

## **How media become the message in Papua New Guinea: A coda**

Nancy Sullivan

January 2003

It's now ten years since I wrote a paper called "Film and Television Production in Papua New Guinea: How Media Become the Message" (Sullivan 1993 and reprinted recently as Sullivan 2003). My intention was to explain and exemplify how indigenous production, in a climate that virtually precludes anything but low budget production, have come to serve very unexpected ends. In keeping with much of the anthropology of Papua New Guinea (PNG), which emphasizes how cultures subsume aspects of modernity unto themselves—rather than vice versa, the article more or less described how such production processes have been unpacked, dissembled and applied to preexisting ideological and practical institutions. The fact that there had been, at that time, so very few productions and only one popular exhibition venue—the foreign owned and resistant national television station--- also tipped the balance for producers in favor of the making of the product over its distribution, so the live action drama of production became at least as important as an image preserved on film or tape. The paper discusses a series of 'first' films and videos, including one I myself co-directed and produced, called *Stolen Moments*. In conclusion, it argues that

At very least, the existing frameworks of scholarship on nonwestern media, which focus on text and viewer reception or on institutional-level production and its ideology, overlook a critical ground-level dimension. In PNG, how a production is made is not only key to questions of style but also reveals separate layers of "indigenous content." Most of all, the enterprise of production is critical to understanding the perceived use-value of new technology.

In 1972, Edmund Carpenter noted despairingly that he had screened films shot by PNG cameramen for the Australian Administration and could see nothing uniquely Papua New Guinean about them. His conclusion, reminiscent of Franz Fanon, was that "New Guineans who may someday produce unique film statements, drawing upon their heritage & their contemporary lives, are almost certain to be men who were first dislodged from their native culture & then, by choice, returned to it, having acquired in the interval a knowledge of several media" (1972:184-85). While in one sense this prophesy has come true, it is also true that our notion of being culturally dislodged is no longer pinned to a view of fragile metaphysical systems. We now have examples of innovative filmmakers who embrace their specialized knowledge as a means of reclaiming local authority over the terms of sociocultural change. (1993:20-21)

Much has changed since this bold statement in 1993; yet so much is still the same. A longer view actually serves my basic thesis, which is that indigenous media emerged as and remains one of the ways in which Papua New Guinea has made modernity its own, which it continues to do. Media production's very survival is its own message about PNG diversity and its endurance under the strains of social and economic change. Because video (mainly) persists as an important site of popular cultural construction, a place where contemporary identities are projected and contested to an urban and peri-urban audience. And because productions of a certain scale always bear the imprint of a production process, they convey more indigenous information to Papua New Guineans than is available to a foreign or 'cold' viewer. Thus, to understand PNG media production, it is still necessary to look to the process as well as the product. Process is different in small scale productions everywhere, but in the west we may not observe process as readily in low budget productions because we know the roles of producers are standardized by routine and unions, among other reasons. In PNG, however, these processes are continually reinvented to suit other daily operations. And because the way the west reads media is itself a relic of modern aesthetics, the way Papua New Guineans read their productions is bound to be different— subjective, more *Papua New Guinean*.

In a longer take now on the industry, two things can be said that continue to support these assertions. First, is that the socioeconomic constraints that held the 'industry' in a low-budget position for so long are still there, but with some important differences—not the least being the fact that technological advances have continued to democratize access to production. There are more TV productions, more standardization of production process and production values in TV, but at large, the media remains inventive and low-budget. And second, is that today's generation has moved beyond patronage, and beyond the point where

facilitators work with innovators to forge the first conventions. This has loosened some constraints, and yet also made independent production of film and video almost unworkable. If before it was necessary for volunteers and consultants to 'bestow' expertise, this was because a commercial base could not take form and NGO's and government arms saw media as a development tool; now, with less donated labour and materials—not to mention money, a lot of these noncommercial film and video projects just don't get made. On the other hand, technology has proliferated. Iconoclastic individuals, would-be big men and women, have so many more media forums: the Internet, digital cameras, web pages, cheap videocams, to name a few. Villagers have more vehicles for self-promotion, which also means that the film/TV producers today are largely town and city dwellers, working within structures that are not shaped by the pressures of village routine, as was the case for their older brothers and sisters. So a degree of freedom on one level has come with restrictions on other levels.

