

Literary icons deserve awards



A debate rages whether some of our literary icons of school days should be honoured with the Order of Logohu, writes JACK METTA

If Yokomo was to be awarded the highest Order of Logohu, would he be known through our history as Grand Chief Yokomo in honour of his contributions to the human resource development of PNG?

Perhaps, but then his trusty dog, Omokoy would be as equally qualified to be recognised as Grand Chief Omokoy, in honour of its canine antics which brought fun and joy to thousands of young Papua New Guineans.

By the same token, similar recognition would then have to accorded to such characters as Raka, Ranu, Malot, Tabu, Kinobo and the rest of the cast, who, during a phase of our life times, reigned supreme in the classrooms and our imaginations, and, continue to do so today.

That was the argument Iariva posed during a heated debate on how to acknowledge the contributions of these imaginary characters, who had figured prominently in shaping the personalities and the characters of hundreds of thousands of us today.

The fact that this column is writing about them; their names continue to ride our airwaves in school broadcasts; and, the language that we are now communicating in, English, attests to the reality that these imaginary figments of some expatriate officer in the educational system of the pre and post independence days, had never departed or erased from our memories.

Gone are the days when bleary-eyed young students would sit agog, both hands supporting their cheeks, staring at the teacher methodically unwrapping the brown parcel that had just been dropped off on his/her desk.

Fans of Yokomo, and the class was full of them, could not wait to find out what new adventures Yokomo and his sidekick Omokoy were up to.

Many of us, the male fans in particular, then thought Yokomo was really funny with his bald head.

Today, many of these fans stand in front of the mirror and see Yokomo staring back at them.

Wonder if they are still holding onto that humour they innocently exuded and laugh at the guy in the mirror, whom they thought they'd never be.

Without knowing it, many of us were looking at ourselves half a century down the line, when we beheld the caricature of Yokomo in the school paper.

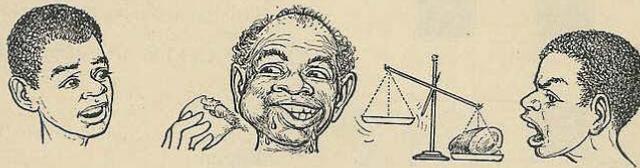
Yokomo was, in fact, the future looking at us through the newspaper and vice versa. So the question was posed: Should our childhood icons be recognised under the Order of Logohu for the contributions they made in the development of this country.

"Yes," Siuke said. "We are speaking in English. We are graduates of an education system that these figments of some people's imagination characterised. We are the products of that education system. And we owe it to them for what we are today."

"Yes," mumbles Ovika, red flakes of betel nut escaping from the edges of his full mouth, as he attempts to substantiate his answer.

"Winnie the Pooh, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and just about every character created by Walt Disney are icons their own right in the United States of America, and accorded such honours as are relevant and appropriate to their status.

Yokomo



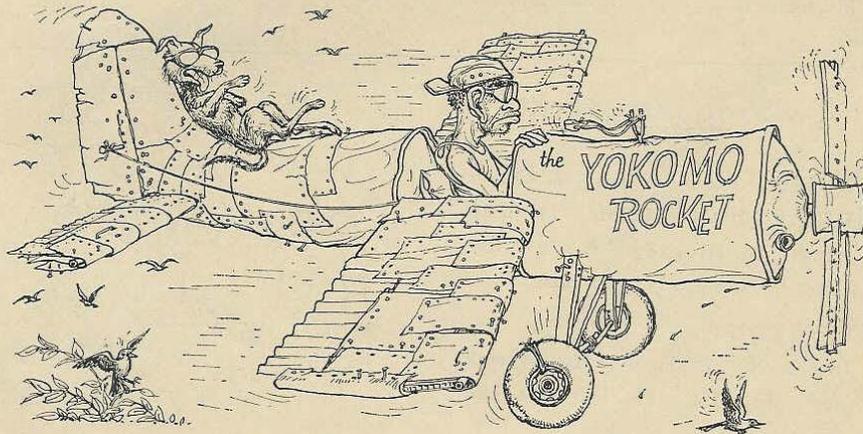
Two boys found a large mango. They were fighting about how to share it.

Yokomo came along. They asked him to divide it into two parts. Yokomo agreed but said he needed some scales. He divided the mango into two parts and put them on the scales. One piece was too heavy so he took a bite of it. Then he weighed the two pieces again. This time the other piece was too heavy. Yokomo

took another bite and weighed them again.

The two boys were very worried because Yokomo had eaten a lot of mango. They asked him to give them the two pieces. Yokomo did not give them the mango. He said he had not been paid for his work. As he said this Yokomo ate the rest of the mango.

Yokomo is not always silly. Sometimes he is very clever.



UPPER PRIMARY

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A Yokomo story from the March 1967 Upper School Paper. Words Keith Jackson. Art John Lucas

"Many of us, especially the majority of the rural population never heard of these characters, but believe you me, somewhere along the line, they would have heard about Yokomo, Kinobo, Raka, Ranu, Malot, Tabu and the rest of the family."

