

NATIONALISM AND PAPUA NEW
GUINEA WRITING*

Slowly, often reluctantly, Australians are coming to realise that Papua New Guinea is an emerging nation with its own cultures, its own history, and its own ability to express its views on its own future. The development of independent expression in the political sphere (though not at first encouraged by the Australian government) has already made itself felt in the formulation of administration policies and, gradually but inevitably, in Australia's official attitudes to the development of Papua New Guinea towards independence. There is little awareness outside Papua New Guinea, however, (and not all that much inside) of the groundswell of national consciousness reflected in the growth of a specifically Papua New Guinean literature. This review takes the release of several important publications by Papua New Guineans, or with a Papua New Guinea theme, to survey some of the developments in this field.

Albert Maori Kiki's autobiography, *Kiki*, published by Cheshire in 1968 (paperback edition, 1970), was the pathbreaker. In a simple direct manner it revealed something of the thinking and feeling of an intelligent and sensitive Papuan born into traditional society in the early 1930s, dragged into the whiteman's world via a mission school, and after a varied career, mostly with the administration, achieving national prominence in the 1960s as a trade union leader and one of the founders of the Pangu Pati, Papua New Guinea's first important political party. Maori Kiki's

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book was at the same time an entertaining personal history, a valuable record of a disappearing traditional culture, and an often damning commentary on a colonial regime.

In bringing his biography to publication, Albert Maori Kiki was encouraged and assisted by Ulli Beier, then recently appointed to a lectureship in English Literature at the University of Papua New Guinea. Beier, already a catalyst in the development of contemporary indigenous literature and art in Nigeria, arrived in Papua New Guinea in 1967 and played a major role in encouraging young Papua New Guinean writers and helping to make their work available to the public. In 1969, *Kovave, a journal of New Guinea literature*, first appeared under his editorship (published by Jacaranda Press in conjunction with The New Guinea Cultural Centre of the University of Papua New Guinea). The journal presents creative writing in English and Pidgin, translations of traditional poetry and folk tales, some literary criticism, and notes on traditional art (and in two issues, advertisements which bring to the attention of Papua New Guineans a fragment of the rich recent writing of Africa). The first four issues of *Kovave* have included stories by Vincent Eri, John Kadiba, Kumalau Tawali, Peter Lus, Wairu Degoba, John Waiko, the Cook Islander Marjorie Crocombe, Maurice Thompson (New Hebrides) and Lazarus Lami Lami (Australia); poems by Pokwari Kale, Tawali, Allan Natachee and the Indian Chakravarthi; plays by Leo Hannett, Waiko, Rabbie Namaliu and Arthur Jawodimbari; translations of traditional poems and folklore by Maori Kiki, Don Laycock and others; an extract from a forthcoming autobiography by Hannett, and a critique of the poetry of Natachee – the first Papuan poet ever to get into print – by Beier. [*Kovave* ceased publication in 1974.]

Beier also edited two new series of slim paperbacks – *Papua Pocket Poets*, which published Indian, Indonesian, African and Australian poetry as well as that of Papua New Guinea, including poems by Tawali (*Signs in the Sky*), Natachee (*Aia*) and collections by Hannett, Tawali and Murray Russell, and *Pidgin Pocket Plays*. In addition Heinemann have published *Two Plays from New*

Guinea (John W. Kaniku and Turuk Wabei) and Jacaranda a volume of *Five New Guinea Plays* (Hannett, Waiko, Jawodimbari, Tawali and M. Lovori), two of which were produced in Canberra in 1969 and reviewed by Laycock in *Kovave* I(2). Laycock alleges a deliberate lack of media coverage of the performances. In 1971 Thomas Nelson (Australia) released a book, *Home of Man: The People of New Guinea*, by Paul Cox and the ubiquitous Ulli Beier, in which Papua New Guinea poems are used as vignettes for Cox's black and white photographic essay.