The film and video 'industry' is still an economic *non-fait accompli*. For a decade, the Australian John Taylor, General Manager of the country's sole television station, struggled unsuccessfully to promote indigenous production under a model of profitability and universal production values. It simply didn't work. Whether this was a chicken-before-the-egg strategy or not, is hard to say. But because there were no distribution outlets other than TV (as cinemas and copyright were absent), a generation of trained film and video producers had no other outlets for their productions than overseas film festivals and, to a lesser extent, cable programs. Taylor again and again refused to exhibit low-production-value programs made by Papua New Guineans, in favor of downlinking Channel 9 Australia's popular daily dramas and game shows. Papua New Guineans don't want to see unprofessional images of themselves, he argued, they would much prefer to see what everyone else is watching: *Neighbours*. Taylor once told a symposium on film and video in PNG that there were no Papua New Guineans bitten by the production bug like himself and his colleagues in film school years ago, where every waking hour was spent watching Goddard and Truffaut.

Less than five years now since Taylor's retirement from EMTV, the productivity and morale of EMTV have effloresced. This is a station that has never turned a real profit for its Australian owners, and so Taylor's attempts to suborn everything to a tight budget may have been necessary. But his absence has radically transformed the station into a lively production house with a raft of domestic programs running every day and evening, covering current affairs and political chat forums, to home and gardening hints, kids shows, and more music video programs than ever before. There are still no EMTV-produced serial dramas or fiction films, but EMTV now plays as much indigenous content as it can get its hands on. This is a place where young technicians get their training and take for granted producing domestic content. Evening rosters include foreign films and programs, but the entire look has changed. The one-minute wrap-around's that used to be the single TV station's only indigenous imagery, has now become a full day of programming filled with Papua New Guinean faces.

Titus Tilly is now a businessman-politician back in his remote island, Yela, in Milne Bay. The driving force in the emergence of music video as a genre—much less an industry—of PNG media, he, like so many of his generation, could not make a living in production (see Hayward Forthcoming). Same old story. But the field of music video has undergone some permutations, as well. One of the major music studios, Pacific Gold, has stepped back from its video production, leaving CHM as a virtual monopolist in the field. There are a handful of smaller music studios in major towns, and they're producing videos as well now. But the budgets are still lean, and CHM is by far the dominant player, creating a more standardized style to the industry. 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 cameras, and preparing power point presentations for class. The global marketplace, needless to say, has radically realigned anthropology's 'gaze.'

Today there are daily music video programs on EMTV, including more and more Pacific Islands videos—from Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu, and elsewhere. As Hayward (Forthcoming) points out, the trend in PNG music video production has been toward a pan-Pacific look, which includes the several light-skinned and mixed-

race performers, as well as one American missionary child, Oshen, who sings the Pacific reggae pop, wears dreads and gestures like a rapper. Cultural carpetbagging? Or cultural reciprocity? Some of the syncretism is fun and ironic—such as the name and popularity of a handsome mixed-race kid named ‘haus boi’ as a pun on house music and the colonial term for household help. Some of these borrowed symbols erupts like sinister vectors in the largely light and kind spirit of PNG music videos, introducing concepts of ‘thugginess’, ‘living large’ and youthful celebrity that are more radical than any of the music. But these are few, and the vast majority of videos are still about family, place, and cultural pride, those most pervasive of PNG values.