"Yes," mused Ivare with a wry smile. "They added local flavour to what was otherwise an era dominated by Western stories like Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, the Three Bears, Cinderella ..."

"Jack and the Beanstalk, Three Little Pigs, Pinocchio..." Siuke chips in.

"We had our own unique niche in the wider picture with the arrival of our own characters and we should be proud of that.

"Yokomo would be a unique piece of history because the Western world would have never heard of him ...the only exception being, perhaps, its white creator, whoever he or she may be."

Iariva was in total agreement.

"Yes, that is a valid point. Think of the famous Grass Roots of this era. He was created by a white man named Bob Brown and even though the white man draws him, Grass Roots speaks and acts like a typical native.

"Truly amazing that a typical Papua New Guinean can be portrayed by a totally different person, eh?"

By and by, the pensive atmosphere is broken by: "Okay, so here we are talking about people who do not exist in real life...umm ... not Mr Brown, of course, but these imaginary characters rather, and all of you seem well learned in fairy tales. And yet, where has it got you all?

There was silence all around as each man contemplated the question and attempted to formulate an answer in their minds.

By and by, Siuke spoke up: "What do they teach in school these days?"

The words seemed to have been taken out of a character in the movie The Chronicles of Narnia - the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.

It's a movie about four siblings — two brothers and two sisters — who discover a fantasy land in the wardrobe in a house owned by a retired professor.

The older two siblings tried to explain the ranting of their young sister Lucy, who first discovers Narnia in the wardrobe, to the professor, when he asked them if they believed their little sister's story.

Detecting tones of doubt in their voice, he uttered, "What do they teach in school these days?"

Indeed, what do they teach in school these days that had not become imbedded in children's minds like the fairy tales and the fantasy world of Yokomo and Omokoy and the seemingly happy lives of a family that Raka and Ranu revolved around.

Media personality, Justin Kili remembers Yokomo and Omokoy well.

In a paper titled PNG needs big debate on how media can give people a fair deal, touched on the aspects of how government information about independence trickled down to the grassroots:

"In the period leading up to and including independence our people depended primarily on the radio for information on the country's march to independence. At that time in the early 70's the illiteracy rate amongst our countrymen and women was very high. Only one in every 30 Papua New Guineans were able to read and write.

Our people depended on the area authorities — officials, church workers and senior high school or tertiary students — to go out and explain the various government pamphlets that had been handed out and the messages of independence they carried.

The one person out of 30 that could read and write was expected by these government officials to further carry out the dissemination of information to the more remote societies and he or she would have had to translate the information into the local language or dialect.

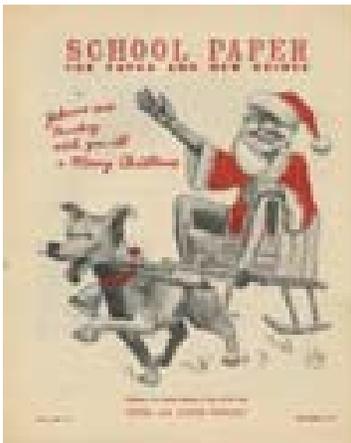
This one person, as representative of the literate elite, kept up with world development through radio news, and continued to develop his reading skills by frequenting government public libraries or carefully going through the 'school paper' full of Yokomo and Omokoy stories that were brought home by their school aged children..."

Mickey Mouse, Winnie the Pooh, Porky Pig, Donald Duck and several others western characters have had stars and imprints of their famous paws and trotters on the sidewalks of famed and prestigious boulevards and streets in America.

Perhaps, orders of Logohu are due for some of our own literary icons, who enriched our lives with so much fun and joy.

As the Wise Counsellor describes it: "Joy is sunshine turned inside out..." and shouldn't that be recognised for something?

Keith Jackson writes: Jack Metta is a columnist and feature writer with *The National* newspaper in Papua New Guinea. More than that, he's one of the best English-language stylists writing in PNG today: acute in choice of subject; definitive in story execution; easy of prose. In his columns in 2007, Jack covered debate raging in PNG about whether some schoolday literary icons should be honoured with PNG's highest honour, the Order of Logohu. Front and centre in this debate were Yokomo and his dog Omokoy.



Yokomo was the fictitious hero of comic stories published in the PNG *School Papers* during the 1960s. Yokomo was created by ex-Asopian [1957-58] Frank Hiob with John Lucas drawing the pictures. When transferred from my school in the bush at Gagl to Konedobu in 1966 to edit the *School Papers*, I inherited Yokomo and, for a reason lost in obscurity, decided he needed a dog. So was created Omokoy. "I have often wondered where the origins of this duo lay," wrote Jack politely, "and now I know. There is practically nothing in the archives these days to follow up the past."

In the photograph at left of the front cover of the November 1967 edition of the *School Paper*, you will see that we adopted a Yuletide theme for Yokomo and Omokoy. The artist on this occasion was Alan Lucas.