Lewa Was Mama
(Beloved Guardian Mother)

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Mi raun lo Sir John Guise stadium  I was at Sir John Guise stadium
Baim buai na stori tsol  Buy betel nut and chat along
Susa wokabout i kam pulim buai Sister approaches. From my hand she
lo han blo mi. Mitupla lap na tok pilai takes my betel nut. We laugh and
Tsol em bingim han blo mi na tok tell a joke
lo iau blo mi
Susa yu raun we? Lapun mama ya She squeeze my hand and whispers
i painim yu in my ear
Mi bekim – buai spakim mi tu
Susa mi stap. Raun tasol. Painim wok. I respond – giddy with betel nut
Mekim wok
Kisim ol pikinini go lo skul. Yu Sister I am here. Spin around. Look
save pinis for work. Make work
Take children to the school. You
know the usual
Yu tok Lapun mama ya la tok wanem?

You say old mother there what talk she wants me for?

Susa em harim osem wanpla rong i painim yu

Sister she hears that something bad you came across

Mi bekim, ai raun blo buai wok lo isi nau

I respond, betel nut dizziness now easing up

Ah yu tok. Em harim se wanpla rong i kisim mi?

Ah say what – she heard something bad I came across?

Ah em harim osem. Yu stap yu traim ringim em n sekim em

Ah she heard. You should try and ring and check on her

Sekim em na painim aut wanem rong em harim

Check and find exactly what bad she heard about

Aiy buai kik ya tanim ai blo mi na bel blo mi sut

Aye betel nut dizziness comes strong and heart it skips a beat

Wanem rong nau ya lapun mama ya i painim mi?

What wrong – what bad that old mother she look for me?

Mi raun lo Boroko, mi sekim ol koulos lo Yakaplin

I go to Boroko. I check dress at market Yakaplin

Ol koulos ya stalk tumas. Sapos mi traim ating by lewa ya kalap kalap

Those stylish clothes. If I try – excited might my lover be

Lewa ya tu sa taitim masol tumas.
Liklik wara na ai sa raun.
Liklik wara na kros na jeles pasin sa pundaun. Ating mi stailim mi tumas

Lover too much flexing muscle.
Small water and dizzy he becomes
Small water and upon me anger and jealousy come. Maybe too much styles – me

Ol koulos tu ya nais tumas. Fifti toea, wan kina na tu kina

Oh those dresses very nice. Fifty toea, one kina and two kina

Ai sore ating mi gat fiftin kina ba mi autim displa retpla blaus

Aye if only I had fifteen kina that bright red blouse would be mine

Tasol tingting kisim masol lewa ya.
Nogut em belhat nating ken

But muscle lover comes to mind.
Anger he might feel again

Mi raun i go i kam. Mi tingim lapun mama ya.

I go and I come. I think of that old mother there
LEWA WAS MAMA (BELOVED GUARDIAN MOTHER)

Maski mi train sekim em.
Pinga paitim namba lo mobail pon
Bip bip bip bip bip bip bip
Putim pon lo iau na harim.
Nek blo em ba kam o?
Putim pon lo iau

Never mind. I try and check on her. Fingers hit the numbers on the mobile phone
Bip bip bip bip bip bip bip
Put phone on the ear. Listen. Will her voice come?
Put the phone on my ear


Hello. Hello. Who are you? Hello.

Mi no harim yu. Yu wet. Ok ok em nau

I cannot hear you. You wait. Ok ok now is good

Yu husait ya mi tok! Yu husait ya mi tok!

Who are you I say?! Who are you I say?!

Maski giamanim mi mi no yangpla meri. Yu harim? Mi lapun meri ya

Don't lie to me. I am not a pretty lass. You hear? I am an old lady

Mi bekim. Mi bekim. Ol kolos kala raunim ai blo mi

I respond. I respond. Dizzy from the colourful dresses
Ol koins lo bilum pairap tu

The coins in my bilum clink as well
Halo. Lapun mama? Em mi tasol ya

Hello. Old mother? It is only me.
Susa ya em tok yu painim mi? Aiyo sori tru mi no ringim yu

Sister said you look for me? Aye sorry did not ring you sooner

Em yu ah? Pikinini lewa blo mi. em yu ah?

Is that you? My beloved child. Is that you?
Lapun mama ya em luksave lo nek blo mi

Old mother there she heard and recognised my voice
Ai yu em pikinini blo mi. Yu orait?