In Madang, the Kristen Press has been active in publishing writing ('inspirational, educational and entertaining') by Papua New Guineans and conducts a Creative Writing Centre with courses and workshops for writers, translators and editors.

Subsequently the administration itself entered the field, through the Bureau of Literature, Department of Information and Extension Services, with the publication of a low-cost quarterly, *New Guinea Writing* (No. 1, August 1970). Editor is Donald Maynard, whose *Fragment of the God* (1971) is one of the *Papua Pocket Poets*, and Tawali is assistant editor. Poetry and prose, in English, Pidgin and Motu, have been contributed by a number of writers including Eri, Natachee, Tawali, Waiko, Kadiba, Paulius Matane, Bob Giegao, Jacob Simet, Jack Lahui, Clemens Runawery, Peter Wia Paiya, John Kasaipwalova, Renagi Lohia, Joseph Saruva and Ikini Yaboyang. So far the bulk of the work in *New Guinea Writing* has been confined to stories of village life or retelling of folktales, though a 1971 issue contained a statement on 'cultural reconstruction' by Black Power leader Kasaipwalova. It is a less impressive publication than *Kovave*, but has the advantages of a larger market and lower price.

The Bureau also participated in organising residential creative writing courses and has sponsored literary competitions.

The above survey, brief as it is, gives an indication of the extent of the burgeoning of Papua New Guinea writing in the last couple of years [to 1971]. The pace at which this has taken place is in part traceable to the setting-up of the University (first graduates, 1970),

which has provided a training ground and an environment conducive to the development of an indigenous literature; more generally, however, it reflects a growing national consciousness and body of articulate expression. Most of the contributions have come from students at the University of Papua New Guinea, though a number have come from other students, public servants and others. As is to be expected, many of these are political activists who felt strongly about the development of nationalism in Papua New Guinea, though (as with Hannett, for example) this may not be a unified Papua New Guinea nationalism. Sometimes nationalism is expressed through a reassertion of the values of the indigenous cultures or voicing of nostalgia for the traditional life, as is implicit in the translation and retelling of traditional poems, songs and folk tales, and explicit in such writing as Tawali's *The Bush Kanaka Speaks* and the poem of Herman Talingapua:

Leleki baskets
hang from the roof of the men's house
pregnant with secrets
and power.
But I,
the 'modern man',
complete with suit,
despatch case and transistor set,
shall never know
what hidden happiness or strength
is tied up in these baskets.
My age and 'learning' notwithstanding,
I am excluded.
Uninitiated,
condemned to sleep with women,
unfit to carry shield and spear.

In much of the writing, however, the nationalist sentiment is overtly anti-white. Amongst some of the more powerful of these, the anti-colonialist message lies in the situation created or re-

ported by the writer; for example, in Waiko's play, *The Unexpected Hawk*, after the *kiap* (patrol officer) has burnt down a village whose people had refused to comply with a government order to move to become part of a single large village:

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.

or from amongst the many enlightening and frequently amusing incidents ('When I was five years old, I thought priests were wonderful, because they wore trousers') in Hannett's autobiographical 'Disillusionment with the Priesthood' (*Kovave II*(1)):

... we also had two different masses: one for Europeans and one for natives. I remember that once a Papuan came into the European mass, and he was literally chased out of the church by the Australian priest, who, incidentally, was a member of the Legislative Council!

Only occasionally is there anything approaching a violence of expression, as in *The Bush Kanaka Speaks*, by the usually restrained Tawali:

Every white man the gorment sends to us
forces his veins out shouting
nearly forces the excreta out of his bottom
shouting: you bush kanaka.

He says: you ol les man!
Yet he sits on a soft chair and does nothing
just shouts, eats, drinks, eats, drinks,
like a woman with a child in her belly.
These white men have no bones.
If they tried to fight us without their musiket
they'd surely cover their faces like women.

