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**Kunapipi**

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Volume 29 | Issue 1

Article 7

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2007

# Philomena

Renata Cochrane

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## Recommended Citation

Cochrane, Renata, *Philomena*, *Kunapipi*, 29(1), 2007.  
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol29/iss1/7>

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# Philomena

## **Abstract**

She died in my arms. There was no time to give her anything on the bare mountainside. It was too late. I was empty-handed. Yet while I cradled her heavy body she was both my daughter and one of the lost children groping between two worlds. The daughter of man.

RENATA COCHRANE

## PHILOMENA



Goilala Village

She died in my arms. There was no time to give her anything on the bare mountainside. It was too late. I was empty-handed. Yet while I cradled her heavy body she was both my daughter and one of the lost children groping between two worlds. The daughter of man.

More abused than cherished she had been in her short life, owning only scraps of learning as full of holes as her one blanket. She had reached out once for a little layer of sophistication — so little that it rubbed off like the sooty black coating of her skin when I massaged her body as the warmth drained from it.

Philomena came from Kerau village in the Goilala Sub-District of Papua. At 8000 feet the mountains and valleys were often shrouded in mist and rain. Between sunset and sunrise it was a bone-chilling place. Only during the midday sunshine did the people begin to thaw out properly. It was no wonder they felt the cold. They had no clothes. The traditional covering for men and women was a broad leaf held in place by a fibre belt.

I felt the cold too, in spite of my clothes. After the evening meal I would settle in the warmest corner of the timber convent, in the angle between the wood stove and the wall of the kitchen. There the Little Sisters, who had given up their parlour for our use, spent the last hour of their busy day.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sister Teresina, the calm mixed-race Superior, and Sister Maggy, the young teacher from Mekeo on the coastal plain, took out their crochet. Sister Anieto — I puzzled over her name until I realised it was the nearest the Goilala tongue could get to ‘Agnes’ — rested her hands on the scrubbed kitchen table where she made bread and rolled pastry and peeled vegetables every day of the week. When all the pots and pans had been cleared off the stove, Sister Gabrielle, the one Frenchwoman among the Papuans, boiled up her syringes for the next day’s work in the dispensary. Sister Aurelia, who suffered from rheumatism in her ankles, sat on a stool with an ancient grey shawl wrapped around her bare feet. Tough, old and tiny, she could — when roused — terrorise the wildest Goilala warrior. She had been at Kerau for many years and the people loved her dearly. Although they called all the Sisters ‘Mame’ (mother), she was their mother in a special sense. She knew their language intimately and understood the complex relationships between the clans. The people said that when Mame Aurelia died they would bury her at Kerau and she could be sure that her bones would be well cared for. At first I did not understand the deep implications of that statement. But I was beginning to learn something about these mountain people from the little Sisters. As Papuans they understood the Goilalas better than any European. I did not have the impression that their replies were what they thought I wanted to hear.

‘I saw a woman wearing a tangle of bones around her neck. Would they be human bones?’

Sister Teresina nodded.

‘That was probably Kemava you saw, from Kerau village. She is a widow. Those are her husband’s bones.’

‘Mon dieu! How long has she been wearing them?’

‘I think he died about six months ago. They made a little enclosure in the village and left his body there until they were nearly clean. Then the relatives took the remains down to the creek and washed them and gave the bones to the widow.’

‘All of them?’

‘Well, Kemava was lucky. Some of the other women helped her by taking a few bones here and there, out of sympathy. But often now they don’t wear all the bones. The fashion is beginning to die out.’

‘Further inland, in the Lunimaipa, the widows still wear all the husband’s bones,’ said Sister Gabrielle. ‘My sister is still there. The widow even carries the dead man’s skull in a special little net bag around her neck. And she wears a special sign of mourning — rows and rows of necklaces made from dried seeds.’

‘For how long?’

‘About a year. Just the same as here. Then there’s a feast and the mourning is finished.’

‘Soon after I came here,’ said Sister Anieto, ‘I went to Sene village. The men were building a little round fence in the middle of the village. I saw them carry

some bones inside. They built a roof over the enclosure. The pigs were walking in and having a good look. The chief came and sat down beside me. "What are you looking at so hard, Mame?" he said.

