The extraordinary European odyssey of tribal chief Pero ToKinkin – from New Guinea to Berlin in 1896
The story of Pero ToKinkin is one of the most extraordinary in South Seas history.

Fascinating new details have emerged about this astute, adventurous tribal leader. More on those revelations, and the extent of our very personal family connection, later. But it all started 123 years ago in what is now Papua New Guinea.

The unlikely tale takes the Melanesian chief of tiny Raluana village in the newly-colonised New Britain to the ‘World Expo’ in Berlin in 1896, opened by the Emperor and Empress of Germany and attended by seven million people over six months.

Pero ToKinkin dons suit, tailcoat and hat to attend dinners with titled German blue-bloods and composes a fabled birthday letter to a billionaire banker who boasted friendship with Chancellor Otto von Bismarck and a peerage from the Kaiser for financing of the Franco-Prussian war.

The New Guinean (Papua was then separate) visits Berlin’s high fashion houses to buy a dress for his wife, enlisting the help of a young East African woman to model the prospective outfits.
He is the first of his tribe to be baptised and accrues enough wealth to order two boats from a Chinese shipbuilding artisan, for 1000 Marks. This proud leader – Luluai as it was known – is later handpicked by the German Governor of New Guinea to be the first *native to establish a European-style commercial coconut plantation.

Pero ToKinkin has many descendants and some, including world-renowned musician George Telek, were also trailblazers in PNG history.

Pero ToKinkin has special significance for me through a unique family connection.

My Danish great grandfather Richard Parkinson was the person who took ToKinkin to Berlin.
But it was his wife Phebe Parkinson who convinced ToKinkin it was safe to take his nine-year-old son Topalankat and six other Tolais on this unheard-of odyssey across the globe. The Parkinsons were among the first settlers in New Guinea and along with Phebe’s sister, later to be known as ‘Queen Emma’, established the first plantations there. Great grandmother Phebe was a multi-linguist who acted as a judge in the local community. Respect and trust for Phebe led to the Tolai group’s audacious trip to Berlin.
There they constructed their own huts – made from materials shipped by Parkinson from New Guinea – on the expansive Expo site and demonstrated their skills in fish trapping and netting, spear-throwing and canoe craft on the adjoining lake.

As an ardent family historian charting my ancestors’ involvement in PNG since 1879, I have long known of the Berlin event but had limited detail of the involvement of ToKinkin and the Tolais. But now I’ve come across an extraordinary account of it all – including the details in my opening paragraphs above – in a German publication from 123 years ago. It’s an 1896 edition of Nachrichten aus Kaiser Wilhelmsland und dem Bismarck Archipel with an article titled ‘The New Guinea Company at the German Colonial Exhibition in Berlin 1896.’ It was translated some years ago and sent to me in 2009 by German historian Karl Baumann. Somehow I overlooked the email at the time while working in the Middle East but recently stumbled across the archived message and its treasure trove attachment.
The find led me to further research and revelations, including the breakthrough discovery of photographs of ToKinkin’s funeral and family in the PNGAA collection in Queensland University’s Fryer Library.

The formal name for the World Expo was The Great Industrial Exposition of Berlin 1896 (in German Große Berliner Gewerbeausstellung 1896).

It was opened on May 1 that year by German Emperor (Kaiser) Wilhelm II with his wife the Empress (Kaiserin) Augusta Victoria.
The above photo of the pair – who also carried the titles of King and Queen of Prussia – shows them posing in front to the New Guinea exhibition with other distinguished guests on opening day. A Tolai fish trap can be seen in the background.

It is quite an intriguing possibility that around this moment the royal pair met Richard Parkinson and he, in turn, presented to them the leader of his Tolai group Pero ToKinkin.

**Intriguing in more ways than one, because Richard Parkinson was the uncle of Danish-born Empress Augusta Victoria.**
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Remember, my great grandfather Parkinson was Danish. He was a son of Christian August II the Duke of Augustenburg, second in line to the Danish throne.

