



Colourful Collingwood Bay



BY JAN HASSELBERG

After passing the last houses, the banks of the Vayova River had come a little bit closer to our gently moving canoe and soon, coconut fronds and tall forest trees were forming a ceiling over our heads.

The fiery, bright blossoms of the New Guinea creepers lit up the greenery like strings of Chinese lanterns in orange and red, some places hanging straight down, while others drew beautifully curved arabesques above us, almost like circles.

What a fabulous and colourful way to mark the start of our little expedition. Joe and Moses were my companions and we were going up to have a look at the lake, just north of the two hills behind Uiaku and Ganjiga villages.

For more than a hundred years, this lake was only visited on special occasions - there is a

sad story behind this - but now, young men go there for fishing and they have decided it should be all right for a stranger and 'waitman' to visit as well.

After the short canoe ride, I was looking forward to a long, nice walk through the forest.

I was in the area because of a book project I'm working on. Based at Tufi, I travelled around the magic fjordland of Cape Nelson for several months collecting stories and finding out what life is like there.

Tufi and Collingwood Bay share the same local government and it was here that I picked up news about two major development projects in the district - prospecting for a nickel mine and a logging project, both in the back of Collingwood. I had to find out more about these two projects, so I set out for Uiaku and Wanigela.



The clay pots were big and round and made at Wanigela - one of the proud crafts still very much alive in the bay. They are made from a type of special clay only found in a small area, and once the pots are burned, they last forever.

A couple of hours on the 'Calvados Queen' and then a dinghy ride brought me safely down to the Maisin people at Uiaku. Here, Jefford Terina made me feel welcomed in his shelter before taking me up to the Sevaru family where I was to stay in the new guesthouse.

Only a few people were around when I arrived because almost everyone in Uiaku and Ganjiga were gathered for a mourning ceremony in the northern-most hamlet. We went up to join them.

Since the deceased had lived and worked in Alotau, there was a big delegation of friends and colleagues from there who had come up as well, so there was quite a crowd preparing for a big meal.



The men were seated on palm fronds on the ground in a double square that was arranged for the occasion - the elders inside, and the younger men at the back. Over by one of the houses, the rhythmical sound of coconut shredding was heard - this is a job for the young men - and next to that, women were getting ready for cooking.

FOLLOWING CUSTOMS

For an important meal as this, one has to do things right. And that means following the old customs. An impressive string of fireplaces were lined up with sticks placed in a circular fashion to hold the pots in place.

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In the gardens far behind the villages, they grow some very big taro and many giant tubers had been brought down along with bananas, tapioca and sweet potato, and some were still being peeled and cut up while the first fires were lit and the first clay pots were put in place. Fish and pieces of pork were put on top of the vegetables before they were



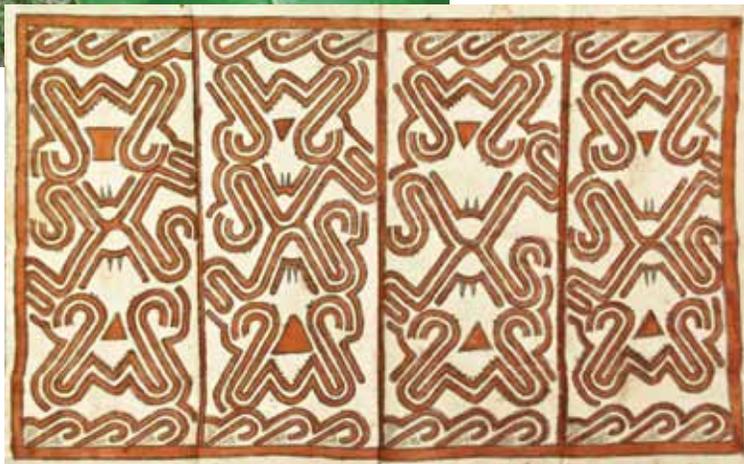
all covered with banana leaves, and then the women made sure the fires were burning properly, waving their small pandanus fans when a little puff was needed.

As a guest, I was invited to join the inner circle of men or was it my grey hair that made me qualified? There was talk about the man who had passed away, of course, and then the Ganjiga counsellor introduced me quite formally.

As I had experienced elsewhere, the locals were keen to hear what a visitor could tell from other places and what impressions he has of PNG. Then, they had much to share with both me and the visitors from Alotau. First, we heard about the damage caused by the flood that followed the torrential rain of the Guba cyclone, just five years ago, and how the villages have struggled to recover.

