

On Kruksie’s awareness of the unseen

*Theresa Meki**

On the 19th of May 2022, Kruksie passed away. Kruksie was my maternal grandfather from Marikente or Marix village in the Henganofi district of the Eastern Highlands Province in Papua New Guinea. His real name is Maigao Tembero. Maigao and Tembero are both names from the Kote language of Finschafen in the neighbouring Morobe Province—most likely given to the family by Lutheran missionaries from Finschafen. His parents were Tembero and Atao. Maigao, also known as Kruksie, was the first of eight siblings. After him came Togo, Frankie, Aputi, Steven, Esther, Pius, and Junis. Kruksie married Neinkenaso or Nunake and together they had seven kids, Dennis (who passed away as an infant), Kekas (my mother), Mao, Patrick, Amon, Ruben, and little Kekas (my auntie is named after my mother).

I was in Canberra when he passed away and could not afford to travel home for his *haus kerai*¹ and his funeral. However, I did send some monetary contribution for the building of his tomb. Surprisingly, his death did not affect me as much as I thought it would. Maybe because Kruksie was very old—he had lived to a ripe old age and with all his faculties deteriorating he needed to rest. To him, death was a welcome relief from pain. The thing about death is that

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it forces you to think about life. The brevity of it, the struggle, the possibilities, memories, and the mystery behind it.

I thought about Kruksie—his life, the type of person he was, his skillset, traditional knowledge, and period of his life. I concluded that perhaps he was the last of his kind or type of person. I am not sure of the appropriate terminology, but he was someone who was in tune with both the material and the spiritual realm. I'll use the rest of this essay to explain what I mean and, in the process, memorialise my Kruksie.

Kruksie must have been born around 1938 or 1939. My uncle Amon told me that when Kruksie was a little boy he saw lots of planes fly over, which must have been the Second World War. My mother was born in 1966 and her older brother Dennis would be about two or three years older than her. Back in those days, men still lived in the men's house and as a method of family planning were instructed to not reside with their wives until their baby was walking about, around two years of age. Hence, most siblings were between two to three years apart. Suppose Uncle Dennis was born in 1963, Kruksie would have then been around twenty-five years old. But as a young man, before Kruksie became a father, he worked briefly in one of the gold dredges in the Bulolo Valley.² He returned to Henganofi where his parents and uncles had an arranged marriage prepared for him.

Nunake, the betrothed (my grandmother), was taken from her village of Haiafaga as a child and lived with Kruksie's parents until she reached puberty. Sometime after she started menstruating the marriage ceremony was organised, and she and Kruksie became husband and wife. I was sad when Nunake first told me about this because I don't think she got to experience carefree fun as a child or as a teenager. Still a child, her life was decided and planned for her. Sad as it was, that was how life was like back then for girls.

But perhaps the wisdom of the elders proved correct with this arrangement because Kruksie and Nunake were quite compatible. Both did not have a lazy bone and were very industrious until old age prevented them from working. After his brief work experience at Bulolo, Kruksie worked as an office assistant at the Henganofi

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station government building where he was given a small flat. Unlike his two brothers Steven and Togo, who went to work and live out their adult lives in major towns, Kruksie as the first born of the Tembero family stayed back in Marikente village. Together with the help of Nunake, he established himself as a leader due to his generosity in organising feasts and distributing food, particularly pig meat.

Purpose of this piece

Kruksie's life spanned the duration of a PNG society in transition from colonialism to independence, from traditional to modern and post-modern life. His Tok Pisin was very good, so I heard a lot of interesting anecdotes from him, but as he aged his Kafe vernacular became his primary language and as a non-Kafe speaker I missed out on a lot of good conversations.

One story that I still remember clearly was when he talked about what life was like before the missionaries came. For the highlands, that would have been before the 1930s because the Lutheran missionaries came into the Eastern Highlands after the 1930s. Before the missionaries brought the gospel into the area, spirits interacted freely with them. Kruksie told me of this one time when the spirits came and took him, lifted him in the air, and flew him to another area close to the village cemetery and dropped him there. At other times, the spirits would hang around the river and whenever someone went to wash or do laundry they would poke fun at them by playfully splashing water or causing them to trip over. It sounded like these spirits were good-natured and didn't mean any harm to the locals. However, they did take issue with strangers.

From his stories, it seemed like the spiritual, unseen world was interspersed with the living. These spirits are sometimes referred to as 'nature' or '*papa graun*'.³ Kruksie said that when the missionaries came with the gospel and started to build churches, these *papa graun* went away to hide in the big bush. But there are times, if they are not happy with the land or the way things are being done, when they will communicate through either dreams, visions, or some other

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type of metaphysical incident to express their dismay. But there are certain people who have the privilege of receiving communication from or having an awareness of the intentions of these *papa graun*. From Kruksie's experiences, I believe he was one of those few people who had this cross-dimensional awareness.

Vignette 1: Awareness of the unseen

Between 1983 and 1984, Kekas (my mum) brought my dad Jonah to her village. They were dating at the time. They decided to go help in the family coffee garden, a small plantation. It was coffee season and a lot of hands were needed to collect coffee cherries. Prior to Jonah entering the garden, Kruksie went ahead and spoke to the bush. He said, 'your children are here to see the place so take care of them while they are here.' He had to introduce my dad to the bush because that was his first time visiting and Kruksie did not want the *papa graun* to regard him as a stranger. After working for a few hours, it started to get chilly, and my dad decided to take a smoke break. So, he sat down near a small fire and quickly dozed off into a much-needed nap. In a dreamlike vision he saw short, chubby, and skinny people surrounding him with bows and arrows; it looked like they were ready to pounce on him. Then suddenly, a giant-looking man came from behind and scared off those little pigmy people. My dad, now frightened, told my mum about the dream. When they told Kruksie, he just said, 'Oh, that giant of a man was my grandfather looking out for you. He was a fierce warrior.'

