4. The 'Pawa Meri' Project

Producing film biographies about women in Papua New Guinea

Ceridwen Spark

Introduction

Who should tell a life story? For whom should they write? These questions confront most life writers. Such questions are crucial for outsiders writing about Pacific lives but they are also important for insiders. In late 2011 I was in the process of planning a research project which involved producing six films about leading Papua New Guinean women. The project, to be funded by the gender division of AusAID, was to be conducted in collaboration with the Centre for Social and Creative Media at the University of Goroka. In the spirit of 'rewriting history from the bottom up', the project entitled 'Pawa Meri' (powerful or strong women) aimed to celebrate 'ordinary' women achieving extraordinary things.¹ Having written about some of the challenges facing educated women in Papua New Guinea (PNG), I considered it important to balance this account with stories about women in PNG who inspired. In particular, I wanted to do this in a way that would be accessible to Papua New Guineans. Because of low literacy levels, films seemed an appropriate way to communicate the life stories of Papua New Guinean women.

During this period I ran into a colleague with strong connections to PNG and a history of working there. Mentioning that I was compiling a list of possible subjects, I asked whether there were any women she would recommend to be included. Her response was swift and discouraging; she could not see the point of making *bik hets* (show offs) of a few individual women by focusing on their achievements. In her view, no one in PNG got anywhere without the support of *wontoks* (friends and family) and, consequently, using film to tell the stories of six individual women was fundamentally problematic. These biographical films would only cause division and jealousy. Moreover, the project represented a misguided attempt to 'help' and would contribute little of use to Papua New Guineans.

¹ R. Smyth, 'Reel Pacific History: The Pacific Islands on Film, Video and Television', in B. Lal (ed.), *Pacific Islands History: Journeys and Transformations* (Canberra 1992), 206.

Her criticisms were provocative. Apologising for being negative, she said, 'I just spend so much time trying to stop people from "helping"'. Her assumption appears to have been that in making these films and putting particular women forward as role models, I was motivated by a desire to show Papua New Guineans what to aspire to and how to 'do development'.

Was my desire to make these films motivated by misguided benevolence? Did celebrating particular kinds of women reflect problematic assumptions about the kinds of women who were worth honouring? And to what extent would my perceptions about the great women of PNG be different from local perspectives? Peter Hempenstall has discussed Marilyn Strathern's argument that in Melanesia, "'persons" cannot be abstracted, or conceptualised, distinct from the relations that bring them together'.² Whether or not one agrees with the particulars of Strathern's argument, Melanesian society does tend to be characterised by a greater emphasis on a person's place within a social group than is the case in most western settings.³ As such, it seems reasonable to query the appropriateness of biography – which tends to focus on the achievements of individual, 'bounded' subjects – for telling stories in PNG.

In what follows, I reflect on these points and the ways in which they have helped me to think through the aims, processes and intended outcomes of the Pawa Meri project. At the time of writing, the project is halfway through its 18-month life. I make no claim to have resolved these matters, nor to pretend they will be resolved when the project is completed. Rather, the essay discusses some thoughts and experiences so far in order to highlight some of the challenges, practical and ethical, that are involved in the production of cross-cultural life stories.

Film-making in PNG

The question of who is telling the story is especially pertinent in a medium as powerful as film. In her essay, 'Reel Pacific History: The Pacific Islands on Film, Video and Television', Rosaleen Smyth recalls Lenin's description of cinema as 'the most persuasive of all the arts'. She writes:

The makers of film history, like the conventional historians of the print media, are all motivated by some idea about the purpose of history – to show how it really was; to rewrite history from the bottom up; to put

2 P. Hempenstall, 'Sniffing the Person: Writing Lives in Pacific History', in B. Lal and P. Hempenstall (eds), *Pacific Lives, Pacific Places: Bursting Boundaries in Pacific History* (Canberra 2006), 43.

