



2005

# Mother's Child

Michelle Kopi

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

## Recommended Citation

Kopi, Michelle, Mother's Child, *Kunapipi*, 27(2), 2005.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol27/iss2/17>

---

## Mother's Child

### **Abstract**

The shrill cry of a baby pierces the still silent night. It is only a few minutes before the strike of midnight. All is still except for the endless croak of river frogs erupting after regular intervals from the water's edge. The rush of the fastflowing river bounces over the rocks in a frenzy. The ripples crush in an echoing rhythm before dispersing into a smooth turquoise towards the deeper parts of the Wahgi. A blanket of thick fog hangs low over the water. From one side of the river it is difficult to see very far.

MICHELLE KOPI

## Mother's Child

The shrill cry of a baby pierces the still silent night. It is only a few minutes before the strike of midnight. All is still except for the endless croak of river frogs erupting after regular intervals from the water's edge. The rush of the fast-flowing river bounces over the rocks in a frenzy. The ripples crush in an echoing rhythm before dispersing into a smooth turquoise towards the deeper parts of the Wahgi. A blanket of thick fog hangs low over the water. From one side of the river it is difficult to see very far.

On the riverbank, two figures sit immersed in the cool water. Upiah washes herself with care. Aunt Monica watches in silence.

From the day she was born, Aunt Monica raised Upiah. Aunt Monica is from Minj in the Wahgi valley. She has always been a good friend to Upiah's mother, Cecilia. They first met in Kagamuga Primary School where they attended school. It is one of the first few established mission schools. Over the years they became very good friends. After Eighth Grade, Cecilia married Chief Waipari of the Jika tribe. Cecilia had her first daughter, Upiah, after four sons. The day remains fresh in Aunt Monica's memory, as if it were only yesterday.

Cecilia had sent word for Aunt Monica. Aunt Monica went the following day with a bilum full of taro and kumu. She remembers the two meeting each other in a long embrace.

'How have you been?' Cecilia asked.

'Oh, I've been all right, and you? I see you've been very busy,' Aunt Monica said. She took Upiah from Cecilia's arms. 'Aren't you a pretty thing?' She smiled. 'You look just like your old Aunt Monica.'

Cecilia laughed. Aunt Monica wasn't exactly what one would call a beauty queen.

'So why did you send word for me?' Aunt Monica asked.

'Waipari will have a pik-killing for the whole tribe, including neighbouring tribes two months from now. I have been so busy lately with the gardening and pigs. I don't know if I can ...'

Before she could finish her words, Aunt Monica was quick to reply. 'Oh, I'd love to!'

Cecilia stood dumb-founded for a moment. Seeing Cecilia's confusion, Aunt Monica babbled on. 'Oh, you old cow, I'd love to take care of this kund kai for you.'

And so it was settled. Aunt Monica kept her word to her old friend and has been with Upiah since. She became Upiah's mother, father, and nanny, but more importantly — her best friend. They shared a strong bond. Upiah felt protected when she was with Aunt Monica.

Even now, Upiah knows she can count on Aunt Monica.

It is Aunt Monica's idea to have the baby in the river.

'But why the river?' Upiah asks.

'Because, my kund kai, it has a mystical meaning. The water will bless the baby when it washes over it. It will have a good life. The water will also make the delivery process much easier and less painful.'

Upiah only shrugs her shoulders and says, 'Whatever! You old people sure have a strange way of thinking.'

Aunt Monica is right. The delivery has gone well.

'Well done! You did well,' Aunt Monica cries out.

Upiah lets out long breaths of relief that swirl like smoke in the cool air. After nine long hours of agony and excruciating pain from the labour, she is exhausted. A sigh of relief escapes her throat. She takes a peek at the little bundle that lay curled in Aunt Monica's arms. 'Isn't she beautiful?' Upiah asks.

'She is,' Aunt Monica agrees. Her skin is the colour of the moon, light, pale, and radiant. She shimmers, glowing in the moonlight. As if finally making up her mind, Aunt Monica nods and smiles proudly.

