AISOLI SALIN OF NEW IRELAND
MEMORIES OF A GREAT TEACHER

COMPILED BY JONATHAN RITCHIE
FROM CONVERSATIONS
WITH HIS FAMILY AND PUPILS
Introduction and Thanks

Chapter One: Growing up in the islands

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INTRODUCTION & THANKS

This book tells the story of one of Papua New Guinea’s first leaders, Aisoli Salin of New Ireland.

It has been written from the memories of late Aisoli Salin’s family members, living on the islands of Tabar, Simberi and In Karavang as well.

The book has been written so that all the people of Papua New Guinea, but particularly the children, can learn a little bit about this remarkable man and his remarkable life.

I would like to thank everyone who has helped with writing the book.

In particular, I want to thank late Aisoli Salin’s family members who passed on their memories of their bubu when I, together with Dr Lalen Simeon and Catherine Nolan, visited their beautiful islands in March and April 2017.

They are: (in alphabetical order):


Mr Lambert Pasuit of the New Ireland Provincial Government and Mr Richard Talevu provided valuable help in allowing our team to get to Tabar and Simberi islands.

I also want to thank one of Papua New Guinea’s most talented artists, Pekimen Yalamu, for the illustrations that show important moments in Aisoli Salin’s life. Dr Kirstie Close from Deakin University in Australia and Gregory Bablis, with the PNG National Museum and Art Gallery, provided great assistance with research for the book. Kirstie has also helped with advice about writing the book.

Jonathan Ritchie

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This was important, because the boy’s father, a man called Mavis, was a leader in his clan and so his first-born son would also be a leader when he grew up.

So as soon as he was able to take part, the boy – who we now know was Aisoli Salin – his father Mavis, and his mother, Marabok, went from Simberi to Tabar. There, he was initiated in a special Malagan cultural ceremony that showed everyone that he was going to be a very Big Man in his later life.

CHAPTER ONE | GROWING UP IN THE ISLANDS

One day more than a hundred years ago now, in the year of Our Lord 1913, a baby was born in the little seaside village of Lavambak on the beautiful island of Simberi.

Simberi is one of the three main islands that form the Tabar Group. The other islands are Tabar and Big Tabar, which both lie to the southeast of Simberi. The Tabar Group is about forty kilometres to the north of the main island of New Ireland.

Like many other places in Papua New Guinea, the people first came to the islands many thousands of years ago. They arrived by boat and brought with them the same kind of lifestyle that their cousins in New Ireland, and in many other parts of Papua New Guinea, had. They caught the fish that could be found in the sea, grew yams and taro, and raised pigs and chickens for meat.

Over time they developed a rich culture, that is now known all around the world: the Malagan culture. Malagan ceremonies are used to mark significant stages in the lives of the people of the islands, from birth to death. The wonderful wooden carvings and masks that are celebrated around the world are also known as Malagan, and these are an important part of Malagan ceremonies.

Tall mountains rise in the middle of the islands, reaching to more than 600 metres, but around the coasts there are large areas of swamp land where sago palms and mangrove trees grow. This is also where the people live, in small villages made up of groups of families gathered into clans.

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Location of the Tabar Group (Simberi, Tatau, and Big Tabar), north of New Ireland
He was given a mask to wear, which was a sign of the important role that he would have in his clan. As well he sat on a platform or bed and was made to carry the important symbols that showed his prestige. Lots of pigs, shell money, and other forms of traditional wealth were given to him too.

Later, after all the Malagan ceremonies had concluded, young Aisoli Salin returned, with his mother and father, to Lavambak on Simberi. His mother, Marabok, already had a son called Lunga, and after Aisoli was born, his parents had a daughter, Baso, and another son, Vater. Aisoli's father, Mavis, had another wife too, called Tillum, but when Aisoli was only a toddler the Wesleyan Methodist Mission set up a station on Simberi. Soon afterwards, the Wesleyan pastors brought in the rule that a man should only have one wife, not two. So Mavis invited another clan leader to marry Tillum, and he and Marabok settled down together with their children.

