

TRADITION, ART AND LOVE

Ben Packham meets an Australian artist who is preserving PNG traditional knowledge through her work. And there's a love story, too.

The mother of a crying infant in Bougainville's Siwai district makes a necklace for her baby from a particular long-stemmed fern. The ritual of preparing the ornament helps to calm the child, while the aromatic qualities of the freshly broken stem relieve its discomfort.

The plant, known as *pokara* in the local Motuna language, forms part of the traditional medical dispensary of the Siwai people.

To Australian artist Kate Robertson, this is sacred knowledge, shared and preserved through the community initiated art project, *Recording the Medicinal Plants of Siwai*, Bougainville.

She's been working with Bougainville's Taa Lupumoi and Rura clans for the past three years to record the images and stories of the region's traditional medicines. Images from the project were recently exhibited at Chapter House Lane Gallery in Melbourne, Australia.

Robertson, 36, is an experimental photographer who

strives to live in harmony with nature and connect with her subjects on a spiritual level.

She first visited Siwai in 2015 at the invitation of Taa Lupumoi clan chief and traditional healer, Alex Dawia.

Dawia had seen one of her previous projects: a series of unearthly images created from the dust kicked up at an alternative lifestyle festival in NSW, in rural Australia.

He'd been looking for someone to help preserve his people's language and traditional medicinal knowledge, and to help bridge the divide between Bougainville and the outside world.

She spent a lot of time on that first visit getting to know the community: playing games, swimming and telling stories.



"It was quite different to anything I was used to," she says. "The environment, the heat, the humidity. I just loved it."

"I hung out a lot with the children. They wanted to talk in English, and teach me words in the local Motuna language."

When she finally brought out her large-format film camera, many were intrigued. But enthusiasm waned because she couldn't produce photographic prints.

"The engagement with the community was lost because there was no visual outcome straight away," she says.

Robertson returned the following year with an alternative camera-less method, known as the lumen process, that uses expired black and white photographic paper.

Sheets of it were placed on tables in a central location of the village, where community members arranged vegetation on them.

The paper reacts to light, plant juices, condensation and anything else it touches, rendering images in an array of yellows, pinks, oranges and browns.

Participants in the project were able to watch the images appear during exposures lasting anywhere from a few hours to several days.

"I hope that I am a bit of a mediator," she says. "I see myself as someone who assembles things, rather than leads the process."

Robertson says the method seems to suit Siwai's matrilineal culture, which encourages deep contemplation before significant decisions are made.

"I hope I'm tapping into the strengths of the women there. It's a quiet strength. I see that as a very feminine thing. I hope I'm tapping into that and respecting that."

Word spread about the project, and local healers began to seek her



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out. One of them, Patrick, described the bush as "our hospital".

"When people get really sick, they go out to live off the forest and take the medicinal plants that are required," he told Robertson.

"It's a way to heal themselves, but also to make sure they don't pass on the illness to anyone else." Another of Robertson's collaborators is Rura clan chief, Jeffrey Noro. He has both a cultural and a scientific interest in the medicinal plants of the Siwai.

After fleeing Bougainville during the civil war, Noro studied natural products and pharmaceutical chemistry, gaining a PhD in drug discovery for his work on marine sponges.

He founded the Kainake Project in 2013 – a sustainable development venture based around his home village.

It aims to educate Kainake's children and improve the area's

economic prospects, while protecting its natural environment. Robertson's art project has become an integral part of the broader community conservation effort.

Robertson and Noro became close during the project, and in 2016 they returned to Kainake and became engaged.

In Siwai's matrilineal culture, Noro's mother, Bridget Sakui Noro, is the clan's "quiet leader". She recently gave her blessing to the relationship.

"In the traditional way of the clan, it's not Jeff who proposes to me, it's the family," Robertson says.

"She went into her hut and came out and presented me with a shell money necklace.

"Everyone was laughing and squealing. They were in shock. Someone said afterwards: 'Do you know what this is? This is acceptance into the family.'"

Medicine man ... local healer Patrick from the Kainake village (opposite page); Kate Robertson's art depicting bush medicine (middle); Robertson and Jeffrey Noro (left).

The crisis helped to revive interest in Bougainville's traditional medicines, because pharmaceutical drugs were unavailable.

But there is a recognition these plant-based cures can be less effective than modern medicines – something Robertson was reminded of during the project.

"I'd been swimming in the creek, and I got an ear infection. In 12 hours I went from feeling slightly dizzy to vomiting and passing out."

"They tried to fix it traditionally, but it wasn't working. I ended up going to a local health care centre."

She was put on intravenous therapy and recovered in a few days. But the clinic was so poorly equipped, staff struggled to find surgical tape to secure the drip to her hand.

The experience reinforced in her mind that communities should not have to rely exclusively on traditional medicines.

"I just thought, 'this is not right'. There should be access to modern medicine in a way that isn't compromised," she says.

She returned with a gift of 10 kilograms of medicines and medical supplies donated by her local GP in Australia.

"When I delivered it back to the hospital, the doctor was really emotional. They just didn't have that stuff there."

"I don't think it's a question of one or the other. Both traditional and modern medicines should be available."

Robertson is currently working on a book with Kainake's children. It will feature images and stories from the project. ■

