

Tokstret: Youth Arts, Activism and Decolonization in Papua New Guinea

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ABSTRACT

In Tok Pisin, the vernacular of Papua New Guinea, 'Tokstret' means "be honest" or "talk straight." As the official language, Tok Pisin unifies 850+ indigenous languages while blending and borrowing words rooted in the country's colonial legacies. This case study explores how the universal languages of theatre can be reclaimed and decolonized to create more accessible and inclusive theatre, focusing on youth and community programs in Port Moresby. Drawing on decolonization theories and principles of applied drama education, strategies that foster change, decolonization, and community engagement are highlighted. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) framework for decolonizing research is extended into applied drama and performance to demonstrate how these practices can serve as inspirational principles for reimagining social change. The 'Youth Arts Program' (YAP) serves as a catalyst for new works addressing social issues, while post-YAP involvement in 'Arts Activism,' a grassroots collective, amplifies

community voices. These efforts are juxtaposed with traditional 'mainstage' Moresby Arts Theatre performances, revealing the complex dynamics of development, decolonization, and the empowerment of young artists in a post-colonial milieu. Through applied drama and theatre performance, these initiatives embody the essence of 'Tokstret,' fostering honesty, dialogue, and empowerment as tools for cultural revitalization and social transformation.

Outside a traditional hauskrai or 'house of crying' grief ritual, a young woman begs her brother to "Tokstret"- be honest- in discussing the financial and social burdens placed upon her due to her late father's passing.

"Tokstret!" a police officer shouts in the face of a young intoxicated 'raskol' being questioned for theft outside a bustling street market.

"Tokstret" in a hushed whisper into the ear of a teenage girl by her boyfriend as he pronounces his love but moves his hands without consent.

"Tokstret" can be heard autotuned to a serenading beat by local hiphop artists on radios, or on the podcast Tokaut Tokstret, wherein a local playwright discusses the dire need for HIV awareness in his community.

Tokstret means 'be honest' or 'talk straight' in Papua New Guinea's official language, Tok Pisin. Tok Pisin is a quilted montage of languages; a creole pulled together from the hundreds of indigenous tongues (over 850 documented in Papua), with added influences of Melanesian, German, English and colloquial Australian sounds and phrases. Tok Pisin functions to unite different individuals, tribes and communities, to amplify voices across the country, and to stimulate communication across groups. In many ways, it's a universal, inclusive, mixed language that attempts to reclaim communication from colonial and oppressive histories. At the Moresby Arts Theatre's Youth Arts Program (YAP), tokstret echoes onstage as secondary school

students share stories from their own communities and address urgent social issues in the performances that open this article. In these performances, tokstret takes on new life as a tool of empowerment, demonstrating how YAP employs applied drama techniques. Here, tokstret becomes both expression and action, amplifying youth voices and advancing the decolonization of theatre in Papua New Guinea.

“Learn by Doing”: Frameworks for Decolonizing Theatre as a Tool for Youth Empowerment

How can the universal languages of theatre be reclaimed and decolonized to create more accessible and inclusive theatre? This question is explored through the experiences of past YAP participants who have gone on to develop new works and engage in arts activism within their communities. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) framework for decolonizing research is extended into applied drama and theatre education, demonstrating how these initiatives serve as potent tools for social transformation and cultural revitalization. By juxtaposing these culturally resonant practices with the established 'western' mainstage performances at the Moresby Arts Theatre, this exploration accentuates the intricate dynamics of decolonization and the empowerment of young artists within the post-colonial milieu.

