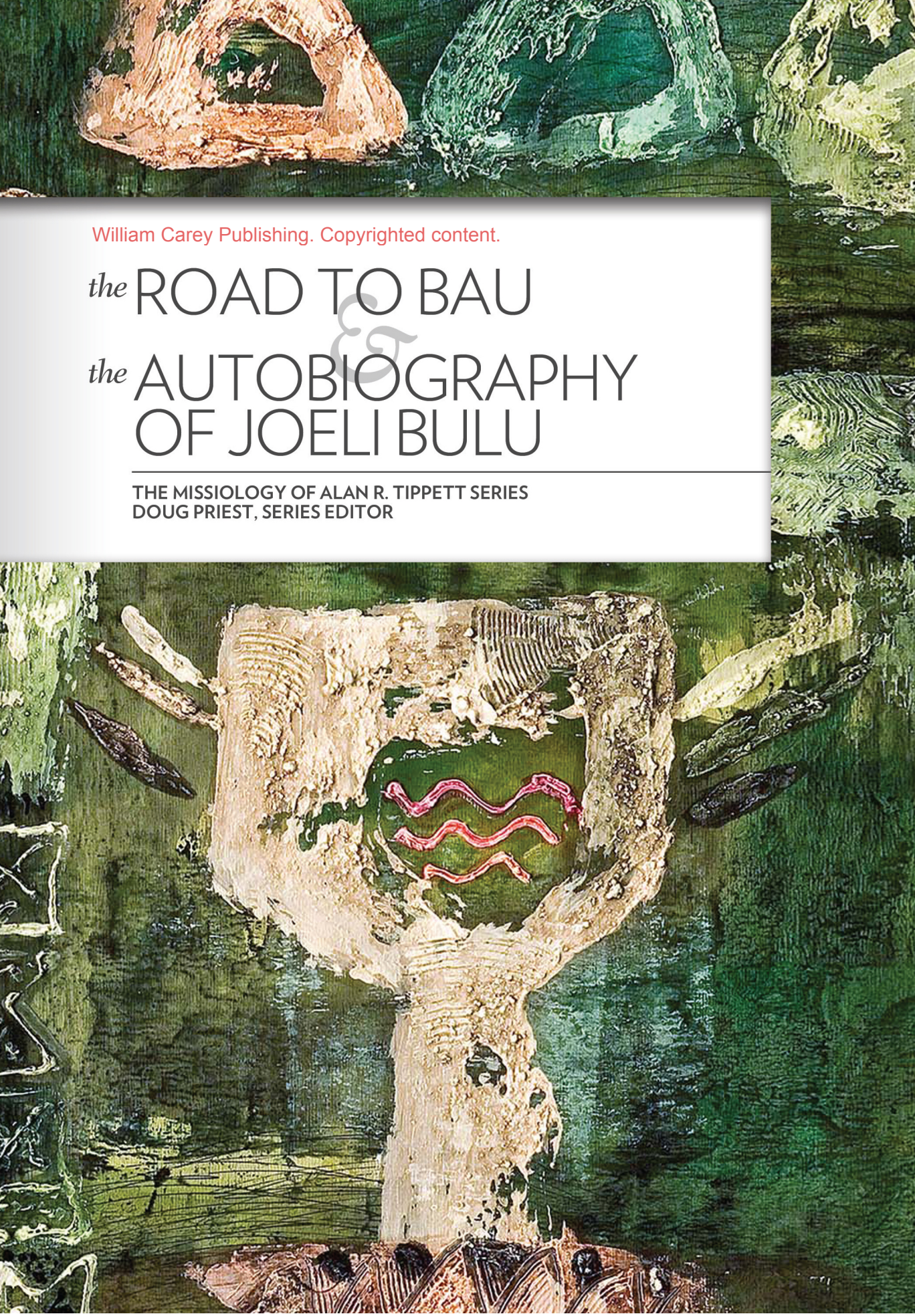


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the ROAD TO BAU & *the* AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOELI BULU

THE MISSIOLOGY OF ALAN R. TIPPETT SERIES
DOUG PRIEST, SERIES EDITOR

The Road to Bau & The Autobiography of Joeli Bulu
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1
"THE END OF THE AGE! ALAS!"

