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## Sisters doing it for themselves: Women and filmmaking in Papua New Guinea

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### Abstract

Despite the financial and cultural odds against them, a small number of women in Papua New Guinea (PNG) are involved in filmmaking, as producers, directors, camera operators or combining all these roles. In this article I discuss three recent examples of women's involvement in filmmaking in PNG. The analysis demonstrates that by making films about and for their fellow Papua New Guineans, Papua New Guinean women are addressing and defining what constitutes 'community' and 'development' from an insider perspective. As the first article to focus specifically on the issue of gender, the article provides an important update on the subject of filmmaking in PNG.

### Key words

Papua New Guinea, women, filmmaking, community, cultural production

### Introduction

Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, Professor of Film Studies at the University of Nebraska writes:

In the 1970s, 1980s, and the 1990s, there has been an international rise in the number of women filmmakers, both independent and studio directors. Women have been prominent as filmmakers in both developed and developing countries. ... For all of these women, the need to make films is a fierce desire they must simply obey, no matter the cost.<sup>1</sup>

Foster's statement has resonance in Papua New Guinea (PNG) where I have lived and worked in recent years. Despite the financial and cultural odds against them, a small number of women in PNG are involved in filmmaking, as producers, directors, camera operators or combining all these roles. While most make documentaries, several also aspire to produce feature films. Because Papua New Guinean women live with strong cultural expectations that they will be carers and homemakers, rather than cultural producers, they face even more than the usual impediments to being filmmakers. Despite these challenges, a small number of Papua New Guinea women is dedicated to making films about and for their fellow Papua New Guineans. In doing so, they

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<sup>1</sup> Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, 'Women filmmakers and directors', <http://www.filmdirectorssite.com/women-filmmakers-directors.html>, accessed October 3 2012

are addressing and defining what constitutes 'community' and 'development' from an insider perspective.

In this article I discuss three recent examples of women's involvement in filmmaking in PNG. Drawing on interviews with women filmmakers, analysis of their films and observations made over various research trips, the article explores a hitherto neglected field which many might assume to be dormant. While some of the challenges confronting Papua New Guinean filmmakers become evident the point is not to dwell on the difficulties they face.<sup>2</sup> Rather, this article focuses on providing an overview of contemporary filmmaking in PNG and introduces a range of projects in which women have been involved.

Nancy Sullivan, one of few academics to have written about local filmmaking in PNG notes that 'the field of media production is a deep vein yet to be mined academically'.<sup>3</sup> Sullivan's most recent article on filmmaking in PNG was published in 2003 as was documentary maker Les McLaren's essay on the subject in *Meanjin*. Sullivan focuses on providing a sense of indigenous filmmaking while McLaren explores the films he and other expatriate documentary makers produced in PNG in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Given that both articles were published a decade ago, the present article constitutes an important update on filmmaking in PNG. Moreover, because the role of gender in the production of PNG films has never been discussed specifically, this article's focus on women constitutes a significant contribution to the understanding of filmmaking in the country.

Adding to knowledge about recent filmmaking by Papua New Guineans, the article proceeds in three sections. The first section explores some of the recent history of filmmaking in PNG. Next, I discuss three films made by Papua New Guinean women. The article concludes by highlighting the significance of addressing local audiences in PNG.

It is tempting to assume that filmmakers in places such as PNG would be most enlivened by the possibility of representing themselves to an international audience. In the era of 'you tube', places once construed as culturally and geographically remote can now be portrayed by local filmmakers on the international stage via the internet. This is an important shift, especially given PNG has long provided ethnographic fodder for outsider anthropologists and filmmakers, many of whom have portrayed the country in sensationalising ways.

Without disputing the significance of Papua New Guineans' increasing capacity to represent themselves internationally, this article emphasises the importance PNG women place on local audiences and community connections. Making films which are not just about but also *for* a local audience, PNG

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<sup>2</sup>I discuss the factors that challenge and support women filmmakers in a forthcoming article.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Sullivan 'How media become the message in Papua New Guinea: A coda', 2003 <http://www.nancysullivan.net/articles.htm>, accessed September 7 2012.

<sup>4</sup>Les McLaren, 'Explorations and experiments', *Meanjin*, Issue 3 (2003).

women filmmakers are engaging with and inspired by their communities at every stage of the filmmaking endeavour. Their passion to communicate through film is bound up intimately with their commitment to their fellow Papua New Guineans. Though these films receive limited press coverage and attention, they indicate some of the motivations and passions of this small but emerging group.

