DECOLONISING THE MIND

Ulli Beier
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DECOLONISING THE MIND
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The impact of the University on culture and identity in Papua New Guinea, 1971–74

Ulli Beier
This book is dedicated to
John Gunther,
the first Vice Chancellor of the University of Papua New Guinea,
whose courage and vision inspired us all

and to
Mathias Kauage
the most original and prolific artist of Papua New Guinea
and a life-long friend
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FOREWORD

I WAS ASKED to meet Ulli and Georgina Beier at Port Moresby's airport and take them to their house at the new university estate at Waigani. Ulli had been appointed to the English Department to introduce the first courses on literature and creative writing.

The Beiers were easy to identify, as passengers disembarked that humid night in September 1967. They stood out from the crowd.

Ulli was tieless, with a loose-fitting printed shirt, black trousers and sandals. Georgina looked equally striking. She wore an indigo batik shirt, and trousers made from an unusual Nigerian weave. A jaunty cap was on her head. She carried a large raffia basket. I was soon to discover it contained a peacefully sleeping infant — their son Sebastian.

Their fellow passengers were mostly Australian. They looked hot and uncomfortable in suits, white shirts and ties. A few returning expatriate residents were in 'Territory' gear — knee-length shorts, long white socks to the knee, short-sleeved shirts — and the ubiquitous tie. In their polished, lace-up leather shoes, they plodded authoritatively through the airport gravel towards the Customs Shed.

The Beiers' reputation had preceded them. Since his arrival in Nigeria in 1950, Ulli's work had extended far beyond the perimeters of the University of Ibadan. He pioneered the teaching of African literature, and wrote widely about Yoruba art and society. In 1954 he founded Odu, a journal of Yoruba Studies. For the next twelve years, Odu became a forum in which Yoruba poets, philosophers and kings could discuss their culture. He edited and published Black Orpheus from 1957. This was the first English language magazine of African literature and the arts.

In 1961 Ulli founded the Mbari Writers and Artists' Club with Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Es'kia Mphahlele and others. He was
chairman for three years. As editor of the club’s publications he produced 17 books on art, poetry, drama and a novel. Ulli also directed the Mbari art gallery, mounting 75 exhibitions of artists from Nigeria, Ghana, the Sudan, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. For artists such as Ibrahim el Salahi (Sudan) and Malangatana (Mozambique), this was their first opportunity to exhibit outside their own country.

Ulli worked closely with the Yoruba actor and dramatist Duro Ladipo to form a Yoruba theatre company. They produced musical plays on historical and mythological themes. Ulli wrote several plays for this company under a pseudonym.

In 1964 the company made its international debut at the Berlin Theatre Festival. Subsequently, they performed with great success at the Commonwealth Festival in Britain, in various European cities, in Brazil and New York.

Georgina went to Northern Nigeria in 1959, and joined Ulli in 1963. She was a gifted and versatile artist who actively encouraged others. As well as continuing her own painting, Georgina created murals on the palaces of two Yoruba kings, and designed backcloths and costumes for Duro Ladipo’s theatre company. From Georgina’s workshops emerged a whole generation of highly successful original artists. They included Bisi Fabunmi, Rufus Ogundele, Tijani Mayakiri, Muralna Owelami and Twins Seven Seven, who all achieved international acclaim.

In *Thirty Years of Osogbo Art* (Iwalewa Haus, 1991), Twins Seven Seven remembers those exciting years:

Ulli and Georgina were unique. They came from another culture and made us more aware of our own culture. They revealed our creativity to the world and to ourselves. That’s what I see in them. They were a kind of missionary; but they were not like those Christian missionaries who came in with the Bible in one hand and with the sword in the other. They came with brushes in one hand and a bag of knowledge in the other.

The varied and lively influence the Beiers brought to the cultural life of Papua New Guinea forms the content of this book.

It is not surprising that a couple with such unique experience in cross-cultural activities were bound to have a powerful impact. John Willett, commented in his editorial of the *Times Literary Supplement* (25 June 1971):

When Ulli Beier left Ibadan in Nigeria for the University of Papua and New Guinea, those familiar with the stimulating work of this
anthropologist-poet-art historian-im presario at once began wondering what kind of new artistic energy he would find in that distant part of the world.

As I had been a resident of 'that distant part of the world' since 1957, I could advise Mr Willett that the Beiers would find little, if any, artistic energy surviving in Port Moresby. The Moresby Arts Council, established since the 1920s and only interrupted by the war, gave performances of musicals and plays for, and by, the expatriate minority.

I was asked to direct HMS Pinafore with the music lecturer of the Goroka Teachers College. We nominated to the council that Papua New Guinean students from the college be included in the cast. This suggestion staggered the all-expatriate council and caused several outraged resignations: 'But where will THEY all get dressed?' Despite this opposition, the HMS Pinafore season went ahead successfully. In 1966, this was the first integrated production in the country.

Within weeks of the Beiers' arrival on the campus they joined me in founding the student's Drama and Arts Society. Over the next few years I worked with them on many drama projects.

One memorable event was Ulli's translation and interpretation of Brecht's The Exception and the Rule. Georgina designed slide projections as sets.

Ulli's energy in those early years was phenomenal: he conducted the university's courses in literature and creative writing; he published the Papua Pocket Poets series; founded the literary magazine Kovave, the first devoted to Papua New Guinea arts and writing; and arranged numerous exhibitions of the first generation of contemporary Papua New Guinean artists in Port Moresby and in Los Angeles, Manila, Bombay and London.

With all that work load he still found time to accept an invitation from Dr H. C. (Nugget) Coombs to write a report on the state of the arts in Arnhem Land. The report was never published because it was too critical of the policy of the Northern Territory Welfare Department. However, all the recommendations were acted on by Dr Coombs, and led to the creation of the Aboriginal Arts Board, of which Ulli was appointed a member.

When the Beiers returned to Nigeria in 1971, after the events covered in this book, our friendship continued.

Ulli was appointed as director of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ife. Georgina directed a design workshop that revived traditional Yoruba textile crafts, adapted fashion styles for more contemporary use and for the African-American market.
Another of their unofficial projects was to gather a comprehensive collection of Yoruba pottery and set up these pieces in a small museum which they donated to the Nigerian Department of Antiquities.

The Beiers returned to Papua New Guinea in 1974 when Ulli was invited to establish an Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies in Port Moresby. He established a film unit (Director Chris Owen) and a folklore collection. An important legacy of the institute is over 100 publications which include collections of poetry, plays, novels, publications in local languages, and two influential journals — Gigibori: A journal of Papua New Guinea Cultures and Oral History. Numerous art exhibitions were organised, of artists from Papua New Guinea, Nigeria, India, Haiti and Aboriginal Australians.

Three remarkable new artists emerged from Georgina’s workshops: William Onglo, Serwai Kepo and Barnabas India.

At that time I was in charge of the Drama and Features section of the National Broadcasting Commission. Ulli provided scripts and ideas for many radio series such as The World Through Poetry; Arts in the Third World; Worship Through Music and Folklore in Melanesia, all of which promoted understanding and appreciation of Papua New Guinea culture.

The Beiers settled in Sydney in 1978, but in 1981 set out again on a new assignment in Germany. They founded Iwalewa Haus, a centre for contemporary art, music and culture from Africa, Asia and the Pacific at the University of Bayreuth.

Iwalewa Haus allowed Ulli and Georgina to use and develop their wide contacts with artists, writers and musicians in Africa, Papua New Guinea, India, Fiji, The Caribbean, the United States and Europe. Ulli had always believed that cultural relations should not be restricted to a narrow exchange between former colonies and their former colonial powers (that is, Nigeria and Britain, Papua New Guinea and Australia, Senegal and France). He pioneered cultural exchanges between Nigeria, New Guinea and India.

With his son Tunji, Ulli inaugurated the music festival Border Crossings. Musicians from different countries were brought together to spend two weeks working out an entirely new repertoire of music that blended different cultural traditions into new musical forms. The annual festival reached its climax with a concert in the baroque Opera House in Bayreuth, arguably the most beautiful theatre in Europe.

During the years in Bayreuth, Georgina spent two months each winter in Nigeria to conduct workshops. Since she had last lived there, the country had experienced political and economic crises. She observed a poverty that had not existed before.
To help provide a livelihood for young people, Georgina introduced appliqué textiles, quilting and furniture design to earn foreign currency for her students. She also taught welded iron sculpture, which she had learned from the New Guinean sculptor Ruki Fame in Port Moresby.

Mutu Ahmed, who became equally competent in welding and textile arts, described his experience of working with Georgina:

She can inspire your artistic work, because she has confidence in you. She believes in you and makes you try harder. She knows so many different techniques. People are surprised. They say: ‘A woman? And a white one? And she is a welder?’ When she is teaching us, she is giving away all her knowledge because she wants everybody to feel happy and stand on their own. (From *A Sea of Indigo — Yoruba Textile Art*, Wuppertal, 1997)

When I came back to Australia in 1984 the Beiers had just returned from Bayreuth. They had transformed their Sydney residence into an informal, unfunded cultural centre called Migila House. Here they presented exhibitions by Papua New Guinean artists such as Kauage, drawings by Oodgeroo (Kath Walker), African indigo textiles, an exhibition of Ulli’s photographs called *The Face of the Gods* and paintings by Georgina.

They staged a variety of concerts as diverse as an Armenian opera singer, a Japanese Koto player and their son Tunji — who was equally skilled in South Indian, Yoruba and jazz music.

I worked with Ulli on poetry programs such as *My Poem is My Knife* and *Poetry of Love and Abuse*.

Although almost 40 years have passed since I first met the Beiers on that humid night at Port Moresby airport, they are both still committed to new projects and ideas.

Ulli is still writing books. Georgina has been doing some of her greatest paintings. In 2001 her work was included in two major international exhibitions curated by Okwui Enwezor: *The Short Century*, which travelled from Munich to Berlin, Chicago and New York, and the Nigerian section of *Century City* at the Tate Modern in London.

Their lives have not conformed to any predictable pattern. Ulli and Georgina still stand out from the crowd.

*Peter Trist*
AN UNEXPECTED CHALLENGE

We have often been asked: 'What made you suddenly leave Nigeria after 16 years and move across the world to Papua New Guinea?'

The move was as much a surprise to us as it was to our friends. We had never thought about Papua New Guinea. We had never read about it, never encountered anybody who had been there. The name conjured up in one's mind spectacular dramatic carvings from the Sepik. We had no idea to what extent colonisation had changed the lives of the people. We didn't know what a town looked like in Papua New Guinea, how many people attended schools there, how many had become Christians. We had no idea what kind of food they ate or what they traded with. We certainly didn't know that they had started a political party — let alone that there was a university on that remote island.

It seemed quite incredible, therefore, when Georgina chanced upon an advert in the *Times Literary Supplement*, which said that the University of Papua New Guinea was looking for somebody to teach 'New English Writing from Developing Countries'. It was September 1966. We were in London on our biannual leave from Nigeria. When Georgina read out the advert our host, who had also spent many years teaching in Nigeria, said to me: 'Well, if you don't apply, who are they going to get?' This was of course a time when African Studies or Black Studies had barely started in the United States and when even African universities were not teaching African literature. The English Department of the University of Ibadan, which I had joined in 1950, flatly refused to even consider an African writer and I had had to sidestep into the Extramural Department to be able to pursue my interest.

We had no plans of leaving Nigeria at the time and I certainly had not started to look for a job. But this was intriguing: here was
a university in a remote corner of the world that wanted someone to teach the kind of course — officially and legitimately — that I had developed in Nigeria, but without the support and the blessing of my employers.

I wrote to the University of Papua New Guinea the same day, asking for some information, though I did it more from curiosity than with serious intent. About a week later the Professor of Literature, Frank Johnson, rang from Port Moresby. He had been most interested to hear from me, he said, because he knew my magazine *Black Orpheus*. He would have loved to offer me the job, but there was a problem: the University of Papua New Guinea only allowed one professorial position in each department, and the position they had to offer at the moment was just an ordinary lectureship. By now I had become really interested and told him that I did not really care that much about the status or the salary, provided I could do what I wanted. I suggested to him that I could work out a new literature syllabus for his department and, if it appealed to him and as long as he could guarantee my concept would not be interfered with by boards and committees, I would be prepared to come on any terms.

It was a wonderful opportunity: to design a literature course for a new university without any regard for British academic traditions. In Nigeria the university was an instrument of colonialism. It proclaimed that its 'mission' was to 'maintain British standards'. It deliberately tried to produce a Nigerian elite with British tastes and living standards. Neither Nigerian history nor Nigerian literature were considered worth teaching. In 'English Literature' the students were given a solid grounding in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English. The English literature course seemed designed to overawe the students with the masterpieces of a foreign civilisation.

My proposal to Frank Johnson was based on the principal that the literature course would have to be related in some way to their own traditions, that the course should be relevant to their lives and their problems and that, rather than overwhelm them with the unattainable greatness of an allegedly 'superior' culture, they should learn to regard the English language as a useful tool, which they could mould in such a way that it could express their own feelings and aspirations.

The literature course should start with a study of the students' own oral traditions. Those who decided to do literature after the preliminary year would have to spend their six weeks Christmas holidays in their home village, equipped with a tape recorder. They were to collect some form of orature: poems, songs, stories, epics, myths. They
were to come back with a transcription and raw translation of their recorded texts. By examining these texts we could discover the literary devices employed in several Papua New Guinean cultures. We would compare these with examples from other Pacific cultures or with oral traditions from Africa or Asia.

When the students had gained some understanding of the role of oral literatures in their own cultures, they could then look at new literatures in English from Africa. African literature was particularly relevant for two reasons: African writers in the 1950s and 1960s were concerned with the same issues that preoccupied the minds of New Guineans at the time: the impact of colonialism on their lives, the conflict of cultures, problems of identity, the struggle for independence. Secondly, African writers had demonstrated that it was possible to adapt a foreign language to one’s own needs. They showed no ‘respect’ for the English language; they did not want to write like Englishmen. They took it for granted that the language now belonged to everybody and that they could inject their own speech rhythms, metaphors and images derived from their own languages and that, in a country where English had been the lingua franca for half a century, they were free to employ the whole scale of spoken English ranging from West African Pidgin to formal English. I hoped that a course on New African Writing would encourage the students to appropriate the English language and use it as a vehicle for their own creative expression.

This was to be followed by other courses on Caribbean, Indian, Pacific and Australian literature. The latter included early Aboriginal writers like Kath Walker (later Oodgeroo) and Colin Johnson (later Mudrooroo).

Third year courses were to be devoted to ‘Modern World Literature’. Since the university did not offer courses in any European languages and literatures at the time, I felt that writers like Sartre and Brecht should at least be introduced in translation and studied alongside English writers like Orwell or Adrian Mitchell. Literature would be used as a window opening onto the world. All colonial empires have isolated their ‘wards’ from outside influences and have tried to assimilate the nations under their tutelage into their own cultural orbit. The intellectual process that was later to be labelled ‘the decolonisation of the mind’ involved the attainment of a wider outlook.

In the final year I felt that students should be given a completely free choice. They would be allowed to concentrate on a single author, a single culture or period, and they would have to produce a mini thesis at the end. I hoped that at this stage the students would have read such
a wide variety of literature that they would have developed their own personal preferences. This would be somewhat hard on the staff because it meant that each student would have to be taught individually.

Frank Johnson liked my proposals and rang up to offer me the position. He informed me that the Vice Chancellor of the university had agreed to upgrade the position to a senior lectureship. He also assured me that I would be given complete freedom to develop the course the way I liked and that he would take care of any administrative problems that might arise. It was an offer I simply could not refuse.

To say goodbye to Nigeria and our many friends there was heartrending, but we also felt it would be healthy to move out for a couple of years and gain some perspective on our complex involvements in that country with writers and artists and actors and Yoruba kings and priests. Because the death of all creative activity is routine, we welcomed the chance to make a completely new beginning, to move into a culture where everything would be new and strange, where nothing could be taken for granted, and where we would have to learn to interpret people's gestures, manners and customs, rather like small children learning to adapt to their environment. We were looking forward to a life where every day would be full of surprises.

We decided to allow ourselves three months to reach our destination. Our first son, Sebastian, was three months old and we carried him through the streets of Istanbul, Teheran, Jakarta, Denpasar, Singapore and Manila in a floppy Hong Kong shopping basket. In those days, there was no direct flight from Manila to Port Moresby and we had to go as far south as Brisbane to catch a plane to Papua New Guinea.

Our first encounter with an Australian official was inauspicious. At five o'clock in the morning the quarantine officer at Brisbane airport confiscated the baby milk, declaring no food of any kind was allowed into Australia. Georgina placed the baby in his basket on the quarantine counter and said: 'If you want the milk, you'll have to have him too, because the two go together', whereupon he grudgingly released the milk.

Waiting in Brisbane for three days to catch a flight to Port Moresby we were not receptive to the beauties of that city. We were too preoccupied with Papua New Guinea. Arriving in Port Moresby in the middle of the night we were met by Peter Trist, the university's travel officer. We had no idea then that he was also a very gifted theatre producer and that he was to become one of our closest friends and colleagues. As we arrived on the campus, we remarked that it was a pity it was dark as we could not see where we were going to live. Peter Trist replied: 'Maybe it's just as well.'
IN THE ‘BOYS UNIVERSITY’

Waking up on our first morning in the University of Papua New Guinea we found ourselves in a bleak suburban house. It was slightly raised from the ground on low concrete stilts and it had been constructed with fibro sheets nailed onto a timber frame. Numerous glass-louvred windows gave you the feeling of sitting in a cage. We were surrounded on all sides by identical houses of slightly varying sizes. Since the campus was still very new and trees and gardens had not yet grown, there was nothing to relieve the grey monotony.

To get our bearings we decided to have a look at the town straight away. The landscape was arid and not at all ‘tropical’ and Port Moresby looked just like a provincial Australian town. After wandering around aimlessly for a while, we entered the Papuan Hotel and ordered two cups of coffee. The Papuan waiter took the order and disappeared. A few minutes later a belligerent Australian woman appeared and said: ‘I am sorry but I can’t serve you.’ We were perplexed: ‘Why not?’ ‘Because you are not wearing any socks!’ We burst out laughing. In British Africa the tie had been the symbol of respectability and racial superiority. Since a tie cannot be worn with a Nigerian gown, it was a convenient way of excluding most ‘natives’ from bars and restaurants, while pretending not to discriminate on the grounds of colour. If a European strayed into one of these establishments without a tie, they offered to lend you one. In Papua New Guinea, the majority of local people were wearing rubber thongs, while the rather unbecoming unofficial Australian ‘uniform’ was shorts and long white socks. I thought my handcrafted Indian sandals were rather more elegant, so I refrained from asking the angry lady to lend me a pair of socks. We left the premises, never to return.
It was our first encounter with racism in Port Moresby and there were many more to come. Some of the big supermarkets discouraged Papuans from entering the store and served them through a hatch instead. In one establishment milkshake cups from which ‘natives’ were to be served were marked with a blue dot. Apart from such petty acts of discrimination, it was the language that many Australians used routinely that was most upsetting. New Guineans were called ‘boys’ or ‘bush kanakas’ or even ‘rock apes’. A patrol officer, who proudly told us that he had just made ‘first contact’ with a hitherto unknown tribe, had nothing to say about the people he had ‘discovered’ except: ‘They are so primitive they don’t even know what a kalabus [prison] is!’ In what had become the capital city of their country, Papuans and New Guineans were only tolerated as cheap labour, living in barrack-type accommodation and being forbidden to bring their families from home. Even menial jobs were reserved for whites: Australians sold newspapers on the street or worked as petrol station attendants. There was not a single shop in Port Moresby owned by a local person.

Coming from an independent African country, we felt like people who had fallen asleep and woken up in some previous century. Certain prejudices existed even amongst people who were sympathetic to New Guineans. One high-ranking administrative officer said to me: ‘I shall be interested to see what you can achieve here. I know what you have done in Africa — stimulating all that literary activity and so on, but our natives are different!’ This man was highly intelligent; he supported the struggle for independence and was a personal friend of several PANGU Pati politicians!

In this overall climate the university was an island of sanity, progressive thinking and serious commitment to the country.

The creation of a university and a house of assembly in Papua New Guinea were indications that the Australian government, being sensitive to international opinion, was seriously thinking of preparing the ‘territory’ for independence. This did not mean, however, that the university was welcomed or taken seriously by many of the old hands in the Papua New Guinea administration. It was jokingly referred to as the ‘boys university’ and dislike for the university was occasionally expressed in petty acts of chicanery. For example, for several years the

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1 Albert Maori Kiki explains in his book *Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime* how the name ‘Pangu Pati’ was arrived at. Shortly before the creation of the first House of Assembly in Papua New Guinea a group of friends gathered around Michael Somare and Albert Maori Kiki. Somare suggested that the new party should be called Papua New Guinea United Party — PANGUPA. Immediately, somebody suggested PNGU Party to which Albert replied PANGU Pati.
administration refused to tar the road that led from Boroko to the campus, so that in the rainy season we had to drive through slippery mud to go shopping. A very minor irritation, but it was meant to be a very clear signal.

If the university became, nevertheless, a remarkable institution rather than a token university, it was due to the extraordinary energy and integrity of the Vice Chancellor Dr John Gunther. Gunther had begun his career in Papua New Guinea as director of medical services, which he built up with considerable drive and determination. He was a lateral thinker, who was not deterred by bureaucratic obstacles. Faced with a serious shortage of doctors, he built up an army of medical orderlies — popularly known as ‘doctor boys’ — who usually had no more than primary school education, but who could be trained to work as nurses and to diagnose and even treat certain illnesses, so that the medical staff could concentrate on the more complicated and serious cases. Albert Maori Kiki, who later became Papua New Guinea’s first Foreign Minister, was once a ‘doctor boy’ in Kerema. Gunther also offered scholarships to students who had graduated from Sogeri High School to be trained as nurses and doctors in Fiji Medical College. He had attracted many brilliant doctors from Eastern Europe who had come to Australia as refugees by recognising their European degrees. Rather than spend frustrating years studying in Australian universities in order to pass another medical examination in a foreign language, they opted to go and work in remote areas of Papua New Guinea.

When Sir Donald Cleland became Administrator of Papua New Guinea (Australian euphemism for ‘governor’), he appointed John Gunther as his deputy administrator and their partnership marked a dynamic period in the development of Papua New Guinea. It was widely expected that John Gunther would become the Administrator after the death of Sir Donald, but he was by-passed and a much less dynamic, much less strong-willed career public servant was appointed instead. John Gunther was ‘palmed off’ with the vice chancellorship of the university, at least that’s how some people interpreted the decision. For those of us who had the privilege to serve in that university it was an extremely lucky choice. I have worked in six universities in three continents, but I have never felt ‘at home’ in any of them, except the University of Papua New Guinea. I always felt like an interloper in academic institutions. I found them hierarchical, often pompous, full of petty intrigues and mostly top-heavy with administration. In some universities, professors routinely made their students feel small and ignorant and often exploited them as research assistants.
John Gunther recruited some outstanding foundation professors to the university, like Ken Inglis (history), Ralph Bulmer (anthropology), Charles Rowley (politics) and Anthony Clunies Ross (economics), to name but a few. Wisely he offered no 'inducement allowance' — which had such disastrous effects in British universities in Africa. This system had created an atmosphere where people thought they ought to be compensated for serving in the wilderness of Nigeria or Ghana. Those who came to Papua New Guinea in those early years were mostly scholars with a particular interest in and commitment to Papua New Guinea. They were aware that their years in Papua New Guinea would not necessarily promote their academic careers in Australia or elsewhere, but they did not care about this. Ken Inglis, in fact, eventually returned to Australia as a reader at the Australian National University after serving not only as Professor of History, but also as the second Vice Chancellor in Papua New Guinea.

On the whole the university tried to develop courses that were relevant and meaningful to the students, unlike the University of Ibadan in Nigeria from which I had just come, which had justified the teaching of Anglo-Saxon in Nigeria on the grounds that they had to 'maintain British standards'. Only the Law Department concentrated heavily on British law during the first year, with the result that one of our brightest students, John Kasaipwalova, refused to answer any of the questions in the end-of-year exams, but wrote an attack on the law course itself! He was failed, dropped law and took up literature instead. He became one of the liveliest dramatists in the university — but in a way it was a pity, because A. B. Weston, the new law professor who arrived only a few months later from Tanzania, completely restructured the law course and told me privately that he would have passed John K.!

Many factors contributed to the high spirits of the university. It was a small institution. We had in the early days only 300 students, which meant that you could know almost every one of them. There was a great deal of social interaction between staff and students. Many students became personal friends. The relaxed atmosphere in the university meant that we could have big parties in our back yard, to which not only students and staff but also university labourers came. There was also a kind of pioneering spirit. The students were aware of the privileges they enjoyed and the responsibilities they bore, being the first undergraduates in Papua New Guinea. They were, on the whole, highly motivated. A university degree meant more to them than a career; they also saw it as a political tool. Many of them had plans of returning to their villages after taking their degrees in order to start
grass-roots movements. Some of them actually carried out their intentions. The staff was conscious of the fact that the future of Papua New Guinea depended, in part at least, on the quality of the undergraduates the university was going to turn out. Our optimism, at times euphoria, was, of course, not quite justified. We all underestimated the power of the multinationals and the corrupting effects of power.

All of us were inspired by John Gunther. He was a rugged man, outspoken and forceful, and he did not suffer fools gladly. Once he actually punched a lecturer at a cocktail party when he got fed up with the man's silly and arrogant provocativeness. Since many of us had been equally irritated by the same person on many occasions, we loved John Gunther all the more for it.

For all his decisiveness and authority he was extremely accessible. He was willing to listen to everybody. He never tried to hide behind bureaucratic procedure, as many people in position of authority do. He gave you a quick decision. And if he said 'no', there was always a good reason for it. On the other hand, if you went back to him a week later and confronted him with fresh arguments, he often said: 'Alright, you've got me, Ulli.' He was big enough to be able to change his mind without worrying about losing his authority.

We found him very supportive of our various activities and generally open to new ideas, but he held a few rather controversial views. He was opposed to Pidgin and believed its use should be discouraged, because it would hold the people back. He had a point there, but then, languages cannot be legislated for or commandeered. Many of our students loved Melanesian Pidgin, not merely because it was a useful lingua franca, at least on the New Guinea half of the island, but also because of the very nature of the language; its sense of humour and the inventiveness needed to express complex things with a rather small vocabulary. They wrote successful plays in Pidgin. They enjoyed writing in Pidgin, not just because they could reach a wider audience, but also because they felt more relaxed with the language than with English.

More controversial was Gunther's view that local salaries should not be brought up to the level of expatriate salaries in the 'territory' — not even in the university. To most of us it felt like a case of colonial injustice, but he argued that it would be irresponsible to raise salaries to a level that an independent government of Papua New Guinea would not be able to maintain. The expatriates, he said, would go away in the foreseeable future and it would be unfair to land the country with a new plutocracy. This went very much against the grain at the time, but his
point of view was simply pragmatic and had nothing to do with prejudice. In retrospect it makes a lot of sense. In Nigeria, we started off with a basic salary for local staff and another salary for expatriates, which was inflated by the ‘expatriation allowance’. Nigerians perceived this as discriminatory and, when their protests became sufficiently forceful and were supported by politicians, the university ‘consolidated’ the expatriate salary into a single lump sum and then paid everybody the same. This meant that when independence came, Nigerian university lecturers earned more than their counterparts in the UK. However, when the country’s economic situation steadily deteriorated, university salaries were frozen so that today, university staff can only survive by running a business on the side, by selling their lecture notes to the students or by living off their spouses’ business activities.

Gunther’s most controversial decision was not to build servants’ quarters on the university campus. He stated his reasons in pretty blunt terms: ‘Australian housewives can do their own bloody housework. Why should they expect servants when they come here.’ His motivation appeared admirable, but in practice the decision caused a lot of suffering. In many households on the campus both the husband and the wife were working. Many New Guineans found jobs in private households as gardeners, childminders, cleaners or all-round helpers. But they had nowhere to live! Some of them came down from Sogeri every day. An expensive truck ride or an exhausting trek. Others preferred to sleep in the high Kunai grass and several of them fell sick as a result.

Our household was affected in a special way. As a number of prospective artists were beginning to gather around Georgina, our living room had to be turned into a studio and a bedroom into a print workshop. The more the activities grew, the more unmanageable the situation became. In the end Georgina went to John Gunther and said to him: ‘I have decided to buy a dilapidated old truck and let it break down in our back yard. Then I will convert it into a studio.’ The Vice Chancellor pondered over this for a few days and then came up with a proposal: the university would build a studio in our back garden, based on the local village architecture using timber and mats. It could serve as working space and accommodation for artists in residence. It was to be called officially the ‘Centre for New Guinea Cultures’. Here, Mathias Kauage would beat his copper panels; Avavo Kava, a woodcarver from Orokolo, would create modern versions of hohao boards; Papuga Nugint, a Melpa from the Western Highlands, and Marie Taita Aihi, a Roro girl, were trained as textile printers and designers. Our back yard soon
became a meeting place for homeless labourers and domestic servants on the campus, and the Melpa community in particular regularly used our water tap in the back garden. The bleak suburban compound was soon filled with lively activity. Marilyn Strathern, who has since become Professor of Anthropology in Cambridge, did some of her research on the urbanisation of Melpas in Port Moresby in our back yard. The Melpas would always provide a gang of willing helpers whenever we decided to have a big *mumu* — on one or two occasions we fed as many as a hundred people with their help!
I had asked the University of Papua New Guinea to delay my appointment for six months because I needed some time to write a book on contemporary art in Africa, which I felt I would never be able to complete in Papua New Guinea. We spent this time in London, where Sebastian was born. We also tried to inform ourselves about the country in which we were going to start a new life, but we were not successful. There was a great deal of literature by anthropologists and missionaries, but none of it even hinted at recent developments that made the foundation of a university possible. None of these books mentioned social change, the gradual formation of a new elite or political activities.

Then, out of the blue, a letter arrived from an Australian poet called Jamie Burns, who worked in a Teachers Training College in Madang. He told me that he was a reader of *Black Orpheus* and that he was an admirer of contemporary African poets like Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka. But did I realise that Papua New Guinea had already produced some contemporary poets of her own? He mentioned a writer called Allan Natachee and even gave me his address.

I wrote to Natachee immediately. It was my first contact with a Papuan, and six months before setting out on the long journey halfway around the world, I received this reply:
Professor Ulli Beier,

How glad I was when I received your letter yesterday THURS., 23–3–67. Therefore I thank you with great respect because you have been humble enough to write to me an unworthy Papua New Guinean like me.

Well, your name was made known to me by the poet (James Burns) or Jim Burns. Therefore, you are indeed not a stranger to me. For I could have met you that time — but the letter from Jim Burns reached me too late. But remember that you are a Professor and I am nothing.

Although I am nothing, I shall try hard and do my best to help you when you come here to Papua New Guinea to teach literature at the University of Papua New Guinea.

Very well, you might wonder how I came to love poetry and started writing it.

Well, it was through one of England’s poet, Lord Tennyson’s poem in 1935 while I was in school (a Catholic mission). It was on a scrap of paper thrown away by the nuns. This is how it went:

While birds of calm sit brooding on the charmed wave,
Charmed magic casements opening on the foam
Of perilous seas in fairylands forlorn.

This was all, and no more. It drove me into composing poetry. As soon as I read it, it clung to my mind day and night. I could not forget it. After three days I wrote a line like this:

I am a poor beggar and roam around the world to find
a shade to dwell.

I left it at that. I was only ten years of age at that time and year of 1935. I will be forty-two years old by 16th July 1967 this year.

Then in 1939 when I was fourteen years old, I composed a poem which I called ‘River of Knowledge’:

From out the source where all existence and noble qualities flow,
From there indeed all outstanding men have come forth down here below, Generation after generation these men may come and go!
But known and yet unseen a river of knowledge shall flow.

I left it at that for about a month. You might not believe me but it is quite true. For when I was only five years old my mother died. So the
Roman Catholic Mission nuns took me, cared for me and taught me how to pray, how to speak, read and write English, for they were English people or nuns.

Very well, I composed another poetry which I called ‘Stone Age Man’:

The time is not so far,
Mortal just as you are,
Somewhere you will all meet,
Somewhere you will all greet,
An ancient stone age man ... etc.

Very well, I am glad that you have been able to contact me and I thank the poet Jim Burns for his good will in helping us to meet by our pens. I will also write to him and let him know that our pens had met.

Thanking you for your estimable services ever and hoping to hear from you soon.

Respectfully yours,
Allan Natachee

It was a sad, pathetic letter, yet very moving. It was the letter of a man who had clearly become alienated from his own people; a man who had lost his bearings and was groping for a new set of values. He would probably never be able to write a poem in English, yet I felt anxious to meet him.

Shortly after my arrival in Papua New Guinea I contacted him and he asked me to meet him outside one of Port Moresby’s big supermarkets. I had learned that he was a Mekeo and, though I had only arrived in New Guinea two weeks earlier, I could already identify the tall Mekeo people by their proud bearing and distinctive dress. So I was looking out for a tall slender man, wearing a red laplap reaching down to his ankles and hibiscus flowers in his big mop of hair. Instead, a small, thin man rose from the pavement where he had been crouching and introduced himself as Allan Natachee. He wore European clothes (usually despised by Mekeo men) and he had even cut his hair short. He was clearly an eccentric in his own community.

