

Tribute to PNG's John Waiko: scholar and politician

by Keith Jackson

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John Waiko in the documentary series *The Last Frontier* (2017)

Photo Credit: [PANG Media](#)

The distinguished academic, writer and politician, John Dademo Waiko, died on 17 November 2024 at the age of 79.

Waiko was born in the village of Tabara in Oro Province on the lands of the Binandare people.

He once said his parents had been reluctant to send him to school because they feared he would not be able to look after them in their old age.

Not only did the young man go to school but he became the first Papua New Guinean to graduate with a PhD, to be appointed a professor and to head the history department at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG).

He was the author of the play, *The Unexpected Hawk* (1969), which was performed to audiences in Canberra and Europe and brought him to [the notice of ASIO](#), Australia's security and intelligence organisation.

He received an MA in African history from the University of London in 1973, undertook his doctorate at the Australian National University in Canberra and was awarded a PhD in 1983. ([The PhD thesis is available online.](#))

His doctoral research took oral history as a starting point through which the Binandare people construct their past, and examined the ways they render the past in the present.

In 1986 he was appointed Professor of History at UNPG, a position he held until 1992 when he was elected as a member of parliament (1992-2002). He held several ministries during his political career including education (1999-2001) and foreign affairs (2001-2002).

Waiko also authored a number of histories including *A Short History of Papua New*

Guinea (Oxford University Press 1993; revised 2007) and *Papua New Guinea: A History of Our Times* (Oxford University Press 2003).

A Short History of Papua New Guinea is a concise book describing the quick and steady growth of the many small, isolated and self-sufficient societies that made up the fledgling British Papua and German New Guinea colonies towards the end of the 19th century.

The book traces how the British and German colonies grew and the effects that each administration had on health, religion, education and trade up to and beyond independence.

A History of Our Times begins with an account of the first settlements, the arrival of the foreigners and the early years of colonial administration under British and German rule, followed by the period of Australian administration and the war in the Pacific.

The post-war winds of change and the movements towards independence are clearly traced.

A distinguishing feature of this book is the detailed account of the 25 years since independence in 1975. Topics of national importance, such as domestic politics, relationships with other countries, the economy, social services, trade and investment are described and analysed in detail to give young Papua New Guineans a real understanding and appreciation of the issues faced by their country in the 21st century.

A constant in Waiko's life was his consideration of the change in identity wrought by colonisation as young Papua New Guineans moved away from their family, tribal area and land.

He recalled his time studying in London, and his consciousness of being from PNG and mixing with and learning about Africa.

He saw the benefits of Australia colonising PNG for only 91 years, minimising the impact on the nation's culture and languages.

His attitude to independence on 16 September 1975 was benign, and he describes Australia and PNG walking side-by-side towards independence together in a peaceful manner.

Waiko was the subject of two biographical films, *Man Without Pigs* (1990) by Chris Owen, and *Minister Without Money* (2007), focusing on his political career.

In *Man Without Pigs* questions of identity loom large. Waiko returns to the Binandere clan and his small village of Tabara. Once there, with his family's help, he has to organise a celebration of his achievements.

Since he has been away from the village for most of his life, he has no recognised wealth in the village, where pigs are used for gift giving, no network of supporters and no knowledge of the preparations and rituals for a celebration.

He wants the event to happen quickly but that's not the way it works in Tabara. *Man Without Pigs* focuses on the antagonism aroused by the clash between traditional customs and Western values in his remote PNG community.

When Waiko arrives with the film crew, drama ensues about rituals that he does not strictly follow.

Chris Owen later said his film was about “the complexity of village politics and the enormous demands and expectations on a person like Waiko”.

Since childhood, he had not lived in this community, where position and wealth are measured by how many pigs a person owns, where money is not exchanged and strict rituals must be followed.

Some of the villagers thought Waiko was acting like a “big man” when he didn't have any pigs to justify his status.

Man Without Pigs went on to win the International Jurors' Prize at the Sydney Film Festival and Best Documentary at the Hawaii International Film Festival.

Waiko married Anne Dickson-Waiko (1950–2018), who was also a professor at the University of Papua New Guinea. They had one son.

This obituary was first published on the [PNG Attitude blog](#).

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