"I am looking to see what you are building in front of your house."

"That is a shelter for the bones of my brother. His widow has already worn them for a year. Now the mourning is finished and it is time to make a feast for him. But we cannot attend to it just yet. We are making gardens and the women are planting taro. When that is finished, I shall gather the people together and make a speech about my brother. Then we will kill a pig and have a feast. Afterwards we will destroy this shelter and we will kick all the bones of my brother into the bush. It is the end."

"Have you noticed that a lot of the women have the top joint of some of their fingers missing?" asked Sister Teresina.

I nodded.

"That's another sign of mourning. As soon as a brother dies, or a child, or someone close to them, the women will take a bush knife and chop off one finger. They break the end of a gourd and hold one cut finger over it to catch the drops of blood. Then they walk to the front of the house where the dead person is and say, "See what I have done for you. See how my blood is running into the gourd". And when they have done that, they can have a piece of the pig that is killed for the feast."

"One day," Mame Aurelia added, "a woman came here. She carry little net bag around her neck. She open the bag, show me top of one finger. She say, "Mame, I have just cut off the top of my finger". I say "Why?" She say "My husband beat me. I forget his food. Mame, will you mend my finger?"

"Mame Aurelia, do you remember the time Philomena cut off her finger?" asked Sister Anieto.

"That time her mother ran away?"

"Who is Philomena?" I asked. "Tell me about her."

"She is a girl from Kerau village, up there," said Sister Teresina, nodding towards the slope of the mountain. "She must be seventeen or eighteen now. She was one of the first children to be baptised here. The father and mother brought her to the church because the Babe (priest) had told them about heaven and they wanted their little girl to be happy there. When the Babe asked if they wanted to be baptised they said, "Later, perhaps". Just now it was too hard for them to change. It was soon after that the mother ran away."

"It was then that Philomena cut off her finger," said Sister Teresina. "The old grandfather — he's dead now came and told the Sisters that the girl was sick in the village. He went to see Pere Andre and asked him to send to Taipini for policemen to fetch Philomena's father."

"Philo's father, he come back all the same. He find Philo sick, wife run away. He go after her, he come to brother's village. He find his wife. He try to pull her

back, pull her new baby back too. She fight. She scream. “You no good. You no good. You want children? Who gives them food? Who make fire? Who give them sugar-cane?” Bye and bye she go back.’

‘And Philomena?’

‘She came to school here. Later on both the parents became Christians. When we took in nine or ten older girls to help us, they asked if Philomena could come. She was a bright girl in school and very willing. So we said yes.’

‘How did she get on?’

Sister Maggy giggled.

‘We had a hard time trying to get her to wash — and all the other girls. But we made them some new clothes — the first they ever had. And they thought that was wonderful.’

‘They were learning quite well,’ said Sister Teresina. ‘And they all seemed happy. One day, without warning, they all ran away. They left their clothes here in the convent and went to a dance. And they never came back.’

\* \* \* \* \*

I thought about Philomena a great deal. Knowing something concrete about her origin and background, her parents and their quarrels, her unhappy childhood, I could reach out towards her. I could begin to feel her as a three-dimensional human being; guess the joys and wonders, the disillusionments and betrayals that beset her. Now I began to understand how essential was fire and warmth and how relatively unimportant a sooty, smoke-grimed skin; how a child might wait all day for mother to come home from the food garden and welcome the bowed figure with joy spiked by hunger. And she suffered acutely, too, from things other than cold and an empty stomach. Dear God, how lonely and desperate a child she must have been to cut off her finger when her mother ran away.

It was only a week after Philomena had taken a strong hold on my thoughts that her father, Wavivi, came down from Kerau village and asked the Sisters to visit Philomena. She had been sick for several days, he said.

It was one o’clock when three of us began to limb the steep track to the village. Sister Gabrielle carried an assortment of medicines — salts, quinine, aspirin, iodine and a small bottle of eucalyptus oil. Mame Aurelia followed with a billy of tea.

‘What’s the matter with Philomena?’ I asked Sister Gabrielle.

‘She came to the dispensary about a fortnight ago and asked for medicine, opening medicine. We haven’t got any castor oil right now, so I gave her paraffin. Then a few days ago her father came and said that Philo was still sick. I gave him Epsom salts for her.’