In the words of ethnomusicologist Philip Hayward (Forthcoming):

Although Western culture, social values and economics are rapidly changing the perceptions and life styles of all but the most remote rural communities in PNG, this does not necessarily imply imminent cultural collapse. Similarly, there is, as yet, little evidence to demonstrate that this represents a simple and unequivocal Westernisation of PNG culture. Indeed, it is possible to argue that PNG culture continues to show signs of diversity, development and accomplishment both in the face of, and—more significantly—*through* the agencies of its ‘modernisation.’

The role of expatriate facilitators in the first generation of media producers cannot be underestimated. And yet ten years on, they’re almost absent. A handful of expatriates still here are no longer the gatekeepers to technology or its conventions (at least, not the sole gatekeepers). There had to be well-intentioned individuals like Chris Owen of the IPNGS (now NFI), and Severan Blanchet and Paul Frame of the Skul Piksa, as examples, for the first generation of indigenous producers to emerge at all. They built, lit and swept clean the proscenium for these innovators, just as Greg Murphy did for the first wave of playwrights and performers of Raun Raun Theatre, and Elton Brash did for the first writers at UPNG. and they did so in light of a number of social and economic barriers, not to mention a handful of other expatriates who might rightfully be called their nemeses, or the ‘anti-facilitators.’ These were people who in one way or another inhibited the development of a film and television industry for not always deliberate reasons, and they include the General Manager of EMTV for a decade, John Taylor; and a series of less than effectual Communications, Culture and Tourism Ministers, National Cultural Commission Directors, and lesser bureaucrats who might have made a difference, but didn’t.

It’s been a long plateau while the development of a film industry in PNG has been suppressed, and so many of the first wave have abandoned their ambitions to find other ways to feed their families. Technical positions only exist now at the National Film Institute, which is the re-invented Skul Blong Wokim Piksa (whose buildings and equipment burnt to the ground in a 1998 electrical fire). Now it services the production requirements of British-Australian filmmaker Chris Owen, on whose projects others largely assist. The EMTV offices are more productive and exciting right now, with some of the first music video makers from Pacific View Productions now joined by younger, newer producers.

The first wave of film/videomakers can be likened to the first wave of performers with Raun Raun Theatre, people of a 'liminal' period: some highly educated, others non-literate, and virtually all of them born in the village and so working from that 'pre-contact' ground zero. These were improv artists in many senses of the word; they collaborated, fell into predetermined and/or invented roles and applied the logistical problems of their new vocations to the exigencies of daily life (rather than vice versa). Some of these innovative, resourceful first generation members are still at it. Leonie Kanawai made a film in 1999 about making slit gong drums her place, Manus, called *Garamut*. Other at Skul Piksa or the IPNGS (which had been the NRI, and ultimately merged with the Skul Piksa to become the NFI), were working on or had finished similar documentaries which were tragically lost in the Skul Piksa fire (Iggy Talasia and Baik Johnston's 1996 film, *Napalunga*, for example, about skin cutting in New Britain). Kumain Kolain finished a follow-up video to his acclaimed *Simnia*, this time about female initiation amongst the Baruya (centered upon his young daughter's rites of passage). Severan Blanchet came back to make two more personal documentaries on his friends in PNG; Les McLaren and Annie Stivens' 1997, *Taking Pictures*, is an excellent documentary on Australian and PNG media producers, and covers much of what this article does, and more.

*Tin Pis Run* raised everyone's expectations. It's true that less came of the effort than people hoped, and some of that may have to do with the confused distribution decisions made by the two production entities, one in PNG, the other in France. While it was aired repeatedly on French and Belgian TV, no one saw it for years afterwards in PNG, and then not until it was played on EMTV-- against the producers' wishes. The weeks of filmmaking did much to bolster confidence of its participants, some of whom, most notably Martin Maden, went on to freelance production careers producing NGO- and government-sponsored work. But others fell out of filmmaking altogether, having proven that high(er) production values and a PNG story can go hand-in-hand, but all the wiser for seeing how post-production is really half of the process, and that marketing and distribution are the most elusive goals of all.