My favourite of the overtly anti-colonialist writings is the delightful Pidgin poem by Leo Saulep, 'Wait Dok na Blak Dok' (*New Guinea Writing*, No. 3), with its light but telling thrust at Australian colonialism:

Blak dok i tok: 'Nau brata givim mi
Tumora, wenem tumora mi no laik tumora,
Yu givim me bek nau yu go!'
Tasol wait dok i tok: 'Wet liklik bai mi go.'

At a more populist level, the growth of Papua New Guinea literature has had some counterpart in the presentation of three notable Pidgin/English national newspapers: *Pangu Pati Nius* (first issue, April 1970), *Bougainville Nius* (sponsored by the secessionist Napidakoe Navitu; first issue, July 1970 – '*Dispela niuspepa em i no bilong smok na tu em i no bilong rabim as. Taim yu pinis long ritim you putim gut na bihain bai yu inap long ritim gen*'), and *Wantok* (published by the Wirui Press [Catholic Mission], Wewak, first issue, August 1970). These are geared to a local audience, are a little bit educative and the latter two encourage people to express opinions through letters to the editor. *Bougainville Nius* is also publishing traditional stories.

Late 1970 saw another important development in Papua New Guinea literature, the publication of its first novel, *Crocodile*, by Vincent Eri (Jacaranda Press). Eri, born in the Gulf District of Papua in 1936, a former teacher and one of the first graduates of the University of Papua New Guinea, was in 1971 Acting Superintendent of Primary Education in Papua New Guinea [Eri later became governor-general of Papua New Guinea.]

Crocodile is a well-written and enjoyable novel. It is, however, more than this. It is impossible to review the book without being conscious of two things: first, that it is the first novel by a Papuan writer and, second, that whether intentionally or not it is to a certain extent a political document, as it is a major contribution to the growing body of writing which expresses a specifically Papua New Guinean identity. The central character in

the novel, Hoiri Sevese, is born in the Gulf District of Papua between the world wars. After the death of his mother (attributed to sorcery) he is transferred from the Protestant to the Catholic mission school, where he begins his partial induction to the white man's world. As a boy he travels with his father on one of the *Hiri* trading voyages across the Gulf to Port Moresby, where his people trade sago and betel nut for the Motu pottery and where Hoiri experiences the wonder, confusion and humiliation of a Papuan in this European-ruled community. After his return to the village Hoiri gets married and becomes a father. The day after his son is born a patrol officer comes to the village and Hoiri is amongst those chosen to go as carriers and paddlers on a patrol inland.

No one was more troubled than Sevese [Hoiri's father]. He wished Hoiri had never come into this world. He cursed the government and blamed Tamate [Rev. James Chalmers] for carrying the Word of God to the village, opening up the way for the patrol officers to be ordering his people around. If only the Government officers were like Tamate and other missionaries, who understood people and cared for their feelings, it would not be so bad. Maybe when people die and change their skins, their feelings and ideas also change.

While he is on patrol Hoiri receives the news that his wife has been taken by a crocodile. Refused permission to go back to the village, Hoiri deserts and returns to kill the crocodile and embed his axe in an invisible rider of the crocodile (a sorcerer). Subsequently he is told that his wife was claimed in retribution for two sorcerers killed by his uncle and that in Kerema people saw a man with a big wound on his shoulder. But before this episode is closed the war intervenes ('It seemed a silly idea that the white men and the yellow men should come to Papua to fight one another. Still, there was no clear story about the reasons why they were fighting one another') and Hoiri, and his father, are enlisted by ANGAU to support Australia's war effort. As a

carrier on the Bulldog-Wau trail (Eri's own father worked on this trail and died after being returned to his village on a stretcher) and in Lae, Hoiri is exposed to more of European civilisation as well as coming closer to a wider group of his fellow Papuans before being thrown back to his village – the war over, his father dead and the presumed agent of his wife's death killed, with 11 pounds, five sticks of tobacco and the hope that his son might grow up to understand the things that baffle him.

