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Death of a Politician

P.O.Box 628,
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Papua,
Territory of Papua
& New Guinea
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Executive Director,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York 10017, N. Y.,
United States of America

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Ugi Biritu was in many ways a typical Highlands politician. As the Member of the Papua and New Guinea House of Assembly for an area which was first entered by European missionaries only in 1949, and which was not brought under full Administration control until the mid-1950s, he was a member of the educated as well as the political elite of his area.

Ugi's official biography, like that of so many other Highlands Members, described his background simply as:

> "No formal education but has had wide job experience and is fluent in Pidgin."

The date of his birth is uncertain, for no Europeans had yet entered the village where he was born, nonetheless his physical appearance in 1949, when the Lutheran pastor A.C.Frerichs first travelled close to Mobei (Ugi's home village), indicated that he was probably born in or about 1937.

The Lufa area, where Mobei lies, was first entered by Europeans in 1930, when Michael Leahy and Mick Dwyer first sighted Mount Michael, which was named after Leahy, while on the first prospecting expedition into the Highlands. This first patrol through the area was followed a short while later by the first Administration patrol into the Highlands under the legendary J.L.Taylor, whose name is still well known to the local people. One of the first Lufa men to learn Pidgin, Wariota, has, in fact, had his memories of the first Taylor patrol recorded. Wariota was very young at the time, but has described his people's early reactions to the white man:

> "...My people were very afraid because they thought Taylor and his blue-uniformed police boys would eat us, for this was the custom of the mountain clans.

"My father, with the other men of the village, took his shield and bow and arrows and hid in the bush. The patrol did not appear to be bent on war, so the men watched silently from the bushes as Taylor and his police moved slowly among my people. To each person Taylor gave some salt which tasted better than any they had ever had before. Then he gave some of my people presents of cowrie shells, beads and mother-of-pearl shell. Some of the luckier men received steel tomahawks and knives. My people had never seen a man with such a white skin. They thought he might be an ancestor who had returned from the dead... Although they were very afraid my people gave Taylor and his men gifts of pigs and food, for it is our custom to exchange presents.

"Later, Taylor climbed Mountain Rongo (one of the peaks of Mount Michael), taking with him his police and carriers. As they climbed the mountain my people shouted to the spirits of the mountain to kill Taylor, for many of them coveted the cargo he carried..."

It seems likely that a party of servicemen may have been the next group of Europeans to visit the area in search of survivors from an American bomber that crashed there during the War. It wasn't, however, until the Lutheran Mission-station, Kisiveloka, was set up near Mobei early in 1950 that permanent contact with the outside world was established. It is possible that some indigenous Lutheran evangelists from the New Guinea coast had come there as early as the late 1920s, and the Seventh Day Adventist Church had sent missionaries to the area earlier too. Wariota, for his part, was unaware of any further European contact with the area after Taylor, until a policemen, Pelisia, and an interpreter from Yabaiyufa came there after the War.

By 1954, the area around Lufa Patrol Post, which was established in 1953, and is now the headquarters of the Lufa Sub-District, in the Eastern Highlands District, had largely been brought under Government control, and been de-restricted.

Frerichs has claimed that the Lufa area was so wild when he first went there in 1949 that he saw no graves at all, but many skulls upon posts stuck in the ground, so prevalent was cannibalism. The Administration has admitted too that cannibalism was still practised, albeit furtively, as late as 1957, while Frerichs has also written that the local people were actually engaged in eating the remains of a girl when he first came upon them. There is some doubt, however, that cannibalism was ever as rife in Papua and New Guinea as the more sensational writers and journalists would have us believe. Certainly, many New Guineans accuse other groups of the practice, but rarely either have any direct evidence of it, or admit to the practice themselves.

L. to R.: Ugi, Mr. Wegra Kenu (M.H.A., Upper Sepik), Author's fiancée, the author, and younger brother being buffeted by the wind, Sydney, late 1965.

Either at the end of 1956 or early in 1958, at about the time that Gunther Renck was establishing the Lutheran Mission at Rongu, near Mt. Michael, Ugi was baptised into the Lutheran Church, and - as is customary at such a time - took a new name, Furuna, which means "peace" in his native dialect, Frigano, of the Yagaria language. Ugi never to my knowledge used this name publicly outside the Church.

As a young man, then, Ugi was trained to become a teacher at the local Sunday School, and only failed to become a Church Elder in later life because of his prolonged absences from his home congregation.

