

Writing and Nation in Papua New Guinea: Literature, Culture and Decolonisation
by Greg Murphy
"Papua New Guinea : Then and Now" Conference
Sydney, Australia, July, 2002

What I want to do here is to talk around the relationship between writing and nation in Papua New Guinea. I am going to do this, under the three headings of Literature, Culture and Decolonisation, by telling three stories, by reading three of my own recent poems, and by reading from three discussions in the Letters to the Editor section of Papua New Guinea's main daily, the *Post Courier*.

I do have two direct things to say, however. Firstly, discussions on Papua New Guinea for a long time have been of the 'Where do we go from here?' type or the 'Doom and gloom' type. I think it far better to be thinking and talking about the 'right now', what Wole Soyinka called 'the niggling, predictable present', however agonising that might be. Secondly, colonisation to me is primarily the taking of people's imaginations away and it can happen in a country, a society, a family or even a personal relationship; decolonisation is part of the process of reversing this. I have spent much of my time in Papua New Guinea meeting, talking, working, relating and teaching in the world of the imagination.

I Literature

The connection between writing and the nation has been around a long time in Papua New Guinea. Peter Kama Kerpi, for example, said in 1973, 'A poet in a developing Papua New Guinea can be a voice of vision playing a redemptive role'. A little later, in 1976, Leo Hannet said that 'it is we writers who are the soul of the nation'. This is a poem written by Apisai Enos even earlier in 1971. It is called *Unity*:

Old wrinkled womb
Mother of
Gamas Markhams Wabags Arowes Kaviengs and Chimbus
You who brought forth
Manus Sepiks and Tolais Gogodalas
Kiwais Keremas Dobuans Huris and Motus
And all those others
Who scattered and dispersed
Who know not their father and mother

Your pregnant stomach burst
Scattering your children like seeds from a pod

*Over your bleeding body they scrambled
And crawled like wriggling worms
Each claiming his part*

*Though your blood is their blood
Your flesh their flesh
Your mind their mind
They will not acknowledge their kin
And like delta islands they drift
Further apart in pools and streams of blood*

*Awake mother
From the coma of birth
And as your clouded eyes regain vision
And your trembling hands steady
Pull them back by their navel cords
Into the warmth of your bilum
Keep them safe under your tapa cloth
Let them recognise each other at last
On your breasts.*

It is an archetypal and enduring image. And, historically, of course, a potent one for both nation and nationalism everywhere. In the year 2000, this letter appeared in the Post Courier. It used the same image, or *tok piksa*, of the mother, and was called *Be careful how you handle the demands*:

*Let's think of a mother and her children in a family.
The mother always shows her love, care, concern, hospitality and generosity to all her children.
The mother also sees her children as equally as important to each other.
Likewise PNG, as a country, is like a family unit.
The Government is like a mother and each ethnic group, province or region are like the children.
When a child is too demanding for self-interest, the mother does not think the second time to meet the child's greediness for food or special treatment.
Instead, out of love and care for all, she shows the full strength of motherhood to the greedy child by smacking the child at his/her back. She does that so that the whole family can have a good life.
Likewise in the case of Bougainville, I have seen that there is no way out for the peaceful settlement on the island, for that matter.
For the good of all the Papua New Guineans, for national unity and solidarity, it is inevitable a civil war on the island is imminent or is the only available answer.
As a former Prime Minister, Sir Julius Chan did in 1997 by the hiring the Sandline mercenaries, he was a leader with vision who thinks ahead of time. He is a real leader who can foretell the future because all peaceful talks are a waste of public time and money as they are always in vain.*

Because the Bougainvillean leaders will always want the highest autonomy or independence, then if the government bows down to those demands, then I warn you PNG. All the children will demand what the mother has given to one child.

Thereby, this very land you are standing on will be divided into how many countries you can imagine – Chimbus, Sepiks, Madangs, Engans, Keremas, Manus and Apos, Get prepared to settle in your own countries.

The Chief, Sir Michael Somare, should also be cautious in handling this delicate and sensitive issue because Sepiks cannot go back to Sepik to make a living there.

It is a letter looking personally and honestly at nation, regardless of how appalling the angle of vision. Another tendency is to go into denial, a kind of romantic denial, which leads to the elusive business of nationalism, as in this letter four days later, entitled *There's no place like my country*:

It's still sweet like it was 25 years ago that this place we now call Papua New Guinea still rings a special bell in my heart that sometimes I am too impatient to confess that PNG is my home, my paradise, my country.

It is sweet home. I love PNG like no other. I do not need to be a soldier, an ambassador, an MP, a sports hero or rich to confess that my country has given me what it can . . . We still owe our villages, provinces and country more than we think we owe.