3 Martha Macintyre discusses and disagrees with Strathern in M. Macintyre, 'Violent Bodies and Vicious Exchanges: Objectification and Personification in the Massim', *Social Analysis*, 37 (1995), 29–43.

a minority viewpoint or a woman's eye view; to decolonise colonial history by viewing it through an ethno- as opposed to Euro-centric lens; or to promote national consciousness.⁴

Film-makers have different agendas, so it is important to consider how films reflect the values and beliefs of those making them and the eras in which they are produced. The following 'potted history' of film-making in PNG helps to outline the politics of representation that has preceded and informed the making of the Pawa Meri film biographies.

Film-making in PNG is usually thought to have begun with the making of *Pearls and Savages* (1921), Frank Hurley's now famous depiction of his journey through the Torres Strait and into two villages in the Gulf of Papua. As Liz McNiven, Senior Curator of Indigenous Collections at the National Film and Sound Archive, writes:

This film may appear ethnographic but Frank Hurley was primarily a photographer. His interest lay in the commercial image rather than the production of an ethnographic record: he used the camera to create art rather than to document actuality.⁵

Bearing in mind the fluid boundary between ethnography and art, film-making in PNG can be said to have been primarily ethnographic until at least the 1950s. In these films, the 'natives' and their ways are the objects of curiosity and explanation. Hank Nelson reflects: '[t]he anthropologists, particularly Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, had made good use of moving film by the 1950s. But all this was taking images from Papua New Guinea and displaying them to astonish and inform distant audiences'.⁶

While ethnographic films are still made in PNG, something of a shift occurred in the 1950s when the Australian Commonwealth Film Unit (CFU) became the main producer of films about PNG. As Jane Landman notes, the CFU 'made a series of documentaries on Papua and New Guinea for ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] Television', the primary purpose of which was to inform Australians watching 'at home' about the 'progress' being made by their northern neighbours. These films were 'friendly and ... not detached, salacious or sensationalising'.⁷ However, like the anthropological films before them, they were not made with indigenous audiences in mind. 'Neither the ABC nor the CFU in the early 1960s, in Australia or in the territories, encompassed

4 Smyth, 'Reel Pacific History', 205–6.

5 Curator's notes, available online at aso.gov.au/titles/documentaries/pearls-and-savages/notes.

6 H. Nelson, 'Write History, Reel History', in B. Lal (ed.), *Pacific Islands History: Journeys and Transformations* (Canberra 1992), 190.

7 J. Landman, 'At Home With Our Colonial Work: ABC TV's New Look at New Guinea', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 24: 3 (2010), 357.

Indigenous peoples in their civic address. Papua New Guineans were “the problem” or “curiosities”.⁸ Maslyn Williams, the senior producer appointed to the CFU series, estimates that 40 films about PNG were made during the ten years between 1956 and 1966.⁹ Even though the unit ‘aimed to film in all districts, and at times ... encouraged Papua New Guineans to direct the camera at what they thought was important’, the primary purpose of the films was to tell Australians about Papua New Guinea rather than to explore Papua New Guinean perspectives.¹⁰

Following the period in which the CFU was the leading producer of films about PNG, politics and art took a postcolonial turn. Reflecting this, some of the expatriate film-makers working in the country began to challenge the idea that Papua New Guinean traditions needed to be abandoned in favour of modernisation. Leading up to and after independence in 1975, film-making in PNG was dominated by outsiders, including some who have come to be synonymous with films about PNG. These include British-Australian film-maker, Chris Owen, who later became the Director of the National Film Institute; and famously, Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson. Nelson comments of this group:

Robin Anderson, Bob Connolly, Gary Kildea, Les McLaren, Dennis O'Rourke and Chris Owen ... were in Papua New Guinea for long periods, learnt Tok Pisin, and were prepared to spend months in the field to get the raw footage, and months in the editing room to shape the content accurately and elegantly.¹¹

Considering this dominance by outsiders in *Taking Pictures*, the self-reflective documentary he co-directed with Annie Stiven, Les McLaren states, ‘... the cameras have been mostly in our hands’.¹²

Despite the proliferation of expatriate film-makers operating in PNG in the decade or so after independence, the period also spawned some examples of Papua New Guinean film-making. These were largely contingent on the willingness of individual expatriates to support local film-makers. Two key films to note in this early period of collaboration are *Tukana: Husat i Asua* and *Stolen Moments*.¹³ In the case of *Tukana*, a feature film, Albert Toro, the now well-known Bougainvillean actor and star of the film, wrote the semi-autobiographical script and co-directed the film with Chris Owen, who was

8 Ibid., 367.

9 J. Landman, ‘Visualising the Subject of Development: 1950s Government Film-making in the Territories of Papua New Guinea’, *Journal of Pacific History*, 45: 1 (2010), 72.

