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Award-Winning Account of a Pioneering Papua New Guinean Woman’s Life on the Frontiers of Change: MamaKuma by Deborah Carlyon

Abstract
Publications about aspects of life or the natural environment in Papua New Guinea have won important prizes overseas, generally for the anthropological studies or scientific or other discoveries they report, not their literary qualities. Recent, outstanding recipients of significant, international prizes include the joint winner of the 1976 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, D. Carleton Gajdusek (for research on kuru), and the winner of the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for Non-Fiction, Jared Diamond, author of Guns, Germs and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years (1997). Other reports of work in or closely relevant to Papua New Guinea have been recognised in the awards made to fourteen or more of the eighty-plus winners of the Royal Anthropological Institute’s (2006) Rivers Memorial Medal, which was originally given specifically for ‘anthropological work in the field’ (a method of study which owes much to pioneering research in Papua New Guinea), and five gold medallists of the Royal Geographical Society (2006). The latter include the first Administrator of the British New Guinea colony, Sir William MacGregor, for ‘exploring, mapping and giving information on the natives’; C.H. Karius for the first expedition to cross from the Fly to the Sepik Rivers in 1926–28 (recounted by his companion, Ivan Champion, in Champion [1932]); and Captain Jacques-Yves Cousteau inventor of the aqualung, underwater photographer, conservationist, and prolific author (Jacques-Yves Cousteau’, 2006), for ‘underwater exploration’. Among women who have written about Papua New Guinea, Margaret Mead, winner of the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organisation’s Kalinga Prize (among others), stands out as ‘arguably the most renowned anthropologist of all time’ (Margaret Mead. 1901–1979’, 2006) — author of forty-four books and more than 1,000 articles, including at least seven books which deal substantially with Papua New Guinean topics (Margaret Mead (1901–1978)’, 2006).
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Award-Winning Account of a Pioneering Papua New Guinean Woman’s Life on the Frontiers of Change: *MamaKuma* by Deborah Carlyon

Publications about aspects of life or the natural environment in Papua New Guinea have won important prizes overseas, generally for the anthropological studies or scientific or other discoveries they report, not their literary qualities. Recent, outstanding recipients of significant, international prizes include the joint winner of the 1976 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, D. Carleton Gajdusek (for research on kuru), and the winner of the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for Non-Fiction, Jared Diamond, author of *Guns, Germs and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years* (1997). Other reports of work in or closely relevant to Papua New Guinea have been recognised in the awards made to fourteen or more of the eighty-plus winners of the Royal Anthropological Institute’s (2006) Rivers Memorial Medal, which was originally given specifically for ‘anthropological work in the field’ (a method of study which owes much to pioneering research in Papua New Guinea), and five gold medallists of the Royal Geographical Society (2006). The latter include the first Administrator of the British New Guinea colony, Sir William MacGregor, for ‘exploring, mapping and giving information on the natives’; C.H. Karius for the first expedition to cross from the Fly to the Sepik Rivers in 1926–28 (recounted by his companion, Ivan Champion, in Champion [1932]); and Captain Jacques-Yves Cousteau inventor of the aqualung, underwater photographer, conservationist, and prolific author (‘Jacques-Yves Cousteau’, 2006), for ‘underwater exploration’. Among women who have written about Papua New Guinea, Margaret Mead, winner of the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organisation’s Kalinga Prize (among others), stands out as ‘arguably the most renowned anthropologist of all time’ (‘Margaret Mead. 1901–1979’, 2006) — author of forty-four books and more than 1,000 articles, including at least seven books which deal substantially with Papua New Guinean topics (‘Margaret Mead (1901–1978)’, 2006).

Prominent literary figures as well as best-selling authors have visited Papua New Guinea too, including some who have written about their experiences. The ranks of such writers include the erudite and allusive Australian poet and essayist, J.P. McAuley, who served with the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU) in World War II and then helped train post-war patrol officers in
Australia before they left for the field; (Ralph) Hammond Innes the British author of multiple best-sellers, including a novel about Bougainville, *Solomons Seal* (1980); and two American-born writers of fiction and travel-books, James A. Michener, whose *Return to Paradise* (1951) remained at the top of American best-seller lists for forty-four weeks (Zwarich 2006), and Paul Theroux, whose recent titles include *The Happy Isles of Oceania: Paddling the Pacific* (1992). Since the days of Louis Tregance (1888), but generally not following his pretence, a number of well-known authors, like Robert Graves, former Professor of Poetry at Oxford and author of the historical novel, *The Islands of Wisdom* (1949), have written about the region without actually seeing it for themselves. In 1999, an academic historian, Bill Gammage, who had previously taught at the University of Papua New Guinea, won the inaugural Queensland Premier’s History Book Award (Queensland Government 2006) for his carefully researched recounting of the pioneering Hagen-Sepik patrol of 1938–39 (Gammage 1998).