### Filmmaking in PNG

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.<sup>5</sup>

So writes Namun from Divine Word University in 2003 (republished on his blog in 2010). And yet, despite Namun's claim that Papua New Guineans don't 'give a second thought to the possibility' of making their own films, since the late 1970s and early 1980s they have been doing so. Although filmmaking in PNG has been dominated by outsiders, it cannot be construed as an exclusively Western enterprise. Moreover, while Papua New Guineans enthusiastically embrace films by outsiders, from Hollywood actions films such as 'Rambo' to Bruce Lee King Fu movies, like most people, they are keen to see people on screen whose lives, concerns and humour resemble their own.<sup>6</sup> As Llane Munau, a Bouganvillean woman who works at the National Film Institute (NFI) says 'a lot of Papua New Guineans want to watch themselves but they don't have any opportunities'.<sup>7</sup> Other filmmakers 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.<sup>8</sup>

In an article also written in 2003, anthropologist, Nancy Sullivan, is more optimistic than King about Papua New Guinean filmmakers representing themselves. Though agreeing that Papua New Guinea 'has yet to control its own media image internationally' Sullivan sees hope in the democratization of media production.

Technological changes have democratized media production in general, making all the earlier Jean Rouch and Edmund Carpenter gestures of "handing over" the means of production sound prehistoric. Elite Papua New Guineans have access to video and digital cameras, CD and DVD burners, and the internet; University students are making their own music videos, taking news photos with digital

<sup>5</sup>Kingston Namun, 'Film making in PNG'. <http://malumnalu.blogspot.com.au/2008/09/why-film-making-is-not-taking-off-in.html>, accessed 7 November 2012

<sup>6</sup> Les McLaren & Annie Stiven, directors, *Taking Pictures*, Australia (1996).

<sup>7</sup>Llane Munau, Interview with author, April 14 2012, Goroka, PNG

<sup>8</sup>Lesli Klainberg and Virginia Riticker cited in Kelly Hankin, 'And introducing the female director: documentaries about women filmmakers as feminist activism' in *NWSA Journal*, Issue 1 (Spring 2007).

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cameras, and preparing power point presentations for class.<sup>9</sup>

There is evidence that the increasing accessibility of filmmaking equipment is resulting in the production of more films by Papua New Guineans. At least a dozen PNG-made films was shown at the 2012 Human Rights Film Festival in Port Moresby, a festival which explicitly highlights development issues explicitly 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’.<sup>10</sup> At the inaugural human rights film festival in 2010, only two of the films on the program were about PNG and both were funded by externally-based aid agencies. As such, the number shown in 2012 represents a significant change. Supporting this, filmmakers interviewed tell stories of people they know, including village dwelling and older people, documenting everything from their life stories to environmental change in their local areas. Perhaps, as Sullivan hopes, these home-made stories will be communicated ‘unadulterated to audiences around the world’, thereby adding to the public record of PNG by its peoples.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, the involvement of Papua New Guineans in the making of a film does not mean the country or its peoples will be portrayed ‘positively’. Nine of the PNG made films shown at the 2012 Human Rights Film Festival were about domestic violence, maternal death rates or living with HIV/AIDS. And looking beyond the films shown at the recent festival, *Tanim: A Tribal Struggle for Power* a documentary produced by Engan woman, Kymberley Kepore, reveals the violence, vote-rigging and corruption involved in local efforts to secure power.<sup>12</sup> Made in the Enga province during the 2002 election in PNG, an excerpt from the film won an Australian Walkley Award for excellence in journalism and was lauded internationally for its exploration of the ongoing influence of tribal affiliations in contemporary Papua New Guinean politics. However, despite the culpability of those portrayed on camera, at home in PNG Kepore was criticised for depicting the people of Enga in a poor light. For Kepore, the implications of making this powerful film were both more difficult and more lasting than they are for the outsiders with whom she collaborated on the project.

Despite the complexities of filmmaking in a country as diverse as PNG, the increasing number of Papua New Guineans representing themselves is encouraging. From the perspective of someone who is interested in gender and representation, this shift is particularly exciting when women are involved. The following analysis of three recent films and their making demonstrates that women are using the medium to participate in and represent their perspectives in the public sphere.