10 Nelson, ‘Write History, Reel History’, 192.

11 Ibid., 197.

12 L. McLaren and A. Stiven, directors, *Taking Pictures*, Australia (1996).

13 A. Toro and C. Owen, directors, *Tukana: Husat i Asua* (1982); M. Wilson and N. Sullivan, directors, *Stolen Moments* (1989).

also the producer. The lesser known *Stolen Moments* represents a collaboration between Mount Hagen film-maker, Maggie Wilson, and North American academic, Nancy Sullivan. Wilson wrote, co-directed and shot the film with the support of Sullivan who was 'producer and co-director'. Sullivan notes:

The importance of this production is that, notwithstanding my presence, it was local to Mt Hagen on all levels: from the themes and attitudes of the story, to the financing, the production goals, and the organization of the project itself. Here, as in other productions, it was more the manner in which the story was made than the presence/absence of a European that rendered the project "indigenous".¹⁴

The effort to support indigenous film-makers was consolidated somewhat in the early 1980s with the establishment of the *Skul Bilong Wokim Piksa* in Goroka, the capital of the Eastern Highlands Province. Sullivan has discussed the history and role of the *Skul* more fully than I can here.¹⁵ Suffice it to say that the *Skul* was set up by Goroka architect, Australian Paul Frame, and that it was instrumental in training several of the country's now more established film-makers, including Martin Maden, the director of cinematography for *Tinpi Run*, the maker of *Crater Mountain Story* and, more recently, *Return to High Valley*.¹⁶ Elsewhere I have discussed *The Last Real Men*, a film made by another graduate of the *Skul*, Ruth Ketau, who currently works for the National Film Institute (NFI).¹⁷

The recent films by Maden and Ketau provide evidence of indigenous film-making in PNG. Notwithstanding such examples, it is fair to say that there was minimal activity during the 1990s and in the early years of this millennium. Reflecting this lack of activity, Kingston Namun, a blogger from Divine Word University, wrote in 2003:

From Demolition Man to Spiderman to Star Wars, Papua New Guineans have watched these Western films so many times that they have become household names. Whether they be on DVD, video cassettes or on HBO, we have become so accustomed to American movies that we never give a second thought to the possibility that we could make our own.¹⁸

¹⁴ N. Sullivan, 'Film and Television Production in Papua New Guinea: How Media Become the Message', *Public Culture*, 5 (1993), 544.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ P. Nengo, director, *Tinpi Run* (1990); M. Maden, director, *Crater Mountain Story*, Papua New Guinea, 52min (2006); M. Maden, director, *Return to High Valley* (2012).

¹⁷ R. Ketau, director, *The Last Real Men: The Nehiya Initiation* (2011). This is discussed in Ceridwen Spark, 'Sisters Doing it for Themselves', (forthcoming).

¹⁸ K. Namun, 'Film Making in PNG', available online at malumnalu.blogspot.com.au/2008/09/why-film-making-is-not-taking-off-in.html.

