9. Celebrating My Journey

The Value of Autobiography in Recording History

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Why do public figures in the Pacific need to record their lives? What are the benefits, pitfalls, opportunities and challenges of this enterprise? I cannot speak for others but in my case I can safely say that I did not always intend to write about my life. Indeed, I was about 55 years old when I started to collect the materials that make up my autobiography: *Laef Blong Mi: From Village to Nation: An Autobiography*.¹ If you haven't read my book, here is a very brief background of my life. I grew up in a village in rural Vanuatu on the island of Malakula and began formal education at age 11. After eight years of schooling, I trained to be a church pastor and worked as Christian Education Director of the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu for six years. During this time I was heavily involved in the struggle for independence, and was elected to the first Parliament of independent Vanuatu. I served as minister in various portfolios for 16 years. But in the election of 1995, I failed to regain my seat.

Personal reasons for writing my autobiography

I had felt that I still had the support from my electorate which I used to enjoy until that point. However, the results of the election showed otherwise, because my support base had been split between my former Vanua'aku Pati and the new National United Party which I had joined. My defeat hit me somewhat hard and it took me a while to fully recover from the hurt this inflicted on me. As I reflected on what might have contributed to my downfall, one factor that appeared to be the major cause was the infighting within the leadership of the Vanua'aku Pati which resulted in the split of that party and, another, the ensuing false accusations thrown at those of us who stood up for our principles. The anger that I felt stirred me up to do something about it, and especially to expose the truth behind the political turmoil and intrigue which had preceded the election.

1 S.J. Regenvanu, *Laef Blong Mi: From Village to Nation: An Autobiography* (Port Vila 2004).

Meanwhile, many of my friends who had stood by me and had worked together with me expressed their support and encouraged me to return to the field the next time around and re-contest. I didn't want to do that, but some encouraged me to write a book about my life and my experience as a statesman. The idea of writing down my experience as a leader had also been mooted by one of my own children. When he listened to me trying to tell him and his brothers about the experiences I had in the period leading up to the independence of Vanuatu, and my work in the government of Vanuatu, he suggested that I should write all that down. I think he could see that I had a great deal that would be of value to them and to other young people who had not actually witnessed these things themselves, and that trying to relate this verbally would not do justice to it.

So the combination of the hurt I felt over my downfall and the encouragement I received to record my experiences gave me the impetus to want to write. And at that stage I had time on my hands that I did not know what to do with. Indeed I had not anticipated a situation in my life when I would have nothing to do, as I had always been busy doing something and, might I add, I loved to be busy. I therefore had not prepared myself for when I would be without a job and have the associated free time.

I felt I owed it to those people who, like me, loved Vanuatu and had made their own contribution to its wellbeing, to share with them the part I myself had played in the service of the country. They had made their own contributions too, in one form or another, in making me who I was, both as an individual and as a leader and statesman. Without them, I would not have been able to accomplish what I had up to that point, both in the church and in national politics and government. This feeling of indebtedness was another reason why I wanted to write, to give something back to all those who had influenced and shaped my life. Furthermore, I was sure that there were people out there who would be interested to know a little bit more about me and that they would be interested to read a book about my life. And now I had no excuse not to do something about that, as I had time on my side to do it.

The need to record important history

Another reason for writing was to place on record an account of the colonial situation that existed in our country, and the engagement of our people in the process of achieving political emancipation, popularly referred to as 'our political struggle' to free our country from colonial rule. Indeed, my lifetime up to that point had been part of the political struggle waged by the people of Vanuatu to regain their right to human dignity, human rights and justice, national identity and international recognition.

Our colonial situation was quite unique in the Pacific, and perhaps in the world, and in a way quite absurd. Our country was ruled under three regimes – the British National Service, the French National Service and the Joint administration, popularly known as the Condominium. None of these existed for the benefit of the indigenous people of the New Hebrides (the name of our islands before independence). In fact we were legally stateless: ‘no people’ under the law in our own country. The Anglo-French Condominium was totally unjust and openly discriminatory in that it existed to serve foreign interests and to promote their establishment in the country with no formal recognition of the indigenous people of the land. The people were left to fend for themselves for their survival and existence in so far as formal governance was concerned. For their subsistence and community life our people relied on their land and their culture and traditional wisdom and experience, which had sustained them for thousands of years.