Aye! You are my child. Are you ok?
Ayee lewa pikinini blo mi long taim mi no lukim yu

Aye my beloved child very long time no see
Mi harim em. Ol kolos kala ya tu ya
Ret, yello, grin, blu, kala kala stret na nais
Spet blo buai tu ya karamapim sait
Sumuk blo paia na mit em mekim bel karai

Ah. Mama em mi tasol ya. Susa tok yu painim mi?
Yu tok. Wanpla samting yu laikim mi mekim?
Yu sik mama yu laik mi kukim sup na kam?
Yu wet bai mi go maket Malaoro painim pis na kumu mi kam kuk

Ah. Mother it is only me. Sister there said you looked for me?
You say. Is there something I can do?
Are you sik mama? Shall I cook some soup?
You wait let me find fish, vegies at market Malaoro. I’ll come cook.

Ai lewa pikinini mi painim yu steret
Ai taim mama tok osem, lewa blo mi i sut
Wanpla rong bai em autim. Em wanem rong steret?
Ol kolos kala sun i kukim nau. Tingting blo mi i go lo buai ken

Aye beloved child I searched for you I did
Aye when mama said like that my heart it skipped a beat
What’s this wrong she will reveal?
What’s this bad she talks about?
Those dresses sun scorched now.
Betel nut kick comes to mind

Ai lewa pikinini blo mi. nek blo mama i wari nau
Mi harim osem masol lewa ya i mekim sampla rabis pasin
Mi harim osem em kisim wanpla meri ken
Mi harim osem ai blo yu bilak yu putim ai galas i go lo wok

Aye beloved child of mine. Mama’s voice is worried now
I hear that muscle lover there he does some bad bad things
I hear he’s has got another mistress now
I hear that your eye is black. That you wore dark glasses into work
O tok tru yu harim lapun mama
Tasol yu save pinis em pasin maret mipla stap
Em orait. Em go wok. Haste nait mipla go raun lo tambu meri ya
Ol pikinini orait mipla stap tasol

Ai na mi kam raun ai giris long kolos lo Yakaplin
Lapun mama em maret pasin tasol – mi orait
Na yu stap tasol yu no sik?
Aiyo mi stap pinis mi kam raun painim pis

Tasol lapun mama ya iau blong em i no harim
Olgeta gutpla toktok blo mi swit tumas
Em i no harim osem mi tok em maret pasin tasol
Het storong ya lapun mama ya em i tok

Lewa pikinini blo mi
Wari kilim mi turu mi tingim yu
Mi tingim yu bai mi halpim yu osem wanem?
Maret pasin em turu tasol skin blo yu em skin blo mi

Ok. Old mother dear all that you hear is true
But you know these ways are marriage ways. We are here
It’s ok. He’s gone to work. Last night we visited the sister in law
The children are alright. We are ok

Aye and here I am admiring clothes at Yakaplin
Old mama it’s just marriage ways that is all. I’m ok
And you ok? You are not sick?
Aye I’ll make sure I’ll find fish I’ll come

But old mother there her deaf ears did not hear
All my good talk, my sweet sweet words
She did not hear me say that this is marriage ways that’s all
That stubborn mother there she continued to say

Beloved child of mine
When I think of you I am worried sick
I think of helping you. How – how can I help?
Marriage ways that’s true but your skin is my skin
Pikinini yu harim mi.
Yu harim gut
Sampla toktok blo mi yu kisim nau
Yu harim mi gat sampla samting.
Samting ya em pawa streit
Samting ya em masol lewa bai silek.
Yu harim? Yu kla lo tok blo mi?

My child listen to me.
Listen very carefully
My words right now you take
You listen. I have something.
This thing is powerful true
This thing. Your beloved muscle
will calm down. You hear?
You understand?

Ai lapun mama yu mekim
bikpla tok
Em pawa ya em wanem
samting streit?
Na i stap we? Yu bai givim or
bai mi baim?
Em lo maket or lo balus?

Aye old mother what you say
is very deep
What is this power thing you
talk about?
Where is it? Will you give it?
Will I buy?
Is it at the market or imported?

Ai pikinini. Yu noken wari.
Yu em lewa blo mi streit.
Mi wari lo yu na mi painim
Em mi yet bai mi givim
Noken tingting noken wari noken pret

Aye child. Do not worry. You are
my beloved child
I worry for you I found this thing.
This thing I will give to you
Don't think. Don't worry.
Don't fear.