Some time later, Ugi trained for a year at the Medical Training School at Goroka to become an aid post orderly, to minister to his people's simpler medical needs.

For six years, Ugi sought the excitement of life away from home, and of paid employment, as an unskilled labourer and plumber with the Public Works Department, and, in 1959-60, took up peanut-farming on his own account.

In 1961, he moved to the Government station at Lufa to become an interpreter with the then Department of Native Affairs, and a photograph taken of him at work then has achieved wide publicity in the publications of the Australian News and Information Bureau, and was subsequently reprinted in a number of books about the Territory.

In 1964, Ugi stood in the elections for the House of Assembly in the Henganofi Open Electorate, a figure-of-8 shaped electorate, comprising parts of the present Lufa and Henganofi Sub-Districts. The electorate consisted of the Kafe, Bagage (though the Bagage speakers all speak Kafe too), Yagaria (with its Lufa and Frigano dialects), and Gono language-groups, who not only had but few pre-contact links with one another, but were, in fact, quite arbitrarily cut off from many of their wantoks (Pidgin, for speakers of the same language), who were put into the Kainantu and Okapa Electorates.

Ugi claimed to speak seven local languages and dialects (tokples in Pidgin), plus Pidgin, and a mere smattering of English and Motu, and, certainly, he alone of the five candidates who stood at the election spoke all of the languages and dialects in the new electorate (except, probably, Bagage, which is spoken in only a very few villages). As a result, though Bono Azanifa gained 8,028 first preference votes from the Kafe-speaking Henganofi part of the electorate, Ugi gained almost all of the second-preference votes of those who had voted for their own language-group's candidate from the multilingual Lufa end. In addition, Ugi, like six other Highland Members, had been an Administration interpreter for some time, and could claim to have a special knowledge of the ways of the Government and of Europeans generally, and had, in effect, long managed to influence, if not control, the local people's access to the kiap.

Ugi was also President of the Lufa Native Club, though he was unable to gain election to the Lufa Local Government Council, which was set up in 1965, after he had exercised considerable pressure in the House of Assembly for its establishment. As an M.H.A., in addition to his income from that source, he set up in business on his own account, and grew a small amount of coffee and potatoes, and reared some goats and a few cattle.

Ugi was, then, a fairly typical Highland Member in background, and in outlook too. Fluent in Pidgin, he had had a minimal education, but had been closely associated with the Administration and the principal mission in his area, but, nonetheless remembered the taim bipo, as he showed in a letter he wrote for me to the journal New Guinea in gratitude for some mild hospitality once shown him:

> "In the time before they (my ancestors) were not happy, they were not able to think properly, and they didn't work well. They liked to fight, and steal ground from one another and they would become angry and take revenge. Now when the white man's law came up, the people were afraid and wanted to run away. Now some men came up and they gave us a name and law and books."

As Ugi was, in fact, illiterate, the original of the letter actually consisted of a small sheet of paper with a number of indecipherable pencil-marks on it, which he "read" to me in Pidgin for transcription

into a publishable form. A few of the marks did indeed resemble Pidgin words.

Ugi's political outlook and career in the House had much in common with those of his fellow Highlanders. Though, towards the end, his interest in the House's activities showed a marked decline, as he realised the limitations that illiteracy and the Administration's failure to translate many of the Bills and other papers placed upon him, he continued always to collect his parliamentary papers with great care, though for what purpose he died too early for me to discover. He continued too until the end to ask the same sorts of questions of the Official Members of the House, to press his people's claims for more roads, schools, bridges, and assistance in their economic and political development.

Given his memories of the violence and insecurity of the pre-contact way of life, and the harshness of the largely unmastered physical environment in which he grew up, Ugi was still of that generation of Highlanders who appreciate what the Australian Government has done for them, and recognise their very real economic, political, even psychological, dependance upon Australia for their areas to progress. In large part, of course, this attitude reflects too the milder confrontation of the two cultures that took place in the changing climate of post-World War II colonialism:

> "The people of my electorate have asked me to tell this house how grateful they are to the Europeans for the things that they have taught them. Before the Europeans came to this country, the only work that our ancestors knew was how to make gardens. Now the people are learning many other things and they are being taught the Australian way of life. Law and order is being brought to Papua and New Guinea, businesses are being started and the country is developing well. The people are very happy about this."

