

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL CANOES ON EARTH

*A Journal — The Milne Bay Canoe Festival,
Papua New Guinea, 2007*

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This is a work of memoir. It reflects the author's recollections of events, locales, and conversations from his own experience over time. Some names and identifying details may have been changed.

First edition.

A Note on the Text

This journal covers the run-up to and the running of the Milne Bay canoe festival — the sailing and paddling of the traditional epoi canoes from villages across the province to Alotau — aboard the RV Infinity in October and November 2007.

The book also includes a separate piece, “A Legend Story - Sineialoi,” signed by John Wils Kaniku, the chairman of the canoe festival, who also appears in these pages. It is not Michel’s writing, and appears here separately, attributed, as an appendix.

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Wils Kaniku

PROLOGUE

The Kula and the Kundu

Anticipation of the character. Conversation about the dream.

The players: John Kaniku. Warren Junior, beating the kundu drum. The canoes, and their sailors.

Symbol of the kula — the art of gift-giving and gift-receiving. The kula expands outward, and our sea-people tribe expands with it.

The sailors are going to come from far away. The true sailors of ancient, traditional craft will want to come, one way or another. Meanwhile, all around the villages, the event will be talked about. Stories told, and new legends made. The old symbols will take on new meaning, and new symbols will be created. The old, merging into the new.

Dances revived, songs sung for the spirit of the sea. Old legends retold, myths reborn, and new ones born. A future where the play of the wind prevails over the speed of the outboard motor.

The spirit of ocean voyaging, even without much money, will show itself possible. The young ones will follow — might build new canoes, and know the sea. A new freedom of movement. The art of magic, and a sensitivity for the biosphere, renewed. A new pride, based on the achievement of knowledge, and of beauty.

A gathering of men and women, in celebration of man and the sea — proud of a heritage, proud of

their own abilities. While all around, destruction and the raping of the biosphere go on, a reborn spirit of ocean voyaging — of creation, of old values re-emerging as new — celebrates the past, the present, and the possibilities of the future.

An identity for a region, spreading like a wildfire across the ocean: the gathering of a people in union with the sea.

PART ONE

Esala, October 2007

From Malinowski: Magic, however efficient, will not make up for bad craftsmanship. But both are considered indispensable.

24 October 2007

By the market place, the convicts are busy erecting shelters for the coming canoe festival. John Kaniku, the chairman and inspiration behind it all, conducts the scene like a brilliant orchestra chief. "I like misfits," he says. "The convicts, low security, will also provide entertainment for one of the dancing evenings."

This is a festival for the people, by the people. Not heavily sponsored — most of the dancers, and the canoes making the journey from far away, will only receive a small token of appreciation at the end, but the spirit of sailing and paddling is what needs to prevail. A mobile phone company wanted to sponsor, but wanted, in return, to put a giant logo over the stage. "It is not a corporate show," John says. "Over my dead body."

The real motivation is to revive an art that is weakening. With the new market economy making its advance into even the most rural areas, the trading side of the canoe culture is losing its main economic incentive. School fees are a constant worry for most rural families — unless a mission is established, but then you pay with your soul, in the name of the Christian god. "Once you give them a Bible, you're in there for hours," someone says.

So much for the Christian spirit — everything that was planned changed, and all six canoes decided to do their own thing. The first three, leaving their respective villages behind, took off, taking advantage of the favourable winds. We loaded all the food — big bunches of bananas, yams, sweet potatoes — onto our aft cabin, to lighten the canoes.

We arrive in Esala late in the afternoon. The scenery is out of a fairy-tale book: Dobu, the volcanic island, shines with the golden glow of the setting sun, and sailing canoes pass by. Very soon paddlers arrive in their small canoes. We are no strangers here — we came two years ago, aboard the *Heraclitus*, and met the communities who would sail their canoes down to Alotau for the big sea-people rendezvous. We never made it that time; our ship was taken from us, we began an exodus to a new vessel, the *Infinity*, and missed the last one. But we are here now.

The hands become one with the canoe — a symbiosis between the crew and the magical “flying canoes.” The steersman and the one holding the sail’s sheet need to be in perfect accord: it will give the edge to win the race. Too much wind in the sail and the steersman won’t be able to hold it; not enough, and the canoe loses speed. Magic is involved, of course, but in the eyes of the “natives,” magic won’t make up for bad craftsmanship, or incompetent sailing. It provides the extra edge.