Lapun mama na displa pawa ya
displa malera
Em i wel, o sop, or lip or simuk,
o paura or wara?
Em Kawar? Mi no save lukim yet
Plis yu tok kla na mi harim

Old mother – and this power –
this magic
Is it oil, or soap, or leaves, or smoke,
or powder or water?
Is it ginger? I have not seen it yet.
Please explain so I can hear
Lewa pikanini em wel yu putim
lo skin blo yu
Lewa pikanini em ti yu tanim bai
masol lewa i diring
Lewa pikanini laik blo yu tasol
Yu tokim mi lo laik blo yu na mi givim

Beloved child. It’s oil you smooth
on your skin
Beloved child it’s tea you make.
Your beloved muscle he will drink
Beloved child it’s up to you
Tell me if this is what you want
and I will give

Ai lapun mama. Ai lapun mama
Nau em maus blo mi em pas na ai
blo mi em op
Tingting nau i go bek buai.
Mi spetim buai ating bai tingting gut i
kisim mi

Aye old mama. Aye old mama
Now my mouth is silent but my
eyes open wide
Betel nut comes back to mind
Maybe betel nut will bring clarity
back to stay with me

Trangu lapun mama wari lo mi
Trangu lapun mama tingim mi
Em painim wei lo halpim mi lo taim
nongut blo mi
Het blo mi i raun lo kainkain
planti tingting

Poor old mama worries about me
Poor old mama she thinks of me
She finds a way to help me out when
bad times come to me
My head spins with all kinds
of thoughts

Mi tingim laip, mi tingim
maret pasin tu ya
Em sa swit na olgeta samting
em orait
Tasol taim masol lewa ya sa
apim wara
Na han skin sa tait na han
sa sleek

I think of life, I think of marriage
ways as well
It is very sweet and everything
is alright
But when beloved muscle lifts
his water
And with his flexed up arms and his
hand he takes a strike

Aiyu maret pasin ya tu sa hat
Skin sa pen na maus sa buruk
Lewa sa pen na kainkain wari
tingting sa kamap
Aiyu maret em orait tasol masol lewa sa
tanim baksait

Aiyu marriage ways they can be hard
Skin will hurt and mouth will break
Heart aches and all kinds of worry
thoughts come up
Aiyu marriage is ok but beloved
muscle he can turn his back
Mama lewa yu tok ken ah
Dispela samting wanem pawa strek?
Bai mi plai lo nait? Bai mi lukim wanem?
Nogut masol lewa lukim mi?

Beloved mama please say it again
This thing what power is it?
Will I fly at night? What will I see?
Maybe muscle lover will see me?

Pikinini lewa yu sa wari nating strek
Em i no wanpla samting nogut
Ai mi tokim yu. Em winim wel blo Kutubu. Yu rabim wel lo skin blo yu
Yu tanim ti na em bai dring em winim ti blo Kurumul

Beloved child you worry over nothing
It is nothing bad
Aye I tell you. It’s better than the oil of Kutubu. You smooth this oil on your skin
You boil a tea and he will drink its better than tea of Kurumul

Aiyi pikinini lewa bai olgeta wari i pinis
Bai masol lewa blo yu bai masol slek
Em bai lukim yu bai lukim yangpla flawa
Em bai lukim swit swit flawa susu i sanap

Aiyi beloved child all your worries will be no more
Your beloved muscle his muscles will ease up
He will only see a young flower – that is you
He will see a sweet sweet flower.
Breasts young and tender

Aiyi pikinini lewa, masol lewa bai no nap
Tromoi ai i go lo narapla meri ken
Yu tasol yu bai flawa sanap stap
Wanem kainkain tingting em i gat lo narapla

Aiyi beloved child muscle lover he will not
Cast his eyes on another woman
Only you. A flower you will stand
All his many thoughts of another

Em bai lus tingting.
Masol nau sa tait lo brukim maus blo yu
Masol ya bai slek na silip lukautim yu
Pikinini lewa olgeta wari blo yu bai ol go tu

He will cast away
Those muscles now intent on hurting you. Break your mouth
Muscles will relax and lie down to care for you
My beloved child all your worries disappear
Yu putim wel lo skin o tanim
ti em dring
Tupla wantaim wankain tasol
Olgeta wari blo yu bai pinis
Olgeta kainkain tingting em sa gat
lo paul bai lus

You smooth this oil on skin or make tea he drinks
Both are very similar
All your worries they will disappear
All his thoughts of going around he will forget

Mi tokim yu em pawa stre,
malera, posin,
Mi tokim yu olgeta wari blo yu bai ronowei
Mi holim stap sapos yu laik
kam lukim
Mi haitim wanpla tasol stap nogut
yu tok mi karim kam

I tell you it is powerful,
Magic, Potion,
I tell you all your worries they will run away
I hold it here in case you want to see
I keep one only in case you want –
I can bring to you

Aiy ogeta skin blo
mi kirap
Aiy kainkain tingting
raun lo het
Ating buai nau em bai stretim
displa het
Lapun mama ya i tromoi
toktok stre

Aiyo goosebumps ripple through my skin
Aiyo all kinds of thoughts enter my head
I think betel nut now will straighten this here head
This old mother she her talk is making sense