‘That’s right,’ said Mame Aurelia, ‘her father, Wavivi, he come down and say, “Philo sick. She vomit all the time.” The Sisters tell him to put her in a hammock and bring her down here if she can’t walk. He say, “Yes all right.” But he do

nothing. Wavivi come again Monday. He tell me Philo not very well. I say “Why you not bring her down?” He say “We wait.” I say, “Mame Anieto, here, she sick too. And we do big washing today. If Philo very sick, we come. If not very sick, we come tomorrow.” He say, “All right! We wait.” But when we finish washing, I say to Sister Gabrielle, “I think we go see Philo today.”

‘I wish we knew what was the matter with her,’ said Sister Gabrielle. ‘We met her about a month ago in one of the villages. She was going to a dance. She said her head was bad and she had a stomach ache. She wanted tea. I gave her aspirin and told her to come to the dispensary. But she didn’t come. Tiens, Mame Aurelia, we forgot the salt.’

‘No,’ said the old Sister. ‘I have a little parcel salt in my pocket.’

‘The old people in the village are always glad to see us,’ said Sister Gabrielle. ‘And they always expect a little salt.’

We skirted the rough paling fence of a newly planted garden, taking care not to injure the tender new shoots of sweet potato. There was a fence to climb and more gardens to cross before we reached the village. I turned to give Mame Aurelia a hand, but she grinned and waved me on. She hopped nimbly over the stile, gripping the rough timber with her bare wrinkled toes.

A man smoking a bamboo pipe came out of the first house in the village. The home dried tobacco was loosely rolled and pushed into a small hole drilled into the flank of the bamboo. The man’s short, woolly hair was braided in forty or fifty tiny plaits. Each plait was bound from end to end with green strips of bark so that it stood out stiff and straight from the scalp. The man said he would walk with us to Wavivi’s house. We passed a small fence enclosing a rough shelter.

‘Is that a pig’s house?’ Sister Gabrielle asked.

‘Yes,’ said the villager. That’s where Umi’s house burned down last week.’

‘Well,’ said Sister Gabrielle to me, ‘they’re getting on. That’s one pig at least that won’t sleep with the women.’

Mame Aurelia touched my arm.

‘That’s where they keep sweet potatoes for planting. Up there in the roof of that little house with no walls.’

We scrambled through the tiny doorway of Wavivi’s house. Just inside the door a big young woman was lying on the earth and ashes of the floor. She was huddled under the tattered filthy wreck of a blanket. It was Philomena.

‘O, mais alors!’ said Sister Gabrielle. ‘She is cold, cold, all over her body. Mame Aurelia, tell her father to make a big fire. And ask him where she is sick.’

She knelt beside Philo, feeling her body. The girl pointed to her stomach and groaned.

‘Wavivi say her stomach very hard, hurt all the time. Sunday she vomit.’

‘And today? Has she been vomiting today?’

‘He say, no.’

‘Ask him about the murra-murra, the salts. Did they do her any good?’

‘He say, no.’

Philomena’s mother, Maria, came in. The deep furrows dug from nose to chin, the empty, sagging breasts made her look old, older than her husband. She did not move closer to her daughter but stood near the door taking loudly and rapidly to the Sisters.

‘All right.’ Sister Gabrielle silenced her at last. ‘Now help move Philo near the fire. And tell the little boy to bring plenty of wood.’

Maria spoke to her young son. He remained curled up near the fire chewing sugar-cane. He took no notice. Maria kicked him. He got up and went out. Maria pushed her daughter into a sitting position and Sister Gabrielle and I shook out the two old copra sacks she was lying on and moved them to the fire in the middle of the hut. I picked up the net bag she was using as a pillow. The girl dragged herself over to the fire and collapsed on the sacks, moaning. We covered her with the tattered blanket.

Wavivi fetched two notched sticks and a pole and slung Mame Aurelia’s billy of tea over the smouldering fire. The small boy came in with an armful of wood. There was no chimney. The smoke filtered out through the cracks between the pandanus-leaf thatch of walls and roof. Mame Aurelia took the billy can off the fire and looked around for a cup. Maria picked up an old tin can, black inside and out and proffered it. Then she changed her mind, poured a little water from a gourd into the tin can and rinsed it out.