This morning the women are sending the canoes out. The canoe is brought to the beach in three stages, each with its own song. First the woven mats that protect it from the sun are taken off; then the men push the canoe onto rollers of

logs. An elder woman, speaking for the women of the village, distributes betel nut to everyone present, while young girls, dressed in grass skirts, stand in line, fragrant leaves in their hair, bodies anointed with coconut oil. The canoe is launched without a single man aboard; then one man paddles it to shore, ready to be loaded. Everyone is saying their goodbyes. The owner, a woman, watches every move — this is the maiden voyage of a new captain.

The ocean is flat, not a ripple; the carved, painted bow watches its own reflection. The canoes have been newly painted, red, white, and black, and so are the paddles. For the first leg, sails of modern material — plastic — are used, but also packed for the voyage are the woven pandanus sails, dried and patched the day before.

For the lashing that holds the boards together, some canoes use modern lashing; the traditional wood-sap kind needs constant attention — it cannot be allowed to fully dry, and every day the seams must be kept moist, or the lashing cracks and the canoe becomes unseaworthy. At the last festival, a canoe had to turn back: the lashing was never dried properly, then never remoistened, and the canoe began to leak.

In all, six canoes are ready. Others are still being built; some blame the organisers for not communicating the right date. Now that the day of departure has come, everyone blames something or someone for not being ready — but the truth is simply that they didn't put in the energy, and the resources, to get their canoe ready in time. Now it's too late.

While the canoes come over to unload their trade goods, we get a chance to sail ourselves. Almost sunset, and here we go, taking the breeze, feeling the canoe move — the stern singing a song in the water, a gentle hiss, the water running alongside coming back as an echo. I take the steering station, raising or lowering the steering oar, applying more or less pressure to hold course. The man holding the sail watches the tension in my muscles, gauges how much strength I can hold, and, confident I can handle it, tightens the sail — the canoe slices the water. Before we reach the ship, every manoeuvre to bring us alongside is done under sail alone. We “dock.”

Now it's time to try paddling. Ari, Tanya, Heather, and I paddle together — a good crew of nine can reach a cruising speed of five knots, with peaks of six or seven; we test it while the canoes are underway.

East Cape. Sailing canoes come in to trade — on the beach, two worlds side by side: the fibreglass boats with outboard motors, and the canoes. Huge bags of betel nut are carried ashore. East Cape has a treacherous passage, with a ripping current, that without motor power takes real skill and knowledge to cross. The first epoi canoe tacks back and forth in the distance.

We anchor close to shore, the seabed dropping quickly to two hundred metres — too deep to anchor further out. We watch the wind carefully, so as not to be blown onto the shore. It is the season of the south-east trades, but the islands work their own strange attractions, and send winds from the north-east instead.

The moon, full three days ago, calms the sea at night — maybe she wants to look at herself, and needs a good mirror. With the children of Dobu, we sat on the *Infinity* and watched her rise over the island, a golden fruit lifting above the trees. We sat with it, without a word, before returning to conversation. Here, conversation means telling stories, and in that spirit I tell the young ones about our travels — how we crossed the biggest ocean of all. They watch everything we do, carefully — cooking, mopping the floor, working the sails. Every move is watched, and then talked about. Lots of giggling.

Before we depart, our anchor gets stuck on the seafloor, so we put the ship in reverse, and in our own way of working, with repeated orders called back and forth, the calls echo out from the different canoes nearby. They must be wondering who “Roger” is — they’ve never seen him, and never will. Maybe he’s the magician who can’t be seen, but is always talked about.

The canoes, in two teams of three, make their way toward the village of Toba, before the race to Alotau: a story of survival, of revival, a stand to keep alive knowledge that is dying, but not yet dead. Fiji, Vanuatu, and the Solomons have all lost the art of sailing canoes; Milne Bay Province is the last stronghold of it left in Melanesia. The incoming tide of development is rapidly changing the old trading routes and patterns. The poetry of sailing is still alive in the blood, but without the economic incentive to benefit the communities directly, the art is hard to keep alive.

The festival is a way to keep those traditions and skills alive — and these sailors can be proud, providing stories and epics to keep the culture

evolving, creating new stories instead of only relying on the old, half-forgotten ones. Talking to the sailors, captains, and owners of the canoes, the carved bow and stern boards are made just as they have always been made — but the story each one tells is now half-forgotten. Some of the names of the designs, and part of their meaning, still survive, but the whole picture is gone, like a puzzle missing too many pieces to show the full image.

The expedition members rest on the beach, fixing their sails, telling stories of their travels.

PART TWO

The Race to Alotau

The epoi canoes start their race toward Alotau — thirty miles of open sea, the wind behind them. They paddle through the strait at East Cape, waves crashing on their bows. A crowd of children, sneaked out of school, cheers them on.