Hoiri is essentially a tragic figure. Already partially alienated from the traditional society by his schooling and the church association of his father, he does not fully comprehend the balance between the material and supernatural worlds of a culture which has no real concept of natural death; still less is he able to come to terms with the reality of a dominant European culture which seems to be reaching out to him yet offers him neither respect nor the gift of understanding. Eri portrays this confusion with sympathy, elegance and power. The hope of resolving the confusion lies with Hoiri's son, yet something recalls a wistful comment in Kiki:

Of course no custom continues for ever . . . And yet I feel cheated somehow, when I remember that I never underwent the *miro ava akore* festival, that I never sat in the *che eravo*, and that no Orokololo girl ever marked me 'as her tree'.

The 'political' content of *Crocodile* is both in the situation it portrays – the clash of cultures in which an uncomprehending traditional society is manipulated by a technologically superior and culturally arrogant white man's world – and in the characterisation of the people in those worlds. The characterisation of the whites is severe, but not vindictive; this is a novel to probe sensitivities, not to club them down.

The main weakness of the novel is that in both situations and characters Eri has tended to draw stereotypes; they are all there – the exploitative missionary, the indiscreet white mistress, the stupid inexperienced patrol officer, the wise, faithful native

sergeant, the hard brusque ADO, the simple good-bloke Australian soldier, the revelatory American negro soldier, the cruel ANGAU officer. Perhaps it is appropriate, however, that a country's first novel should record these types. If *Crocodile* does not have the polish of some African writing with a similar theme (Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* comes to mind) it is nonetheless an admirable beginning.

Shortly after the publication of *Crocodile*, Jacaranda Press released another important novel with a Papua New Guinea setting, *The Stolen Land*, by Ian Downs. Though not an indigenous product, Downs's book is included in the context of this review because it is concerned with New Guinea nationalism, and because Downs's writing carries the authority of his intimate association with the country, as district commissioner, planter, and member of parliament and of the Administrator's Council. It can be read, we are told, as a serious attempt to explain and excuse the development and destruction of the hero, a Melanesian torn by the counter-pressures of the modern world and his own pre-literate society:

in the hope that some notice can be taken of its warning of future violence so that some of the lessons of our time can be used in an endeavour to ensure that home rule and independence in Papua New Guinea can be orderly and peaceful.

The Stolen Land traces the development of Joseph Makati from his departure to school in Australia ('Joseph had been chosen by his village as an expendable orphan to be given to the Church'), through his return to the New Guinea highlands and entry to politics under the guidance of a king-making European planter:

'The first thing', Hardie told Joseph, 'is to remember you are black and then be thankful. You are born in an age when the twilight of the white man in this country is clear and the day of the coloured man very close . . . The honourable and sensible thing for you to do is to lead your people before you are caught up in the middle of the mob, with no choice of direction'.

to the achievement of national prominence and representation of his country at the United Nations and on, eventually, to the end of the story. In this reviewer's opinion *The Stolen Land* is a failure as a novel, unsatisfying as a story and yet well worth reading.

The first half of the book is perceptive, informative and well written, building up tension while offering a good measure of sensitive descriptive writing, sharp commentary on Papua New Guinea society – black and white – and often vitriolic humour:

No one will ever know what Sir James and Lady Craig privately thought about the social occasions which passed for hospitality at Government House and which it was their duty to provide . . . There were drinks at a table presided over by a bar steward and a tray of anaemic dry sandwiches contrived from some sort of fish-paste on another table further away. There were not many of these and guests were reluctant to seem greedy by rushing them. Those who did investigate them seldom returned and it is possible that some sandwiches survived to be used again.

Always a formidable critic of much of what goes on in administration, in white society generally, and amongst the local people, and with a close knowledge of the landscape and the people, Downs is at his best in building up to the election of Makati.