Our country is surely unique and complex. But we are a community of diversified cultures and values. And it is wonderful how we have come to blend this diversity to building a country of one people, one nation and one country.

Then the country is the most high we want to live for. It does not matter where in PNG we are from, who we are, what we do; we always fall back to where we belong. Where we belong is where our base is, our foundation is and our resting place is. No wonder why someone from Ulamona village in Bialla, who died in Manus was flown to Ulamona for burial. One Ero villager in Kikori met a Sepik man he has never met in PNG on the streets of Tokyo and started talking to each other in pidgin; many Papua New Guineans follow the Melbourne Storms not because of the team but the presence of Marcus Bai, a PNG student in New York was found in tears when he saw the national flag flying at the United Nations headquarters among other flags. These situations express a sense of belonging to an identity, a nation, a country. If this situations can tell a story, then why can't we in PNG share that feeling of oneness as we live in this great country?

The one fact is that there is no other place on earth that is like our village, our district and our country. There is no language, no culture, no tradition and no behaviour like ours elsewhere on earth. If so, these should form the basis of our love, our patronage and our belonging to this wild but beautiful and virgin country. See for yourself . . . Moresby is not bad. It is what we make of it. It is Manhattan in the Pacific. Like it or not it is the nerve centre of this beautiful country. Visiting her is like visiting your home village where the elders still long to live to see you come home. When in Moresby take a glance of my hero Sir Michael Somare who shaped this country. Imagine the dreams of our gone forefathers. They liked it that way. It is like a big village where our elders like Sir Michael still live to keep the fire burning. This is the beauty about our capital . . .

Let us share the cries and heartaches, the love and joy and the resources so abundant to us. We are capable and rich. We are in nature's own Disney land, the one especially built for us with all resources rightly placed in their own places so no one is better off than the other.

This is 'we' rather than 'I', 'our' rather than 'my'. There is more flowery language and rhetorical persuasion, less of the 'niggling present' and less real engagement with the reader beyond a challenging metaphorical suggestion that Papua New Guinea is like some kind of virgin lover.

The two letters are about that interplay between nation and nationalism that almost every Papua New Guinean writer has dealt with in one way or another. For those who look honestly at themselves and their world, some sense of nation may emerge. Try to speak on behalf of other people, and nationalism will almost certainly result. In literature with a capital L, that is, the literature that truly illuminates human experience, there cannot be claims for legitimacy, there cannot be denial. There can only be honesty and more honesty and more honesty, an honesty that allows the reader the power of generalisation and the freedom of imaginative identification.

My story reaches back into the more distant past. The most brilliant time I had in the world of big L literature was working with John Kasaipwalova on his long poems *Sail the Midnight Sun* and *My Tide Let Me Ride* and the Raun Raun Theatre's *Sail the Midnight Sun* trilogy over a three year period from 1979 to 1982. It was, I think, a brilliant collaboration. It involved two visits to the Trobriand Islands, one talking with John in his *haus win* on Muwa Island, the other touring the main island with the first part of the trilogy. It involved a tour together with Raun Raun Theatre to the Asian Arts Festival in 1981. It involved talking in the oddest places, one on his boat, the King George II, in Lae, another at the Drive-In in Port Moresby. And of course many visits by John to Goroka and many rehearsals with the Company.

The first two parts of the trilogy were easier theatrically because John had written down all of *Sail the Midnight Sun* and most of *My Tide Let Me Ride*. So it was very much a matter of Raun Raun Theatre transforming these directly into theatre. Regarding *Sail the Midnight Sun*, the reaction from John and his uncle Chief Nalabutau was highly enthusiastic:

They are not going to worry about us. We have taught them. They are going to go ahead in their own way with their own ideas about what to do with theatre . . . You've told the whole story completely . . . in fact it is excellent . . . the substance of what is got across is the level of awareness like opening up people's eyes to see.

The three bits of this transformation, the oral story of *Imdeduya*, the epic poem *Sail the Midnight Sun* and the folk opera *Sail the Midnight Sun* were all published. The late Elton Brash said of the poem in 1980: 'Sail the Midnight Sun [created] . . . a national hero . . . at a time when the national imagination might need a hero or two'.