However, the things that were important to us as a people – our language and culture, our land and our unity – were disappearing before our eyes and we had no means to address this as we had no voice in the governing of our country. The only option available to us was to unify ourselves into a strong political force with unity of purpose.

Fortunately, the churches were on our side. They were the sole providers of any level of education and health for the people of New Hebrides during most of the colonial period. This explains why it was that the first leaders in the fight for political independence and justice for the land were all church people, many of whom were ordained clergy and lay leaders of the church. My own church’s involvement, the Presbyterian Church, in the struggle was significant.

Our independence and the building of our new nation, Vanuatu, was not a ready-made package prepared by our colonial masters to be handed over for our adoption. As is covered in some detail in my book, we had to fight every inch of the way for justice and our rights, and even the right to formulate our own constitution. In the process we became unpopular in the eyes of the establishment. We risked our lives in the struggle but the goals and objectives of what that fight was all about were worth the sacrifice.

While this period in our history was abhorrent, and something one would want to forget rather than trying to remember or glorify it, I hold the view that it is an important part of Vanuatu’s history which should not be overlooked. It must be made known and not forgotten. In a way, I consider myself somewhat fortunate to have experienced living under that colonial situation. I therefore felt duty bound to tell future generations of Vanuatu what I could about our colonial

condition. And I have seen the proof of the rightness of this decision as I watch the reaction of people today whenever I talk about the colonial condition that Vanuatu was once under. They react with intense interest, disbelief and dismay.

The other side of the coin is that it is important for people to know how our country became emancipated from the colonial stranglehold. This was the political struggle of all our people. It took certain important strategic approaches to take the country out of its chaotic, colonial system. These included the development of a new level of national consciousness, unity of purpose, awareness of our land rights, political consciousness and willingness and commitment to make sacrifices to achieve the ultimate goal of winning back freedom, justice and our political independence. It is important that all of this not be lost sight of. People who take these things for granted make a weak, confused and corrupt nation; but knowledge, appreciation and memory of this struggle make a strong nation as Vanuatu should be.

An opportunity to bring some issues out into the open

In addition, I saw the writing of the book not just as an opportunity to record our struggle for independence but also as an opportunity to expose what I knew about the period that came after, especially after 1987 when, in a sense, all we had worked for began to fall apart. I wanted to bring out into the open what I considered to be the root causes of many of the political and national problems that Vanuatu has experienced for a long time until today. I wanted to give my side of what I considered to be the rottenness and corruption within the leadership of the Vanua'aku Pati and the national government at that time. I saw that selfish interests and greed for power and money had taken a strong grip on some leaders, who were intent on resorting to any course of action to achieve their desires, and which manifested itself in the demonstration and riot of 1988 in Port Vila, the split within the Vanua'aku Pati, and the dishonesty and lies fed to the people of Vanuatu to cover up the wrongs of the leaders.

It had never occurred to me before that people in leadership positions in political parties or government could behave like this, and so I wanted to record and expose such behaviour to set the record straight, and as a warning for future leaders.

To encourage others to write

My final reason for writing the book was to encourage other people to also write their stories and to give their own account of what happened at that time and the part they played in these events.

We Ni-Vanuatu, like other Pacific Island people, come from cultures in which the traditional means of communication is oral. We pass information from one person to another or from one generation to another by word of mouth, whether through conversation or by means of stories, myths, legends, and songs, or in art forms such as painting, drawing or dances. Information about the past is kept in the memory of individuals and is often shared only with certain people under tight customary rules.

The point should also be made here that people of Vanuatu, like their fellow Islanders throughout the Pacific, have a wealth of information and knowledge which they do not necessarily want to share with others, unless they are encouraged to do so for a particular reason. It may be that they think the information and knowledge may be of no interest to anyone else, or they are reluctant to share tribal 'secrets' with outsiders. Also, when young people move out of the village to go to school or to live in town, the older generation may not have any traditionally approved channel through which to pass on their knowledge or the stories of their lives. When the information held by one custodian, or even a whole generation of people, is not recorded, it can be lost forever, thereby depriving the incoming generation of the heritage that should be theirs by right. I recall a remark once made at a memorial occasion for a dead member of a community: 'Our dead are buried with a wealth of information and knowledge accumulated over many years of their life time and we are left poorer as a result.'