Smith's "Twenty-five Indigenous Projects" (2012) establish principles to reclaim, protect, and celebrate indigenous cultures, histories, and identities (Louie, et. al, 2017). These project principles form a framework for decolonization research which include (in no particular order):

Claiming – Asserting rights	Envisioning – Imagining futures
Testimonies – Truth telling	Reframing – Redefining narratives
Storytelling – Collective histories	Restoring – Healing communities
Celebrating Survival – Honor resilience	Returning – Repatriating belongings
Remembering – Recalling traumas	Democratizing – Equalizing voices
Indigenizing – Reclaiming practices	Networking – Building alliances
Intervening – Influencing change	Naming – Reclaiming terms
Revitalizing – Restoring traditions	Protecting – Safeguarding knowledge
Connecting – Relations & Environments	Creating – Innovating arts
Reading – deconstructing accounts	Negotiating – Finding solutions
Writing – Documenting culture	Discovering – Unearthing histories
Representing – Re-imaging identity	Sharing – Exchanging knowledge
Gendering – Exploring roles	

The examples from this case study show aspects of these twenty-five principles as they provide a strong starting point for the important work of decolonizing through theatre education and performance. The principles applied will be defined, explained and then explored through the experiences of the MAT (Moresby Arts Theatre), the YAP (Youth Arts Program) and Arts Activism in Papua New Guinea.

“God, I hate Shakespeare!”: Setting the Scene(s) at Moresby Arts Theatre

“God, I hate Shakespeare! That’s right, I said it. [No!]. I do! I hate Shakespeare!” The lyrics of Wayne and Karey Kirkpatrick’s 2015 Broadway hit *Something Rotten* fill the building as a troupe of Moresby



Figure 6: Papuan actors dressed in western suits for adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

Arts performers warm up. The actors, zip-zap-zop dressed in an eclectic montage of thrifted costumes that create 'Elizabethan meets 1980s mashup,' with an Oceanic flare. The irony of this warm-up for the group's adaptation of *The Tempest* is palpable. Other popular warm-up tunes that oft fill the house include anything Sondheim or Lin Manuel Miranda, along with healthy doses of *Wicked*, *Dear Evan Hansen*, or local artist hip-hop/reggae/rap blends. In many ways, the Moresby Arts Theatre (a.k.a. the MAT) is like many Western-influenced community and amateur theatres: a local hangout for teens and young adults who do not always fit in elsewhere, a black painted proscenium with decades of paint built up, a storage junkyard of broken and breaking set/prop/costume pieces, and an endless campaign to keep funds flowing. There is a huge set of keys that gets passed around, posters and graffiti that document over a century of performances, and, in-between rehearsals, a group of smokers who constantly intend to quit.

Unique to the MAT, as opposed to community and amateur theatres found in Australia, the U.S. or the U.K., is a theatre that sits on a grassy, well-gardened knoll, tucked in-between the parliament buildings of Papua New Guinea and international embassies. Fallen mangos, mosquitos and the occasional black mamba python are scattered amongst the grounds, and a series of makeshift temporary dwellings are growing along the back-security fence. An armed security guard opens the ancient gate, his smile stained red with betelnut, (a favored stimulant around PNG, whose deep red stains are oft mistaken for blood by visitors on the streets of Port Moresby). Although expertly designed as a cinderblock Victorianesque proscenium stage, the hundred plus years are wearing on the building, along with the clashes of power on the board of directors.

The colonial hangover of expat theatre-makers is being challenged by the next generation of Papua New Guineans, most of who were born well after the country's 1975 independence. The theatre itself is both a literal and metaphorical relic of colonialism and postcolonialism arts funding. The lobby is covered with a collection of posters spanning the last century, mostly Shakespearian or Greek classics, with a sprinkle of popular musicals starting in early aughts. Also in the lobby are posters commemorating the works of famed Papua New Guinean Nora Vagi Brash, which are staged annually (most frequently her independence-era play *Which Way Big Man?*). The mainstage shows are heavily influenced by funding from the Australian High Commission, with consideration for what might bring in more audiences, and a heavy hand of expatriate favor. The MAT serves as a community space for theatre and art that strives to uphold Smith's principles (2012) of decolonization. It does this by fostering *networking* and building alliances, *sharing* and exchanging knowledge, and *connecting* to build community relationships while *reframing* narratives, *indigenizing* performance practices, and *storytelling* the collective histories. The MAT is a constant *celebration of the survival* of the arts, the strength of the community, and the resilience of a complex with vibrant set of often-clashing cultures.