When we settled down for our first long conversation at home, he handed me a pile of papers — a complete collection of his poems. Then he reached down into his betel nut basket and brought out an imitation laurel wreath, made from tin and painted gold. It had been bestowed on
'Cautiously advance atomic age' 15

him by a somewhat phoney organisation based in the Philippines that had the ambition of appointing a 'poet laureate' in every country of the world. While I read the bizarre laudation, Allan placed the laurel wreath on his head and wore it until he left.

He told me that his real name was Avaisa Pinongo and that he had adopted the name of Natachee from the hero of a novel about cowboys and Indians, which had been his first introduction to fiction at school. During the war he was recruited as a carrier by the Australian administration, but the commanding officer of his unit thought he was too young and sent him back home. He spent the rest of the war working on a plantation. After the war he tried to lead his people towards a better life and started a 'cargo cult' movement. The so-called 'cargo cults' in Papua New Guinea were based on the assumption that the material and technological superiority of the white men arose from their ability to communicate effectively with their dead people and that, before one could hope to have access to the white man's secret knowledge, it was necessary to make a clean break with one's past. In many coastal villages this belief, fanned by charismatic leaders, resulted in the destruction of a community's entire cultural heritage: ceremonial houses, carvings, masks, drums and sometimes even decorated canoes were burned in a kind of religious fervour. But in the Fifties the 'cargo cult' movement had largely died out in Papua New Guinea and Allan Natachee was not the kind of charismatic populist who might have revived it. Instead he was being accused by the churches of being a fraud and, to escape from an impending court case, Natachee left his village and came to Port Moresby, where he had been working as a labourer and carpenter ever since.

Natachee saw himself as a martyr: a man rejected by his people because he was ahead of his time and, in their ignorance they could not share his vision. Having failed to lead them, he cast himself into the role of poet-prophet; he would proclaim the new age regardless of what price he might have to pay for it. He told me that his wife had left him shortly after the birth of their first child. Apparently she thought he was wasting his time on writing poetry and that he should rather spend his energy on earning more money for his family. But, Natachee said: 'It did not matter that she left me; it was just one of those sacrifices I had to bring to fulfil my role in life.' Deserted by his family and cast out by his village, he continued to write about the new age:

cautiously advance atomic age
step by step
and crush under your foot our stone age …
hark and behold, our stone age is swaying
groaning
under your mighty steps of pain ...

He never explained the blessings he expected the new age to deliver to his people, but he was quite unequivocal in his condemnation of the past:

when our ancestors were lying fast asleep
in our land of countless dark ages
when no suns have streamed
no moons had quivered upon our land.

Tradition was to him:

none but worthless heathen rubbish.

The contempt for the past went hand in hand with starry-eyed admiration for the white man:

restless he is indeed, and kind and just.

He dissociated himself from those who asked for independence and he certainly did not want to see the Europeans leave the country:

O why must Brother White be driven away from Brother Brown whom he made well?
What sort of wrong has Brother White done to Brother Brown of savagery?

Needless to say, at a time when Papua New Guineans were struggling to establish a new identity, they were in no mood to listen to their self-proclaimed prophet. On the other hand, he was patronised by some Europeans who arranged for him to read his poetry on the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission) and who, thus, strengthened the false image he had built up for himself of an inspired poet.

Yet, in spite of his pathetic verse and his confused world view, Allan Natachee was a fascinating man: infinitely sad and lonely, yet undaunted in his sense of mission; rejected by his countrymen, yet full of human warmth. What kind of man, I wondered, might he have been if he had grown up in his own culture rather than among the nuns? Or alternatively, if he had been given the opportunity of pursuing his education to enable him to fully digest and critically examine ‘the advance of the atomic age’? Here was a man with a big heart and real sincerity, yet hopelessly confused between two irreconcilable worlds and
trying to express himself in a language whose music, rhythm and subtler meanings he did not understand.

Was Tennyson really his only experience of poetry? Or could he remember anything from his early childhood, before he was picked up by the Catholic mission? ‘Well,’ he said, ‘when I was three or four years old, I used to hear the older people sing. Then when they stopped singing, I used to repeat their song from memory. They were very surprised to hear me sing. As a small boy I was very fond of rubbing my skin with red native paint. The first song I learned to sing was one of the war songs that speaks about the god Aia. Then my poor mother died and I was taken to the nuns. There were no more songs for me …’

A few days later Allan came to me with a sheet of paper: he had reconstructed the war song from memory and had translated it into English for me.

Aia on the road he walks!
Aia all naked,
On the road he walks!

Aia my hand is faultless!

Aia all naked,
You shake your spear.

Aia in war decoration!
Aia all naked,
In war decoration!

Allan Natachee seemed to have become a new man. He had shed the pompous diction of his Tennyson-inspired poetry and had captured the simplicity and dignity of this ancient chant. He became really enthusiastic about Mekeo poetry and promised to make more translations.

A week later he brought half a dozen magnificent looking Mekeo men to our house. They were impressive with their lean features, the flowers in their hair and the aromatic herbs in their armbands. For six hours they sat in our living room, chanting Mekeo songs. Allan himself joined in the chorus. He suddenly let go of the contrived image he had created for himself and allowed himself to be carried away by childhood memories and by a newly discovered appreciation of his traditional poetry.

For the next two weeks he spent several hours a day listening to the recording we made on my little tape recorder and transcribing the
songs. The resulting collection of traditional invocations to the Mekeo creator god Aia became the first volume of the Papua Pocket Poets series that we published at the university. Natachee's English versions cannot capture, of course, the hypnotic effect of the chanting by his elders, but they do achieve a serenity and stark beauty that forms an extraordinary contrast to the bathos of Natachee's own celebrations of the atomic age.

Shortly after the publication of ‘Aia’, Allan Natachee disappeared from my life. He never visited me again and none of the Mekeo people I asked knew of his whereabouts. Since he was a loner, with virtually no friends, it was impossible to trace him.

_Aia the creator_

Water all over
all all over
darkness all over
all all over

Aia sitting seated
Aia living alive

Aia sitting seated
sitting forever
Aia living alive
living forever

Aia without beginning
Aia without end

Above the water
Aia has lived
Aia has watched
above the darkness
Aia has lived
Aia has watched

Aia creator of our earth
Aia creator of our home

Creator of earth
creator creating
creator of home
creator creating
By mouth wind of Aia
we were made
by lip wind of Aia
we were made

Eater eating
things all things
things above
things below

Aia lighting alight
lighting our earth
lighting our home

Aia lighting all over
lighting all our earth
Aia lighting all over
lighting all our home.
When I had signed my contract with the university in Port Moresby, we were naturally anxious to learn what we could about the country. But unfortunately, the university library in Ibadan had only one book on the subject. It had the off-putting title In Primitive New Guinea and was written by the Reverend J. H. Holmes (1924). It was basically an account of the missionary's stay in the village group Orokolo in the Papuan Gulf. But, even though the author's understanding of the culture was slight and he was obviously prejudiced against the primitive 'heathens', he gave us a first glimpse into a miraculous new world.

It was not until seven or eight months later that we met our first Papuan. It was late at night in the departure hall of Brisbane Airport in September 1967. We had spent about three months travelling through Turkey, India, Indonesia and the Philippines in the direction of New Guinea. Now, we had reached our last stop and, within a few hours, we would finally reach our destination. There about 200 Australian passengers waiting to board. Then, suddenly, we saw him: a short, stocky man with a powerful profile. He stood out among the crowd, not so much because he was the only black person there, but because he moved with the relaxed assurance of a man who has a purpose in life. We wanted to go up to him and ask him a thousand questions about his country but, somehow, we did not muster the courage. Then, the loudspeaker called us to board and we picked up the baby in his basket and innumeruous packages that we had accumulated on our long journey. Everybody else was busy with his own affairs, but the Papuan came over to us and said simply: 'You seem to have a lot to carry. Let me help with the baby.'
On the plane we had a brief conversation. His name was Albert Maori Kiki, he said. He had been a patrol officer for the Australian administration, but he had recently resigned from that position in order to become the secretary of a new political party. I asked him what part of the country he was from and he said: 'Well, you wouldn't have heard of it, it's a very small place in the Papuan Gulf called Orokolo.'

This seemed a very good omen indeed. There were 500 different languages in Papua New Guinea and probably tens of thousands of villages and our new friend came from Orokolo! We took a great liking
to him at once: he had a calm dignity about him and a poise that suggested he was firmly rooted in his culture, in spite of the European clothes he wore and the foreign language he spoke so fluently. Before we parted at the airport in Port Moresby we agreed to meet again as soon as possible.

A few days later, he came over to have a meal with us. We were shocked that he arrived on foot — in Nigeria, the secretary of a political party would have arrived in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes. We apologised that we had not picked him up, but he laughed and said that his mother's people had been semi-nomadic and that, even as a very small child, he had had to walk long distances.

We spent a very long evening listening to the stories about his childhood and his remarkable parents. Kiki, his father, had spent years working in a copper mine near Port Moresby, then became a seaman and was finally appointed the village constable in Orokolo. His mother, Eau, had come from a different culture. She belonged to the Parevavo tribe that lived in the thickly forested hills on the banks of the Purari River. The Orokolo and the Parevavo people were traditional enemies and the marriage between Kiki and Eau was due to some very unusual circumstances.

Kiki was a widower — his first wife had died shortly after she gave birth to her second son. Eau was a widow. She had lost her second husband and, since she had given birth to two children already, she could not expect to marry again because the Parevavo restricted the number of their children. When Kiki had just come out of his mourning period, the Australian patrol officer took him on a long trek into the hills. Kiki spoke several local languages and was extremely useful as an interpreter. When they came to Eau's village, Kiki blew his whistle and all the people came out. The patrol officer made them all line up for counting. Then he asked whether everybody was now present? The people said yes, except for a woman who was in mourning. Kiki then blew his whistle again and Eau came out, her body painted in white clay because she was in mourning. The patrol officer asked her: 'Who is your husband?' Eau was afraid that if she had no man to protect her, the white man would take her away. And since she knew that no Parevavo man would marry her, she boldly stood next to Kiki. Kiki was surprised, but he accepted her because he welcomed the opportunity to get a new wife without having to go through the usual lengthy negotiations with her relatives. Had Eau been a younger woman, her people would have fought to keep her but, since she was now unmarriageable in their own community, they let her go. The Australian patrol officer also welcomed
the marriage, because he felt that, sooner or later, the woman would return to her people and tell them about the coastal culture of Orokolo and about the Australian presence there. So, Eau followed Kiki to the coast and, two years later, she gave birth to Albert. The women of Orokolo accepted her warmly, particularly because she was a skilful midwife. But the men shunned her, because they were thinking about the Orokolo men her people had killed. She never really felt at home on the coast and, shortly after giving birth to her son, she took the baby and returned to her own people.

The first five years of his life Albert spent amongst his mother's people. As soon as Albert could walk he accompanied his mother wherever she went and he could still remember the incantations she used when she had to deliver a child:

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You are clinging to the womb like a parasite
you are chafing against my belly
like tree trunks rubbing each other in the storm,
let go, let go,
the woman sitting under the umbrella tree
is appealing to you:
Maruka,
you are chafing like trees in the storm,
come down then, Maruka, come down.
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Albert Maori Kiki was a great storyteller and we sat spellbound, listening to him all night. All the books I had managed to read in London prior to our departure to Papua New Guinea had not given me such an insight into the lives and cultures as his narration did. 'If only I could have read this before I came here,' I said to Albert. 'I think you have to write your autobiography.' He looked surprised. The idea had obviously never occurred to him before. Then he said evasively: 'I have to organise PANGU Pati for the forthcoming elections in February. I will be much too busy to do anything at all until after that.' But I felt too excited to let that pass. 'Alright,' I said, 'you don't have to write it, all you have to do is to speak it. Just give me two hours a week and I will do the donkey's work.'

It was a presumptuous offer on my part. How could I make such demands on his time when I had only just met him? Besides, how could I trust myself to make a good job of this, when I had never done anything like it before? My only excuse was my enthusiasm. And then, although we had only just met each other, we were already close friends. So he laughed and said: 'Let's meet every Tuesday afternoon.'
We met for ten weeks and I have never worked as enthusiastically on any project and probably never as well. Albert Maori Kiki's storytelling was very passionate and absolutely honest. He was never apologetic about himself or his people or their customs. He was never fumbling or searching for words. He gave each session a perfect form and each Tuesday afternoon's recording corresponded to one chapter of the book. After the session we had dinner together and as soon as he left, I sat down to transcribe the tape. On Wednesday and Thursday I edited the text, but he was such a good talker that there was relatively little to do. Years later I worked on several other biographies, but never encountered such fluent and balanced narratives again.

I sent the completed manuscript to Murray Mindlin, the editor of Pall Mall Press in London; he needed no persuasion. He accepted the book enthusiastically and arranged for it to be published simultaneously in London, New York (by Praeger) and Australia (by Cheshire).

Shortly after we had finished our work, Albert went electioneering to Orokolo and I decided to accompany him. I was anxious to meet his relatives there and, furthermore, we had already planned a new joint project: a book on hohao boards, ritual carvings through which the people of Orokolo communicated with their ancestors. We flew to Orokolo on a tiny five-seater plane with a single propeller, flying so low
that we could observe the people going about their work in the villages. We stayed in the house of Albert's brother Heni. The people were most hospitable, yet slightly bewildered by my presence. Was I really a European? Neither the missionary nor the anthropologist, least of all the patrol officers had ever slept in a 'native' house or eaten local food. They had houses erected for them a little outside the village and lived mostly off tinned food. They reproached Albert for being cruel to me because he was taking me to the river to wash, whereas Europeans always had water brought to them. Soon, they had made up their minds about me: I was not really a European; I was Albert's dead father Kiki who had returned to see how his son was getting on. They said: 'He is not allowed to say who he is; if he reveals his secret, he will have to return immediately!'

But there were others who argued that I was not Kiki but his younger brother Lovori, who had been named after one of their clan ancestors. Apparently my Nigerian batik shirt had contributed to the making of this particular myth: it looked so unlike the usual European cloth that they concluded it must be a strange type of bark cloth. As we were walking through the village, people would call out: 'Oh, it makes me sad to see Lovori again, but you are not giving him proper respect!' Or they would say: 'Why didn't you tell us you were going to the creek today? We would have come to collect his footprints from the wet mud to keep as a souvenir.'

When the book finally appeared, it was a huge success. I had called it *Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime*, because here was a man who had lived through incredible cultural and social changes and had survived the experience as a whole man, not nervously divided between two ways of life, two moral or cultural loyalties.

Albert Maori Kiki emerged from his book as a warm person of great wisdom and integrity. The numerous reviewers all responded to his confident and balanced personality. David White, reviewing the book for *The Sydney Morning Herald* (19 October, 1968), said:

The book shows his pride in his people and his complete lack of embarrassment about their traditions ... It also splendidly conveys some of the paradoxical qualities of this man — his assertiveness, combined with gentleness, his anger joined with humour. Above all it gives a good idea of what has become increasingly apparent to me in the three years that I have known Albert Maori Kiki that he has as much warmth as any man as I have ever met in my shorter and infinitely paler life.
Gerald Moore, writing in *Kovave* (no. 1, vol. 1, November 1969), remarked:

The immediate impression made by this book is one of vigour and independence of mind. Mr Maori Kiki seems to have been able to pass right through the colonial experience from his remote village childhood to public life in a near independent New Guinea without acquiring a trace of a ‘colonial mentality’. He takes the white world very much as he finds it; intolerant of the slightest bullying or condescension, he is ready to respond warmly to any sign of genuine human interest or love of his country. If New Guinea has many young leaders as pungent and forthright as Maori Kiki, she will be fortunate indeed.

... 

Of all these [political] issues Maori Kiki writes with the same passion, humour and intelligence which mark the story of his childhood and upbringing in a world that seems much more than thirty years away. His book will win new friends for a talented people who have been for too long the property of the missionary, the anthropologist and the policeman.

In press conferences, too, most journalists found him irresistible. The *Sydney Morning Herald* says: ‘Unlike most politicians, Albert Maori Kiki does not mince his words.’ He can dismiss the Minister for Territories, Mr C. F. Barnes, ‘with a short, unflattering sentence’. His outspokenness has earned him the enmity of the territory’s conservative Europeans, ‘but to meet him he is irreverent rather than outspoken and charming rather than aggressive.’

The prestigious German newspaper, *Die Welt* (31 October, 1969), reporting on his press conference at the launching of the German edition of his book, says: ‘He is friendly and reserved, yet confident rather than shy.’ He has survived the enormous cultural transition ‘without adopting the attitude of the privileged amongst the ignorant’, and he answers the most banal questions from journalists with patience and ‘a mischievous irony, which seems to be one of his outstanding qualities’. The writer concludes that ‘without any exaggeration, Kiki is a phenomenon’.

Kiki’s book was translated into Swedish and Japanese and there were paperback editions in Germany and New Zealand. There were over 40 reviews and reports appearing in Australia and Germany alone, I have not been able to collect reviews from any other country. The
success may owe something to the fact that it was an absolute first: a book from a country that had produced no written literature in English so far, and an author who had a range of experiences that no other author could match. But it certainly could not have had such a lasting success without the quality of the storytelling that has all the liveliness, warmth and directness of oral literature.

Only the die-hard territorians, planters, businessmen and some administrative officers raised some dissenting voices. Some regarded Kiki's mildly outspoken book as 'aggressive' or 'disrespectful'. Some said he had been 'instigated' to write it by a left-wing rabble-rouser called Ulli Beier, and others doubted that a 'bush kanaka' could have conceived a book at all. They claimed it was a kind of forgery on my part. In certain circles both Kiki and myself had earned the label 'communist'. The Australian press, however, was warmly supportive and, world-wide, the book earned many friends for Papua New Guinea.
SANITY IN THE MENTAL HOSPITAL

W
e did not come to Papua New Guinea with an agenda. We had no plans for art workshops, magazines, theatre groups or any of the activities we had been involved in in Nigeria. We were well aware that the Nigerian experience would be totally irrelevant here. In fact one of the big attractions of coming to Papua New Guinea was the fact that we would have to go through a total learning process. Everything would be new, nothing could be taken for granted and we would have to learn how to interpret every new phenomenon. So we were prepared to merely open ourselves up to all the new impressions and experiences.

But, within the first week, we found ourselves involved in a very unexpected situation. The local newspaper, The South Pacific Post, carried an article about the poor conditions that prevailed in the mental hospital in Laloki, just outside Port Moresby. We were surprised to learn that there was such a thing as a mental hospital in Port Moresby at all. How had traditional societies coped with mental illness, we wondered? Surely they must have had their own methods of dealing with it for thousands of years. And, how could outsiders apply their own criteria of ‘normality’ to another culture of which they knew next to nothing? How could a hospital deal with patients who spoke neither Motu nor Melanesian Pidgin (the two lingua franca in Papua New Guinea), but only one of the 500 local languages that nobody else understood?

Laloki Hospital was situated in a rather dry landscape. It was a bleak concrete building. In a yard enclosed by a cyclone fence some 20 or 30 patients stood around, listlessly gazing with blank eyes, as if they were not registering what they saw. Only one or two took notice of us at all and moved closer to the fence, but they did not speak nor gesture in any way.
We found our way to an office and met Dr Moi, a young Papuan doctor, who radiated great calm and sympathy. He explained to us that the living conditions of the patients were indeed poor, that plans had been drawn up for a new hospital, but that funds had not been made available by the government as yet. He told us that the patients we had seen had to be contained because they were sometimes violent, but that
the majority of patients were quite free to walk about in the gardens and some of them were farming and leading a fairly normal life. Occasionally, one of them absconded for a couple of days — but they always found their way back to the hospital, because they had been brought to Laloki from remote places and there were no relatives with whom they could stay. We met many of the patients and wondered why some of them had ended up here. Most of them looked perfectly normal, though you could sense that they were lonely and bored. Even the most sympathetic hospital could not replace their village community.

Georgina asked Dr Moi whether she could come to Laloki, maybe twice a week, to relieve the boredom of the patients by encouraging them to paint? He welcomed the idea immediately. He said that he would tell Dr Burton-Braddley about it, who was the psychiatrist in charge, and that we should arrange the practical details with Mr Brown, the chief nurse. Mr Brown was, by profession, a Singer sewing machine mechanic — but it was nothing very unusual in the ‘territory’ of Papua New Guinea for people to have unusual careers.

When Georgina first turned up with paintbrushes and paper in Laloki hospital, she remembers that:

I did not know if any would be interested in using these materials, but there was an unexpected stampede of people eager to break the boredom of existence by becoming involved in this new activity. To some extent the problems and personalities of people were revealed. Some sat in front of a blank sheet unable to make a single mark, while others were extremely nervous. Some drew quivering nervous lines that did not form any image. Some were painfully meticulous and realistic. Tiabe began to paint with certainty and boldness. He built up images from broad lines of primary colours. It was because of my interest in Tiabe’s work that I continued to work at Laloki for the next four months.

It became apparent that some of the artists should never have ended up in this institution. Sukoro, for instance, an older man from the Sepik, had killed a man because he had cut down a tree. The Australian magistrate interpreted this as a kind of raving manic behaviour but, the fact was, the tree had been planted to mark a boundary between two hostile villages, and to cut it down amounted to a declaration of war. Sukoro was a peaceful, quiet inmate at Laloki, and he painted attractive pictures mostly of lizards and crocodiles in a style quite reminiscent of traditional bark paintings.
We were unable to discover why Hape was ever hospitalised. If he had had any symptoms of mental disease, he certainly did not have any when we met him. He came from the village of Arehava in the Papuan Gulf and all his pictures were inspired by traditional hevehe masks and hohao carvings. Such art works had not been produced in the gulf for
Decolonising the Mind

about 30 years, but Hape was old enough to remember them. His first paintings were monochrome and very tentative, as if he was carefully exploring his memory. They kept closely to the rather austere clan designs, where each zigzag line, each curved or spiky pattern has specific meaning within the history of a particular clan. In traditional Papuan art, a carving was never described as 'beautiful', only as 'correct', — that is, the right designs were in the right position and displayed in the correct context. Gradually, his designs became bolder and less conventional. Though reminiscent of hevehe masks, they had nothing to do with the spirits of clan ancestors anymore. They were highly individual designs. The decorative patterns were sprouting wildly in all directions, the traditional severity gave way to an exuberant, boisterous baroque. Gradually, he also discovered the joy of colour. He came from a culture that only had earth colours — ochres, black and white — at its disposal. Now his images exploded in almost psychedelic colours. The immense vitality and joy of his images seemed to reflect a healing process. Here was a man who had lived through the humiliating capitulation of his culture before the intrusion of the white man. He still could make little sense of the processes that had changed and destroyed his world, but he was now able to impose his own order on it, a fantasy vision of great splendour. Hape was actually released from Laloki after some months. He returned to his village and to the life of a farmer, but he continued to paint for some years and we were able to help him sell some of his work.

Another remarkable artist was Mathias, who came from Aitape. We could not communicate with him verbally because he had no Pidgin and nobody in the hospital understood his language. He was obviously lonely, but his paintings reveal a remarkable certainty. He was basically a graphic artist. His lines are sensitive and lively and, being illiterate, he used the alphabet as pure pattern.

The most exciting, powerful and vibrant artist in Laloki was Tiabe, a Southern Highlander who had been diagnosed as a manic-depressive patient. In Modern Images From Niugini, a special issue of Kovave (1974), Georgina remembers Tiabe as follows:

To me Tiabe was first and foremost a painter. I know that he went through periods of mental disturbance, but I do not think that his pictures were interesting because of this.

Tiabe has a powerful imagination, his images are forceful and they are executed with an enviable simplicity. He paints lines that flow with an easy assurance; there is the sort of quality that a Mirò would admire.

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Tiabe comes from one of the remoter areas of Papua New Guinea. His village is several days’ walk from Tari airstrip. He has had little close contact with Western civilisation and yet he has an impressionist understanding of it. He regards it with extreme distrust. He is intuitively aware of its dangers. He has not heard of pollution, nor has he read any road accident statistics, but he senses the quality of destruction. Unlike many other Niuginians, he is not impressed with the wonders of the white man’s achievement. They depress him. In spite of his lack of experience his instinctive knowledge bypasses profane reality and leaps to the core of truth. He sees industrialisation as a kind of sickness, as Kafka saw the bureaucratic world as a crippling disease.

All Tiabe’s paintings depict the destructive elements that are in conflict with nature. He has a morbid fascination with machinery but he does not welcome this invasion of his world with naïve joy. His vision of our world resembles our own nightmare vision of a Martian invasion in a horror film.

The vertical and horizontal lines that occur in nearly all of Tiabe’s pictures represent electric cables, telegraph poles and roads that obliterate the landscape. He has painted several cars, but they are always involved in accidents. His car becomes an instrument of destruction and death. ‘Helicopter’ is perhaps the happiest of his pictures: a magnificent, blood-red painting, its boldness made even more startling by the pilot’s ultramarine goggle eyes. Tiabe always uses primary colours — only they can be sensational enough for his intensely powerful images. He always works in short bursts of intense concentration and with total conviction, never hesitating and never cumbersome, irrelevant or fussy.

As the government had sent Tiabe to the hospital, so they organised his repatriation to his Southern Highlands village. I went to the hospital one day and he was gone. He had not been cured.

At Laloki there were patients from many different language groups. Many patients had neither a warder nor a fellow patient with whom they might communicate. No psychiatrist could possibly cope with such a situation. Tiabe’s Pidgin was far too limited to be of any real assistance in treatment.

The patients at Laloki enjoyed considerable freedom. Only violent patients were confined; others were permitted a fair amount of
freedom of movement and did some farming. The wards though were stark like warehouses — uncomfortable and hot.

Recently Tiabe had been returned to Laloki. I went to visit him, after nearly four years. He approved of the new ward that had been built in his absence, and he showed it proudly. It had the atmosphere of a country club rather than a hospital.

Tiabe is still an energetic and powerful man. He stands out as a man of integrity and authority. Sometimes he is happy and joyful. Gaiety bursts out of him — not the peculiarity of strained gaiety but a beautiful exuberance — that in turn rapidly clouds over with worry. Then he talks of electricity, cars, cables and roads that lacerate the landscape.

It was not possible, of course, to turn these patients into professional artists, with the exception of Hape, who survived on his paintings for several years after leaving the hospital. Some of those who came to the painting workshop never produced any striking images and only five artists were exhibited. But, for all those who participated, it was a very welcome relief from boredom. It was a new form of socialisation and many of the sessions took place in a content and relaxed atmosphere. There was one occasion when Tiabe got himself into such a state of euphoria that he could not contain his images within the confined space of his sheet of paper — large though it was — and he continued the design on his legs.

There was one inmate called Hegene, who came from a very remote Highland community and who had a particularly tragic history. He had committed adultery and in the ensuing fight the husband had pushed his face into a fire. The community would normally have killed him for such an offence, but Hegene managed to run away. However, his face was practically burnt away — he had no nose and no lips, no cheeks and no eyelids — only his eyes stared out of the sockets as he was wandering aimlessly through the bush. He was finally picked up by a patrol officer. As he could not return to his village, he was sent to Laloki, partly for his own protection and partly to try and help him overcome his deep depression. However, the drugs were not effective and he felt so embarrassed about his appearance that he would not talk to anybody and isolated himself totally. When the painting workshop started, he watched it for several weeks from a distance, then he joined one day and began to paint vigorously, but all his figures were without
a head. He always drew in such a way that the body and neck filled the entire sheet and there was no room left for the head. One day when we visited the mental hospital he was totally transformed: he had painted his face red! And though he now looked like a grotesque mask, he had given himself a face! He had eyebrows and a mouth and a suggestion of cheekbones and of a nose, whereas before his face had been just a lump of scars. He gained enormous confidence after that, socialised with the other patients, overcame his depression to a large extent and, from then on, he began to paint figures with faces! He never became a really interesting artist, but in one sense he was Georgina’s biggest success.

The exhibition of Laloki paintings we staged at the university library was the first exhibition we ever mounted in Papua New Guinea and it was also the first exhibition of contemporary art in the country. The ‘art scene’ in Port Moresby consisted of an annual art exhibition organised by the YWCA, in which Australian housewives exhibited their watercolours together with Papuans and New Guineans, who had been initiated into this sterile activity by patronising whites. The works were divided into categories like ‘landscape’, ‘seascape’, ‘still life’, ‘portrait’, and ‘abstract’, and an adjudicator was flown in every year from
Australia to award prizes within each category. To give prestige to this exercise, the exhibitions were opened by the Administrator's wife and the adjudicator was usually a prominent figure in the Australian art world, like the director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. In this ritual a prestigious figure from overseas talked about 'tone' and 'texture' and 'composition' and all the other European art jargon, and the 'natives' were judged entirely by an Australian, that is, European, yardstick. No doubt these adjudicators were fully aware of the mediocrity of the work, but the name of the game was to 'encourage' and to praise the 'effort' made.

The exhibition of Laloki painters caused some shock waves and even mild antagonism among territorians, but it was very well received at the university and particularly abroad.

We had no funds to promote these artists in a commercial way, but with the help of various friends we managed to show this work in London, Edinburgh, Brighton, Geneva, Manila and Bombay. Hape had a solo exhibition in Nigeria, and at a later stage the Laloki artists were included in larger shows of contemporary New Guinea art, which were staged in Los Angeles (Otis Art Center), Prague (Naprstek Muzeum) and Sydney (Aladdin Gallery). In all these cities they provided the public with their first encounter with contemporary art from Papua New Guinea. The reviews were very positive throughout, though, not surprisingly, most of the critics used terms like 'tribesmen' and 'primitive' in order to find a suitable pigeonhole for these surprising art works. We must remember, however, that 'primitive' was not a derogative term in their own vocabulary, but one that carried the nebulous prestige it had in the era of Picasso.

Decades later, it is interesting to read these early comments on the Laloki artists. The following four excerpts, from reviews published in London, Geneva, Manila and Bombay, convey some of the international response to the exhibition

FIVE CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS FROM NEW GUINEA

It is difficult to decide what arouses our greatest admiration and response in these paintings: whether it is their colour, their vital line, their magic essence, their boldness and freshness, their urgency, or their individuality.
Sanity in the mental hospital

Their 'primitiveness' is very near the primordial roots of all art, and most of all of modern art: to the magic vitality of the soul and to its participation in the powers of nature. Simple expression of the human instinct turns spontaneously into genuine art. Everything grows out of the immediacy of experience in which animals become flowers, flowers animals, man becomes a symbol, and ordinary ununderstood letters reveal their original archetypal meaning.

Motives from all levels are used in a highly creative way: patterns of ceremonial shields or from ceremonial houses, simple utensils like suspension hooks; and even modern man lends his cars and helicopters for magic purposes. In all that the individuality of every artist is clearly discernible; each has his own 'style' and expresses his personality in his idiosyncratic use of colour, line, pattern, subject.

To the psychologist there is added meaning in these paintings: they demonstrate the tremendous relief of being allowed to give expression to human emotion, so long suppressed and stifled by illness and hospital life. This joy gives them their quality of intense immediacy and feeling.

Car Crash, Tia Be, screen print, (82x53cm)
It all combines to turn these paintings into a vital artistic experience and stimulus. One can only hope that this creative and unique work will be pursued and developed.

Gerhard Adler commenting on the London exhibition

PRIMITIVE ART — PRINTS EXHIBIT BY 5 TRIBESMEN

Prints made by five primitive ‘tribesmen’ from the remote mountainous area of New Guinea will be exhibited at the viewing room of the Solidaridad Galleries, corner M.H. del Pilar and Remedios Streets, Malate, starting today, December 17.

This is the first exhibition of any contemporary New Guinean art. The prints were brought to Manila by Mrs Georgina Beier of the University of Papua and New Guinea at Port Moresby.

Two of the ‘tribesmen’ have had less contact with the Western world than most people, yet their work does not appear particularly exotic and some of it astonishes by its modern twentieth century vision.

The artists are Tiabe, Mathias, Sukoro, Kupialdo and Hape. None of them can read or write, none had any schooling whatsoever. Some of their works express their emotional contact with the Western world for the first time.

Sukoro and Hape are artists who draw on memories of their tradition. When they were young the great artistic traditions of the Papua Gulf and the Sepik river were still alive. But they grew up to witness the sudden capitulation of their culture. Hape’s work is related to hohao and hevehe designs of Arehava in the Papua Gulf. He can remember the ancient motives, but also creates new ones and produces endless varieties of design. His work is infinitely more varied than the tradition that inspired it. Hohao and hevehe designs were never intentionally varied but were faithfully reproduced generation after generation. Hape is free from such rigid discipline and free to invent. Sukoro’s work is barely reminiscent of his Sepik origin. His use of pattern and a sense of formalism are perhaps the only indications of his cultural background.

