting food; we could not imagine a few months earlier. They also brought drinking water, which we found a little strange. We live in a region where you can hardly find anything but water. Mother told me not to question too much the strange things they brought. After all, there were also very useful things, like the fruit potato. Mother in particular was happy about those. Potatoes are nutritious, tasty and also easy to prepare, mother liked to repeat. What I did not like at all was the new imported fish and meat. It was packed into cans and its taste was really weird. You could have it with tomato sauce, which was acceptable, because it was really sweet. But the one which was just meat or fish with oil was awful. They said to us that it is normal fish, but to me already the smell was disgusting. Besides food they brought a lot of instruments and tools. They were useful to build new barrages to protect from the rising sea water. One of the ship was even bigger than the others. It was carrying a huge machine that was equipped with a shovel that was as tall as five men. Mike, Kevin and Anna told us that this excavator was in charge to build a new underwater protection

in a certain distance of the island. We could not see what they exactly did there, but after some days it looked like a wall was growing out of the water. All of us were fascinated. Father still went fishing from time to time and told me that the wall really was grounded under water and made out of grey stone. He promised me to paddle to the wall once.

In addition to the protection a new harbour was built. It was still made of wood and only for smaller boats which transported goods and people from the big ships to our island. It was mainly built because more and more people came to visit our place. Elisabeth once explained to us in a culture lesson that tourists want to come to our island. She told us that they are nice people which are interested in getting to know our island. She really was right. Tourists are people that wear funny clothes and want to get to know places far away from their homes. They came with the small boats and visited our island for one afternoon. They were led by a guide and everyone had cameras and made a lot of pictures. They always were really happy when we saluted them or even shook their hand and exchanged some words in their language. Very often they gave us sweets in response. Before they went back on their boats they always had lunch at our school. Sometimes we brought some fresh fruits for them to try, but mostly they ate the food, which was coming from the ships. I guess they were used to it.

Chapter 3: Improvement

Our new friends called themselves development aid workers. They let us know that they came to Nayra to help us and improve our recent situation. In fact, their help was really useful in some cases. We had much more food than before. All of the children have been able to go to school. Even grownups have been able to learn new things. They also had measures which helped our people in cases of illness. They built a protection wall for the water. And the tourists which came often brought helpful goods, such as sharp saws to cut down trees or modern fishing devices. But one thing did just not improve at all: despite the flood protection wall, sea level was rising more and more. Also the fish population still decreased, which was even worse. Of course we had food from the development aid and the tourists, but it was not our food and the amount of cans and plastics which we used daily was gathering behind our houses.

More and more often islanders came to Grandfather's to ask him what would happen to the problems on our island. He did not know what to do and therefore met Kevin and Chris. I was allowed to accompany him because I spoke their language much better. Grandpa told that he was worried about future on our island and both of them slightly agreed. They mentioned that at some point we might have to consider leaving our island behind. I was shocked and so was Grandpa. Kevin tried to calm us and said that changes are still possible. He promised to do everything he could to save our existence. We went to the town centre and Grandpa reported from our meeting. The islander's reactions were diverse: some have been sad. Some of the young people somehow mentioned that Betterland could be exciting. Some got really angry and asked my grandfather what he thinks we should do. He mentioned that we need to trust them as we cannot save our

existence on our own anymore. We should all help together, he said, and we will see that we will somehow be fine – here or in Betterland.

Much has changed since that day. The number of tourists increased. Once I heard one of them mentioning that it was something special to see the island before it would disappear. Large containers were set up for the garbage, which were emptied sometimes. Also our development lessons changed. They told us that due to climate change the sea level rose. Somehow they could not explain us how this happened to us. They only said that it happened because of wasteful behaviour of the humans. I could not understand how our former lifestyle could be seen as wasteful. So because of this climate change everything had to change, especially in other parts of the world. They taught us about sustainability and how people in the big cities of Betterland are trying to find solutions for climate change. Some of the older people could not understand anything of this.

Time was passing and it seemed to be inevitable that the island has to be left. In addition to our six friends from Betterland, some official people from their governance came. They explained us that we will be warmly welcomed there and further explained what would be necessary to go there. We just had to fill out a document, so that we could be registered and do a medical check, because they were afraid of exotic diseases. When we would reach Betterland, they promised us, we would have proper places to live, food would be provided and we had the chance to improve our cultural and linguistic skills. They called it socialisation. Just after a few months we would be able to live an ordinary life with all the possibilities people in Betterland have. Before the officials left, they told us that the rescuing program will start in thirty days and that until then we will get special lessons, explaining life there.

And that was what happened. Our teachers explained everything to us: The number system, the road traffic regulations, the education system, the importance of work and earning money, pension system, Internet, leisure activities, media, religions and politics. In addition, correct management, shopping in a supermarket, social norms and manners. We were taught how to fill out a document for the social welfare office, how to write a letter to your grandmother and how to order food in a restaurant.

Chapter 4: Departure

We are now sitting on the last boat leaving Nayra. Some families and our six former teachers. We are heading to Betterland. Everyone seems stressed and almost no one wants to talk.