By this time, the people from the islands had begun to know more about what was happening in the world beyond their shores. Long before Aisoli's birth, even before his father was born, the first European people began to visit the islands. For many years, these visits were short, and there wasn't much contact between the islanders and the outsiders. But by the 1870s, European ships had begun to arrive, looking for men who they could take away to work on plantations in other parts of the Pacific. Then in 1884, people from Germany declared that the islands, along with all of New Ireland, New Britain, and large parts of the mainland of New Guinea, were under the control of the German New Guinea Company. Many more missionaries and traders came to the islands of the Tabar Group, as well as men who set up plantations to grow coconuts. They grew coconuts so they could produce copra from the inside of the coconut. This was used for a range of purposes by the Europeans.

The Germans appointed local officials who could help them to control what the people were doing. They appointed certain men, who were already customary leaders, to become luluais (which is a word from the language of the Tolai people in New Britain). One of these was Aisoli's father, Mavis. In fact, because of Mavis' standing in his clan, he became a Paramount Luluai, a more senior and important position than the others. In this role, he helped the Germans organise the lives of the people from Simberi. He was like a policeman.

Young Aisoli and his sister and brothers were brought up as Christians within the Wesleyan Mission (these days we know this as the United Church). One of the first things that the Mission pastors did was to set up a school so that the youngsters from the villages around Simberi could learn about the world and be good members of the Church. Aisoli's father wanted his son to know everything that he could and so Aisoli began his education at a very early age, in the missionaries on Simberi. But the opportunities to be educated at the mission were limited, and so young Aisoli moved back to Tabau, where he lived with some relatives and attended school there. Even on Tabau, however, Aisoli soon found that he wanted to learn more, even more than the missionaries could teach him. That was why, when he was ten years old, Aisoli left his islands to go to New Britain so he could go to a brand new school that had just opened.
By the time Aisoli was ten, in 1923, there had been some pretty dramatic changes, brought about by the Great War (we call it World War One now), Germany had been defeated by Britain and its allies including Australia. So the German people who used to be in charge of the islands had been replaced by Australians.

One of these was a man by the name of John Walstab, who had fought bravely in the Great War and was now working in the islands. As a bright young student, Aisoli soon came to his attention.

Mr Walstab knew that there was a new school that had been set up by the Australian government at Kokopo in New Britain. He decided, there and then, that young Aisoli should be one of the school’s first students.

So after farewelling his family and his beautiful islands, Aisoli got on a boat for the voyage to the town of Kokopo, more than two hundred kilometres to the south.

The school at Kokopo – its full name was the Kokopo Native Elementary School – began with fifty students, all boys, from across the Territory of New Guinea. The boys ranged in age from six to twelve years old. They all lived at the school, sleeping on wooden beds and bathing twice a day in the sea which was not far away.

The teacher at the school was a man who would be very important in Aisoli’s later life. His name was William Groves. Like Mr Walstab, he had served in the Great War and then when the War was over he became a teacher. Mr Groves was very interested in the culture of the Papua New Guinean people and was anxious that it be preserved and kept alive as much as it could be.

He found this was difficult, when so many changes were taking place at the time. He did his best, though, and tried to encourage the boys at school to be proud of who they were. He even composed a school song, which went like this:

*We love our Land! And it is the rule To work for New Guinea, as we learn in school; And when we are men, we want to see How much better our Land can be. Dear Land of ours, with your sea so blue; God make us always proud of you! Home of our people; place of our birth! We love you always; dear Native Earth!*

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**CHAPTER TWO | SCHOOL YEARS**
After a time at the school at Kokopo, both Mr Groves and Aisoli moved to the Malaguna Native School, that was located in Rabaul, some thirty kilometres away. This school had been set up in 1923 for bright students to go on to further study once they had finished their primary school years. Mr Groves was to be headmaster of the school.

Aisoli had begun to learn English when he was a school boy at Kokopo, and he learned more while he was at Malaguna.