We follow in their wake in our red Zodiac — a bumpy ride, almost impossible to film, but we manage it. As the canoes raise their sails, our own crew on the *Infinity* struggles with the anchor.

The pandanus sails unfold into the wind, and the most beautiful canoes on earth glide over Milne Bay — a sight no photograph, no moving image, will ever match.

PART THREE

Normanby District

Normanby, Esala District, 24 November 2007

The epoi is raising its sails, coming toward the *Infinity*. Smiles first; eyes meet, and shine. Friends, reunited. After the exchange of stories, our mutual travel reports, and a meeting on board to plan our days, I set sail with the Laser and the canoes toward the village. I have the privilege of steering the epoi, learning the helm from Kevin — the wind is strong enough from behind to make the steering tricky. We make a landing on the beach, and greet the few people gathered there — the canoe owners, and the coordinator, well coordinated.

The main idea is a two-day event, highlighting the culture of the canoes, and the kula. We sit quietly, chewing more betel nut — I'm on my fourth already. At the entrance to the village, Kevin takes my hand as a gesture of friendship; I have with me a bottle of rum, a promise I made him back in Alotau. Now it's fulfilled.

A beautiful girl from Misima steps to the edge of the scene, and a small conspiracy floats up around her — every movement, every turn of the head or eyes, is noticed, and quietly acted upon.

The programme is set now, confirmed, and passed on to whoever will put it into motion.

A new canoe is being built. The long log, already shaped and hollowed, is now receiving

carvings along its sides. Two huge boards are ready to be worked — they'll become the sides. The two prow-pieces are already carved with the story of Iabwana. The paddles, in rough cuts, lean against a tree. I keep touching the epoi, these living sculptures of beauty. Steven, the owner and builder, has shaved his beard — some razor blades made it back from Alotau.

I notice obsidian scattered all over the island now — a black volcanic glass known as the sharpest natural blade there is.

The owner of the Waimai, a woman, tells me: without a woman's permission, a tree cannot be cut. Women also budget the feasts, and are in charge of the yam house. And of course, they own the land.

Before the canoe festival was set up, the epoi were dying — few people looked after them, and let them rot; the elders had given up, and had stopped passing the knowledge down. Then, suddenly, everything changed: the epoi are being built again, and interest has been sparked. The old myths are being retrieved, pieced back together from what's left, and, where necessary, reinvented — the past joined to the future, for a vision forward.

For four days I won't go to the island under engine power; I'll steer the epoi, or the fishing canoes, to shore and back. The wind blows gently, and each morning we reanchor a little closer to the villages, on better holding ground. The dugong makes its appearance again, becoming a regular, if elusive, visitor.

Island time means something can start once everyone is ready. Intelligence, and the necessity

of thinking for yourself, while exchanging the mwali or the bagi, learning to read the smallest signs — the ones that give away the inner life of a man.

PART FOUR

The Storm at Nuakata

Canoe festival. Esala. The dives. Friends. The storm.

— Only the last of these was written up; the rest is left as he noted it.

Nuakata. We anchor safely, three cables from shore. Canoes come out from the island to sell their produce — pineapple, papaya, bananas, shells, carved canoes. By nightfall, heavy rain, without wind, pours onto the deck. The rain intensifies, and the wind grows stronger by the hour. The barometer is falling. The weatherfax shows nothing special, but something is coming.

I keep track of the wind through the scoop that funnels down into my bunk — unfortunately, so does the rain, and my mattress is a sponge by now. By 4:30, first light, the wind is already strong. Then it hits.

I ask Carol to start the main engine, and get a team to raise the small boat. By now the wind is howling at fifty knots. We are dragging, and dragging fast. With the engine ahead, we relieve the pressure on the chain, but hold the wind at an angle, to shelter from the swells now rising, while we get the small boat up. The team is impeccable.

The wind keeps building. Every drop of rain becomes a stinging needle, hitting the face all at once — it keeps the body alert, alive. The game now is to use just enough engine to relieve the

pressure on the chain, without using too much, since the anchor is still down.

The wind keeps shifting, but settles steadily out of the north; the swells keep building. With Laser and Gaie, we weigh our options, and consider slipping the chain. I decide instead to raise the anchor and get out to sea — easier said than done. The swells are now fifteen feet high, and the team on the bow battles them; the chain comes up, and drops again. On the helm, every time the wind hits from the side, it takes everything to keep *Infinity's* head into it.