Ok lapun mama bai mi pinisim
raun na mi kam
Yu stap lo we? Bai mi painim yu
Yu wetim Tunde nambaut mi bai kam
Yu harim? Displa em mi harim em
i swit tumas

Ok old mother let me finish
I will come
Where are you? I will look for you.
I’ll come around Tuesday. You wait.
You hear? This thing I hear it sounds so very sweet
Mi stap mi stap na salim
planti tingting go

Olgeta tok blo lapun mama em orait

Tasol nau lo pepa kainkain stori
sa kamp

Olsem malera na posin em i no
gutpla pasin

I stay. I stay and dwell
a lot on this

All her words are ok – old mother

But now many many stories show up
in the papers

That magic and poison are not
good ways

Ol tok ol Hagen kilim
wanpla mama

Ol Hagen kukim mama ya lo paia

Olgeta man meri sanap na
lukim em

Ol tok pawa, malera, posin mama
ya em strong tumas

They said the Hageners killed
a woman

The Hageners burnt her on a fire

All the men and women stood
and looked at her

They said her power, her magic,
her poison was too strong

Poret blo ol ol kilim em ol
Hagen ya

Ol tok ol wansol Bougainville kilim
tripla meri

Ol susa ya ol mekim rong? Ol mekim
wanem rong turu?

Na lapun mama ya em painim wei lo
halpim mi

Their fear overcame them –
those Hageners

They said the islanders on Bougainville
three women they did kill

Did those sisters do a wrong? What
wrong exactly did they do?

And old mother there she has found
oil to help me out

Lapun mama ya em toktok
gut tasol

I no gat wanpla rong. Em painim
sol wei lo halpim mi

Em wari kilim em lo mi na em i
painim mi

Old mother there her words are
very good

There is nothing wrong at all. She just
found way to help me out

She is worried sick for me and all
she did is look for me

Aye all kinds of thoughts I
dwell upon

Ai planti kainkain tingting mi salim
7. LEWA WAS MAMA (BELOVED GUARDIAN MOTHER)

*Tunde kam na Tunde go na mi no go*

Tuesday came and Tuesday went.
I did not go

*Painim lapun mama ya. Mi no go*

Look for old mother there. I did not go

*Friday kam na masol lewa apim wara*

Friday came and muscle lover his drink he lifted

*Ai taim nogut blo mi i kam han buruk*

Aye when bad times come.
Broken arm

*Han buruk mi go hausik go painim marasin*

Broken arm to hospital I go. Look for medicine

*Ol nesi i sasim mi lo haim han buruk*

The nurses charge me for my broken arm

*Ol tok mi rong lo man i paitim mi*

They say it’s my fault – the man he fights with me

*Ai masol lewa em kam lukautim mi klostu tripla wik*

Aye nearly three weeks muscle lover there he looked after me.

*Narapla Tunde kam na go. Narapla potnait kam*

Another Tuesday comes and goes. Another fortnight comes.

*Wara i kapsait olsem tais. Masol lewa ya apim wara gut*

Water pours like a flood. Muscle lover lifts his water well

*Em maret pasin tasol mi tok. Olgeta samting i orait*

Its only marriage ways I say.
Everything will be ok

*Maret pasin tu ya mi tok. Taim nogut taim wara ron mi sa kisim taim*

But marriage ways I say. When bad times come and water runs – suffering I stay

*Mi tingim ol gapman nau ol tok lo rausim pasin kilim galas meri*

I think of government now they say to get rid of sorcery killings

*Mi tingim taim lapun man i sik na Blut blo pisin ol glasim wok painim aut*

I think of my old man – sick
The blood of a bird they used to diagnose

*Husat turu em i bagarapim em. Wanem has blo sik blem*

Who to blame for making him sick.
What to blame for making him sick.
I remember when my old man died and the frog came and sat
On the door of the house to tell us – bad news coming
I think of dreams I had. I think of signs of ancestors
Aye old mother there she is not wrong. She is only worried for me
I think of birth mother’s story of her old father in the days
He said to her that they must wash her too
Birth mother responded. Hey old man have you not heard?
The churchfolk washed me and Jesus he is my guardian watchman now
And Grandfather he responded like this
Child that’s all right I think Jesus is a good man
He will watch you from above. But as you know the spirits of the land are powerful
That is why we must anointment will protect you too
So poor dear birth mama. She humbled herself now
She let the old man wash her. Protect her and anoint her with betel nut spittle
Taking strength from ancestors and Father God as well
These ancestral ways have been here before and now they’re in the blood
7. **LEWA WAS MAMA (BELOVED GUARDIAN MOTHER)**

*Na masol lewa ya masol i no sleek*

And muscle lover. Muscle did not slack

*Masol lewa ya i taitim han olgeta taim*

Muscle lover he always flex his arms

*Na skin blo mi latik dai. Mi sa pundaun olsem lang*

And my skin. It is numb. I fall down like a fly

*Skin blo mi i les na wari kilim mi*

My body is tired and I am worried sick.

