



The writer Kalo at her grandparents' grave in the family's mat-mat (cemetery) at Kuradui



Marylou and Alf Uechtritz in their later years



The funeral procession of family and friends winds its way up the hill at Kuradui



This view of Mt Tavurvur at Rabaul from the deck of Kokopo Beach Bungalows is writer Kalo's favourite

COMING HOME:

Ples blo mi East New Britain

Kalolaine Fainu

My earliest memories of Lae are of the open wooden-floored house my grandparents lived in, with a tennis court off to the side that my grandfather rolled out himself, the abundance of tropical flowers in the gardens he created wherever he went, and the need to keep an eye out for puk puks (crocodiles) while swimming in the creek to cool down... and of course, Christmas. My grandparents Alf and Marylou Uechtritz loved to celebrate Christmas, never more than when their large brood of children and grandchildren were around. As a child,

it was so much fun coming together with our ever-expanding family. My mum is one of 11 children and so the house was always full of pikinini cousins running a-mock!

I think my first trip to PNG was not long after I was born, when my mother returned to Lae to introduce me to my grandparents who were at that time living out at Zifasing

Cattle Ranch in the Markham Valley where my grandfather was the bossman (station manager). I still have the black and white photos of me as a baby being held by them at

Nadzab Airport. Sometimes I find the idea of Christmas trees, Santa Clauses and all the wintery trimmings being celebrated in our hot and steamy tropical islands somewhat incongruous, but then I recall the old family photos of my grandfather as a boy, of his grandmother Phebe Parkinson and brothers Ewald and Peter by the Christmas tree, and I understand the tradition transcends

the glittery decorations and slightly nonsensical red Santa suits and represents a time when families gather under one roof. That has always been my favourite part of Christmas. I can barely remember a present I received as a child but I hold dearly the memories created with my cousins as we played and swam all day long in the summer heat, feasting endlessly on meals lovingly

prepared by my grandmother and the singing of often out-of-tune carols. Without fail, Nana would set up her nativity sets to remind us we must 'remember the reason for the season'. Even after my grandparents moved to Innisfail in Queensland, PNG remained in their hearts and could be felt in every room in their home, with collections of masks, spears and carvings, beams transported down from PNG, and the garden abloom with bougainvillea, frangipani, hibiscus and other tropical plants brought over by my grandfather. So, despite living in Australia, PNG has always felt familiar because of those early memories and stories we grandchildren grew up listening to, of adventure, family history, extraordinary beauty and culture of a

faraway land. My darling Nana died in 2018, her wish being to be buried with Grandpa back in PNG in the family mat-mat (cemetery) at Kuradui in East New Britain - the place where they met and fell in love. When my mum, aunts and uncles started discussing the logistics of bringing home my grandparents' ashes, I experienced a very strong and clear calling to connect with the land and people of this place that I had grown up hearing stories about, so I put my regular life in Sydney on hold, packed up my beloved beachside apartment and moved to ENB for three months to arrange the event. Although I knew only a handful of people, spoke only limited Tok Pisin and barely a word of the local Tolai language, I share my Nana's adventurous



Alf and Marylou Uechtritz' Rabaul wedding in 1952



Kalo on her Grandpa Alf's knee at Nadzab Airport, Lae, 1980



Phebe Parkinson with her grandsons Ewald (left) and Peter at Christmas in the late 1920s



Queen Emma (standing) with her younger sister Phebe Parkinson, the writer Kalo's great great grandmother