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<sup>9</sup> Sullivan, ‘How media become the message’

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.humanrightsfilmnetwork.org/festivals/papua-new-guinea-human-rights-film-festival>, accessed December 18 2012

<sup>11</sup> Sullivan, ‘How media become the message’

<sup>12</sup> James Frankham, director *Tanim: A tribal struggle for power*, New Zealand 2002.

The point here is not to define that which differentiates women's films from men's but rather to outline some of the film projects in which Papua New Guinean women have been involved. The following examination of the making of three films completed in 2009, 2011 and 2012 respectively, reveals that honouring community connections is important to the women involved in these projects. In all three cases, the women concerned were motivated by a desire to tell the story of the people with whom they had worked, in a way that would resonate with that community as well as with other audiences in PNG. As the analysis shows, the matter of connecting with wider international audiences is of less importance to these women filmmakers than is their sense of wanting to be known among their own people as filmmakers who engage responsibly with their fellow Papua New Guineans.

### *Mama bilong down under*<sup>13</sup>

In 2009, the YumiPiksa team based at the University of Goroka in the Eastern Highlands Province, produced a DVD titled: *YumiPiksa: Stories from the Papua New Guinean Highlands*.<sup>14</sup> The collection contains three short documentaries that emerged from German-born Verena Thomas' PhD project about community uses of video to promote local knowledge and storytelling.<sup>15</sup> The first film on the DVD, entitled *Mama Bilong Down Under* tells the story of Mama Lucindo, who lives at the Down Under settlement near the University of Goroka. I focus on *Mama Bilong Down Under* here because it was co-directed by a woman and a man, namely Klinit Barry and Arthur Hane-Nou and because it tells the story of a woman. Barry was also the sound recorder and co-editor of the film and has since contributed to the making of the recent KomunitiTokPiksa films about HIV/AIDS in PNG.<sup>16</sup>

This thirteen minute film focuses on Mama Lucindo, a great-grandmother who, having lived in the settlement for 48 years, is Down Under's longest dwelling inhabitant. When the filmmakers approached the Down Under community to ask them what they would like to make a film about, they suggested the focus be on Mama Lucindo because she is an important figure in the community. In a gentle and under-stated way, the film depicts Mama Lucindo's life and concerns, including her efforts to provide for her extended family while living on an urban settlement in which she has limited land on which to grow food. We see Mama Lucindo making pikelets to sell at the Goroka market, walking to the stream with her grandchildren in order to do her washing and collect water, while talking about her efforts to support her family, including paying the school fees of her grandchildren and great grandchildren. While in some

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Hane-Nou and Klinit Barry, directors *Mama Bilong Downunder*, Papua New Guinea 2010.

<sup>14</sup> *YumiPiksa: Stories from the Papua New Guinea Highlands*. Papua New Guinea 2010.

<sup>15</sup> For more information about YumiPiksa and the making of these documentaries, see Verena Thomas "'YumiPiksa" - developing a community-responsive way of filmmaking in Melanesia' in *Pacific Journalism Review*, Issue 2, (October 2011).

<sup>16</sup> For more information about KomunitiTokPiksa see Verena Thomas, EvangeliaPapoutsaki, Joys Eggins 'Visual Dialogues, Community Action & Social Change: a South Pacific Islands HIV/AIDS project application', in AMIC 19th Annual Conference, Singapore, June 2010, *Technology and culture: communication connectors and dividers*.

respects a sobering reminder of the daily struggles that women in PNG face, the film is not bleak because Mama Lucindo is positive about the people that surround and support her in the settlement. In contrast to the western media's tendency to depict urban settlements in PNG as characterised by 'tribal strife', Mama Lucindo says: 'we speak different languages but we like each other and get along'.<sup>17</sup>

Watching Mama Lucindo go about her everyday life, echoes of the 'truth' of women's domestic and familial experience resonate to create and document the hardship of everyday life in a Papua New Guinean settlement.<sup>18</sup> In this way, broader political issues of inequity and lack of access to basic services are raised subtly but powerfully. As Barry puts it:

The video is like an eye for all that went right inside the heart of Down Under, so they can see the real people, how they eat and how they sleep for example ... *Mama Bilong Down Under* is a film of all the remote places in Papua New Guinea where people don't have light, no running water, maybe they have a little creek, just normal life.<sup>19</sup>

As with early feminist films in the Western world, *Mama Bilong Down Under* opens up domestic, 'feminine' work and spaces to reveal important realities about life in a PNG settlement.