The last days on our island actually have been really nice. The socialisation classes ended few days before the first families were brought to Betterland. Elisabeth told us that we should enjoy our time together and she would not want to disturb our last days at home. She seemed to be really touched. Our parents planned a last big ceremony, which should be as great as some years ago. Everyone helped each other: whether it was fishing, collecting fruit or preparing food. Me and a few other boys helped Grandpa to collect firewood and chop it up. I cannot remember that we ever had such a big fire. The quantity of fish and fruits was predictably limited and so some portions of potatoes and canned food were prepared. After all, everyone should be filled today. Although Elisabeth said they did not want to disturb us during the last days, Grandpa ordered me to invite our teachers as guests. They were very pleased and assured me to come. Grandfather opened the evening with a speech. He said that this was a special evening at special times. A long tradition, he said, seems to come to an end in our own spot of home. He could not have imagined this end until a few years ago. But now it was so far. Our people learned on Nayra how to deal with the environment and the population. Now we have to move to new areas. There will be other problems than fishing or wet firewood. But we will also be able to face these problems. The rising water level and the lack of food have made life impossible. We would now be able to escape these problems. He thanked our six teachers for their willingness to support us. Then he lowered his voice and asked us

to be happy in Betterland. But we should never forget our roots. These are on Nayra. An island that will soon no longer exist.

Nobody wanted to talk. After an everlasting time, Elisabeth raised her voice. She thanked Grandpa deeply. The receptiveness on her part to Nayra was not to be taken for granted. She was very happy to have decided to come here as a development aid worker. She knows that we will now leave our homeland and that this is happening due to climate change. A change that comes to the people of Nayra without any fault on their own. They hope that this is a sign of human behaviour in the world. For this it is necessary that we tell our stories in Betterland. She would fully support that. Ultimately, she hopes that we can lead a respectful life in Betterland and perhaps see each other again in a few years' time.

After a short moment of silence everyone applauded. The atmosphere was marked by a strange mixture of sadness, hope and pride. I saw grandfather wiping a tear out of the corner of his eye and asking everyone to start eating. The rest of the evening was very exciting for everyone. The old people shared some of their favourite past stories. Our parents discussed a lot with our teachers about life in Betterland. About human interactions, perspectives for future and their children's education. Most of the children sat down in a circle a little further away. They talked about the different pictures they saw during the language and culture lessons. Some were really waiting to see a big city, an airplane or an amusement park. For myself I sat down with my sisters and Grandpa. He seemed to be really happy about this. He mentioned that soon we will be able to choose what we would learn or work. I told him that I wanted to be a Photographer. My sister Thuru wanted to build houses in the future and Suma said she will become a teacher. All of us four liked this idea. Ten years ago, we would have never thought of choices like that.

Now on this ship, everyone seems much more hopeless. We've been sailing for a long time now and still have not arrived. I am very excited about the big harbour. But not only on this. I am curious what will happen after our arrival, where we will live, how the school will be there. I am curious what my parents will work and what life will be like if I do not have to be a tribal leader in the future. Above all I am curious what we will eat. A tourist once gave me a sweet with passion fruit taste. Real passion fruit tastes better. Maybe I will find some one day.

Postscript: How life went on

The last ship from Nayra, on which Ukata and his family, among others, sat, moored in a large seaport of Betterland. Here the families were taken directly to tents where their healthiness was checked and vaccines were enriched. Then a small welcoming committee, consisting of a city representative and a few young people, who gave the children a cuddly toy, saluted them. From the port, the families were transferred by bus directly to a refugee shelter on the outskirts of the city. In the immediate vicinity were two car dealerships, a furniture store and a supermarket. The accommodation had already been built a few years earlier for refugees from a war zone. Some of them still lived there, but the majority of the inhabitants now came from Nayra. The furnishing of the rooms was very simple. There were family rooms with six beds and dormitories with eight to ten beds. Washrooms were shared and located in the corridor. Many of the existing objects were new to the former islanders. In the common lounge there was a shabby table soccer and a television, on which usually the news of the day was played much too loud. For the children there was a paved playground outside, which was actually used a lot.

The children from Nayra were allowed to go to the local elementary and secondary schools. As education was hardly adapted to them, it was hard to follow the classes. Not many of them have been able to graduate. For their parents and grandparents, life was even more difficult. They were able to visit some special language courses to be prepared for work. People under sixty years of age then were allowed to be employed in companies with a poor payment. The inhabitants spent most of their free time in the accommodation. From time to time voluntary refugee helpers were on site to help them with problems and organise events. Two years in a row a small festival was organized to bring the culture of Nayra closer to the inhabitants

of Betterlands. But the small number of visitors caused the local authorities to stop the financial support for this purpose.

Ukata was one of the few kids, who managed to graduate from high-school. He still liked the idea of becoming a professional photographer, but in order to earn money started working in a local retail market. Together with his sisters' incomes, his family was able to move into a small apartment, which was at least in a better located district. From time to time Ukata had to think of Nayra. He did not really miss it as it was more than fifteen years ago and seemed kind of unreal. Meanwhile climate change was provoking problems all around the world. While people in Betterland mainly thought about their own income, the next climate refugees in another parts of the world were already on their way into the unknown.

Ukata wondered if any of those who had to leave their homeland for any reason until now were somehow to blame for it themselves. But then he had to leave for work. He snatched his car key, blew his daughter a kiss and left.

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