

2-22-X23-2918

REVIVING MEMORY: THE FORGOTTEN STORIES OF NAGALAND

PEH YANG YU¹

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how art can serve as a means of preserving cultural heritage, focusing on the preservation of endangered folktales of the Naga people in North East India. The focus of this research is on the younger generation of Naga people, whose lives negotiate the impact of globalisation, and who have participated in drawing workshops to glean the imagery to incorporate into the artist's illustrations of the traditional folktales. This project is an interdisciplinary collaboration between an artist-linguist and oral speakers to produce two bilingual illustrated reading books in the Mongsen dialect of Ao (a Tibeto-Burman language), in Tenyidie (an Angami-Pochuri language) and in English.

Key Words: endangered folktales, Nagaland, children, collaboration, bilingual illustrated books.

INTRODUCTION

The Naga people inhabit the mountains that form the India-Myanmar border of north-east India. They are divided into numerous tribes that speak dozens of mutually-unintelligible Tibeto-Burman languages (Coupe, 2007, p. 4). Nagaland is inhabited by at least 20 indigenous minorities, each unique in terms of their customs, belief systems, folklore and dress. Their isolation from the outside world enabled Nagaland to retain much of its indigenous culture until the intrusion of the British Empire in the nineteenth century. The establishment of missionary schools since that time has increased the literacy levels of the children, with approximately 80.11% of the Naga people now literate in English (Nagaland, 2011), now an official language (Boulton, Harrison, n. d.). This has, however, come at the cost of their own culture. The new generation of semi-educated Nagas is now renouncing their past and traditions, deeming them to be foolish and uncivilised (Mills, 1926, p. 307). Following the teachings of the Bible, missionary schools rejected books documenting their tribal stories (Mills, 1926, p. 307). Nagaland lacks a writing tradition; death rituals, headhunting achievements, folktales and myths were passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition. As such, folktales play a vital role in reviving the Nagas' traditional customs and beliefs in the minds of the new generation, who are already experiencing a loss of their culture (Barman, 2008, p. 14).

This research paper investigates how these endangered folktales can be preserved through the use of illustrations and visual images accompanying the texts for today's Naga people, especially the younger generation. The first section will include studies by Assistant Professor Junko Yokota on the importance of having illustrated children's books, and in using artwork to document the oral histories so that the younger generation might be more receptive towards embracing these folktales. The second section focuses on the choice of methodology for the illustrations for Nagaland through an analysis of a drawing workshop conducted there. Lastly this paper will address the ethical issues and concerns when considering this issue from the perspective of an outsider.

This paper is not simply research on Nagaland and its people, but rather an investigation into how their cultural traditions can be translated into useful educational materials. It is also a contribution to the larger initiative by the linguists of NTU who are working with the

¹ YANG YU, PEH, Student, School of Art, Design and Media, College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. E-mail :- PEHY0008@ntu.edu.sg.

community on new texts on the traditional dialect, Mongsen Ao.² This larger project also researches ways to preserve the language through collaborations with artists “to produce bilingual illustrated books in the Mongsen dialect of Ao, and English” (Coupe et. al., 2015).

Target Audience

The choice of targeting children’s literacy materials is largely due to the ability of such materials to effectively influence children’s growth and intellect. It is widely known that picture books are instrumental in forming the basis of a child’s education and upbringing (Bosman, 2010). Given that many belong to a marginalised community, there has been no opportunity for the Nagas to publish books in their own language. The bilingual books can help preserve the culture and develop literacy in their endangered language, and also provide a link to the globalised world by helping them become familiar with a world language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The folktales of Nagaland are passed down from generation to generation through oral history. As Mongsen Ao is an oral language, recording the folktales depends on the memories of the people, although the folktales recorded today from the surviving tribes may differ (to a greater or lesser degree) from past versions due to the lack of written records. The tribal values and beliefs contained within them, however, may not have deviated much.

With the establishment of written versions of the folktales, one can now look forward to having illustrations to accompany them. The folktales from Nagaland, particularly from both the Ao and Angami tribes, formed the basis of this research study. According to Junko Yokota, these folktales will help portray their cultures in a variety of ways for common understanding, and could also allow readers to experience the feelings and thoughts that guide the values and beliefs of their lifestyles (Yokota, 1993). This explains the importance and the purpose of having illustrated books for children.