From this point on, however, the novel deteriorates. It is as though Downs believes that to maintain the pace of the story he must keep increasing the 'bigness' of his setting. In quick succession Makati is selected to visit the UN, scores a gleefully acknowledged verbal coup over a Russian delegate, is kidnapped at gunpoint by a black power leader, is seduced by 'a big ripe [Russian] woman' who restores his manhood and pride in the name of international brotherhood (Makati reciprocates by hopping into bed with another young woman so that she can prove she is not a colonialist), and returns to plot something like a bloody, messianic Unilateral Declaration of Independence. The plausible Hardie turns into some sort of super CIA agent, a

believable liberal academic type becomes a stooge of a vast international conspiracy, as does a recognisable administration type (in the hopes of acquiring a rich wife), and Makati himself inexplicably comes to assume a national status which apparently places him next to the administrator.

The result, unfortunately, is like something of a poor man's James Bond. And amidst all this there is a constant allusion to 'alien [especially communist?] intrigue' which at first looks like a satire of the Kingsford Smiths [Kingsford Smith was a prominent member of the planter community in Papua New Guinea in the early 1970s.] et al. of the unworldly conservative clique, but subsequently appears to express Downs's own forebodings. If this is what is meant by 'the lessons of our time' which the dustjacket points us to, it is not clear, at least to this reviewer, precisely what Downs is warning us all against, still less what should be done to ensure that nirvana of orderly and peaceful transition to independence.

The other major Papua New Guinea book to appear within the last few months also has something to do with the clash of cultures, though that is not its main subject. *Hohao* (Nelson, 1971) represents a joint effort by Ulli Beier and Albert Maori Kiki to record something of a declining culture while it is still more or less possible to do so. It is a study of the carved and painted ancestral spirit boards, *hohao*, of the Elema people from the villages of Orokolo in the Papuan Gulf. The pictures and description of the important *hohaos* known to have survived are accompanied by the myths of the various clan heroes portrayed, as retold by Maori Kiki.

The culture of Orokolo survived the onslaught of European civilisation somewhat longer than the cultures of other parts of the Papuan Gulf, but shortly before the Second World War the men's cult houses were burnt down (probably by Christian converts) and they were never rebuilt. 'The traditional Orokolo culture was overcome by a spirit of complete malaise and depression'; the men's cults, initiation ceremonies and mask festivals

died out and the distinctive art form almost disappeared. Of the few *hohaos* which survived this assault some were later cast aside by their owners who feared their power now that they were no longer subject to the restraints of traditional ritual. One *hohao* representing a powerful ancestor was, at the request of the ancestral spirit, dressed up in European clothes and buried in the Christian cemetery. Although there has been a recent revival of the art form as a commercial enterprise, the traditional *hohao* and much of the associated mythology is virtually lost.

It is perhaps a little disappointing that the authors have covered only a small segment of the rich culture of this region and that, apparently, they have not gone beyond Papua for examples of this art form. But their approach serves to press home the realisation that we have been left with only the scraps of a culture. *Hohao* is a nicely produced volume and a welcome addition to the sparse literature on the traditional art of Papua New Guinea.

And there are more books by Papuan and New Guinean writers in the pipeline: Albert Maori Kiki has received a Commonwealth Literary Fund award to work full-time on another book and autobiographical works are promised from Paulias Matane, head of the newly created Department of Business Development, and from Leo Hannett. [Michael Somare's *Sana* also appeared in 1975.]

The rapid expansion in Papua New Guinea's indigenous literary output in recent years is important. Apart from providing entertaining reading with a local flavour, it rests with Papua New Guinea writers to record something of their traditional cultures before they disintegrate, and to help to formulate a sense of national identity and to get the country's nationalist demands across to Australia and the world generally. There is no doubt that Papua New Guineans will benefit from this; hopefully it will also contribute to a more sensitive appreciation by Australians of the difficulties and responsibilities of being a retiring colonial power.