There were strong feelings about the millions of relief funds that were 'lost' in Popondetta and never reached the flood damaged areas. Strong feelings also surfaced when logging became the subject.

The Maisin people fought a brave fight against a big logging project in the 90s and they managed to stop it, giving them both national and international attention, acclaim



and support. Now they are upset about the new wave of eager foreign companies finding their way into the bay. Guests from Wanigela brought some worrying news of the project that had already started up there. But then the meal was ready and the dark clouds disappeared.

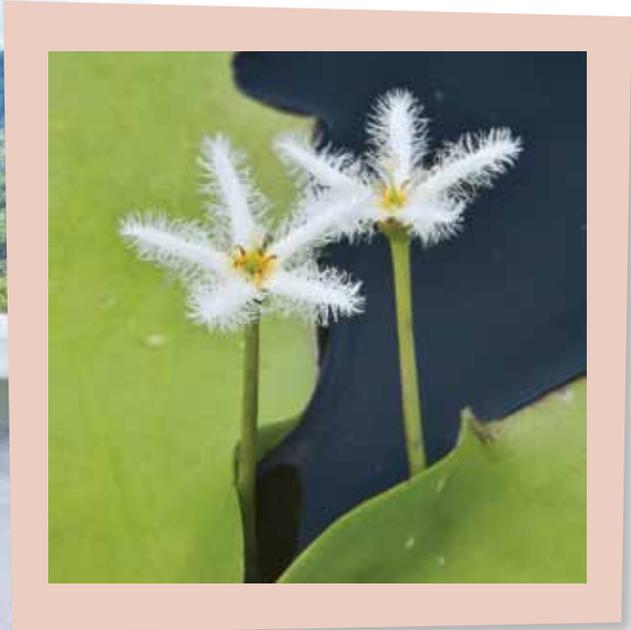
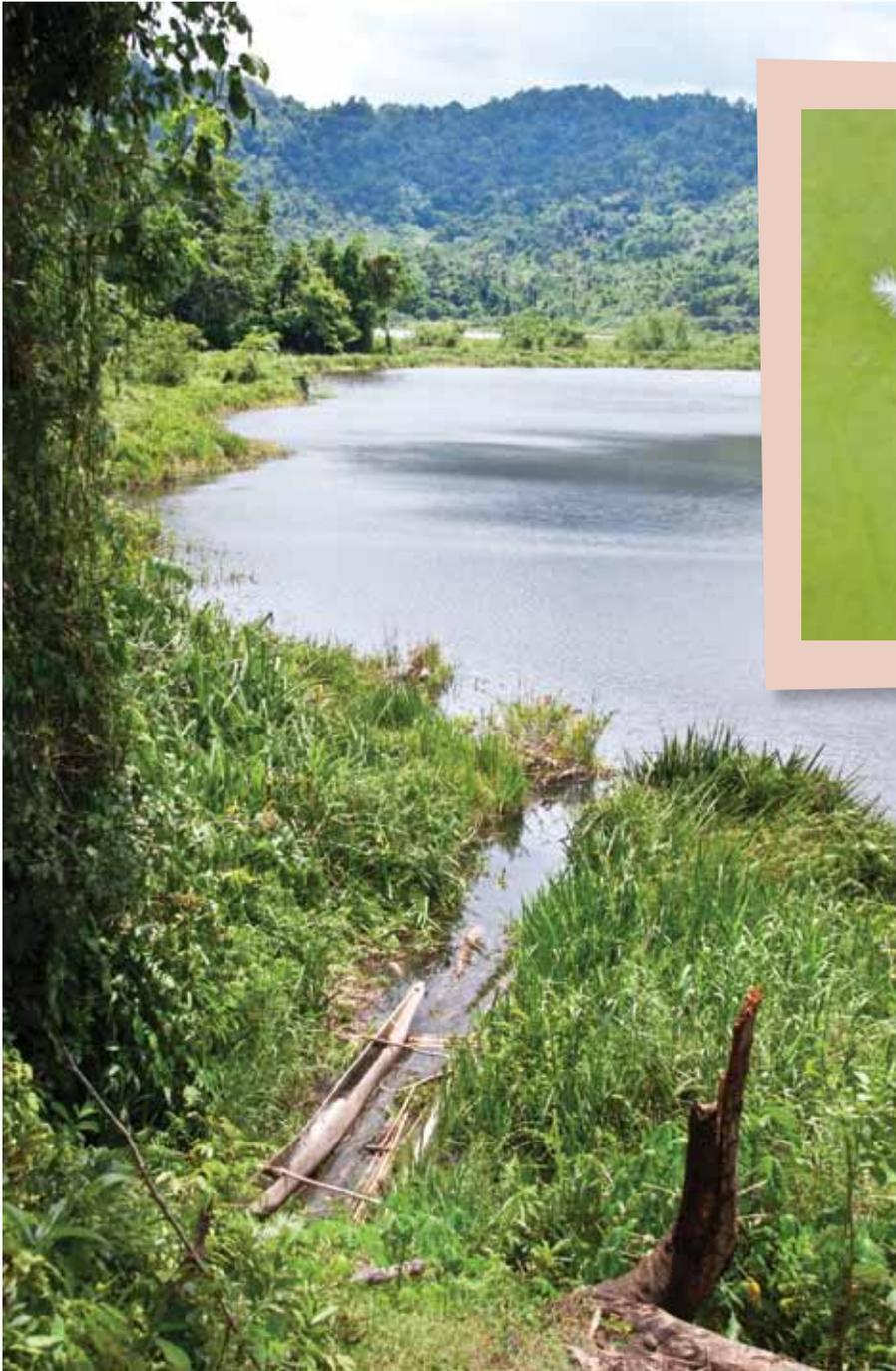
MAKING THE BEST