In fact, Aisoli did very well at school in every way. His intelligence and his love of learning meant that he topped the school in his final exams at the end of 1926, along with another boy, from Manus, by the name of Lue.

And because of how well Aisoli and Lue did, they were offered an enormous opportunity.

Mr Groves was from Melbourne, at that time a large city in the southern part of Australia (it is an even larger city now, of course, but it was still big in 1927). He was returning home to Melbourne after finishing his time as a teacher at Kokopo and Malaguna.

Because he had been impressed by how well Aisoli and Lue had done while at school, he requested permission from the Australian government to bring both boys with him to Melbourne. The boys would stay with him and his family in a part of Melbourne called Ivanhoe, and attend school at the nearby Ivanhoe State School.

It isn’t hard to imagine the thoughts that were going through Aisoli’s mind about this. It was a big move from Simberi and Tatau to Kokopo. But to travel by ship, first to Sydney, thousands of kilometres away, and then to Melbourne, by an overnight train, must have seemed almost like a dream. And then to learn at an Australian school, with students who had such different cultures to him – well, that was even more of a challenge.

But Aisoli quickly learned that it wasn’t the colour of someone’s skin, or where they came from, that mattered. He learned English, far more than he had been able to at school in New Britain, and before anyone knew it, he was a regular student, just like the others.

In fact, for the rest of his life, everyone who heard him talk in English said that he sounded just like an Australian!

Aisoli’s time in Melbourne showed that he was able to adapt and fit in to a world that was very different to that of his islands.

Instead of wearing a laplap, he wore trousers and shirts. Instead of swimming in the sea and eating fish, kaukau, yams and banana, he had hot baths, and ate lamb chops and white bread. And instead of being the son of a Paramount Luluai and a very important person himself who had been initiated in a Malagan ceremony, he was just another school boy.

At the end of 1929, Aisoli left Melbourne and returned to New Guinea. Mr Groves had finished school and was now a grown man. He wanted to find a wife and have children. He also needed to find a job so he could look after his family.
Aisoli and Lue returned home to New Guinea at the end of their time in Melbourne with Mr Groves. Their time at Ivanhoe State School had prepared them, Mr Groves said later, to guide the steps of their own people and to become leaders.

Aisoli soon found work. His first job was as a teacher back at his old school at Malaguna. Then he moved to a new school at Nodup in Rabaul, where he worked for three years.

On holidays he returned home to his islands, where he was welcomed back by his family and all the people.

On one of his visits back to the islands, Aisoli was accompanied by Mr Groves, his old teacher, as well as Mrs Groves and their children. Mr Groves had decided to live in the Tabar islands for a few months so he could learn more about the ways of the people there. By this time, Mr Groves had become an anthropologist, which is what people who study other people and their culture are called.

One of the things that Aisoli did to help Mr Groves was to translate what the people of the islands were saying into English. He also helped him and his family settle in to village life.

This is a picture of Ivanhoe in Melbourne in 1927.
Aisoli’s father, Mavis, wanted him to stay in the village and live like a traditional village man. But Aisoli did not want to do that. He had learned about the outside world during his time at school in New Britain and Australia. He wanted to use his education to make a difference for his people. So after helping Mr Groves, Aisoli returned to New Britain and his job at Nodup School. But it was not long before he moved to Kavieng, which was at that time the main town of New Ireland District. At Kavieng, at least he was much closer to his father and mother on Simberi. His job there was as a clerk with the Public Health Department.

But as the years went on, it was clear that all was not well with the outside world. The shadow of war began to reach across the islands. When war broke out in 1939 Australia and Germany became enemies of each other again, but this war, which we now call World War Two, also involved many other nations. One of these was Japan, located to the north of Papua New Guinea. Japanese planes attacked the big American base in Hawaii in December 1941.