There was a bit of a problem with *My Tide Let Me Ride* because the Company were waiting for

John to complete the poem. It eventually arrived, two-thirds of it at least. While waiting, Raun Raun Theatre, after talking with Trobriand storytellers, had been developing the story of Baniara, a Kula hero, who is befriended by a Snake Chief. After some time, however, John made it clear that he wanted the second part of the trilogy for the female character from *Sail the Midnight Sun*, Imdeduya. So the theatre company worked this in. Eventually John completed *My Tide Let Me Ride* up to the stage where Imdeduya gives rebirth to her son but in the form of a snake (it is clear that there was some blending of myths here). Raun Raun Theatre, using John's oral conclusion to the story, completed the folk opera to the point where Sanguma the Snake child goes, like Baniara, up into the Sky. It is my favourite and contains I think the most piercing evocation of the nation and the mother in peril in all of the trilogy. At the beginning of it, the child, Niugini, has drowned and been carried away by the Spirits of the Storm. Imdeduya, importantly the mother, is grieving (see the first ten minutes of *My Tide Let Me Ride*, National Film Archives of Australia).

Then came the final part, the *Dance of the Snail*. I met up with John in Port Moresby where I asked him to outline the story and its philosophy to me. The theatre company needed to complete the trilogy since it had now become a crucial part of its own artistic development. The trilogy was always as much a creation of Raun Raun Theatre as it was of John Kasaipwalova.

The *Dance of the Snail* was finished in its first stage right at the time I was leaving. When asked what I thought would be a suitable farewell from Raun Raun Theatre, I said that I would be interested in a performance of the trilogy, all in one evening. The evening came. A rehearsal of *Dance of the Snail* was held in the morning. John Kasaipwalova had arrived on that morning, staying with me. He talked with the Company about the Sky and the Snail and taught a song for the Snail, then strangely left in the afternoon, saying he had domestic problems to attend to. I said my farewell to the Company at the same time.

Is it possible that his departure may have been about more than domestic problems? There was a festival of theatre and dance, a large crowd of invited guests, artists and audience, a huge mumu and a pig on a spit. He would have been in his element. In actual fact, he later began working on a controversial piece of music and dance theatre called *Sana Sana* which he had been talking about for a number of years. The collaboration was over.

Although, as far as I know, John never questioned the legitimacy of *Dance of the Snail* as a work of art in its own right, he may have seen it in a way more bound to the intricate tapestry of Trobriand mythology and magic, less immediately national in philosophy, more a comment to the colonisers than a celebration and investigation of himself and the nation.

We were both motivated by nation, my motivation very much influenced by his. His philosophy on nation is everywhere accessible in his poetry and therefore also in the Raun Raun Theatre *Midnight Sun* trilogy. Just to take one example, from the video sequence referred to above, a tiny drop of blood is rescued by the Sea at the beginning of *My Tide Let Me Ride* when the spirits of Thunder, Lightning and Rain devour the body of the dead Niugini abandoned on the sea. Imdeduya recovers the drop of blood and in trying to give rebirth to Niugini, gives birth to Sanguma, the snake, instead. The 1982 poem says:

*Yet when all is gone
One tiny drop of blood ebbed slightly unseen
Past the gnashing teeth, beyond the swallowing mouths.*

This small drop of blood, seeded by a tear of forgiveness from Imdeduya (or tradition) and by a grating grain of sand from Niugini (or change) will enable the pearl of Papua New Guinea to 'ride the tide', as John put it. He is using the image as a political symbol here in the same way that he used it in 1971 in his poem *The Reluctant Flame*:

*Deep in my core that small blood droplet pulses lonely and faint
Each day the weighty cover shrieks arrogantly
Vowing to crush and smother the tiny flame within that pulse
But somewhere in my vein my small blood drop
begins to volcano cry.*

As he later said about that poem: 'The Reluctant Flame is me . . . It carries the general potential of a new nation coming into Independence'.

There is nothing essential about this, nothing like the nationalism of one of the directors of *Sana Sana* who said at the time 'my aims are to make sure a Tolai is a Tolai a Chimbu is a Chimbu. 'PNG' is a European gift we will never fit any of our Tolais Chimbus in'. To me it is not the role of a writer to proselytise or posture about such things as 'Our Way', 'Melanesian Way', 'Pacific Way', 'Australian Way', 'American Way' or any other 'Way'. It is the role of a writer to make connection with past and future societies and their literature. Literature must make a connection. It is part of a process and must inevitably refer to that process. Lives, people, society, nation – never, nationalism, or 'Our Way'. Once you have 'cultural custodians', to use an expression of John's, then you are seriously colonising culture by trying to preserve and mummify it.

Preservation and mummification are antithetical to what I have called *jouissance*, that sense of joy bound up with loss, which to me characterises many Papua New Guinea cultures. It is a quality that can be easily, perhaps always is, blocked and perverted. Nationalism blocks and perverts. Whether this was happening with *Sana Sana* and *Kasaipwalova* in the early nineties, I don't know. Had he developed a more nationalistic perspective? I don't know. Why he left that day, I have never been able to find out. He did at one stage ring me and ask me to take over the direction of *Sana Sana* but I declined, not for domestic but for professional reasons.