Happily, over the last decade, the increasing accessibility of film-making equipment has resulted in the production of more films by Papua New Guineans. At least a dozen PNG-made films were shown at the 2012 Human Rights Film Festival in Port Moresby, a festival which explicitly highlights development issues via a focus on 'the current situation in Papua New Guinea and what can be done to further implement human rights in those key areas'.¹⁹ At the inaugural Human Rights Film Festival in 2010, only two of the films on the whole program were about PNG and both were funded by externally based aid agencies. As such, the number shown in 2012 represents a significant increase. Supporting this, film-makers I have interviewed tell stories of people they know, including village-dwelling and older people, documenting everything from their own life stories to environmental change in their local areas. For instance, at home in Melbourne, I recently watched a music video about police destroying homes at the Paga Hill settlement in Port Moresby in May 2012.²⁰ This demonstrates that, via the internet, home-made stories are being communicated 'unadulterated to audiences around the world', thereby adding to the public record of PNG by its peoples.²¹

In addition to representing themselves, Papua New Guineans also want to watch themselves. Historically, they have had limited opportunities to see people on screen whose lives, concerns and humour resemble their own. As Llane Munau, a Bougainvillean woman who works at the NFI says, 'a lot of Papua New Guineans want to watch themselves but they don't have any opportunities'.²² Film-makers have noted the 'visceral power and connection' viewers feel when they see people who look like them and with whom they can identify on screen.²³ Such comments reveal the intricate link between the ethnicities and identifications of the film-makers, the ways in which this impacts on the films they make, and the capacity of these films to engage local audiences.

The above analysis reveals a gradual, but encouraging, increase in the number of films made by Papua New Guineans. The question of who Papua New Guineans are addressing when they make films is, however, little discussed. In the next section, I consider the 'imagined audience' in films made in and about PNG, in order to reflect more deeply on the importance of addressing Papua New Guinean audiences.

19 Human Rights Film Network, available online at www.humanrightsfilmnetwork.org/festivals/papua-new-guinea-human-rights-film-festival.

20 PNGexposed, available online at pngexposed.wordpress.com/2012/12/18/human-cost-of-paga-hill-demolition-captured-in-new-music-video/.

21 N. Sullivan, 'How Media Become the Message in Papua New Guinea: A Coda', available online at www.nancysullivan.net/articles.htm.

22 L. Munau, interview, April 14, Goroka, PNG (2012).

23 S. Frilot, in K. Hankin, 'And Introducing ... The Female Director: Documentaries about Women Film-makers as Feminist Activism', *NWSA Journal*, 19: 1 (2007), 68.

The question of audience: who is watching the films?

With the exception of some popular local films, including *Tukana*, *Tin Pis Run* and, more recently, *The Road to Wabag* and *Return to High Valley*, the overwhelming majority of films made in and about PNG have been directed to an international audience. This causes consternation among Papua New Guineans of all backgrounds, whether educated middle class, student or village dweller. As Les McLaren shows in *Taking Pictures*, there is resistance to filming in public places because of the widespread belief that these images are used to portray Papua New Guineans in a negative light overseas.²⁴ Moreover, the national ire about this is not confined to criticism of expatriate film-makers. For instance, Kymberley Kepore, the Engan woman who made *Tanim*, has been criticised for making a film for international audiences that depicts the people of Enga in a poor light.²⁵ Shot during the 2002 election in Enga, *Tanim* reveals the violence, vote rigging and corruption involved in local efforts to secure power. The repercussions of making this powerful film have been more difficult and lasting for Kepore than for the outsiders with whom she collaborated on the project.

To make matters worse, the few films that have addressed local audiences in PNG have done so in explicitly pedagogical and patronising ways. While, as noted above, the imagined audience of the CFU films was Australians watching at home, in the early 1960s the unit did produce some films for local audiences. These were designed to teach PNG people the behaviour that the Australian government and its representatives saw as desirable and appropriate. Reflecting the broader attempt to smooth their transition into a modern democracy, these productions tended to construct the newly constituted group of ethnically diverse peoples known as 'Papuans' and 'New Guineans' as inferior beings in need of instruction.

One such film, *A Woman Called Gima*, explicitly addresses women.²⁶ Encouraging local women to participate in women's groups and through these to learn about good hygiene and health, the 21-minute film models the modern, efficient and, by implication, superior way for women to get together. The 'star' of the film is Gima, a neatly dressed and apparently educated Papua New Guinean woman who stands out from the other women in the village. Gima's distinction

²⁴ *Taking Pictures*, Australia (1996).