As well as helping Mr and Mrs Groves to understand more about the culture of his people, Aisoli met a young lady on Tabar called Catherine Pares. Shortly afterwards, they became husband and wife, with the first of their two daughters on the way. Aisoli and Catherine named their first-born daughter Wilma, the same name as one of Mr and Mrs Groves’ daughters.

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Some of the Japanese made the women from the villages perform dances for them, and if any of their husbands objected, they would be punished. Sometimes they made the women wear their laplaps very short while they were dancing.

As the War went on, the food supplies belonging to the Japanese became scarce. So the people needed to work extra hard in their gardens in order to feed the soldiers as well as themselves. Many people were hungry during this time, with not enough food to go around.

Aisoli saw all this, and he wasn’t happy with what he witnessed.
When the War ended, Aisoli was living in his home village of Maragon on Simberi. Thanks to his experience working with the government in the years before the War, he was given a new job which involved looking after the people living on Simberi.

The first job that he had to do was to repair the damage that the War had caused to the islands, in particular to Simberi. During those terrible years, most of the Japanese soldiers in the Tabar Group lived on Simberi. So the Allied planes dropped most of their bombs there. The exploding bombs destroyed many houses. As well, people's gardens had been ruined.

The Australian government started a scheme to compensate village people for the damage caused by the War. This allowed villagers to receive money that would allow them to rebuild their houses and repair their gardens. It even allowed them to buy more pigs and chickens if they had been lost because of the War.

A few years after the War's end, Aisoli returned to teaching. In 1947, he began working at another school, this time in New Ireland. This was the Utu Native School, that had been set up before the War when it was known as Maiom. Later it would become well known as the Utu High School.

As well as working as a teacher there, Aisoli set up one of the first newspapers that were intended to be read by the people of his country. This was called ‘Lagasai’, and it was written entirely in Tok Pisin, or one or other of the local languages spoken by people living in New Ireland. ‘Lagasai’ is a word from the language of the people from Kara and Nalik. It means ‘to send the word forth to everyone’. Aisoli explained that this was like if two boys killed a crocodile, and another saw what they had done and ran to the village, saying ‘Lagasaina’, which means that he had news to tell the people in the village, about what the boys had done.

So ‘Lagasai’ was a bit like what Aisoli had been doing during the War, when he told the Allies about what he had seen. But it was more than that. It contained news, certainly, but also allowed Aisoli to express his thoughts about a lot of things that he had seen and heard in his travels around Papua New Guinea. Especially, he used ‘Lagasai’ to talk about how important education was for the development of the people.

At the start of the War, there was an Australian who stayed behind in the islands, hiding from the Japanese and reporting to the Allies (the Americans, Australians, and New Zealanders) about what they were doing. His name was Cornelius Page, but his first name was usually shortened to just ‘Con’. Before the War he had been the manager of a plantation on Simberi.

Mr Page watched how the soldiers were treating the people and for a few months, he was able to send messages by radio to the Australians and Americans about what he had seen. But in June of 1942, Japanese soldiers took him prisoner and soon afterwards he was killed. However his important work was continued by none other than Aisoli Salin, who wrote down all that he saw taking place.

During those years of hardship many people from the islands suffered a great deal. Aisoli made notes in a diary about this, and also about what he saw the soldiers doing. It was very dangerous work. He would certainly have had his head cut off if he had been found out.

When the Japanese soldiers came to inspect the villages, he used to lie on the beach and pretend he was sick with malaria and couldn’t move. All the while, in the sand under him he kept the diary, hidden from the soldiers. Luckily for him, they never found his diary!

Later, Aisoli was able to give his diary to an Australian—named Stan Bell. Mr Bell took Aisoli to the island of Emaus, where he met some of the Allied soldiers. At first, they were suspicious about him, thinking that he might have been helping the Japanese. But soon they realised that in fact he had been very courageous, reporting what he saw about how they treated his people.

The War finally ended in 1945, and the Japanese were defeated after much fighting. Afterwards, what Aisoli saw, and what he wrote down, helped the Allies to find out which Japanese soldier had committed crimes against the local people and who killed Australians like Con Page.