My poem is called *Byzantium Revisited* and could be subtitled *Literature*:

I

What will they make of it
Down the historical

Track?

II

That large-grey block of cement
On a high hill outside Port Moresby
Graffiti telling its coded story.

On top of it a wire framed giant
Bird of paradise telling another story,
A monument in the sun
Spray of wire feathers
Caught in the sky, full sail.

Down below on a shaded corner
Of the block a beggar sits head down
By a 44-gallon rubbish bin.

And what does he make of it,
The refuse, the betelnut spit, the smell,
The red putrefaction?

'Last year's words belong
To last year's language'?

III

The beggar will not be there then
The bird of paradise will have rusted away
But will the Emperor be there?

The golden young emperor
Naked breath-taking beauty
Soft as the brown feathers
Of the Raggiana bird of paradise
Singing high in a gilded cage

Breathing sacred words to the wind
About 'mackerel crowded seas'
And 'sailing to Byzantium'.

So beautiful we had to turn away below
Adoring maidens dancing and turning
And turning into the wind.

Will this be what they see

Further down the track?
Will Byzantium come round again?

IV

What do I make of it but what the eyes
Can see with no chance now
Of that other reality?

A sad old beggar
Rolling around with rotten
Oranges and used condoms blocked
By cement from the bird
Rusting in the rain.

I had to turn away from the irony,
The artifice of the bird
And the eternity of human ends.

This is 'no country for old men'.
Dark times cloud over
The *jouissance*. The air lies still.

'Next year's words
Await another voice'.

V

And what new voice will sing
As I another poet limp off
Down the track?

II Culture

The three letters to the editor here range around the issue which, as I have suggested, is a central one in Papua New Guinea at the moment – the call for preservation of culture. Nobody can determine what a culture should be. Culture is not absolutely anything. The first letter is called *Beware misuse of Oro tapa cloth* and it is signed Tradition Lover:

It is very good that our government has placed an emphasis on our traditional culture and costumes. The Education Department is also doing the same in schools. I would like to challenge all parents to do their part to educate our new generation in our traditional cultures and costumes, teach the children and young people how to use them in the

right way, so that they will not fade or pass away and be replaced by imported costumes. I am from Oro. By birthright I am a chief of a well respected and well known clan in Popondetta. I value my traditions. I love my culture and costumes and am proud of them and take pride in the value of each ornament we wear because it identifies us whether we are from a high, middle or low class. We can tell by the kind of traditional dress worn in the Oro province whether it is a borrowed one and whether a person is a commoner or low class. We admire other provinces with their beautiful and colorful costumes and the way they dress. I challenge those of you who are still with your customs to keep them up and be proud of them, especially Highlanders and some coastal provinces, for example, Trobriand Islanders and the Mekeos. Preserve them and teach the young their values.

Most people from Oro have approached me and I myself too feel sad, angry and ashamed as people from other provinces and some theatre groups use the Tapa. Their use of it is a mockery of our Oro culture because they do not use Tapa in the proper way. The way Tapa is worn varies because of the hierarchy in the tribe and status in clan.

The Tapa is designed with different means, and also there are different groups, men wear women's Tapa. This is a mockery of Oro people.

I therefore am stressing, please do not use Tapa if it has not been a part of your forefathers' dressing. I apologise to others as I know it is only some people in those other provinces who use Tapa wrongly and not the whole province itself.

One of the strongest customs that exists in Oro is that no one from a different clan is allowed to wear another clan's Tapa design or special ornament. If it is worn by mistake, that clan's members have to kill several pigs and make a feast to compensate the owners of that special designed Tapa costume and ornament, otherwise the owners will strip off that person in public. After the usage of that particular costume it is returned and never used again by the clan who borrowed it. These values are taught by Oro people to their children and are also advised to be careful with their culture.

If you are not from Oro, you have to be cautious with the tapa that you wear, or else you might be stripped naked in public!

Identity, including rank and status, is not something that you can ensure by insistence. To me, if you insist on the 'right way' and resist changing identities, then I suspect the very thing you fear most will certainly happen, that is, the fading away of much cultural manifestation and display. To me, the use of tapa cloth in the video sequence mentioned above does not bastardise culture in any way but in fact enhances it.

The next letter by Project Consultant is called *Tourism needs more awareness:*

In FORUM with Mike Manning the article 'PNG missing out on Tourism kina' Post Courier December 7, 2001 has really touched my interest of which I would like to stress some problems which need to be seen by the industry management.