However, Deborah Carlyon is the first author of Papua New Guinean descent to have won a significant literary competition abroad, the 2001 Queensland Premier’s Literary Award for Best Emerging Queensland Writer. Her success is especially noteworthy for the way in which the Award recognised the quality of both her writing and her research, as well as the literary potential, at least as much as the already substantial achievement displayed in the manuscript, which was subsequently published as a book. Her book, *MamaKuma*, not only tells a remarkable tale, it does so with eloquence, insight and skill. In doing so, her grandmother’s biography draws on the author’s experience as a child growing up in Papua New Guinea after her own mother, Ba, Mama Kuma’s only child, returned there with her husband and started a family; Deborah Carlyon’s own ongoing contacts with her grandmother, her extended family and other relatives, including subsequent visits back to their village; as well as scarce, relevant written sources.

Biography has been described by one of its most famous practitioners as ‘the most delicate and humane of all of the branches of the art of writing’. Originally made in the Preface to the well-known collection of biographies, *Eminent Victorians* by Lytton Strachey (1), the claim can be regarded as extreme and, in certain respects, self-promoting. The same biographer’s next remark that ‘it is perhaps as difficult to write a good life as to lead one’ goes even further than good judgment would commonly allow. But, judging from its apparent rarity, a biography that not only recites the facts of a life but explains its context, patterns and purposes is difficult to research, let alone write.

*MamaKuma: One Woman, Two Cultures* is a very impressive biography indeed, the more so for being the author’s first book. Its centrepiece is the life-story of a truly remarkable, adventurous, lively and self-possessed woman, Kuma Kelage, who became known to her family and others as the ‘Mama Kuma’ of the book’s title. But the book is, in fact, more than the life of its main character. It is also the author’s account of her discovery of her grandparents’ history, meeting, and
Mama Kuma - em yet. A leader, Kuma Kelage, p. 136. (Deborah Carlyon)
marriage; the ways in which their previously unconnected worlds interacted for a time; and their permanent separation when her grandfather died without seeing their recently-born child, Ba. In telling the story of Mama Kuma’s subsequent life, the narrative goes on to include the process of mutual self-discovery through which the author, Ba’s eldest offspring, has come to understand her Papua New Guinean family roots.

The opening words of the Prologue set the scene for the challenge the writer has set for herself: to portray events in her grandmother’s life in the same way as they were understood at the time in the community where Mama Kuma was born and belonged (at Gunkwa in the Sinasina area of Chimbu in the Papua New Guinea Highlands). Defining herself in terms of her relationship with that community, Deborah Carlyon, states clearly ‘My relatives have never spoken as if they were found or discovered. In their minds they have always existed; therefore, it was they who made the discovery of white men’ (1). Observing that the white-skinned beings who came to the Highlands had, obviously, chosen to leave their own homes, the people of Gunkwa initially concluded the visitors must have been motivated to wander by discontent. As the strangers came unaccompanied by any females, they were seen not to be born of women either — and, not being human, to be probably ghosts of the villagers’ own ancestors.

Mama Kuma was, clearly, a very unusual person. Take, for example, the initiative she took as a young girl when she ‘reached towards the magic of inexplicable connection’ (27) and went up to the first white man to visit her village, an ANGAU officer on patrol, in order to return a raincoat he had thrown at her, and then took his hand. Think next of the courage it took to accompany the same man, with her cousin, Garia, back to his camp, and eventually to go with him on patrol to distant and unknown Kundiawa and Mount Hagen; and, ultimately, when she had matured physically, to marry the same man, still known to the community in the familiar colonial fashion as ‘Masta’ John Warrick. These early initiatives were followed by many more bold and purposeful displays of attitude and action during a life which spanned history, distance and, ultimately, a very wide range of experience.

The journey which is her life-story took Kuma Kelage from a ‘pre-contact’ childhood — through bringing up her only child, Ba, in a wider society marked by the attitudes and opportunities characteristic of late-colonialism, including several false starts at Ba’s schooling, and eventual sponsorship by a generous American missionary family — to political independence, and beyond. Kuma Kelage died in Australia shortly before Christmas, 1992. The small group of family and friends who grieved for her in Australia is contrasted with the hundreds who gathered to grieve for her in Goroka, ‘calling her spirit back across the valley’ — and the echo of her name which came back (164).

Kuma Kelage’s physical journeys beyond her first exploratory trip close to Kundiawa took her to other Highlands centres, initially on foot, and then by aeroplane to Lae and, later, Australia and, on one occasion, Fiji. In what might
Sindaun long ples. Sitting within the warm circle of a village fire, p. 32.
(Deborah Carlyon)
be regarded as symbolic counterpoint to the distance and speed she had travelled along so many other roads, her period of residence in Goroka furthered her reputation as a very determined pioneer, not only because she became one of the first older Papua New Guinean women to drive a car, but because of the obstinacy with which she insisted on driving at all times in first gear!

