The Pawa Meri Project: An Account of the Collaboration So Far

Author: Ceridwen Spark
Victoria University, Melbourne

Keywords
filmmaking, collaboration, Papua New Guinea

Abstract
In this paper, I describe a research and filmmaking project currently underway in Papua New Guinea. Entitled Pawa Meri (meaning powerful or strong women), the project is a collaboration between Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia and the University of Goroka in the Eastern Highlands Province of PNG. Pawa Meri is funded by the gender division of AusAID and involves making six films about leading Papua New Guinean women.

Biography
Ceridwen Spark holds a postdoctoral fellowship in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology at Victoria University in Melbourne. Since completing her PhD at Monash University on native title in the Australian context, Ceridwen has been involved in various research projects in PNG, where she was born and grew up. Recently, Ceridwen’s work has been published in Oceania, the Journal of Pacific History, the Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology and Australian Feminist Studies. Ceridwen has a longstanding interest in gender, culture and equity issues and continues to research these and related matters, primarily in the Pacific context.
Introduction

In Papua New Guinea (PNG), women play an important role in their families and communities. Often understood to be the glue that holds these together, women nevertheless tend to be represented as playing a less significant role in leadership than men, who continue to be seen as the ‘natural’ or rightful occupants of political and public positions. The 2012 elections in PNG saw the election of three women as Members of Parliament, Julie Soso, Loujaya Toni and Delilah Gore. While this is an important development, given that the remaining 106 seats are held by men, there is still a long way to go politically. However, it is almost axiomatic to say that leadership is demonstrated in many and various contexts and not only in the formal political arena. This is particularly so in the case of women.

At the same time as they are portrayed internally as less capable of leadership than men, in the international literature about development, Papua New Guinean women tend to be represented as longsuffering and disadvantaged. There is truth in such representations. While women living in towns are more likely than their rural-dwelling counterparts to be tertiary-educated and employed in the formal sector, the society in which they live and work continues to be strongly patriarchal. Indeed, despite the nation’s much discussed cultural diversity, strong traditions of male dominance and privilege persist in most parts of the country (Spark, 2011). Consequently, challenging male authority in any way – or even being perceived to do so – still results in a beating in many parts of the country (Spark, 2011).

And yet, despite the hardship faced by many women in PNG, one only has to visit the country to appreciate the strength of the women and the significance of the contributions they make at every level of society. Having being born and grown up in PNG and more recently having conducted research trips to various parts of the country, I have experienced Papua New Guinean women’s resilience, good humour, kindness and capability on many occasions. A similar experience is also noted by anthropologist, Martha Macintyre (2012):

> Most women I know who have worked with Papua New Guinean women leave the experience with deep respect for them. I have inevitably felt privileged to work with women whose intelligence, warmth, resilience and humour is invested in a project even when they are faced with opposition and inadequate resources. In such contexts women emerge as capable, resourceful and powerful. In terms of their 'power to' accomplish things, women regularly display their capacity to make decisions and to act upon them.

Despite their achievements and qualities, Papua New Guinean women are rarely acknowledged or celebrated in public forums. Celebrating the lives and leadership of six inspiring Papua New Guinean women is thus at the heart of the *Pawa Meri* project.

Establishing the collaboration

In 2010, having written about some of the challenges facing educated women in PNG, I saw it as important to balance this account with positive stories about women in PNG. In particular, I wanted to do this in a way that would be accessible to Papua New Guineans. Traditional written biographies are unlikely to reach the majority of PNG’s population, due to its low literacy levels and limited access to books. Consequently, it seemed films might be the best way to communicate stories about PNG women. Shown in schools around the country, films might shift perceptions about women and their roles and inspire young people to be courageous and determined in pursuing their goals no matter what their circumstances.