‘Come, Philo,’ said Sister Gabrielle. ‘Take this aspirin and drink some tea.’

Philomena hoisted herself onto her elbow. She gulped a little tea, moaned again and hugged her arms over her swollen stomach. She swallowed the aspirin, then huddled again under the blanket her eyes rolling.

‘I don’t know what to do for her,’ said Sister Gabrielle.

‘I’d better go and fetch Pere André. He has so much experience with these people. I don’t know what’s wrong with her.’

I stayed with Mame Aurelia. Philomena never stopped moaning. I put my hand on her short, dry, frizzy hair, grey with ashes and massaged the back of her neck.

Philomena called out to her mother and Maria passed the gourd to her. She tried to drink but the water slopped onto the ground. I held her head and she drank a little, then her head slumped back on the floor.

‘Mame Aurelia,’ she moaned, ‘Oh, Mame Aurelia.’

The old Sister took her hands.

‘Poor Philo,’ she said. ‘Poor Philo. Babe is coming. Wait a little. Babe is coming.’

Philo was quiet. Her father talked for a long time. I asked what he had said.

‘He said his wife has a sister who went far away to a country called New Guinea. She is married there. She say it is a good country. When a man die, the women do not take his bones any more and wear them. They bury the dead man

and go to pray for him. I say to Wavivi — this is good. Why people here not do the same?’

Philomena groaned. Maria picked up a bunch of large wilted leaves off the floor. She selected one and rubbed her daughter’s swollen stomach with it. An old, wrinkled, grey-haired woman, naked like the rest, scrambled through the door.

‘Eh, sinebada,’ she crowed. She took my hand, foraged inside her small net bag and offered me a handful of Cape gooseberries. She squatted in the corner of the hut where a second fire still smouldered and poked in the ashes looking for a sweet potato.

Philomena’s body heaved convulsively. She rose to her knees then slumped over her crouching mother.

‘Poor Philo,’ Mame Aurelia crooned. ‘Babe come soon.’

‘Is she married?’ I asked.

‘No. But she leave her mother one time. For a long time she go walkabout.’

Philomena clutched her mother. Again Maria took a wilted leaf and rubbed her daughter’s body. The girl lifted herself to her knees and threw herself on the ground near the door, just where we had found her. A moment later, Père André arrived.

‘Eh, Philo?’ he asked. ‘Comment ça va?’

He knelt beside her and felt her body.

‘Eh,’ he said, ‘but you are cold, Philo.’

He asked her parents question after question. How long had she been sick? Where was the pain? Was it always in the same place? What about the Sister’s medicine? No good? Had she been able to pass water? How long ago had she stopped vomiting?

‘Well,’ he said at last, ‘I think the best thing we can do is take her to the station. I’m pretty sure it’s uraemia, stoppage of the kidneys. First we’ll surround her with hot water bottles to get her warm. Then we’ll have to clear the kidneys.’

Père André hoisted Philomena to her feet. Reluctantly, Wavivi put his daughter’s arm around his neck. Umi was waiting outside. He stooped in the entrance and lifted the girl’s knees. The three men lifted her dead weight through the tiny doorway and carried her into the open space in the middle of the village.

‘Now,’ said Père André, ‘go and get a hammock, and come back quickly.’

They put Philomena on her tattered blanket. She slumped over onto her side.

‘Poor Philo,’ said Père André. ‘She started well. She lived with the Little Sisters for about a year, you know, with several other girls. Then she asked to go to a dance. She didn’t come back. There was a patrol going through the district. The police took her. How could you expect a girl like that to resist temptation? A blanket, a new dress, plenty of food. She followed the police to Karuama and they made her into a harlot.’

‘She was just growing into womanhood then. A fine, big girl. It was two years ago. She would have been about seventeen. Finally she ran away from the police and came home. She went down to Taipini to sell European potatoes and came back full of malaria. The Sisters gave her medicine but like the rest of the village people she couldn’t be bothered coming back for regular doses.’