While I think the field of media production is a deep vein yet to be mined academically, the perspective taken here, of seeing it as a production process rather than a product, is consistent with some of the post-Independence anthropology on social change. I think mainly of the work of Gewertz and Errington (1996, 1997), who have explored the new urban identities of Sepik River peoples. But the study of music videos has already been taken up by ethnomusicologists Webb (1990), Hayward (forthcoming) and to some extent Feld (1988). And here the work concurs with some of the recent anthropology on changing subjectivities, and the way a 'consocial' self does or does not become 'individuated', as in Foster (1996/97), Knauff (1999), and Strathern (1998). Virtually everything written about PNG serves the message of perpetual, assertive diversity rather than a popular cultural conformity that we would expect from the lock-step of modernity. And whether this is reflected in social process or psychological toil, contemporary PNG is still the most complex and rewarding place to study culture.

To step back for a moment, it seems nothing has changed after all. In the western film industry the image of PNG continues to be drawn along the same lines as Robert Flaherty's 1931 *Tabu*, with films like 1998's *Krippendorf's Tribe* (by Todd Holland), offering monkeys and grunting tribal warriors. Then there's Warner Brother's 1998 *The Thin Red Line* with its backdrop native villages in dreamy Solomon Islands sequences. In 1995 an Australian company made *Robinson Crusoe*, starring Pierce Brosnan, which included the Bougainvillian playwright and actor William Tukaku, as Friday. Set in Madang and filled with Papua New Guineans from Milne Bay to the Highlands (plus one Aboriginal Australian) playing members of a single tribe, it no more advanced the image of modern PNG than it served the need of a local film industry. (For a moment, however, William Tukaku had visions of Hollywood, before the film suffered *Tin Pis Run*'s fate and got shelved for several years.) I think we can safely say that Papua New Guinea has yet to control its own media image internationally. Whereas thirty years ago Edmund Carpenter predicted it would require a radical social and metaphysical change on the part of Papua New Guineans to do so, it now seems like this might be achieved by another means: With the proliferation of cheap technologies that at once unify and also maintain distance (as they promote decentralization as much as centralization), it may more likely be that some day soon one PNG filmmaker's low budget drama or

comedy or social documentary may be seized by processes that convey it unadulterated to audiences around the world and make the first global cultural impression of this unexpected and beautiful place.

## References

- Carpenter, E. 1972. *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Feld, S. 1988. Notes on World Beat. *Public Culture* 1(1):31-8.
- Foster, R. 1996/7. Commercial Mass Media in Papua New Guinea: Notes on Agency, Bodies, and Commodity Consumption. *Visual Anthropology Review* 12 (2):1-7.
- Gewertz, D. and F. Errington. 1996. On Pepsico and Piety in a Papua New Guinea 'Modernity.' *American Ethnologist* 23:476-93.
- . 1997. Why We Return to Papua New Guinea. *Anthropological Quarterly* 70:127-35.
- Hayward, P. Forthcoming. Dancing to a Pacific Beat, in Roger Beebe and Jason Middleton, eds. *Music Television/Music Video/MTV*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Knauff, B.M. 1999. From Primitive to Postcolonial in Melanesia and Anthropology. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Strathern, M. 1998. The New Modernities, in Verena Keck, ed., *Common Worlds and Single Lives*, Oxford: Berg Press.
- Sullivan, N. 2003. Television and Video Production in Papua New Guinea: How Media Become the Message. In Toby Miller, ed., *Television: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, London and New York: Routledge, Vol.1, Part 3, Chapter 19.
- . 1993. Film and Television Production in Papua New Guinea: How Media Become the Message. *Public Culture* 1993, 5: 1-23.
- Zimmer-Tamakoshi, L. 1998. Women in Town, in Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi, ed., *Modern Papua New Guinea*. Kirksville, MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press.
- Webb, M.H. 1990. *Lingua Franca, Song and Identity in Papua New Guinea*. Boroko: IPNGS.