It seems unlikely that this film could have been made as well without Barry who liaised with the women in the community while co-director, Arthur, communicated with the men.

We wanted to give voice to the woman especially because sometimes the woman doesn't speak when men are around so, Arthur and I decided to split up so we could have two groups so that is how we co-directed the film.<sup>20</sup>

As a result of Barry's gender-segregated discussions with the women of Down Under, the voice of Mama Lucindo not only emerged, but became central, enabling the filmmakers to construct an account of a life that Papua New Guinean women can identify with and recognise. The film's empathetic representation of Mama Lucindo's everyday life and struggle to support her family is indicative of the wider social context in which the burden of feeding children and finding money for school fees is borne by women.

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<sup>17</sup>*Mama Bilong Down Under*

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the role of domesticity in feminist film see Theresa de Laurentis, 'Aesthetics and feminist theory: Rethinking women's cinema', in *New German Critique*, 34, 1985. See also Wendy Everett, 'Through the I of the camera: Women and autobiography in contemporary European film' in *Studies in European Cinema* Volume 4 Number 2 (2007).

<sup>19</sup> Klinit Barry in Verena Thomas, *YumiPiksa: Our Pictures: Community responsive filmmaking in Highlands New Guinea*, unpublished PhD thesis, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Klinit Barry, interview with author, 12 April 2012, Goroka, Papua New Guinea.

Barry, herself the mother of two teenage children, is the chief bread winner in the family, and works hard to pay for her children's education. She says she is proud of the film because it tells the story of a woman's struggle to care for her family, which resonated with her personally.

She told us of her struggles and I see that one thing that makes a woman stronger is to sustain the family to like make the family grow and at least there is food on the table... For me to make a film about a woman, that's the greatest, like my happiness, I'm happy to hear a story from a woman that is being strong and could support the family.<sup>21</sup>

Despite their strength, resilience and the important role they play in their communities, women such as Mama Lucindo rarely are celebrated in public forums. From the perspective of an outsider, *Mama Bilong Down Under* makes an important contribution to redressing this while simultaneously demonstrating the power and importance of local filmmakers' producing these films. As Barry said when she was interviewed by an Australian journalist:

I co-directed Mama Bilong Down with Arthur. When we came to Down Under, they are our family. We know them, we eat with them, we go around with them, we play with them. So it's easier for us to come and stay in the community because we are part of the community and we made this story.<sup>22</sup>

Her words highlight the importance of filmmakers establishing and maintaining close relationships with those involved in making the film. Barry sees this ability to communicate with 'the talents' as her 'biggest strength' and relates it to the roles women perform as mothers and in the household.

I think that is a big role for a woman to have, have strength to coordinate so things are happening in the way that it should happen. It's not always perfect but at least it's going the way it should and then every part in the family or community or whatever we are involved in are satisfied.<sup>23</sup>

Like so much else in Melanesia, success depends on one's capacity to negotiate one's place in and contribution to a community, and women increasingly are claiming their positions in this regard. While being a woman may help with this process, as the following discussion of *The Last Real Men* makes clear, it is also important to be perceived as an 'insider' and not someone who will 'run away' with the story for his or her own ends.

### *The last real men*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Klinit Barry, interview with author.

<sup>22</sup>Kinit Barry in Tania Nugent, *Papua New Guinea's Filmmakers*, August 3, 2010 <http://australianetwork.com/pacificpulse/stories/2972316.htm>. Accessed 7 October 2012.

<sup>23</sup>Klinit Barry, interview with author.

<sup>24</sup>Ruth Ketau, director, *The Last Real Men: The Neheya Initiation*, National Film Institute, Papua New Guinea, 2010.

*The Last Real Men* is a film about male initiation rites among the BenaBena people. Traditionally, Bena men have participated in four initiation activities: cane swallowing, nose bleeding and penis and tongue piercing. *The Last Real Men* follows a group of new initiates as they participate in two of these: cane swallowing and nose bleeding.

Bena, located about half an hour's drive from Goroka in the Eastern Highlands Province, is the place of the mother of filmmaker, Ruth Ketau. Ketau trained as a filmmaker at the 'SkulBilongWokimPiksa' in the 1980s.<sup>25</sup> One of only two women among 'the boys' who learned at the Skul, originally she followed the lead of the one other woman completing the training; namely Leonie Kanawi who went on to make *Garamut*, a film about slit gong drums in Manus.<sup>26</sup> Soon, Ketau learned that she would benefit more from 'hands on training', by holding the camera, setting up the lighting, conducting interviews and following subjects. Later, like others associated with the Skul, Ketau spent three months in France at the Varan Association, where she learned more about how to research, film and edit a documentary.