²⁵ J. Frankham, director, *Tanim* (2002).

²⁶ M. Williams, director, *A Woman Called Gima* (1963).

is enacted physically; she is shown standing apart from the other women, shaking her head disapprovingly at those who talk and make *bilums* during meetings. The script is as follows:

This is Gima. She is the wife of the new school teacher. She shakes her head sadly when she sees what a bad meeting this is ... Gima ... knows that the Secretary, Mary, should keep a book with the names of the women who come to each meeting and should write down what happens. Gima also knows that Dora, the treasurer, has to keep a book and know how much money the club has saved. Gima knows all these things and thinks she can help them.²⁷

Gima then proceeds to show the apparently incapable and too relaxed village women a 'better' way, including how to hold an orderly meeting, mark attendance and manage a budget. By the end of the film, the women of the village are doing as the film (via Gima) instructs. The clear message is that they will reap the benefits in the form of healthier and more productive lives. Through these behaviours, previously unfocused and unknowing village women can themselves become women like Gima.

Given this history, it becomes crucial to consider how to make films for a local audience in a way that does not replicate the pedagogical imperialism of the past. While the involvement of Papua New Guineans does not guarantee either that power inequities will be flattened out or that the films produced will be well-received by local audiences, it is an important first step. In particular, the challenge is to work across cultural differences to try to achieve co-authorship.

Collaboration and control: co-authoring the Pawa Meri films

Film is different from the loneliness of writing: it is cooperative, different skills are required and the technology forces compromises... But undoubtedly the most satisfying involvement is at the level of producer/director – keeping close to all activities and always having the right to influence, if not command.²⁸

So wrote Hank Nelson, reflecting on his involvement in the production of the film *Angels of War* which explores the story of Papua New Guinean involvement in World War II.²⁹ Nelson's description suggests that the role of 'producer/director'

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Nelson, 'Write History, Reel History', 199.

²⁹ G. Daws and A. Pike, directors, *Angels of War* (1982).

is akin to that of 'author' in that it involves 'influence, if not command'. If the Pawa Meri films are to reflect collaboration and mutual control, the power to command (to author) must also be shared. It is not enough to have Papua New Guineans involved as technical crew. But co-authorship is challenging at the best of times. Nelson co-directed and co-produced with two other Australian men, Gavan Daws and Andrew Pike, to make *Angels of War*. In the case of the Pawa Meri films, the process of 'authorship' involves ongoing cross-cultural interaction, including between me, an Australian born and raised in PNG; the German producer, Verena Thomas; and the women who are the subjects and directors of the films, as well as their families and friends. This situation is variously stimulating and difficult.

Each of the six Pawa Meri films will be directed by a Papua New Guinean woman. It is hoped this will help the stories to be seen through PNG eyes. But this is not a matter of 'handing over the means of production' in the naïve belief that when 'outsiders' relinquish control authentic PNG films will emerge.³⁰ For a start, the funding, provided by the gender division of AusAID, entails unstated obligations on the part of those involved. We could not, for example, make a film celebrating a woman's decision to remain subservient to a husband who beats her. The sceptical colleague I mentioned at the outset of this essay might perceive our need to convey certain messages and not others as imperialism masquerading as development. However, the alternative – that is, that the films do not get made at all – would seem a pity given the power of the cinematic medium to shift perceptions and institute change. 'Handing over' control might be acceptable and effective if one perceives all to be well in the world of gender relations in PNG. The alternative view is that cross-cultural interaction around gender issues offers an opportunity for people of different backgrounds and mindsets to respectfully listen to and acknowledge other points of view and, in doing so, reach a new position together. The best way to illustrate this is by example.