I

I cannot tell you the year of this tale, though one who knows the stars might help to find the answer. I only know that it was the year in which the comet with three tails appeared in the heavens, when people awaited its meaning with fear—did it spell tragedy or some amazing achievement? They were not kept in suspense for long, for it was also the year the first white man's ship appeared in those parts. It might have been the *Pandora* (1791), the *Providence* (1792), or the *Arthur* (1794); or it may have been some other vessel. I do not know. I only know that three events are told together in the songs of the minstrels—the comet with three tails, the first white man's ship, and the wasting sickness.

A strange disease indeed was this legacy of the white sailor whom they took ashore from the white man's ship.

"Our fathers," so say the storytellers of the tribe, "felt their legs go from under them, and as they walked they swayed and fell, and where they fell they lay. Not many of them died of the disease—but their friends had need to strangle them because of their weakness. They became such a burden to everyone. Prior to that, few but widows were strangled, and that to accompany their dead husbands into the next world. But from this time there began our custom of strangling the sick. Both customs we retained until Christianity came."

Another song tells of havoc caused in Naitasiri, until a plant from which a potent medicine was made, was found, and gave relief and eventually cure. Its name, *Vueti Naitasiri*, is remembered to this day.

Two old women, captured in the wars half a century later, brought with them from their village an ancient lament, and as they performed their rhythmic body movements they chanted these words:

> Great is the sickness lying at the masthead,
> Swollen like food-baskets their heads,
> And hoarse indeed their voices;
> They fall, and helpless and pitiable they lie.

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Degei[1] is put to shame.
A noble thing indeed is the strangling rope.

So ran the story of Vunivasa. At Vunivia it was the same:

What is this sickness that smites them?
I remember!
The wasting sickness, that spreads far and wide.
I remember!

And again at Kura the doleful melody is heard:

The old men are listless,
I remember!
Terrifying indeed the sickness,
I remember!
We do not die. We do not live.
I remember!
Our stomachs ache. Our heads ache.
I remember!
The strangling cords creak.
I remember!
Spirits flow away like running water.
I remember!

Everywhere throughout the country the same miserable tale is told and sung of the wasting sickness which came with the first white man's ship and the comet with the three tails.

Have we fallen upon a new age? Alas!
We lie down. We grow torpid. Alas!
Many die. A few live on. Alas!
Many die indeed only by the rope. Alas!
Their girdles rot around their waists. Alas!
The women despair. Alas!
Their grass skirts unloosed. Alas!
And we wonder at it all.
What can it mean?
Is it a sign of death to the chiefs?
Is it the end of the age? Alas!

II

Maybe ten years later. Again I cannot tell the date with certainty. One thing only I know—that the tale is told together with that of an eclipse of the sun and a tidal wave. It is said

1 Degei is the name of their god.

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that Chief Naulivou was installed into office as chief warlord of Bau on the day of the eclipse (some say it was 7 September 1802), and he had followed Chief Banuve, who had died a victim of another white man's disease. The eclipse, the tidal wave, a second white man's ship—and death.

Slowly once more the graceful brown bodies begin to sway, and arms move to the rhythmic beat of another dirge.

Loudly roar the waves of the trade winds,
Breakers chase each other in quick succession,
To burst over the end of the canoe shed
Shaking a shower of berries from the *vetau*
Into the open doorway.
Mother of No'wester collects them
Bringing them within the house to me
To be my playthings.

Quickly run out the neap tides
New is the tale we hear
As a ship comes up from the ocean.
They launch the *Word of the Chief*
And sail out of the Kabara Sea.
Where they lower the sail at the stern.
O, you, who travel the ocean.
There is Rotuma and Galagala.
On Distant Reef the surf boils
This is the place where canoes anchor.

The foreigners have returned
And anchor at Blowing Sand.

* * * * *

The sickness has come among us
Empty is every district.
Our warriors by it are bound
Their heads droop and wither
As the *diaga* plant droops at sunset,
And are buried in the place of the dead.

The foreigners have sailed away.
Our men are swept away.
Our women are swept away.
They are as withering plantains.