*Manila Times, 17 December, 1968*
Poster of an exhibition of prints by Hape, a Papuan artist, that was held in Nigeria.
Helicopter, 
Tia Be, 
screen print 
(82x53cm)
SCREEN-PRINTS FROM NEW GUINEA

Five really ‘primitive’ men, belonging to mountain tribes, were hospitalised in Port Moresby, where someone had the idea of encouraging them to ‘paint’. The result is exhibited here: it is astonishing. They are not really paintings, but rather drawings, either in primary colours or in black and apparently drawn with fingers; some are reminiscent of traditional motifs; others again have the charming and awkward imagination of children’s work and one thinks of Mirò and Picasso (whose creations were not spontaneous, however, like these). These art works have, luckily, nothing touristic about them; they are nourished both by very ancient beliefs and by the astounding encounter with the world of the whites. A revelation.

La Tribune de Genève, 7 May, 1969

TRIBAL ARTISTS DISPLAY FRESH, UNTUTORED VISION

A fascinating glimpse into a primitive sensibility untouched by consciousness of modern urban civilisation is to be seen in the lithographs of five Papuan artists from New Guinea on view at Gallery Chemould.

Absolutely untutored till they found themselves convalescing in a Port Moresby hospital, these tribal artists coming from the unknown hinterland of New Guinea have produced intuitively expressive visual statements of a childlike vision. Their technique is indeed deceptively simple, rather like that of the ceramics of Picasso.

Of the five, Tiabe leads with five lithographs projecting a sort of traumatic but distant experience of such phenomena as a helicopter or an electric shock. His ‘Moto Bagarap’ shows a humorous insight into the contortions of the machine world. His drawings have the legitimate crudity of children’s art.

Mathias is a potentially abstract artist. His ‘ Masks’ has the lucidity of this genre, and his ‘ Black Fish’ with its purity of image embellished by an unsophisticated slice of the alphabet could easily have graced a Picasso plate.

Sukoro in his vision of lizards provides a meticulously decorative effect, while Kupialdo is again a child artist in disguise.
In Hape's two lithographs we see the flourish of a born designer and it is easy to see their relationship with some of the traditional designs of tribal art in the Papuan Gulf.

It was Georgina Beier who discovered these prodigies and groomed them. Her introduction to the artists is most enlightening, and this confrontation with the freshness of an unfamiliar vision surely makes for a good change of our urban viewpoint.

*The Times of India*, 13 August, 1969
The Nigerian, Chinua Achebe, has told a fascinating story about a local lunatic in his native village of Ogidi who entered a classroom one day, took the chalk out of the perplexed teacher’s hand and proceeded to give a lesson on the geography of Ogidi. The supreme irony of the situation was that the only geography normally taught in the school was the geography of Britain! It goes without saying that the only literature taught in colonial schools was the literature of Britain. And it probably needed a lunatic like myself to try and make the students interested in the literature of their own country.

When I came to Papua New Guinea, no significant written literature had been produced in the country, so the logical thing to do was to first of all interest the students in their oral traditions. In the 1960s, all high schools in Papua New Guinea finished at class four; that is, two years before school certificate. The university was forced, therefore, to introduce a so-called Preliminary Year, in which students were taught enough English language skills to enable them to follow a university course.

Those who opted to study literature in the university were equipped with a tape recorder and, during their six weeks Christmas holidays between Prelim and First Year university, they had to record and translate some oral literature in their village: a love song, a magic formula, a ballad, a myth or whatever they wished. Before examining these texts in class, I went through them with each student individually to try and analyse the kind of poetic devices that were being used in that particular language. This was not an easy process, but occasionally we stumbled on real gems. I remember for example a student, Moika Helai, who had brought a translation of a Motuan myth. I compared his
English phrase ‘and dawn broke’ with the original text and said to him: ‘You have used three English words to translate a whole Motuan sentence. What is the literal meaning of the original?’ He said: ‘And light swam into the darkness.’

For the students, the examination of these texts became a voyage of discovery into their own cultures. At the same time they were given a chance to compare oral traditions of Papua New Guinea with those from other parts of the Pacific, from Australia, Indonesia, and even from Africa. To encourage the students’ interest in poetry I began to publish a series of little booklets, 18 × 12 centimetres, cheaply produced, but with bright covers designed by Georgina. They were called the Papua Pocket Poets (PPPs) and sold for 50 cents each. Since I had no subsidy for this, I could only print about 60 copies at a time, and when they were sold out we had a ‘second edition’. I could not quite recover my costs, but it was well worth the effort: students bought each other’s booklets and discussed them and eventually they were stimulated not just to collect oral literature, but to write their own poetry. It was a great encouragement for them to see themselves in print! Several interesting collections of oral poetry were made by the students like Dragon Tree, incantations from the Solomon Islands by John Saunana; Wiliwil, Pidgin songs by Leo Hannet; and Nansei, Pidgin songs by Kumalau Tawali.

One of the most remarkable publications was Apisai Enos’ Warbat, a collection of Tolai love charms. In the Gazelle Peninsula young boys join a secret society where magicians teach them to make love charms. The midal, a tanget leaf painted in different colours, is hung up over the fire at night, where wind and smoke make it twist and turn. The boys sing the warbat songs, which make the girls restless in their sleep until, eventually, they get up and meet the boys to make love to them. This is a selection from the PPP volume Warbat:

Your jasmin blossom faded
your flute blows tenderly
into your heart
you riggle and you dream
get up and follow me!

And make my snake
melting hearts with tooth magic

1. I arrived in Port Moresby with the first four volumes which I had prepared in London: Taaroa — poems from the Pacific; Pantun — Malay folk poetry; Ijala — animal songs by Yoruba hunters; Python — Igbo poetry.
you are falling in love with me
inggling centipede
riggling your heart

Up there in the Giao tree
the midal hangs
in a spider's web
during tomorrow's singsing
you'll watch me to the end
while I dance with my jasmin blossom
tonight the charm is hot

Eeeeeeeeh! You are captured
and there you stand
and sit in the whirlpool
your chin on your knees
you dream about someone
sleeping on your stomach
your heart burns like fire
hurry, delay not

Let us have a tree leaf
iai!
You stick it in your hair
wear me round your neck
then I'll come to pull you along

We'll plunder the flower garden
in the evening breeze
your heart is sweet and soft
open to the breeze of tenderness
Tonight!

Get up, come to us
we'll sit and sing
the beautiful songs tonight

Melodious the music of flutes
in the bush
the flowers of the trees
and the birds of the air
all sing warhat songs
tonight
eoa!
The first volume of original poetry was Kumalau Tawali’s Signs in the Sky. Years later, many of his poems have lost none of their freshness and beauty. This invocation of the tuna could only have been written by a New Guinean:

Tuna you are a mirror of the blue
Tuna you are the pain in my veins
Tuna you are lord.

When I set out to catch you
I am a prisoner of taboos.
‘Don’t dangle your legs over the side of the canoe.’
‘Don’t whistle for merriment.’
‘Is your thought straight?’
‘Is your wife having her first pregnancy?’
‘Are you newly married?’
All this awkwardness my duty.

But on the market you are the sun.
You darken the eye of the inland man
when he offers plenty in exchange
without bargain — just to get you.
You are worth the pain in my veins.
In ‘Mourning Song’, Kumalau Tawali evokes a really startling image:

I sat and listened to him
mourning his mother.
The song’s rhythm
almost possessed my tears.

There were peaks and valleys
each peak a painful memory
each valley a receding image
of his mother.

I realised the thousand things
that must have rivered through his mind.
I saw his mother, looking at me now,
his mother cooking food, his mother
talking now in her soft voice …

And suddenly I understood:
a fantastic process was taking place,
a miraculous communication.
A spectacular re-enactment
took place on the vast stage in his head
and my mind was the audience.

Another remarkable volume of original poetry by Enos was *High Water*. Neither the romantic mood nor the tenderness of these poems owe anything to a study of Western literature. The roots of these sentiments can obviously be found in the *warbat* love magic that Enos learned in his youth. It was the very fact that he began to see the *warbat* songs as ‘poetry’ rather than simply classifying them as ‘magic’ that gave him the confidence and the stimulus to write poetry himself.

**MOON**

Nothing is tender and soft
like a handful of glistening grass
cuddling my back with gentle fairy fingers.
The mountains, packed onto each other,
sit with mighty bottoms and golden heads
puffing blue clouds from bamboo pipes;
they cast dark shadows
on the sloping kunai grass.
The Fly River flows to the sea
not chattering like starlings do around their nest
nor giggling quietly like midnight lovers
but silently, like a bracelet of silver
it seems to encircle the earth.

The scent of frangipani
is heavy under the coconut palms
and bats play their love games
against the moon.

Steal away then, steal away at night,
to the dance of fireflies.
Fly away
let me love you
with moonlight touch.

Another gifted poet was Bede Dus Mapun, a Southern Highlander. One might think that in the mid twentieth century it would be impossible to write a poem about a sunset without using worn out clichés, but Bede produced some startling images:

She came across the shimmering sea
like a virgin to meet her groom.
The mighty ocean, shrouded in his glory,
was shivering like a dying cockatoo
with an arrow in his heart.
As she sank below the horizon
her last golden rays trailed like a train
across the blue sky.
The swaying palms against the white sand
were bending lower with the southern breeze,
casting their long hair this way and that
like 'playboy' models
displaying their nude bodies
before the indifferent eye
of the cameraman.

It is interesting to note that the political sentiments, the themes of race and prejudice, colonialism and paternalism, which dominated the plays by young New Guineans, are virtually absent from their poetry. The poets were much more concerned with their precarious position between two cultures, with the difficulties they had in relation
to their fathers and mothers when they went home to the village. It is a painful theme, because their affection is truly with the traditional life and yet they feel excluded from it. Kama Kerpi, another Highland poet, exploits this theme in the PPP volume *Call of the Midnight Bird*:

> We sat around the fire.
> Doors barred to shield off
> the cold mountain winds.
> The flicker of firelight
> leaping before our eyes.

> And then under the cover of darkness
> the old woman began
> stories of long ago,
> of her favourite, simple joys.
> And there we followed her on an unused trek
> passing through an old ruined kingdom.

> Filing over the horizon were the days
> of wars and hill-farming,
> where feasting and hunting
> became the simple joys of life,
> a life that remains a scar in her.

> Sorrow masked her wrinkled face.
> It was a nightmare,
> and only sleep awoke us from a
> strange journey.

The Papua Pocket Poets were given an unexpected boost by Max Harris, who used the cover of the PPP called *Love Poems of Papua New Guinea* as the cover of the *Australian Book Review* of June 1969 and who sold the PPP from his famous Mary Martin Bookshop in Adelaide.

Australian scholars, like Don Laycock and Catherine Ellis, contributed volumes on Buin songs from Bougainville and Aboriginal children's songs respectively. My Indian colleague, Prithvindra Chakravarthi contributed volumes of Indian poetry, and even school children began to send poems.

Within four years I produced 25 volumes of the PPP, the last one being John Kasaipwalova's long, angry political poem *Reluctant Flame*. It was a poem inspired by the *négritude* poets and by Frantz Fanon, but it was the kind of healthy, exuberant, explosive exposure of colonialism that Papua New Guinea surely needed at the time. After our return to
Nigeria, Prithvindra Chakravarthi continued to edit the PPP and brought the total number up to 36. But *Reluctant Flame* marked, in a sense, the end of a short era. Its sophisticated political awareness swept away the delicate innocence that for a few years could produce love poems like this song by James Numbary from Yuo Island:

Two white birds  
Fly fly together  
Sit sit together  
One fruit on a tree  
Steal steal together  
Eat eat together  
Swallow swallow together  
Take off take off together  
Fly away together  
Sit sit together
I never believed that creative writing was something one could teach in a university. There are no universal standards with which to assess creative writing. How could you grade Isabel Allende against Milan Kundera if they both attended your class? And, how can you advise a student on his writing unless you have a really close rapport with him? Unless you understand who he is and what he is trying to say? It would be easy enough to 'improve' a piece of writing by a student — make it flow better, slick it up maybe. But is that what that particular student needs? Do you know what he is really aiming at? Does he know himself at that stage? For how long do you let him experiment and play around trying to find himself before you can say anything? It is an awesome responsibility, because you might just ruin him forever. And finally: what is the point in a student getting a pass in creative writing? Surely this is something you either do very well or not at all. At what stage, then, do you give up on a student and kick him out of the class?

But, a peculiar set of circumstances finally coerced me into offering creative writing as a subject at the University of Papua New Guinea. The English Department's courses were organised in such a way that all language and literature courses were considered half-units so that, for every literature half-unit, my students had to also select a corresponding language half-unit. The argument behind this was that language and literature are complementary and that somebody who intends to become a linguist will become a better linguist for having studied some literature, and vice versa. It seemed logical enough, but some of my best students didn't think so. The problem was twofold. The language section had introduced a new way of looking at grammar, a system of 'sector analysis'. I must confess I never really found out what
it meant, but I was told this was the latest thing imported from America.
For some reason or other some of my students hated it; moreover, they
did not get on with the lecturer who taught the subject. I could not set
myself up as a judge to assess either the subject or the gentleman who
taught it; but my dilemma was that the students I was most interested in
came to me and said that, while they would love to carry on with
literature next semester, they simply couldn’t bear another six months
of ‘sector analysis’, so they had decided to drop English altogether.

I went to Frank Johnson, my professor, and asked him whether we
could not give a few selected students the chance of dropping language
and taking two half-units of literature instead. He sympathised with me,
but said that such a proposal would never pass through the faculty. The
only hope was to try and introduce creative writing as an alternative to
language. He was willing to present that proposal at the next faculty
meeting, but insisted that I attend because somebody might ask an
awkward question that he could not answer — then the whole idea
might be thrown out because we had not argued our case properly. Frank
Johnson knew my dislike for committees, and, being a very generous
boss, had said to me: you get on with your job, I’ll take care of all the
administrative hassles. But this was one occasion when I could not
avoid the faculty.

Awkward questions were indeed raised in the meeting — but,
looking back now, I cannot remember what they were. I do remember,
however, that the creative writing course was finally manoeuvred
through the faculty with the strong support of Ken Inglis, the Deputy
Vice Chancellor.

To avoid some of the absurdities implied in a university course in
creative writing I made the following arrangement: first year students
interested in taking creative writing could submit work to me any time
they liked. I would make time to discuss it with them individually, but
they would be given no credit for it. I would then invite a number of
students (not more than six or eight) to register for creative writing the
following year. If I rejected a student, it was not necessarily a
judgement on the student’s ability. I felt I could only do this type of
work with students with whom I had established a close relationship.
Occasionally, I might have to say to somebody: I do feel you have
talent but I cannot relate to the kind of thing you are trying to do; why
don’t you ask one of my colleagues if they can help you? There seemed
no point in working with a student if you felt you couldn’t get on the
right wavelength with him.
One of my first and most fascinating students was Vincent Eri. He was a mature student, 31 years old, who had been an education officer. He had twice visited Australia and had been to a conference in Teheran. In 1966, he was sent to Malaysia to represent Papua New Guinea at a writers conference. Remembering this episode in his life, he told me: ‘I said to myself, if I am supposed to go to a writers conference I better write something first.’ So he sat down and wrote a piece on village life in Moveave, which was intended to become the first chapter of a novel. Returning from Malaysia, he never got round to proceeding with it. His administrative duties took up all his time and he virtually forgot about the plan. In 1967 he was awarded a scholarship to the newly established University of PNG. He enrolled in literature and soon brought me his story. It was a rather sophisticated piece of writing. He had a very good command of English and was able to give the reader a good insight into life in his native village, Moveave in the Papuan Gulf. There was nothing sentimental about his account; no attempt to glorify the good old days, but a precise description often spiced with a slightly detached sense of humour.

I took to Vincent Eri at once and enjoyed working with him. I looked forward to his further instalments of his novel The Crocodile. He was not exactly hard-working, but each chapter, when it finally came, made extremely entertaining reading and we often spent long, open-ended sessions discussing his writing. By the time he was to take his degree in 1970, however, he had not written the final chapter of the novel and I had to twist his arm, threatening to withhold his degree if he didn’t complete it. Vincent Eri never wrote anything again in his life, but he went on to make a brilliant career as Ambassador of Papua New Guinea to Australia and eventually as Governor General of Papua New Guinea. Writing the novel, however, helped him to find himself and to acquire that urbane sense of humour and the easy self-assurance that made him a better ambassador and a better governor.

Not surprisingly, the first novel by a Papuan attracted a great deal of attention. Betty Collins, in the Sunday Australian (28 February, 1971), said that ‘Vincent Eri writes English with lyrical simplicity’ and that ‘his novel, The Crocodile, needs no paternal pat on the head. Lucid, sometimes beautiful, sometimes horrible, it tells with direct simplicity the life of Hoiri (pronounced Ho-eeri), a boy from a hill village, who grows up, marries and becomes a carrier for the Australians during the war against the Japanese.’

Harry Jackman, in The Australian (6 February, 1971), says: ‘It is a work of power, clarity and integrity.’ But many Australians felt upset
about what they considered to be the unfair ridiculing of Australian government officers and, in particular, officers of ANGAU (Australia New Guinea Administrative Unit). Maslyn Williams, writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (20 February, 1971), said that the pictures Vincent Eri drew of Australian administrative officers were 'cut out caricatures' and that if that was what he really believed, the suggestion that this book was a worthy contribution to New Guinea literature 'could be dismissed as ridiculous'. This highly sensitive reaction to a Papua New Guinean who dared to lampoon Australians was somewhat absurd in an Australian colony where many Australians still referred to New Guineans as 'boys', 'bush kanakas' or even 'rock apes'. After a century of being pictured as 'cut out caricatures', one could surely forgive Papua New Guineans for having a bit of fun at the expense of their oppressors. Harry Jackman, however, took a very different view. Having been an ANGAU officer himself and having lived among the people of the Papuan Gulf as a co-op officer, he said that he could vouch for the integrity of the book. And Betty Collins said in *The Australian*: 'For the rest of us, expatriates who live in New Guinea ... *The Crocodile* is a gentle but salutary lesson in understanding and loving another people.'
Few reviewers and commentators have pointed out, however, that Vincent Eri is not painting crude images of noble Papuans and evil whites, but that he applies the same sense of detached irony to his own people. His description of Hoiri’s first sexual encounter with a girl is hardly romantic; on the contrary, it is written tongue-in-cheek:

Mitoro felt uneasy as they walked past the last house and stepped over the fence. The moonlight had cast dark shadows here and there. Iviri made sure that no one was following them.

‘My brother is over there, in the shadow of these banana trees,’ she whispered to Mitoro. She produced a little parcel from under her arm. Reluctantly Mitoro accepted it. ‘I’ll wait for you under those bushes,’ Iviri said, and walked away.

With uncertain steps Mitoro walked towards the grove of banana trees. Hoiri dragged her by the arms and drew her into the shadows. Her skin was cold like that of a snake — a scaleless snake. The touch of her weakened the base of Hoiri’s tongue like poison. His throat suddenly ran dry. He encountered her fingers, then the nails, and then the joints, as if she was a different species. She moaned and her hand went limp.

‘What’s the matter? Did I hurt you?’ Hoiri whispered.

‘No, you just bent the finger that had a sago thorn lodged in it for the past week. I only pulled it out this afternoon.’ Her voice was calm and clear. She was speaking to the bananas. Hoiri reached out for her elbow and wheeled her round to face him. His arms felt their way gently down her smooth back to her loins and pulled her closer to him. There was warmth in her strong young breasts. The elastic of her Petticoat lifted easily and Hoiri’s hands surveyed the shape of her buttocks — two smooth round pots that fitted nicely in the palms of his hands.

A fruit bat swooped over their heads. Several pigs grunted in the bushes. They heard Iviri coughing a little distance away and Hoiri began to show his impatience.

‘Leave me,’ Mitoro said. ‘I didn’t promise you anything.’ She was looking at his teeth rather than his eyes. There was a sulky look on her face.
With one arm round her shoulders and the other around her thighs, Hoiri lifted her bodily and placed her on her back. His knees forced their way between hers and his hands lifted her petticoat over her chest. With a sigh of relief he entered her. Her fingers tightened round his back. Hoiri’s ears were blocked by his own breathing. Then all was still. Mitoro’s breast seemed the softest place Hoiri had ever lain on. He wanted to lie there forever, but Iviri coughed again. Hoiri rolled over. ‘You better hurry, or your mother will be looking for you,’ he said, wiping her back.

By now the cooking fires had been put out in most of the houses. Fewer boys and girls were left in the streets. Hoiri changed into a pair of nice white shorts he had brought back from Port Moresby. The smell of Johnson’s Baby Powder on his private parts drifted around and made the girls sniff several times as he passed. He and his cousin were the only ones who had the white man smell about them. The girls paid them compliments. Some offered themselves to be powdered.

The creative writing class attracted some of the brightest and certainly the most politically conscious students. They were not literati; they were not discussing style and form. They were disinterested in literary trends and fashions. They used literature as a tool. They were aware that they were the first generation of Papuans and New Guineans who could talk back at the white man. Ever since the Germans, the British and later the Australians had ruled the country, they were expected to take orders and obey them. They had never been credited with the intelligence to form an opinion of their own. They were considered uneducable by most early administrators and missionaries, and it needed a courageous man of strong convictions like the Rev. Charles Abel even to insist that Papuans could be trained as carpenters!

Now, there was a group of young men and women who sympathised with the aspirations of PANGU Pati, who were trying to define themselves as Papuans and New Guineans and who were anxious to interpret their own history and their own culture in their own terms, rather than have it interpreted — and often denigrated — for them by white people. Their motivation was not too dissimilar from that of the African négritude writers of the forties and fifties, but they were less romantic and more down to earth than their Francophone colleagues. They were all very idealistic — at least in those early days. John Waiko refrained from taking a lucrative job in Port Moresby after completing his MA degree in Canada and spent two years in his Binandere village.
instead, in order to persuade his people not to sell their forest. John Kasaipwalova broke off his studies at the university in order to form the Kabisawali movement in the Trobriand Islands.\textsuperscript{1} Arthur Jawodimbari went to Nigeria to study drama at the University of Ife, so he could develop professional theatre in Papua New Guinea. Rabbie Namaliu and Leo Hannet became vocal supporters of the independence movement.

With the exception of Russel Soaba none of them made a career as a writer, but all of them made distinguished careers in a great variety of fields: Leo Hannet became Premier of Bougainville, Rabbie Namaliu became Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Jacob Simet became the Chairman of the National Cultural Commission, John Waiko became the first indigenous professor at the University of Papua New Guinea, Arthur Jawodimbari became the Director of the National Theatre Company, John Kadiba became a lecturer in an Aboriginal college in Darwin. Kumalau Tawali got sidetracked into Moral-Rearmament, John Saunana became a Cabinet Minister in the Solomon Islands, Russel Soaba a lecturer in English at UPNG. Kaka Kais played a leading political role on Manus Island. Their venture into creative writing made all of them more aware of their culture; it helped them to acquire a strong sense of identity and a vision for the future of Papua New Guinea.

For the success of the creative writing class I feel greatly indebted to Frank Johnson. He was a wonderful head of department. He gave me a great deal of freedom and a great deal of responsibility. He believed in me when I felt uneasy about undertaking this task. When I left Papua New Guinea, I decided that if ever I was going to head a department or institute myself, I would treat my staff the way Frank Johnson had treated me.

The political and economic developments in Papua New Guinea, the sense of disillusionment and a general feeling of helplessness have crushed some of this enthusiasm and idealism in recent years. In Papua New Guinea now, life has often become an issue of mere survival and, as a result, a sober pragmatism has now replaced their earlier hopes.

The writers produced a wealth of poems, short stories, plays and autobiographical sketches. To keep the enthusiasm alive, I felt that I needed another outlet beyond the Papua Pocket Poets. I mentioned this to Frank Johnson and he suggested I should talk to Brian Clouston, the editor of Jacaranda Press. Clouston visited Papua New Guinea

\footnote{Kabisawali was a political/cultural movement that tried to replace the local government structure introduced by the Australian administration. John Kasaipwalova persuaded the people of the Kabisawali movement to plant surplus yam again so that they could revive the traditional feasts and dances. The young carver Valaosi created an innovative series of relief panels which illustrated the history of the movement.}
frequently because he published many of the school textbooks for the country, for example the primary school readers that Frank Johnson wrote and which were illustrated by Lois Johnson.

Clouston hardly lived up to one's cliché image of a 'publisher'. No classy 'refinement' there. No cultured literary talk. He was a rough and ready fellow with a heavy Queensland accent. Some people would have described him as crude. But, he certainly was a 'doer' and a lateral thinker and, the more I had to do with him, the better I liked the man. Later on we became real friends, but our first encounter was not promising. I told him I had a creative writing class and that I wanted to have a literary magazine. He looked at me with some disbelief and then said: 'A literary magazine in Papua New Guinea? You must be joking! I could never sell something like that in this country.' I didn't know how to answer that at the time, but I didn't give up. I felt sure I could get through to this man in the end.

Finally I went and put together a pilot issue of Kovave, complete with layout, cover design and vignettes by Georgina. The issue contained the first chapter of Vincent Eri's novel, an autobiographical sketch by John Kadiba, three folktales, a collection of students' poetry and Leo Hannet's play Em Rod Bilong Kago. I sent the manuscript to Brian Clouston and said: 'I am willing to pay the printing costs for this pilot issue. All I ask you to do for me is to channel it through your normal editing process and then make an attempt to market it in Australia. I will try to sell it in Port Moresby through the university bookshop.'

The response to Kovave in Australia was extremely positive — at times enthusiastic. Max Harris wrote in The Australian Book Review (June 1969):

With the publication of Kovave, indigenous literature in the English language in Papua New Guinea reaches a new evolutionary stage. Kovave is New Guinea's first literary magazine, and its purpose is to encourage young Papua New Guineans to communicate creatively to each other in a common, if foreign, language. It is framed as a workshop magazine, hence the title, which is the name of the first initiation ceremony in Orokolo in the Papuan Gulf. The Kovave festival of initiation does not convey full manhood status on the initiates, but they have gained one very important right; they are given their weapons and they are now entitled to go and fight.

...
While the work being done in Port Moresby is intrinsically important and the literary results have a refreshingly original flavour, the bibliographical significance of these projects has yet to be appreciated by international librarians and collectors. A long history lies ahead of New Guinea and the first journal of New Guinea literature in the history of the country will be a document of long-range historical value. Likewise one day when the category of emergent literatures will be recognised as a fundamental sub-classification, the 'Papua Pocket Poets' will be recognised as a pioneer experiment in the field.

With such enthusiastic backing from Max Harris and many other Australian writers, Brian Clouston readily took on the responsibility of publishing Kovave. And the libraries, alerted by Max Harris, soon took note. The New York Library Journal drew attention to the magazine in their August issue of 1970:


The prolific Ulli Beier, formerly at the University of Ibadan and recently appointed Senior Lecturer in the University of Papua and New Guinea, years ago founded Odu, a 'Journal of Yoruba studies', and Black Orpheus, perhaps the earliest and surely most influential vehicle for English-language African literature. Now, from his new base in the South Seas, comes another pioneering venture: an artful word-and-picture organ for New Guineans that can only be described as both imaginative and invigorating. Should this seem undue praise for a maiden issue, simply consider that it encompasses, in part, a selection of satirical Buin songs (for example, 'o my hornbill husband, you have a bad smell,/and when Kaaeko comes and smells you/he will take you to Panirai, and your spirit will enter a pig./He'll make you like a curtly-tailed pig,/and at dawn you will cry for food./You will sing out for yams/the food of the living'); a zesty, unmanicured autobiographical fragment, 'My Head is as Black as the Soil of Our Country', by Peter Lus, who presently sits in the Territorial House of Assembly; three pungent (if not raucous) folktales from Manus; inventive drawings by two 'Highland artists', Akis and Kauwagi (plus an appreciative essay by Beier); a spread of sensitive, spirited verse by high-schoolers and collegians (one of whom sings ruefully 'of the burden/of school rules and regulations/of lining up, confinement and
insipid food/and the harsh clanging of ringing bells/calling me to
more dull work like/cleaning up the old fashioned library'); insightful
reminiscences of a childhood among the fish-catchings, betel nut-
chewing, taro-eating, magic-making Manus (when still not quite
Christian); a sombre, gripping one-acter, 'The Unexpected Hawk', by
John Waiko, a university student; and a robust short story, 'Tax',
napped by John Kadiba, one of Waiko's colleagues at U.P.N.G., which
— like the play — comments wryly and tellingly on the portentous
encounter between Europe and the Islands.

Kovave, appearing twice a year, produced ten issues, including one
special issue on Papua New Guinea art. Some issues appeared after my
departure under the capable editorship of Apisai Enos. Jacaranda Press
also started a Pacific Writers series, of which I edited the first four
volumes: Vincent Eri's The Crocodile and three anthologies: Five New
Guinea Plays, Niugini Lives, and The Night Warrior and Other Stories.

Kovave was eventually succeeded by several other magazines like
New Guinea Writing, Bikmaus and Ondobondo.
Theatrical forms could be found in all cultures of Papua New Guinea: masks, pageants, ritual processions and even organised dance dramas were an integral part of religious and social life. In Orokolo, for example, the men sat on the platform of the men’s house reciting a myth, while the women would act out the story on the ground. The Orokaiva in Northern Papua acted out little sketches: a cuscus hunt or a story about a group of young men who discover a beautiful girl in a tree and then quarrel over who is going to possess her. The use of animal masks was common in such performances, and they were usually livened up by a clown who, in recent times, would dress up in European clothes and a pair of goggles made out of coconut shells. In many communities, the appearance of the ancestral masks in the village ended with a dramatic performance in which the ancestors were sent back to the land of the dead: the masks were either shot with bow and arrow or burned.

Conversion to Christianity gave rise to plays re-enacting the arrival of the missionaries. Usually the evangelists were met by aggressive groups of warriors, but they managed to diffuse the danger with the help of some simple trick like the lighting of a cigarette, which convinced the fierce warriors of the ‘superiority’ of the foreign culture.
Some of these plays dramatised the killing of the Reverend Chalmers. I witnessed one such performance, in which Chalmers was preaching pompously with outstretched arm and pointed finger at a group of screaming warriors. While his faithful band of native catechists were being murdered one by one around him, he went on unperturbed with aloof ‘dignity’ until it was his turn to be killed.

Theatre, in the strictly Western sense, was introduced by amateur groups of expatriates, who did not, however, interact with the local population. The first ever performance with a mixed cast was directed by Peter Trist, who was then a clerk with the territory administration. *HMS Pinafore* by Gilbert and Sullivan featured such gifted Papua New Guinean actors as Cecily Kekedo and John Bili Tokome. But the experiment caused a rumpus within the Port Moresby Theatre Group: four members resigned in protest because they were not prepared to share their dressing rooms with Papuans.

In 1966 John Gunther invited Peter Trist to join the university staff. Officially he was appointed as the travel officer, but Gunther, who was a good judge of people, probably guessed or hoped that Peter would involve himself in student theatre. And indeed, Peter Trist went on to become the key figure of the University Drama Society.

Within days of our arrival in Port Moresby, Frank Johnson called a meeting to found the University Drama Society. He wanted to nominate me as chairman of the society, but I felt that as a total newcomer I had rather take a back seat. If I remember correctly, the committee consisted of Frank Johnson (chairman), Prof. Clunies Ross, Leo Hannet and Arthur Jawodimbari as student representatives, myself and, of course, Peter Trist, whose initiative lay behind the formation of the society.

The first public performance of the University Drama Society was staged in April 1968. It was a very strange and at the same time exciting event. My review in the *South Pacific Courier* of May 1st was somewhat aggressive in parts, but it certainly helped to stimulate a lively discussion amongst the members of the Drama Society and amongst the students of literature and creative writing.

**STRANGE CHOICES**

The Drama Society of the University of Papua New Guinea made its debut on Friday with probably the most incongruous collection of plays ever presented on one night. They were the first act of Bernard Shaw's 'St. Joan', Euripides' 'Alcestis' and a sketch in Pidgin by Leo Hannet.
‘St. Joan’ wasn’t such an odd choice as one first thought. Joan trying to explain her nationalistic ideas to the feudalistic Robert de Baudricourt sounded uncannily topical and some of her patriotic punch lines could have been lifted straight out of the PANGU Pati manifesto.

Peter Trist’s direction kept the play moving and the student cast surprised us with good diction. Jerry Tamate created a really forceful and soldierly Baudricourt and Kathy Abel played Joan with great charm. She was perhaps a little too sexy for the part, but you can’t really quarrel with that. The mixture of slapstick humour and subtle irony came across well and the audience responded superbly: they were with it all the time.

‘Alcestis’ was a much more ambitious, but also a much more unhappy choice. I suppose Euripides is a respectable name, the sort of fellow one ought to play at universities. But what a bad play it is, nevertheless! An absurd, melodramatic plot, melodramatic sentiments interspersed with the trite wisdom of the chorus. I very much doubt whether even a brilliant cast could get away with this dated play.

