

Ovu ga hoe! I will not go!

by Gordon Peake

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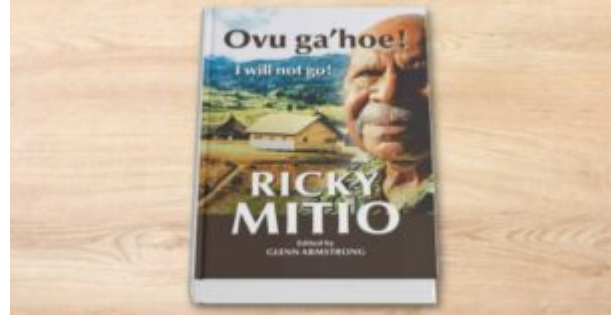


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A person I respect deeply uses the phrase “soft bigotry of low expectations” to describe problems besetting Papua New Guineans working in the development sector. In other words, there is a pernicious assumption that Papua New Guineans are capable of less because of their background and they can get patronised to high heaven when they deliver serviceable work.

I thought of this person when trying to figure out how to describe Ricky Mitio’s *Ovu ga hoe! (I will not go!)*. Stephen Howes found a copy in the CHM duty free shop at Port Moresby’s international airport, where it retails for K150, and suggested I review it. After my initial read, I was stumped as to how to approach this book penned by a veteran bureaucrat once high-up in PNG’s coffee industry.

My dilemma was this: as a critic, I neither wanted to come across as supercilious nor to give the patronising equivalent of a pat on the head. So, I’m going to take my friend’s advice and just play it straight. This is an unexpurgated, insightful, sometimes off-the-wall, beautifully illustrated and produced, earthy, sometimes confusingly structured, always readable book with a bit of the flavour of a vanity project to it. I am so glad the author took the time to write it and that Glenn Armstrong, his editor, felt no need to dilute Mitio’s voice or tidy too much the way he presents his thoughts. The net effect is that rare thing: a long sighting of the inner logic and motivation of a self-made Papua New Guinean big man.

Memoirs by Papua New Guineans are few and far between, hence valuable when they come along. They offer unfiltered and authentic observations about life and society and what that person finds important and worth recording.

Sir Albert Maori Kiki was the first Papua New Guinean memoirist. His *Kiki: Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime* (1968) is an account of the enclosed world of his childhood, first contact, and his entrance into a colonial world as well as his political awakening. Another politician, Francis Kongu Awesa, covers similar ground in the evocatively titled *Nina Inji: From Laplap to Laptop*, an account of his village childhood and political life at a time of huge societal and political change. The most prolific of them all is Paulias Matane, a former Governor-General of the country,

who wrote 44 books, many of which touched in some way on life in Papua New Guinea and the changes that happened in his lifespan. (Matane also wrote travel books. His *Coach Adventure Down Under* is one of my favourite books about Australia.)

Mitio's life story certainly fits in with the genre of documenting this period of monumental change or, as he puts it in one of his many flamboyant phrasings: "from the fringes of cannibalism to the lamb flap age".

He grew up in the 1950s, a few years after the arrival of Australian colonial officers in his valley. A few decades later, he's a leading government bureaucrat, jet-setting all over the world to spruik PNG coffee and attend countless international shindigs. Little in his childhood and early adulthood had prepared him to be effective in such a job.

The initial sections of the book are well done. Early chapters describe the tribal society in which he was brought up, his early childhood memories and the arrival of the Christian missionaries. He describes in fascinating detail how congregations developed and how evangelists used Christian doctrine to dampen and ultimately end what he calls "tribal fighting". He sketches warm pen portraits of his parents. He describes poignantly the bare-floor nature of his schooling. Equally touching is the passage in which Mitio relates his first experiences with Australian food which coincided with the arrival of a cash-based society. He and his sister fought over an empty can of corned beef "just to clean up the last morsel inside with our fingers".

Once we get into his adult years, the tone of the book changes and often not for the better. Chapters get shorter, digressions more caffeinated. A lot of what he describes is either written up as a jape or a peroration.

Some examples of the range of subjects touched upon are an obsession with female anatomy; how he mistakenly booked himself and his wife into a brothel in Tokyo; rules for life including never taking food from a menstruating woman and not getting involved in black magic; pictures of his business cards; and a rundown of his favourite country songs. He details his medical conditions, most of which were happily abated by recourse to private hospitals. He runs for parliament once and fails. We learn of disquisitions from statesmen who say things to him like, "you must seek a paradigm shift in your development goals and strategies to bring about proactive, alternative ways of administering the PNG coffee industry for the good of all stakeholders". He devotes a chapter to his medals.

He's clearly a proud father and rightly so — there's a long section where he describes his children, a few of whom offer glowing testimonials to him in return.

Along the way one gains profound insight into the benefits that come with being attached to the PNG state. He picks up his girlfriend, now wife, in a helicopter, a sign that he is a “big bosman”. There’s the frequent travel overseas too, of course, and he’s able to send his son to a private school in Brisbane for a spell. After he retires from his job he secures a range of consulting contracts, an illustration of the small, networked world of this industry as well as others. One of his business cards fell out of my copy of the book.

There is little self-reflection from Mitio about the coffee industry that he helped regulate or whether his formative years and education enabled him to regulate it effectively. The statistics are little to crow about. The industry “stagnated” after independence, the value of the commodity falling by half since that time, as per analysis from Stephen Howes and his co-authors in their new economic history *Struggle, Reform, Boom and Bust*. Coffee production was basically flat from 1976 to 2023 while global coffee production soared. Mitio details comprehensive efforts to change regulations and functions within the coffee industry but says nothing more on why the PNG industry failed to take advantage of market opportunities.

I would have wished for a bit more about the inner bureaucratic bastardry that made him be “the most hired and fired CEO” in the country’s history. He recounts factually what happened but skates over the “how” and the “why”. This would have been a fascinating insight into the rules of the game in Waigani.

Who should read this one-off sort of book? Anthropologists and historians, especially those interested in the Highlands and religion. And anyone involved in any form of support for the production of Papua New Guinea’s commodities like coffee and cocoa, for it reveals much — perhaps more than intended — about the people who regulate these industries, such as Mitio, and what is important to them.

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