In Yokota’s book *The Book Matters*, she further elaborates on the importance of illustrations in children’s books. The role of illustrations in a book is crucial given that it attracts children’s attention, and images are the first things children come across before they learn to speak and read. As the illustrations and texts come together, they provide the readers with an immersive experience that is not possible through text or images alone. Illustrations help define and give extra personality to the story. Depending on the style of illustrations, they can impact on how the characters are depicted and expressed to the readers for their imagination to interpret (Teale, Yokota, and Martinez, 2008, p. 106).

Building on Yokota’s observations, the illustrations for the folktales could be in the form of realistic illustrations that resonate with the experiences of the children. The choice of medium and the style of illustration take into account the preferences of the children as well as their compatibility with the folktales, so that they can be distinctive and memorable (Yokota, 2008, p. 103). After all, images are said to “have a kind of social or psychological power of their own” to “affect human emotions and behaviour” (Mitchell, 2005).

Moreover, the politics of Nagaland could be hinted at through the illustrations, which then serve as cautionary lessons for the children. Nagaland’s long history started as a tribal society focused on hunting, where the human instinct for survival presided over their lives. Subtle depictions of the working politics in Nagaland are revealed through the interaction of the characters in most of the folktales, which consist of animal stories, legends and fairy tales that were passed down orally as “observations of human foibles” (Hutton, 1921, p. 253)³ and

² Mongsen Ao is an Ao dialect, mainly spoken in the Mokokchung district of Nagaland, north-east India.

³ John Henry Hutton was an English-born anthropologist who studied the tribal cultures of the Assam region.

reflections of their traditions and customs (Mills, 1926, p. 30).⁴ These folktales can provide crucial teachings to their children on how to survive in this complex world.

For instance, in the Ao folktale “Why Does The Leopard Cat Eat Chickens?” (Imchen, 2004, pers. comm.), theories of art and politics are reflected through the narratives and the illustrations (Figure 1). It is considered to be an animal story that portrays animals in their natural environment while possessing human-like abilities. It also hints that the strong will always triumph over the weak, if the strong must possess the necessary wit, strength and bravery to overcome obstacles (Ao, 2006). This folktale could even be considered as a tool to teach the younger generation for survival in the midst of the chaotic politics in Nagaland. As an animal folktale, the use of animals as main characters could enable children to transcend cultural bounds (Yokota, 1994, p. 214).

CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

Nagaland has several neighbouring countries, including China, Tibet, and Burma. To create an illustrated book for Nagaland, it would be useful to refer to the books and the artists who have created similar illustrated folktales.

China

“Why Snails Have Shells” is a folktale from the minority cultures of China. This particular Zhuang story explains how animals have evolved, and why snails appear the way they do (Han, 1993, p. 1). This is very similar to the Ao tribe folktale “Why Does the Leopard Cat Eat Chickens?”, in which moral lessons and teachings about nature are reflected. Both folktales derive from minority cultures.

This story shows how selfish the snail is in not wanting to share her shelter (shell) with other creatures in times of need. As a result of the snail’s hard-heartedness and vanity, she must deal with trouble of moving very slowly everywhere she goes and risk being crushed by a person’s foot.

The style of this illustration is similar to wood-block printing, where subject matters are seemingly cut out and heavily outlined in a dynamic composition. The use of strikingly contrasting colours enhances the visual effect of the print, heightening the tension between the characters, and between the characters and the environment. The artist, probably wanting to remain true to the essence of the story, chose to use China’s traditional methods of image production.

Tibet

The Tibetan tale “The Rabbit Judge” is a story about the wit and wisdom of the rabbit, and its dealing with the cunning and ungrateful wolf (Han, 1993, p. 29). The goat, too kind-hearted and trusting, saves the wolf from a trap, and is foolish enough to nearly save the wolf a second time, but the rabbit uses its wits to stop this from happening.

The wood-block illustration for this scene depicts the rabbit in between the goat and the wolf, as if being an impartial judge. This composition shows intense tension between all the characters, accompanied with darker colours and with a deep-orange moon hanging low on the sky, suggesting a night scene.