As it was, the direction rather underlined the artificial character of the play. We were spared nothing: the noble stride, the throbbing voice, the wringing of hands, the clenching of fists, the pointing of fingers. The audience was duly confused: Mr Clunies Ross, who played the king’s cantankerous old father with truly vitriolic vigour was greeted with roars of incongruous laughter. But even in this performance the diction was extremely good. Amongst so much wordy reciting and proclaiming, not a line was lost. Special praise is due to Ekeroma Age, who came across as a subtle and intelligent actor, in spite of the impossible part of King Admetus he had to perform.

The evening was brought to an uproaring close with a sketch, ‘Em rod bilong kago’, written by Leo Hannet, a student at the university. The sketch is very brief, has next to no plot and an introductory monologue in English that does not fit the mood of the play. In spite of this, ‘Em rod bilong kago’ has considerable merit: the dialogue is extremely witty and it is surprising how Leo Hannet succeeds in creating characters with so few lines.

Superficially this sketch comes across as a hilarious farce, but there is an underlying note of sadness and also tenderness. Underneath the
bickering of Ramram and his wife Tande we sense some real affection, and the friendship between the two old men, Ramram and Caligula, and their feeling of impotence vis-à-vis the younger generation are truly touching. The cast, headed by the author himself, were all excellent and the riotous response of the audience left one in no doubt at all that there is a tremendous future for Pidgin theatre in this country.

Altogether an evening full of promise. We are indebted above all to Peter Trist, whose initiative created the Drama Society of the University of Papua and New Guinea.

There is of course no reason why a Greek myth cannot be reinterpreted by a group of students in Papua New Guinea. But, playing it straight and imposing on some rather outdated theatrical conventions simply did not work. Both actors and audience felt ill at ease. Two decades later William Takaku made a brilliant adaptation of Medea in Pidgin!

In an interview, given to Bernard Minol in the university magazine Ondobondo 20 years after the event, Peter Trist's assessment of the evening is not too dissimilar to mine, though his language is rather gentle:

... the first programme we presented consisted of quite a strange mixture of plays. One was a one act play, a version of a Greek myth, the second was a scene from Bernard Shaw's 'Saint Joan of Arc'. The audience sat through both of these with a deal of interest, but somewhat uncomfortable through the strangeness of the language and the situations that were presented. Finally the third play of the evening brought the audience to a great deal of excitement and understanding. This play was the first Pidgin play to be presented in Port Moresby, to an audience of expatriates, Papua New Guineans from all over the country and people from other parts of the Pacific. This was Leo Hannet's 'Rod bilong kago', which was directed by Leo himself and Leo was also in the cast. The effect of the play on the audience was absolutely amazing. There was tremendous excitement and life in the audience at witnessing this rather simple play of Leo's ...

Pidgin was to become, eventually, a major vehicle for student theatre, because it gave the authors access to a large audience of labourers in Port Moresby, who had little or no English. As they became more politically conscious, they wanted to share ideas with or even
influence all levels of society. Plays like Rabbie Namaliu's *The Good Woman of Konedobu* did in fact become very popular with the labourers of the university and nearby Administrative College. Another very popular play by Rabbie Namaliu was *Cannibal Tours*, which lampooned European tourists who came to Papua New Guinea, to stare at the exotic, primitive natives. The play was later turned into a brilliant film by Denis O'Rourke.

Peter Trist's next production, however, was a Ghanaian play, *Dilemma of a Ghost* by Ama Ata Aidoo, which had fascinated students in the literature course. Her play analyses the problems of a young Ghanaian university graduate who returns home to his village with a sophisticated black American wife. Peter Trist, who produced the play, saw it as an interesting variation on the common Papua New Guinean dilemma when someone coming out of a village situation has to fit into a modern city like Port Moresby. Here the couple that had adopted Western values found it hard to come to terms with the villagers' world view.

Another play that was popular in the literature class and was, therefore, suggested for production by Peter Trist was Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule*. It is an early, rather didactic play, which I had translated specially for use in class. It is about a merchant who travels through the desert with a carrier. He is trying to get a concession for an oil exploration. Because he wants to beat his competitors, he brutally drives his carrier to exhaustion. They get lost in the desert and soon exhaust their water supply. The carrier discovers another water bottle and in spite of the bad treatment he received, he wants to share it with his master. The paranoid merchant is startled, thinks the carrier wants to kill him and shoots him dead. In a subsequent court case the merchant is acquitted: the judge maintains that the oppressive merchant had no reason to expect kindness from his employee — therefore he acted in self-defence. It was reasonable for him to go by the rule, he could not assume that this particular carrier would be an exception.

Peter Trist gave the play an appropriately stark production: an almost bare stage and scene changes indicated by slide projections designed by Georgina. Brilliant acting by Kumalau Tawali as the carrier and Kane Savage as the judge made it a memorable performance.

What attracted the students was the unadorned but powerful language, the boldness of the message, clear-cut issues and the direct way in which the audience was addressed and involved. The final chorus, they felt, could have been written for them:
So ends the story of a journey.
You have heard and you have seen
what is normal, what happens daily.
But we ask you:
That which is usual, find it strange,
what is ordinary, find it inexplicable,
what is commonplace, let it surprise you.

That which is the rule recognise as abuse.
And when you have discovered abuse,
fight to change it.

The students soon discovered that drama was an ideal vehicle for protest, for querying the legitimacy of the colonial establishment, for asserting their own values. I tried to persuade them that theatre offered many other options as well, that it could help them to rediscover and redefine their culture.

I actually wrote two plays based on Papuan myths, which the students had collected for our literature class. They Never Return and Alive were actually published under the name of M. Lovori (a transparent disguise for those who had read Kiki’s Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime), and they were performed by the Prompt Theatre in Canberra. But the only play that was directly inspired by them was Arthur Jawodimbari’s The Sun, a strong play that became one of the major events of the first Papua New Guinea Arts Festival.

But, it was the political urgency and their need for self-assertion that motivated the students. And, as they began to produce their own plays, under the discreet guidance of Peter Trist, they proceeded to query the arrogance and paternalism of white society and to enjoy the luxury of lampooning their white ‘masters’ — though in a much more gentle way than the Australian colonialists had been ridiculing them for the last century or so. White audiences reacted with mixed feelings. Many with great sympathy, others slightly piqued, others again outraged. After the first performance of Kumalau Tawali’s performance of his play Manki Masta, which looks at a colonial family from the houseboy’s point of view, Lady Cleland, the wife of the Australian Administrator in Papua New Guinea, Sir Donald Cleland, went up to him, shook his hand and said charmingly: ‘But we are not all like that, you know!’

A decade later, Ken Inglis remembers his own sense of uneasiness about the plays in his essay ‘Education on the frontier’, which appeared in the Melbourne Studies of Education (Melbourne University Press, 1980):
Europeans in the territory, as those who have been there are — or should be — willing to admit. It is a salutary lesson to see ourselves as others see us.

The play that possibly caused the greatest upset among some Australians was Leo Hannet's *The Ungrateful Daughter*. Ebonita, a New Guinea girl, has been adopted by an Australian family, who are proud to have educated her to become a well-spoken, well-mannered girl, sophisticated enough to become the wife of a young Australian. Though she has reservations about marrying a man she doesn't love, she is coerced to go through with the wedding because it is ‘for her own good’. In the last minute, however, she tears off her veil and shouts: ‘I want to be free!’

The very short sketch manages to raise many sore points: the patronising attitudes of well-meaning whites, the undesirability of assimilation to white values, the exploitative and destructive nature of the Bougainville copper mine and the refusal of the colonial administration to grant independence. Most upsetting, though never discussed by anybody publicly, may have been the fact that Leo Hannet introduced into his play a Bougainville resistance movement and that he quotes — however obliquely — the radical rhetoric of Stokely Carmichael. It was about this time that in circles that had routinely referred to the ‘Boys University’ we were now being referred to as the ‘Mau Mau Factory’.

By now the Drama Society had a perfect venue for its plays: an amphitheatre that John Gunther had kindly agreed to build, though on condition that the Drama Society would make a financial contribution. To raise money for the theatre the indefatigable Peter Trist turned his small bachelor’s bungalow into a mini theatre and produced such plays as Ionesco’s *The Bald Primadonna* and Tennessee Williams’ *Suddenly Last Summer*.

The young PNG dramatists received a new boost when Al Butavicius of the Prompt Theatre in Canberra became interested in their plays. After a first production, which included John Waiko’s *The Unexpected Hawk* as well as *They Never Return* and *Alive*, the Prompt Theatre proceeded to produce the politically ‘hot’ plays: *Manki Masta*, *How Missionaries Inspired Cargo Cult* by Arthur Jawodimbari, and Hannet’s *Ungrateful Daughter*.

The press reaction was mixed. Sue Nicholls in the *Canberra Times* (21 April, 1970) headed her article ‘Opportunity wasted’ and was clearly upset and angered about the portrayal of whites and wrote off the whole evening as banal. Peter Fuller heads his report in the *Canberra*
News (21 April, 1970) more appropriately ‘The future is their concern’. A certain Ric Throsell, replying to Sue Nicholls in a letter to the Canberra Times (4 May, 1970) says: ‘If the playwrights discard convention in search for appropriate forms, that is to be encouraged … This was no lost opportunity. The important thing is that the plays were written, more important that they were performed. And there is no doubting the depth of the pain and the bitterness of their contempt and hate. This is the very essence of drama, and it has a message for Australia.’

If the plays were crude, then the response of the Department of Territories was even cruder: they tried to counteract the message of the plays by littering the Canberra playhouse with pamphlets, telling the audience what wonderful work they had done in Papua New Guinea. The dilemma of the Department of Territories was amusingly reported by Mungo MacCullum in The Australian (23 April, 1970):

Whites are not people, said the old New Guinean on stage at the Canberra Theatre, and most of the predominantly white audience giggles sympathetically. So did the conservative Territory politicians, present as VIP guests. And after the play, drinking white wine and vermouth backstage, we hear officials of the Department of Territories trying to work their way out of the dilemma of praising the New Guinean playwrights for their literary merits whilst at the same time insisting that their attitudes are mildly exaggerated and untypical.

Eric Walsh, reviewing the plays in The Nation (2 May, 1970), remarks that after the performance the territory officials were

... busy explaining that the intense feelings demonstrated against Europeans, in Leo Hannet’s play particularly, do not in fact exist.

The fact that three plays, with roughly similar themes, had been written by New Guineans answers Territories. An even better answer was given in a discussion of whether the overbearing role of the European had been fairly portrayed. The reviewer heard one (New Guinean) politician warning a colleague over drinks after the show: ‘Don’t drink here. You’ll get drunk and some of the whites will beat you up.’ Now where would he get that idea from?

Some of the most astute observations were made by John Small in The Bulletin (2 May, 1970):
PAINTING THE WHITES BLACK

The Department of External Territories made a couple of publicity leaflets available to audiences at 'New Guinea Black and White', a group of three plays given their premiere in Canberra last week. Waiting for the performance to start, one could read about Australia's achievements in the territory — the vast amounts of money spent, the expanding economy, the spread of education, the approach of self-government — and feel fine.

From the black man's standpoint, things look very different, as became clear when the lights went down.

In all three plays the white man appears as exploiter and oppressor, as missionary, boss, administrator or capitalist, treating the blacks with more or less explicit contempt and in return inspiring fear, bewilderment and hatred. His family life is based on deceit and bullying, his pleasures are merely gross and foolish, his religion is cant, his professed good intentions, if any, are hypocrisy or self-deception. Lazy, greedy, cruel and callous, the white man appears almost as an embodiment of evil, the 'Devil White Man' of the black Muslims.

Caricature? Maybe. But after the play one black New Guinean said that he could easily name 20 whites who behaved like the characters on stage. Another less sophisticated black was heard to warn a friend that the whites would beat him up if he had a drink, and a white New Guinean said that the plays could not possibly have been written by natives — the authors must have been rabble-rousing whites. Small incidents, but enough to show that the bitter attitudes of these plays spring from real injustice.

In the 1970s, theatre in Papua New Guinea became more ambitious: professional theatre companies were created at the National Art School, and in Goroka (Raun Raun Theatre) new playwrights emerged like Albert Toro and William Takaku and Nora Vagi Brash. But the amateur student theatre of the late 1960s will be remembered for its enthusiasm, its vigour and above all for its optimism and faith. They may not have been great dramatists whose works will last eternally, but they were inspiring because, in the words of Peter Fuller, the future was their concern.
Our first meeting with Akis is unforgettable. He was extremely small, just under five feet, but sparkling with humour and energy. His bright eyes were darting about like a bird's and he radiated enormous confidence, which was the more surprising since this was his very first visit to Port Moresby. He came from the little village of Tsembaga in the Simbai valley, which has been described in Roy Rappaport's *Pigs For The Ancestors*. When Akis came to Port Moresby early in January 1969, the 200 people living in Tsembaga had experienced little social change. They were subsistence farmers, and the highlight of their lives was the big pig exchange feasts described by Rappaport. They had no knowledge of the outside world until a bomb was dropped near their village towards the end of the World War II. It was not until 1956 that they encountered their first white man. During the next two years, Australian administration patrols ‘made contact’ with the villagers of the area, and only in 1962 was the region finally opened to traders and missionaries.

Akis was in his late teens when he first met Europeans. Being intelligent and enterprising he worked for Anne Rappaport, Roy's linguist wife, between 1962 and 1963. When the Rappaports left, he showed his spirit for adventure again by becoming the first Tsembaga man to sign up as an indented plantation labourer. On the copra plantation in Madang he became the first fluent Pidgin speaker in his
Akis at his first exhibition at the University of PNG. Behind him are (left) Ralph Bulmer, Professor of Anthropology and (right) John Gunther, Vice Chancellor.

village. When another American anthropologist, Georgeda Buchbinder, began work in the neighbouring village of Modi in 1967, she soon employed Akis as her interpreter and assistant.

Trying to teach her in his Maring language, Akis began to make little drawings of plants and animals, for which there was no Pidgin word. They were scribbles rather than drawings, but Georgeda was nevertheless intrigued by them. In January 1969 Georgeda Buchbinder came down to Port Moresby to work in the university library for a few weeks. She brought Akis along, partly because she wanted to give him the opportunity to see the capital city for the first time, and partly because she wanted to introduce him to Georgina, who she hoped might help him to develop his art. But the work Akis brought with him did not look very promising. Prof. Ralph Bulmer, remembering Akis 20 years later, wrote to me about these early attempts:

I have three pages of these early sketches before me as I write — crude drawings on a cheap scribbling pad, using green and black felt-tip and a red ball-point pen. On these sheets are various plants —
The pioneer of contemporary PNG art

some recognisable bananas — , a stone-bladed axe, a connected sequence of multi-coloured lozenge — shapes intended, I suspect, to represent a snake, or perhaps a rainbow; and four human or human-like figures. Even these last, two of which show some continuity of style with drawings in his first exhibition, could easily be dismissed as the scribblings that a thousand village school children might produce. Yet — like Highlands children’s earliest drawings also often are — they were intriguing. When, a few days later, they were shown to Georgina Beier, that marvellously skilful and sensitive mentor of indigenous artists in both West Africa and Papua New Guinea, she was sufficiently impressed to provide Akis with large sheets of cartridge paper and encourage him to extend himself. Over the next month or so she also taught him to do batik. His success with this medium was instantaneous. By the time he held his exhibition, Georgeda Buchbinder was wearing a dress adorned with huge-foot cassowaries and human figures. Over the next few months kaftans, dresses, lavalavas and shirts, in batik or screen-printed with Akis’ designs, became the height of fashion among expatriate staff on the University campus.1

In remembering the beginning of her working relationship with Akis, Georgina wrote:

The sketches he had made for Georgeda Buchbinder were quite rough. There was little in the drawings themselves to suggest that Akis might become an artist: it was the man’s personality that made me believe in his artistic potential. As he was to stay in Port Moresby for only six weeks, there seemed little point in trying to work with him at that time. However, my curiosity in the man and the images he might possibly develop was so great that the day after I met Akis I bought materials for him to work with. He worked for long hours every day. He differed from other Niuginian artists in that he found it almost impossible to work with other people present. He preferred solitude.

Akis soon evolved his own style. He was never sidetracked by European influences or pedantic ideas of realism. Akis depicted the world he knew intimately — the animals that inhabited the Simbai valley: the cassowaries, bandicoots, lizards, sugar gliders and snakes. People occurred less often in his drawings, and they were indistinguishable from his representations of spirits.

Communication through Pidgin was not always easy. But when his drawings tended to become unbalanced or flat, or when the composition was dull, he had to be made aware of this. All one’s technical terms about art had to be rethought and rephrased. Languages are like people; each one has a different personality and each one requires a different approach. It is a great advantage of Pidgin that it has not yet developed a technical jargon on art, and the kind of slick but meaningless phraseology found in our Sunday papers. Art criticism is fortunately impossible to translate into Pidgin. Pidgin is too honest.

The very activity of trying to discuss artistic problems in Pidgin brings one much closer to one’s student and his aims. I tried to communicate to Akis that one of his drawings was dull and rigid, that there was no relationship between the different figures on the page. This is what it sounded like in Pidgin: ‘Nek bilong muruk em i tait tru, nai ai bilong en emi
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Akis replied: ‘Sikin na gras blong ol i no guria.’

Translated into English this conversation would become: ‘The cassowary’s neck is stiff and his eyes are blank like glass eyes. His legs are like sticks. I think the cassowary, the snake and the wallaby appear to be dead. They are not singing or walking about. The three of them are aimless. In your good drawings all the creatures are lively as if tipsy on beer and they all sing and dance together.’ Akis remarked on his dull drawing: ‘Their skin and their feathers fail to vibrate like an earthquake.’

He was now aware of the vitality of one drawing and the rigidity of another, and this helped him to develop more and more self-criticism.

Akis creates many variants of his ideas by relying on the use of pattern and texture. In his drawing of six spirits, the bodies, heads and legs of the figures are basically the same. But his love of detail and his marvellous inventive imagination create infinite variety within the basic shapes: wigged spirits and bearded spirits; hairy bodies and X-ray skeleton bodies. Akis has made dozens of cassowaries and each one is different. Some are black and furry-feathered; others are striped. Some grow an extra head or an extra pair of legs. Although his basic subject matter never changes, he is never repetitive.

Akis begins his drawings in a rather strange way. He first draws economic outlines, then creates form in the bodies with a network of guidelines. He does not necessarily follow these lines as he proceeds. Sometimes the lines serve as a division for different patterns; sometimes they get completely covered with hairy texture. These lines tend to give his work a slightly three-dimensional appearance.

Akis’ drawings are not illustrations of the mythology or oral tradition of his people. European visitors continually ask him for the precise story behind the pictures and often will not accept the fact that there is none. ‘Primitive’ art in their minds must be narrative or illustrative. They could not imagine that Akis could invent a cassowary with two heads spontaneously and insisted on being told the legend of the two-headed cassowary. Akis often got exasperated by their insistence and at times made up stories to satisfy them. Nevertheless his drawings do convey the
life of a people who make no prosaic division between the natural and supernatural. They illustrate the bond between the human spirit and the animal world.

Although the cultural art forms of the Maring people are very limited, Akis is able to draw on traditional visual ideas. Here and there he seems to make use of traditional shield designs, and the ways in which he breaks up the human faces are derived from ceremonial face painting at home. Together with body decoration and costume, these are the main forces of his creative expression.

Towards the end of his first six weeks in Port Moresby, Akis' drawings became more and more imaginative and less reliant on the characteristics of animals. His work was now more reminiscent of a seventeenth century traveller's engravings of exotic tropical animals, except that Akis' concept of shape was cleaner and his line more sensitive. Those weeks were like a dreamtime. His transition was smooth and unrelenting. His single-mindedness and sense of direction never wavered. His work became more and more refined.

Akis' drawings were the first unique example of what the dormant imagination of the people of Papua New Guinea could create in a non-traditional context. Watching Akis was like unearthing a complete culture — almost like excavating, peeling off layers of time, to reveal an unknown culture that is perfectly intact.

2 We were all so excited about the drawings that we decided to exhibit them in the university library. There can hardly be a modern artist who exhibited his pictures after only six weeks' work. But this was a historic occasion. A New Guinean had — to a point — stepped out of his own culture; he had made drawings that were of no particular relevance to the people in his own village, even though they expressed his feelings about the village and about the forest that surrounded it, and the animals and birds and spirits that inhabited it. It was a very personal statement; the drawings spoke of Akis himself and did not fulfil any ritual or even decorative function in his own community. They appealed more to the white man, whose world he had been first to penetrate from his village. We could not, at that time, guess that he was going to make a profound impact on New Guineans as well, particularly on the Highlanders in Port Moresby.

2 Georgina Beier, ‘Akis’, in Modern Images From Niugini, Kovave Special Issue, Port Moresby, 1974.?
We were actually aware, though, of the danger that Akis was embarking on a career and a lifestyle that might isolate him from his own people. Therefore we made a big effort to invite the Highlander community, who lived on the fringes of the university as labourers, cleaners and gardeners, to Akis’ exhibition. In the university, Australian egalitarianism was strong enough even in a colonial situation to allow functions in which professors, students and labourers participated. Ralph Bulmer, who made the opening speech in Pidgin, remembers the occasion as follows:

The opening of the exhibition was itself a remarkable occasion. The university was just entering its fourth year, and the first stage of its building programme was nearly completed. The buildings were to be formally opened a week later: the Science and Union blocks, the new pyramidal high tech lecture theatre, and the university library, in which the exhibition was held. Both the progress of the university and the accelerating progress of Papua New Guinea towards independence made 1969 an exhilarating year.

Ulli Beier had seen Akis’ exhibition, the first of a long series that his Centre for New Guinea Culture was to sponsor, as an opportunity to make a most important statement about the university community and its relationships to the wider national community outside. Here was a chance, he felt, to bridge to some degree the gulf between the expatriate and the academic staff, and the students, both indigenous and expatriate, on the one hand, and the largely illiterate labour force, mainly from the Highlands, that kept the university running, on the other. Ulli wanted the Highlanders to be there. And, somewhat diffidently and shyly, many of them came — the gardeners and cleaners and domestic servants from around the campus. So too did the academics and the invited members of Port Moresby’s expatriate community — the event had been well publicised in the South Pacific Post — and many students. I knew that history was being made that day …

Akis’ friend, Saem Majnep, recollects that Akis was somewhat nervous of standing up in public in front of all these senior people in the university. But Bulmer reports that after the event Akis burst into uncontrollable laughter, saying: ‘Here I am, just a little man from the bush, and I do these drawings, and all these important people here gather to look at them.’ In future, he was to handle his European clients with ease and confidence, humouring them if necessary by inventing stories for his pictures, but not taking them too seriously.
After the exhibition, he returned to Tsembaga to complete his work for Georgeda Buchbinder. He was also concerned about his mother, who was too old to farm. 'He promised to return to Port Moresby after he had harvested the sweet potatoes,' says Georgina, 'but two years passed by before I saw Akis again. He was then married and had a five day old son.'

During the two years at home, Akis had done practically no drawing. He had been too busy farming and fulfilling his numerous social and ritual obligations. Besides, his drawings would have been regarded as an odd and irrelevant activity. The few sketches he made during this time did not exceed the standard of his earliest scribbles.
When he returned to Port Moresby in 1971, he was surprised to see so many activities in the studio of which he had once been the only occupant. Mathias Kauage was working there now, a Chimbu artist whose first drawings had been inspired by Akis' own exhibition in February 1969. There was Marie Taita Aihi designing textiles, and Ruki Fame working on welded iron sculptures. During the first week, Akis was worried by this unexpected competition, but he soon reached his former standard and acquired his old confidence.

Akis' second stay in Port Moresby lasted three months, during which his work became more complex and powerful. In many ways this period can be regarded as the pinnacle of his career. His work was bold, extremely sensitive and infinitely varied within the narrow confines of his chosen medium. He had no desire to experiment with new subject matter or techniques. He saw little need even for the use of colour. In Georgina's words: 'He was not sidetracked by the desire to use effects.'

At the end of this fruitful period he returned home to pay his bride price. Throughout his career, which was to last another 14 years, he never really felt tempted to settle in Port Moresby. His real life was at home, and he invested the entire proceeds of his work into his farm and into building up his social position at home. In subsequent years, after our departure from Port Moresby, Akis returned to Port Moresby once a year for varying lengths of time, to work in a studio given to him by the National Art School and to exhibit there. The art school made screen-print editions of many of his drawings, thus increasing his income considerably. Akis' line became harder and stiffer in later years, but he lost none of his exuberance and humour. His work has found its way into many private homes and into several public collections in Australia, but he has never received the international recognition he deserves. His example and his success inspired a whole group of other artists from the Simbai valley, including Barnabas India, Cecil King and Wungi.

Akis died, quite unexpectedly, in 1985. Ralph Bulmer estimated that he must have been about 46 years old. All those who knew him experienced him as a bright, energetic and healthy man. The cause of his death was never diagnosed. In him Papua New Guinea lost one of her most gifted artists and, certainly, the first to work entirely outside a traditional context. His impact on Papua New Guineans cannot be overestimated. He broke new ground, and even Mathias Kauage, the most successful of all contemporary artists in Papua New Guinea, might never have begun to paint, had it not been for the inspiration and hope he received from Akis' first exhibition in February 1969.
INVENTING HIS OWN TRADITION —
Mathias Kauage

The one hundred odd Highland labourers who came to celebrate the first exhibition of Akis’ drawings at the university library on 28 February 1969 were not just sipping drinks politely, like some of the European visitors. They were obviously excited by what they saw and chatted noisily about the drawings. Unfortunately, I never found out what these drawings really meant to them. There was one man amongst them, however, who was so deeply impressed that the experience changed his entire life. That was Mathias Kauage, a Chimbu labourer who was working as a cleaner at the Administrative College at the time.

Kauage had spent a happy childhood in the Chimbu mountains, roaming through the forest with other boys, shooting birds and roasting them, and — a first symptom of cultural change — playing marbles! His experience of Western education was rather brief. With other children he was enrolled in the Catholic primary school. But when the teacher beat him because he was helping a little girl with her work, he walked out of the school, determined never to return. His father, who had been a distinguished warrior before the arrival of the Australian administration, was not going to tolerate a stranger beating up his son. He did not send Kauage back to school. He went there himself and threatened to beat the teacher.

When Kauage was about 17 years old, he signed up as a plantation labourer in Sogeri. After finishing his contract on a rubber plantation, he walked down to Port Moresby and found himself a job as a cleaner. Those were the unhappiest years of his life. The job was
boring, the treatment he received from his overseer was humiliating. The labourers were housed in barracks and were forbidden to bring their families from home.

Kauage was unusually tall and strong. His massive head sat on his shoulders like a block of granite. His face was heavily lined, which Europeans often mistakenly interpreted as a permanent frown. The only clothes he could afford were to be found in Chinese stores and came from Hong Kong, so that his shorts were always a couple of sizes too small for him, and he tended to walk awkwardly, as if afraid he might burst out of them.

After seeing Akis' drawings, he bought himself an exercise book and, when the other men in his dormitory had gone to sleep, he sat on the floor and began to draw. But, years of humiliation by white administrators and employers had undermined his confidence. Rather than trust his own imagination, he tried to copy illustrations from schoolbooks. The next morning he asked his friend, Papuga, to take the exercise book and show it to Georgina. Papuga was a Melpa man from Mount Hagen, who was attached to our household and fulfilled multiple functions: he looked after the garden as well as the baby and eventually ended up as a textile printer.

When Georgina told him that she was not interested in those drawings, Papuga looked crestfallen because he had failed in the mission he had undertaken for his friend. Seeing his disappointment, Georgina asked him to bring Kauage along. Kauage appeared with more bad drawings, some of them copies from *Winnie the Pooh*. He was painfully shy, but Georgina realised that the pathetic drawings did not reflect his character. There appeared to be a hidden strength in the man, waiting to erupt. Georgina thought that there must be a way of liberating this suppressed power. She gave him sheets of large white paper and a felt pen and encouraged him to try working on a bigger scale. For some weeks Kauage returned again and again with sheets of paper covered with bad copies from books and comics.

One day, Georgina discovered in the bottom right-hand corner of a large piece of paper a little spider: it was the first time an original idea had appeared. She said to him: 'This is the first time you have made a drawing that you haven't copied. Do more spiders.' Even then, Kauage could not find the courage to use his own mind. He brought more and more bad copies. Georgina could not stand it anymore and said to him: 'Please continue to visit us and have a glass of beer with us, but please don't bring any more drawings!'
Mathias Kauage in ceremonial dress at Iwalewa Haus, Bayreuth, Germany 1990.

The following day Kauage came in a buoyant mood and presented her with 25 sheets of white A2 paper, all covered with rows and rows of spiders! 'Like a military march of spiders,' Georgina said. The drawings were still rather clumsy, but emotionally it was a real breakthrough and, to strengthen him in his new direction, Georgina bought some of the sheets. During the following days he tried rows of beetles, rows of butterflies — then one day he came with a drawing of a giant mosquito, covering a whole page! It was his first real drawing: a sensitive line, and the overall shape broken up into delicate areas of pattern. From now on there was no holding him back. His imagination burst forth.
He now developed a series of drawings depicting riders and horses. They were the horsemen, he said, which he had seen on mission stations and farms in the Highlands. But the original experience became completely transformed in his imagination. The horses appeared to fly rather than run, and the riders floated in the air above them. It was as if Kauage was depicting his newly won freedom, his sense of relief after having broken out of the restrictive vicious circle of his existence. At the same time he was beginning to develop his own personal style. The horses were embellished with decorative designs, some of them being geometric, while others consisted of stylised human faces. This desire to
'mark', to decorate everything with intricate pattern, was something he had absorbed as a child in Chimbu country, where bamboo flutes, spears, shields and the faces of dancers were all adorned with rhythmic designs.

His drawings became more and more fantastic: his horses began to grow wings! Other imaginary creatures began to appear: men were riding two-headed cassowaries or crocodiles; women played with large fish or ten-legged snakes. As he created his zoological fantasies, Kauage's ornamentation became more and more elaborate.

The next phase, which you might call the 'romantic period', expressed more personal feelings: they were scenes of flirtation, in which boys were pursuing girls, but they always seemed to be rejected. They could never touch the girls, who turned away shyly. 'Mi laik holdim han bilong meri — meri no laik', or 'Mi laik dans wantaim meri, meri no laik', was the way in which he commented on these drawings ('I want to hold the girl's hand — she refuses'; and: 'I want to dance with the girl, but she refuses'). Even when the figures were naked, they had no sexual organs, yet, it was always clear who was who: the girls had softer,
undulating bodies, but harder faces; the young men had straighter bodies, but they were always pleading.

Kauage's work reached a first climax with a series of imposing, statuesque women. They were standing alone, filling the entire page, wearing full feather headdress and other intensely patterned decorations. Their small breasts were exposed or covered with patterned bras. Their lower bellies were always covered with broad bands of pattern — but these were not meant to suggest pants. A child was often drawn in the belly to suggest pregnancy. These women were like goddesses, warding off evil; but, occasionally, they appeared to be menacing and beyond the reach of mortal men.

For about a year, Kauage progressed steadily, then suddenly he fell into a deep depression. There were two reasons for this. Kauage had joined the adult literacy classes provided by the university for its labour force. Somehow the schoolroom atmosphere reminded Kauage of his unhappy childhood experience in the Catholic school. He suddenly felt insecure again in this strange new role. 'He was suddenly brought face to face with a world that made him uncomfortable,' Georgina commented. 'Every human being goes through the traumatic experience of growing up, but in a recently colonised country like Papua New Guinea, a man goes through this agony twice: he may be a man in his own culture, but he is a child in the superimposed foreign culture and he finds the prospect of another “initiation” worrying and alarming.'

Simultaneously, Kauage faced another crisis. Since he had begun to sell his drawings, he had been able to give up his humiliating and boring job as a cleaner. He now worked every day in the sago mat studio, which the university had built for Georgina. Kauage now had a lot of time on his hands and wanted to work all day long. But soon he came to realise that even his fertile imagination had limits! No artist can turn out 15 or more new ideas every day!

During this phase of depression, his figures lost the rhythmic flow of movement. They began to lose their long arms and legs until only the hands stuck out from a heavily ornamented black block. The faces stared dolefully from the centre of this block. For the first time male genitals began to appear — mostly disproportionately large. While Kauage made these drawings for us, he secretly produced different images, which he gave to his teacher in the literacy class. They were copies of commercial posters, carried out in sickly pastel coloured crayons. It was like a complete regression to his earliest feeble attempts.

Georgina now introduced him to linocuts. These helped him to find his way out of his depression, because he could now spend more
time on each individual idea, and the possibility of using black heavy lines and areas suited his present mood.

It was not until he gave up the literacy classes, and until Georgina introduced him to copper-beating, that he was able to achieve another big breakthrough. The copper-beating allowed him to use his enormous physical strength and, at the same time, it forced him to spend a week or more on the execution of a single creative idea. On these copper panels Kauage could finally work on the scale that suited him best. He could now design a 1 x 2 metre panel spontaneously with smooth, rhythmic lines: women and birds were floating through a sky full of stars; a fierce cow threw a rider into the air; footballers grappled with the sun; everyday events were elevated into a personal mythology.