'I think she looks just like me.'

Upiah laughs. 'That's exactly what you said when I was born!'

'Did I? I don't remember,' Aunt Monica replies thoughtfully. 'Anyway, it's not my fault I've got strong genes,' she says with a wide grin.

In the distance the lonesome howl of a dog is heard. Dogs all over the village begin to bark in response. They chorus in a long howl that descends far over the hilltops. It echoes all around, drowning the sound of the river frogs. It is the howl of victory. A child is born.

'We shall call her Maiyah,' Aunt Monica says importantly. 'It means one that carries good fortune.'

An exhilarating joy fills Upiah. She breaks down weeping. Upiah cries for the child, for herself — for everything! Her back is turned on Aunt Monica. Aunt Monica is busy washing Maiyah. She is unaware of the tears streaming in a flood down Upiah's cheeks. Upiah wonders in silence, 'How such a painful experience could end with this new life. A new creation bringing forth a thousand new possibilities.'

Only moments ago she had wished she were dead. Now she feels like the happiest woman alive.

\* \* \* \* \*

Upiah had arrived a month ago from Port Moresby. In Port Moresby, she had stayed with a friend, Linda, for the first few months of her pregnancy. Linda was single and had a place of her own. It was convenient. Though Linda was good to her, Upiah missed home. She wanted to have her baby back home — among her own people.

‘You want to go home, don’t you?’ Linda had asked one day. They were alone. Linda had noticed Upiah looking out the window to the horizon. Linda’s small flat overlooked the wharf at Paga Hill. From that point, one could look far out to sea and across to the Hanuabada coastline.

‘Yeah, I guess so,’ Upiah replied. She sat there expressionless. Upiah sounded like she didn’t care, but Linda knew better. If there was one person in the world Linda knew, it was Upiah. They had been through so much as friends that Linda knew Upiah more than Upiah knew herself. Upiah sounded like she didn’t care, but she did care. She cared very much.

A week later, Upiah flew to Mount Hagen. She planned her stay long before her arrival. She would spend the remaining months of her pregnancy with Aunt Monica. Her father would kill her if she went home with her growing abdomen. It was safer for her to wait until the child was born. Upiah knew Aunt Monica would be the only one to understand her and protect her. She was right.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now standing at the water’s edge Upiah shivers in the cold. A slight breeze blows across the water’s surface.

‘Come, let us go. You will need to rest. Tomorrow we shall leave in the morning,’ Aunt Monica says. She moves to where Upiah is standing, on a flat stone near the water’s edge. ‘Here, wear this. I don’t want you catching a cold. Cecilia may think I haven’t been a good friend.’

‘Oh, ma stop it!’ Upiah cries. She is sobbing now. ‘Thank you. Thank you for everything!’ Upiah is thankful. ‘What would she do without Aunt Monica? She is the greatest thing that has happened to me. She wonders. Tomorrow Upiah will face her people. She is terrified of the thought. But she feels happy to bear the pain with Aunt Monica. Aunt Monica reflects a strength that Upiah knows none other to possess. Upiah sighs in relief, knowing that she will always find her strength in Aunt Monica.

It has been three years since Upiah last saw her people. The Jika tribe in the highlands has been slow in adjusting to the ‘new ways’. They still cling to their old traditions, feeling a bitter resentment towards the white foreigners. Upiah’s father, Chief Waipari, viciously refutes the new order. He makes it a point at every meeting in the hausman or singsing ples for the community to ignore the white man’s culture and influence. He often makes a long speech saying: ‘This white culture is killing the traditional moral beliefs of the land. As the sons of our forefathers we must protect the ways of our ancestors. This, my fellow tribesman, is the path to maintaining peace and good order amongst ourselves and our neighbours.’

It was for this reason that Waipari forbade Upiah to go for further studies overseas. ‘No, I will not allow it!’ he had said. ‘You have completed Tenth Grade. I don’t want you to go any further. Now, you do what every other girl your age is doing — you get married!’ And with that he had stormed off in rage.