Of course tourism is one of the many income generating industry on which some countries entirely depend very much for internal revenue budgets of their government. Now PNG is at the crossroads of this industry because we have many alternative income earning areas such as in agriculture, forestry, fisheries and mining. Thus, the importance of tourism industry lacks

appreciation the bulk of the population in both rural and urban areas.

Because of the insufficient awareness of the importance of tourism as an alternative kina spinner, Papua New Guineans have, over the last 20 years, treated foreign tourists like discards, unemployed or criminals from their country drifting in disguise as 'neo-colonial exploiters' like those pre-independence foreigners who left with all the wealth they built from local cheap labor. Yes, Mike Manning identified some obstacles – visa and entry control, tax regime, credit cards, and others which are basically legal and policy matters that PNG government need to review. I suggest that tourists be given some mark of identification upon arrival that will separate them from other foreigners.

Lots of tourists find difficulties to move to any places because of fear of attack or robbery and unsure of routes.

Taxi services that decline in most towns be supported by the Tourism Promotion Authority. Taxi can be cars, trucks, horse, donkey, buffulo for both rural and urban centres.

Apart from the misunderstandings about the realities of the Papua New Guinea economy, not, I must admit, my forte either, we can all shudder with horror when we remember when people were categorised and marked in such a way.

And the final letter is called *Don't bare your breasts* from Boroko in Port Moresby:

It is good to see women taking an active part in the promotion and preservation of our traditional cultures but I feel it is immoral and pornography at its best for women to dance bare breasted with only grass skirts over their private parts.

I know many will be infuriated by my argument but I feel it is about time Papua New Guineans realise that we are in a modern world and that many practices that we considered the norm in traditional societies are no longer relevant today It is men who force these women to dance barebreasted under the pretext of traditions and this must be stopped In traditional societies, men regarded women's breasts not as sex objects but as a source of milk for babies. In fact, women were generally regarded not as sex objects but as partners who would look after pigs, make gardens and raise healthy children so that the husband would obtain great riches and maintain a good status in society.

Men and women had different houses and they lived separately from one another. Men went to the women's house to eat and retired for the night.

The only reason for having sex was to raise children, and sexual encounters would happen on a six to seven year interval after the birth of a child.

Today because of Western influence, PNG men have discovered that sex is not only to conceive children but there is also pleasure involved with the act. Breasts are no longer for babies but adults as well. Today, PNG men see women's breasts differently than how our forefathers thought of it. This makes dancing barebreasted a pornographic act and it must be stopped . . . If men demand that women uncover their breasts when they dance, maybe men should go around and dance naked or wear sheaths around their private parts because that is what happened in traditional societies.

The ideas that somehow you can achieve cultural objectives by edict, that any behaviour

unacceptable to a certain cultural construct must be Western influence, that pre-independence foreigners carried away all the wealth, that xenophobia can ever be justified, are some of the consequences of a preservation mentality.

My story here is about masks. When Raun Raun Theatre designed its first production in the year it began in 1975, the year of Independence – it was a Siassi story about twin culture heroes called *Betlail* – I thought it appropriate that the twins wear Siassi style masks like the ones in the video sequence above. At this stage, I knew a little but not much about the historical and philosophical importance of these masks called *tumbuan* or *nakamutmut*.

The initial masks we used were conical like the originals but made of different materials and with generalised designs (designs as I later found out are the most important part of these masks). When we were in Lae town on tour, however, one of the actors playing a Twin and from Siassi acquired a real mask. He used this for performances in Lae quite happily and apparently with the approval of an Aromot Island elder who saw a performance there.

It had always been my plan that the production should go to Siassi from where it originated so that audiences there could comment, critique and discuss it. During the boat trip to Aromot in 1976, however, the mask disappeared. The only place it could have gone was overboard. It definitely got on the boat because I saw it.

But the story didn't end there. In 1979, I was looking for four masks to top the four draped stage props which represented the various lands visited by Niugini on his Kula journey in *Sail the Midnight Sun*. I happened to be looking for costumery in an artifact shop in Lae when I saw a number of Tami Island masks for sale. Tami is not now regarded by the Siassis as part of their place and although there was trade, they are not now major trading partners of the Aromot islanders. I bought four. I assumed that since they were for sale, the purchaser had some say in their fate.

Once again, like the tapa cloth mentioned before, I think this use of these masks enhanced their cultural importance and did not destroy it. Just as it can be said that cognitive literacy, unlike initial literacy, means using reading and writing as a tool for learning, I think that there can be a cognitive oralcy, which, unlike the functional communication of initial oralcy, can be used as a tool for learning about self and the world.

As we were touring Papua New Guinea (*Sail the Midnight Sun* is still the only theatre production to have toured all provinces in Papua New Guinea), stories began to filter back from Aromot Island in Siassi that we should not be using the Tami masks. At one stage, because of this, we changed to oval-shaped panels with generalised designs on them.