Nonetheless, the psychological dependance upon Europeans which has characterised so many indigenous reactions to colonialism generally was an important factor in Ugi's makeup, as shown, for example, by his reaction to the Goroka District Officer's answer to Ugi that the indigenous people should develop the Territory's agricultural and fishing resources themselves:

> "...how can we (do these things for ourselves) if the Government will not show us the way? Unless the Government helps us to build roads and schools in this area, the people will remain ignorant and primitive for a long time and will follow the barbaric ways of our ancestors."

To Ugi, "development" was still conceived of in terms that involved the people's active cooperation with the Administration, often under extremely trying conditions. Developmental projects in relatively backward areas such as Lufa are often undertaken with great enthusiasm still by the people themselves, with the

aid of Administration advice and guidance, and often without payment or even the proper tools for their labour:

> "Men and women built this road (from Okapa to Goroka) with their own hands without the aid of machinery, but it is not good enough for heavy trucks. The Government should consider allocating some funds for this road...,"

- surely a mild request in such circumstances.

So much is "development" still a cooperative venture in such an area, that Ugi, in his last Question in the House, requested that the police in the bush areas be asked to assist the people in building roads, for, as he put it:

> "...the police help unite the people on such projects and in these areas are regarded as the friends of the people."

The dependance upon outside assistance, however, and the accompanying conservatism about political and constitutional change, are not simply the reflection of political cowardice, or the result of official intimidation. In fact, on a number of quite crucial issues, Ugi was prepared to vote against the Administration in the House, and to face the risks that such a stance involved. While no nationalist yet, and extraordinarily conservative by the standards of contemporary Afro-Asia, and even of many of the Territory's more highly educated indigenous leaders, Ugi was a "progressive", not only by the standards of his own home area, but in terms of his willingness on 18 out of 27 occasions in the first eleven meetings of the House to have his vote publicly recorded in opposition to the Administration's line on the particular matter under discussion.

While he didn't want Australia to leave the Territory yet, Ugi had sufficient pride in himself as a politician and in his people to assert their interests against Australia's when they came into conflict, as, for example, when he supported a demand that the Pidgin-speaking Members be given greater assistance in the House through provision of more and better translations of important documents. For the most part, however, even his rebellions against the Administration were European-led.

Although few Highland Members actively politick in any conventional sense when in Port Moresby, Ugi, in a manner few of his colleagues could emulate, was able to argue in terms of the national interest, even if its specific definition was very often expressed in terms of his own electorate's problems:

> "Mr. Speaker, quite a few members seem to be very cross with the Treasurer because of the way he has allocated funds to the various districts in the Territory. Everybody seems to be just thinking of his own little area and whether it has received money or not... It is very good of the Australian Government to give us this grant to help us here in

> Papua and New Guinea. But we would like to really see work being done. We hear that quite an amount of money has been allocated for these jobs, but we would really like to see finished products - things like roads and bridges, etc. We do not see these things and that is why we keep on talking about the same points here in this House.
>
> "I am going to talk about my own electorate now..."

Ugi, too, felt the usual resentment of Members from the "bush" areas at the huge amounts of money that must be spent in towns such as Port Moresby, and on Government stations generally, although he did try, nonetheless, to gain improvements in the living-conditions of the Administration officials at Lufa. Unfortunately, as he himself pointed out :

> "I have told my people several times that I come to Port Moresby to get money from the Government and that it has got to be done through proper administrative channels. They think that I can just pick up the money and put it in my pocket and bring it back. They do not understand that normal administrative channels must be followed..."

Despite this, he sought to be a true voice of his people, as he conceived of that function.

Ugi's demands, then, were those of an essentially backward people from a very seriously underdeveloped area, and, during his term as Member, the Administration, perhaps because, perhaps in spite, of his efforts, undertook a considerable amount of road-building and other development work in his area. It is, in fact, as much a compliment to his people's persistence as it is perhaps a criticism of earlier Administrations, that today his area can boast of at least one young man in Form IV, the final year of high school. Surprisingly too, Ugi was sufficiently conscientious, perhaps simply "political" enough , to plead the causes in the House of the Kafe half of his electorate, where he had gained very few votes indeed in 1964, and of a religious mission other than his own. Indeed, although he lived on the actual Lufa station, in order to be close to the centre of affairs in his area, he took some care in the House to raise the purely local concerns of the people in his electorate who were really part of the Henganofi Sub-District.