*Ol poroman blong masol lewa tu ya*

And the friends of muscle lover too

*Ol i tokim em olsem. Em ya kaikai kawar na spetim meri ya bai em i tusim yu. Rausim em.*

To him they said like this. Here, eat this ginger and curse that woman She will leave you. Get rid of her,

*Maus blong em i sap tumas. I gat planti resa mama stap*

Her mouth is way too sharp. There are many other beauties here

*Mi traim lapun mama ya mi traim em tasol*

Let me try old mother there. Let me just try her and see

*Pinga blo mi paitim pon*

My fingers hit the phone

*Bip bip bip bip bip bip bip bip*

Bip bip bip bip bip bip bip bip

*Lewa blo mi sut. Mi pulim win*

My heart it skips a beat. I take a breath

*Tasol nogat susa meri ya em tromoi inglis kam*

But it’s only sister on the phone in English she responds

*‘The person you are calling is not available. Please try again later’*

*‘The person you are calling is not available. Please try again later’*

*Aiyo lapun mama ya yu go we? Yu stap o?*

Aiyo old mother dear where are you? Are you there?

*Em orait bai mi traim gen bihain*

That’s ok I will try again later

*Narapla Tunde kam na go*

Another Tuesday comes and goes

*Bip bip bip bip bip bip bip bip*

Bip bip bip bip bip bip bip bip

*Susa meri tsol em bekim kam … Em orait bai mi ‘try again later’*

Only sister responds again … That’s alright I will try again later

*Bip bip bip bip bip bip bip bip*

Bip bip bip bip bip bip bip
Tripla mun i lus na les lo wet mi ketsim bas i go
Go kamap lo ples we op kat timba haus sanap. Lapun mama. Yu stap?
Trangu taim mi go kamap i nogat haus i stap. Sit blo paia tsol i bilasim graun
Aweee mi sakim het. Na op kat haus? I bin sanap lo hia

Three months go by and sick of waiting I catch a bus and go
I arrive at the place where the off cut timber house stands. Mama are you there?
Alas when I arrive there is no house but ashes decorate the ground
Aweee I shake my head. Off cut house? It used to stand right here

Isi tasol mi askim ol lain lo sait sait haus
Ay plis yupla lukim lapun mama ya? Em go raun?
Ssss weessh susa meri yu husat? Yu lewa pikinini?
Sori tru lapun mama go pinis

Whispering I asked the neighbours nearby
Aye please have you seen this old mama here? Has she gone out?
Shhh weeeeshh sister girl who are you? Are you beloved child?
Sorry true but old mother she has gone

Mipla kisim kainkain tingting na bel hevi
Lapun mama ya em pawa meri stret na bilum i pulap
Malera, kambang, posin, kawar glass meri em em stret
Olgeta pawa ya em holim stap na pawa blem i winim mipela

We were faced with all sorts of thoughts and worries too
That old mother she was very powerful. Her bag was full of stuff
Magic. Lime. Poison. Ginger. Sorceress she was that is true
All the powers that she had they overcame us you see

Poret em kisim mipla taim harim kainkain masalai
Na pisin krai lo nait. Ol meri Samarai palai lo bik moning
Rokrok singaut na binatang i dai lo winduo
Mipla kisim taim lo kainkain birua tingting

We were filled with fear when we heard all sorts of spirits
And birds they call at night. Samarai women they fly over near dawn
Frogs they call and bees drop dead on the window sill
We were faced with all sorts of thoughts and worries too
7. LEWA WAS MAMA (BELOVED GUARDIAN MOTHER)

So the men who represent.
The men they said
They said. She must go! She must go
and our place will be safe again!
Beloved sister so we burnt her house.
That’s the ashes that you see.
Poor thing. Kill her we did not.
But chase her we did and we did so
throwing stones


Ayee I am overcome now with
concern for her
Where did she go? I ask of them.
Is she ok? I asked of them
She is my beloved mother how could
you chase her so
Why did I wait three months? Find
fish and come to her.