CHAPTER FOUR

AISOLI AS A LEADER
There were other young and capable leaders like Aisoli across Papua and New Guinea. They had attended school and many were very good speakers and writers, including in English. Many of them also had worked bravely during the War years, either as fighting men or as spies and scouts behind the enemy lines.

In the years that followed the War the Australian government decided to change the way that it governed the Territory of Papua and the Territory of New Guinea.

To begin with, at the start of the War the two Territories were joined, and after the War ended they were called the Territory of Papua and New Guinea.

Also, the government started to develop the Territory by building many more schools, aid posts, wharves, airstrips, and roads than had been there before the War.

The government also set up lots of village councils or local government councils in many locations across the Territory.

One way that the government tried to help the people develop was to set up cooperatives. These were meant to make it easier for village people who wanted to join together to sell the food and other things, like copra, that they had grown or harvested. In 1950 Aisoli helped to set up a cooperative on Tatau. He allowed villagers from Simberi and Big Tabar to join in.

But the biggest and most important step that Aisoli Salin took, the one that made him famous around all of Papua and New Guinea, was about to happen.

The Australian government started to make changes that we now see as the first big steps towards Papua New Guinea becoming an independent nation. The most important of these happened in 1951, when the first Legislative Council to represent all of the people across all of Papua New Guinea was set up.

The Legislative Council was almost like the first parliament. It was located in Port Moresby, in the Red Cross building at Ela Beach, although later it would be moved to where Papua New Guinea’s first National Parliament would be situated, up the hill on MacGregor Street.

It was made up of people – in those days, they were all men, not women – who discussed the laws of the Territory and gave their advice to the man who the Australian government had appointed to be in charge. This man was known as the Administrator, and when the first Legislative Council began, this was Mr Jack Keith Murray.

Although the Legislative Council was a bit like the parliament, it was different in a few ways.

To begin with, most of the members of the Council were not elected by the people of Papua New Guinea. Instead, they were appointed by Mr Murray because he thought that they had particular knowledge or skills that would be helpful to him.

Also, the Legislative Council was not able to bring in new laws by itself, like Members of the National Parliament can do today. Rather, the Council’s members gave their views on subjects. The Administrator then took these ideas to the Australian government to discuss and make the final decisions.

Finally, even though most of the people who lived in Papua New Guinea then were called Natives, or indigenous people of Papua New Guinea, most of the Council’s members came from the European population which was much smaller. So most of the Papua New Guineans living in the Territory were not represented in the Legislative Council.

It was in the Legislative Council where Aisoli showed that he could be a leader not only of his people on Simberi, or the Tabar Group, or even of New Ireland. Because of the leadership he had shown, and his education, he was one of three Papua New Guineans who were asked by Mr Murray to become a member of the Legislative Council.

The others were Mr Pita Simogun fromSepik, and Mr Henry Dickson from Kiriwa Bay. Both Mr Simogun and Mr Dickson had demonstrated that they were outstanding leaders from their own local areas. Mr Simogun, Mr Dickson, and Aisoli took on this important job. They were like the people who go ahead before anyone else, so they could show the way for the other people to follow.
When he left the Legislative Council in 1954, Aisoli dedicated his full attention to his first love, teaching. While he was a member of the Council he had continued to be involved in looking after his people in the islands, including with the cooperatives and also in education.

By this time he had married again, to a lady called Wilma, and with her, he had his first-born son, Alfred (also known as Lalu). Together they moved away from the islands, and the heat and dust of Port Moresby, and went to Madang, with its beautiful islands and lagoons and its clean breezes from the sea. There, Aisoli returned to teaching for a while, before he took up a more senior role in the Education Department as a supervisor and schools inspector. In this job, he travelled around many parts of the country, visiting schools and making sure that the teachers were doing the right thing and teaching their students properly.

During this time, he became widely known all over Papua New Guinea. He was respected for his wisdom that he had learned over the years since he was first initiated as a leader, and many people now in senior positions in Papua New Guinea remember him fondly.