Ugi, though somewhat frightened by much that he saw on his first visit to Australia at the end of 1965, and especially, for example, of such objects alien to his experience as the Manly ferries which ply their way from one side of Sydney Harbour to the other, was keen to improve himself educationally. Thus, he was very disappointed when, for medical reasons, he was refused permission earlier this year to go to Australia with seven other Highland Members on an Administration-sponsored trip to undertake a three months' course in Sydney to learn English.

Quite apart, then, from his personal upset at this refusal, and the disappointment at his inability to take part in much of the House's proceedings - he tended to speak in general debates such as the annual Budget debate, and on the adjournment at the termination of each day's sitting, rather than in more technical debates on particular bills - he was, just prior to his death, publicly shamed at Henganofi in a manner that could only have added to the miseries that sickness had already brought him.

The occasion of his public shaming was during a visit of the Select Committee on Constitutional and Political Development to Henganofi. The Committee was at this time touring the Territory to hear evidence from the public on their attitudes towards the Territory's political future, just before the Committee began to draw up its blueprint - which will be released within the next few weeks - of the next stage in the Territory's development towards self-government. An old indigenous ex-policeman, who had accompanied Administration patrols on their rounds some years before, stood up in front of Ugi and attacked him publicly for allegedly neglecting the interests of, especially the Henganofi end, of his electorate, where he had, in fact, gained little support in 1964, and, despite some work on the local people's behalf in the House, and some visits to the area, where he could still make little headway at all against the local politicoes.

Shame is probably the most powerful sanction short of actual killing or the use of sorcery in indigenous society, and may indeed itself often lead to self-inflicted death, and, though Ugi actually died during an epileptic fit in Goroka on March 15 of this year, his end was probably brought much closer by the shame he experienced before his fellow M.H.A's. Certainly, he dwelt very much on the subject just before his death, and seemed to have aged very much during his last few months.

Ugi's funeral on March 20 attracted more than 2,000 of the local people, many of them dressed only in their traditional malo (Pidgin for the loincloths made of bark or grass which were worn throughout the area), and able to follow the Lutheran service, conducted predominantly in Pidgin by a New Guinean pastor, in translation into the local language. There were also perhaps two dozen local European Administration officers and missionaries there, including the District Commissioner for the Eastern Highlands, and a number of inquisitive outsiders who took photographs, quite unashamedly, throughout the service.

The hymns were mostly sung in Pidgin, though two were sung by a special choir in the local language. The addresses were delivered by the local Lutheran pastor (a European), the D.C., another European official from Goroka, and the indigenous M.H.A. for Goroka.

(Photo by W. Burford, Radio Goroka)

The scene was fantastic. The indigenous part of the congregation was seated in a large square on the ground before the open grave, while a few indigenes and almost all of the Europeans were seated in the centre of the multitude on benches. Few of the local people wore wholly Western-style clothes, although the coloured beads worn by the women, and the number of men in shorts, betrayed the changes wrought to tradition in the area. The incongruity was startling, then, as the speeches were recorded by a man from Radio Goroka, and the major part of the congregation sat, largely unresponsive even to the Pidgin prayers, in an area surrounded by roped-off pathways brilliantly decorated with bright red and yellow flowers and pieces of cloth tied on.

The cross above the grave was light grey, with black ends, and simply bore the name and date of death. The service itself, however, was conducted amid a constant murmur of interested voices, and prayers were said with everyone seated, until the time came for the coffin to be lowered. Then, the steady undercurrent of noise gradually became louder, the crowd rose to its feet, and the multitude began to press in towards the grave, as a group of policemen and prison warders began to lower the coffin, and the local women wailed ever louder to their sorrowful crescendo.

For some hours afterwards, people stood around in groups on the hill above the station, and a few elderly women continued wailing in the square before the grave. Somehow, I never did discover where Ugi's immediate family was, but then the occasion was not designed for them.

As one walked past Ugi's dark and shuttered house, which lay right on the station, one could see the local politicoes shaking hands and looking at each other knowingly, for soon there will be a bye-election to find a replacement for the remainder of Ugi's unexpired term.

Meanwhile, back in Mobei, where little real development has taken place since contact, though some money is beginning to enter the village from the sale of coffee and other produce, and the small wages brought back by the labourers who go to the coast for money and excitement under the Highlands Labour Scheme, and where life is certainly more secure under Government control, the people are now talking darkly of the sorcery used against Ugi...

Yours sincerely,

Edward Wolfers.

Received in New York May 22, 1967.