India

“Hanuman’s Ramayan” explores the plurality of stories from mythologies that have passed down through the generations, and the idea that a story belongs to no one person (Pattanaik, 2010). It can have as many forms as there are tellers, and can grow and change with societal norms. The illustrations used here also display spontaneity and modernity, while maintaining

⁴ The folktales of Nagaland could be direct reflections of local superstitions, beliefs and fears, and there may be magical and fantastical elements in them.

some traditional elements and visual references that derive from the ancient reliefs of the Ramayana; for example, the depiction of the sensuous figures - *Mithila* painting the *Wayang Kulit*. Also, the illustrations are of a decorative nature, seemingly referenced from the adornments of the Hindu gods and Indian miniature paintings, modified and integrated into the story to serve a new generation of young people. It is important for the artist to fuse traditional elements with modern artistic styles to attract a contemporary audience base, so that the mythology can be passed down from generation to generation.

From these stories, it can be seen that magical and fantastical elements are also being utilised in other countries' folktales to illustrate a moral. Even for seemingly normal and natural occurrences, this allows the reader to understand, appreciate and relate to the story in accordance with their real-life experiences. Similarly, tensions between the main characters are frequently depicted through proximity and expressions while interacting. This shows that folktales from these countries use similar techniques in terms of their style of narration and value systems, although they differ in terms of customs and beliefs. One conclusion to be drawn from these folktales is that they are established to disseminate educational messages for the generations to come.

The Choice of Aesthetic Styles

To support the fact that it is useful to create images that children can recognise and relate to, we refer to Yokota's paper "Realism in Picture Books for Children." She mentions how important it is to provide a truthful depiction of the various places and people through both texts and illustrations (Yokota, 2013/2014, p. 64), and the concept of "authenticity" is introduced. If this is achieved, the readers will be able to reflect on their own lives and better appreciate and understand the underlying moral teachings behind the stories (Yokota, 2013/2014, p. 66).

Yokota's concept of "realism" has contributed to the idea of having a realistic depiction of the Mongsen Ao folktales. For instance, images of their distinctively carved and thatched houses, animals and natural environment were composited together through Adobe Photoshop, using photomontage before planning the colour palette for the final paintings (Figure 1). The medium of watercolour for the realistic style of painting will aid the readers in identifying the living environments that are familiar to them, while adding a layer of spontaneity to the style due to the nature of the medium. Colours and motifs that are of symbolic meaning to the tribes could also be utilised and integrated into the paintings to add further value to the historical significance of the folktale. Most importantly, the first realistically illustrated book of "Why Does the Leopard Cat Eat Chickens" to be sent back to the Ao community in Nagaland for feedback in 2015 was very well received by the community, as the style of illustrations resonated with them. This further confirmed that this kind of illustration will be suitable for the following books.



Figure 1: Photoshopped image of a scene (left) and the painted version (right)

METHODOLOGY

Workshop

As mentioned before, it is important to investigate how the children of Nagaland react to the notion of imagery in literature. However, as there are no published books to reference for this research, primary sources will be used instead in the form of drawings created by the children of Nagaland during one of Miss Joan Marie Kelly's day workshops in an orphanage at the city of Dimapur in 2013.⁵ During the workshop, the children were asked to imagine themselves in the future and draw a self-portrait. Figure 2 demonstrates that the children are strongly influenced by western culture, depicting themselves wearing westernised clothing and accessories rather than as they actually look. It is also evident from their drawings that they have stereotypes regarding certain jobs and ideas of what is beautiful (for example long blonde hair, hourglass figures, high-heeled shoes). A researcher from the University of Cyprus, Andri Savva, concludes that children tend to internalise images by making connections with their own feelings and experiences, relating their supposed understanding of the image to a new context. These children are very intrigued by visual images of western culture, which is so deeply embedded within them that they visualise themselves in that context. The children depicting themselves as "westernised" shows that they have been so heavily exposed to foreign cultures that their own indigenous culture is entirely buried. In fact, they risk being able to recognise foreign visuals better than their own traditional imagery.