Phebe (sitting) in an undated photo of market day at Kuradui Plantation



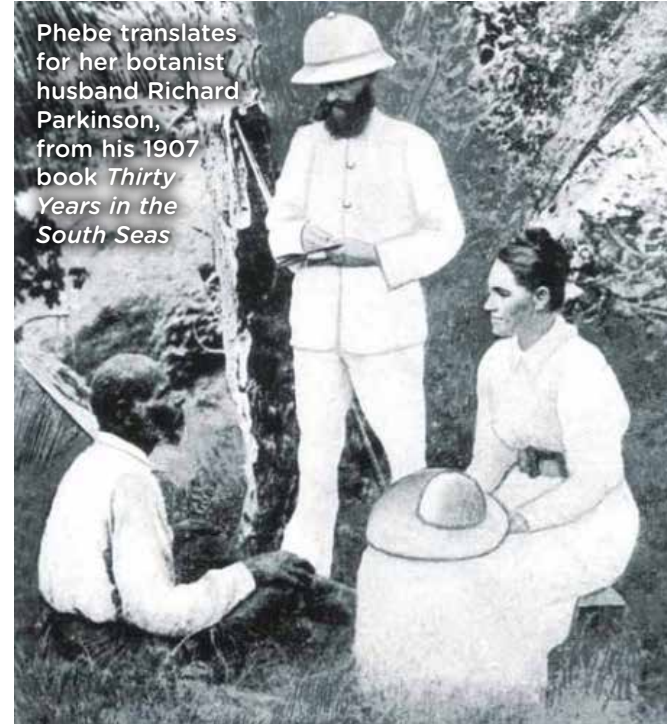
Phebe with her horses outside the family home at Kuradui Plantation circa 1915

spirit and threw myself into my responsibilities with gusto. I had a long list of people to connect with and an even longer list of tasks to oversee; including checking on the raising of pigs for our ceremonies and making sure we had enough shell money for the kastom (custom) wceremonies. In true PNG style, not everything went to plan, but in the end, it all came together thanks to a collective effort from the Kuradui community, the Tolom

clan, other members of my family and a network of new friends made on the ground in ENB. Let me rewind a little to explain how we have a family mat-mat on this island and why this 'ples' is so important to us. Our family legacy starts on the tiny island of Savaii in Samoa when my great-great-great grandfather Jonas Coe, an American, was shipwrecked there in 1838. Still only a teenager, Jonas fell in love with Samoa and

its women, taking six wives from whom 18 children were born. His first wife Leutu (also known as Joanna) Taletale, was a cousin to Samoa's royal Malietoa Laupepa. She bore eight children to Jonas, including sisters Emma and Phebe. Emma was much older than Phebe and had already sailed across the seas, married and begun building a commercial trading empire by the time she returned to Samoa to ask Phebe (only 16) and Phebe's much older husband Richard Parkinson, a botanist and the son of a Danish duke, to join her in a voyage that would take them to a new world; to a mysterious land known as 'New Guinea'. In 1882, they boarded a whaling ship and headed off into uncharted territory. I often think of what the voyage must have been like for my tumbuna, (great-great grandmother Phebe), a brown-skinned half caste woman, sailing across the ocean to an unknown land with a baby in arms and likely

very little idea of what would greet them at their destination. She must have sailed with some trepidation, but also a courageous and adventurous spirit. From the stories I've been told and literature I've read, including letters by Phebe to American author Margaret Mead, my great-great grandmother took it all in her stride. She and her sister were very close, but quite opposite in character. While Emma was an astute businesswoman and entrepreneur, focused on building one of the most successful copra empires across the Pacific at that time, Phebe spent more time among the people of ENB. It is said she became highly respected and was known for paying in tabu (shell money) for children and women taken as slaves, adopting many native children, while also learning local languages that allowed her to develop strong relationships within the community.