When *Sail the Midnight Sun* eventually toured Siassi, Aromot Island was dropped from the tour. I was not there at the time and this decision was made by the tour leader who was from Siassi. This is the entry from his diary report:

Siassi 17.10.79 *We arrived at Siassi on 17th of Oct. and go straight to Aromot Island to discuss about the mask whether we use them or not. The village people don't want us to use them because it was a forbidden masks so we didn't use them in public and it also useful for men only. We had a long talk about the masks and 2.30pm we left for Siassi Provincial High School. The performances at Siassi Pro. High School is good and exciting one, and lot of the people are interested to watch the show and they all wanted us to do other performances as well. The life was interesting for everyone when we arrived at Siassi. The people from Aromot want us to do a show at Aromot Village but we told them we are running out of time to Travel to Madang so we didn't put a play there The village people are so worried because we didn't show them anything.*

The crux of the matter is here. I suppose the tour leader was saying, if you have cultural prescriptions, live with them. The rest of us will get on with it.

Culture might well be a bastard, in fact. To me, it is the most illegitimate fact of our daily existence. It is born out of love and passion. It is claimed and disowned, disowned and claimed, in multifarious ways, very much a matter of the 'niggling present'.

My second poem is called *Woman Waiting* and could be subtitled *Culture*:

Sit sit
Sit sit.

All morning
All morning.

Sleeping first
Then
Cradling infant
Then
Sit sit
Two together.

Same place
Same place
Scratching knee
Seeing everywhere
Shifting baby on lap
Looking around
Adjusting hair
Going nowhere.

And then I saw
She'd gone

And sat
Underneath an Air Niugini DC3
Mounted twenty feet above her in the air
Saying PAPUA NEW GUINEA NATIONAL AIRLINE.

III Decolonisation

The newspaper discussion here is one about rugby league. Jamie Maxtone-Graham, one of the prominent members of the elite began a discussion in the Post Courier about the following in Papua New Guinea for the State of Origin series between the Blues and the Maroons. This letter was from a person in Goroka:

Give more time to our games

I totally agree with Jamie Maxtone's views and all intelligent Papua New Guineans in government should seriously think about getting the government to ban live telecast of Australian games in Papua New Guinea in the interest of not only our identity but for our future generations.

I don't want my child to grow up believing that Australians are superhumans and he can't beat them in rugby league.

At the moment we see Australian players as the best and when our national team takes them on, our players are already beaten psychologically even before they run onto the field.

That's why the Australians defeat us by cricket scores every time we play them.

Therefore I suggest EMTV should give more time to televising the semi-professional competition, the SP Cup.

Leave the Australian matches to be televised by Australian TV stations.

On the same day, there was another letter by Rasta, also from Goroka.

PNG identity quite intact

I refer to a letter by Jamie Maxtone-Graham about Papua New Guinea being in danger of losing its identity.

The sad irony of the contents and the assertions, having to come from someone within that very elitist social order that actually perpetuates the cultural trend in question is almost laughable.

Can't Mr Maxtone-Graham see the vestiges of protest, not against Papua New Guinea and its inherent culture but against those in control?

What kind of role models and heroes within the country does he want us to look up to amidst the quagmire of corruption and regression? Does he mean us to love and adore role models that siphon people's money from the public purse of even hundred thousands of kina, maybe millions

more and do not show the slightest pang of remorse? People who live in glass houses should not throw stones!

Other than the Australian State of Origin football series, there's nothing much to be wild about in PNG and we will continue to be wild about Australian football. So why the fuss about Australianisation?

If ever there's anybody who is in danger of an identity crisis they will be those of a social caste who tend to send their children to international schools that teach Australian syllabuses or send them straight to Australia for Australian education. Not to mention those who enjoy dual residencies and citizenship with Australia.

Fear not Mr Maxtone-Graham, for I am in no such danger as you may have perceived and by the way, I have nothing against Australia, Australians or Australianisation. I benefit more from AusAid than from you and your masters! You may have hurled one stone too many.

But bear in mind that I will continue to bet on the Melbourne Cup to supplement my needs and wants where those of you in control have failed me.

I will also continue to cheer the State of Origin football series as antidote to the state of negativity created by those of you in control.

I seek out these Australian sports as a means of consolation from my miseries all the while those in control struggle to outdo each other.

This particular debate was not only a political outcry against corruption and elitism but was talking about that key point – who creates tradition and identity? About the fact that these things are constructions most often by those in power. For all those who claim to speak on behalf of others, Rasta is strong evidence to the contrary.