Some good folks they told me this
Sister have no fear. Old mother there
we have heard
Old mother has gone to family
at Morata
She did not die but here she must not
return. In case angry ways arise

Ayee now my thoughts are calmer now
She did not die. She has runaway
to Morata
That’s ok. Bip bip bip bip bip bip
bip bip
Sister lady only English she responds
… ‘try again later’
Tunde kam na Tunde go narapla tripla
mun i lus
Bip bip bip bip bip bip bip bip
Aiyo mama lewa mi salim
tingting kam
Wai na mi no harim tok blo yu

Tuesday comes and Tuesday goes.
Another three more months pass by
Bip bip bip bip bip bip bip bip
Aiyo beloved mother my thoughts
I send to you
Why did I not heed your counsel

Maret pasin em tasol i no
wanpla samting tu
Maret pasin em tasol. Masol lewa
apim wara
Masol lewa paitim mi, skin i pen,
blut i kapsait
Masol lewa kisim narapla, na narapla
na narapla meri ken

It’s only marriage ways. It’s really
no big deal
Only marriage ways. Muscle lover
takes his drink
Muscle lover beats me up. Body
hurts. Blood – it pours down
Muscle lover takes another and
another and another woman again

Ating sapos mi harim yu – was mama
lewa, lapun mama
Ating sapos mi harim yu masol lewa ya
bai dai lo mi tasol
Ating bai maret pasin stap orait
Ating bai pemili tu bai sindaun gut

Perhaps if I had taken heed – guardian
beloved mother. Old mother
Perhaps if I had taken heed. Muscle
lover – in love with me alone
Maybe marriage life would be alright
Maybe family life would be ok

Em orait na nau mi salim
tingting tsol
Mi bai bip bip bip bip bip bip bip
Inap swit nek blo yu pairap lo pon lewa
was mama blo mi
Diriman na wetim wanpla gutpla taim
bai masol lewa ya i dai lo mi tasol.

That’s ok. So now I think of you and
ponder these
I will bip bip bip bip bip bip bip
Until I hear your sweet voice on the
phone. My beloved guardian mother
Dream and stay and wait for one
fine day when muscle lover would
die for me alone.
Afterword for *Lewa Was Mama*

*Lewa Was Mama*—Beloved Guardian Mother—can be considered an ethnographic poem (Denzin 1997; Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor 2010). It is reflexive auto-ethnography (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011; Reed-Danahay 2001) and in this afterword I elaborate its context and relation to the themes of this collection. The poem is set in Port Moresby, the capital city of Papua New Guinea (PNG), where I was born and lived for many years. It draws on decades of life stories and experiences, including those from fieldwork for my PhD, which was conducted over a six-month period from January to June 2013. I wrote the poem—or perhaps more truthfully, the poem came to me—after returning from my fieldwork. As I started to sift through my data, I found myself struggling to reconcile gaps between the big picture development narratives about women’s empowerment and the intimate details of the day-to-day lives of the many women I knew.

The starting place for the poem is the Sir John Guise Stadium, a key feature of the city’s landscape and the site of many national celebrations, such as Independence Day, sports and an important national campaign calling for action on violence against women. For many years it also played a part in my family’s daily routine. Watching soccer training and games, walking around the stadium for exercise, and catching up with family or friends meant hanging around the informal markets in and around the stadium.

The poem’s narrator, a woman who resides in the city, leads the reader from the stadium on some of her typical outings around the city as she reasons through her own dilemmas in love and marriage (similar to those discussed by Ceridwen Spark and Jenny Munro in this volume). She must contend with the dilemma she faces when offered help to deal with her marital problems by her elderly friend—*Lewa Was Mama*—who lives in a Moresby settlement. Boroko is a residential suburb. Morata is a suburb into which merges one of the city’s larger and older informal settlements. Malaoro is one of the larger fresh food markets and Yakaplin is one of the largest used clothing markets in the city. Kutubu is the site of one of PNG’s oil projects located in the highlands region at Lake Kutubu. Kurumul tea comes from the Kurumul tea plantation, also located in the highlands region of PNG.
The poem is set in 2013 when PNG and various international agencies were grappling to understand and find solutions to the epidemic of violence in PNG, which includes sorcery and domestic violence.

Sorcery and gendered violence: A humanitarian crisis

Just months before I commenced my fieldwork in 2013, the non-government organisation (NGO) Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières, MSF) declared the prevalence of sexual and domestic gendered violence in PNG to be a humanitarian crisis. Sadly, 2013 turned out to be a significant year for the narrative of violence in PNG’s history. In February, shockwaves were felt through the international community as news and graphic images emerged of Kepari Leniata, a 20-year-old woman in Mt Hagen. Leniata had been set alight after she was accused of sorcery and burnt to death in broad daylight in front of hundreds of onlookers. In April, the world learned that in Bougainville four women had been abducted after being accused of practising sorcery. One—Helen Rumbali—was beheaded and the other three held captive for several weeks. A foreign national was gang raped in Madang around this time.