After returning from France, Ketau was determined to make a documentary about an aspect of her cultural heritage. Her motivation for making the film was twofold: she wanted to record the dying cultural practices of her people before it was too late and to make her name as a filmmaker. To this end, she met with her uncle, local business man, AuwoKetauwo to discuss the cultural practices of the Bena men, 'the Neheya initiation'. Auwo was the first of many men who asked her why she wanted to know. Then and since, Ketau has declared her desire to make the film through reference to the need to preserve her kinsmen's cultural heritage. As she says in her narration for *The Last Real Men*, she has recorded the men taking part in these ceremonies so her son and his sons will know what Bena men used to do.

*The Last Real Men* did not depict penis and tongue piercing because of greater cultural taboos surrounding these practices. Nevertheless, Ketau's film is ground-breaking both in that it depicts cane swallowing and nose bleeding and because it is the first time a woman has been allowed to witness, let alone film these practices. The confronting nature of the initiation rites and the fact that they are being performed for the first time in a long period, having been strongly discouraged by missionaries and the introduction of Christianity to the Bena, only make the film more compelling. The older men's reflections about the power they gained from participating in these rituals are fascinating and at times, humorous, including for example, when they discuss their enhanced sexual appeal as a result of initiation. Ketau also captures the younger initiates' pre-initiation fear and subsequent sense of achievement and pride. The cane-

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of the establishment and work of those associated with the SkulBilongWokimPiksa see Nancy Sullivan, 'Film and television production in Papua New Guinea: How Media Become the Message', in *Public Culture*, 5, 1993; Nancy Sullivan, 'Interview with Albert Toro', in *Cultural Producers in Perilous States. Editing Events, Documenting Change* (ed) George E Marcus, University of Chicago Press, 1993; Les McLaren, 'Explorations and Experiments'.

<sup>26</sup> Leonie Kanawi, director, *Garamut* Papua New Guinea 1999



swallowing and nose-bleeding activities themselves, while difficult to watch, are unflinchingly well-documented, as is the preparation of the cane and grass for insertion into the nasal and throat passages. Having being made by a woman who, while in some aspects a cultural insider, nevertheless had to negotiate and convince her relatives to participate, the film represents a significant achievement. Ketau says:

The two main characters in the film they are like ah, my distant uncles or something so they said: "If we don't give it to you, who will come and record all the information? We are going to die with it". So they told the village, the whole village. They were complaining the other time and they said: "okay if you don't want to come and tell her, forget we will do it for her, we will tell her. Don't ever come!" So my film is about my stories, all these stories.<sup>27</sup>

In documenting these cultural practices, the film serves as an important record for future generations.

Unsurprisingly given the taboos surrounding the practices, making the film was not easy. Some men refused to participate, others were suspicious about Ketau's motives, thinking that she wanted to make money from selling the hitherto secret knowledge. She says women used to die for knowing such things:

They were hard on me too. They asked me why and some of the boys the new generations they said "she is lying, she is trying to, she will dig everything and she will sell it. Don't give everything" and I said, "where am I from, you just, you guys tell me where am I from? I am from here and I will not run away. I will stay here and you guys will put what you know into the medium before it goes away."<sup>28</sup>

As the quotation makes clear, given her cultural and familial connections to Bena, Ketau was able to respond to the Bena men's suspicions about what she would do with the information in ways that would be impossible for outside filmmakers. Nevertheless, while her 'insider' status offered some advantages, Ketau said she still had to work hard to convince the men to trust her, spending many months sitting and chewing buai (betel nut) with the old people to listen to their stories and gain their trust.

I went with newspapers and betel nuts and food and smoke and all these things, sugar, tea, I went, I just went, I went and lived with them. So I have to build up my relationship with them and they have to know me and let it come to me. So I chew with them you know, mingle around with them, I spend time with them.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Ketau, Interview with author, 8 May 2012, Goroka, Papua New Guinea.

<sup>28</sup> Ruth Ketau, Interview with author.

<sup>29</sup> Ruth Ketau, Interview with author.