The story here is about a theatre workshop project in Papua New Guinea in the year 2000. Two resource persons, one Papua New Guinean and one expatriate, spent two months working with theatre groups in the province of Tarantella (names and places have been fictionalised).

The epigraph to the story is a refrain the Hillaire Belloc poem, *Tarantella*:

*Do you remember an Inn,
Miranda,
Do you remember an Inn?*

What follows now are excerpts from the reports of the two Resource Persons which may shed some light on the horrendous climax to the story.

[RP PNG] *This is a group that has very little influence from other groups or the western and modern PNG theatres. How they present and what they show comes from deep inside themselves. This is what I have been trying to get across to performers all this time. They have performed once in Tarantella and 2 times in Giri within the last 9 months. This is a group that has 6 females including 2 mothers. Most of the men are much older, above 25 years' old.*

There is much strange power and lots of energy on stage. The richness and spirit of the past is still alive in each individual. Even the costumes that identify the environment they live in. More so the stage setting is just open space with no backdrop coming out from house boy [euphemism for men's ceremonial house or spirit house] to perform in the middle of the village. About 20 – 30 family at one time become the audience. I see that with bad influence or wrong direction this group will lose all that it has. This problem is like father and child as the child grows up.

[RP EXP] *Alois [group leader] also spent quite some time telling me about how he intends to make the group "commercial". He tells me about a workshop with NCC [National Cultural Commission] where they were told that all the theatre groups need to "sell" their "product" to tourists. I have heard this before. I can not help but think that the tourism industry in PNG is not large enough to employ all the theatre groups who are receiving this message. I feel false expectations are being raised and perhaps the groups are being steered away from creating works for a PNG audience, and toward a "disney-fication" of contemporary PNG culture for the benefit of the trickle of tourists that come here.*

[RP EXP] *Later in the afternoon Mark [specialist] and Sinaka [head of the host organisation] arrived. Due to the accident that had occurred during my reception, this welcoming was a little more subdued. Still, the same items were included: the surprise attack at the boat, the singing [dance] to the grand stand, the speeches and plays. Shortly after the show, while Mark and Sinaka were washing up, a man began to beat his wife. I inquired, and was told that it was one of the women from the theatre troupe. Her husband had not given her permission to join the group, and having just returned from town, and having seen her perform, he decided to beat her up for it. Fortunately she was holding a child, and so he did not beat her too badly. After asking if it was all right I went to see the woman, who had gone into her house. She said she was okay. I talked with a few people who seemed upset by what had just happened. My assumption was that they were upset at the fact that he had beat her up. As it turned out, they were upset because he did this in front of the Kukurai [Chief] and during a public function, not because he beat her up. Had he waited five minutes and beat her inside their house, this would have been all right in the eyes of those with whom I was talking and I can only assume they were a fair representation of sections of the community.*

[RP EXP] *The Intestine - This game too was rough going. At the end discussion, one boy said that he enjoyed the whole day except he thought the Intestine was "a bed of sin". I thought I must have mis-heard, so I asked him to repeat his comment. No, I had not mis-heard. As he made his comment all the other guys were visibly disturbed. It seemed clear to me that they did not share his opinion. I responded that in theatre one needed to be comfortable touching other people with respect, and that trust is very important to a theatre group. If people's thoughts went elsewhere during an exercise, or if some individual chose to take advantage of a game to behave inappropriately, then this was probably something that the group leaders had to deal with. After we closed the session three of the leading guys came up to me to apologise for the comment about the "bed of sin" explaining that that particular individual was a problem in the group and that he smokes too much marijuana.*

[RP PNG] *That night I seriously looked back at my life in theatre after 20 years and the*

support and understand she [his partner] had for me. In the past and even today so many fine talented performers quit theatre because of misunderstanding or jealousy, others quit because of no money in this profession. You may count so many reasons. In fact is there a future in theatre? That question has been asked so many times in any theatre group. My honest answer is I love what I am doing and that is my life in theatre. I speak for myself yet deep down I know it is not good enough reason to the question. Two out of ten theatre people make more than five years as performers. Excluding [the national theatre]. Here I am talking about Community theatre. Thanks to my wife and kids I am still free doing what I love best. Acting, dancing and now teaching. Tonight I am happy and relax ready for tomorrow.

