

Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow: a portrait of the artist in New Ireland



ABC Australia

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## SEAWASH, INSECTS, NEW IRELAND MUSIC

KIRSTI Hello Kirsti Melville here, welcome to the History Listen.

A generation before Margaret Mead arrived in Samoa, the artist and ethnographer Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow was exploring New Ireland off the east coast of PNG. She arrived there in 1908 with her husband Augustin Krämer who was head of the German Marine Expedition. In those days New Ireland was a German colony called Neu Mecklenberg. She published her book “Among Art-Loving Cannibals” back in Germany in 1916, but then she fades out of history. And so today, producer Mike Ladd goes in search of Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow ...

## BOOK SHOP BELL

MIKE Our story begins when Tim Flannery, then director of the South Australian Museum, found the original German edition of Elisabeth’s book in an antiquarian bookshop.

FLANNERY I opened this book, it had a beautiful title, which translates as artistic cannibals, really lovely, and by a woman, which is even rarer, and it had was full of this lovely artwork, these lovely drawings. So I bought it, I brought it back to Adelaide, where I was living at the time. And we had a German speaking volunteer at the museum called Waltraud Schmidt. And I showed her the book.

WALTRAUD So he asked me to read the book for him, and to tell him if it was worth doing anything with it. So I read it. And I loved it. Her writing offered a fascinating and unprecedented intimate insight in the lives of the women on the island. And then we decided it might be worth translating it.

## FLUTE, WAVES, CICADAS

OLD TEXT EKB Men and women belonging to the same totem class are not allowed to marry or to make love to each other. This is strictly enforced. A couple desiring to have sex secretly and without permission, escape to the beach, or they meet in the house of a single person whose silence they have bought with shell money.

WALTRAUD It was quite challenging, the archaic Gothic type face, you know, and words that had totally changed their meaning over time. The word blöd nowadays just means stupid or imbecile, you know, something like that. And I thought that can't be because Elisabeth called the women in the village blöd, and I thought, that can't be true because she adored them. And that's when I went and found an antique bookstore and found a dictionary from 1888. And then I realized yeah blöd at that time only meant shy.

OLD TEXT EKB The women of Lamasong appeared to be especially shy and bashful. The customs of the village prevented the women from enjoying so many things. From then on, I ignored their strange behaviour and approached them in a relaxed and friendly manner, which proved to be very successful.

MIKE So who was Elisabeth Krämer Bannow, and how did she come to be on New Ireland in 1908?

## MUSIC SOLO PIANO

WALTRAUD            She was born in 1874 in Wisma, that's a small town in the northeast of Germany. But her parents moved to Berlin when she was still a toddler. And her father was a chemist who was employed in the factory of Johannes Kahlbaum. And very soon he was promoted to an executive position in this chemical factory. They lived in Kreuzberg, which nowadays is more Alternative Living, but at that time, it was a very affluent and yeah very fast-growing place. Looking at her background, growing up in an affluent family, she got a really good girl's education. She was kind of prepared for a middle-class marriage. You know, she learned how to play the piano, how to sing, how to paint, draw, weave. She was quite well read, you know, in the classics and all of that. She talks about the Nibelungenlied epic, but she had to be careful not to be too educated. You didn't want to be a "blauer strumpf" or blue stocking, but usually the girls of the middle classes they got married when they were eighteen, nineteen, you know, but just the fact that she married when she was almost thirty showed that she tried to push the boundaries. But she realized if she wanted to go and have adventures, what she obviously wanted, she had to find a husband, who took her along.

MIKE                    Enter Herr Doktor Augustin Krämer.

MUSIC                PIANO CELLO DUET

WALTRAUD            Augustin Krämer was born in Chile. His parents had emigrated there, but they came back when he was still very small. And he wanted to study zoology sciences, or music. He played the cello and the piano. But his dad said no way you become a doctor. So he studied medicine. And then he joined the Navy. So he was a naval officer, and a surgeon marine. And he was sent on expeditions before the turn of the century to Samoa, and I think the Caribbean and the Mediterranean and all of these places. And then when he came back, he visited Berlin quite a bit. And that's obviously how he met Elisabeth.

AUGUSTIN LETTER        She's very musical and paints wonderfully. Her artistic abilities are only surpassed by her kindness. She declared that she would accompany me everywhere, and that she would be proud to assist me in my work. You see that it just needs a stroke of luck, to not get totally unfaithful to anthropology.