CHAPTER FIVE | RETURN TO THE ISLANDS

Aisoli stayed as a member of the Legislative Council for three years. He retired in 1954, to allow other capable leaders from other parts of Papua New Guinea to learn about how to govern and look after the people. His place was taken by Mr. John Vua, who had been president of the Rabaul Native Village Council.

But that wasn’t the end of his work, or his contribution to the welfare of the Papua New Guinean people.

During this time, he became widely known all over Papua New Guinea. He was respected for his wisdom that he had learned over the years since he was first initiated as a leader, and many people now in senior positions in Papua New Guinea remember him fondly.

In Madang, he was also a strong leader in the Church into which he had been baptised the Methodist Church. In fact he helped set up a Church there, because before he did so there were only Catholic, Lutheran, and LMS (London Missionary Society) churches.
While he knew his work was important, Aisoli began to think that it was time that he returned to the islands, this time for good. For much of his life since leaving for school at Kokopo in 1923, he had lived in many different parts of Papua New Guinea. He wanted to go back to his peaceful village, to the sound of the sea and the gentle winds blowing in the coconut trees.

So he returned to the Tabar Group, where he set up a school on Tatau. Many of the men and women living on the islands attended his school there. Much later, after he had passed away, the school was renamed the Aisoli Salin Primary School.

Some of his students from those days remember him as a strict teacher, who always wanted the boys and girls to learn a lot, to show their families what they were capable of achieving. Sometimes, he would hit the students with a cane if they misbehaved. Later in their lives, though, they still remember him with affection. The students remember how well he spoke English, and some of the amazing stories that he was able to tell them about his life – his time in Melbourne, what it was like when the Japanese occupied the islands, the Legislative Council, and other things.

For everyone, the time comes in life when all we want to do is to sit down, somewhere cool and comfortable, and think about what we have done with our lives. If we have bubus (grandchildren), then all the better, because they always want to know about what we have done and where we have been.

This was the same with Aisoli.

Some of his grandchildren, nieces and nephews remember how he used to like to sit and tell stories. One remembers that she used to say to him 'let’s tell some stories, I want you to speak in English', and he would say 'OK'.

He told them some of the things he had learned while he was a school boy. One was the rhyme about the pussy cat that went:

Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?
I’ve been to London to look at the Queen.
Pussy cat, pussy cat what did you do there?
I frightened a little mouse under the chair.

They remember how generous he was. He would always make sure that none of the children left empty-handed after visiting him.

But no matter how restful his last years were, there came a time when his life neared its end. He loved being back in his islands, and even though he still needed to go to other places from time to time, he was always glad to be back at home.

His distinguished service to his country and the people of Papua New Guinea was recognised in 1981 when he was given a medal that showed he was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (M.B.E.).

But no matter how highly he was regarded in the world outside the islands, it was his own family, and their love and respect for him, that mattered the most.
Aisoli’s family found that he was sleeping more and more, until in 1996, at the grand age of 84, he passed away. He was buried close to where he was born. His family continue to look after his grave, which is always kept neat and tidy, with the sand freshly raked every day.

He used to tell people that ‘I want to die quickly, I do not want to live to hear and see what is coming later’.

After such a full and eventful life, we can all understand that he finally wanted to return to the ways of his ancestors, who had lived peacefully and happily in his beautiful islands.
The illustrations that appear on the front cover and pages 8, 12, 17, 22 and 24 were created by Philemon Yalamu (www.artech.com.pg).

The photographs on pages 11 and 26 were provided by the Salin family.

The photograph on page 14 (Ivanhoe) is from the State Library of Victoria.

The photograph on page 16 (William Groves) is from Papua New Guinea Portraits: The Expatriate Experience, edited by James Griffin and published by the Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1978.

The photograph on page 20 (Old Luluais and Tultuls) is from the Cochrane Papua New Guinea Collection, in the University of Wollongong.

The photograph on page 23 (the Aisoli Salin Primary School) was taken by the author.