Like Klinit Barry, Ketau highlights the importance of becoming part of the community. To gain the men's trust, Ketau distinguished herself from single, unmarried women who might abuse this secret knowledge, time and again stressing her status as an older married mother of three, who was not going to misuse the information they shared with her.

Because of the secret nature of the knowledge, Ketau says she had to protect herself and her family from the spirits ('nokondis') when she was making the film. As such, in addition to providing food, including pigs and goats for the team and community who were supporting her, she needed money to buy live chickens and other food to offer as a sacrifice for the spirits. The money for this food and the other offerings was provided by the NFI, then under the direction of British-Australian filmmaker, Chris Owen (see Sullivan 2003). The film cost around 12,000 PNG Kina and the majority of it was shot in 2004. Ketau says that now the film would be much more expensive to make because of the rising costs of living in PNG.

*The Last Real Men* was completed in 2011. It was scheduled to be launched in May 2012, however at the time of writing, Ketau's film has not been promoted in Goroka or elsewhere in PNG. The only public showing of *The Last Real Men* was at the 11th Festival of Pacific Arts in the Solomon Islands in July 2012. Ketau's ambition to make a name for herself as a filmmaker in PNG is unlikely to materialise unless she is able to promote her film in PNG and more widely. As she says:

For me *The Last Real Men* is my link out. Yeah emtasol (that's all). When people see this film they will believe in me and will give it [i.e. funding] to me. Mi ting olsem (that's what I think).<sup>30</sup>

The difficulty for Ketau is that for her film to circulate and thereby act as her vehicle for self-promotion, she would need to be supported by the NFI to attend related events. With the exception of the screening she attended in the Solomon Islands, this does not seem to be happening. This is regrettable especially in light of the many achievements of the film and the challenges Ketau faced in making it. These issues and the extent to which such difficulties relate to gender inequity in PNG are taken up elsewhere in a forthcoming article. For now, however, it is sufficient to note that while films such as Ketau's can be made on a low budget, money and time need to be dedicated to promotion and distribution if a film is to find its audience.

In the next section, I consider *Road to Wabag*, the making of which also highlights the difference that being a cultural insider makes to the production of films in PNG.

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<sup>30</sup> Ruth Ketau, Interview with author

### ***Road to Wabag***

On 12th June, 2012, the film *Road to Wabag* (or in *tokpisin* *Rot go lo Wabag*) was premiered at an invitation-only event in Port Moresby. On June 22, the film was also advertised on the Masalai blog, one of the most popular blog sites in PNG.<sup>31</sup> The Masalai advertisement announced the film's first airing on Kundu2, the national television network. Two days after the film was shown on Kundu2 for the first time, Alexandra Kalinoe, the executive producer of *Road to Wabag*, posted a comment on Masalai announcing that the film would be shown 'four times before the end of the month'.<sup>32</sup> Compared with *The Last Real Men* which seems to have sunk almost without trace, *Road to Wabag* was a national success before it had even screened.

*Road to Wabag* was produced by Media Playground, a production company with offices in Brisbane, Australia and Port Moresby, PNG. Alexandra Kalinoe, who joined Media Playground to make the film, says while the idea came from the client – in this case the Wabag District Administration – it was a project about which she felt passionate. For Kalinoe, who was educated in Australia for much of her primary, secondary and tertiary education, the film represented an opportunity to tell an inspiring story about what a community can achieve when it works together. Shane Johnston, Design Director at Media Playground and the co-producer of *Road to Wabag* similarly was committed to telling this story of development at the local level.

To some extent, the great interest in *Road to Wabag* has to do with intrigue surrounding the man who is the focus of the documentary. The film was commissioned by the Wabag District Administration, where Sam Abal and his father, the late Sir Tei Abal, have been prominent leaders for over thirty years. The Administration wanted to communicate the reality of life and politics in the small town that is the capital of Enga Province, located four hours by road from the town of Mt Hagen. When the Administration approached Media Playground to make the film, its goal was to communicate with people working in donor agencies both the difficulties and possibilities of working in a place such as Wabag. As Kalinoe says:

They needed people to see what they were going through. People don't see that here. People don't go to Wabag, nobody goes there and like they have huge problems, they were a conflict zone. This is a conflict zone like in Afghanistan or something and that's what people need to understand. You know, it's tribal fighting, it's not like tribal fighting like throwing a few arrows here and there or whatever anymore, it's like there are high powered machine guns and people get killed. That's how it works. So they had to fix that situation and try to get the community involved in more co-operative type business activities. The problem is