Phebe translates for her botanist husband Richard Parkinson, from his 1907 book *Thirty Years in the South Seas*

It was little wonder she made such an impact on my grandfather Alfred. When he spoke of his 'Gran', it was always with utmost admiration and love, for she helped raise him after his mother (Phebe's daughter Dolly) left Alf and his brothers in the middle of the night after an argument with their father Peter Uechtriz. The details of why she left are not clear, although sadly it is thought she was unable to bear the grief

of losing her middle child to blackwater fever in Australia while he was at boarding school. There are other theories too but it was without doubt a tragedy as Dolly, a highly educated and gifted woman, was never to return and is believed to have died penniless and abandoned. In time, Grandpa Alf was also sent to boarding school in Australia at a young age, as was common among the many



Four of the 11 Uechtriz children (from left) Gordon, Max, Maryann (writer Kalo's mother) and Peter with a local man at Sum-Sum Plantation in the '50s

expatriate children growing up in remote PNG. His father remained in PNG, working the family plantation at Sum-Sum on the south coast of ENB. As was also the case for many PNG boarders, school was tough and not the right fit for a kid used to walking around barefoot, running wild and free in the bush, hunting, fishing and learning from the land. After his initial introduction to it, Grandpa ran away from his Bowral boarding house and boarded a train to Sydney, going in search of his older brother Ewald who was by then boarding at Riverview College. I think he was picked

up trying to embark on a ship bound for PNG. Needless to say, I don't think Grandpa enjoyed boarding school that much. Fast forward to 1952 and this is where love at first sight struck my grandfather while attending church in Rabaul. He always claimed he never heard a word the priest said that day. Alf Uechtriz married his sweetheart Marylou Harris, my grandmother, at St Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Rabaul and immediately boarded a schooner to head back to Sum-Sum Plantation. In a TV interview in 2004, my grandfather reflected on the day by saying, "We didn't need a honeymoon, Sum-

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Sum had it all, a beautiful beach, fresh fish from the sea and tropical fruit from the gardens, it was truly a paradise.”

And it was from this paradise that they began to create their family, with the first six of their 11 children born at Namanula Hospital in Rabaul. When Nana was expecting the arrival of a new baby, she would wait for a ship to pass and take her into Rabaul. There she would wait until the baby was delivered before returning home to Sum-Sum to present the newborn to Grandpa. I always imagine this *Lion King* version of my Nana arriving by ship, being lowered into the smaller boat which was oared into the jetty, holding out the latest baby for my Grandpa and the plantation workers to see. Many of the grandchildren in my generation always thought it unusual that Nana made that journey on her own while Grandpa stayed back to work the plantation. She however thought it was strange that we expected him to go. “That’s just the way it was done!” Bless her stoic and unwavering spirit. She was small, but she was mighty! When I ask my mother to recount her memories of being a young girl at Sum-Sum she says she remembers feelings more than moments. One fond memory though is being spun around and around by the family hausboi and ‘adopted older brother’ Timmy. She told me that when she was a little girl, she really believed she would “grow up to be a man, and not just a man but a black man”. As the only girl in the first five children and surrounded by male plantation workers, I guess that was her world.

Fast forward many years and here I am today, living between two worlds, in the land where my ancestors lived and where their stories continue to be breathed in and whispered about through local folklore.

“The journey of bringing my grandparents home became a journey of coming home for me also”

The journey of bringing my grandparents home became a journey of coming home for me also. I’ve never lived outside Australia before or had a desire to set up anywhere else until I arrived here.

After more than a year of organisation and many months of preparation, in September 2019 members of the Uechtritz family started to arrive in ENB – from places as close as Cairns in Australia and as far-flung as Dallas, Texas and the United Kingdom. And they arrived in hoards. Our family booked out one entire resort at the Kokopo Beach Bungalows and spilled over into a few of the other resorts and guesthouses across Kokopo. There were more than 90 international visitors in our contingent of family and friends, many with their own pikininis and bubus in tow, and many visiting for the first time. After a few days of last-minute preparations and some local touring of the beautiful Gazelle Peninsula: a harbour cruise swimming with the dolphins, a must-do walk up Mt Tauruvur (an active volcano), trips out to the Duke of York Islands, the Uechtritzs and the Dierckes, all descendants of Richard and Phebe Parkinson, gathered together to lay to rest our loved ones at Kuradui. Along with Alf and Marylou Uechtritz was Uncle Chris Diercke, who is also descended from Phebe, from another daughter Nellie (Dolly’s sister). After the burial, two days of ceremonial kastom took place where the families were officially adopted into the Tolom clan