Nevertheless, Upiah went against her father's will and accepted the scholarship. Waipari cursed his daughter. 'I don't ever want to rest my old eyes upon her again. She has deliberately opposed everything that I stand for. And has mocked my power as the chief to this tribe. For this reason she will not prosper in her endeavours.'

Indeed, old Waipari's curse did fulfil its goal. Upiah was unsuccessful in her studies. And now? She had brought back a child without a father — a bastard.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now her past has finally caught up with her. She anticipates her people's reaction. 'What will she possibly say to them?' she wonders. Her father, a man of principle will keep to his word. He will banish her from the family and tribe. The stories of long ago come back to her in a surge; the severe punishment girls received for bearing illegitimate children. The brutality, the anger, the beating ... everything came back to her in a sudden rush. They will strip her, beat her with bamboo canes until she bleeds, and burn her with hot logs. Upiah could already feel the heat melting her skin like wax, the barbwire ripping at her flesh. Aunt Monica sees the anguish on Upiah's face.

'Mama, what are you thinking about?' she asks.

'I worry Aunty. I worry about what they will do to me,' Upiah whispers, almost choking on her words.

'Don't worry, be strong,' Aunt Monica reassures her. 'I will not let them harm you.'

But Upiah knows better. Aunt Monica cannot protect her. This is a tribal matter. The men will stop Aunt Monica or anyone else who gets in the way. Taking a deep breath Upiah decides that she is ready.

Whatever awaits her at the end of her journey home, she will accept. After all, she had brought it upon herself. She must go through this if she is to be accepted back into the tribe. Upiah's mouth quivers; her face is stern. Crystals form at the corner of her eyes. 'I am not scared,' Upiah says between gasps of air. 'I shall endure this pain, not because I am ashamed of Maiyah, for I do not regret her or wish to deny her. But because tradition holds me accountable.'

Aunt Monica looks at her in reverence. In all her years she knew of none that possessed such remarkable strength and courage.

Walking up the hill, Upiah's pulse quickens. Behind her Aunt Monica follows in silent pursuit. In her arms Maiyah is asleep.

They approach the entrance to the village. Upiah sees smoke in the distance. 'Maybe from some garden plot that is being cleared for the planting season,' Upiah thinks. Sweat trickles down the side of her face. Her hands, legs, and neck are sticky from perspiration. Her mouth is dry. Her limbs are sore from the long walk. Her head is bowed. It is as if she is carrying a heavy load on her back.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aunt Monica is filled with a deep sorrow for Upiah. She had watched Upiah grow from a toddler into this beautiful young woman. At the age of eighteen Upiah left home to pursue studies overseas. Aunt Monica remembers clasping the fence at the Kagamuga Airport in Mount Hagen, to bid her goodbye. ‘Don’t get married while I’m gone,’ Upiah had said.

‘It’s a bit too late for that,’ Aunt Monica had thought. Tears rolled down her cheeks in an endless cascade. Aunt Monica watched heart-broken as Upiah turned to wave one last time, before boarding the plane.

Now she is back — with a child. Upiah’s family is going to be so disappointed. Aunt Monica finds herself dreading what is about to happen. Further ahead Upiah draws to a halt. She searches the landscape for any sign of life. In the dead heat she spots a few lazy dogs scratching at the fleas. The place is deserted. ‘Where is everyone?’ Upiah wonders aloud.

‘Perhaps they’re at their gardens?’ Aunt Monica’s answers her.

But Upiah is doubtful. ‘No,’ she replies. ‘They’re expecting us.’

Upiah enters the village. She notices that nothing has changed much since she left. The memories of her childhood days come rushing back to her in a flood. Those were her carefree days; the days when she was ‘the great chief’s daughter’. As a child she loved playing in the cool shade of the pine tree in the middle of the singsing ples. Now she realises in despair that it is gone. It had been chopped down. Its roots burnt to the ground. The hausman where the elders of the village meet still stands. At a glance it looks as if it is about to collapse. Yet over the years it stood tall and strong overlooking the sing-sing ples. The posts are dug deep into the hard soil. The roof has been replaced with new kunai grass time and time again.