Kauage's copper and aluminium panels were technically highly competent, very decorative, delightfully bizarre and, above all, happy. They reflected Kauage's newly found self-confidence and his discovery of an independent, free life. With poverty finally banished from his life (he had been earning $6.50 as a labourer), Kauage now changed his entire appearance. He could at last afford to buy long trousers that fitted; he wore brightly coloured shirts and a wide-rimmed hat with a band that read: ‘Masta Kauage — Artist’. ‘Masta’ was of course a term that in colonial language was reserved for white men. His confident appearance also changed people's attitudes to him. When he first began to visit us, people would ask: ‘Who is this sinister looking Highlander coming to your house?’ Now they wanted to know who the dashing black American fellow was? Kauage could now afford to buy a house at Hohola, a popular and respectable suburb. The price of $5,500 was a very large amount of money in those days for somebody who had come to the capital from the New Guinea Highlands. Kauage now got invited to ambassadors' cocktail parties and, after work, he might drop in on the Vice Chancellor of the university for a drink. His first exhibition of metal panels in April 1970 had turned him into a celebrity. After his second show he went home to his village and returned with a wife.

Kauage's survival skills were tested severely after we left Papua New Guinea in March 1971 to return to Nigeria. Kauage soon found out that he could not maintain his house in Hohola, because his wantoks began to descend on him and he found himself landed with the responsibility of looking after an extra 10 or 12 people. He sold the house and moved to the Creative Arts Centre, where he was offered accommodation in return for becoming a students' warden. Here, he could also exhibit his paintings from time to time. But, when the centre was upgraded into the National Arts School, the whole atmosphere
The Life and Death of Lambaki Okuk,
Mathias Kauage. Acrylic painting.
Okuk was a leading Politician. Like Kauage,
he belonged to the Chimbu people. Here, Okuk
is depicted lying in his coffin. Sydney, 1987.
Exhibition at Migila House.
became more academic and Kauage felt less comfortable there. He then moved to Marata, a new housing area made available to migrants who flocked into the capital from rural areas. The government supplied water and electricity, but the people had to build their own houses. For the first two years, they were allowed to squat in shanty huts, but then they were expected to improve their properties.

Kauage now found it harder to sell his work and was often reduced to hawking his pictures outside the big tourist hotels. He found that his own government neglected him and that his own people took little interest in his work. Gradually, his work became weaker and a little repetitive, because there was not enough stimulus. At the same time, he never wavered in his determination to be an artist. He never made another attempt to get a different kind of job or to go home and live off his farm.

When we returned to Port Moresby in 1974, we found that Kauage's work had gone rather stale. The reasons for this were that he seldom had enough money to buy copper and that he made all his drawings on the same scale on sheets of A2 paper. Georgina gave him large sheets, 200 x 75 centimetres. This simple device forced him out of his routine and he responded dramatically to this new challenge. During the next four years he became primarily a painter. He developed a marvellous sense of colour.

Unlike Akis, Kauage loved the city. For him, Port Moresby was home. He was fascinated by the cars, the motorbikes, the aeroplanes and helicopters; he enjoyed the excitement of the politics, the raskols, the policemen, the drunks and the street entertainer ‘Cowboy’. Soon his fantasy images were replaced by the realities of everyday city life. Kauage became the first chronicler of life in Port Moresby, but he superimposed on the drabness of his subject matter his Chimbu sense of design and colour, his optimism and his irrepressible sense of humour. He now acquired a following in Australia, particularly in the universities, and he held exhibitions in Sydney, Brisbane, Perth and Canberra.

It was during this time that he developed the technique that he used for the rest of his life. He started with a light pencil sketch, then he laid in areas of colour: first all the reds, then the blues, the greens, the yellows and so on. He then made the shapes stand out by giving them all bold, black outlines. Finally, he would say: ‘Nau mi bilasim em’, which means roughly ‘now I will decorate it’. The Melanesian term bilas normally denotes the face painting, shell jewellery and feather headdresses used by dancers during festivals. For Kauage it meant the superimposition of various patterns on all his images — men and
women, birds, fish, horses, trees, cars or helicopters, with which he celebrated his creations.

In spite of his fascination with the city, Kauage took great pride in Chimbu culture and invested much time and energy trying to keep it alive. Some of his first earnings were spent on bird-of-paradise feathers, so that he could participate in festivals at home. As soon as he became a little more affluent, he acquired enough feathers to dress 20 men, so that now he could stage a sing sing in his village.

Kauage was also an accomplished jew's-harp and bamboo flute player and singer. He liked to perform at the opening of his exhibitions in Australia and Europe. He has performed with some distinguished musicians like didgeridoo player Charlie McMahon and percussionists Greg Sheehan and Tunji Beier.

Yet, he was painfully aware that his culture was doomed. When he visited Germany in 1994, he asked Georgina whether she could help him to bring up his junior son Dioniboi (Pidgin for Johnny Boy) in Australia. She said yes, but only if Kauage would send him home for a few years so that he would learn the Chimbu language and Chimbu culture first. She did not want to take the responsibility for alienating him even further from his culture, to which Kauage replied: ‘There is no culture left for him to learn.’
In 1996, Kauage was invited to attend the opening of the Glasgow Museum of Fine Art. Three years earlier the Museum's Director had acquired four of his paintings at Kauage's exhibition in the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in London. The Glasgow Museum was opened by Queen Elizabeth II. The Queen was fascinated by Kauage. After the opening she gave him a lift to his hotel in Glasgow. Kauage later sent her a portrait he had painted of her and, in 1999, he received the OBE.

Though Kauage has had many ups and downs in his career, he is clearly one of Papua New Guinea's most successful artists. Following the late 1960s, he exhibited widely in Australia, Germany, Britain and the United States. Many of his works are to be found in public collections like the Museum of Modern Art in Glasgow, Iwalewa Haus in Bayreuth, the Australian Museum in Sydney, the SchmidtBank in Germany, and the Otis Art Center in Los Angeles.

Among his many spectacular successes were the exhibition *The Life and Death of Iambaki Okuk* in Sydney in 1987, the painting of a Mercedes bus belonging to the House of World Cultures in Berlin (Haus der Kulturen der Welt), and the *Painted Pillars* he created for the 800th anniversary of the city of Bayreuth. In 1987 he received a special award from the Blake Prize for Religious Art in Sydney, and in 1996, he met Queen Elizabeth at the opening of the Museum of Modern Art in Glasgow, which acquired some of his finest works. In 1998 he received the OBE.
Kauage was not just an important episode during our stay at the University of Papua New Guinea. He has became part of our lives. We were fortunate enough to arrange four visits for him to Australia and three to Germany during the last 20 years. Each time, the change of environment, the relief from the stress of daily living in Port Moresby and from financial worries gave him new inspiration. Being with Georgina in particular, being able to talk to her about his work in a way he could not discuss it with anyone else, always stimulated him to reach new heights in his painting. But we, too, were always been strengthened by his presence. His friendship, his sense of humour and his astonishing creativity always inspired us and gave us new hope.

In 1998, we were at last able to visit him at his own home. What we remembered as the shanty town Marata has since become a green suburb and Kauage lived in a well-built house. His garden produced fruit and vegetables as well as flowers. It was pleasing to see that the Travelodge Hotel in Waigani has decorated the entire ground floor with his paintings — like a little Kauage Museum! Even so, life was not easy: Port Moresby now can no longer boast a single art gallery. He was forced to hawk his pictures outside the tourist hotels and — what was even more humiliating — he had to compete there against four or five ‘artists’ who shamelessly imitated his work. He was really upset about this, and about the undiscriminating eye of most of the expatriate clients. He drew some satisfaction from the fact that his older son Andrew had become a skilful artist.

Kauage held his last exhibition in Sydney at the Ray Hughes Gallery in February 1999.

Kauage is one of Papua New Guinea’s biggest success stories and he has a wide circle of admirers around the globe. When Georgina took him to London in 1994 for his exhibition at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, the immigration officer at Dover looked at his passport and said: ‘Mathias Kauage? The painter? I have a picture of yours hanging in my living room, which my friend who was working in Port Moresby gave me as a birthday present!’ Even so, the magnitude of his achievement is barely recognised by critics and art historians. The following tribute was written by Georgina for his London exhibition:

As a small child Kauage witnessed the penetration of his homeland by foreign invaders, who were remarkably different in appearance and manner to the usual type of invader, whose customs were comparatively similar.
The new invaders were something unimaginable. They came in bizarre machines. 'A helicopter passed over me first. I went to get a bow and arrow. I sat on top of the mountain. I wanted to shoot this bird …' Later he observed the white 'mastas': 'A new place was made for a plane to fall down in Kundiawa. We boys talked about it together. We said something like: man, look at all those mastas going inside this thing. They go inside and it goes away. When they are outside it stays.'

Kauage's generation was thrown into events out of their control. Kauage's parents were born into the security of tradition. His children are born into an era where the computer and jumbo jets are ordinary. No people on earth have been faced with having to adjust to such massive cultural changes as Kauage's generation.

One could imagine that Kauage's vision has evolved from an ancient folk tradition. On the contrary: he comes from a culture that produced neither carvings nor paintings. Chimbu artistic expression was limited to self-decoration and to incised geometric patterns on arrows and bamboo flutes.

Kauage is the sole inventor of a new art form and the only artist in Papua New Guinea whose work portrays the urban environment. The spirit of his Chimbu tradition and the excitement of the invading technology is bound securely together. His motor cars, aeroplanes and helicopters glow with the colours of a Chimbu warrior in full ceremonial dress. He grafts the splendour of a disappearing culture onto jumbo jets, motor bikes and politics. He accepts the intrusion of a foreign culture with patience, gentleness and intelligence. He converts the technological invasion into a style that belongs to him alone with humour, conviction and enormous energy. He is an inventor and a survivor: a 'creative giant'.

Kauage was above all a great artist, but, we should remember, that he was also an entertaining storyteller and a remarkable musician. Kauage's stories — told to us in Sydney (between December 1979 and January 1980) were recorded, transcribed and translated into English from Melanesian Pidgin by Georgina. Some, like the following, have been published in a pamphlet that accompanied Kauage's exhibition at the Ray Hughes Gallery in 1999:
People ask me ‘Did you go to school?’ I went to school in my place. Not much of it. Maybe six months, that’s all. When I went to school, we were writing numbers, tens and times.

Now I was strong on a little school mate. She was my little girlfriend. Okay, now this young girl, not too young, didn’t know how to write. She said, ‘Kauage, you write for me’. I wrote some tens and times for her, I wrote her name. Now one by one we go to the teacher. I want to give my paper to the teacher, but he didn’t call out for me and I was in the middle of the line. Then he said ‘You come’. He called out for me and the girl to come together. Okay, now I gave him my writing. He finished looking at it. Then the girl gave him hers. ‘So on the first day of school you know how to write? Kauage, you wrote this and gave it to this friend of yours. You two sit down.’

Okay, we sat down. We sat down a long time. All the others finished writing. They all go to play outside at sweeping and cutting grass. We stayed inside this school house. We stayed on and on. Four o’clock finished. All the children came back inside.

Kauage flies to Glasgow to the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Mathias Kauage, acrylic on canvas, 120.5 x 183.5, 1999. The museum had acquired four of Kauage’s paintings. He commented on this painting: ‘The Queen is waiting for me. The two of us open the new museum. Later she gave me the OBE.’
'Alright, later you look at more of this.' He took hold of a very big bible — a big book. He fight my head! My head was truly broken. I feel my head is broken, and he fights me again with this big book. My ear is in pain. One kind of insect knows how to cry and cry in the night. My ear cried out in the same way. I want to really fight this man. I stood up straight and talk to him, 'I've had enough of school. Now you can't come and get me from my village. If you come and get me, I will give you my spear. You can't come for me and take me from my house. It's forbidden. I don't like school'.

I say to everybody, 'Okay, I finished'. I talked to the girl, 'You finish too! Never mind about more school in this place. They fight too much. It's no good!'

I never went back again.
KAUAGUE'S VISIT TO
BAYREUTH AND
LONDON,
8 June–6 August 1994

Georgina Beier

Kauage was more like a member of our family than a colleague or ex­
student. My son Sebastian remained particularly close to Kauage
from the age of two. We left Papua New Guinea in 1978, but our ties
with Kauage grew stronger. We brought him to Sydney four times
and to Europe four times. His visits would last three or four months.
He lived with us and would work very long hours every day
preparing for an exhibition.

I have never known Kauage to exhibit any trait of jealousy,
meanness, bitterness or anger. The one thing that hurt was that he
felt he was respected far more in Europe and Australia than in his
own country.

The following essay about his visit to Germany and England
illustrates his generous character and the astonishing way in which
people responded to him.

Twice a day a small plane arrives at Bayreuth airport from Frankfurt.
This is the only airborne connection to a metropolis. It feels a little
bit like New Guinea, this ‘airport’ — it’s so small and friendly you could
say ‘Hi’ to the pilot. Of course, Bayreuth has other connections, like
roads and trains, unlike New Guinea, where in most places you get off
the plane and start walking.
Today we are expecting Mathias Kauage. The city of Bayreuth has invited him to participate in the project ‘Art on the street’, which will be part of the city’s 800th anniversary celebrations. It has been four years since we have seen him.

The airport is located on a flat plain above the valley in which Bayreuth lies. It’s windy up here. The plane lands and glides to a halt. A handful of passengers emerge. Three businessmen carrying briefcases, down for the day. Another two look like Americans. The lady is fat with a blue-rinsed perm and pearls. They must have come for the Wagner festival. But there is no Kauage. This is a catastrophe: Lufthansa has lost him! Because he speaks barely any English, he was supposed to be an escorted passenger. The travel agent at the airport searches for information on his flight from Singapore to Frankfurt. Lufthansa informs him that the flight had been cancelled — it never left Singapore.

Kauage lost in Singapore! The chance that any Singaporian official could speak Melanesian Pidgin was remote. We go home, sit in silence, frantically wracking our brains, wondering what to do. Ring Singapore airport? But who to talk to? Is there a lost person’s office, like lost luggage? Maybe a compassionate New Guinean passenger is looking after him? After some hours of intense anxiety the phone rings. A taxi driver has found him outside the Frankfurt airport terminal. We had been misinformed. The plane had actually left Singapore on time! It had taken Kauage five hours to find someone with the sympathy and patience to communicate with him. Kauage had given the taxi driver a notebook with a jumble of telephone numbers. Several of them were in Berlin. Eventually one of the Berliners knew us and gave the driver our number. The driver had made a big effort. He was not supposed to leave his cab, which was standing in a queue. So he had to dash backwards and forwards between the telephone and the car, which had to be moved on each time!

There was actually another flight to Bayreuth the same afternoon. But who would escort Kauage to that remote corner of the airport where fourteen-passenger planes took off? He had been lost once and we could not lose him again. The only alternative was to ask the taxi driver to bring him in his cab. It was not cheap!

Kauage finally arrived, and after the first joyful exchanges of greetings he said quietly and shyly: ‘Su bilong mi stap?’ (Are my shoes still here?) I brought the shoes he had asked me to keep for him four years ago. He looked at the battered old shoes with a kind of tenderness and at that moment we all knew that his spirit had never left this house. He removed his new shoes, slid into his old ones, and four years vanished.
Love Story,
Mathias Kauage,
Acrylic on canvas,
Chimbu feet are famous in Papua New Guinea. A person with wide feet like mine will be told that he has Chimbu feet. The Chimbu people live in a wild, rugged mountain country. They have been walking up and down their mountains for thousands of years and their feet seem to have taken on the character of the terrain. Even so, Kauage's feet, like his character, were more extravagant than those of any other Chimbu I know! His old shoes had been worn and marked by a gigantic personality. I often wondered what the Greek shoe-mender I knew in Sydney would have thought of these shoes, for he knew how to read a man's soul by looking at the soles of his shoes. When I took Ulli's shoes to him to be mended, he said, after looking at them for a long time: 'This man walks gently, he has wisdom and patience.'

Two days after Kauage's arrival, the ‘Art in the Street’ project was to start. The city has placed white sewerage pipes, 2.5 metres high, on the street for artists to paint. Fourteen pillars lined a major road opposite the town hall. These were for the local artists. Another six pillars stood on a paved, rather intimate area at the bottom of wide stone steps, flanked by balustrades. The steps led to the eighteenth century palace and church. This group of pillars were for the creations of Kauage, Madhvi Parekh from India and myself. We had only two weeks to complete the work and the weather was against us. The rain was like needles of ice. Madhvi developed a terrible cough, Kauage's hands froze. The rain stole our time and diluted our colours. Kauage suggested making our paintings on canvas and wrapping them around the pillars. But finally the sun appeared and Kauage enjoyed working on the street, being surrounded by people all the time, for the Bayreuthers were fascinated by Kauage. A young man came up to him: 'Kauage?' Kauage was not surprised. 'My name has gone round the world!' The young man had done research in New Guinea and spoke fluent Pidgin. Naturally he knew about Kauage, but curiously he now met him for the first time in Bayreuth.

Children flocked to Kauage and shared their sweets with him. One child of about eight offered him two marks! 'Thank you very much,' Kauage said, 'but you are small and I can't take your money.' Not only the children were charmed by this man's personality and by his magical paintings. One elderly gentleman put a packet of cigarettes in his pocket every morning when he passed Kauage on his way to the office. A very old lady who walked slowly with the help of a walking stick gave him ten marks. But he returned it. 'I am younger than you. You need it more than I.'

Kauage would buy coffee and beer in the nearby Italian ice cream parlour. But after a few days they wouldn't charge him any more.
Sometimes, when he worked for a few hours without having a refreshment, the waiter would bring him a beer. A young woman would watch Kauage painting for hour after hour. She was pitifully thin and tragically miserable. She seemed a very disturbed person. ‘Oh, I am sorry for this girl. She can’t smile anymore and she has no money. Her mama and her papa are in another town. Okay, so I am buying coffee for her. I gave her 20 marks to buy some coffee. She brought me the change. But I said to her, no, you keep it.’

By the time the mayor of Bayreuth opened the street exhibition of pillars, Kauage had finished his first pillar. He had been working twelve hours a day, and occasionally until 11 at night. There was just enough light from the Italian ice cream parlour to draw in the black lines. It took him nearly three weeks to complete the two pillars, about 200 hours, and he never took a day off. The sheer stamina of the man earned him a great deal of respect from the Bayreuth public.

The Bayreuthers were intrigued by Kauage’s rugged appearance, they admired his energy and were attracted by his shy, gentle character. But when, at the opening ceremony of the painted pillars exhibition, he appeared with a spectacular headdress of bird-of-paradise feathers, they were simply overwhelmed. He looked grand and it was not surprising that he appeared in full dress on the cover of the July issue of the Bayreuth magazine that advertises the cultural events of the month.

Among his most fervent admirers were a group of teenagers from the Café Babylon social club, which was financed by the Evangelical Church. It catered mainly for school drop-outs and children of asylum seekers. They were so enthusiastic about Kauage’s pillars that Harry Imhof, the dynamic and dedicated initiator of Café Babylon and other social projects for young people, promised to try and acquire a pillar for Café Babylon. Kauage would affectionately refer to Harry as ‘boss bilong ologeta pikanini’ — the boss of all children.

Kauage’s second pillar was two-thirds finished. His cigarette supply was still going strong and the Italians continued to supply him with free coffee and beer. The weather was now ‘the same as New Guinea — the ground can cook your feet’. On a Saturday afternoon the city staged a bicycle race. Kauage enjoyed the excitement: the commentator’s voice blaring through the microphone, the cheering crowds, the sweating cyclists. He had a marvellous capacity to enjoy the life around him, however strange. During an interlude a man rode around the town on a penny-farthing bicycle. Kauage was fascinated. The next day Ulli took him to the historical museum to see a collection of these oddities. He wanted a postcard of one, but none were available.
Painted Pillar in Bayreuth, Mathias Kauage. Commissioned by the City of Bayreuth for the 800th anniversary of the city. Apart from the local Bayreuth artists, three artists at Iwalewa Haus were commissioned to decorate two pillars each: Kauage, Georgina Beier and Madhvi Parekh (India).

Kauage painted the cyclist onto his pillar and filled an empty area nearby with a snake. The cyclist seemed to be falling off the penny-farthing. There had to be a story to this: the snake became female as he painted in some brightly coloured snake eggs. 'She is saying, get away from here, don’t come closer, my children are in those eggs. You are riding that bicycle in a crazy way. You will kill my children!'

A few days later a man came to Kauage and gave him four postcards. They showed a drawing of a man riding a penny-farthing bicycle. It was in fact the first postcard ever printed in Bayreuth. This gift was yet another example of Kauage's popularity.
Kauage was working from dawn to dusk to get his pillar finished before travelling to London for the opening of his exhibition at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery.\(^1\) The evenings were the time for storytelling, as it is in Papua New Guinea, often lasting three to four hours. Fortunately his stories were as entertaining as his paintings. For some years now he had been planning to bury Ulli in the Chimbu mountains, in his clan land. ‘It’s not good if they plant you here. That’s like throwing you away for nothing. I wanted to build you a house by the river, so you can take a bath without walking down from the mountain. Now the council has brought the water up the mountain in pipes. We will all live together on top of the mountain.’ Kauage is smiling. ‘Ulli, your skin is becoming loose. When you die we will plant you well, in the new fashion. Before, we would wrap up the body in leaves and plant him with his treasures, his shells, his feathers, his wealth. Now we have a new way. We are making stone houses under the ground. We will make you one. We will give you a table, a chair and a typewriter.’ I offer him my 1950s manual typewriter. ‘We will make a book case for your books and leave plenty of paper around for you to write. When we want to visit you, we will break down stones, go inside and say hello.’

Every night was full of stories and sometimes stories would turn into songs or he would play his bamboo flute. On his bamboo flute, Kauage produced sounds that are quite unfamiliar to Western ears. There is a simplicity about this music, but also a delicate charm. Kauage explains to the Bayreuthers who have listened to him that he can only give a vague idea of what Chimbu music was like. When he was a child, he would hear orchestras of up to 200 flutes! Short ones for the young boys to play, and different lengths of fat flutes for the men. Women never played flutes, they were not even allowed to see them. Music was something that belonged to the spirit world. The orchestra moved through the mountains. They would descend to the river, wash their flutes and return to the village. Sadly, that was the music of Kauage’s childhood and it would be impossible to assemble such a huge orchestra today. However, he has spent large sums of money — sales from paintings — to buy enough decorations to dress 50 men. The feathers of colourful birds for headdresses, shells, cuscus fur. He has struggled to keep his culture alive.

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1 Rebecca Hossack, an Australian and the owner of a highly respected, innovative gallery in Central London, has exhibited Mathias Kauage in 1994, 1996 and 2000. In 2003 Rebecca Hossack organised a retrospective of Kauage’s work in the City Gallery of Bristol. Queen Elizabeth lent her portrait, which Kauage had donated to her, for this exhibition.
A journey to London

Uli Bauer and Thorolf Lipp, two university students who worked part-time as assistants in Iwalewa Haus, drove Kauage and me to London. We left Germany and drove through Belgium to the French border. It was about 2 o'clock in the morning. ‘Passports, please!’ Only now did I realise our predicament. Kauage needed no visa to enter Britain, but he did need one to travel through France! He was worried. ‘Ah, police have come, it is me who is wrong.’ The customs officers ordered us all out of the vehicle, and Kauage, in his nervous state, tore his new shoes. We go to the office and fill out forms for him. Name, address, nationality. There was a problem. The young officers had never heard of Papua New Guinea. They looked up a book fatter than two bibles and discovered that Kauage needed a visa, but still they did not know where to locate this country. Somewhere in Africa, they assumed. Kauage said: ‘Australia.’ He often says that, because at least it points in the right direction and people have heard of it. ‘Profession?’ Artist. We explain that we are taking his paintings to London for an exhibition. The customs officers demand to see the paintings. We unwrap one large picture of an aeroplane. The customs officers are stunned, smiling with joy. They tear up the forms. ‘Go, go,’ they say. ‘If you see anybody, tell them you did not meet any customs officers. Good luck!’ Later, at the ferry, nobody asks for our passports.

When we reach Dover, Kauage’s passport is stamped. The official is interested in him. ‘I’ve been to Papua New Guinea for a holiday.’ ‘Oh really?’ I said, ‘then you must know Kauage!’ He is startled. ‘Is that the Kauage? Do you know Debbie and Martin Wakefield? They have two of your paintings!’ The official is delighted to have met Kauage and I give him an invitation to the exhibition. We continue our journey in a happy, optimistic mood. Kauage is still worried about his torn shoe. ‘I look like a rubbish man.’

In London, Kauage stays in a flat above the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in Windmill Street, off Tottenham Court Road. Here he can receive visitors and meet journalists without travelling across the confusing city. He is very content. ‘This woman, the boss of the gallery, she is a good one. Look, she has bought me new shoes.’ He opens a bag. ‘This too.’ He unfolds a Union Jack. Looking at Kauage’s paintings, Rebecca realised that he has a passion for flags. There is also a T-shirt with ‘London’ written across it. ‘All these presents. She is a number one lady! ’

The next day a large photograph of Kauage dressed in his ceremonial headdress of feathers appears in the Independent newspaper.
and two paintings have been sold. On Tottenham Court Road, Kauage acquires a stack of postcards and a London badge. ‘Free! I didn’t lose any money on it.’ He had gone to the stall and picked out the postcards. The man said: ‘Fifty p’, meaning 50 pence each. Kauage gave him 50 pence. ‘The man look strong at me.’ Then he gave Kauage the money back. ‘Take them — a present from me,’ and he added the badge. ‘People like me in this country,’ says Kauage.

He painted a picture of Rebecca, a portrait of her. She has long hair, a long skirt and bare boobs. Beside her is a bird of paradise. The painting is called *Good morning Rebecca*.

The gallery was packed for the opening, and Martin Wakefield, the customs officer’s friend, was there. After five years in Papua New Guinea, he had been back in London for five months and was finding it very difficult. Kauage spent most of the evening sitting on the floor and playing his flute to a crowd of children and babies. The following day, Thorolf Lipp and Uli Bauer took Kauage to the Museum of Mankind, to see an exhibition about Papua New Guinea. The three of them were going up a wide flight of stairs, when they met a man descending ... he said: ‘Kauage?’ It was the director of the museum. He personally accompanied Kauage through the exhibition, while the two German students quietly followed the celebrity.
Back in Bayreuth

When we returned to Bayreuth we learned that the city was unable to donate one of Kauage's pillars to Café Babylon. They were going to auction the pillars to recover some of the costs of the project 'Art on the Street'. Harry Imhof did not want to disappoint the youngsters. He decided to commission Kauage to paint a mural in Café Babylon. He paid him generously with his own money and arranged for a nearby Greek restaurant to let Kauage have all his meals and drinks at his expense. Harry suggested that the theme for the mural could be the activities the kids enjoyed, and the message should be peace between different countries and cultures. I asked Harry if Kauage could visit homes of some of the children to possibly get some ideas for the mural. Harry rejected the idea, for many parents would be embarrassed to receive visitors, because they lived under very poor conditions. In many cases several kids had to share one bed. When Kauage heard this he had an idea. 'Ah, I will put ten children into one bed. Black ones, white ones, yellow ones, and I will cover them with their flags!'

Kauage's job was not easy, because his mural was on a staircase and some areas were difficult to reach. On one occasion he startled Harry. He put down his brush, turned to Harry and said: 'I want six girls, the boys said you have six or ten of them. They say I should have six. Okay, Harry?' Kauage is smiling. Apparently the boys had been saying that there were girls in the club too and it would not be right to put mainly boys in the mural. Kauage painted a bare-breasted girl playing billiards, one of the kids' favourite games. Harry thought the church might object to the 'nudity', so Kauage covered her up like this:
Kauage came home one evening, looking puzzled. ‘The woman belonging to the eating house gave me cloth for the table.’ It is wrapped up in Kauage’s bag. He opens the parcel and I am expecting a souvenir, but no — this is a beautifully handmade lace cloth, the kind a family would bring out and use only on special occasions, an heirloom. He is not that enthusiastic. ‘It is white, it has no colour and there are holes in it!’ I tell him it was probably quite old and only used at times like Christmas or when a baby was born. He wraps it up very, very carefully.

Another time it was after midnight and Kauage was not home yet. When he finally arrived it was clear that he had been drinking. Apparently he was relaxing in the Greek restaurant after work when a young couple came to talk to him. The young lady had lived in Papua New Guinea between the age of eight and 14. Her mother had died there, she had committed suicide. Her daughter was trying to recapture Pidgin, the language she spoke fluently as a child. It was a very emotional evening for her. The following morning Ulli asked Kauage for his passport. The mural was proceeding at a steady pace, as Kauage was working twelve hours a day. Even so, it was clear that he could not finish the mural unless his visa was extended. Kauage said: ‘Oooh, I left it at the eating house, my air ticket too, together with my money.’ ‘How much money?’ ‘I think six thousand or five thousand mark. It’s in a book.’ ‘Book, what book?’ Ulli dashed off to the Greek restaurant. It was not yet open, because it was 8 o’clock in the morning. Ulli knocked on the door of the owner’s flat. He appeared, laughing quietly and handing Ulli ‘the book’, a small leather portfolio. He explained that since Kauage was a bit high he had persuaded him to give him his valuables for safe keeping.

Finally only some last minute touches had to be made to the mural. A very small boy from Afghanistan was sad. ‘He is saying, ooh, my flag isn’t there. I am sorry for him, so I’m painting it in. The lady in the eating house, she shows me her flag and I paint it in. There it is, under the billiard table.’

The night before Kauage was to leave Bayreuth, Harry organised a big farewell party. Kauage dressed in his feathers for the last time. All the youngsters were photographed with the kind man from the other end of the world. Kauage removed a bird from his headdress and presented it to Harry. The lady from the Greek restaurant gave him more presents: a scarlet thermostatic bag for his child to keep his school lunch cool and fresh, and a Greek vase.

An hour before Kauage was to leave, Rebecca Hossack arrived from London. She gave him a T-shirt with a picture of the Queen’s
The whole volume *Five New Guinea Plays* came out of Beier’s course in Creative Writing, and all five were put on at the university. The characters blur in my memory now. I see a succession of coarse white Australian officials, planters, missionaries and their wives, being laughed at, resisted or subverted by sharp-witted and virtuous servants and villagers. The best parts were often played by the authors, and to impersonate the most brutal white characters they secured some of the gentlest and most humane of liberal academics. Sitting through these morality plays with varying mixtures of pleasure and discomfort, I was tempted to offer an anonymous prize for the first play about a good white and a bad native. But there were passages of true dramatic complexity. John Waiko’s play ‘The Unexpected Hawk’ ended with an exchange which was theatrically powerful and which helped us teachers to know our students:

Son: Why do they treat us like this?

Mother: No one knows why. We do not understand them, and they do not try to understand us. But every tree has its roots deep down in the ground. Even their actions must have roots. I want you to go to school, so that you can dig out the roots. Do not hesitate to uproot their tree and drink their wisdom.

Son: But who will look after you when I go to school?

Mother: I am not a stone to live always. But I want you to make sure that, before I die, you return with the secret.

Son: Yes mother, I will go. I will dig the root. I will not give up until I dig up the root — even if it will take me to Popondetta — even if it will take me to Moresby. I must dig up the tree, roots and all. I must learn how to plant the seed and I must return with the secret and plant it.

The linguist, Don Laycock, said in the programme notes for an evening of three New Guinea plays by the Prompt Theatre in Canberra:

This is not to say that the viewpoint of these plays is not biased; this is surely inevitable when the people of Papua New Guinea themselves begin to write about a European society, which they see only from the outside — or underneath. But the bias is only in the exaggeration — some would say caricature — of European attitudes and actions; the attitudes and actions themselves are typical of many
Mural in Cafe Babylon, in Bayreuth. In the centre: self portrait of Kauage, flanked by a Bird of Paradise and a wallaby. Below: children of different races. On the right hand wall, a football player. On the left hand wall, a billiard players. Below the billiard table is the Greek flag.

palace on it. It was from the man selling postcards in Tottenham Court Road. When he heard that Rebecca was going to see Kauage, he said: 'This is for the artist from New Guinea.' Rebecca had brought Kauage his money from sales of his paintings. The sales included four paintings sold to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Glasgow. Altogether he had earned DM 26,000. He tucked the notes into his shoes before boarding the plane.

2 The Museum had not officially opened when they purchased Kauage's paintings. In 1996 Kauage was invited to come to the official opening. On that occasion he met Queen Elizabeth II. In 1998 she awarded him the OBE.
THE MODERN ARTIST
IN AN EGALITARIAN
SOCIETY —
The tragic story of
Marie Taita Aihi

Shortly before we arrived in Papua New Guinea, Port Moresby was shaken by a traumatic event: Peter Pako, a Motuan from Porebada, who was widely considered to be Papua’s first successful businessman, was brutally murdered. He was a highly intelligent and energetic man, a man who knew how to seize an opportunity. With his thriving trucking business he was determined to establish himself in the new capitalist order that the Australian colonisers had introduced and superimposed on the egalitarian Papuan societies. But what Westerners would have admired as business acumen was perceived by Motuan villagers as selfish greed; as an attempt by one man to set himself aside from the rest of the community. For a man to accumulate wealth without sharing it with the community was unheard of. In societies in which, until fairly recently, money had been unknown and in which land was communally owned, the opportunity for accumulating personal wealth had never existed. The murder of Peter Pako must, therefore, be seen as an attempt to restore the social order; as a last ditch stand against what was perceived as an egotistical and brutal new lifestyle.¹

¹ There were people who believed that the murder could have been vengeance for the seduction of a married woman, or simply a case of attempted robbery by raskols. But the majority of people I spoke to saw it as a violent attempt to restore the social balance.
It is not surprising, therefore, that occasionally even a successful Papuan artist was judged by the community as someone stepping out of line. The tragic story of Marie Taita Aihi must be interpreted in this context.

