



# My island home

*Born on a remote island, Lynne Shori found herself caught between two worlds. After unravelling the mystery of her missing family, she set about reconciling her past and future. By Holly Pendlebury.*

I was about three months old when my father found out I existed. There were only two white men on the island: my father and a priest. My father was sitting on his veranda one evening when the priest came up to him and said, 'John, there's a white baby in the village, and it's not mine.'" Lynne Shori laughs as she recalls what is a familiar tale from her childhood. Yet the events that followed remained a secret for 20 years of her life.

Shori, 41, an investor relations manager who lives in Lilyfield in Sydney's inner west, was born in 1966 on Rambutso, a remote island in the Bismarck Archipelago, north-east of mainland Papua New Guinea (PNG). Her mother was a local named Niakop Epili and her father, John Quinnell, now 68, was a Sydney teacher who taught children on the island.

Shori was raised by Quinnell and spent her childhood between PNG, Singapore and Australia.

She grew up with the belief her mother had died during childbirth, but was lucky to have other mother figures in her life. "My dad remarried, so I had a stepmother, and my grandma and two aunts were also involved in bringing me up," says Shori. Although she knew the subject of her mother was painful for her father, she desperately sought more information.

"I don't know why, but when I was 20 I decided to ask my paternal grandmother, 'Did my mother really die in childbirth?'" says Shori. "She said, 'Lynne, who told you that?'" Although it wasn't known at that time if her mother was still alive, the truth about Shori's past started to emerge.

When Quinnell discovered he had a daughter, he decided he would try to adopt her, as he felt he could provide her with a better life. Her mother, who was only 18 at the time, agreed. "There was a village court hearing, and there was my dad and one of his

friends on one side and everybody else in the community on the other," says Shori. Although it was agreed that he would adopt his daughter (she was exchanged for a sewing machine and a cooker), her departure was seen as a loss to the villagers. It also stirred up tension among the expatriate community.

"It was a difficult time for my father," explains Shori. "There were a lot of Australian men in the same position who weren't having anything to do with their children, and he was ostracised by the white community for shining a light on the situation."

Quinnell and his daughter moved from Rambutso to Lorengau, the capital of Manus Province, where the hostility became apparent. At a community Christmas party, Santa Claus handed out presents to all the children – except for Shori. "It was a small community, so the omission was not an oversight," she says. "The incident was one of many my father



Clockwise from left A banana boat crosses the sea;  
Kuluoh village puts on a welcoming ceremony;  
Lynne Shori with her mother Niakop in 2007.  
Opposite Shori with her father John in December 1970.



faced and, unfortunately, I think my history is tied up with a period of pain for him.” Quinnell left Lorengau not long after, with his two-year-old daughter in tow.

In mid-2006, Shori was finally ready to reconnect with the Melanesian heritage she knew so little about. “I was heading towards 40 and suddenly I needed to know about this other half of my identity,” she says, although she had no idea where to start.

Five months later, in November, Shori’s uncle Cec Quinnell, a hospital emergency department clerk, was chatting with a patient of islander descent who, through a strange twist of fate, turned out to be Niakop’s sister Angela. From her aunt, Shori discovered her mother, then 58, was still alive. “I had the weirdest sensation. I felt like I was being pulled closer to the ground,” says Shori. “That’s the only way I can describe it – something shifted for me.”

The following year, in April 2007, Shori and her

partner Ruud Dautzenberg booked their tickets to PNG. Shori wrote a letter to her mother three months before her arrival, introducing herself. The letter was addressed to the island’s health centre and reached Niakop one week before her arrival. “Over the years, I’ve written articles for journals, presentations and media releases, but writing to introduce yourself to your mother ranks up there for difficulty,” says Shori.

The journey to Rambutso involves flying 900 kilometres north-east from Port Moresby to Manus Island, then travelling by boat for up to four hours (depending on the weather). “We landed in Manus with no idea how to get to Rambutso,” says Shori. “It didn’t matter, because as soon as I landed, people knew who I was and we were handed over from one connection to the next.” The welcome she received from the villagers was beyond her comprehension. One of their own was returning home.