The turning-point in Kuma Kelage’s transition to ‘Mama Kuma’ was her eventual marriage to John Warrick. As he was called up for active service in Aitape soon after they became man and wife, their daughter was born in his absence, and the father would die without ever returning to the Highlands, seeing their child, or leaving much in the way of notes. He, therefore, remains only a shadowy figure but, seen through the eyes of her relatives, there can be absolutely no doubt about the strength of his commitment to his wife, and — very unusually for the period — his spontaneous and generous acceptance of the associated responsibilities to kin and community that marriage in Papua New Guinea customarily entails (including the payment of ‘bride-price’).

When news of John Warrick’s death first reached Gunkwa, the community approached an Australian official to seek confirmation. He responded by producing and reading out a letter in which the deceased asked the Government to ensure his child would receive a good education. Initially regarded as sacred because the villagers could not read it and because of the way the communication appeared to transcend time, John Warrick’s farsighted request and the provision he made for his wife and unseen daughter are correctly described in the book as, in effect, planting the ‘seeds of a new beginning’ (82).

Kuma Kelage’s eventual response to the loss of her husband was to ask an old woman to prepare a ‘bush medicine’ that would make her infertile for the rest of her life. Although she married again — on three separate occasions — she did as the old woman advised and focused her life on her only child, Ba (Kuman for ‘moon’). With the aid of an American missionary family concerned for the child’s future, Ba was given the opportunity to further her education in Australia and the United States, before marrying, returning to live in Goroka for fifteen more years, and having four children of her own, including Deborah Carlyon, her first-born.

The most discordant note in the story retold in the book comes as a shock right at the end, long after John Warrick’s death. It occurs when Deborah Carlyon records how she finally saw a ‘record of casualties form’ provided by the Australian Department of Veterans Affairs, which explains her father’s death in the baldest, most insensitive, indeed offensive and crudely racist, terms. The form, apparently, suggests that John Warrick was responsible for his own death, having suicided with the aid of a gun after learning of the birth of his daughter, Deborah Carlyon’s mother, Ba. The actual words quoted refer to the deceased husband and father’s ‘long service in New Guinea in primitive circumstances with few Australians and lacking association with fellow Australians’, and state this ‘would definitely lead toward an abnormal mental outlook’. The form goes on to say that John
Gutpela Man: long pela nas. A warrior with integrity, p. 96. (Deborah Carlyon)
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Warrick’s ‘long association with natives must have brought on a feeling of frustration in his effort to carry on his duties. The deceased’s health (both physical and mental) was, apparently, in such a state that it seems most likely that the act of killing was not done with criminal intent …’. Despite the pain such a callously unfeeling and prejudiced report must have caused, the biographer granddaughter of the deceased politely describes the document as ‘lodged within a colonist perspective’ (167–68).

Fortunately, for the sake of decency and good sense, the next entry in the file is a statutory declaration from an Australian friend who had also lived and worked in the Highlands, and understood what Kuma meant to her husband and his care and concern for her. In the immediate aftermath of John Warrick’s death, other Australians displayed feeling and practical concern for the widow and daughter by providing them with housing in town, and making it possible for Ba to receive a Western-style education (a process which was initially interrupted by Kuma’s unwillingness to be separated from her daughter for any considerable length of time).

In the epigraph at the start of the book, the author eloquently describes her mother’s environment as having ‘nourished a stability neither stale nor stagnant’ (xv). At a number of points in the narrative, the author depicts certain aspects of Highlands society so eloquently, concisely and aptly that her descriptions are likely to be widely quoted in future. Her account of the way in which a child can be ‘held by many hands, suckled by many breasts, and loved by many mothers’ (xv) is an example. So is her pithy summary of the skills needed for hunting as ‘agility, invisibility, and silence’ (107). Elsewhere, she characterises the complex interactions of marriage exchange with the remark that ‘survival and contribution were the essence of existence, and pigs made these possible’ (113). Twice, the author describes pre-colonial Papua New Guinea as the time ‘before white men arrived with good intentions and loaded guns’ (9, 83). She recounts the activities which occurred when Kuma’s ‘desire and hunger for the new’ (36) combined with ‘the momentum of colonialism’ (42) to create misunderstandings about European and Chinese customs, as well as the uncertainties and interactions when Papua New Guineans from Highlands and coastal areas met, creating new opportunities for interaction, including demonstrations of kindness (the two came together on the occasion when Kuma, faced with the betel-nut-stained teeth of a coastal person, was prompted to try cleaning her own teeth with a torn twig and soap [91]).