Marie was born in Waima, a Roro village in Central District. She was a twin and her mother gave her away to a childless relative. Like other children who grew up in similar circumstances, she did not resent her adoption. On the contrary she was rather pleased to have two sets of parents. Her mother could not breastfeed her, but a Catholic nun came and supplied her with milk powder. The nun became more and more attached to the child and, by the time Marie was five years old, she was ‘adopted’ again, this time by the mission. She remembers the Sister who brought her up with kindness. Sometimes she ran away to her home in the village but, as time went by, she slept in the mission, however much she missed her parents, because she did not want to appear ‘ungrateful’. When she was 12 years old, she was sent to a mission boarding school further away from home. Here, the Sisters were rigid disciplinarians. And the punishments they thought up for the girls were often unreasonably harsh and humiliating. Such petty indignities could be endured and forgotten, but there were other ways in which the school did permanent damage to Marie. The education provided by the nuns was designed to alienate her systematically from her culture. The nuns regarded the Roro people as primitive and, therefore, evil. In their own estimation, they were therefore ‘saving’ the girls from a deplorable fate. In later years, Marie Taita Aihi had great difficulties coming to terms with her own culture.

Early in 1968, Georgina met Marie who had completed her two years secondary education, which was all the mission offered. She was then employed on the Yule Island Mission as a nursing assistant. The nun in charge of the clinic was Sister Joseph Mary. While her official job was to supervise this branch of ‘technical education’, she also used her own initiative to encourage the girls to paint. She admitted that she knew little about art, but she felt instinctively that it would be wrong to impose Western imagery on the girls, and she encouraged them to look at traditional designs: anything from tattoo patterns to hohao boards. The mission did not appreciate her efforts, in fact, she was often criticised, but she persisted, quietly and modestly.

I got to know Sister Joseph Mary through an exhibition of school children’s paintings that was held in Kerema in December 1967. I did not really expect to find anything interesting there, but I flew down to see it just in case something unexpected would turn up amidst the usual
routine of school kids’ drawings. And, indeed, amongst the clumsy flowers and palm trees and the crude attempts at drawing human faces, there was one small picture that was fascinating. Georgina remembers it as a ‘brightly coloured, fresh looking painting’ by a twelve year old schoolgirl that was vaguely inspired by a hohao board from the Papuan Gulf. The painting had come from a Catholic mission station and plantation in Araiimi, which was further up the coast.

A few weeks later I travelled up the coast by canoe to Araiimi station. I discovered that some interesting art teaching had been conducted there by one Sister Joseph Mary, but that she had since been
transferred to Yule Island. Father Dillon, the University Chaplain, now arranged a meeting with Sister Joseph Mary when she visited Port Moresby; and when she saw some of the work going on in the Centre for New Guinea Culture at the university, she invited Georgina to spend a week at Yule Island to introduce the girls to tie-dye and dyeing techniques. While at the mission, Georgina looked through hundreds of drawings of tattooed animals, hoping to find some that were good enough to be used as vignettes in our literary magazine Kovave. She finally picked four that seemed to have more life and strength than the others. All four turned out to be by the same girl: Marie Taita Aihi.

During Georgina’s brief stay at Yule Island, Marie produced some more drawings, which already showed some marked improvement on the previous ones. Georgina thought she would make an excellent textile designer. The mission reluctantly gave her permission to come and work for one month at the Centre for New Guinea Cultures, but only on condition that she would forego her biannual Christmas holiday at home.

In July 1968 she spent one month working with Georgina. She produced some lively screen-prints and also tried her hand at textile design. At the time, Georgina was about to set up a Papua New Guinean cottage industry called ‘Harâ Harâ Prints’, which was to produce screen-printed textiles based on local designs. Marie was not only a gifted designer, she also had enough education to become a business manager and she was sufficiently open-minded to be able to work with a Highlander, Papu a Nugint, who was going to be the chief textile printer. Father Dillon now negotiated her release from the mission, so that she could become a full-time student.

She was unusually open-minded. Georgina taught her to drive — she was the first Roro woman to drive a car! She also taught her to sew, and Marie made her own clothes from the textiles she had designed. Her textiles were popular with many of our friends, so that soon they could be seen all over Port Moresby, and Marie seemed all set to start a brilliant career. There was one factor, however, that we had not reckoned with: it was the Roro community in Port Moresby.

Some of the older men seemed to regard her behaviour as unseemly. They felt that she should learn cooking and gardening and that it was high time she settled down and got married. Many of the women envied her success and her smart looks, and they pressured her into giving them gifts of clothes with her designs. For a time Marie resisted these pressures Bradyly, but after a while we could see that she was getting worried. The fact that she had been brought up by the
mission did not help: she was completely out of touch with her community and her culture, and she did not really understand what was expected of her and how she should respond to these pressures and resist them without giving too much offence to her people.

In December 1969, Marie took a bold step: there was going to be a big festival in her village and she decided to go home, stay with her adoptive parents and participate fully in the festivities. It was the first time she had ever gone to a village festival. She invited us to come along, but Georgina could not easily get away at the time, so I accompanied her to Waima alone. The festival was a spectacular affair. The occasion was prosaic enough: the villagers had put money together to buy a communal truck. The festivities went on for three days and nights. Men and women were decorated elaborately. The dancers' faces were painted with fine yellow lines, running vertically along their features. Their feather headdresses were stunningly beautiful and sometimes as high as the dancer himself. The drumming and dancing was continuous. The performers were doing shifts: while some of the dancers were taking short naps, with their heads placed on wooden head rests so that their make-up and feathers did not spoil, others stepped

Man, horse and snake, Marie Taita Aihi, screen print. The decorative motifs are based on tattoo designs of the Roro people.
into the ranks. The *kundu* drums resounded in a continuing hypnotic drone that brought both the performers and the spectators into a floating, trance-like state. But, in a curious way the village was divided: while the adults staged their traditional ceremony in all its splendour, the teenagers staged their own dance, barely a hundred metres away, with a string band. Compared to the traditional ceremony they looked cheap: the Hawaiian influenced music was banal, their European-type clothes looked dowdy compared with the regal appearance of the traditional dancers. The elders tolerated what appeared to be almost a protest demonstration, but at the same time I witnessed a cruel manifestation of the determination to keep some control: a young girl was tied to a tree. She was near naked and her limbs were smeared with honey. She had been tied near an ants’ nest and would have to suffer both the indignity and the painful bites for a whole day and night!

Marie Taita Aihi dressed in a grass skirt. Her face was painted and she wore flowers in her hair. From time to time she joined the dancers, shyly and a little awkwardly, but she was clearly trying to demonstrate where she belonged. For three days and nights she would not go near
the string band at all. Though she felt somewhat ill at ease, being a stranger amongst her own people, she was extremely happy during these few days. She was reunited with her parents and her adoptive parents, all of whom she loved dearly and she felt that she had undertaken a first important step towards reconciliation with her people. She felt that there must be a way of pursuing her career as an artist on the one hand and reintegrating herself into her community, at least up to a point. As far as I could judge as a stranger her gestures seemed to be appreciated and fully accepted.

The day after the festival we were travelling on an open truck to the airstrip to catch a plane back to Port Moresby. Marie was still aglow with the experience. As we were passing through a palm grove, a coconut fell off a tree and grazed her head. Though she was not hit directly on the head she seemed to have a slight concussion: she was a little dizzy and had a strong feeling of nausea. Above all she looked frightened. As there was no hospital within easy reach, the only thing I could do was to take her on the short flight back to Port Moresby. There she was taken to hospital immediately, but no serious damage was diagnosed. After three days of rest and observation she was released. Though Marie had fully recovered, she had not lost her fear. She was convinced that this was not an accident, but that some of the elders in her village had made puri puri — that is, witchcraft — against her. She could never free herself of this fear again. In her perception, she had been called to order and punished for attempting to elevate herself beyond the other members of her community. For a while she stayed around listlessly and sank into deeper depression. Then she went home to her village and, when we saw her again years later, she was selling coconuts on the market in Port Moresby. She seemed content now and relaxed, but she had lost her spark and the energy that we had so much admired in her earlier. As far as we know she never made another drawing in her life.

Georgina was now faced with the problem of finding a substitute for Marie Taita Aihi, who could be trained to help run Hara Hara Prints. She felt she owed it to Papuga Nugint to provide some kind of continuity for the craft he had learnt.

Georgina has never really wanted to involve herself in running a business. When we first came to Port Moresby we were somewhat dismayed by the poor quality of textiles that was available in both supermarkets and Chinese stores. I could not quite visualise myself wearing a shirt with hibiscus flowers printed on them! In Nigeria, we had been spoiled: both hand-woven fabrics and batiks, which were
available on any market, were literally works of art. So Georgina started to produce a few yards of hand-printed cloth, purely for our own use.

But the clothes we began to wear became so popular that she had to print more and more for our friends and even for complete strangers. Georgina then constructed a professional printing table and shifted the whole operation from our dining room to the studio in our back garden. Papuga Nugint, who had been our gardener, childminder and friend, was trained as a textile printer. It soon became clear, however, that the whole operation was getting out of hand. It was taking up too much space and too much of Georgina’s time and, sooner or later, we would be accused of running a business on university premises. The only way out, therefore, was to set up a business owned and run by New Guineans.

Georgina first hoped she might find a Melpa, a man from Papuga’s own community, to become his partner. But when she could not find a suitable person she decided to train Henry Vileka, a young man from Henganofi in the Eastern Highlands, and hope for the best:

Eventually I found a young man from the Eastern Highlands who seemed to have some of the qualities I was looking for. He seemed brisk, energetic and imaginative. He was interested in taking a gamble, in giving up a well-paid job selling cameras in order to learn this new craft.

It was obvious from the start that a partnership between the two men would lead to tensions. They were both Highlanders, but from very different cultures and backgrounds. While they made great efforts to trust each other and to work together, their friends and employees tended to pull them apart.

We were extremely lucky to find some suitable premises which we could rent at a reasonable price from a European. In those days not many Europeans would rent business premises to a Niuginian. We drew up a partnership agreement between Papuga Nugint and Henry Vileka. Nugint was in charge of the technical side. Vileka learnt bookkeeping, and he became surprisingly good at adapting traditional designs for textiles within a very short time.

Obtaining a business licence for a New Guinean, however, was not quite as easy. Georgina took Henry Vileka to the relevant office. He queued up at the counter to apply for a business licence. In the meantime Georgina sat down, reading a book. After the best part of an hour had passed, Henry was still standing at the counter, unattended, while Australians who had arrived long after him had been served.
Georgina now went up to the counter and said to the woman behind the counter: 'Excuse me, but my friend here has been waiting for a long time.' She appeared genuinely shocked: 'Oh, I'm sorry, I thought he was the tea boy!' She was, indeed, not a racist. It simply had not occurred to her that a New Guinean might want to apply for a business licence. She then proceeded to explain that there was no such thing! Her office issued licences that permitted Australians or Chinese 'to trade with the natives', but there was no provision for 'natives to trade with natives'. Hara Hara Prints simply opened without a licence.

The reaction of the white community to the newly opened New Guinean business was rather mixed. Some people were openly hostile. Many stores from whom Henry Vileka had to buy material for the business would not accept his cheques and would force him to make every purchase in cash. Even more insulting was the fact that in many offices and shops, Henry was simply overlooked. Europeans were not used to dealing with a responsible New Guinean. They ignored him, because they took him to be some houseboy waiting for his misis. Some other people tried to be so 'helpful' that their patronising attitude

*Hara Hara,* mural by Georgina Beier. A corrugated iron shed, that served as a cottage industry that produced screen printed textiles that featured traditional New Guinea designs. Designers and printers were trained by Georgina Beier. She also designed many textiles for the workshop. All the staff were Papua New Guineans. This was only the second local business established in Port Moresby at this time.
threatened to smother the whole business. A few were practical and extremely helpful.

In many ways, Hara Hara Prints was extremely successful. The business side was run smoothly and efficiently by Henry. The quality of the printing was high and the textiles proved to be extremely popular. The business was thriving. But the real problem was whether the partnership between Papuga and Henry could last. To give an even-handed advantage to both sides, it was decided that an equal number of Hagens, from Papuga's area and of Henganofis, from Henry's area, should be employed. It is possibly the greatest mistake we ever made. While Papuga and Henry tried to bridge the cultural gap between them, their wantoks sowed seeds of suspicion. They accused the other side of misappropriating funds and were always making claims on the business in terms of free gifts of printed cloth.

In a way, the free gifts of cloth to friends, relatives and employees of the partners was not a bad thing. While it drastically reduced profits, it provided a kind of assurance for the business: it brought goodwill from the wantoks, it spread the profits around a wider group of people, which is, after all, in keeping with the more communal ways of living that are traditional to Papua New Guinea. Last and not least, it brightened up the Moresby scene by providing so many Highland labourers with brightly coloured shirts with Niugini designs.

Tension between the employees was heightened by the fact that none of them had a place to live. They all had to sleep in the workshop, which was illegal, because the area was classed as industrial and not residential.

Shortly before we left the country, when the business was beginning to pick up and look like a success, a violent fight broke out between supporters of both partners at a party. Only the vigorous efforts of Nugint and Vileka managed to control the fight. The quarrel was patched up with a further party, but the future did not seem too bright for Hara Hara when we left Papua New Guinea.

But, ultimately, it was not the tension between the Western and the Eastern Highlanders that caused the collapse of Hara Hara Prints. The business survived these rivalries for a while. Then something happened that we had not expected at all. Some months after we left Papua New Guinea Henry Vileka went home for his Christmas holidays. He felt rich and successful and wanted to impress his wantoks with his new status. When he arrived at Goroka airport, he hired a posh car and drove it to his village. Throughout his holidays he drove this car through the villages. In the end people got so jealous that he was
framed, taken to court and jailed for alleged rape. Hara Hara could not survive this disaster.

In one sense Hara Hara was a failure. Nevertheless I do not regret having taken the gamble. Hara Hara had many positive effects. It demonstrated that illiterate people could be employed to do highly skilled technical jobs. It demonstrated the imagination and enterprise that Vileka brought to the business. It helped to make Niuginians aware of the adaptability of their traditional designs for the applied arts, and it stimulated a new sense of dress — not only among university students, but also among the workers of Port Moresby. It made people in Port Moresby and elsewhere aware of the need for a national identity and so contributed towards the evolution of a national dress that reflected this identity.²

The tragic fate of Marie Taita Aihi and Henry Vileka demonstrated that many Papuan and New Guinean village communities still felt threatened by individuals who seized opportunities and became successful in a rapidly changing world. Older people felt that basic values of the society were being undermined. While Marie and Henry paid a heavy price for their success, they also became role models. Gradually, Papua New Guinean societies found a balance between individual ambition and loyalty to one’s wantoks.

There was nothing in Ruki Fame’s background and upbringing to suggest that he might become an artist. He was born in the tiny village of Yohobo, about 10 kilometres from Henganofi in the Eastern Highlands. When Ruki was about seven years old, the six hamlets that made up the village were converted to Christianity by the Lutheran mission. The mission dealt roughly with the people’s traditional culture.

Ruki’s father was forced to send away his second wife with her three children. She had to seek refuge with her sister. But Ruki, being the son of the first wife, was lucky enough to remain in his father’s house. Ruki grew up without knowing the traditional festivals of his people. The delicate head rests and the bold wooden eating bowls were no longer being carved. Only arrows and spears and string bags were still being produced by his uncles and aunts. The boys of Ruki’s generation no longer went through initiation rites; they were no longer firmly rooted in the local community. They eagerly attended the mission school in the hope that this new type of education might open a wider world for them.

Ruki was sent to the Lutheran Primary School at Finintegu when he was seven. But the school could not take him further than the Standard II. He had to move on to Kainantu, then to Asaroka and finally to Hagen before he could complete his Standard VI. Ruki would have liked to go to Asaroka High School, but the mission made him apply for a place in Madang Technical School instead. However, he was not accepted and so, reluctantly, he returned to his village where he
found a job running his uncle’s tiny trade store. But the village life was too restrictive for him now. Within six months he had saved enough money to buy himself a one-way ticket to Port Moresby.

He arrived in the capital in August 1968. He had no idea how he would survive there, because he had neither resources nor skills. Many of his wantoks were just drifting, some had become hooligans. But Ruki was luckier than most. He found a job as a grass cutter with a firm called Allied Enterprises. He earned $13.00 a fortnight, barely enough to feed himself. Allied Enterprises was reputed to be the only indigenous business in Port Moresby at the time. It was owned by a Papuan called Francis Ovia. The firm manufactured office furniture, mainly for government departments. Mr Vijinaika, a Sri Lankan officer of the ‘Small Industries’ Department, had assisted the establishment of the firm with advice and training schemes for artisans. Ruki’s eagerness, alertness and intelligence soon came to the notice of Francis Ovia and he gave him the opportunity to do more interesting and lucrative work. He became a painter in the carpentry section, then a brickmaker.
Finally he was given the opportunity to take 16 welding lessons with Mr Vijinaika, and then he advanced to the position of a welder, producing metal furniture for Allied Enterprises.

A young Highlander with little education could hardly hope for more in the capital, which offered virtually no opportunities to Papua New Guineans. In 1968 even relatively menial jobs were still reserved for whites. But Ruki was not really satisfied with his life. He had too much drive, too much energy and initiative to be content with his position. He was restless, but he did not know in which direction he could move.

The decisive change came when his friend, Henry Vileka, became the manager of Hara Hara Prints. Ruki and Henry came from neighbouring villages and had been close friends from childhood. When Ruki learned that Henry had opened his own business, he took a drastic step: he resigned from his job at Allied Enterprises, turned up on Henry's doorstep and declared that he was going to be a partner in the business. It was obviously a very risky decision to take: Ruki would not be able to find another job like the one he had given up and he had not been given any assurance by Henry that he would welcome him into his business. But Ruki played the wantok card: he knew perfectly well that Henry would find it extremely difficult to reject him, when ties of common language and common heritage bound them together. He also believed that, having had slightly more education than Henry, he was bringing some assets into the firm. Indeed, Henry somewhat reluctantly took in his friend, but things did not work out well. As Georgina remembers:

Ruki was an individualist with a quick, lively mind, and he became irritated with the slow, careful processes of textile printing. His energy and his drive upset the methodical work style of his friend. I was getting worried about their relationship, which was becoming very tense, and I realised that the differences in temperament could eventually wreck the entire business. The only solution would be to set up Ruki in a business of his own.

Georgina thought it would be a pity to waste Ruki's considerable experiences in welding. She asked him whether he would like to do ‘art welding’. Ruki obviously had little idea what that meant, but he was the kind of person who eagerly grabbed any new opportunity. He had obviously become uneasy about his relationship with Henry and here was an opportunity to start an entirely new enterprise of his own.

Georgina has described the beginnings of Ruki's career as an artist as follows:
I was able to borrow some welding equipment for him and set him up in a small workshop. At first he tried to make little iron lamps. Though these were attractive, they sold slowly. His first breakthrough came when someone asked my advice on the interior decoration of his house. His low-ceilinged living room was painted white, but had a very ugly 1.2 metre by 2.4 metre window at the end. He needed something to disguise the glass louvres, but he did not want to stop the breeze with curtains. I suggested a figurative iron screen.

This job gave Ruki his first opportunity to try his hand as a designer. The work was successful and he now began to make a series of screens or iron wall hangings, cutting out shapes with his blow-torch from iron sheets. For his imagery he derived inspiration from an old Papuan carver, Avavo Kava, who was at the time working in my compound. Avavo Kava came from Orokolo in the Papuan Gulf and he was carving hohao boards. Ruki’s traditional culture has very little in common with that of Avavo Kava, but Ruki comes from a culture whose artists are no longer active and the few months he had spent in Port Moresby had opened him up and made him sensitive to ideas from any quarter.¹

Many people in Port Moresby began to commission Ruki’s screens to replace the ugly ‘boy wire’ (security bars) in front of their windows.

Ruki’s first exhibition of welded screens and lamps was held outside the university library on 6 August 1971. Georgina said on the invitation card:

The works exhibited are welded paintings. His use of colour as a background gives his designs a more vivid depth …

Ruki’s designs have a sophistication and elegance and yet there is energy and liveliness in his work. The limitation of the medium he chooses to work in concentrates the quality of design and produces a simplicity that is reminiscent of some of the great artistic traditions of carved shields in Papua New Guinea, where limitations of technique arose from the environment.

The exhibition was a great success and Ruki has been living as a professional artist ever since.

¹ From Modern Images From Niugini, Kovave Special Issue, Port Moresby, 1974.
Happy Man and Proud Man,
Ruki Fame, iron sculpture, 1977
Partly in order to help Ruki break out of the initial two-dimensionality of his work and partly out of sheer curiosity, Georgina took a few welding lessons from Ruki, then proceeded to make two freestanding figures, a man and a woman. Ruki, always eager to pick up any challenge, created his first three-dimensional images: two pigs and a bird.

When we left for Nigeria in 1971, Georgina arranged for Ruki to go to Goroka Teachers College, where he could work with better equipment.

Georgina and Ruki only worked together for four months before we left for Nigeria, but it was enough to lay the foundations for his career. The brief co-operation had far-reaching consequences for both partners. Ruki has become a highly successful professional welder, who has carried out many public commissions in Port Moresby and Goroka. He soon abandoned the images he had borrowed from Avavo Kava and developed his personal style. Many of his works display a delightful sense of humour, like his well-known pamuk (prostitute) series. On other occasions his work can be serene — as in several crucifixes that have been commissioned by PNG churches.

Georgina used the skills she picked up from Ruki to produce a 10 metre high sculpture for the University of Ife, Nigeria, as well as murals for the Institute of PNG Studies and for the College of Advanced Education on the Gold Coast in Queensland. In 1992, she conducted a workshop in Oshogbo, Nigeria, which produced several iron sculptors like Rotimi Togbe and Mufu Ahmed, who have already held successful exhibitions in Europe. In 1997, Georgina conducted a workshop for professional welders in Fiji. Artisans who had spent years on building sites or bridge constructions suddenly discovered that they could use their technical skills for creative expression.

The encounter with Ruki was typical of our entire experience in Papua New Guinea during those exciting four years: it demonstrates that teaching is a joint journey of exploration by 'teacher' and 'student'. It is a pooling of resources rather than a one-way traffic of knowledge from one person to another. I am told that Leonardo da Vinci made this remark: 'Pathetic is the student who does not surpass his teacher.' I feel ill at ease with this statement, because it seems inspired by the European notion of perpetual 'progress'. Instead, I would rather say: 'Pathetic is the teacher who does not learn from his student.'
Dukduk (masquerader from the Gazelle Peninsula),
Ruki Fame, iron sculpture, 1977
Every two years an agricultural show is held in Goroka, in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Visitors from abroad flood into this show; Americans arrive in chartered planes, and hotels are sometimes booked two years in advance by foreign agencies. The attraction, of course, is not the coffee beans or the sweet potatoes, but the human exhibit of performing New Guineans.

The show does not represent a serious effort to present New Guinean traditions in a dignified manner. It is, rather, a case of the dancers being thrown in among the lucky dips, the greasy-pole competitions and the sundry other paraphernalia of a vulgar funfair. The tourists stroll from hot dog stand to Coca Cola kiosk, snatchings a glimpse of the Stone Age in between. The intimate and sensitive Highland flutes are drowned by blaring loudspeakers announcing the results of the polocrosse tournament.

The numerous Highland groups who appear at the show to dance are, more or less, commandeered by the administration. Those living nearby enjoy the big singsing, the crowd and the competition, but those who have to spend four or five days walking to the showground are less happy. The accommodation provided for them is poor, the food consists mainly of sweet potatoes and, if they want to supplement their diet, they have to pay exorbitant prices in the big city. Those who do not officially compete, but who have taken tremendous trouble in dressing up in all their feathers and personal decorations, are nevertheless charged a gate fee.
In these unpleasant and undignified circumstances, among the features of the 1968 show were the administration stands that exhibited the cash crops, artwork and people of each area. The interested visitor could there get a quick survey of the culture of a vast area, which he might never be able to view first hand.

The most impressive district exhibit was the roundhouse from Okapa. Cramped inside it, a group of warriors dressed in dark feathers sang some of the most beautiful songs I have ever heard. The purity and serenity of this music, however, was very difficult to hear above the pop music relayed by loudspeakers and the shrill voices of the lottery sellers. On the outside of the Okapa roundhouse were bows, arrows and wooden dishes of the area and some extraordinary carvings. They were unlike any other carving I had seen before. They were between 1.2 and 1.4 metres high, generously carved in white wood. There was an element of crudity about them that arose from a desire to be emphatic, and a total refusal to achieve refinement for its own sake. They were bold, powerful images that stared at one with eyes of inlaid marbles. Some were economically painted with simple geometric designs, while others wore a boldly painted scarlet face and chest. Some were dressed in beads, their noses pierced with shell ornaments, and others had shorts painted on them. It seemed like a kind of vigorous pop art, an artform with no recognisable antecedents — certainly the work of powerful imagination.

We tried to get as much information as we could from the District Officer who had arranged the whole exhibit. The artist, Wanamera, lived in a village called Asempa, several hours drive from Okapa on a nearly impassable road. We wanted to know whether they were religious carvings, but we were told quite emphatically that they served no purpose at all, that they were 'just carvings'. The District Officer assured us that the artist was not going to come to the show and that it would be dangerous for us to try to negotiate the road to Asempa. His evasive story was soon contradicted by a missionary with a heavy German accent who declared that the carvings were all the result of a dangerous cargo cult. We attempted to buy some of the works but were informed that they were not for sale. Quite naturally, we became more and more curious about the artist and the background to his art. We spoke to some of the Okapa councillors, who informed us that Wanamera was in fact coming to the show. They introduced us to him the following day.

Wanamera impressed one immediately as a very distinctive personality, for although he wore European clothing he did not appear drab. Most Highlanders have little respect for European clothing. They buy the dull, ready-made choice of shorts and shirts from the Chinese
stores. They may resent the three dollars they have to spend on a shirt in order to appear respectable in a town. They would much more willingly spend $20.00 on a particular bird’s plume to be used in a village ceremony. But Wanamera had somehow found himself a pair of brilliantly striped shorts and a narrow brimmed trilby, which marked him as a rare individualist, in spite of his very Australian long socks and lace-up shoes. This short wiry man was pleased with the interest we took in his work, but reluctant to talk to us on the showground. He appeared nervous in the presence of so many officials. But, he agreed to stay behind for a day or two after the show, if we could arrange for his transport back home. So, we arranged for the loan of a Land Rover and we felt pleased that we were going to have an opportunity to visit Asempa to see more of Wanamera’s carvings.
The road from Goroka to Kainantu is part of the main trunk road that runs through the Highlands. It is rough but reasonably level. From Kainantu to Okapa the road deteriorates considerably. The grades become steeper and steeper and the corners more dangerous. After Okapa there is barely a road, but a track of loose boulders and river stones. It is barely wide enough for one car, but that is hardly a problem for, one rarely meets another car. It is a dangerous drive, possible only in a four-wheel-drive vehicle and with a very experienced driver. Clinging to the tiny ledge and continually climbing through this magnificent, harsh country, one is more and more aware of the loneliness and isolation of the people who must live there. The ‘road’ does not cut into the landscape but melts into the mountains. The vegetation is sparse and there are very few villages by the roadside, though huts or fires can be seen in the distance.

For the last two hours of our journey, Wanamera became more and more excited. He kept implying that Asempa was very near. Indicating some mountain ridge in the distance he would say: ‘Asempa i klostu; Asempa istap antap.’ But, when we got nearer that ridge, we would learn that he had indicated another much more distant range that we had not been able to see before. Perhaps his relatively long absence from his village had made him overexcited. Perhaps he was thinking of a much shorter footpath, because his people often walk the shortest and not the easiest route.

Eventually, we reached a very high ridge that seemed like the top of the world. The landscape spread into huge distances. A moonless night descended and it became extremely cold. Then, there was a dramatic entrance into Wanamera’s ‘line’. For, suddenly, he called out in a high-pitched musical chant. He was singing the announcement of his arrival and voices answered in the dark. The entrance to the village was blocked with a kind of stockade. The villagers had to come out of their huts and lift the logs that had been piled horizontally between four vertical posts. The old custom of stockading the village for defence purposes seemed to have survived the age of road traffic. We passed through several such villages before we reached Wanamera’s own village. Each time there was the singing and the excited response. This musical communication was extremely moving. A song in the dark coming from a disembodied voice seems purer than in sunlight.

When we reached Asempa at last, everybody gathered in one of the eight roundhouses to hear the news from Goroka and to meet the strangers. Nearly all the villagers were dressed in traditional ornaments, the men carrying their weapons, which formed part of their everyday
Woodcarving by Wanamera displayed at the Goroka show in 1968
apparel. The house was heated by an open fire in the centre of the floor. We were glad of the warmth, but the thick smoke was painful to our eyes. Because of the bitter cold, the round huts have no windows and the smoke escapes slowly through the thick thatch roof that reaches quite close to the ground. We sat on a number of bamboo platforms, which followed the outlines of the wall and which appeared to be sleeping platforms.

Wanamera gave a long description of Goroka, of the show, and took pains to explain the purpose of our visit. Eventually, we were led to another hut, which appeared to be the only one that was unoccupied and available to house strangers. It was different from all other buildings in the village in that it was a square house and divided into two rooms. The only objects in the house were a life-size wooden image of a man and a small shrine of fresh flowers. The carving was eight years old and was the first Wanamera had ever made.

The following day, Wanamera began to talk. He told us about the death of his brother and how that afternoon the dead brother had appeared to him in a dream, complaining that the people of Asempa were not looking after their dead. They did not even 'mark the ground' properly. The brother instructed him to make carvings of all people who died in the village, to keep them in a special hut, build altars with fresh flowers for them and institute a weekly *singsing* in their honour. And so, Wanamera began to build his extraordinary mausoleum of the village dead. His brother's injunction made immediate sense to him because, in the tradition of his people, power, wealth and success come from the dead ancestors. When things go wrong, the immediate explanation is that the ancestors have been deprived of proper respect by the living. The coming of the white man brought confusion and bewilderment into the villagers' lives. Some customs were suppressed, others abandoned. The startling contrast in the standard of living between the white men and the New Guineans made the people of Asempa aware that something was deeply wrong somewhere, that they were not succeeding as well as they should. Like many illiterate New Guineans in this situation, Wanamera responded by creating a new mythology based on traditional beliefs concerning the ancestors, but incorporating also Christian elements like the weekly 'service' for the dead and the use of cut flowers on altars.

Wanamera hoped that his action would strengthen the ties with his ancestors again, help him to break the isolation of his people and help them to comprehend and benefit from the modern world. Again and again, we heard officials refer to him as a 'cargo cult leader'. But
Wanamera did not seem to believe that his efforts would bring a sudden flood of manufactured goods into his village. He did try, however, to revive and strengthen the communion with the dead, and he did expect from it some form of a happier and more meaningful life in much the same way other religions offer.

The mausoleum has a spectacular impact. Of some 50 figures, no two are alike. His use of marbles for eyes is one of the few design elements that recurs frequently. But no two carvings are of the same proportions. His 50 carvings are 50 inventions. Some figures have huge, heavy legs that dwarf the body and make the tiny arms appear to be amputated. Sometimes, the arms are not carved at all. In one figure a huge, dark hand is painted on the body and spreads across the belly. Other figures have arms carved in shallow relief; one has the arms spreading away from the chest, then reaching back to form short, stumpy legs. Some are inspired by characteristics of the dead person, but it is a surrealist characterisation. The breasts and penis are usually removable. He makes a cavity in the figure and carves the breasts or penis separately, to be inserted. This method is adopted because it saves Wanamera the trouble of whittling away large areas to include the protuberances. Occasionally, he even represents the breasts merely by cavities, negative shapes that add to the surrealist atmosphere of the whole. The carvings are seldom higher than 1.4 metres. The portrait of his brother still remains the tallest one, it is 1.7 metres high. The smallest figures of 25 to 30 centimetres represent dead babies. There is only one animal figure, a superbly simple abstract bird. It is quieter in personality than the other figures and has the purest concept of form. The great variety of styles and ideas may result from the fact that there is no tradition of carving in Asempa. Wanamera may never have seen a carving when he made his first image.