The men came back with a greasy net hammock. They laid it on the ground and lifted the groaning sick girl onto it. Without warning, her head slumped to the right, her stomach heaved. From her mouth and nose flowed a thick, slimy, green stream, pumped out by each convulsive movement of her body. The men stepped away hastily. The girl had stopped moaning now. We could only see the dirty yellow-whites of her eyes through half-closed lids. A yard or two down the mountainside stood Maria, sniffing, tears running down her cheeks. Père André held the girl’s hand. Still the green slimy flood pumped out as if there was no end to it and with it Philomena spewed out a worm eight inches long. With the next convulsions came smaller worms. The girl drew in her breath sharply and worms and slime were drawn back into her mouth. There was a faint bubbling of slime between her clenched teeth.

‘Quickly,’ said Père André.

He reached for the net bag that held his purple stole and the holy oils for the last Sacrament.

‘Come, my daughter, say the act of contrition with me.’

He held her head with one hand and her right hand with the other. Philomena made no movement as the father prayed in her name, in her language. Then he absolved her and quickly took out the small bottle of holy oils.

‘Give me something to wipe her mouth.’

Sister Gabrielle handed him a scrap of cotton wool. He wiped away the green slime, then anointed her forehead and mouth. He laid his hand on her left temple.

‘She looks dead but I can feel a faint pulse. Sister Gabrielle, you had better go down to the dispensary and bring an injection of camphorated oil. That will help stimulate her heart. I don’t think we can move her as she is.’

We moved Philomena off the hammock and wrapped her again in the blanket. The slime of her vomit had soaked into the bare dry earth and I saw that its bright green had been caused by chewed up leaves.

‘What are those leaves she has been eating?’ I asked. Père André asked Maria.

‘She says she gave Philo nothing, that it is sorcery. Can you hear Wavivi? He is up there at the top of the village, shouting already that someone has brought about Philomena’s death by sorcery.’

Maria unwrapped a small parcel of khaki cloth. Inside were all the tiny plaits she had cut off Philomena’s head when the girl became sick. Maria laid them on

the ground at her daughter's feet. She seemed to have lost interest. She drifted away.

'Well,' said Père André, 'we must try to get her warm. Will you take some of this oil and rub her chest.'

I rubbed oil on my hands and massaged the inert body, over the ribs and between the breasts. In a moment my hands were black. As I worked over the dark skin, layers of soot and dirt rubbed off. Underneath, Philomena's skin was lighter by several degrees. Mame Aurelia chafed her feet.

Four or five women had gathered around to watch. They began their ceremonial wailing. Père André turned on them.

'Can't you wait until the girl is dead?'

They scattered, giggling, the ceremonial tears still running down their cheeks.

'You can stop now,' Père André said to me. 'See if you can find the pulse in her wrist.'

'It's very faint.'

'Well, cover her up now.'

There were so many holes in the blanket. I laid my raincoat over it. Père André took a little oil and rubbed the girl's neck.

'Why has Philo's mother gone away?' I asked. 'The girl isn't dead yet.'

'Oh,' said Père André, 'she is much more concerned now with fixing the blame for Philo's death on someone than worrying about whether her daughter will live or not. In this country, it's not possible to die a natural death. Someone must be blamed.'

Sister Gabrielle came up the hill, panting. She filled a syringe with camphorated oil. The girl made no movement when the needle pierced her arm. We all agreed that her pulse was still faintly beating.

'Now,' said Père André, 'there is the question of transport. How do we get her down?'

'A camp stretcher would be best,' said Sister Gabrielle.

'Yes. Well, I'll go down and leave the three of you. One of the schoolboys can bring the stretcher, then some men can carry her down.'

There was nothing more we could do. I put one arm under Philo's head and rubbed her cold right hand. Her pulse was a mere flutter. She lay there, one of a thousand; victim of a crumbling tribal structure; of colonialism. She had been caught, without knowing it, in the assault of technology, the invasion of a money economy upon the age-old life pattern of her people. She knew too little, or too much, for her own good.

A group of naked men and women gathered on the bare mountain side. Fog began swirling towards us. The men lit a fire of dry pandanus leaves and huddled beside it, smoking. The women chattered and giggled. We sat there a long time.

'I think Philo is dead,' Sister Gabrielle said. 'Can you feel her pulse?'