There has to be a new way for our people to pass on to others the wealth of information and knowledge associated with their life experience. They have to *write*, especially for the younger and future generations of their own community who were not part of a particular period in the life of their country but who are now literate, and often computer literate as well, and are used to accessing written information. The knowledge of that history can have an important bearing on the country and its people from one generation to another, as discussed earlier in this paper. And the onus is on those people, the leaders who had the vision and who directed the course of action towards the realisation of their vision, to pass their experiences on to the coming generations of younger people in a written form.

I was keen that those of us who were the leaders at the time of independence should tell the story of our experience. While we all were involved in the development of Vanuatu in more or less the same period towards one overall national goal, the accounts given by each would convey different aspects. The diverse accounts would reflect the varying circumstances of the contributors. And all this taken together would make a very rich and valuable account of what happened during that period.

So my last reason for writing was to encourage my compatriots to come out and write their own versions of our history. I believe that those of us who were leaders at that time have the ability to write, given the level of education each has achieved and the free time we have. I dedicated my book as a challenge to other Ni-Vanuatu to write.

Why write an autobiography?

The four reasons above represent the main thrust and aim of my book. But why write it as an autobiography? And why do I want others to write their autobiographies?

Firstly, I wanted our people to hear their history from us, the first-hand actors, and not through someone else telling our story. No one is better qualified to communicate an experience than the people who themselves have been part of that experience, whether as actors themselves or as recipients. I want our people to write their own life stories in the way they want to tell them and in their own words, and not have someone else writing about them. I believe our people will feel prouder to hear from their own leaders directly. What they hear from us will make a greater impact on their lives than if non-nationals or non-indigenous try to relate it, as has often been the case in the past. Another advantage of having Pacific Islanders themselves write about their experiences is that the language used will be simpler and easier for Pacific people to understand. Pacific writers telling the stories of their own lives will use less complicated English, the language of storytelling, rather than the jargon and academic language of university researchers and non-indigenous writers.

Secondly, as I was writing my book I felt it would be helpful to persons reading it to have not only the historical facts about our struggle for independence but also some idea about the prevailing conditions and circumstances at the time, and the environment surrounding my life at different stages. It was for this reason that I included such details as my childhood, my life at school and my family life, as well as references to my personal conduct, hobbies and beliefs. Such anecdotal details help readers to see and understand the conditions of life at that time and the background to the historical events, seen through the eyes

of someone who actually experienced them. In addition, the village life and the school conditions I experienced are now a thing of the past, but still of great interest to today's children and young people, as well as an essential background for understanding the context of the historical events that took place.

Such anecdotes also help the reader to understand a person better with all his or her character, sentiments and personality, even if they have not seen that person. In addition, personal stories about a writer's life help to lighten the writing and make reading easier and more interesting, as the readers see the human side of politics and national life reflected in the values and failings of the main characters. Many people who have read the book have commented favourably on it and said they were especially interested and intrigued by the personal details and stories. For example, a recent review I found on the internet commented:

The narrative brims with cultural insights, particularly in the early sections. From learning the lost art of fishing with black sea slugs to discovering the rituals of a Vanuatuan circumcision ceremony, the reader encounters a whole host of information about traditional life on the islands. Despite having a total population of fewer than 250,000 people, the archipelago is divided into a series of communities that differ enormously from one another – so much so that when Regenvanu went away to school on mainland Efate he was the only pupil there who spoke his language.

However, perhaps most striking of all is the revelation that Regenvanu, having no official birth date and finding himself obliged to 'pinpoint when [he] had begun' by the Franco-British colonial administration, plumped for the date 1 April 1945, both from a sense of lightheartedness – because this is the Western April Fools' Day – and because this is the day the UN was founded.²

Even strangers come up to me in the supermarket or on the road and say that they recognise me from the photos in the book, and that they feel they know me. To me this is a result of the 'personal touch' that comes with autobiography.