By what magic I don't know, the anchor comes off the bottom, and we start moving away from the land and the reef, a few metres off our stern. Luckily, Laser had welded some cheek plates onto the rail to guide the anchor home. The rain still hits like a needle-gun, a giant swirling nest of stinging bees; the wind is now straight out of the north. The area is dotted with reefs, and careful navigation gets us out to open water, where we raise sail and drift until morning.

Meanwhile, the cyclone hits the islands hard. Food crops go down — bananas, breadfruit, papaya, coconuts, all knocked to the ground. Rain washes over the soil, spoiling the cassava. The roofs of four houses fly off. But all this is nothing next to what's happening on the south coast, where floods kill a hundred and forty people, and counting. People climb into trees; the lucky ones make it up the mountain. Even four days later, some are still stuck in the trees, unable to come down, the brown, saturated rivers carrying huge logs past beneath them. The sea itself turns the colour of chocolate, and the food crops, and the houses, are simply gone.

It is — or used to be — the good season. The climate is changing. Our biosphere is showing us its disturbance.

We were lucky: once the cyclone passed, we anchored off one of our favourite dive sites, and played with turtles, moray eels, and manta rays. Another cyclonic act was waiting for us as we reached Alotau, with a long list of tasks ahead — there, too, the bay had turned to chocolate, the rivers in flood, the road to East Cape closed.

On Tuesday we put together a rough cut of some of the footage we'd shot at the canoe festival. Napatana Lodge was full, sponsors and committee members all there. Manix came down, fresh off a flight from Honiara, in the Solomons. John Kaniku beamed.

APPENDIX

A Legend Story — Sineialoi

by John Wils Kaniku

Sineialoi was the last-born in a family of seven girls. They were all pretty, delicate, soft-spoken. Sineialoi was the prettiest — her curly hair always fell neatly down her back, her large round eyes always sparkled, and her ant-sized waist made her the most talked-about girl in the village.

The boys did everything they could to win her attention, but none succeeded. Still, they kept trying to marry her, and every time, she turned them down with a shy smile.

Sineialoi's popularity with the boys brought jealousy from her sisters, and from the other girls — she was always left out of their games. That jealousy surfaced one day when the sisters decided to go fishing on a remote island. They waited for the afternoon low tide, and, taking advantage of the current, the seven sisters got into one canoe and paddled out.

On the island, while they waited for the tide to turn, Sineialoi collected coconuts, husked them, and went off to the nearby rocks, leaving her sisters to their plans. Sitting on the rocks, she watched mother dolphins teaching their young to jump.

“Wilwili iabobo natum kaposi iawoooooooo,” she chanted, and the dolphins kept time with her, leaping. Then they swam closer to the rocks, and she rewarded them with coconut.

High in the branches above, an eagle watched her in silence.

"And what are you looking at?" she asked it, taking off her grass skirt to bathe. The eagle said nothing — it flew off toward its own island, and she watched it go, until it disappeared.

After her wash, she gathered shells as she made her way back around the island to her sisters. The tide had dropped, and the sisters were scattered across the reef, collecting shells of their own. She joined them.

"That's a lot of shells you've collected," said one. "Thank you," said Sineialoi.

"Sineialoi?" another called. "Yes?" "Come help me get this octopus." She picked up her basket and went to help. Then another sister called her over, and another — cooperative, not knowing her sisters had already made a plan to leave her behind.

When the tide began to rise, the sisters returned to shore to clean their shells. "Sineialoi," one said, "those shells you've collected — something's wrong with them." "What is it?" "They're poisonous."

She was puzzled — she had known shells her whole life, and knew which were poisonous and which weren't — but not wanting to hurt anyone, especially her own family, she said nothing. Her sisters gathered around her. "Go get new ones. These are poisonous — do you want the boys to laugh at you?"

Without protest, she picked up her basket and went — but the tide had risen too far now to

gather any more shells. Out of her sight, her sisters got into the canoe, and left, abandoning her on the uninhabited island.

“They lied to me,” she said, when she understood, and collapsed in tears. “They fooled me. All those shells were never poisonous.”

For days she waited for someone to pass by and rescue her, but no one came. Alone, but not lonely, she made her life on the island — most of her time spent with the dolphins, and talking to the eagle, which had taken up a permanent perch on a branch nearby.

One evening she decided to try for home. She gathered fallen coconuts and bundled them together, and set out the next day, when the sea was calm, paddling inch by inch toward the long distance home. By late afternoon, exhausted, she had to rest her paddle — and the current swept her out toward the open ocean.