In 1912, the MAT was built as an expatriate drama club that specialized in bringing "the Bard" to those "in the bush," with *those* initially referring to the Australian expats rather than the local communities ("Join the MAT" Poster, n.d.). There is much to be debated about "claiming that a Shakespeare production [in a

previously colonized space] simply reinforces a history of colonialism,” or if that “undermines the agency of the artists” (Al-Saber, 2016). Arguably, it would depend on the who/what/where/why/how of the production, but Shakespeare as, “a powerful tool of empire, transported to foreign climes along with the doctrine of European cultural superiority” (Al-Saber, 2016) is not the current focus within this case study of decolonization. The current demographics of the MAT are a mix of native Papua New Guineans, Australians and a cycle of international expats. Similar to the Tok Pisin language, the people of the MAT are a blend of colonial influences with indigenous execution that negotiate development and communication between people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Hananiah Dickson, a MAT participant, YAP mentor and longtime community member describes her experiences of *networking*, *connecting*, and *storytelling* in her experiences at the MAT:

Telling stories has always been at the core of who we are as Papua New Guineans. To be able to write and be able to put on stage with such creativity, turning words into life, is amazing! Stories connect us to people and connect us to our ancestors. It is a way in which we stay true to who we are as a people; we carry ourselves through our stories. The community that comes together to put on a show, the effort put in, the bond that remains after the show- that is what I am proud of. (personal communication, 2024)

On any particular day, the theatre often shares space with a *haus krai*, or traditional ceremony akin to a funeral or wake. Mourners camp out on chairs for days or weeks; tea cups and beer bottles litter the space in what almost looks like a post party in a university share house. The MAT is frequently a community space before a performance venue, and currently sits as the last community ‘accessible’ theatre in the country. With the closure of Goroka’s Ruan Ruan Theatre in 2017 (Looser, 2012), the demise of the National Theatre (ABC, 2000), and the “elitist” (Ballard, 2012:42) gatekeeping of local university dramas, the MAT is the last community-driven theatre space. This is not to discount the flourishing performative cultures of Papua New Guinea; there are a number of *haus tambarans*, or places of ancestral worship and meetings for elders, that have performance-based traditional cultural rituals, song and dances. These are

traditionally closed to all women and anyone outside of the specific tribe or community. Oral storytelling is central to the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and wisdom in Papua New Guinea. There are stories in the drama of everyday life in churches and markets as well as public performances of cultural celebrations, such as *Singsings*, when tribes and villages annually gather to share cultural dress, song, dance and dramatized reenactments of traditions or customs, including funeral ceremonies, intertribal wargames, making fire and life celebrations.



Figure 2: Traditional Singsing attire for performance

From Mandate to Movement: Bridging Western Structures and Indigenous Stories

The National Department of Education mandates an Arts Syllabus (2017), but lack of funding results in these programs being cut in many public schools. Those that do offer programs often graft “indigenous material loosely onto predominantly western theatrical frameworks,” (Looser, 2012) such is often seen at the MAT’s mainstage Shakespeare and popular western theatre musicals, satire or farces. These efforts at *indigenizing, reframing* and *storytelling* (Smith, 2012)

reflect a slow long process of empowerment and decolonization. Theorists and practitioners describe this as a radical task aimed at disrupting the colonial legacy that continues in academic and cultural institutions, promoting narratives and practices that represent the diversity and richness of marginalized communities (Madison, 2010). A task in which artists and academics must be "actively seeking out and elevating the narratives of those who have been silenced by colonial histories, ensuring that the stage becomes a space of representation and resistance." (Young, 2013) The legacy of pre-independence era playwrights such as Nora Vagi Brash or John Kasaipwalova began the work of decolonization, but the movement has slowed since 1975, and the need to share stories of the diversity, strength and richness of Papua New Guineans is left dangling for future generations.