Figure 2: Self-portraits by the children, 2013

According to research findings, paintings that depict a familiar subject matter could very well suggest young children's preferences (Savva, 2003, p. 4). As a result, these drawings highlight what is going on inside the minds of the children of Nagaland. It demonstrates that the children will be interested in western-influenced images as well as in subjects that are familiar to them. This points to an issue regarding a possible binary between the environment and the self, where the environment is "nature" and the self is "western." In Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, he talks about the problem of the self, and his sustained interest in defining and acquiring Truth that gives rise to a conception of self. Plato's key objective in this text was in locating truth in a metaphysical world and in theorising the human self as a thinking being capable of accessing that metaphysical world through the method of discussion. According to Plato, "truth is to be attained by a partnership of two like-minded people . . . in the common pursuit of the beauty not of this world which is ultimately to be identified with the Form of Good, and which gives meaning and coherence to the whole of reality" (Lasater, 2007, p. 84). Plato thus establishes two binaries: the metaphysical realm as different from the physical world, and the human self and the physical world. In other words, the human self's "true" nature exists separately from

⁵ According to Joan Marie Kelly, this workshop is part of a collaboration with Enhancement and Partnership for Integrated Change (EPIC).

the physical world, where there is a sense of disconnection between the two binaries that results in crisis. This is what the Naga children are now possibly facing.

The Reader's Engagement with the Storybook

The methodologies used for the illustrations also add an additional layer of interpretation for the readers. Other than the illustrations, the accompanying additional interactive features for books such as pull-tabs and pop-ups allow readers to “manipulate the book through direct and sustained contact with it” (Hoffman, Teale, and Yokota, 2008, p. 107). With this, the interpretation of the story is highly dependent on how the readers interact with the book, since it will have to take into account one's interests and ways of seeing and touching.

There is also an issue between the artist and audience: the audience is conceived of knowing in advance the work and the process of its production (Clarke, 1973). In this case, the readers act as contributors to the artwork themselves, and the work will not exist without their participation. This is highly applicable in the case of illustrated folktales, since folktales originate from oral stories that are eventually set down in writing according to how the story is remembered and depicted. The readers of the illustrated folktale also have to form their own interpretations of it, and add their own experiences and insights to grasp the significance of the folktale more fully and relate it back to their own lives. The artist must create an artwork that can constantly question and provoke the viewers' thinking and interpretation of their environment and social issues.

Another form of engagement includes interviews with the Naga people. One way to ensure that there is no misrepresentation of objects, stories and subject matters is to bring the completed illustrated folktale to Nagaland. For instance, the illustrated folktale for the Angami tribe titled “Boiled Crab” (Figure 4) has been completed under close collaboration with a native Angami, Kenei Kuotsu, currently living in Singapore. He has provided valuable insights about his tribe, especially on the details of their daily living experiences and the environment around them. Most importantly, Kenei has assisted the artist in conducting surveys and tests with the local children and gathering their feedback on the first version of “Boiled Crab” in 2015, so that their comments might help improve the new set of illustrations and better suit the children's preferences.

A separate group of children was also asked to illustrate their own version of the folktale on blank paper captioned with text from the folktale, to help the artist understand their ways of perceiving the story. In Figure 3, the children imagined the crab realistically and tried to depict it in the most accurate way possible through their careful rendering.

On the other hand, the different species of birds that the children have drawn varied slightly from the artist's versions in the illustrated book. This could be due to the fact that the children commonly saw these species of birds around their homes, or that these were the birds that left the most lasting impression in their minds (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Drawings by Angami children

As a result, Figure 4 shows the new set of edited illustrations (2nd edition) created with reference to the children's drawings and the images given by the natives. In the various scenes, the anatomy of the crab's "claws" were given more exaggerated curves, as most of the children's drawings placed a playful emphasis on its pereopods. The original colour of a live crab was found to be dark brownish grey, which was different from what the artist had originally thought it to be (first edition). In addition, the Great Barbet was replaced by the Great Spotted Woodpecker in consideration of the children's preferences as seen in their drawings (Figure 3). However, some illustrations remained the same where the original drawings resembled the children's interpretation of the subject, such as the illustration of the Alexandrine Parakeet.