WALTRAUD            He was instantly taken with her and they were married in 1904.

BIRDS PAPUAN BABBLER

WALTRAUD            He was deployed to the Pacific on board the SMS Planet for nine months to survey the Bismarck Archipelago. But the problem was that was a military ship. And she couldn't come with him on a military ship. So he did his nine months. And then she followed him on a private boat. And she didn't just come on her own, but she brought quite a lot of scientific instruments and stuff with her. And he was extremely happy that she came.

AUGUSTIN LETTER        She will be here in a few days to my great relief, as I've become increasingly aware that I'm useless.

WALTRAUD            They went to the Caroline Islands, and especially Palau and Truk and they did very successful research there and they brought a lot of items back.

MUSIC LONG FLUTE

MIKE            Back in Germany in mid-1907, the Krämers were writing up their Palau field notes when the news came through about the leader of the Deutscher Marine Expedition to the south coast of New Ireland, Dr. Emil Stephan.

AUGUSTIN LETTER            An insidious disease probably made worse by Blackwater fever struck down Stephan. For four days he was carried in his hammock over rough trails to Namatani, the government station, but he died on the 25th of May 1908, shortly after arriving. When the shocking news arrived in Germany, I was asked whether I would be disposed to take over from Stephan.

WALTRAUD            And he said, yes, I'll do it, but only if my wife can be my official assistant, and she is a proper paid member of the expedition.

MIKE            That was the context in which Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow sailed to New Ireland in 1908, the only woman on a 30-man German Naval Expedition.

FLANNERY    Yeah, no wonder she found some joy with local women.

#### SEAWASH, MUSIC, NEW IRELAND BIRDS

WALTRAUD            They started in Muliama in the southern part of the island, and that was quite wild, still at the time. And Augustin Krämer calls it totally unspoiled because he hated you know, the influence of the Europeans and the missionaries. He wanted to keep it as it was.

OLD TEXT EKB            Our ship went around Cape Senna, before turning into an elongated Bay in which Muliama was located. With eager expectation, we gazed at the palm-lined beach and the clusters of small houses underneath the trees.

#### BIRDS HORNBILL

WALTRAUD            He needed her to study the women's lives because they found out that the male researchers had absolutely no way to get anything interesting out of the women. That was her main thing and to paint the landscape, the plants, animals. Birds were her favourites.

OLD TEXT EKB            In those dense dim forests, there were many large pigeons with light grey and cinnamon brown chests, their backs gleaming greenish gold. Deep in the forests too live the wonderful, majestic hornbills. The beating of their wings sounded like the deep rustling of the wind.

#### HORNBILLS

#### MUSIC 1908 WAX CYLINDER RECORDING FROM THE EXPEDITION

GILLESPIE            One of the other members of the expedition was Dr. Otto Schlaginhaufen. And he carried with him a phonograph for recording music on wax cylinders.

OLD TEXT EKB            On the 12th of December, Dr. Schlaginhaufen had left on a Chinese schooner for the adjacent island of Lihir.

GILLESPIE            My name is Dr. Kirsty Gillespie, I'm an ethnomusicologist and honorary Research Fellow with the Queensland Museum.

#### SCHLAGENHAUFEN VOICE

GILLESPIE            The voice you hear at the beginning of the song is Schlaginhaufen's voice.

#### MUSIC 1908 LIHIR SONG

GILLESPIE            That was one of the recordings he made on the island of Lihir in 1908.

#### MUSIC 1908 WAX SAMPLE LOOP

GILLESPIE            When I read Otto Schlaginhaufen's writings, which mentioned that he had recordings, I thought the first obvious place to go to ask about these recordings would be the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv in Germany, because it is a very well-known collection of wax cylinder recordings. There were nineteen recordings made by Schlaginhaufen, and they were all made in the one place in Lihir. The Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv sent me a disc with the nineteen songs on the disc. Thankfully, they'd already been digitized by the staff there and I took a copy of that disc to Lihir. And it was very exciting for them to hear these songs from so long ago. Schlaginhaufen didn't make any translations that I'm aware of, of the songs. So we made the translations on Lihir 100 years later. Most of the songs could be understood by Lihir people now, and because of the repetitive nature of the songs, they are short lines that are sung over and over again for dancing, people were able to join in when they listened. The song tells a story about an uncle and his nephew. The uncle asks the nephew where he has died and the nephew replies that he has died at sea. He is drowned in the whirlpool. So it's a song about the Spirit speaking to the living world. It's a very sad song and it would be very emotional when it's performed. The song has four lines:

*You my nephew  
Where will we come ashore?  
In the Whirlpool you will draw me out.  
You will pour out my blood in the salt water.*

#### WHIRLPOOL

#### JUNGLE INSECTS WITH FROGS

OLD TEXT EKB        Dr Schlaginhaufen returned from a stay on Lihir. He began his work here by approaching the people of Lamasong so that he could perform some anthropological measurements. They gave him a good deal of difficulty, the reluctant men could be coaxed into allowing the measuring instruments to be put on them. But the women reacted with panic and horror.

WALTRAUD            You wouldn't want to be measured with callipers you know around your head and it was awful.

OLD TEXT EKB                      Painting and drawing constituted my main occupation at the beginning. This proved to be a very good method to approach the shy and reserved villages. Even the women who were especially withdrawn got used to me as I had to visit a village quite often, and sit quietly without paying attention to anyone in particular, if I wanted to complete a painting.

WALTRAUD                      After a while, the curiosity of the women took over.

OLD TEXT EKB MONTAGE              Pig breeding is mainly the women's business. At night, the pigs would sleep in the house, they were looked after, almost as if they were children. Sometimes, we would see a woman nursing a piglet next to her own infant, and this created ...

...Bairu with no children of her own could easily name eight plants that the women use for birth control...

... As a rule, births happen at home. The woman gives birth in a standing or sitting position. A lying pose is thought to be dangerous for the child...

WALTRAUD                      She could get a lot more information about more intimate stories of the women you know, she learned about pregnancies and births and abortions and ideals of beauty. And she had a lot of respect for the native population, especially the women, not the men that much.

OLD TEXT EKB                      My sympathy for the women was particularly strong, for I was confronted with daily demonstrations of an extreme contrast between the active life of the women and the lazy, hedonistic existence of the men.

WALTRAUD                      Except for the shark callers, she was incredibly impressed with the shark callers.

SHARK CALLER LIHIR

OLD TEXT EKB                      We were fortunate enough to experience an extraordinary and rare event, the return of the shark catchers with their prey. They brave the open sea in their tiny rocking canoes and dare to fight these strong animals.

SHARK RATTLE

OLD TEXT EKB                      The animal usually is attracted by trailing a stinking baitfish attached to a bamboo pole, by clattering the coconut shell rattle and by hitting the side of the boat. Then, a man leaning over the rim of the boat slips the nose over the shark's head, the others pull it tight before thrashing away at the beast with their clubs.

SEAWASH

FLUTE

NEW IRELAND FOREST INSECTS

OLD TEXT EKB We exploited this moment to go to the mysterious walled-in square behind the boys' initiation site. No woman was permitted to see that conspicuous creation, a kind of Malanggan.

BAINTON My name's Nick Bainton, and I'm an associate professor at the University of Queensland. I've been doing anthropological research in New Ireland for around fifteen years or more. Malanggan is a major cultural institution throughout New Ireland. Its main manifestation is these very intricate and complex carvings that are produced as part of the Malanggan cycle, the series of feasts and exchanges that form part of the mortuary cycle. And these carvings are put on display. And they are often understood as being a depiction of the deceased person, or people who are being commemorated at particular feasts, but they also embody power. They're regarded as being very dangerous. And so the knowledge that goes into to carving Malanggan into producing these this is heavily guarded knowledge it's regarded as being secret knowledge. It's passed down through lineages and will be passed through from Master carvers through to their apprentices. So Malanggan is not a something from the distant past. It's something that's still practiced quite prominently throughout New Ireland.

OLD TEXT EKB We were told that any unauthorized female invading this court would be strangled. Luckily, I was exempted from that rule.

WALTRAUD She could be quite pushy as well. They loved to be party crashers. And weren't very popular for that. Or when they went on these long hikes, you know, in the south, where there were no rest houses and they had to stay in villages, they had absolutely no problem to look for the best and the biggest house and to kick everyone out who was living in there, and to take it over for the night.

#### MUSIC WITH CHANT

OLD TEXT EKB How can these humble people not despair and lose their will to live when they have to watch their beloved old customs and habits fade away, when they are not granted the basic human right to exist for their own sake, it cannot be denied that advancing trade and traffic are ruthless forces.