To supply the mausoleum with flowers is the task of Wanamera’s wife. She plants patches of flowers all over the village and prefers bright reds and yellows. She is a slim woman, taller than her husband. One senses that Wanamera relies heavily on her and that she carries much of the burden of his activity. Although she remains discreetly in the background, Wanamera mentions her continually, gives her credit for her help and often speaks of ‘we’ rather than ‘I’.

Every Saturday, a service is held in the mausoleum. He must have borrowed the Saturday from the Seventh Day Adventist mission that is not far away. A small band of people gather in the hut. They sing traditional songs, eat food and think of their dead. The carvings line the walls in a large semicircle. From the centre, opposite the door, a line of
figures comes forward to the middle of the room; it is kept standing by wooden railings. This appears to be the dividing line between men and women at the ceremony. Not all the carvings represent specific dead. Some merely represent the anonymous collective dead, and it is from these that Wanamera has occasionally agreed to sell one of his figures.

It is possible that Wanamera has seen some of the black funeral figures that are occasionally created in the Henganofi area. But those figures are simpler and more stylised, following an established formula. For Wanamera, each carving represents a new idea. His imagination remains fresh; there is no indication of his carving reaching a sterile
stylisation. Nobody helps him to carve and he always works alone in the bush, on the very spot where he cut the tree. He then brings the carving back to the village to paint.

Wanamera is not a traditional artist. Nor can he be called a modern artist. He is not really working to express himself, but he is working for his community, for their future. There is a millenarian hope here, perhaps, but no organised 'movement' and certainly no evidence of his collecting money or gifts as some of the so-called cargo cult leaders were alleged to do.

Wanamera regards himself as a persecuted man. He claims that he has been jailed eight times since he began his carvings. He does not fully understand why this occurred nor what the charges have been. He vaguely feels that he was made to suffer for his beliefs. But the effect of the alleged jailings served to strengthen his purpose. Wanamera thinks that both missions operating in the area (the Lutherans and the Seventh Day Adventists) are hostile to him. They did, in fact, accuse him openly of cargo cult activities and he thought that they were very angry because he had refused to accept waswas, or baptism. Baptism is often accepted casually by Highlanders who do not realise what is meant by 'conversion', but Wanamera and some 30 other villagers had refused even this compromise, and Wanamera was branded the ringleader of this mild and unaggressive resistance.

One other reason why Wanamera feels unimpressed with Christianity was the dismal failure of the mission school in Asempa. The teacher absconded with the cash after two years and was never replaced. Wanamera's only son was thus forced to end his education prematurely, having picked up a very poor knowledge of Pidgin at school and now being virtually unemployable. Nevertheless, the son has little appreciation for the father's work and, in spite of a first dismal failure to find regular employment in Port Moresby, he has returned there a second time to try his luck.

We made several fruitless attempts to find out from the administration whether and why Wanamera had been jailed. All four District Officers, past and present, to whom we talked were evasive. All spoke in vague terms of a cargo cult. Such cults do, in fact, often disturb the peace. Money can be collected under false pretences. People may be incited to destroy their belongings or even crops in expectation of their salvation. In some cases, leaders have sacrificed their lives in the hope of bringing salvation, in imitation of Christ. In such cases, the administration is bound to step in. Even such extreme and confused cargo cult leaders do not, however, deserve the contempt they usually
get. There is some logic in their thinking. After all, the coming of the white man has disturbed their relations with the ancestors and, for an illiterate person, education is a form of magic that the white man refuses to share with him. After all, it was not possible for a New Guinean to have even a complete primary schooling until the end of World War II!

No one admitted that Wanamera had been jailed and there were no records of these jailing in any of the courts. One District Officer asserted that he thought Wanamera did no harm and should be left alone. Another said that he had jailed so many people in his term of office he could not remember whether he had jailed Wanamera or not. The incumbent Administrative Officer said that Wanamera was currently being ‘investigated’ and that, therefore, he could not comment. His Papuan assistant volunteered the information that cargo cult was again ‘rampant’ in Asempa. Another officer again firmly denied that there had ever been any jailing, but admitted that on one occasion the police had raided the mausoleum and taken away and destroyed all the images. The reason for the raid was not given. Wanamera, though horrified by this incident, immediately began to rework all the carvings.

The absence of court records of the jailing is still a mystery. One Administrative Officer suggested that the jailing occurred only in his mind — but one can hardly assume that the entire village of Asempa lived under that same illusion. Since we made those inquiries there were no more jailing. It might have had something to do with the fact that the issue had been made public; on the other hand, it might merely have been because the administration accepted his election as village councillor and because they were considering the possibility of commercialising the carvings. But his work hardly appealed to souvenir hunting expatriates in Papua New Guinea and the kiaps had no contacts to the international art market. Had they succeeded, Wanamera might have made a lot of money, but that would not have solved his problems. His entire artistic activity arose from the need to come to terms with the incomprehensible changes that were happening around him. This involved the creation of a personal mythology and of strengthening the community by re-establishing strong links with the dead.

Wanamera never thought of himself as an ‘artist’. His work did not arise from any personal ambition. He looked for neither money nor recognition. He was a powerful visionary who tried to give his small community in Asempa village a new lease of life.
Coming to Papua New Guinea was like a voyage of discovery. Everything was new. Our extensive African experience was quite irrelevant.

On our very first day in Port Moresby we had to learn that at a market in Papua New Guinea you cannot bargain; if you tried to beat down the price the vegetable seller would simply look at you with contempt. In Nigeria, a market woman would consider you a kind of a spoil-sport if you paid her straight away what she had asked. She might be glad to earn more money than she had expected but, on the other hand, you had cut out the social interaction: the jokes, the teasing, the undertones of eroticism, the building up to a lasting trade relationship.

To improve the appearance of our bleak university dwelling, Georgina painted a mural on the outside wall. In Nigeria, a crowd would quickly have gathered, enjoying the spectacle and laughing and commenting loudly. In Papua New Guinea, people walked past discreetly, perhaps looking at the activity shyly, but certainly not staring. Papua New Guineans were reserved, immensely dignified and extremely egalitarian people.

We enjoyed our state of innocence in our new home where every day was full of surprises. We certainly did not indulge in the common colonialist's pastime of playing off one lot of 'natives' against another and always finding the current experience inferior to the last.

But Africa kept catching up with us in a number of ways. Most African countries had received their independence around 1960 and, as the Australian government came under mounting international pressure and UN commissions were asking what they were doing about the 'territory's' independence, Australian administrators were naturally looking at Africa. When we arrived in Papua New Guinea, the Vice Chancellor,
Dr John Gunther, was in fact visiting Africa to look at universities and meet his counterparts there. It must have been a fruitless exercise, because his own university was much more progressive and independent than the conservative, colonial and totally British oriented universities in Africa. Some time later the territory administration sent a delegation of PNG parliamentarians to Africa to observe independence at work. Not surprisingly, the delegates returned, having their own preconceived ideas confirmed. Australian MPs returned more apprehensive about independence than before; PNG politicians like Michael Somare, on the other hand, came back saying: if they can do it, so can we.

Even though this trip didn't give people any new ideas, one was grateful for the serious motivation behind it. It was certainly a big improvement on a previous move by the PNG Administration, when they advertised for white policemen in Rhodesia, allegedly because they were experienced in handling ‘natives’.

Many expatriate public servants in Papua New Guinea held the opinion that Africans were more civilised ‘natives’ than Papua New Guineans. When people saw the first Kauage copper panels in our house, many assumed automatically that we had brought them from Africa. ‘Our natives could never do anything like that,’ they said. Even in the army similar views were expressed. When an army truck collided with Georgina’s car the sergeant who came to investigate the accident talked contemptuously about the Papua New Guinean soldiers he had to train, then went on to compare them to a group of Tanzanian soldiers who had been sent over for a brief training course: ‘Those Africans were different. Really nice guys and pretty competent.’

The tragedy of the Nigerian civil war and the photographs of starving Biafran children touched the hearts of Australians. Even in Papua New Guinea people collected money in the streets for humanitarian aid to Biafra!

Even so, Africa remained a nebulous concept, a set of clichés really, until the arrival in December 1968 of a Nigerian lawyer, Ikenna Nwokolo. He had been a law student at Melbourne University. While he was doing research for his higher degree there, the civil war broke out and he had to get a full-time job as a tutor in the Melbourne Law School. One of his former colleagues, an American called Arthur Tarnow, had found a job in the law department of the University of PNG, and it was he who first suggested to Ikenna that he should apply for a position in Papua New Guinea. He told Ikenna that the Papua New Guineans were not adequately represented by Australian lawyers in the courts. Tarnow said that because of his American training he was not allowed to practice law in Papua New Guinea, but that Ikenna, having been called to the English
bar, was certain to be admitted. That would give him the opportunity to become a role model for the local students, whom he could motivate to practice law rather than end up in a safe university job, teaching it. Ikenna took up the challenge and at UPNG he soon found an open-minded dynamic head of department, A. B. Weston, who had been professor of law at the University of Dar-es-Salaam. Ikenna and his West Indian wife Elaine were equally popular with expatriates and Papua New Guineans.

In 1969, Ikenna caused a sensation when he defended the Mataungan Association in Rabaul against a government court action. Mataungan was a Tolai self-help organisation. Since 1949, they had controlled the native Government Council, which administered, amongst other things, the Tolai Cocoa Project, which was worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. In 1969, the Administration transformed the Rabaul Council into a ‘multiracial’ council — without any prior consultation. The Mataungans felt that this was a thinly disguised takeover bid for the Tolai Cocoa Project. To protect their rights they locked up the Council Chambers. The Administration then sued Oscar Tamur, Daniel Rumet, Melchior Tomot and other Mataungan leaders for ‘stealing’ the Council keys. It was a rather complex case and amounted to a trial of strength between a conservative colonial government and a group of local politicians who were claiming the right to run their own affairs.

Winning the case turned Ikenna into an instant national hero amongst Papua New Guineans, while giving him the reputation of being a troublemaker amongst some of the more die-hard territorians. Later, Ikenna successfully defended Albert Maori Kiki before the Parliament Privileges Committee, when the Colonial House of Assembly charged him with breach of parliamentary privilege because, on a visit to Australia, he had referred to ministerial members in Papua New Guinea as ‘Mickey Mouse ministers’. Ikenna remained close to many of these early politicians like Michael Somare, Albert Maori Kiki and Ebia Olewale. He became a role model for many of our brightest students like Leo Hannet, Rabbie Namaliu, John Kasaiwalova and many others.

Ikenna Nwokolo and his wife Elaine changed the political and social landscape in Papua New Guinea in many other ways, simply by using their common sense and prodigious energy to break new grounds on all kinds of fronts.

Elaine Nwokolo opened a driving school for Papua New Guineans. A simple, straightforward business venture, one would think. Yet it was viewed by some Australians as an attack on the status quo. ‘What are we coming to if a “boy” can go and learn how to drive?’ A prominent, but conservative New Guinean even thought it was a school for ‘training thieves’. As a matter of fact, Papua New Guineans did not steal cars —
neither before nor after the establishment of Elaine’s driving school. Before she opened it, however, they used to borrow cars. Our car, which was usually parked on the street in front of our house, was occasionally ‘borrowed’ at night by people who gave driving lessons to their wantoks. For a while we were not aware of this, because it was meticulously returned to the same spot in the early hours of the morning. One morning, however, we found a notice on the windscreen. The clandestine ‘driving teacher’ apologised because he had run out of petrol! However, they did push the vehicle back to where they had found it.

Another business venture of Elaine’s was an African boutique. The textiles she used to make up dresses, shirts and bübäs in a modern West African style were actually not of African origin. They were textiles produced in Holland specifically for the West African market and did reflect the bold taste and preference for colours of West African women. These fashions were particularly popular with New Guinean men. They brightened up the streets of Port Moresby considerably. Elaine’s fashions were a welcome relief from the drabness of the clothes offered in supermarkets and Chinese stores.

Many other distinguished Africans came to work in Papua New Guinea, for example Prof. Enyi (agriculture) and Prof. Ezilo (medicine), both at UPNG, and Dr Lucas for the World Health Organisation. In the mid-seventies, the Ugandan writer, Taban Lo Liyong, brought new life into the literature department. Among the short term visitors were such eminent people as the Nobel Prize laureate, Wole Soyinka, and the television and theatre producer, Segun Olusola.

African literature became an inspiration to many Papua New Guinean writers, because they identified with many of the cultural anxieties and political issues which African authors — particularly those of the French négritude school — were concerned with. African literature was not only taught in the UPNG, but also in many of the Teacher Training Colleges. In Goroka, Elton Brash produced a play by Wole Soyinka with his students. When they learned from me that Soyinka had been jailed without trial by the Federal Government of Nigeria, they wrote to General Gowon, asking for his release. I did not expect the Nigerian government to react, because so far they had brazenly ignored all protests, including those by the international PEN club and Amnesty International. To my surprise the students of Goroka Teachers College did receive a letter from the Secretary

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1 This was used to describe Francophone writers from Africa and the Caribbean who protested against the French policy of assimilation and established African cultural values in their poetry. The critique of Western values by writers like Leopold Sedar Senghor (Senegal), Aime Cesaire (Martinique) and Leon Dama (Guyana) inspired young writers in Papua New Guinea.
of the Head of State, stating that Nigeria was fighting a war and that strict security measures were necessary. However, all cases of detainees were being evaluated and Professor Soyinka's case was presently under review! We had no idea why a group of students in Papua New Guinea, out of all people, would be honoured with a reply, but the scenario I liked to imagine runs something like this: all letters from European and American organisations or celebrities were being viewed as 'interference in the internal affairs of Nigeria'. The letter from Papua New Guinea, however, must have shocked the public servant who opened it. Most likely he had never heard of Papua New Guinea before. He must have been surprised to get a communication from such a remote and — in West Africa — unknown place. How was it possible that Nigeria was getting such a bad reputation even in such a distant little black country that was struggling for its independence? So, he felt that a polite response rather than defiant silence was appropriate in this case. (Wole Soyinka was actually released a few months later, but I would not go so far as to see a connection.)

Adventurous teachers in high schools and Training Colleges occasionally produced African plays. One Training College performed Obotunde Ijimere's Yoruba version of *Everyman*. Unfortunately, I have forgotten — many years later — which college it was, but I do remember distinctly the mixture of bewilderment, fascination and delight when the students listened to a recording of the original musical version in the Yoruba language. A year after we left Papua New Guinea, the National Theatre of PNG produced Obotunde Ijimere's *The Fall*. William Takaku translated the original text (in West African Pidgin) into Melanesian Pidgin. Peter Trist, who directed the play, remembers:

The cast responded enthusiastically to the play's very loose version of the Bible's 'Genesis' and to William Takaku's clever adaptations of West African references to Papua New Guinea.

'Masta Godu' and his top angels — the good Gabriel and the tricky Lucifa — were conceived in post-independence public service terms: Godu was a super demanding Departmental Head. Gabriel became an overzealous clerk with government uniform inherited from colonial days: knee-length white socks, black shoes, long-sleeved button-up shirt and an uncomfortable necktie. Lucifa was, in contrast, a non-conformist: tight jeans, a patterned body shirt and platform shoes — a sort of Bruce Lee/John Travolta image. God's creatures became the Papua New Guinea fauna: Bird of Paradise, Crocodile, Dugong and Wallaby. The plants were similarly tropical Pacific.

The main change was the 'forbidden fruit'. Ijimere had substituted palm-wine for the biblical apple; in Takaku's version it became the
betel nut. Especially appreciated by the audience was the play's denouement. The 'wicked' Lucifa — con-man and trickster — was not punished but succeeded in becoming a politician and Government Minister! Thus the adapted Nigerian comedy became Takaku's 'Pekato Bilong Man' and was a huge success with audiences in Lae, Kainantu, Goroka, Hagen, Wapenamenda, Madang and Wewak.

It would be a mistake to think that the African presence in Papua New Guinea was purely beneficial. When the deteriorating conditions on the African continent made Papua New Guinea attractive merely as an escape from home, many mediocre Africans sought and found employment and some of them felt as superior to Papua New Guineans as the most die-hard Australian administrators had done.

Contact with Africa and to a lesser extent with India, however, did give the people of Papua New Guinea another window on the world. Colonial powers tended to jealously exclude all other political and cultural influences in their own territories. They were all, to a greater or lesser extent, believers in their mission civilisatrice, as the French used to call it. Accordingly, cultural exchanges in Nigeria used to be limited to Britain, while in Senegal they were limited to France, and in Papua New Guinea they were limited to Australia.

By creating at least some modest interchange between Papua New Guinea and Africa, we were able to make Papua New Guineans aware of the fact that their cultural dilemma was not simply to make a choice or to find a compromise between PNG culture and Australian culture. It was important at that stage to make people aware that the world was infinitely more complex than that, that there were many more models and many more choices. We arranged several exhibitions of contemporary African art in Port Moresby and took an exhibition of PNG art to the Festival of the Arts in Ife, Nigeria. New Guinean plays, like They Never Return, were performed at the Institute of African Studies in Ife.

When, in 1974, we returned to Papua New Guinea to start the Institute of PNG Studies, I was able to persuade the Nigerian government of General Obasanjo to donate $30,000 to our institute, and President Senghor of Senegal sent us $10,000, even though Senegal was not an affluent country like Nigeria. When I went to thank the Nigerian government for their largesse during a visit to Lagos, I managed to persuade the energetic and enlightened minister of foreign affairs, General Jo Garba, to invite Papua New Guinea to the World Festival of Black Arts in Lagos. This event gave PNG writers, dancers and musicians the opportunity to encounter world famous black performers, not only from the African continent, but also from the Caribbean and the United States.
The quality of life in a new country is not merely determined by the dramatic highlights: big festivals or exciting exhibitions of new artists, a successful theatre production or the emergence of a young poet. Perhaps, even more decisive in creating the ambience of one's life, are the daily encounters with friends and helpers or even strangers; the unexpected rapport, the discovery of other people's ways of seeing things, the experience of their spontaneous warmth and trust and friendship.

This chapter is a mosaic of little anecdotes, of the small encounters of daily life that form the colourful backdrop to the actions of the protagonists.

An instant friend — Papuga Nugint

Within days of our arrival, a self-possessed looking Highlander appeared outside our house. He had the typical stocky and muscular figure of a man who grew up climbing steep mountain passes. He had an impressive profile with a prominent nose. Had he grown a long beard he could have walked straight out of an ancient Assyrian relief. As we left the house he approached and asked whether we needed a 'houseboy'. The term 'boy' made us wince, but we did need help. Georgina asked him what wages he expected. He named what would have been then the average fortnightly wage. Georgina, fresh from West Africa and used to bargaining, automatically named a slightly lower sum, fully expecting him to launch into an entertaining game of bargaining. Instead he gave her a contemptuous look, turned around and walked away. He did this with such aristocratic dignity that Georgina called him back immediately. He was clearly the kind of person we could live with.
Papuga quickly became a friend. He attracted many of his wantoks to our compound, who would use our water tap to wash. Often, one or two of them came and shared a meal with Papuga on the verandah of the studio at the back of the garden. As soon as Sebastian started to walk, he trotted across the garden and climbed the steps to the verandah to eat with the men. He would rather share the cold rice and tinned mackerel pike with Papuga and his friends than eat with us. The Hagen men loved him and began to treat him like a mascot. When a number of them went to Koki Market on a truck, they would carry him.
along and sometimes he stayed out with them for the whole day. Though Port Moresby was considered to be a dangerous town even then, we never worried about him. He was perfectly safe with his Hagen friends. Only once we got seriously worried. The men had taken Sebastian out in the morning, but by nine o’clock in the night there was no sign of them. We began to fear that there might have been an accident. We drove to the police and the hospital — but no car accident had been reported. Finally they turned up at eleven o’clock — Sebastian wide awake in high spirits. Apparently, when they were at Koki Market, they met some friends who invited them to a *mumu* at Sogeri some 25 miles away in the hills. They all came back laughing and happy, and we couldn’t really let them know how worried we had been.

Once, Georgina was driving back from Boroko to the university. Papuga occupied the seat next to her, while Sebastian was sitting on the back seat. In those days cars were not fitted with seat belts in Port Moresby. As she was overtaking an army truck, the truck suddenly swerved and crushed the left side of her car. With enormous presence of mind, Papuga put out both arms behind him and threw the child into the opposite corner of the car. Sebastian would undoubtedly have been badly hurt or killed had he not done so. But as a result Papuga lost his balance and his face crashed straight into the windscreen. When the car, having been dragged along by the truck for metres, finally came to a halt and they jumped out of the vehicle, Georgina saw Papuga’s face streaming with blood. Only his eyes were, miraculously, unhurt. Fortunately the car’s windscreen was made from ‘Sekurit’ glass, so he received no deep cuts and the hospital was able to remove all the glass within a couple of hours. Only a few small scars remained in his face.

Like all other people who helped us in the house for a while, Papuga soon moved to more interesting and rewarding work. He became a textile printer and partner in Hara Hara Prints. When the New Guinean cottage industry ultimately collapsed, through no fault of his own, Albert Maori Kiki employed him to run his pig farm in Port Moresby.

**On becoming a private bank — Moka**

One of Papuga’s friends had been in a terrible car accident. He spent several weeks in hospital. We met him for the first time on the day he was discharged. He came to visit Papuga in order to borrow some money from him. He looked emaciated and exhausted. His clothes were ragged. A huge scar ran across the side of his neck. He looked thoroughly depressed. Georgina said to him: ‘Here is a hundred dollars. Go and buy
yourself some good food and a new shirt.’ He accepted the money with dignity and we did not see him again for four months. Then suddenly, when we had completely forgotten about the incident, he knocked on the door. He was totally transformed. He looked strong, bright and healthy. He wore starched white shorts and long white socks and a smart white shirt. Only the scar on his neck reminded us of his accident.

He handed Georgina $200.00 and said: ‘I have come to repay my debt.’ Georgina said: ‘But Moka, I did not lend you this money, I gave it to you. Besides, I didn’t give you $200.00, I only gave you a hundred.’ But Moka insisted that she must take the money. We realised now that he wanted to use us as his ‘bank’. By demonstrating that he was reliable and by investing an extra $100.00 in us, he made sure that in times of an unexpected emergency he might come back to us and ask for help. We would have been quite happy to become part of his social security network, but unfortunately we were just about to leave Papua New Guinea.

‘Moka,’ Georgina said to him, ‘it is very unfortunate, but in two weeks time we must leave Port Moresby and we may never come back. Keep your money, because we will not be able to help you next time you are in need.’ However, no argument could persuade him. He clearly felt that his honour was at stake; and in the end — reluctantly and sadly, but also with admiration — we had to accept his money.

A vision of paradise — John Waiko’s father

John Waiko was one of my creative writing students. He had written several short stories and a play, *The Unexpected Hawk*, which had been performed by the Prompt Theatre in Canberra. John also studied history and he asked me whether he could bring his father down from his village in Binandere, so that he could record the old man’s stories and his wisdom. The problem was not just to find the money for the airfare, but also to provide accommodation, because he could obviously not share John’s student room.

We raised the money for his fare and offered him a room in the studio at the back of our garden. The accommodation suited the shy old man, who was a little bewildered by all these new impressions. He had never left Binandere country before, he had not even been to Popondetta. The *salo*-matting studio looked less forbidding to him than the fibro structures the university had built for its staff. Every evening, after classes, John came to see his father and recorded his stories. During the day, the old man sat quietly on the verandah of the hut. Sometimes he sang softly to himself. He never ventured out by himself. He cooked
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his food in the garden, but he complained that the taro one could get in
Port Moresby was not nearly as good as the ones at home. He proudly
explained that in his village they grew 40 different varieties of taro!

A couple of weeks after his arrival the Tübingen Student
Orchestra came to Port Moresby to give a concert of baroque music.
The German Foreign Office had been sponsoring this orchestra's
concert tours all around the world for several years. I had heard this
brilliant young chamber orchestra five years earlier in Nigeria. There,
the performance fell rather flat. Classical music did not appeal to
Nigerian students. Music had to be a physical experience for them.
If you couldn't dance to it they quickly got bored.

In Port Moresby our students listened spellbound to this totally
unfamiliar sound. It is very unlikely that any one of them had ever
heard Bach or Vivaldi, and certainly they had not encountered a live
orchestra. Yet they were listening with rapt attention.

John Waiko's father was completely overwhelmed. He had never
been inside such a huge building before and he was dazzled by the tiers
of bright orange seats that rose up to a great height. The space was
completely closed off from the outside world. There was a supernatural,
soothing coolness in the room, and then suddenly this otherworldly,
mysterious ocean of sound. When finally John had escorted him back to
his modest little room in our back garden, he broke his long silence and
said to John: 'Was this wonderful place paradise?'

Home sickness

I had travelled to the village of Asempa in the Eastern Highlands with
Elton Brash, where we visited our friend, the artist Wanamera. As we
were setting out for the return journey, a small boy ran up to us and
asked whether we could give his uncle a lift to Goroka. The old man
was a tiny, fragile looking figure. He was barely five feet tall. He was
nervous because he had spent his entire life in his village and had never
travelled in a car. He had decided to undertake this adventurous journey
because his son was a teacher at Goroka Primary School and he hadn't
seen him for a long time.

All along the way the young nephew talked to his uncle. Though
we could not understand what he said, it seemed clear he was trying to
calm him down. The old man kept silent throughout. I could sympathise
with him, because the descent from Asempa was indeed scary: the 'road'
consisted of large, loosely piled stones; it was narrow, winding and steep.
Looking out of the window one saw a drop of 200 feet.
When we arrived in Goroka he stepped carefully and tentatively — as if he didn't trust the unnatural smoothness of the tarred road. He felt uncomfortable and insecure in this strange environment. When we reached the school where his son was teaching, we were informed that he had been transferred to another school, but nobody was quite sure where he could now be found. The old man was shaken by the news. His eyes grew large with fear and he began to perspire as if with a sudden outbreak of fever. Elton suggested we put him up in a staff quarter of Goroka Teachers College, which happened to be empty and which was situated right next to Elton's own house, so that it would be easy to look after him. ‘Why don't you spend a few days there,’ he said to the old man, ‘until I have traced the whereabouts of your son through the education department?’

Georgina took some tea, bread and fruit over to the house and told him that she would bring a cooked meal later. She was alarmed to see that he was obviously very sick. His brow was hot with fever. We took turns spending some time with him, trying to reassure him. The next morning the young nephew came with the empty sugar bowl and asked for some more. Three times that day Georgina refilled the bowl. Finally she saw him coming back from the trade store carrying a pound of sugar: the old man's idea of drinking tea was to fill a mug with sugar, wet it with tea and then spoon it out. But no amount of sugar could lift him out of his deep depression. On the third day he was literally shaking with fever.

We guessed that his illness was home sickness, that he simply could not adjust to this strange, unreal environment. Fortunately Elton had now discovered that his son had been transferred to Madang and that he was in good health. We went to deliver the good news to the man and at the same time we brought a vehicle with a driver that could take him back to his village. As soon as he received the news of his son and saw the vehicle, which would take him home, his eyes began to sparkle, the greyness left his face and the fever disappeared instantly. He threw off his illness like a snake shedding his skin.

**Hospitality**

Kamangau is one of the most famous pottery villages in the Sepik district. They produced eating bowls, which came to a point at the bottom (almost like a spinning top). These dishes were made by women, but the patterns, representing the owner's clan designs, were carved by men. Traditionally they were kept in the men's house and
never exposed to women, but recently, with the break up of ancient customs, they were being offered for sale.

We were on a collecting trip for the Wewak Cultural Centre. In the early 1970s we collected and donated over 300 Sepik pots for the pottery museum they were going to build. A friend of ours had told us that he had been to Kamangauia and that you could reach the village conveniently by canoe. Our guide, however, insisted that it was a five hour walk inland. We were puzzled by this — but of course he was right. Had we made the trip in the rainy season, the village would indeed have been accessible from the river, but in the dry season we had to face a strenuous walk through a swamp. A few hours walk through a palm forest could have been a very pleasant experience, but the problem was that there was no dry land at all and we had to balance on spiky sago palm leaves, which had been placed along the swamp. Our guide had no difficulty balancing on the hard ribs of the palm fronds, while avoiding its sharp thorns. In fact on a couple of occasions he literally sprinted along in order to catapult a bird! We did not find it quite so easy. It required a lot of concentration to balance along the slippery surface. On one occasion one of the long, hard thorns went right through my sandal and penetrated my foot. It broke off clean, so I had nothing to hold on to in order to pull it out. But our guide proved to be an experienced surgeon. With a razor blade he cut off some of the hard skin on the foot, then extracted the thorn in a matter of seconds! As the sun began to set we wondered if we would reach Kamangauia before dark — we could hardly have manoeuvred the thorny path in the night.

When we finally entered the village it was virtually dark. The village appeared to be asleep. Only an old man was sitting on a log in the middle of a circular clearing. He was eating boiled taro. He must have guessed that we were hungry, because he rose silently and passed us his food bowl, signalling us to finish his food. I had never liked boiled taro — I had always considered it very bland, but on this occasion it was delicious and I cannot remember many meals I enjoyed as much. The combination of fatigue, hunger and the gentle, matter-of-fact hospitality transformed this simple meal into a banquet! Gradually, men, women and children emerged from the houses to welcome their visitors. There was a marked absence of younger men — most of them had gone to Wewak or further afield in search of employment.

The men brought some more logs and for a while we sat under the stars, while we introduced ourselves and explained the purpose of our visit. They agreed to bring out some pots the next morning, then they made arrangements for our accommodation. We were taken to a large
house on stilts. To make us feel at home they had gathered all the items of Western comfort they could lay their hands on: two pillows, a blanket, a mosquito net (!) and even a bottle of warm beer. They apologised that this was the only bottle of beer they could find in the entire neighbourhood, brought us more food and then retired. The floor was made of the curved limbium logs, so that it was rather like sleeping on corrugated iron, but after the tiring and exciting day we slept soundly.

Next morning, they brought out many superb pots, which we could acquire for the museum. When we set out on our return journey, a crowd of young girls preceded us, carrying the pots right up to our canoe. They were leaping along the slippery, thorny palm fronds. Somehow the return journey seemed much less strenuous, partly because we had acquired some practice in negotiating the path, but mainly because of the hospitality we had received and because of the cheerful girls who accompanied us.

We brought our precious load safely back to Wewak but, sadly, the National Cultural Council never did set up the museum and, eventually, all the pots we had collected and donated during several Sepik trips were stolen.¹

**Being adopted by a child — Moruo**

A young boy, perhaps nine years old, stood shyly at the edge of our garden. He did not dare to knock on the door, but waited until we came out. He was looking for a job, he said. We do not really need anybody, we replied, and what kind of work could you do? I could look after your baby, he said, or do any other work. He was a very attractive child, with large round eyes. He explained that he had come down from Goroka with his uncle and that they had come to visit their relative, who was working as a labourer at Admin College. His uncle was now returning home, but he, Moruo, wanted to stay in Port Moresby because he wanted to go to school. His uncle had said that if he wanted to stay behind he would have to find a job and earn his keep and his school fees. We could not resist him. We told him that we would send him to school and look after him, if he could occasionally look after Sebastian, who was about eight months old at the time. His uncle told us that Moruo could sleep with his relative at Admin College, which was not far away.

¹ The reason why there were so many pots for sale in the village was that these pots were traditionally given to young men during their initiation ceremony. They would use them as their eating dishes for the rest of their lives. But most of the young men had left the village to find employment in the towns. The pots were left behind and the custom was broken.
For a while, this arrangement worked well but, a few weeks later, Moruo appeared on our doorstep at ten o’clock at night. The labour overseer of Admin College had gone to check the dormitories of the workers, had discovered Moruo and evicted him in the middle of the night as an ‘illegal’ resident. Moruo’s little puppy that his uncle had given him was kicked to death by the overseer. From then on, Moruo lived in our house and we bought him a beautiful new puppy, part Alsatian, from an Australian friend. He quickly settled down to become part of the family and did extremely well at school.

About a year later I had to go to Goroka Teachers College to give some lectures and we decided to use the opportunity to visit Moruo’s village. We could not take the child with us, because it would have meant taking him out of school. On a Sunday morning, we borrowed a friend’s car and drove to Moruo’s village. The only road leading to the village led through a plantation that was owned by a former District Commissioner. As we were driving through the coffee trees, the planter’s son suddenly appeared on horseback, aimed a gun at us and shouted that we should get off his land! After a very unpleasant argument he allowed us grudgingly to pass, but warned us not to ‘trespass’ on his land again. A couple of kilometres before the village the road ended and we left the car behind. We stopped a woman, who carried a large string bag full of sweet potatoes, and asked her for directions. When she heard that we were the couple who looked after Moruo in Port Moresby she ran ahead of us, singing out loudly so that her voice echoed from the mountains, to proclaim our arrival.