Another point I'd like to add here is that I was writing at a time when my level of interest in national politics was very high. I cared about the welfare of the country, and about the work and development we had made. I believe political writing, especially in the form of autobiography, is best done at an active age and at a time when one is still politically focused. Also, at that stage my mental capacity to remember and evaluate my life experience was still at a high level. I could still

2 Available online at ayearofreadingtheworld.com/2012/08/06/vanuatua-a-global-village.

remember vividly those experiences I had had, which were so important to me. They became my passion, the driving force within me to make me want to share my life experience with others. Accounts of historical events given subjectively in autobiography can have this quality of genuineness, passion, and a sense of purpose and urgency that is often missing from other forms of writing. This is why I think that autobiography is an ideal form for historical writing.

The challenges of writing in the Pacific

I would like to finish this paper with a short discussion of the technical side of writing and especially of the challenges that we Pacific writers face to get our work published.

My personal experience

Once I decided what to write about I got down to it. I simply wrote down as much as I could remember, as if I was telling it. When I had exhausted what I could remember about one topic, I would start on another topic. Often I would get up in the middle of the night or in the early hours of the morning and write what I had recalled, and insert it in the appropriate section.

I wrote the entire book in my own handwriting. I did not have a typewriter to work with, let alone a computer. As I pointed out in the book, I was fortunate at the time that there was someone with the time and knowledge in using computers who offered to type my written manuscripts for me. Initially it was not easy for that person, as my writing is not easy for other people to read. Even I find it difficult to read my own writing at times.

Also, I had been collecting photos of interest over the years, resulting in a large collection of photo albums now sitting in my house. I had been doing this simply as a hobby I enjoyed, but when the need to use photos and pictures to go with the stories that I had written came up, I had a huge collection to choose from to publish with different parts of the book. I believe the photos have helped to make the book more enjoyable to read, and I have watched many people flipping over the pages just looking at the photos.

However, my written manuscript would have remained just that had it not been for the active interest of other people with the skills and knowledge I did not have. Without these people, the book would never have been published. I have mentioned the assistance in the typing of the book. But the greatest assistance came from a long-time friend, Dr Howard Van Trease, who, as an historian, took a keen and active interest in my project. His close connection with the University

of the South Pacific (USP), and especially the Institute of Pacific Studies (IPS), helped to facilitate the final process in getting my book published as we have it today. And I am forever grateful to Howard for that.

Difficulties for writers today

Having said that, however, I know for a fact that there are people today in my own country, and also in Fiji where I have worked, and I am sure in other Pacific countries generally who, like me, appreciate the value and importance of telling their own stories but have great difficulty in getting those stories published. I know of many who have actually written down the story of their lives, what they have done for their people and their countries, and what that means to them. Many have lived through exciting times and experiences and want to share their experiences with the incoming generations through writing. But often they are frustrated because they arrive at a point where they can make no further progress. They lack the finance and the technical assistance in the form of editing and organising their material, so it just sits somewhere in their house, unfinished and inaccessible to others.

Some have managed to have their life stories written by other people and published by them, but this is not the same as an autobiographical account. Many people today with experiences to tell are getting older and are losing their memories; and some have already died, thus missing out on the opportunity to pass on their stories.

This situation should become a challenge to us as individuals and as institutions. What role can we play to get people who have something worth sharing in written form to do so while their interest and passion is still high?

I believe that IPS, which was founded by Professor Ron Crocombe and had as its primary goal to encourage research and writing by Pacific people and facilitate publication of their works, has been replaced at USP by a more conventional publishing operation. IPS subsidised its publications and did not pay royalties to the authors, but was able to publish books by Pacific Island writers as a result. This might not have been accepted by publishing houses operating for profit. The loss of IPS means that opportunities of financial and editorial support for Pacific writers are fewer nowadays. I am not aware of any other publishing options in the Pacific similar to that provided in the past by IPS.

I hope that this book might be an important first step in understanding the difficulties Pacific authors face and may result in a plan to assist them in their efforts. I would suggest, for example, that programs be run by universities in the region to teach the art of book writing and publication. In this respect I would hope that one outcome of this book would be to encourage regular opportunities for discovering and assisting potential authors in the Pacific.

This text is taken from *Political Life Writing in the Pacific:
Reflections on Practice*, edited by Jack Corbett and Brij V. Lal,
published 2015 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.