National responses

In many ways, these events led to an awakening in PNG of the need to address violence. As part of this, a movement to hold a national Haus Krai to acknowledge the crisis of gendered violence in PNG emerged. Haus Krai is the Tok Pisin term for a house or site of mourning, where people gather to mourn a deceased person. As the movement gained momentum, a number of Haus Krai events were held throughout the world to express solidarity with the victims of violence and to call for action to address violence in PNG.

In Port Moresby the national Haus Krai was held at the Sir John Guise stadium. I was conducting fieldwork while following these events and in May 2013, attended the national Haus Krai in the city.
The space between national and international responses and lived experiences

After fieldwork my evenings would involve catching up on personal and mainstream news via Facebook. As there was no television where we were living, Facebook was an important way for me to keep abreast of the *Haus Krai* movement. Despite being a 15-minute drive from the Sir John Guise stadium where people were gathered, I noticed a difference between the lived reality of my life and that of the people with whom I was interacting in the field. Many people in the settlement community had phones but because of a lack of electricity they generally were off because the batteries were flat or to preserve them for the most important calls. People asked if I had brought newspapers with me as a way to catch up on the news, but also to add to their stocks of toilet paper used in the pit toilets. A few houses had TVs and there were a few communal TVs, but most people seemed unaware of the national *Haus Krai* movement.

Yet violence was intimately interwoven in the day-to-day stories of struggle and survival (see Jolly 2012; Jolly, Stewart with Brewer (eds) 2012): a woman slashed with a knife by her brother-in-law; a woman beaten; a family chased from their home because one of its members was accused of sorcery; stories of love and magic to help allay a man’s violent tendencies or tame his indiscretions; women elders caring for their grandchildren in the absence of parents; an elderly grandmother caring for her orphaned grandchildren after their parents had died of AIDS; and community leaders striving to address development needs while battling in courts to stay forceful evictions.

Celebrating indigenous spirituality:
Sisterhood and motherhood

In my life, a dream or the sighting of a specific animal or other ‘sign’ conveys a meaning and is usually reflected upon to anticipate the future or explain the past. Traditional legends of women, love, seduction, magic, sorcery, weaving, gardening and life also resonate in my memory. The lived realities of many women I know reflect this same rich interweaving of the spiritual and the worldly. This poem is a celebration of the indigenous spirituality—as opposed to indigenous sorcery and witchcraft.
The space between the public responses to violence that highlight the brutality and the private narratives of witchcraft and magic relates to the more positive and spiritual magical effects that are also elements of the supernatural. As I watched the news of Leniata and Rumbali in disbelief, my emotional response involved my understandings of positive stories of spirituality. Were these phenomena one and the same thing? How had their communities judged these women so harshly when these communities placed value on their embodiment of spiritual good? By believing in my own version of spirituality was I complicit in ‘practice’ that so terrified communities?

Martha Macintyre noted in her work among Tubetube people that ‘stories about witches and spirit beings of various sorts provide far richer material on Tubetube ideas of embodiment, social and individual morality, and personhood’ that ‘constitute a discourse on embodiment’ (Macintyre 1995: 40). _Lewa Was Mama_ may well be viewed as such a discourse about the embodiment of contemporary Melanesian femininity. _Lewa Was Mama_ is the ‘pivotal antinomy’ (ibid.: 42). To her community, she embodies the anti-social female witch; to her young friend she offers spiritual protection, love and healing. As for the people of Tubetube (Macintyre 1995), the stories of _Lewa Was Mama_ and her friend are interwoven with conflict and violence.

In this space between the public responses to violence and the private lives of those experiencing it lies the less discussed narrative—that of the mutual support women give each other. The poem celebrates the ‘mutuality of being’ (Sahlins 2014: 62) in which women are mutually constituted (ibid.) through sisterhood and motherhood. In the way the Melanesian person is relational and partible (Strathern 1988), so too the Melanesian woman in relation to herself and other women can be regarded as relational and partible. This feminine connection and support as well as the full extent of the impact of violence is often rendered invisible when women are cast as individual victims, rather than socially connected. The poem is both a celebration of bonds between women and of indigenous spirituality—in its many unfathomable forms. Reflecting back to when I wrote the poem, I privileged the feminine voice and feminine relationality even though I often criticise Western feminist discourses for not being culturally sensitive to PNG women’s lived experiences, anchored in social relationships that include men. The poem explores the relationships and exchanges that women conduct among themselves in ways that ‘acknowledge male domination and
gender violence [and in doing so, they make possible] radical changes in
gender relations, even perhaps in the models of the person’ (Jolly 2012: 5; also see Macintyre 1995 for a discussion). By contrast, but similarly
highlighting the ruptures in gender relations that contemporary life has
produced, Stephanie Lusby’s chapter (this volume) enables us to see our
own complicity in perpetuating gendered violence when we ignore the
intersection between producing security and male aggression.