Parkinson’s half-brother was Frederick VIII, the future Duke of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Augustenburg. This Frederick was the father of Augusta Victoria who married the German Kaiser.
An interesting side note is that on the island of Bougainville in PNG, a mountain range is named after its discoverer Parkinson and a prominent bay is named Empress Augusta Bay in honour of his niece.

At the bottom of this blog is a link to an article explaining how the Dane Richard Parkinson came to have such an English-sounding name.

The Nachrichten article reveals the names of all eight Tolais who travelled to Berlin, something which will be of intense interest to members of the East New Britain community today:

The small group left Kokopo early in March 1896 and arrived at Berlin two months later. Luluai ToKinkin, thirty-five years of age at the time, was party leader. He was accompanied by his son Topalankat, nine years of age, as well as ToVagenge, ToValut, ToValuna, ToValanglagur, ToKulap and Tinai. Several were ill on arrival at Berlin and were treated at the Charitee Hospital. Unfortunately for ToVagenge, he was too sick to participate in the Exhibition and was immediately returned to German New Guinea.

The Expo was something of a propaganda exercise for the thrusting German empire. The colonial section also included exhibits and people from German East Africa colonies. The New Guinea section included a Haus Tambaran “genuine down to the last spar” and next to it “a tabu house on stilts” from *Seleo Island (in today’s Sandaun Province).

The paragraphs below are all from the 1896 Nachrichten with some clarifications and additional notes in brackets from what I gleaned from Baumann’s footnote.
Villages were erected in the styles of the various participating colonies and were comprehensively furnished with artefacts so as to provide spectators an understanding of native life in distant parts of the empire. Additionally, in the German New Guinea exhibit ToKinkin and his fellows demonstrated their competence in spear throwing, rowing and fish trapping daily to curious Berliners. Two canoes and a range of fish traps and nets accompanied the Tolais to Berlin for the purpose as well as comprising exhibits in their own right.

The German New Guinea village exhibit included a range of structures drawn from around the Protectorate. Included were a tree house from Finschhafen, plus money and death houses from Neu-Mecklenberg (New Ireland). Luluai ToKinkin and his men constructed their own huts under the tree house and lived in them for the duration of the Exhibition, just as if they were back at Raluana.

Richard Parkinson of Ralum...had loaned his collection of diwarra (shell money commonly used on the Gazelle Peninsula) together with the tools used in its preparation. Luluai ToKinkin demonstrated how to make and wear the costume of the Duk Duk society, a feared male cult.

Carl von Beck, a director of the New Guinea Company and senior employee of Adolph Hansemann’s Disconto Bank, met ToKinkin in Berlin. ToKinkin explained to the sophisticated German that his Melanesian world was very different from that of the German's: his moon travelled in a manner quite unlike that of the northern hemisphere and that his ocean was located elsewhere. ToKinkin was a wealthy man by Tolai standards and he was proud to relate to Herr von Beck that he had placed two orders with Ah Tam, a ship builder on the Gazelle Peninsula, for two craft that cost him a total of one thousand Deutschmark (sic). Luluai ToKinkin also informed Herr von Beck that he was a man of considerable repute in his own society, possessing as he did a large amount of diwarra.

The Tolai team at the 1896 Colonial Exhibition was all male and ToKinkin undoubtedly missed his wife who remained at home. He decided that while in Berlin he would buy her an expensive dress as a present. However, he found the great variety of female clothing available in Germany’s capital city confusing and was unable to select one. Eventually he hit upon the idea of asking someone to model dresses for him. Obligingly, an eighteen-year-old Wasuahel female with the German East African contingent, Misiki, agreed to act as a mannequin. One particular dress she modelled featured puffed sleeves. The Africans and Pacific Islanders attending the Exhibition all agreed that it was a magnificent garment, and with that heartening endorsement, ToKinkin purchased the dress and took it with him back to his village for his undoubtedly delighted wife.

