

More than neighbours

By MICHAEL FIELD - Sunday Star Times

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Photo: Reuters

Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Michael Somare.

Fiji and Papua New Guinea leaders have attacked New Zealanders as people not of the Pacific. Journalist and author Michael Field reflects on being a Kiwi in Pasifika.

WHEN I first met Michael Somare, it was one of those rare moments when he wasn't prime minister of the country he largely created, Papua New Guinea.

I was among crowds stuck at an airport in Madang in 2004, on PNG's northern Bismarck Sea coast. In the always interesting world of PNG, we were going nowhere because a wheel had fallen off the plane.

Among the crowd were a group of old, sweating white men, some with the slouch hat of the Australian Infantry Corps that several decades before had fought the Japanese nearby.

As PNG's founding prime minister at independence in 1975, Somare had a long struggle against Canberra. That hot Madang afternoon he went out of his way, pulling strings and using influence, caring for the old diggers.

Thirty-five years on, Grand Chief Sir Michael, now back as prime minister, is an irritable, bitter 74-year-old, given to thinking he has a divine right to rule the country of seven million people, nearly twice the size of New Zealand.

Somare has taken to seeing Fiji's military bully Voreqe Bainimarama as the new hope for Melanesia.

Last month Bainimarama hosted a poorly attended "Friends of Fiji" summit at Natadola. While the formal Melanesian Spearhead Group pulled out, Somare showed up, supporting Bainimarama's petulant attack on Canberra.

"I don't consider Australia and New Zealand as Pacific island people," Somare said, as if that justified anything.

By his definition Samoa did not make the cut either – it's seen as under New Zealand influence.

Only two days before disclaiming on race, Somare had stood in front of a fellow member of the PNG parliament, Sam Basil, and said, "If you were outside, I would kill you."

Last week Bainimarama, in a striking interview with the ABC during which he wore a red triangular party hat, supported the Somare theme, saying New Zealanders and Australians should be excluded from the Forum as they were "not Pacific islanders".

"They [Australians and New Zealanders] crept in slowly like the proverbial camel, you know, with their head in, and then the front legs, and then the back legs, and all of a sudden the owners of the tent were out and they were inside the tent," he said.

As a journalism student in Wellington, I nearly ended up at the inaugural meeting of the premier regional institution, the South Pacific Forum, held in the Maori Affairs Room at parliament on August 5-7, 1971.

Australia and New Zealand attended, along with newly independent Fiji, the Cook Islands, Nauru, Tonga and (as it was then) Western Samoa.

Their modest four-page communique (last year's Forum communique was 25 pages long) referred to a "private and informal discussion of a wide range of issues of common concern".

On top of their agenda were French nuclear tests in French Polynesia. It remained the top matter until 1996; then the Pacific found it had little in common.

The new spirit between New Zealand and the Pacific was soon revealed as a sham when in 1973 the Labour government of Norman Kirk began dawn raids on Pacific Island migrants. It went unnoticed until National's prime minister, Robert Muldoon, cranked them up and even rounded up Maori and made them prove they had the right to be here.

I had just come back from Africa where I had worked as a volunteer in the Kalahari to discover this parody talking about letting white Rhodesians into New Zealand – but not Polynesians or blacks – because they were "kith and kin".

I launched into the story, as did many reporters around the country, and the Evening Post published on its front page my accounts of outrageous behaviour by police and immigration officials. There were many meetings; decades later I can go past the Newtown Primary School hall in Wellington and recall the hundreds of Pacific Islanders who gathered there, feeling fearful and deeply hurt.

I JOINED VOLUNTEER Service Abroad (VSA) at the age of 23 because it offered a cure for persistent wanderlust by paying my airfare and giving me a job, house and adventure.

Rather than getting me to do useful things like digging wells, teaching the illiterate or curing leprosy, VSA put me on the staff of Samoa's prime minister, Tupuola Efi.

The department tea-lady offered me board with her policeman husband and her large family, which included at least three teenage maidens.

I went with Margaret Mead, the great American anthropologist – or at least her book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*.

Written in 1928, it got Americans believing that Samoan teenagers were relaxed and happy in their free love; and if they could do it, so could everybody else. I explained all this to the girls, but slowly it dawned on me that Mead was wrong. She then died. A telex machine clattered with demands for grief-stricken tributes from happy natives. Tupuola said no.