Vignette 2: Knotted stomach

A few weeks prior to his death in May 2022, Kruksie's stomach had turned into knots and he couldn't pass stool for days. He was in terrible pain and could barely walk. He called and cried to my mum explaining his pain—something was not right. Mum quickly called her two brothers Ruben and Mao, who lived in the village, and chastised them. She instructed them to quickly go buy a carton of meat,

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make a *mumu*,⁴ and feed people. For whom exactly and for what occasion, she did not specify. She said, 'Just do it'.

Apparently, a couple of days prior to Kruksie's stomach situation, Ruben had arranged for a bulldozer to come flatten a little mountain next to the Okuk highway near our village. It seems that the unseen landowners were not happy with that action—that's why they knotted Kruksie's stomach. Anyway, my uncles quickly purchased a carton of sheep meat, bought vegetables from the market, made a *mumu* and called people in the village to come eat. In addition to the *mumu*, the uncles also slaughtered a pig, collected its blood into a dish and, using *tanget* leaves,⁵ sprinkled the blood onto the surrounding area where the landscape was changed. That very night, Kruksie finally did a number two. The message was, 'before you make any drastic changes to the landscape you need to appease the unseen landowners or *papa graun*.'⁷

When my mother called and reported this to me, I recalled that more than a decade ago, probably around 2008 or 2009, when the PNG Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project was under way and construction was starting in the Southern Highlands Province, there were so many stories coming out of that province about giant snakes retreating into the bigger bush, being upset and angry. These giant snakes, or '*traipla moran*' as the locals called them, were omens or manifestations of *papa graun*. I found all of this very intriguing.

Moreover, there are only certain people in the village, usually older men or women who are privileged to get these types of dreams or communications from the *papa graun* or the unseen. For us, Kruksie was one of them. He might have even been our last. The type of person who is aware of what 'nature' wants and whom nature chooses to communicate with. I don't think this type of privilege, wisdom, or responsibility can be passed down to the next generation. It certainly wasn't passed down to my uncles, as they were quite ignorant of the implications of their action with bulldozing that huge chunk of land. At least my mother had the insight to interpret Kruksie's cry accurately. Instead of rushing him to the hospital—which is what I would have done—she called for a *mumu* to appease the *papa graun*.

Vignette 3: Controlling the car

Kruksie had that connection with the land right until his death. The next and final vignette is a bit surreal, but it happened. That's the main reason I must write it down, because eventually I will forget, and my mum and uncles will forget and then it will be like it never happened.

On the night that Kruksie passed away, which was around 2am on 19 May 2022, he died peacefully. He did not struggle. Only his son Ruben was near him when he passed. Ruben called my mum and his brother Patrick in Goroka town, but they didn't hear the phone. They were all fast asleep. He rang until 3am when, finally, his niece Anko answered her phone and relayed the message to everyone in town. By 3:30am they left Goroka and drove to Henganofi, arriving around 4:30am. The Goroka family travelled to Henganofi with two vehicles. An outback Toyota LandCruiser and a Toyota ten-seater.

Upon their arrival, they carefully wrapped Kruksie's body in a blanket and carried him into the ten-seater. Ruben and my mum sat behind with Kruksie, and Patrick got in the driver's seat to drive. Other relatives piled into the outback LandCruiser. As they were about to leave, Patrick started the car, but the engine suddenly died. Patrick got out of the car and lifted the bonnet to check the battery. It was fine. He tried to start the car again. Still nothing. Patrick, being a mechanic, checked everything else with the car and it all seemed fine, but why would it not start?

At this point, all Kruksie's children started thinking hard. What did they do to cause this? Mao, usually quiet, spoke up. He said, 'we rang for a long time and you guys in town did not pick up the phone quickly. Also, all this time when Kruksie was getting really old and feeble you guys hardly ever visited him.' While Mao generalised this accusation, the siblings knew that he was referring to their brother Patrick. Of Kruksie's children, Mao, Ruben, and little Kekas lived with their families in Henganofi, so they were always nearby to look after him. My mum, despite living in town, visited him almost every other weekend and had built him a house. His other son Amon

lived eight hours away, worked in a Chinese company and had no time to visit. But Patrick, unfortunately, did not pay much attention to Kruksie—he was preoccupied with his mechanic work and family. It was like Kruksie was saying, ‘when I was alive, you never came and took me out driving and now you want to drive me away?’

Patrick came around into the back seat of the car. He gently held Kruksie's cold feet, and he apologised. He said, ‘I'm sorry that I was too busy making money and taking care of my own family that I did not come visit you regularly when you were alive. Please have peace so that we can go.’ Patrick returned to the driver's seat, started the engine, and the car roared back to life. It was strange but made sense to everyone there. Kruksie's spirit was not happy—that's why the car didn't start—and once that was acknowledged he allowed them to take him to the funeral home.

Notes

- 1 *Haus kraï*: A site for mourning, a temporary shelter usually built quickly to accommodate friends and neighbours who will visit the bereaved during their time of mourning. *Haus kraï* also refers to the period from when the deceased resides in the funeral home until the day of burial.
- 2 Hank Nelson, *Taim bilong masta: The Australian involvement with Papua New Guinea* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2001), 147.
- 3 *Papa graun*: father of the ground or land in Tok Pisin.
- 4 *Mumu*: earth oven.
- 5 *Tanget*: a shrub (*Cordyline fructifera* species of plant) whose leaves are used in sorcery for sending messages and as a mnemonic device by knots made into them.