On another occasion ToKinkin and his fellow Tolais were invited to a dinner hosted by Carl von Beck. All seven appeared perfectly appalled in white shirts, ties, dark suits and hats. Their grooming even extended to liberal applications of Eau de Cologne and hats were dutifully removed before entering the premises in which the dinner was held.

During the course of an after-dinner speech, ToKinkin learned that Adolph von Hansemann, head of both Disconto Bank and the New Guinea Company, had turned seventy years of age that day, i.e., 27 July 1896. It was suggested to ToKinkin that a brief expression of birthday good wishes to the grand old man would be appreciated.

The concept of “birthday” was unknown to ToKinkin, and neither could he comprehend someone reaching such an advanced age. Once such phenomena had been explained to him ToKinkin resolved to write a “big fellow book” to von Hansemann. He did so in his native Kuanua. His companion, ToValut, then converted the “place talk” into English. The English language text was then translated into German for the benefit of Herr von Hansemann. The English language version of the letter read as follows:

Mr. von Hansemann, good morning!

I write a letter and give it to you. I, Tokinkin, 35 years old, and I have three brothers and two sisters and I am the oldest. In my land I am a Sir, all people call me Luluai which means King. That is the end what I have to tell about me. Furthermore, I tell you, we all went on a steamer5 to Kokopo and Bukadschin (Bogajim) and Toroboi (Surabaya). After 9 days we reached Toroboi, after 2 days we came to Matawa, 2 days later Singapore. Here we had to wait for a week and changed then on an other steamer (SS Stettin), after four days we came to Colombo, after 7 days we came to
Arab (Arabia or Aden), after a further 7 days we came to a kind of land Tariki (Egypt), after six days we saw another land Italy, one day later we saw Genua (Genoa) days later we arrived Gibraltar, after some days we arrived at Hamburg, the number of days I don’t know. And now all countries are finished and we are here (in Berlin) and I say furthermore the whole journey lasted 2 months and a half and now we stay here for 2 month and a half.

Sir, I continue to tell, I want to go in the month October at home, because it becomes cold again, and in my land, it is always warm, and cold is not good for me, and Berlin is too long cold, and if someone stays too long at this place, he possibly can die.

Step by step Franke (company official) will tell me, when we all can return. Now my speech about these months is at an end and I will tell you some other things.

But I have forgotten to tell you, that I wish some great knives for work as well as a soldier cap with a red stripe and my salary. I want in objects from a store in Berlin to take them with me in my land.

We all which came over here, have our women and children at home, and if we would stay too long they would believe we died. My father is died, but Mr Pagison (Parkinson) wanted that I should travel to Berlin, if he hadn’t wanted that, I would remain at home, and if I wouldn’t come to Berlin, all the others wouldn’t come, therefore I came finally. And when I return to Ralum I wish to obtain a second box. (ToKinkin refers here to the standard sized trade box supplied to indentured labourers in German New Guinea on completion of their standard three-year contracts. Normally, each labourer would fill it with trade goods purchased with his accumulated savings).

I continue to tell, we all came here for nothing, but Parkinson told us, when we return from Germany to Ralum, he will give us diwarra, that is money in our country. (Tolais would not accept German currency at the time, insisting on being paid for goods or services in either diwarra or kind).

And now good morning Mr. von Hansemann and I wish you that you will still live many years, and I wish you many good things on this day.

ToKinkin

My friend the late Gideon Kakabin, a wonderfully-talented Tolai historian of Kokopo, also was fascinated by ToKinkin and the other Tolais who went to Berlin. Gideon actually tracked down a descendant of another member of the group and wrote:

“Their leader was the big man Pero ToKinkin from Raluana. He was also a good friend of Governor Hahl. Amongst the group was a 12-year-old boy. He was from around Balanataman near Maulapau and his name was Tinai. He was still alive in 1961. Salisbury records that although he was by now, a 90-year-old man and partly deaf, he could still remember the Masai and Cameron’s dance in Berlin. He could remember all the ports to Naples. He remembered also the Quality of German beer”.

I understood from Gideon that a descendant of Tinai, a singer-songwriter, is collating material for a book about this man.

