



GANGS OF PORT MORESBY

Stephen Dupont's intimate portraits offer an insight into the lives of Papua New Guinea's 'raskols'.

PHOTOS STEPHEN DUPONT

The photographs were taken over a couple of trips in 2004. I was travelling with my best buddy, Ben Bohane, who is a writer and photographer. In this case, we were going over to do a story as freelancers. Ben and I were looking to do a story around gangs and we went to Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea. We just happened to hear about this particular settlement from a local friend of ours who suggested we look at Kaugere, the settlement where the pictures were taken.

We ended up meeting a person there called Lady Kidu, who at that time was the local MP for Kaugere. We travelled with her for a day and we drove into a tribal war that had started up. There had been a murder the night before and all of Kaugere was in this very tense situation in which Highlanders and Motu, the coastal people, were at war with each other. Lady Kidu is a pretty courageous woman and she went inside the settlement to find out what was going on and talk to the community to try to prevent this war. We went in with her and as we were documenting events, we met the leader of the local Kips Kaboni gang. After meeting him we gained access to the gang and I spent time photographing them inside their safehouse, which is basically their clubhouse.

"Raskol" is a pretty common name given to people who are in gangs or involved in any sort of crime. Due to the poverty, a lot





of the youth are pushed into petty crime, sometimes crime on a much bigger scale: hold ups, car jackings, armed robberies, bag snatching. Opportunistic things and in some cases much more planned, brute crimes. Some of the gang members were very young, maybe 12 or 13, and some of them were in their forties or early fifties. Like any sort of gang or group, I think it has a lot to do with finding camaraderie and support amongst your peers. These gangs also act as a kind of private security force for their communities. If there's any trouble, like a tribal war, the gang acts as this vigilante force that protects their own community and their own people. They have Kips Kaboni graffiti around the settlement so you know what is the Kips Kaboni area and the other gangs in Port Moresby do a similar thing. You mark your territory with graffiti on the walls.

Their weapons are very interesting and I think that's what makes them stand out from any other gang culture around the world. Pretty much everything's homemade. I was fascinated by the gaffa-tape guns and the way they make them. They use pipes, wood; they just build them from whatever they can get their hands on.

You always picture gangs as dangerous and violent and nasty, and I'm sure they have that in them, but I certainly didn't get that impression of them in their relationship with me. Their whole philosophy was not just to go out and rape and pillage, their philosophy was that they needed money and needed to put food on the table for their families. Their wives and children were like any other family in the community, just living a daily struggle. The cost of living is astronomically high and the incomes are low. They're trying to make the best of a really, really bad situation.

What's interesting is that I went back last year and saw a lot of the guys I photographed seven years ago. Of course some are in jail or dead, but most of them have got jobs and are law-abiding citizens – they've become gardeners, labourers. Some of them are security guards, which is quite ironic. It's quite interesting that a lot of them haven't stayed in the gang. Maybe they've just grown out of it; they've moved on to do good things. ⚡

Raskols: The Gangs of Papua New Guinea is out in October.

IMAGES FROM RASKOLS BY STEPHEN DUPONT, PUBLISHED BY POWERHOUSE BOOKS.