[RP PNG] *I was very happy to see my wife and 2 daughter who just came down from the highlands. She explained that her father was very sick and had been admitted to the hospital in the neighboring province. She and kids were just stopping by and will be on the ship on Sunday. We went into Mark's office for her to say hello and later that afternoon I took them home. Just to mention I had not seen my family for nearly eight months.*

[RP EXP] *In the afternoon Mark was over at my house, when Jr. Pengau [group leader] comes over to announce that their group thought about it, and they decided they do not want me to run the workshop, but rather prefer Danga [Resource Person PNG] to do it, as he is in town anyway. Mark told the group that it was not up to them who gave them their workshop; the only choice that was theirs to make was whether there would be a workshop or not. I went over in the morning to ask if the group was ready to begin. I also asked why they did not want to work with me. I explained that if they had a good reason I would not be upset, but that perhaps if I knew the reason we could work out a way to function anyway. They said that they were ashamed to work with a woman, and that it was easier for them to be "crossed" by Danga than by me, because he was a friend. I told them that I did not intend to cross them anyway, and that if they wanted to perform in public then they had to get over their "shame". In any case, I am not convinced that those were in fact the true reasons they requested to have Danga instead of me.*

[RP EXP] *Danga picks up one of the coconut mats around the play area, takes it some 10 metres away and lays down for a nap. As we are only waiting for some of the group to arrive, and we are already beginning later than we had expected. Soon several people from the group turn to look at him and talk amongst themselves. They look at me as if to enquire what he is doing. They do not seem overly impressed.*

[RP EXP] *We all were supposed to go to Ana station for a joint workshop, however Danga did not show up. When Mark arrived in the morning to pick us all up, I told him I thought it was unlikely Danga would be feeling up to work this morning, as he had been drunk since the previous afternoon. He had been hanging around my house yelling, making funny noises at Narella and myself, he was even throwing beer bottles at my fence.*

Here you have two theatre artists, one intent on the use of theatre as a means of self expression and cultural change, the other intent on theatre as part of an unchanging cultural tradition; culture, race and gender as constructed, versus culture, race and gender as essence.

The Inn

On November 20, 2000, in true Melanesian fashion, a final function to mark the completion of the theatre workshop project took place at an Inn by the sea close to Tarantella town. The afternoon began pleasantly enough with discussions on the workshops and on Tarantella politics. The discussion on politics continued with the politician saying more repeatedly as the evening wore on, “I must have control” [meaning control of the province]. Resource Person (PNG) arrived very late. The Specialist [project advisor] confronted Resource Person (PNG) about his intimidation of Resource Person (EXP) and his financial exploitation of his assistants during the project. Eventually Resource Person (PNG) joined in what was becoming a more heated affair and he and the politician told Resource Person (EXP) that she should “fuck off” because she was using Papua New Guineans as “guinea pigs”. Events then gathered pace quickly. After much shouting and abuse, they were both eventually persuaded to leave, mainly by the host who turned off the generator and swamped the Inn in darkness. Resource Person (PNG) disappeared, eventually back to his Province. Resource Person (EXP), in a state of shock, remained in the care of the host of the Inn for two days and left the country shortly after.

My last and latest poem is called *The Flying Island* and could be subtitled *Decolonisation*:

It was kind
of him to invite me
aboard
(I confess Gulliver
is my *wantok*)

[Rasta
probably is too
but this
is not
actually
part of
the poem]

and as we walked
he said

the effects are so
clear here
even if the causes
sometimes
get lost

in the flare of mountains
and the glare of coastal sun.

A pretty
young Englishman
with pink cheeks
and brown
World Bank
sandals, was saying
PNG needs a rebirth

and my memory
was a colonial
relic. It's all
a process,
he said. Well
of course it is,
you pommycock,

processual
rape of an
image-
nation. Flying
islands
and forgotten
hinterlands
hardly ever join

half-naked
dead boys
circled by
M16's
and half-clad girls
draping the discos,
Miss Club Galaxy 2002.

Flying home
over the high
ridges, so high –
white
quilted peace –
it's a dream
I don't want to end,

this interplay
of mountains, shadow,

cloud and sun,
a shivering
rainbow
circling the plane
as I land.

Decolonisation may be alive and well. But what kind of decolonisation? Decolonisation which intimidates and terrorises needs to be called something else. Decolonisation which disguises and defends mediocrity cannot be culturally creative.

Papua New Guinea is all of the above – father, mother, family, virgin lover, M16s, discos, Sandline, Disneyland, SP Beer, tapa cloth, masks in myriad shapes, birds of paradise, betelnut, rich and poor, blood and storms, grass skirts and penis gourds, Port Moresby and island villages, World Bank, *Sana Sana*, *Dance of the Snail*, bare breasts, tourists, Blues and Maroons, private parts, uncovered or otherwise, and yes, HIV, Tolais and Chimbus, Sir Julius Chan and Sir Michael Somare, buffaloes and of course, donkeys, although I must admit I have not yet physically met one of these in Papua New Guinea.

Greg Murphy
Madang
30 July 2002