It was Gideon’s passion to chart the lineage of ToKinkin and I hope this article will spur his descendants to complete Gideon’s initial research.

Gideon would have been excited with my discovery in the Fryer Library of Queensland University a series of photographs relating to ToKinkin and his funeral. They were in a donated collection by Rev. Neville Threlfall.
One shows ToKinkin as an elderly man in front of his village home. Another shows a large group of his sons and descendants after his funeral.

Then there’s a culturally significant image labelled “Tubuan about to burn down Pero’s house after his death, according to custom.”
The signature photograph at top of this blog is from my collection and was taken by Richard Parkinson in 1902. It shows ToKinkin, now 41 years old, with members of his family. His military style cap and staff are symbols of his office as an administration-appointed Luluai. Next to him is his son ToPalankat then aged 15. He is wearing clothing he bought in Berlin. The woman in the foreground would presumably be his senior wife, the one for whom ToKinkin bought the blue satin dress with puffed sleeves in Berlin, Perhaps that is the very dress she is wearing in the photograph.

A copy of this photo seems to have been flipped the other way in Baumann’s article. The author Baumann or his translator notes: “Perhaps the uniformly serious facial expressions of the family members reflect the fear that their souls might be stolen while being photographed”.

The Baumann article finishes:

ToKinkin was an exceptionally able man and he and members of his family caught the eyes of Europeans residing in the vicinity of Ralum-Raluana.

Helmuth Steenken mentioned ToKinkin in his book „Lebensläufe aus dem Paradies der Wilden“. In it he refers to the diaries of Johanna Fellmann, whose husband Heinrich, succeeded George Brown at the Wesleyan mission at Raluana. Frau Fellmann mentioned in her diary that ToKinkin and a man named ToBolo were the first Tolais to be baptised at the mission. A formal photograph of the two men circa 1900 appears in Governor Albert Hahl’s memoirs, Governor In New Guinea.
Her diary entry for 25 June 1897 reads as follows: Today I went for a walk to our neighbouring village to visit ToKinkin, the chief who was a member of the Colonial Exhibition at Berlin. One should see him in his rig out. Usually he has on a black tail coat but without trousers, only with a so-called lavalava cloth, additional a stiff collar with a tie.

Today in the morning he and his wife participated in Heinrich’s preaching at Raluana. His wife was dressed in a sky-blue satin dress with a lace collar. She looks like a Queen with a fan in her hand.

Governor (Albert) Hahl subsequently made mention of ToKinkin’s positive response to his request that he engage in European style coconut production despite it being totally counter intuitive to Tolai farming culture.

A final note to acknowledge that, even then in 1896, the colonial exhibitions at the European Expos were seen by some as controversial and have since been labelled ‘human zoos’. That’s understandable and can be deliberated elsewhere. What can’t be argued that the adventure by Pero ToKinkin and the Tolais was breathtaking and commendable. Europe had only recently come to New Guinea. But these New Guineans ventured undaunted to Europe. Certainly there would have been apprehensions, but these were assuaged by a woman they trusted and who, in turn, cared for them: Phebe Parkinson.

That bond continues today.

Scores of Parkinson descendants next month will travel from Australia, the UK and USA to a special event in East New Britain, PNG. We all inter the ashes of our parents Alf and Mary Lou Uechtritz and cousin Chris Diercke in the Parkinson family cemetery.

A stone’s throw from where Pero ToKinkin grew up, the Raluana clan and Kuradui landowners will perform traditional mourning and burial ceremonies to honour them.

As I was preparing to publish this blog, I came across an illuminating article by a talented young Papua New Guinean writer named Watna Mori working at Australia’s Lowy Institute.

Ms Mori made a reference to the biography of PNG pathologist and politician Sir Albert Maori Kiki and wrote it … “conveys the exhaustive and mind-boggling experience that was his life – and continues to be the lives of Papua New Guinean people: cramming 10,000 years into one lifetime.”

Immediately to mind came Pero ToKinkin.

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