While other changes occurred, Kuma Kelage remained firmly committed to her community’s traditional values, beliefs and practices throughout her life, even preferring to see a traditional doctor on the eve of her death. Her granddaughter (and biographer) overcame some initial embarrassment and felt ‘a quiet, secretive pride’ (148) when she pleased the old lady and their kin by allowing herself to be dressed and celebrated in the traditional way when she, in turn, as a twelve-year-old, became capable of bearing a child. The pride that she sensed Kuma shared meant that Deborah Carlyon felt that she, in turn, ‘shone’ (149).
In the Preface to a personal memoir recalling two years of living and conducting fieldwork among the Gahuku people of the area around Goroka, Eastern Highlands, Dr Kenneth E. Read (who had been one of John Warrick’s contemporaries in ANGAU), asked why it is that ‘so much anthropological writing [is] so antiseptic, so devoid of anything that brings a people to life?’ (Read ix) The people whom anthropologists observe, analyse and describe often appear, in his words, to be pinned like butterflies in a glass case, with the difference, however, that we often cannot tell what colour these specimens are; and we are never shown them in flight, never see them soar or die except in generalities. The reason for this lies in the aims of anthropology, whose concern with the particular is incidental to an understanding of the general. (Read ix)

This is why Read, having written scholarly articles of a conventional academic kind about Gahuku and other Papua New Guinean societies, chose to produce a volume of much more personalised portraits, including a close-grained account of the life of the young Gahuku girl, Tarova, and his interactions with her. His portrait of Tarova breathes life into more standard academic accounts of the inferior status of women in most Highlands societies (indeed, in Melanesia generally). It also provides valuable insights into the roles that women nonetheless
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play, and the influence they may still exercise. Deborah Carlyon’s book achieves a similar result, but on a much bigger scale. Thus Mama Kuma is shown in the round, and over time, as actor, not simply reacting to social pressures or initiatives taken by men. Consistent with Lytton Strachey’s belief that ‘Human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past. … [t]hey have a value which is independent of any temporal processes’ (Strachey 1), Mama Kuma’s granddaughter and biographer sees and paints a picture of a living, breathing person with a personality and a determination to shape her own life. The widespread phenomenon whereby Papua New Guinean communities initially thought of white- and other-skinned interlopers as ghosts of their ancestors is given context, depth and stylish expression, not least because of Deborah Carlyon’s eloquent prose.

Thus it is that, in telling the particular, at times moving, story of her grandmother, their kin and their community, with clarity, insight and style — and trying to do so from what might be described as the inside looking out — Deborah Carlyon’s recounting of her grandmother’s life helps to correct or, at least, balance more conventional accounts of life on the frontiers of change in Papua New Guinea (and similar situations elsewhere). In acknowledging the active parts that village people, women and children have played, and continue to play in initiating and shaping change, the book highlights the pioneering roles that Mama Kuma and people like her have played.

Certain aspects of MamaKuma’s descriptions of traditional Highlands society may strike some observers as idealised (examples include the description of Mama Kuma’s powerful father, Kelage, as a ‘revered chief’ [9], and the statement that ‘[i]n the village, human warmth, affection and responsibility permeated every task: company, conversation, humour and unity of purpose wove together love, play and meaning — from gardening at sunrise to storytelling at sunset’ [16]). Anthropologists are likely to question repeated use of the terms ‘chieftain’ and ‘chief’ for traditional Chimbu leaders, the more so because of the influence anthropological studies of Chimbu society have in formulating the concept of the ‘big man’ as the prototype of leaders in the Highlands and elsewhere in Melanesia (Brown; there are, of course, chiefs — men who hold, often inherited, positions of authority — in some areas, and leadership even in Chimbu quite frequently passes from father to son).

However, viewed as a whole, MamaKuma is not only a very well-written account of a truly remarkable and impressive woman. It is also an insightful tale of mutual discovery and self-discovery across space, cultures and time — a story told with affection and respect. The book both expresses and conveys the personal quality which K.E. Read thought to be missing from standard anthropological reports and other academic works on Papua New Guinea, while being scholarly in the general sense of paying close attention to sources. The black-and-white drawings at the start of each chapter mean that, viewed as a whole, it is, in many
respects, a work of art in itself, not just for the words and conventional photographs of places and people it contains. The artistic integrity of the book is further emphasised and enhanced by the poetic epigraphs which appear at the beginning of a number of chapters. *MamaKuma* is, in many respects, a work of art in much the same way as the life that the redoubtable Mama Kuma tried — and, in many respects, managed — to make for herself.

NOTES


2 See Marilyn Strathern on women in Mount Hagen society, p. 284.

3 See Edward Schieffelin *et al* among other sources, for further accounts, and James Macauley for an evocatively titled essay, ‘We Are Men — What Are You?’ for reflections on the theme.

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Macauley, James 1960, ‘We Are Men — What Are You?’, *Quadrant*, Winter, pp. 72–79.