I hope that by foregrounding feminine narratives of women’s relationality
and opposing the violence they experience, Lewa Was Mama enables us
to see how narratives of ‘women’s empowerment’ potentially can work to
diminish the relationships that women draw on for mutual support. They
can also background the broader impacts of violence on communities
or networks of women who suffer collectively. The national Haus Krai
movement is a public performance of this collective suffering but still
speaks to the masculine state domain, to intervene and address violence
perpetrated by men on women. Lewa Was Mama and her younger friend
feel each other’s pain as women and try to support each other through
friendship and material (fish) and spiritual (magic) gifts.

In another example of changing gendered landscapes, Tait Brimacombe
(this volume) discusses how the advent of mobile phones and social media
platforms are providing women with avenues to participate in dialogue
that would not previously have been possible. Similarly, indigenous
spiritual connections also are being revolutionised by technology. In Lewa
Was Mama, the two women never actually meet in person but this does
not lessen the intensity of the feelings and emotional interactions between
them. After the initial message conveyed at the market by their mutual
friend—a sister—they communicate primarily through their mobile
phones, or through the community from which Lewa Was Mama has fled.
Mobile phones facilitate conversations about such issues.

Transformation and intergenerational
mutuality

Lewa Was Mama shows how mutual constitution of women is also
intergenerational. In embodying this spirituality, older women especially
find ways of passing their knowledge on to younger generations.
This shapes gender and transformation in the Pacific.
When I ask my birth mother about her early years in the 1940s, she describes them simply. She was born in a small hamlet called N’Drayongai in the Lahan area of Bulihan village on Manus Island. At birth she was wrapped in traditional bark cloth, *n'drih*. As a girl she slept in a hessian bag that had been used for copra. Her mother suffered from leprosy and was sent to far off New Ireland for treatment. She never saw her mother again. When the news reached her family that her mother had died, succumbed to her leprosy, her father decided to withdraw her from the new colonial school so she could care for her two younger sisters. Enthusiastic to attend school, she went on a hunger strike for several days until he relented. Frustrated and angry, her father allowed her to return to school—‘Go to school and see where it will get you!’—he scolded her. As a young woman, while away from her home, she converted to Christianity but could not resist her elders’ insistence that she be ‘washed’ to ‘protect’ her from earthly spiritual forces. As a mother, she and others acknowledge the presence of loved ones passed, who gently lit up the evenings with their flickering glow—the fireflies—ensuring our *lukaut* (care). Her stories and those of others told to us as children, transfer their indigenous personhoods and inform our understandings and our own enactment of this spirituality even in the urban context. She—Nahau Kambuou Rooney—while helping to care for her younger sisters and remaining anchored in the family that raised her, went on to become PNG’s second ever female-elected Member of Parliament in 1977 and PNG’s first female cabinet minister.

The personal stories of women’s cultural and social roots, including their adaptive strategies and challenges, can become obscured in the overarching development narratives around women’s empowerment. Dame Carol Kidu, Julie Soso, Enny Moaitz, Dame Josephine Abaijah, Margaret Nakikus, Felecia Dobunaba, Rose Kekedo, Naomi Martin, Meg Taylor, Anne Dickson-Waiko, Orovu Sepoe, Waliyato Clowes, Nahau Kambuou Rooney and others all rose to the top in their fields (Macintyre, this volume) while navigating their own PNG sociality with the professional and international demands placed on them. Women’s status in Melanesia reflects their ability to adapt to place-determined socioeconomic and political factors that shape how women are seen, factors that usually place the traditional in opposition to the modern (Soaki, this volume). These oppositions privilege men and are often amplified in the urban context (for a discussion see Soaki, this volume; Spark, this volume; Cox, this volume).
Lewa Was Mama seeks to foreground the complexity of this spiritual and social connection between women in PNG and how it possibly plays an important part in enabling them to adapt and navigate the complex and sometimes inexplicable terrain of tradition, modernity, love, nurture, hope, joy, pain, violence and conflict. When the cameras have been turned off, the development workshops have ended and the national and international movements lose their momentum, this connection also enables them to retain a sense of self. It enables them to retain a degree of distance from universalising gender equality discourses that seem to prefer to ascribe ‘success-hood’ or ‘victim-hood’ to the singular woman. As Macintyre (this volume) states, ‘Melanesian social worlds are in flux’. I hope that Lewa Was Mama makes visible some of the contributing factors and adaptive responses to this state of flux.

References