Three years away from home seems like an entire lifetime. Why does she feel like a foreigner here? Perhaps she had lost herself in the world of the white man? And even the world Maiyah’s father belonged to. On this sudden thought Upiah turns to pick up Maiyah from Aunt Monica’s arms. She speaks to Maiyah with tears in her eyes. ‘Be the woman I never was.’ Upiah kisses Maiyah on the head before handing her back to Aunt Monica. ‘Please take care of her for me,’ she pleads.

Aunt Monica is confused by all this serious talk. ‘Upiah what are you trying to say? I won’t have you talking like that!’

But Upiah is not listening. In the distance, the sound of feet approaches. Upiah closes her eyes in anticipation. She swallows hard. The lump in her throat rises. From behind the hausman, Robin and James, her two brothers appear. Their mother, Cecilia, appears moments later. She is wearing an old laplap that had lost its colour a long time ago. It was the first gift Upiah had bought her mother. Upiah looks away disgusted. ‘Why did her people have to live like this?’ she wonders.

Cecelia throws herself at Upiah’s feet wailing. ‘Upiah, Upiah, my Upiah. Kund kai, nga kund kai!’

Upiah feels her mother's tears trickle down her toes to seep into the hard soil. In despair, Upiah slowly bends down to pick her up in her arms. They cling to each other. Her mother's body feels small and fragile in her arms. As a child, Upiah remembers her mother as a powerful woman who towered over her. Now, she is shrunk like a rag-doll in her arms; she stands heaving in sobs. Her head is buried in Upiah's chest. Looking up, Upiah realises that a crowd has gathered in the singsing ples to witness what is about to happen. All of a sudden, Robin and James seize Cecilia from her grip. Upiah watches helpless. Cecilia fights with her sons, biting, and clawing at them as they drag her away.

'You idiots. Fools! Not my baby. Please not my kund kai!' she pleads.

Upiah opens her mouth to object, but stops. Waipari appears from the hausman. There is silence. Behind him several young men stand waiting for their orders. The old chief's eyes blaze with anger. Upiah notices that the old man had changed very little. He looks the fierce chief and warrior she remembers ten years ago. His gaze at that moment could penetrate steel. It comes to rest upon Upiah. Upiah looks away. Far off in the distance she hears the howl of a stray. A long, lonesome howl descending far into the sunset. Upiah whispers her last prayers, 'Lord, give me the strength to endure what I am about to receive.'

She begins to remove her clothes.

The crowd watches in shock. Aunt Monica watches from a distance in silence. She had taken the chance to move to the edge of the singsing ples where she hides. Maiyah is asleep in her arms. They stand there unnoticed for some time. Helpless. She knows now that it is no place for her to intervene. There is nothing she can do. The only thing left for her to do now, is to get Maiyah away from these evil people. At that moment, all attention is on Upiah — watching and waiting. She stands alone in the middle of the singsing ples — bare before them. The women folk bow their heads; horrified to see what stands before them. They are powerless because they are only women.

'Oh, you evil, evil men!' Cecilia shrieks in horror. She breaks loose from Robin's tight grip. In haste, she covers her daughter from the intruding glares. Pointing at her husband she says, 'You call yourself a chief? Ah? Did you forget that you're a father too? Whatever happened to your fatherly responsibilities? Always putting your pride before your family. You will die a very sad old man with no bloodline to carry your shameful name. You think...'

Waipari raises a hand in anger to silence her. The other hand he raises and the crowd soon charges at them screaming. The two stand defenceless, flocked by the angry mob. An axe, a stone, and a stick in their hands; they were all over them in merciless torture. Drops of blood splatters on to the faded laplap of long ago. The mother and daughter lie drenched in their own blood.

Dark clouds hover above. The last speck of light shines, its brightness dimming with each breath. Upiah's vision becomes blurry. She smiles — she has paid in full. Maiyah will now be accepted into the tribe. She will live to see another day. Darkness.