While conducting research in PNG, I learned about a group called Yumi Piksa (Our Films). Yumi Piksa began in 2009 as part of Verena Thomas’ PhD project. Verena, originally from Germany, first went to the Highlands of PNG in 2001 to make *Papa Bilong Chimbu* (2007), a documentary about her great uncle who had been a
missionary in the region. In 2009, she returned to explore culturally-appropriate ways of filmmaking. Basing herself at the University of Goroka, Verena worked with interested local participants to make films, while simultaneously documenting the experiences of those who took part. This collaboration led to the production of three films about local people, capacity building among aspiring filmmakers in PNG and Verena’s PhD. As an extension of these developments, the Centre for Social and Creative Media was established at the University of Goroka in 2012, with Verena Thomas as the inaugural director.

In 2010, I called Verena to discuss the possibility of collaborating to make films about leading PNG women. She was open to our working together and in May 2011, I travelled to Goroka and the Chimbu region to meet Verena and others involved in making a documentary drama about HIV/AIDS. During this research trip, I also approached AusAID in PNG with a project proposal. In late 2011, the gender division of AusAID agreed to fund the Pawa Meri project. The contract was finalised in April 2012 and filming is currently underway.

Those involved in Pawa Meri can be broadly categorised as follows: the subjects and their communities, the filmmakers, the research team and Australian producers and editors. While, on paper, the agreement is between two universities, an extended network of family and community members, camera crew and others substantiate the collaboration. At the University of Goroka itself, the project benefits from the support and involvement of Klinit Barry, the administrative assistant in the Centre for Social and Creative Media, and Theresa Meki, who in early 2012, gained a scholarship to conduct her Honours degree under the auspices of the project. Klinit, who was also involved in Yumi Pika, is directing one of the Pawa Meri films and Theresa’s research on young people’s views about women in leadership will inform the series as a whole.

In the next section, I discuss one of the films in more detail in order to provide further insight into the collaboration.

**Sister Lorraine Garasu and Llane Munau**

Identifying the prospective subjects has been challenging, partly because we are spoilt for choice. In addition, we are committed to achieving 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. From the beginning, we felt it was important to include a story from the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, because of the region’s unique history and relationship to PNG (Regan, 1998).

Having canvassed friends from Bougainville and academics who live and work there, I had a shortlist of five women who were possible appropriate subjects. After considering each of the women’s contributions we decided to approach Sister Lorraine Garuso. According to Anthony Regan, long-time adviser to Bougainville parties in the Bougainville peace process, Sister Lorraine is ‘an absolute stand out’ in terms of being ‘tireless and committed’ over many years and in various roles (Regan, 2012). Active during and after the Bougainville conflict in peace building, Sister Lorraine has also worked with a wide range of stakeholders, including international aid organisations, over an extensive period. In addition, she has been a tour de force in the promotion of women’s voices during and since the conflict. With the support of other nuns, Sister runs a safe house at the Nazarene rehabilitation centre in Chabai and works with the women who come there and the local community to promote women’s economic empowerment and independence. These are just some of this energetic woman’s achievements.

In March 2012, I met with Sister Lorraine in Moresby and she agreed to take part in the film. Among her reasons for participating, Sister Lorraine mentioned her sense that many young people in Bougainville lack purpose, direction and hope as a result of the civil war. Sister Lorraine hopes the film about her will help to convey some of the possibilities and benefits of being involved in community building and thereby shaping the future.
Between February and May 2012, I lived in Goroka with my family. The time was valuable in that it enabled the establishment of the collaboration and time to further develop some aspects of the project. During this period, we decided to have six PNG women involved as directors. This would help to ensure the stories were told with PNG eyes and add an additional capacity building element to the collaboration.

As part of this process of engaging PNG women, we approached Llane Munau, a Bougainvillean woman who works at the National Film Institute (NFI) in Goroka, to direct the film about Sister Lorraine. Although she has worked as a filmmaker and received informal advice from the previous Director of the NFI, filmmaker Chris Owen when he was still in Goroka, Llane describes herself as self-taught. She says it is difficult not knowing whether the work she is doing has any merit in the eyes of professional filmmakers (Munau, 2012a). For this and other reasons, including because Sister Lorraine’s story is also a story about Llane’s place of origin, Llane has been most enthusiastic about being involved in the Pawa Meri project.