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There is a story told in Nakelo that the epidemic of dysentery was eventually cleared away only by a great flood, a higher flood than ever before or since, when whole villages were swept out to sea and the mangroves were buried in silt. Much of the lower Rewa delta is said to have been built up at the time. The Bauans have a similar tale.

III

On 10 September 1808: Valevatu, a petty chief, entertains a party of visitors led by the paramount chief of the district. There has been a conference of the old men. They have promised to set their defences in order and to aid their overlord in war. They have feasted together on yams and breadfruit, and the remainder of the night is spent in dancing in the moonlight.

The ancient faith of their fathers has ordained that they dance while the moon shines, the men and the women in separate groups, to the tune of the bamboo nose-flute. The visitors are armed with the ancient weapons of war, manufactured according to the traditional arts handed down from their ancestors. Indeed, is it not from their great ancestor, whose famous exploits are sung in the tribal ballads, and whom they have since deified, to whom they now give worship very similar to that given to the ancestor spirit himself?

Yet there is one among them who seems a little less at ease than the rest, and his weapons are new and strange—a musket on his back, and a pair of pistols at hand. Beneath the black paint that covers his body lies a white skin.

He is now asked to demonstrate the magic of his instruments of war, and having previously taken care to place more than one ball in each, he proceeds to sink some into nearby trees and cause damage which truly astonishes his hosts. Though the paramount chief knows the secret, no other person can be induced to even touch a pistol.

For the time being the support of this tribe is assured, though later they found it favourable to aid the enemy, for which double dealings they paid dearly by a punishment inflicted by the white man's weapons.

IV

The date is about a month later. A fleet of canoes prepares to attack an island, and the island canoes come out to meet their invaders. There is a preliminary skirmish with bows and arrows and stone-slinging, and as they draw closer, with spears and clubs. The spears are pointed with guardfish bills and many, finding their marks, are surgically extracted by the victims themselves by means of sharp pieces of shell or bamboo. A prisoner is taken. It is said his wounds will be dressed in the morning (but actually he will be clubbed and eaten). One hundred and fifty war canoes surround the island. The attack lasts three days and leaves the island devastated. Hogs, plantains, yams, mats, baskets, and fishing nets are plundered, and every house is burnt, and the food trees are cut down. The hideout of the

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old men and women and children is discovered, and these are lashed to poles like pigs and carried away among the plunder. Some die of the treatment. Others are clubbed. No one is shown any respect, save a grotesque, deformed boy, who is respected only because his malformed body indicated him to be spirit-possessed.

In the intense excitement the cries of the dying are hardly distinguishable from the bloodthirsty yelling of the victors. A warcry rings out with every new victim, the war songs begin, and the war dances follow—filthy and lewd.

On one canoe stands a white man; beside him, forty-two bodies. All night the wild rejoicing continues. Then another day—a day spent in cutting up and cooking bodies. There is dexterity in it.

White men, clad and painted as the natives, find their participation in native war takes them further than they want to go. There are no food supplies from the quartermaster in native war. For four days there has been no prepared meal, which possibly explains the disgusting gluttony which follows plunder and massacre.

One of the white men has the initiative to say that the eating of human flesh is forbidden by his God, and this alone saves him, but his only food is yam cooked in the same pots as human bodies.

V

It is another month later.

A white man bargains with a native chief. He offers many costly presents—presents much better than he usually gives away. But the chief drives a hard bargain. He may not fully understand what lies behind the China sandalwood trade, but he does know the white man will do almost anything to get this timber.

So the white man accepts the terms and agrees to fight a native war, and accordingly a native army of some 1,800 is joined by a white man's launch, with sixteen white men armed with muskets and cutlasses, and another launch with a 12 lb. carronade and a swivel and fourteen men.

It is an attack on an island fortress, and ammunition supplies are sent from the white man's ship. The fortress falls before the firearms, but it has been desperately defended, and the capture reveals some two hundred corpses within—among them the body of the chief.

Though the chief for whom the white men fight promised to save the women and children, he can do nothing about it. War, as they know it, is savage war. There is no mercy.

The next day sees a Christian burial—the body of a white man killed in action. Afterwards white men stand and watch the preparations for cannibal feasting.

Within a few days they have their sandalwood—one hundred tons of it—which reached Port Jackson on 14 February 1809.

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