When the Alotau guests left in their two very full boats the next day, waved off by an enthusiastic crowd that filled the whole beach, yes, some even in the sea, I made my way to Betty's house.

One can't visit the Maisin people without

purchasing a prime piece of tapa cloth, and Betty is one of the experts. Tapa has been made for centuries along the northern coast of PNG and the Maisin have a well founded reputation for making the best.

Betty had one that was almost finished and I could tell it was going to be a great one with the traditional parting into four similar sections. It was going to be a female tapa, which they wear as a skirt when they put on their traditional costumes, so it was much bigger than the loin cloth variety that are for the men. The black contours were already in place and showed a beautiful, decorative pattern with iconic ocean waves on the top



and bottom. When I came back later that day, Betty had finished making the red dye, the dun, and was starting to add it to the tapa with a pandanus brush. Earlier in the day, she had collected the inner bark from a saman tree and leaves from the dun tree, which were then heated in a pot over the fire. When the consistency and the deep, blood-red hue was achieved it was ready for application.

The tapa fibers also come from the inner bark of a tree, the mulberry, and after being peeled off with the greatest care it is beaten on a wooden log with a mallet that looks like a small cricket bat. The fibers loosen and the bark extends.

After one or two hours of beating, the cloth has got the right size and it is then hung to dry in the shade. Betty knows all the secrets of how to get a strong and beautiful tapa and for her as for all other Maisin, the keeping of this tradition has become an important part of her identity and it also generates some income for her family and her community. She is proud of her work.



Now, on my last day here, we were slowly moving up the river to the place where we had to park the canoe and take to our feet. The path was quite wet and we walked long stretches in both mud and water. The rainy season was part of the explanation for this, of course, but only partly.

After the great flooding disaster in 2006, both the creeks and rivers found new courses, and the paths were either swept away or turned into waterways. We passed through large areas covered with tall seaweed-like grass and dead trees - this had been their gardens a few years back.

The last stretch of our walk was through big rainforest, and finally, along the side of one of the hills we came to a small clearing right next

to the lake with a nice view across. It lay there quietly resting in the bosom of the hills and the forest, far away from any settlement and surrounded only by untouched wilderness.

A small canoe was tied by the shore just below us and some egrets flew by in undisturbed grace. This tranquility was somewhat deceptive, however. I knew many men had died here a long, long time ago, but the details of this story is not for strangers and visitors, and this is something one has to respect.

OLD MAGIC

I also knew that the lake is full of crocodiles. Now at mid-day they would be resting in the weeds and elsewhere on the shores, but after sunset they would be back out in the water. Some years ago, the men who were allowed to visit the lake had a way of calling the crocodiles out from their hiding places, but now with fishing taking place, this old magic is lost.

Joe invited me out in the canoe and we paddled around for a while, getting the full impression of the place. With only an occasional bird call heard from the bush, the quiet reigned around us. A jacana was tip-toeing from one water lily leaf to another looking for snacks, and some cormorants were sitting around on naked branches drying their wings in the sun.

I found it difficult to imagine that in some hours there would be crocodiles swimming around here, and even with the knowledge of past bloodshed, I couldn't think of this place as anything but eternally peaceful and beautiful.

At the villages I had witnessed the magic of tapa making, taken part in a mourning ceremony, heard many interesting stories and made many great friends. It was a wonderful stay and I hope to be back some day with more time to spend.



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