In August, we held a workshop for directors in Goroka and, as an exercise, the up and coming women directors interviewed one another. During her interview, Llane made the following remarks about her involvement:

For myself the Pawa Meri Project is a way that I can catapult myself and put myself out there to tell PNG and also tell the world that I am like mi wanpla PNG meri mi ken mekim film na (I am a PNG woman and I can make films) if you have any projects mi redi long stap wantaim yupla (I can do this with you). Like to me the Pawa Meri project is like I’m really thankful to Verena long (from) UOG and even AusAID. AusAID em fundim displa (they are funding this) project, that they are teaching me as one person but for myself I want to teach others and I am going to teach others and that’s what I have been doing, teaching others. So teaching me like AusAID is teaching 10 people or 20 people or 30 people ah, so that’s why the Pawa Meri Project is very important to me (Munau, 2012b).

While Llane is keen to benefit from the mentoring provided by Verena and others at the University of Goroka, including documentary maker, Mark Eby, and camera person, Bao Waiko, her remarks highlight that she sees her involvement primarily as an opportunity to equip herself to train other filmmakers in PNG. If this is one of the outcomes, the capacity building element of the project will be far reaching indeed.

In April 2012, Llane and I visited Sister Lorraine in Chabai to learn more about her, to meet some of the people with whom she works and to establish the feasibility of shooting a film in the location. During this time, Llane considered her approach to making the film. We were well looked after, hosted in one of the empty safe houses and generously fed by the nuns. The experience highlighted the necessity of having support not only from the subjects, but also from their communities. Sister Lorraine indicated that this hosting arrangement would be extended to the crew when it returned for the filming. We discussed that the Pawa Meri project would help to pay local people to prepare food for the crew on its return, thereby providing some employment for community members. Such mutually beneficial arrangements are invariably part of the collaboration, especially when filming takes place over an intensive period, as it must in remote locations such as Bougainville.

In October 2012 a small crew, including Llane, Verena, Bao Waiko and Dilen Doiki returned to Bougainville to film Sister Lorraine’s story. The decision to return at this time was made in March when Sister Lorraine mentioned that she ran a series of activities between October 15th and 17th to mark International Rural Women’s Food Day, World Food Day and the Eradication of Poverty Day. Filming on Sister Lorraine’s story is now complete. However, many tasks remain. Llane will draft a ‘paper edit’ of the film and in November 2012 an Australian editor will spend time in Goroka working with Llane and...
the team on two of the films that have been shot so far, including the film about Sister Lorraine. The engagement of people with such expertise is necessary for while the project seeks to involve Papua New Guineans at every stage, there is limited expertise in the country when it comes to high level editing and production. The *Pawa Meri* project will endeavour to support the directors to advance their skill base in these areas, including by enabling them to work with those proficient in editing and publishing. In this way, it is hoped the project will help to equip the directors to teach others these skills in the future.

**In summary**

Through a close look at the progress so far of one of the *Pawa Meri* films, I have endeavoured to demonstrate the sense in which collaborations inevitably draw on a range of people and a wellspring of expertise. From community members who provide filmmakers with invaluable insights into a person’s life, camera crew who wake early to keep up with someone as dynamic as Sister Lorraine, and academics in Australia who provide mobile phone numbers for key contacts, the network of people involved extends well beyond those named on the signed documents between funding and university organisations. This entails challenges as well as benefits, some of which have already become apparent and others of which will no doubt emerge as the project continues.

**Endnotes:**

i. see also www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/radio/onairhighlights/opportunities-lost-for-bougainvilles-lost-generation, 1 November 2011 (accessed 28 November 2012).

ii. This was made possible by the Endeavour Award Program which provided the means for me to live in PNG for four months. I am grateful for this award without which this extended stay in Goroka would not have been possible.

**References**