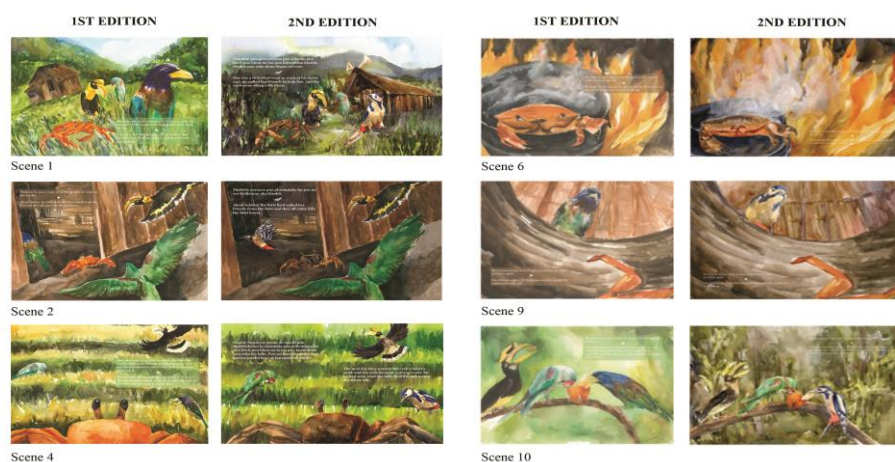


Figure 4: Comparison between the first and second editions of the illustrated folktale “Boiled Crab”

By involving the local people in deciding and agreeing on the aesthetics and the content of the illustrated folktale, this process can be considered a form of engagement that directly gathers their feedback and reflections.

Studying Naga Art/Colonial Photographs

Another way to study the visual culture and/or the environment of Nagaland is to turn to the primary sources documenting the lives of the Nagas and their works of art. These objects have strong cultural connotations and symbolism that could be incorporated into the illustrated folktales and help make the new generation of Nagas familiar with a cultural heritage that is quickly disappearing.

For instance, in “Boiled Crab”, the Angami's traditional house (Figure 4, scene 1) is included in scenes so that the readers can relate to the housing conditions of the past. The horns on top of the house signify that the owner holds a prominent position in the local community. The front façade of the wooden door is also decorated with Mithun skulls, a symbol of wealth (Jacobs, 1990, p. 51).

The kitchen depicted also resembles a typical Naga kitchen, dark and covered in soot, with kitchen tools lying around. The kitchen tools include carved wooden food dishes and cups, cane-work baskets for carrying and storing grains, and some household utensils, all illustrated in the folktale.

The landscape of the Khonoma village, home to the Angami tribe, is covered in forests and their unique form of agriculture and terraced cultivation. Photographs of these landscapes were used as reference materials for the background paintings of the illustrated book.

ETHICAL ISSUES INVOLVED

If one were an outsider working on the traditional folktales of Nagaland, it would be hard to avoid the fact that the illustrations are carried out with a “foreigner” or modernised mind-set. Thus, what is being produced may differ from what is acceptable to the people of Nagaland. The artist may have overlooked some details that can appear crucial to their culture and tradition, since he/she will rely on secondary sources in formulating their knowledge about the Nagas. Moreover, the artist will have to use extra caution in inserting his/her opinions and contemporary stereotypes into their traditional folktales. It is important for them to respect the Naga’s opinions, and harbour no bias towards the Naga culture.

In Clair Farago’s “Silent Moves: On Excluding the Ethnographic Subject from the Discourse of Art History,” the ethical issues involved in the research of ethnographic subjects are discussed. She highlights the ethical issues one has to take into account while researching their folktales, as they may interfere with an indigenous culture. As there is a fine line between “research” and “intrusion”, it is important for the researcher to be wary of disrupting the lives of the people during the course of the investigation (Farago, 2008). As the role of a historian is one who researches, studies and writes about the past (or even the present), it would be highly unethical to misinterpret the culture of study according to personal experience.

CONCLUSION

It is important to create suitable illustrated books for children through the various available methods to preserve the folktales of Nagaland together with their traditional culture and languages. Since many of the Naga children will be seeing their folktales in imageries and the language for the first time, the study of how they receive and perceive images will play a crucial role in determining the type and style of the illustrations created. Most importantly, the Nagas themselves realise that their traditions are endangered, and they are looking for any kind of support. It would be helpful to encourage the new generation of Nagas to embrace their indigenous culture, rather than constantly looking to foreign lands for support, and to maximise their efforts to sustain their cultural heritage while facing the next cultural transition and changes in their lifestyle. Given that all human beings originated from primitive societies, one must realise that no culture is superior to another.

