

# 45 years of Papua New Guinea Independence Day



(Bird of Paradise)

This year 2020 on 16<sup>th</sup> of September which will be this Wednesday, we, the nation of Papua New Guinea, will be celebrating our sapphire anniversary of Independence from Australia.

Coming from Manus Island, the smallest province in Papua New Guinea, I am proud to share with you a brief history, and some of my memories, of our Independence Day.

This day 45 years ago, was the year I started my primary schooling in grade one and I remember this special day was a moving and exciting experience for me. We were dressed in our traditional costumes, danced to the beat of garamut(drum) and marched with hundreds of people from five villages who gathered in my village. We sang God save the Queen and lowered the Australian flag and, for the first time, raised the new Papua New Guinea flag while singing the national anthem. In the evening we had the biggest bon fire, built in the centre of the soccer field. Nothing spectacular like Sydney fireworks, but was this was an outstanding celebration that marked the new beginning of a new country.



(Our PNG flag)

Fortunately, unlike many countries who had gained independence, we did not have to fight to achieve it. We were given freedom as a nation and our forefathers like chief Sir Michael Somare, the late Sir John Guise and Fr John Momis, Catholic priest then, and a few others were entrusted with the responsibility to lead us, and many others followed them to guide us thru. They wrote the Constitution, adapting the Westminster system, and created the structure to govern and protect the country.

The question often arose: did we gain our Independence too early? I think we were lucky - and I would say no to this question because it was the right moment for these forefathers to be entrusted with the move to independence. Thinking about it, I use the following analogy to describe our experience of

independence. PNG is a bit like the “13<sup>th</sup> piglet that has no tits to suck” but was rejected by its soar, and left alone to support itself. However, “the mother pig,” Australia, never abandoned its piglet, Papua New Guinea, as the nation which has given support in monetary funding, personnel and aid.

Papua New Guinea known by its initial PNG, has come a long way then in the last 45 years and has done very well in its achievements through advances in education, infrastructure development and social life.

Today much of the outside world has only heard of us through the media when there is gloomy and negative news headlines like law and order problems, “rascal activities,” tribal wars, murder, corruption, natural disasters or things like refugee camp issues on beautiful Manus Island - hellish for the 3000+ boat people, and so forth. Rarely we hear good news of heroes and achievements in the country.

Papua New Guinea is known as the “Land of the unexpected” because of the surprises of colourful culture and the many undiscovered species of life in the country. Certainly, due to the vastness of its geography and the topography, it is not well understood unless one pays it a visit.

It is a country of 836 different languages or more, spoken by 22 provinces, divided into four regions, including the autonomous Bougainville and the national capital, Port Moresby.

Papua New Guinea is a rugged country and is known to be the third biggest rainforest in the world with its terrain and primitive and beautiful vegetation mostly untouched, with mountains and valleys, rivers and seas, blessed with unique fauna and flora. It is one of the richest developing countries in the world blessed with gold, copper, oil and other minerals resources.

### HISTORY IN A NUTSHELL – Map of Papua New Guinea.



Our ancient inhabitants are believed to have arrived in Papua New Guinea about 50-60,000 years ago from Southeast Asia during an Ice Age period when the sea was lower and distances between islands were shorter. New Guinea (as it used to be known), one of the first landmasses after Africa and Eurasia to be populated by modern humans, had its first migration at about the same time as Australia, placing us alongside one of the oldest continuous cultures on the planet.

Agriculture was independently developed in the New Guinea highlands around 7,000 BC, making it one of the few areas of original plant domestication in the world. A major migration of Austronesia speaking

peoples came to our coastal regions roughly 2,500 years ago, bring with it pottery, pigs, and certain fishing techniques.

Some 300 years ago, the sweet potato entered New Guinea with its far higher crop yields, transforming traditional agriculture. It largely supplanted the previous staple, taro and yam and gave rise to a significant increase in population in the highlands.

A number of Portuguese and Spanish navigators sailing in the South Pacific in the early 16th century were probably the first Europeans to sight Papua New Guinea. Don Jorge de Meneses, a Portuguese explorer, is credited with the European discovery of the principal island of Papua New Guinea in around 1526-27. Although European navigators visited and explored the New Guinea islands for the next 170 years, we kept pretty much to ourselves until the late 19th century.

## **PAPUA NEW GUINEA BECOMES A NATION**

Elections in 1972 resulted in the formation of a ministry headed by Chief Minister Michael Somare, who pledged to lead the country to self-government and then to independence. Papua New Guinea became self-governing on 1 December 1973, and achieved independence on 16 September 1975. The country joined the United Nations (UN) on 10 October 1975 by way of Security Council Resolution 375 and General Assembly resolution 3368.

## **RELIGION**

Religion in Papua New Guinea is predominantly Christian, with traditional animism and ancestor worship often occurring less openly as another layer underneath or more openly side by side with Christianity. The courts, government, and general society uphold a constitutional right to freedom of speech, thought, and belief.

Catholic missionaries went to PNG around 1882, as well as the London Missionary Society, followed by the Anglican, Lutheran and United Church. Fundamentalist sects arrived in the last 20 years.

## **SINCE INDEPENDENCE**

The 1977 national elections confirmed Michael Somare as Prime Minister at the head of a coalition led by the Pangu Party. However, his government lost a vote of confidence in 1980 and was replaced by a new cabinet headed by Sir Julius Chan as Prime Minister. The 1982 elections increased Pangu's numbers, and parliament again chose Somare as Prime Minister. In November 1985, the Somare government lost another vote of no confidence, and the parliamentary majority elected Pias Wingti, at the head of a five-party coalition, as Prime Minister. A coalition, headed by Wingti, was victorious in very close elections of July 1987. In July 1988, a no-confidence vote toppled Wingti and brought to power Rabbie Namaliu, who a few weeks earlier had replaced Somare as leader of the Pangu Party. The next prime minister was Sir Mekere Morauta. Then, under legislation intended to enhance stability, new governments remained immune from no-confidence votes for the first 18 months of their incumbency. Sir Michael Somare was re-elected as Prime Minister but due to his health and corruption issues was forced to step down. Peter O'Neill, came into office in 2011. In 2019 PNG had its 8<sup>th</sup> prime minister, James Marape with whom now we are united to celebrate our 45 years of Independence and our 1000 years of history.

**God bless Papua New Guinea.**