“We came up from the water’s edge and a big group had formed. We were walking in the middle of it. Two women were approaching me. Then my mum stepped out from behind and grabbed me and started crying,” says Shori.

Shori discovered that along with her half-brother and -sister back in Australia, she also had seven half-siblings on Rambutso – and a very large extended family. The amazing sense of community there caught her by surprise.

“In Australia the family unit is weakening, but over there, even the extended family are incredibly tight. I’m related to 4500 people on that island,” she says, laughing. It was a shock for Shori to discover this strange new world that could have been her own reality. “I just can’t imagine. I’m a city girl, a lousy camper and I’m scared of fish!”

Rambutso lies in an area known as the Coral →

Triangle, which is renowned for being home to three-quarters of the world's coral species. The island is a tropical paradise with lush forest that runs all the way to the water's edge. Yet life on Rambutso can be less than idyllic for its inhabitants. There are no modern conveniences – no electricity, hospital, toilets or running water. “The locals live traditionally. Life is about catching or growing the food you need,” says Shori.

Free diving for sea cucumbers for sale to Asian markets is the only source of income, which the locals use to buy necessities such as batteries and kerosene. Obesity-related disease is an issue (thanks to the islanders' taste for coconut milk and starchy vegetables such as taro and sweet potato), as is declining fish and sea cucumber stocks.

Two weeks after Shori's return to Sydney, her half-brother Fred died while free-diving for sea cucumber. Following his death, Shori and Dautzenberg threw themselves into creating an aid organisation called Friends of Rambutso. “Harvesting sea cucumber is not sustainable and there have been more deaths since,” says Shori. “We wanted to set up something that would provide them with an alternative income.”

Friends of Rambutso aims to aid the villagers in the areas of health, education, infrastructure, education and sustainable development. “We've been able to engage villagers at the grassroots level,” says Shori. “I've been able to say, ‘I'm one of you and I'm setting up this organisation to help you help yourself.’”



Shori and her Australian half-brother Drew on the island.

She also attributes the group's success to the legacy of her father's time on Rambutso. “My father was a hard-nosed teacher and several of his students – one is the head of the environmental science department at the University of Papua New Guinea, another is a partner at one of the top-three law firms in PNG – attribute their success to him. Today we see that goodwill carried over to Friends of Rambutso,” says Shori.

Several projects are under way, including the shipment to Rambutso of rechargeable batteries and a recharger (as well as the collection of the thousands of batteries discarded in the pristine waters surrounding the island), the installation of a solar panel as an alternative energy source, and the implementation of education programs

about sustainable fishing, safe free-diving practices and coral reef monitoring.

Shori has returned to Rambutso several times since her initial visit in 2006, but her life remains in Sydney. “I suppose I'd call myself a fairly typical inner-city resident,” says Shori. “I enjoy good strong coffee, wine in the evening, spicy food and access to information – none of these exist on Rambutso.”

But despite her lack of requisite gardening skills or the ability to catch and kill wild pig, Shori feels her connection with the island is growing. “It feels like I'm going home,” she says. “I'm feeling more and more connected with the land and the community.”

Last month, Shori got word from Rambutso that two near fatal free-diving accidents had been avoided due to the safe-diving instruction given to the locals by Pro Dive Drummoyne in Sydney. Already it seems the Friends of Rambutso are having an impact.

Although Shori is still coming to terms with the reasons her father kept part of her life a secret, she feels no regret for the amazing life she's lived – which has finally lead her back to Rambutso. “We're starting to make a story together and I feel an ownership of that story,” says Shori. “The other part – the part that happened up until I was 40 – was something that happened because of other people's decisions. But what's happening with Friends of Rambutso is something I'm choosing to do.” ●

For further information about Friends of Rambutso, visit [www.friendsofambutso.org](http://www.friendsofambutso.org).

CUT OUT

, white sandy beaches fringed with coconut trees  
and aquamarine water over reefs that drop steeply  
away close to the shore

“I felt very sorry for my mother because she'd just  
picked up one child and then lost another,” says  
Shori.

Unlike some other aid organisations, w

In our discussions

, as subsistence farmers

in March this year