Delegations pounded their way up a narrow wooden staircase to the landing outside my office; they were horrified that the prime minister was not showing suitable respect to Earth Mother. It was not that Tupuola thought she was better off dead. He just did not want to glorify a woman who had libelled Samoans for decades.

While I was in the PM's Department, the consequences of the dawn raids coloured relations with New Zealand. Muldoon would show up, sometimes at just half a day's notice using a Civil Aviation calibration flight, and hector Tupuola in an, at times, colonial fashion.

Tupuola (who is now Head of State Tupua Tamasese Tupuola) told me he did not mind; he saw Muldoon as a lonely and friendless man who would benefit from fa'a Samoa.

Like most of my generation, the colonial history of Samoa was largely a blank sheet.

Tupuola went to the United Nations in 1976, as the world reeled at the scenes coming out of apartheid South Africa's Soweto. When he said Samoa understood the pain of the black community because Samoa had gone through it too, many New Zealanders in Apia objected that Tupuola was being extravagant.

We used the government newspaper Savali to give some historical context to Tupuola's remarks and, to my embarrassment, I found a story I knew nothing of – and had certainly not been taught in school. It was of a pacifist movement, the Mau, and the young Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III, the prime minister's uncle.

In 1929 a New Zealand policeman had shot and killed him as he stood unarmed in the street, calling for peace. Seven others were killed too. Under New Zealand's careless rule, 25% of Samoa's people died in a month in 1918 from influenza.

All this had been forgotten. I produced a book in 1984 that drew a deeply emotional response from Samoans. The Mau story had largely gone unrecorded, other than in song. New Zealand was a bit slower to deal with it, and it wasn't until 2002 that Prime Minister Helen Clark apologised for the appalling tragedy.

Perhaps up to that point, Somare could have got away with his line that we are not a Pacific people, although I would have never accepted it. As a school boy, I had Fijian rugby billets staying with us. I knew their world was mine too.

A COUPLE OF years ago I was in Tokelau, New Zealand's last territory, sitting on the malae of the tiny Fakaofu Atoll.

I count that warm, calm evening as a moksha moment – release from the Anglo-centric New Zealand world to that of the Pacific. Small white terns, flitting in and out of breadfruit trees, enhanced their intense greens. Into the space, as the sun sets, the kids get together to play. It looked informal, and quickly games of touch rugby, volleyball and netball were under way. What made it different was that all the games were taking place at the same time, on the same small space. Games passed through each other as if the other didn't exist; it was a tribute to the concept of sharing.

Too many New Zealanders believe that Pacific Islanders are dependent on our taxes and that, without us, they would simply fail to survive. They should be grateful, in other words.

It is not the case. Tokelau – and Samoa, the Cooks and the other Pacific islands – have much that they can contribute to creating a region that will never quite be paradise, but will certainly offer a vision of a better world.

The definitive moment that proves Somare is wrong was in last year's tsunami in Samoa. I reported on the tragedy, conscious of my family connections to many of the places hurt by the waves. I am not alone in this – thousands of people in New Zealand and Australia now have family in Samoa.

It was a little more than that, though, for New Zealand had found in that tragedy a sense of a wider Pacific community that it was part of.

This was no disaster to some Third World country. Call me hopelessly romantic, but I believe the Robert Muldoon New Zealand petered out and disappeared. People, for a whole lot of reasons, got on with creating a new Pacific vision. This is not some advertising jingle or warm fuzzies; it was tested in the tsunami and it worked.

Two days after the tsunami I was standing on a devastated Upolu beach.

Prime Minister John Key was trying to find someone on his phone – some way to get help.

It wasn't a politically affected gesture; it was too small amidst the death then to worry about, but like thousands of other New Zealanders the idea was to give aid and help as soon as possible.

In 1929, New Zealand politicians had their police shoot and kill unarmed Samoans on the streets of Apia. Exactly 80 years later, New Zealand ran to Samoa's side to give aid. We all change and learn, of course, but what I like about this is that despite the mess New Zealand made, Samoans came, changed us and became part of us.

And Grand Chief Somare; sorry, but we are Pacific Islanders, and we're all in this together.

Michael Field is the author of Swimming With Sharks: Tales from the South Pacific frontline, published by Penguin