Marylou on her birthday in January 2018 with granddaughter Kalo

and the men of age were invited to take part in the first level of initiation into the male-only Tumbuan secret society. As a woman, I wasn’t able to take part in this sacred initiation, but it was still one of my favourite parts of the ceremonial weekend as I watched my uncles and cousins wrap red lap-laps around their waists and remove their t-shirts to expose bright white chests, which were then painted, along with their faces, by the other male clan members. I could sense the anxiety and the excitement from my male relatives as they were about to head off into the bush and into the unknown. When they returned, they were joined by the Tumbuan who leapt and beat their feet as the men stuck out their chests and raised their arms in the air, all the while roaring out indecipherable masculine cries to the large crowd of spectators gathered at the site of the old Kuradui homestead. I remember I was in the middle of an interview for the documentary film I am making about this story when they began to arrive back from the bush, and I couldn’t help

THE BEER YOU DESERVE





Uechtriz men before initiation (left) and after (above)

in a deep spiritual state. By the end of two days of ceremony, we are exhausted, but our hearts are full. The wishes of my grandparents have been fulfilled, and all the generations of our family will forever be connected to the land and the people of ENB, our new clan family and our extended Kuradui community.

For many, it was only a few short days before bags were packed and planes were boarded, whisking each of us back to the familiar modern world from whence we'd come. But for me, the feeling of home had changed. Something within me had changed. A long-submerged sense of belonging was starting to run through my veins, and although one chapter of this story had just been completed, for me, this was just the beginning of something entirely life-changing. I was called home for a reason. I know it. I feel it. Disela ples, em asples blo mi. Mi wanpela tolai meri

“When they returned, they were joined by the Tumbuans who leapt and beat their feet as the men stuck out their chests and raised their arms in the air, all the while roaring out indecipherable masculine cries”

stret! (This place, is my home. I am a Tolai woman!) After landing back in Sydney, I found myself feeling oddly lost walking around beneath the shadows of skyscrapers, the whirr of traffic blitzing past me on concrete freeways, and commuter trains of people glued to their phones. Although scheduled to get back to my media production freelance work and part-ownership of a city gym, within less than two weeks I was back on a plane bound for PNG, throwing myself into the exploration of a new life path; one that is found among the cocoa plantations and kokonas (coconut) trees, in a land where ancient spirits stir and call your name, where new feelings blossom and vision lengthens with the evening light, where the sight of the



but turn away from the cameraman and his questions, the sight of the returning initiates and the tribal sounds making the goosebumps rise on my skin. A huge sense of pride ran through my bones, and as I looked up, large birds circled above the grounds, and I felt our ancestors were with us in that moment and they too were proud of this occasion that bonded our many families together as one clan, a tie that had been established between our common ancestors more than 140 years ago. On the final day of kastom, our family was presented with traditional sing-sings, some that included

the names of our ancestors, the names of my grandparents and even my own name. What an honour. One of my favourites to watch was the Longoron dance. Before the ceremony, some of the male dancers are sent into the bush where they fast for weeks in preparation. When they reappear, they are in a seeming hypnotic trance. This particular dance is only performed by the Tolai people of ENB on occasions of deep significance, such as burials. The men in the trance-like state are said to be guided by the spirits. Sitting close to the dancers, I was in no doubt these men were



Uechtriz and Diercke cousins and aunts stand with members of their new clan family after being adopted into the Kuradui community

volcano across Blanche Bay brings comfort and the quiet rumble

of a guria (earthquake) that shakes me awake in the middle of the

night reminds me to be grateful for every day I get to live and

discover the magic and the mystery of this ples blo mi. Note: Kalo's journey is also part of an independent documentary she is currently directing and producing, although this has been held up during the past year due to COVID-related travel disruptions. You can follow her blog at: www.achildofoceania.com/

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