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<sup>31</sup> [masalai.wordpress.com/2012/06/22/rot-go-lo-wabag-a-documentary-showing/](http://masalai.wordpress.com/2012/06/22/rot-go-lo-wabag-a-documentary-showing/) accessed July 19 2012

<sup>32</sup> Alexandra Kalinoe, comment on [masalai.wordpress.com/2012/06/22/rot-go-lo-wabag-a-documentary-showing/](http://masalai.wordpress.com/2012/06/22/rot-go-lo-wabag-a-documentary-showing/) June 24 2012. Accessed July 19 2012.

you need a national government to support that, you need donors to support that. The problem is the donors don't go out there. Nobody goes out there, nobody sees this stuff.<sup>33</sup>

As a result of the focus on Sam Abal and his determination to establish life-changing projects, including a chicken factory and better roads in the area, the film tells a positive story of cooperation among an oft-fractured group.

Viewer interest in the film was enhanced greatly because of the focus on and interviews with Sam Abal and his family. Sam Abal was the acting Prime Minister of PNG when Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare was stood down pending a tribunal investigation in 2011. His time as acting Prime Minister was tumultuous because of the contentious ousting of Somare and the subsequent takeover by Peter O'Neill. It was made more so when Sam's son, Teo Abal was arrested for murder. During and after these events, Sam Abal maintained silence, except for announcing that it was he who had alerted the police about the murder and telling the press that anyone involved would 'face the full brunt of the law'.<sup>34</sup> As such, the film, while intended to represent an account of what can be achieved if people are cooperative and hardworking, was compelling because of the rare insights it gave into the personal lives of leading political figures and their families. This was a first for any PNG film which Kalinoe says was only possible because of the support of the people of Wabag District, and the Abal family and the trust they placed in Kalinoe and Johnston.

Kalinoe and her colleague at Media Playground, Shane Johnston, both come from well-connected Papua New Guinean families. As such, they were well-placed to make this film. Kalinoe, whose parents are from the East Sepik Province, Michael Somare's home, recognises that she was in a privileged position in being able to speak with people such as Sir Michael.

We were lucky because we could get access to people to make this film who were family friends..., so it wasn't that difficult to get them to talk on camera. I think when we made this film, we were the first people to have an on camera interview with Sir Michael ... after his operation where he was talking about pre-independence.... So, that was great. I think it's really important to tell their stories.<sup>35</sup>

In telling these stories, Kalinoe's main interest lies in the role of producer because she believes that 'too many films about PNG are made about by foreigners with a confused and not necessarily correct perspective of the subject matter'.

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<sup>33</sup> Alexandra Kalinoe, interview with author, 20 November 2012, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

<sup>34</sup> [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/43406611/ns/world\\_news-asia\\_pacific/t/slain-woman-found-home-island-nations-pn/#.UMITabbbK8U](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/43406611/ns/world_news-asia_pacific/t/slain-woman-found-home-island-nations-pn/#.UMITabbbK8U). Accessed 17 November 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Alexandra Kalinoe, interview with author.

Even film makers here tend to make films for a foreign market, and so important messages for the PNG audience are lost in translation, so to speak ... Today, some Papua New Guineans remain suspicious of foreign film makers. For example, making *The Road to Wabag* was initially difficult because I had to get people to trust us.<sup>36</sup>

Prior to making the film, Kalinoe, Johnston, and another member of their team, Brisbane based Media Playground Creative Director, Sean Condon, who served as cinematographer and cameraman for the project visited Wabag. Media Playground supports a community-based initiative of their client, Fresh Water, a brand of bottled water produced in PNG, namely the *Grassroots Footy Foundation*, which aims to teach primary school-aged children ball handling skills, health, fitness, and the ideals of good sportsmanship. Media Playground conducted a sports clinic in Wabag together with former PNG rugby league player, John Wiltshire. This laid the foundations for their future interactions with the community. Abal supported the clinic in his capacity as Member for Wabag, as did the local Wabag Primary School headmaster, District Administration, other members of the Abal family, and the local community. During the clinic, Media Playground presented sporting equipment to the school on behalf of Fresh Water, and Johnston and Kalinoe spent two days meeting different people in the local community.