By the time we emerged from the trees to get our first view of the village, we were struck by the most amazing sight: the village consisted of two parallel lines of houses that stretched from the top of a hill right down to the valley. Men, women and children were standing in groups outside their houses. As soon as they saw us, they started singing out in a rhetorical fashion, like a confusion of heralds announcing our arrival. As we approached the first house, a woman took the baby out of Georgina’s arms. Other women picked up Georgina and carried her on their shoulders, lying flat like a plank. The men came and lifted me up and so they carried us all the way up the hill. As they carried us they were crying loudly as they remembered Moruo in distant Port Moresby. Every time we passed another hut the inhabitants joined the procession and the weeping. When we reached the top of the hill we were seated on the ground. The whole village surrounded us, weeping. We were each surrounded by a group of old women, who were stroking us while they were crying. When they finally calmed down, they fed us on
roasted sweet potatoes and asked many questions about their child. Finally they collected money from every household and then they presented us with the sum of $4.00 to help us look after Morua. We comforted them by promising that we would send him home during his Christmas vacations.

When we returned to Port Moresby we gave the money to Morua. But he refused to spend it and kept it instead like a souvenir.

Morua was not lucky with his puppies. Some months after our return, the little dog ran out onto the road and was run over by a car. Morua cried bitterly, then he dug a grave for it in the garden. When he buried the dog he placed the four dollars on top of the corpse.

**Meeting a magician**

Michael Somare was one of the few politicians in Papua New Guinea who was deeply concerned with cultural issues. Long before he became Prime Minister, he talked to me about the sacred images that were kept in the men’s ceremonial house in his village in Murik Lakes. They were shaped like highly decorated ceremonial spears, but each one had a face because they represented the ancestral spirits. Only the most senior age group in the village was entitled to see them or handle them. They were normally hidden in the rafters of the *Haus Tambaran* and were brought out only very rarely.

Michael knew that a Catholic missionary had once persuaded one of the first converts to steal four of these sacred objects. At the time, the District Officer pressured him to return them to the village, but he only returned two, while the other two presumably ended up in some European museum. Michael was worried that, with the growing ‘artefact trade’ in Papua New Guinea the remaining images would eventually disappear. To preserve at least the history of his people, which was closely associated with these images, Somare asked the village elders for permission to have them photographed and their history recorded. His proposal caused a great deal of controversy in the village. People felt that to show these images to Michael Somare would be a sacrilege, because he was much too young to be exposed to them. To have a stranger photograph them was out of the question. However, some of the men felt that theirs might be the last generation to respect this heritage; with Christianity and education it was not certain that the young generation would go through all the stages of initiation. If they were to grow up with different customs and different beliefs, at least the history of the village and the memory of their tradition should be preserved.
After several months, the people of Darapap village sent a message to Michael Somare, informing him that on a certain day they would send a canoe to Wewak to pick both of us up. They would then discuss the matter with us and try to come to a decision. We travelled through a stormy sea and, by the time we arrived in the village, it was already dark. We were led to a large house on stilts, where a dozen elders were assembled. Once again the familiar arguments were raised, but they seemed to come to no conclusion. Suddenly there was a silence and we felt a powerful, magical presence. A very old man had come up the steps, and though he had moved absolutely silently and we were all sitting with our backs to the entrance, we sensed his presence. As he stepped into the light I saw that he was very old, very calm and very dignified.
When the others resumed the discussion, he listened for a few minutes, then he said: ‘I shall ask the kakars to come down tomorrow.’ He did not refer to the sacred images as objects that had to be taken down from the rafters, but as spirits who had to be asked to come. With this brief statement the discussion was finished. Food was now served. Michael now explained to me that the old man’s name was Wino and that he was the highest priest in the village. He belonged to the senior age group which, at the time, consisted of only two people: Wino and Karok. They were the only two men in the community who were entitled to see the kakar images.

While we were eating I noticed that Wino was using a very beautiful spoon. I asked Michael whether it was made from mother-of-
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[Image 0x0 to 458x692]

pearl. He said: 'Yes. Let me ask him to show it to you.' But I quickly said: 'Please don't do that. I do not want him to think that I want to buy it.'

The next morning the kakars came down. We were made to wait on the beach for several hours until everything was ready. Michael now explained to me the complex way in which Wino had rationalised and justified his action. Apparently the images could only descend from the ceremonial house when a new age group was to be initiated into the highest grade. The 12 men who had been discussing the matter with us the previous night were now being initiated, so that they could see the kakars for the first time. Since I was of the right age, I would be made an honorary member of this age group, so I could see and photograph the images. Michael was too young to become a member of the age group, but he would be permitted to attend as my interpreter.

We were finally fetched and taken to an enclosure erected with palm leaves. Before we were allowed to enter we presented our gifts of food and galip nuts. As we entered the enclosures the long bamboo flutes began to play. The 29 kakar figures had been arranged in a long
line. To the right and the left of the display, the senior priests, Wino and Karok, were squatting. The newly initiated men stood silently and obviously overawed by the ancestral presence. We too were overwhelmed by the seriousness of the occasion and the otherworldly presence of the images. When, after a couple of hours, a few raindrops began to fall, we were told that the kakars had to return to the Haus Tambaran, but we were not allowed to watch their departure.

The following day we were allowed to write down the history of the images. A woman called Areke had come down from the very source of the Sepik River. She had no husband, but when she reached the village of Iwaroma in Moim, she gave birth to the spears in the middle of the lake. They were finally discovered by the Nagam clan, who put them on a raft and travelled down the river. After long migrations one group of them finally settled in Murik Lakes. Michael and I eventually published the story of the kakars in the Records of the Papua New Guinea Museum (no. 3, 1973).

After a very intense three day stay, we said goodbye to the people of Darapap and set out on our return journey. When we got the outrigger canoe afloat and were sailing out toward the ocean, a little boy came running along the beach. He jumped into the water and, swimming with all his strength, soon caught up with us. He climbed on board, delivered greetings from Wino and handed me the mother-of-pearl spoon. I felt greatly honoured but I was also shocked: during the meal on the first night in Darapap we were sitting quite far away from Wino. He could not possibly have heard our conversation.

Michael Somare was happy that he had been able to record the history of his clan in an age when ancient traditions were being forgotten fast. But, at the time, he had no idea of the sacrifice that Wino had to make on his behalf. Initiating the next grade to become gapars, that is custodians of the kakar spears, meant that Wino and Karok had to resign from their positions. It was difficult to imagine this old man to be no longer a priest, a prophet or the ruler of his people. The kakars would no longer speak through him; for the rest of his life he would sit in his hut without fulfilling a function in his society. He said of himself: ‘Mi stap nating.’ That Wino would make this sacrifice when he was at the height of his powers was a sign of his deep disillusionment with his society. He knew that he was probably the last priest who had successfully protected the ancestral images and he must have felt that the final service he could render his community was to allow Michael Somare to record the history for a new generation, who would no longer be initiated. Wino died six months after he resigned from his priesthood. Years later, I still treasure his spoon.
A RELUCTANT FAREWELL

In autumn 1970, I received an invitation from Michael Crowder to attend the third Festival of the Arts at the University of Ife in Nigeria. Michael Crowder was an English writer and academic who had spent a dozen years or so in Nigeria. I had first met him when he was editor of Nigeria Magazine, a monthly publication issued by the Ministry of Information, to which I had been a regular contributor. I was to give a lecture on something or other, but I remember that I also brought with me an exhibition of prints by Kauage, Marie Taita Aihi, Tiabe and others. It was the first ever cultural exchange between Africa and New Guinea.

The festival is memorable for two incidents. One night I was watching an open air dance performance in one of the university courtyards. I found myself standing next to a stranger, who introduced himself as Pierre Hutton, the Australian High Commissioner to Nigeria. He was interested to learn something about my work in Papua New Guinea. I told him that I was just preparing for our very first arts festival at the University of PNG. He said: ‘Please let me know if I can be of any help.’ I said: ‘Maybe you can. I would love to bring a Nigerian to our festival. Somebody with experience in theatre, who might give our students a hand in one of their productions. Somebody who comes from outside and looks at everything in a fresh way.’ Pierre Hutton asked whom I was thinking of, and I said: ‘Segun Olusola.’ The High Commissioner knew Segun in person and was quite enthusiastic. Segun Olusola was Director of Programmes at the National Television Station in Lagos and he was also known as a writer, actor and theatre director. ‘If you could interest your friend in the idea of spending a couple of weeks looking at Australian television stations,’ he said, ‘then we could easily include Port Moresby in his itinerary.’ Pierre Hutton was a lateral
thinker who was always determined to pursue a good idea, regardless of what the bureaucratic complications might be. Later, when I returned to Nigeria, we co-operated on many projects. He helped me to bring an Aboriginal didgeridoo player to tour Nigerian universities, and through him we were able to stage three evenings of films on Australian Aboriginals. He was probably the most open-minded and helpful ambassador I had ever met.

The second incident was both exciting and disturbing. The day before I left the University of Ife, the Vice Chancellor, Dr Oluwasami, called me and said: ‘You may have heard that Michael Crowder will be leaving us next year, so we are looking for a new director of African Studies. Wouldn’t you like to come home and do this job for us?’ It was a strange feeling! Nine years earlier, when the University of Ife had just been founded, the first Vice Chancellor had offered me this very same job! I had turned it down then, for a number of reasons: I wasn’t sure whether I could work with that particular VC; and, above all, I was so deeply involved in a number of fascinating projects like the literary journal Black Orpheus, the writers and artists club Mbari, which I had just founded with Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and others, and a Yoruba theatre company in Oshogbo. I did not want to burden myself with administrative responsibilities. Now the offer was much more tempting. Here was a research institute with a brilliant, mostly Nigerian staff, which also had a museum, an archaeology department, a film unit and even a theatre company. The possibilities for an imaginative director seemed limitless.

On the other hand it seemed the wrong time to leave Papua New Guinea. John Gunther was seriously thinking of replacing the make-shift Centre for Papua New Guinea Cultures in our back garden with a properly established and funded centre. Was I really needed in Nigeria as much as in Papua New Guinea? I asked Dr Oluwasami: ‘You have some brilliant Nigerian scholars in this institute. Several of them would make excellent directors. Why do you need me?’ He said: ‘I know that we have a lot of capable people. We are offering you the job because you have pioneered African studies in this country at a time when the established universities didn’t want to know about it. We want you to come back, because we feel we owe you that recognition. I don’t want an answer from you straight away. Go back and think about it. I cannot make you a formal offer until I have had council approval. But that will merely be a formality. You will hear from me in a couple of months.’

When I returned to Papua New Guinea, I was much too busy preparing for our first Festival of the Arts to even think about Nigeria.
For decades, colonial officials had been staging so-called singsings all over the country. They were really tourist spectacles and Papuans and New Guineans had no say in their organisation or planning. The kiaps were sent out to commandeer dance groups from various districts, and a panel of expatriate officials judged the performances, usually offering a pig as a prize. There was no real creativity involved in these events, and certainly no innovation of any kind.

The festival we planned at the university was a much more modest affair. We had very little money to spend. The concept was worked out with students like Leo Hannet, John Waiko, Arthur Jawodimbari, John Kasaipwalova and Apisai Enos. The core of the festival was going to be three plays written and directed by students. There was to be a poetry night, one traditional dance group, a traditional orchestra and several art exhibitions.

Instead of organising a temporary show of Papua New Guinea artists for this occasion, we persuaded the university to make a permanent collection of contemporary PNG art. Since the university had made no provision for either an art gallery or a museum, we decided to use the two large staircases of the Faculty of Arts building as a permanent display space. The university acquired two very large Kauage copper beatings, drawings by Akis and prints by Marie Taita Aihi, Tiabe and others. We also included a painting by Lois Johnson, the wife of the professor of English, because she had grown up in Papua New Guinea and she was without doubt the most gifted Australian painter living there. The director of the Port Moresby Museum had also given us some outstanding masterpieces of traditional PNG art on extended loan, the most spectacular amongst them being two huge Asmat posts.

What had started as a make-shift arrangement turned out to be an ideal venue, because the art works, instead of becoming ‘precious’ objects in the artificial atmosphere of a museum, just became part of the students’ lives.

As a complete contrast to this permanent collection we had invited the great Aboriginal bark painter Yirrawala from Arnhem Land. In spite of the geographical closeness and the obvious Australian connection, there had been virtually no cultural interchange between New Guineans and Aboriginals. The calm, dignified old man proved to be a fine ambassador for his people. His visit had been made possible by Sandra Holmes, who put her collection at our disposal and who accompanied the artist whom she had supported for so many years.

John Waiko brought a group of Binandere dancers from his village and Leo Hannet brought a group of trumpet and pan pipe players
from Bougainville. The trumpets were hollow wooden tubes of varying lengths. They had no stops and each player could produce only one note. The composition was built up through a complex co-ordination of all the musicians. They performed in the university forum, standing in a large circle with all the musicians facing inwards. Sandra Holmes tried to enter the spirit of the festivities by appearing in the forum dressed only in a grass skirt and a garland of frangipani.

The three plays were performed in the beautiful open air theatre of the university. *Cry of the Cassowary* was written by John Kaniku, a student of Goroka College. The performance, which he directed himself, won him a study grant in Australia because Jean Battersby, the Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Arts Council, happened to attend the performance. Russel Soaba's *Scattered by the Wind* was a somewhat melodramatic but courageous play about a young New Guinean who had studied in Australia and found himself alienated within his own family, which found his liberal views rather outrageous. The main conflict was between James, the 'modern' man and his brother Ben, who is portrayed as a hypocritical Christian.

To me the most exciting play was Arthur Jawodimbari's play *The Sun*, which is based on a Binandere myth from Northern Papua: a long long time ago the sun was controlled by a powerful magician from Towara village. Every morning he used his sun magic to make it rise and every evening he commanded it to set. But in those days the sun shone in Tomara village alone — the rest of the world lived in darkness and cold. When the magician died, he left his big lime gourd with the sun magic to his young son, Tunana. Tunana then worked the sun magic every day. Since he had no parents and he was too young to have a family of his own, he lived with other young men in the men's house and his sister, Dobana, sent him food every day. But her husband Bunani was extremely jealous of all the attention given to his young brother-in-law. One day, when he was to carry a bowl of food for him to the men's house, he secretly removed the taro and replaced it with stones. The unsuspecting Tunana invited his friends to share his meal and felt so humiliated when they bit on stones that he decided to leave the village.

He carried his sun magic away with him and, the following morning, the sun no longer rose in Tomara. As time went on, their crops withered, their stock of taro ran out and their children began to die. In the end they decided to send out Dobana to find her brother, beg him to forgive them and return the sun. In the meantime, Tunana had walked to Jinaga village. He arrived in the dark and was afraid that he might have strayed into a village of cannibals or sorcerers. But he was so
tired that he fell asleep. When the villagers discovered him early in the morning, they decided to spare his life and receive him into their community. Tunana made his sun magic and the people of Jinaga felt the magic warmth for the first time. They gave him three women as wives and made him their chief.

When Dobana finally finds her brother he feels sorry for the suffering of his old village. With a retinue of Jinaga people he returns to Tumara, laden with gifts of food. However, he refuses to stay with them; his place is now with his newly found community. The people of Tumara implore him not to take the sun away again and leave them in the dark and cold. But Tunana says: 'I will leave you, but the sun shall shine on all. No man is big enough to keep the sun a prisoner. Today I'll break my lime pot and set him free. Released from bondage, the sun shall roam the sky, removed from human reach. And he will wander from place to place and shine on everyone in turn!'

In Arthur Jawodimbari's poetic rendering of this simple tale, the sun became a metaphor for independence, for the abolishment of tribal rivalries and the renunciation of the misuse of power.

Another highlight of the festival was the poetry night, which was also staged in the open air theatre. Here, young New Guinean writers were joined by three distinguished visitors from abroad. Kumalau Tawali and Apisai Enos, two student poets, impressed with the unadorned directness and purity of their work. Their presentations had an invigorating freshness about them. The Nigerian actor, theatre director and broadcaster Segun Olusola gave a highly professional reading of some of Nigeria's great poets, like Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka. Edwin Thumbo, Professor of English at the University of Singapore, presented his own urbane and highly polished verse.

The most stunning performance was probably that of Hone Tuwhare, a Maori poet and, undoubtedly, one of the most sophisticated writers in the Pacific. Hone was, at the time, working as a boilermaker in Bougainville, and we were lucky that the copper mine was willing to release him and even pay his fare to Port Moresby. His entry was spectacular. As he stepped onto the stage he lingered for a while in the darkness outside spotlight. And before the audience was even aware of his presence, he recited one of those dramatic Maori *hakas*. Hardly any of us had ever heard one of those powerful Maori war chants before; so his brief explosive performance took our breath away. Before we could recover from it he stepped into the light, smiled, and with a throw-away hand gesture remarked dryly: 'Just a prop!' Then he proceeded to recite his own poetry in English.
In January, the letter from Dr Oluwasami arrived. It offered me the position of director of the Institute of African Studies for a period of three years, after which I would have the option of renewing it or becoming a research professor in the institute with no more administrative responsibility and being able to concentrate on my own work. He also offered Georgina a job as research fellow on Yoruba crafts and facilities for running workshops.

But it seemed the wrong time to leave Papua New Guinea. After three and a half years, everything was beginning to fall into place: the artists were receiving international recognition. The student theatre was lively and provocative. Papua New Guinea writing was being reviewed in Australian newspapers and even in Europe. Albert Maori Kiki’s book was being translated into German and Swedish.

There was one factor, however, that made it very hard to reject the offer from Nigeria: I had spent 16 years in that country, from 1950 to 1966, and they had been the formative years of my life. Even though I was 28 years old when I arrived in Nigeria, I had no clear idea of who I was and what I wanted to do with my life. It was the experience of Yoruba culture that gave me a sense of identity and purpose. It was also in Nigeria that I met Georgina. We both reacted to the country in very similar ways. We discovered that our very different talents complemented each other perfectly and in some mysterious way or other we brought out the best in each other. Was it right to bring up our children without introducing them to the very culture that had determined and shaped our lives? And if I did not accept this job, would I ever be offered another one? Because clearly: Nigeria did not need me any longer; their invitation was a gesture of friendship. But another generation of Nigerians would hardly remember me. But most important of all: how could I let my children grow up without experiencing the country in which I had discovered myself?

I felt that I really did not have a choice and so I sent in my letter of resignation. Dr John Gunther then wrote me a letter, which made my departure even more painful:

I do suggest to you that the challenge of Nigeria has been answered by very many people, including yourselves, and there are many Nigerians who can carry on; this is not true of Papua and New Guinea; we are only just beginning to meet the challenge.

I would like to talk to you at your early convenience.

Yours sincerely,
J. T. Gunther
I agreed to delay my final decision for a while, and eventually John Gunther came up with a concrete proposal. The university was going to set aside a piece of land, where a ‘Centre for Papua New Guinea Cultures’ would be built. Both Georgina and I were to be employed full-time running it. A house and studios were going to be built for us. It was going to be a joint venture between the university and the department of education, which was being run at the time by the dynamic, open-minded Dr McKinnon. He made a final, forceful appeal on 23 March:

Mr U. Beier  
English Department  
UPNG  

Dear Ulli,

I feel I have to make one final plea to you to stay in the Territory for at least another three years. I can well imagine the kind of pleasure you would have in taking over an institute of African studies or culture after the policy decisions had been made and you had a happy going concern. This is most enticing and I can understand, as Georgina said, it may not be a case of Africa wanting you but of ‘us needing Nigeria’.

I know nobody in Australia or anybody elsewhere with whom I am acquainted, who has the ability to get so much of their culture out of the New Guinean people, or to encourage them to use foreign art forms to express themselves in ways of great merit. Maybe we can train someone but it’s going to be some time. I challenged you before with the fact that you had already trained people to do your work in Africa.

I hope that the Papua and New Guinea Museum will develop into an institution of excellence. It has never been given a chance in the past and I don’t know whether it’s going to be given a chance in the future: whether we like it or not, chance means finance. I have one other belief, and that is in a country as impecunious as Papua New Guinea is, you can’t afford two libraries, two museums, in fact you can’t afford two of anything that are very expensive. The University has to have some part in the development of the museum and the museum must be dependent on the University for academic assistance. I feel absolutely certain that if a cultural centre were to be set up, you are the ideal and logical person to direct it. However, in this regard I can make no promises.
What I can promise is that between McKinnon and me, we will employ you to do the kind of extramural education that you are doing now, relieving you of those teaching responsibilities that you now have, although I would hope that you would continue with Creative Writing. In addition, between us we would find employment for Georgina.

I don’t know whether a letter like this is going to have any influence. I’ll be away for six weeks until about 7th May. It would be possible to get in touch with me — I’ll leave my various addresses. Alternatively you may talk to McKinnon. I’ll try to talk to him before I leave.

Yours sincerely,

J. T. Gunther

It was one of the hardest decisions in my life to say no to John Gunther after this second letter. But deep down I was convinced that I had to go.

Our farewell party was both magnificent and dramatic. We had invited over 120 people: staff, students and labourers. The labourers consisted mainly of Papuga Nugint’s wantoks — in other words Western and Eastern Highlanders. Peacefully they worked together all morning to prepare the huge mumu.

Everybody felt the pain of parting and the Highlanders in particular cried uncontrollably. One old man sobbed on Georgina’s shoulder, biting her arm in despair. As the evening wore on and people had had a fair amount to drink, some tension unexpectedly arose between the Eastern and the Western Highlanders. I suddenly saw a man who had raised his arm and was about to bring it down on another man’s head. Instead of confronting him I went and put my arms gently around him, whereupon he dropped the bottle and fell into my arms, crying. However, at another corner of our back yard fighting suddenly broke out. Within seconds the two groups were charging each other like warriors in a mountain battle. The fight spread into the neighbouring gardens. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the fight stopped. Blood had been drawn. A man was bleeding profusely from his head. Everybody now was gathering around him. He was carefully carried to a utility van and driven to hospital. Whatever the cause of the fight had been, for the moment at least it was forgotten. The party ended in a mellow, sentimental mood.
Sadly, we were never to meet John Gunther again. When we
returned to the University of Papua New Guinea for a spell of three
months in 1973 as consultants, he had already retired and was living in
a remote area of Queensland.

There was a somewhat bizarre epilogue to our departure from
Papua New Guinea. Two weeks before we were to leave I attended a last
meeting of the Aboriginal Arts Board, to which I had been appointed
by Dr Coombs two years earlier. The meeting took place in Darwin. On
my last evening there I was sitting on the verandah of the hotel, having
some farewell drinks with friends. A senior public servant said to me:
‘Why do you want to go back to Nigeria of all places? If you want a
change from your job in PNG, surely we could find something for you
here.’ Somebody else added: ‘From all I hear, Nigeria is not a very safe
place. And what would the military government think of a person like
you, who has all the wrong friends like Chinua Achebe or Wole
Soyinka? Do you think you will be safe, so soon after the Biafran war?’
I said somewhat stubbornly: ‘I feel I have to go. This is not a rational
decision at all. Even if I knew they were going to put me in jail, I would
still go.’

My statement must have been repeated and misunderstood and
repeated again and reinterpreted again. Because a month after we
arrived in Nigeria, a messenger arrived at our house in the University of
Ife with an urgent letter from Dr Epo Eyo, the director of the National
Museum in Lagos. He had received three telegrams: from John Gunther,
from Albert Maori Kiki, and from Dr Coombs. Apparently some
newspaper had carried a brief news item, saying that the entire Beier
family was lingering in jail in Nigeria, even one year old son Tunji!

In retrospect, I know that this controversial decision was the
right one, because my youngest son Tunji found his destiny there.
Sebastian, who was four years old when we left Papua New Guinea and
seven when we returned there, has remained close to Papua New
Guinea in his temperament and character. Tunji, growing up amongst
Yorubas in Nigeria, knew by the time he was four that he wanted to be a
drummer and that nothing would stop him. Growing up in Papua New
Guinea, he might not have discovered his real role in life as easily and
certainly not as soon.
In 1973, two distinguished visitors from Papua New Guinea came to see us in Ife: Albert Maori Kiki, the first Foreign Minister of the newly self-governing country, and Pita Lus, the Minister for Sports, Tourism and Culture. They were returning from the United Nations assembly in New York and took the opportunity to stop over in Nigeria. Curiously their visit coincided with the performance of a play called *They Never Return* at the Institute of African Studies’ theatre. It was based on a Motuan legend about the origin of death. In Port Moresby I had written this little play, which was performed by the Prompt Theatre in Canberra. Now, Muraina Oyelami, a gifted musician and actor associated with the Institute, produced a Nigerian adaptation of this Papuan story.

The visitors were the guests of honour at the premiere, but they had not come to Ife to enjoy some impromptu holiday. They were on an official mission with a message from the Chief Minister Michael Somare. As Papua New Guinea was approaching independence, the message said that the government was anxious to create an Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies. But they did not want an esoteric academic institution, which would be no more than a haven for people to write their PhDs. Such an institution was already existing in any case (the Australian National University research unit in Port Moresby).

What Somare had in mind was an institution that was more concerned with the problems and aspirations of ordinary people in Papua New Guinea and their concern about their dwindling cultures. He wanted an institution that would gather oral traditions suitable for use in schools; an institution that would examine and discuss government cultural policies or the impact of missions and tourism. He felt that he wanted to give this job to somebody he had known and trusted during the years of the fight for independence, somebody who
shared his own concerns about the cultures of Papua New Guinea. He therefore asked me to return to Papua New Guinea and set up an institute and direct it, at least until such a time when a new generation of Papuans and New Guineans had emerged from universities at home or abroad who would be qualified to take over. He pointed out that Nigeria had many hundreds of qualified people to choose from, whereas Papua New Guinea as yet had none.

I could not refuse those arguments. But, it meant giving up a very interesting and secure position and a pensionable job, in return for a short term contract job. Georgina would lose her own position and — the most serious concern of all — I wasn’t sure at all whether they had created the kind of infrastructure that would make such an institute viable. So far, no thought had been given to the funding of it.

Before I left Papua New Guinea in 1971, Michael Somare had asked my advice about the setting up of a ministry of culture. I argued very much against it. It would entangle cultural development in a maze of bureaucracy, and it would take the initiative out of the hands of the artists and writers, musicians, actors and dancers, and create a situation where cultural matters were being decided from above. I suggested that he should take a look at the Australian Arts Council instead. I had the privilege of being a member of the Aboriginal Arts Board when it was first created. Apart from the secretary, no one was on a salary. We were not meant to initiate policy. Applications were sent in for funding of projects: dance groups, publications, a film project, educational projects. We were to decide whether the projects were worthwhile, whether the costing was reasonable, and so on. Naturally, a board like that had its own preferences, maybe even prejudices, but as the membership was to be changed every two years, one could hope, at least, that every submission would get a fair hearing sooner or later.

A National Cultural Council was indeed set up by the PNG government but, some time later, a Ministry of Culture was set up in addition, so that they ended up getting the worst of both worlds. To aggravate matters even more, culture was lumped together with sport and tourism into one ministry, so that the ministers’ energy was largely diverted towards other matters.

It was clear that the creation of an Institute of PNG Studies would be an uphill struggle under the circumstances. Yet I felt I had to take up the challenge and I asked Dr Oluwasami to release me from my contract prematurely. I could argue that we had made some impact on the cultural scene in Ife, with three successful arts festivals, a theatre company that had become self-supporting, and a museum of Yoruba
pottery, which we had built and donated. Georgina had established a studio for Yoruba traditional textile crafts as well as a small textile printing workshop. I told Dr Oluwasami that it was time for a Nigerian to take over. He expressed his sincere regrets, but said he would not want to stand in my way.

Three decades later it is difficult to know what the real motives for a decision had been at the time. I feel that the following considerations must have played an important part: a feeling of guilt that I had left Papua New Guinea prematurely in 1971, leaving unfinished business behind, and an uneasiness about the growing interference of politics and bureaucracy in my work at Ife, in spite of the efforts of the Vice Chancellor to protect us.

When we were about to leave Nigeria, the PNG National Cultural Council had not attempted to find a building for the institute, not even a temporary office, nor had they made any arrangements for our own accommodation. I therefore took the precaution of wiring Ken Inglis, the Vice Chancellor of the university, asking him whether he could lend us a house and an office.

When we arrived at the airport we were picked up and taken to our house on the university campus: it was next to the very house we had occupied when we had first come to work for the university in 1967! Our next-door neighbour was Rudi James, a West Indian law lecturer, whose wife Adeola was the sister of Mosun Omibiyi, a musicologist who had been on my staff in the Institute of African Studies in Ife!

When we woke up the next morning we found that a letter had been pushed under our door. It was a cheque for $20,000 with a note from the National Cultural Council, saying that that was something to help me start the institute! But that is another story.
GLOSSARY

bilas: decorations: feathers, shells, leaves etc.
cargo cult: the belief that European industrial products were sent by
dead ancestors and the attempt to obtain such goods through
ancestor worship.
Haus Tambaran: spirit house, men’s ceremonial house.
Hevehe masks: ancestral masks common in Orokolo, Papuan Gulf.
Hohao boards: carved, oval-shaped boards, four to five feet high,
symbolising ancestral spirits who are sacred to a particular clan.
(See Bibliography)
kakars: elaborately carved spears representing ancestors in the house
tambaran in Darapap village, Murik Lakes.
kiap: government official, District Officer or District Commissioner
(from English: captain).
kunai: sword grass.
laplap: loin cloth or any piece of cloth.
midad: leaves painted with designs that are used in Tolai love magic.
mission civilisatrice: ‘civilising mission’: French colonial policy of
assimilating Africans to French culture.
mumu: food cooked by steaming with heated stones in an earth oven,
a common method of cooking in the Highlands.
pamuk: prostitute.
puri puri: witchcraft.
salo-matting: mats used in the construction of houses.
singsing: a festival involving dancing and singing, often referred to
touristy competitions of traditional dances organised by Australian
district commissioners.
territorian: an Australian public servant, farmer or businessman who
has made the ‘territory’ of Papua New Guinea his home.
wantok: one who speaks the same language, one who comes from the
same culture (from English: one talk).
warbat: love magic of the Tolai people, songs used to attract girls.
Ulli Beier: Select Publications


1972: *When the moon was big, and other legends from New Guinea* / compiled by Ulli Beier; illustrated by Georgina Beier, Collins. Sydney & London.


1974: *A certain foreign cult called Christianity — Do we need it?* (Pseudonym, Peter Kros) Discussion paper No. 3, Institute of PNG Studies, Port Moresby.


**Georgina Beier: Select Publications**


1971: *Akis Drawings*: a special publication of the journal *Kovave*. Port Moresby.


1972: *When the moon was big, and other legends from New Guinea*, compiled by Ulli Beier; illustrated by Georgina Beier, Collins. Sydney & London.

1973: *Three New Guinea Artists*, catalogue for an exhibition at the Australian National University, Canberra; stenciled.


2001: *Georgina Beier*, Verlag für Moderne Kunst, Nürnberg. (eight authors: five Africans, one Chinese, one German and one English discuss the life and work of Georgina Beier. The book also documents the work of the African and New Guinean artists who emerged from her workshops.)
Church, Servai Kepo, pen and ink drawing, 1976
Untitled, William Onlgo, pen and ink drawing, 1975
PANDANUS BOOKS

Pandanus Books was established in 2001 within the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS) at The Australian National University. Concentrating on Asia and the Pacific, Pandanus Books embraces a variety of genres and has particular strength in the areas of biography, memoir, fiction and poetry. As a result of Pandanus’ position within the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, the list includes high-quality scholarly texts, several of which are aimed at a general readership. Since its inception, Pandanus Books has developed into an editorially independent publishing enterprise with an imaginative list of titles and high-quality production values.

THE SULLIVAN’S CREEK SERIES

The Sullivan’s Creek Series is a developing initiative of Pandanus Books. Extending the boundaries of the Pandanus Books’ list, the Sullivan’s Creek Series seeks to explore Australia through the work of new writers, with a particular encouragement to authors from Canberra and the region. Publishing history, biography, memoir, scholarly texts, fiction and poetry, the imprint complements the Asia and Pacific focus of Pandanus Books and aims to make a lively contribution to scholarship and cultural knowledge.
In the late 1960s, in the backyard of a bleak, suburban house in Port Moresby, the newly established University of Papua New Guinea constructed a studio, ambitiously titled the ‘Centre for New Guinea Cultures’. Here, Akis drew his exuberant animals, Mathias Kauage beat his copper panels, Avavo Kava carved contemporary hohao boards, Marie Taita Aihi designed textiles, and Ruki Fame worked on welded iron sculptures. Meanwhile, at the university, a course in creative writing was established, an active drama group came to life, the *Papua Pocket Poets* series commenced and *Kovave, a journal of New Guinea literature* was born. The arrival in Port Moresby in 1967 of Ulli and Georgina Beier was a catalyst for this growth in contemporary indigenous literature and art. In leaving Nigeria, where they had spent many years working to promote the art and literature of the Yoruba people, the Beiers came to Papua New Guinea — where Ulli took up a lectureship at the university — excited with the possibilities of embracing, nurturing and promoting a rich artistic and literary culture.

In this memoir, Ulli Beier asserts the essential relationship between a university, culture and national identity. The period spent by the Beiers in Papua New Guinea, a time of burgeoning national independence and celebration of the arts, was fulfilling in a way that left an indelible imprint on their lives. This lucid and inspiring memoir of those years is a moving tribute to the people of Papua New Guinea and their heritage.

Ulli and Georgina Beier live in Australia where they continue to promote and support the work of artists from Papua New Guinea.