WALTRAUD She wanted to preserve the culture. On the other hand, she had prejudices too. She was a child of her time. They came from Europe and they were the colonial power, you know, and they were the researchers.

OLD TEXT EKB The doctrine of the equality of all humans is not yet appropriate for the natives, they should treat the whites as their masters until they have learned from them how to work steadily and how to strive for self-improvement.

#### BIRDS HORNBILLS

WALTRAUD At last when they had to get from Lamasong at the end of their stay to Kavieng the boat was a few days early and they hadn't been notified. They were up in the mountains you know watching feasts and recording and when they came back their camp had been abandoned. There was hardly any food left for them.

#### MUSIC DRUMMING

OLD TEXT EKB      Now we were abandoned here without a chance of leaving this island in the foreseeable future.

WALTRAUD          And they were told someone would pick up their luggage but they had to walk. And so that was 150 kilometres and she got very sick.

MIKE                But they made it to Kavieng in time to be rescued by another boat before the stormy season closed all shipping.

SEAWASH

WALTRAUD          And from there they went again to the Caroline Islands to Palau. And for nine months I think and then they went back to Germany in 1910. And that's where they stayed.

MUSEUM ATMOSPHERE

MIKE                Augustin Kramer took up a position as director of the famous Linden ethnological museum in Stuttgart, and Elisabeth worked for him doing editing and correspondence.

WALTRAUD          And she went back into the shadows.

MIKE                She published her book during the First World War at the end of which Germany lost its colonies

WALTRAUD          In 1918, they were just confiscated by the League of Nations and after the Treaty of Versailles. Then they were distributed among the victorious powers. All the Pacific islands north of the equator went to Japan and the ones south of the equator to the United Kingdom, and the United Kingdom handed them on to the Dominions as a reward for the help in the war. And Australia got New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago and Nauru.

MUSIC

MIKE                Apart from publishing a few articles, we hear no more from Elisabeth. Her husband Augustin became Professor of Anthropology at Tübingen University until he retired in the 1930s. He died during World War Two, we think from old age.

WALTRAUD          Their house was bombed and destroyed. Almost all her paintings, water-color paintings, got destroyed in the war. And Elisabeth died in January '45. And you can't find anything about her death, so I guess it was natural causes.

MUSIC LUKPAU CHILDREN'S CHANT

CICADAS

MIKE                So what was Elisabeth Krämer Bannow's contribution to Anthropology?



WALTRAUD She introduced kind of a new method, how to do it. I mean, this way of interacting and getting research done is nowadays it's called participant observation. She developed that herself. She had no training whatsoever. And so she figured out if, if I just let them come to me, and then we can do things together, and I watched them and I participate, no matter whether it was crafts items, or dancing or you know, rituals.

BAINTON She was a trained artist, not a trained anthropologist, probably unwittingly, ahead of her time.

FLANNERY She clearly was a very capable person. She was an artist of considerable talent, an ethnographer, a very able ethnographer self-taught, but she was doing something very different. It shows its worth it reveals a deeper understanding of culture, I think, and people.

BAINTON I think this is a fascinating book. And it's a wonderful record. It contains some very insightful descriptions. The sketches alone are incredibly valuable, but it also needs to be read through a critical post-colonial lens, it needs to be viewed as a product of its time, as much as it tells us a lot about daily life in New Ireland. It also tells us a lot about German colonials at that time as well.

#### CALM SEA ON PEBBLES

WALTRAUD She was gentle in one hand and very determined on the other, very intuitive on the one hand and very scientific on the other. And you know, I spent so much time with her that I really felt I had gained a friend and I really missed her when I had finished the book.

#### ORIGINAL GERMAN TEXT FADES UNDER

OLD TEXT EKB Tombara, I am yearning for you and the shady forest lining your shores. I am longing for your luminous seas. Sometimes, when I am dreaming of those wonderful times, I still can hear the sonorous laughter of the hornbills that had frequently accompanied us on our journeys.

#### BIRDS HORNBILLS

KIRSTI You've been listening to "Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow: a portrait of the artist in New Ireland." Our readers were Lily Baker Föhring and Andreas Sobik. Thanks also to Marc Anderson for his nature recordings from PNG. The sound engineer today was Tom Henry and production was by Mike Ladd. I'm Kirsti Melville, catch you next time on the History Listen.