Kalinoe's understanding of the importance of building trust among the community being represented echoes Ketau and Barry's emphasis on building relationships with those involved in the film. For Kalinoe, this means telling positive stories and honouring the trust of those who take part.

People trust you to tell a story, you have to tell it right, you know. You have a responsibility ... I understand that... maybe you have an audience that you need to appeal to, some sort of drama [is required], but I'm not going to make anything like that...I'm not doing that. It's my country, I'm not going to make people think that... everyone's...crazy because people are not all crazy here. ... I'm going to make stories about things that work so that people can take that blueprint and go and do it somewhere else. If I spend my money I spend my money, it's really that simple.<sup>37</sup>

Kalinoe's reference to spending her own money highlights the commitment and passion she brought to the project. Regarding the budget for *The Road to Wabag* she only says 'we absorbed a lot of the costs', refusing to divulge how much was covered by the Wabag District Administration and how much by herself and Johnston via Media Playground.<sup>38</sup>

Media Playground worked with Moubment Films to produce the film, and the film was directed and edited by Brisbane-based Johnny Moubarak, a close

<sup>36</sup> Alexandra Kalinoe, personal communication with author, 4 July 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Alexandra Kalinoe, interview with author.

<sup>38</sup> Alexandra Kalinoe, interview with author.

friend of Johnston's, and a long time Media Playground collaborator. Kalinoe says:

Working with a small and committed team made the film making process much easier given the logistical and financial difficulties associated with the filmmaking process in PNG. Most importantly, the film could not have been made without the tireless efforts of Sam and Anna Abal's son, Lyndsay Abal, who was instrumental in opening doors for the film crew, bridging cultural and language barriers, and helping us to win the community's trust. He was there every step of the way, and the film making process formed a bond between the crew, Lyndsay Abal, his parents Sam and Anna, the extended Abal family and the people of Wabag.<sup>39</sup>

Combining access to resources, including personal connections with insider savvy, tertiary education and a commitment to contributing something positive to her country, Kalinoe seems to represent a new era in filmmaking in PNG. Like Goroka business man, Norman Carver, who organised the funding for *Return to High Valley*, Martin Maden's doco-drama about life in a highlands town, Kalinoe is glad to have made something for and about Papua New Guineans.<sup>40</sup> She says:

*We've had a wonderful response to the film since it aired on national TV station Kundu 2. People are proud to see films made by Papua New Guineans that tell uplifting stories.*<sup>41</sup>

Kalinoe and Johnston continue to look for more opportunities to make uplifting and historically accurate films about Papua New Guinea and Papua New Guineans.

## Conclusion

In her 'coda' about filmmaking in PNG, Nancy Sullivan hopes that films made by Papua New Guineans will be communicated 'unadulterated to audiences around the world'.<sup>42</sup> This would appear to be happening: at the time of writing, at home in Melbourne, I have just watched a music video about police destroying homes at the Paga Hill settlement in Port Moresby in May 2012.<sup>43</sup> There is a potentially transformative power in the transnational circulation of such media. However, the message that emerges most clearly from the above analysis of these films is that Papua New Guinean filmmakers want not only to represent themselves abroad but to address their fellow Papua New Guineans. At a time of great change in their country, the women filmmakers of PNG are using film to preserve cultural knowledge, document

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<sup>39</sup> Alexandra Kalinoe, personal communication with author, January 26th 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Maden director *Return to High Valley*. Eastern Highlands Papua New Guinea 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Alexandra Kalinoe, personal communication with author, 4 July 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Nancy Sullivan 'How the media become the message'.

<sup>43</sup> <http://pngexposed.wordpress.com/2012/12/18/human-cost-of-paga-hill-demolition-captured-in-new-music-video/> accessed December 12 2012.

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social realities and offer hope. And they are doing so in a language that speaks, first and foremost, to those they know and care about most; other Papua New Guineans.

**Author**

Dr Ceridwen Spark is postdoctoral fellow in the College of Arts at Victoria University in Melbourne. Her work has been published in a range of contexts including *Oceania*, the *Journal of Pacific History*, the *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* and *Australian Feminist Studies*. Ceridwen has a longstanding interest in gender and equity issues especially in the Pacific context. At present, she is a chief investigator on the 'PawaMeri' project, an AusAID-funded collaboration with the Centre for Social and Creative Media at the University of Goroka. The 'PawaMeri' project will lead to the production of six film biographies about leading women in PNG.