“Kwaaa, kwaaa, kwaaa,” a seagull cried above her, warning the other creatures. A turtle, surfacing nearby, heard the warning and swam to her, diving beneath the bundle of coconuts and pushing it toward a remote, stunted-treed island where the eagles lived. The dolphins came to help too, leaping and diving around her, pushing the bundle along, chasing off the hungry sharks that gathered. When she was safely ashore, they all left her.

“It’s the same girl I saw on the island,” said the eagle. That eagle was no ordinary bird — it was a young man, wearing an eagle’s feathers. He stepped out of them, went down, and carried her onto the rocks, where he built a fire, cooked food,

baked taro, and set it beside her, before returning to his feathers and watching from the treetop.

When Sineialoi woke, she was surprised, and glad, to find food, water, and a fire waiting.

"You're safe on this island," said the eagle. "Who is it?" she asked. "Just a friend." "Who are you?" "A human, in an eagle's feathers." "Oh. I see."

The eagle took off his feathers again, left them on the rocks, and came to sit with her, and they talked. "So — you were watching me." "Yes. And I fell in love with you." "How extraordinary." "I didn't think you'd end up here." "Neither did I, but here I am." "That's right." "Taken this far out, I'll have to think of a better way home." "I suppose there is one." "Any ideas?" "Not at the moment." "Why can't I ride on your back, and you fly me home?" "Hmmm." "Come on." "Let's try it tomorrow." "Okay."

They slept on the rocks that night, warmed by the fire. The next day, they tried it — but because the eagle had already fallen in love with her, he pretended it was too hard, flying with her on his back. After a few attempts, they gave up, and stayed on the island. Each day, he flew off and returned in the evening with wood, food, water. Sineialoi gathered fish and shells. Life became so good that she forgot about going home at all — and, in time, she fell in love with him, and married him.

"Know something?" she said one day. "No." "I'm pregnant." "Are you?" "Yes." "Then I'm going to be a father. I must build a house." The next day they began — he flew in the materials each morning, and they built it together in the

afternoons and evenings, finishing within a few days.

She gave birth to a fine boy, who grew to be a handsome man, and a strong eagle. He spent his days with his father, and joined them both for dinner each night.

One day the boy came home early, sad, in tears — his father was dead. While out hunting, someone had burned the grass where he kept his eagle feathers hidden; running to save them, he was attacked by a wild pig, and fell into the flames, and burned to ash along with his feathers.

Days passed, and loneliness turned Sineialoi's thoughts back toward her village. "Son," she said one night, "we must go back." He agreed, and the next day they began to prepare.

"Fly to that island," she told him. "Beside the big tree is your eldest aunt's garden — bring back her best bananas." He flew off and returned that afternoon with them — and she knew her sister was alive. "Now fly to the second island — beside the big rock is your second aunt's garden. Bring her best yams." He returned that evening with them, and she knew her second sister lived too. The next day: "Beside the red hill is your third aunt's garden — bring back her best taro." He returned with it that evening, and again she knew. "Now," she said, "change into a man, go into the village, and bring me back your grandfather's paddle." He did, and returned with it — and she held it to her chest and wept with joy, knowing her parents were still alive. "Tomorrow," she said, "we go home."

At dawn she climbed onto her son's back, and they flew to the island, landing on a hill where he

changed out of his feathers and hid them in a cave. Together they walked into the village, hoping for a warm welcome.

But her sisters turned up their noses, and whispered in disgust, as Sineialoi and her son entered her father's house. There was a great commotion — but her grandmother hugged the boy and wept, glad her daughter had returned, and not alone.

Life went on, until the day she feared came: her son fought with one of her sisters. "Your son is the son of an eagle," the sister said. "Take him back where he belongs." "My child is no eagle," Sineialoi said. "He is human." "He fights like an eagle."

In the days that followed, the same taunts kept coming, and wounded him further, until one night he ran off, back to his own island, in his eagle feathers. When he didn't return, Sineialoi went up into the hills to check the cave — his feathers were gone.

"My child, come back to me. Please, come back," she cried. But he never did. She returned to the village, and lived apart from the others.

Then a day came when her whole body felt strange — she felt like a fish trapped inside a human body. Her warm blood ran cold, and her skin began to grow thick with salt. Carrying a small bilum around her neck, she said goodbye to everyone, sisters included, and walked down to the beach under the light of the setting sun. Looking back, she saw the whole village following her — but she kept walking, out toward the reef. When the sea reached her neck, her body changed into a fish, and she went under.

In her new form, Sineialoi swam away to a new life, new surroundings, new friends, and made her home under the sea, by the remote island. She lives there still, happily, beneath the waves — while above, her son lives on too, happily, in his own eagle's feathers.