Choosing the subjects

I lived in Goroka for some months in 2012. During this time, I had discussions with many people to try to identify six women about whom we might make these biographical films. In the course of these discussions, various Papua New Guineans made clear that they valued leaders who remained connected with the 'grass roots', as opposed to those who direct their energies to shoring up their own privilege and power. Given PNG's much-discussed diversity, it was

30 Sullivan discusses the matter of "'handing over" the means of production' in 'How Media Become the Message', 2003.

important to try to achieve a balance across the series in terms of the province of origin, area of contribution and expertise of the six women, and as far as possible in relation to other factors, such as age range. It would not be appropriate, for example, to make six films about educated, employed women living in urban centres such as Port Moresby and Goroka. Doing so would risk alienating the majority of PNG's population, many of whom live in rural areas, may never be employed in the formal economy and are unlikely to have completed secondary, let alone tertiary, education. In PNG, educated women are often portrayed as 'inauthentic and non-representative'.³¹ This construction can be used to dismiss their claims and exclude them from power. As such, and while aware that it would be wrong to make six films about formally educated, urban women, I would be reluctant to pretend that this is not an important group to represent in the context of six films about leading women in PNG.

These issues are pertinent when deciding whether or not the educated daughter of an Australian teacher and a well-known politician ought to be one of the subjects for the films. Some expressed doubts, including the educated young women involved in the project, who thought this potential subject would be considered privileged and thus hard to relate to. I was of the view that educated, socio-economically advantaged people of mixed heritage were part of contemporary PNG and thus no more or less authentic than anyone else. Moreover, in order to avoid excluding the category of young women, we needed a subject who was less advanced in years than most of the women we were identifying.

Arguably, my desire to include a younger, educated woman with Australian parentage among the six 'Pawa Meris' simply reflects my own cultural biases, including a tendency to value youth and a sense of comfort with the 'middle-class'. Nevertheless, this does not mean the outcome – exploring and celebrating the life of someone whose experience is atypical in PNG – is wrong. Indeed, the exploration of exceptional lives can reveal a privileged person's very ordinariness and humanity.

I am told by the director working on the film about this subject, and who has already conducted most of the filming, that the team involved with her is now excited and happy to tell her story, precisely because the person in question values her connection to PNG and its people above a potentially easier and more comfortable life in Australia. For the team, such choices reveal the subject's strength of character and commitment.

31 M. Macintyre, "'Hear Us, Women of Papua New Guinea': Melanesian Women and Human Rights', in A. Hilsdon, M. Macintyre, V. Mackie and M. Stivens (eds), *Human Rights and Gender Politics: Perspectives on the Asia-Pacific Region*, (London 2000), 153.

Now it is my turn to be challenged. Just as the Papua New Guineans working on the Pawa Meri films have been forced to confront their prejudices so too must I, for in telling this particular life story, as in a number of the Pawa Meri films, the subject's strong Christian beliefs are a key part of how she narrates her resilience and success. As a secular Australian, I perceive the widespread religious devotion of Papua New Guineans to be an explicable but sometimes alienating facet of life. But I cannot dismiss or 'write out' the enormous significance of Christianity in this context. As such, co-authoring this life story with a devout director and subject will require a genuine sharing of control, while endeavouring to ensure the film does not become a vehicle for proselytising.

Conclusion: transforming the genre from within the Pacific?

Producing jointly told stories across cultural and religious differences is no easy task and we have a long way to go. Nevertheless, at this point in the Pawa Meri project, I do not consider the collaboration irredeemably problematic in the ways my sceptical colleague implied. Although there are challenges involved, co-authoring these life stories seems a worthwhile endeavour because in the process those of us involved are required to confront and question the beliefs we hold dear, and which differentiate us, while at the same time delineate new ground through a growing sense of the values and beliefs we share. I also think it is unlikely the films will make *bik hets* of a few individual women. Rather, what seems to be emerging are films in which six strong and courageous women reveal, in true Papua New Guinean style, the extent to which they are made, sustained and enabled by those around them. As such, I hope that the Pawa Meri films will come to represent an exciting and unique contribution to the genre of life stories, requiring those of us involved in their production to think differently about our sometimes too 'de-socialised' accounts of the lives of individual subjects. This being so, rather than reflecting the imposition of a western genre on Pacific peoples, the films may come to represent an instance in which the genre itself was transformed by being practised collaboratively in a new location.

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