It is thus important for history to stay alive in the hearts and the minds of the people as they progress towards the future, while staying loyal to their own roots.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to acknowledge the funding for this project from Nanyang Technological University under the Undergraduate Research Experience on Campus (URECA) programme.

REFERENCES

- Ao, T. (2006) *The Hills Called Home*. India: Penguin Group.
- Barman, B.R. (2008) *Folktales of Northeast India*. Delhi: GNOSIS.
- Broome, N.P. and Hazarika, N. (2012) India: Community conservation at a crossroads. In Protected Landscapes and Wild Biodiversity. In: N. Dudley and S. Stolton (eds.). *Volume 3 in the Values of Protected Landscapes and Seascapes Series*. Switzerland: IUCN, 83-90.
- Bosman, J. (2010) Picture Books No Longer a Staple for Children [Online]. *New York Times*. Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/08/us/08picture.html?src=tptw> [Accessed 3 November 2015].
- Boulton, R. and Harrison, S. (n.d.) The Nagas – Hill Peoples of Northeast India [On-line]. London: Cambridge University. Available from: http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/naga/coll/4/xintroduction/detail/all/page_8.html [Accessed 15 February 2016].

- Clarke, T.J. (1985) *On the Social History of Art. In: Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*. London: Thames and Hudson, 9-20.
- Coupe, P. (2007) *A Grammer of Mongsen Ao*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Coupe, A.R. et al. (2015) Giving it back: From oral folktales to illustrated bilingual reading books for minority languages. In: *4th Language Documentation and Conservation*, Hawaii (Mānoa), USA, February 26- March 1, 2015. Unpublished.
- Farrago, C. (2008) Silent Moves: “On Excluding the Ethnographic subject from the Discourse of Art History.” In: D. Preziosi (eds.) *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 195-214.
- Han, C. (1993) *Why Snails Have Shells*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.
- Hoffman, J., Teale, W. H., and Yokota, J. (n.d.) The book matters! Choosing narrative children’s literature to support read aloud discussion of complex texts in the early grades [Online]. Available from: https://www.academia.edu/3695977/The_book_matters_Choosing_narrative_children_s_literature_to_support_read_aloud_discussion_of_complex_texts_in_the_early_grades [Accessed 1 June 2016].
- Hutton, J.H. (1921) *The Angami Nagas*. London: Macmillan and Co.
- Imchen, K. (2004) Narration of Why Does the Leopard Cat Eat Chickens? Interview with Associate Professor Alexander Robertson Coupe. Personal communication.
- Jacobs, J. (1990) *The Nagas*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Lasater, A. B. (2007) *The Dream of the West, Part II: The Ancient Heritage and the European Achievement in Map-Making, Navigation and Science*. Morrisville, NC: Lulu Enterprises.
- Mills, J.P. (1926) *The Ao Nagas*. London: Macmillan.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. (2005) *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nagaland. (2011) [Online]. Available from: <http://www.mdoner.gov.in/content/nagaland-2> [Accessed 10 June 2016].
- Pattanaik, D. (2010) *Hanuman’s Ramayan*. Chennai, India: Tulika.
- Plato Lives: Writing and the Western Self (n.d.). [Online]. University of Albany. Available from: <http://www.albany.edu/faculty/rpy95/webtext/plato.htm> [Accessed 12 January 2016].
- Savva, A. (2003) Children’s Responses to Visual Images: Preferences, Functions and Origins. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 4, 300-313.
- Spagnoli, C. (1998) *Asian Tales and Tellers*. Little Rock, Arizona: August House.
- Teale, W.H., Yokota, J., and Martinez, M. (2008) *The Book Matters: Evaluating and selecting what to read aloud to young children*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.
- Yokota, J. (1994) Bookalogues: Book that represents more than one culture. *Language Arts*, 71, 212-19.
- Yokota, J. (1993) Issues in selecting multicultural children’s literature. *Urbana, National Council of Teachers of English*, 70(3), 156-67.
- Yokota, J. (2013/2014) Realism in Picture Books for Children: Representations of Our Diverse World. *Filoteknos*, 4, 64-71.