Figure 3: Which Way Big Man? A scene juxtaposes a traditional Asaro Mudman with an Expat Supervisor on stage.

“Which Way Big Man?”: Mentoring Next Generations in the Youth Arts Program

"You think you are better than me because you wear a suit and tie? You think you know better because you speak English? This land does not belong to you, it belongs to us, the people who live here." (*Which Way Big Man?* Vagi Brash, 1975)

Nora Vagi Brash, one of Papua New Guinea's most revered playwrights, reflects on how her decades-old work remains deeply relevant today when speaking with hundreds of youth gathered at the MAT. She eloquently discusses the history of modern Papua New Guinean theatre, particularly highlighting the politically charged, passionate dramas written by young men at the University of Papua New Guinea- and herself- during the years leading up to the country's independence from Australia in 1975. This speech, one of her last at the MAT before her passing, urges the next generation: "Our customs and traditions are who we are. If we lose them, we lose ourselves." Vagi Brash whispers her love and adoration of each performer present, reminding the room that "Theatre is our way of telling our stories, of keeping our culture alive. It's about us, by us, for us" (YAP presentation, 2023). Vagi Brash represents the decolonizing methodology principles of *claiming* rights, *representing* identity and *reading* the past into the present for the future.

In order to train new voices and the next generation of Papua New Guinean playwrights and performers, the MAT partners with the University of Goroka and local secondary schools around the capital city. Dr. Jane Awi, of the University of Goroka, and her team of teachers-in-training partner with MAT performers and artists for the month-long Youth Arts Program. The program is open to all the local and private secondary schools in Port Moresby. Over the course of a six-week program, 500+ students from local public and private schools meet with and are mentored weekly by the teaching artists, student-teachers, local performers and/or MAT volunteers. YAP students attend intensive workshops on theatre skills, acting basics, physical and contemporary styles, technical aspects, improv, playwriting, and theatre games. Meanwhile, the chaperoning teachers from each school attend workshops on process drama, educational drama praxis and ways to incorporate drama and theatre pedagogy

into their core curriculums. In terms of Smith's (2012) decolonizing methodologies principles, Dr. Awi, Life Drama and the Youth Arts Program model the application of *democratizing* the equality of voices, *returning* the performative styles of ancestors and cultures, *envisioning* futures full of aspirations, *intervening* to influence societal change and *claiming* the rights of youth, education and citizenship.

YAP is created around what Awi designates as "Life Drama" techniques (Awi, 2014, 2018; Baldwin, 2010; Haseman et. All; 2014). Life Drama is a participatory workshop program based on the principles of applied theatre. It centers on an "open story" of a societal issue and its impact on the family and community. The program initially used drama-in-education and theatre-for-development techniques, including role-play, image theatre, and Boalian methods to help participants explore the emotional, social, and economic effects of the issue at individual and community levels. The Life Drama curriculum encompasses facilitated games and exercises in role play, hot-seating, tableau and image work inspired and adapted from by the work of Boal, Heathcote, Neelands, Prendergast and Saxton, and other such canonized process drama, applied theatre and drama practitioners. The list of applied drama theorists and facilitators habitually sits in a western perspective, but the work of applied drama offers a powerful tool for decolonization by providing a space where marginalized voices can reclaim their narratives, challenge dominant discourses, and reassert cultural identities that have been suppressed by colonial powers (Prentki & Preston, 2009; Prendergast & Saxton; 2013; Landy & Montgomery, 2012). Through mixed devising, process drama, and Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1992; 2006), utilizing indigenous song, drum, dance or stories, students create original performances of social action theatre. At each school, students perform their original creation for their peers, followed by a schoolwide reflection and workshop run by MAT teaching artists. The culmination of YAP is a three-day theatre festival held at the MAT with parents and community members invited to attend.

Weaving Song and Story: The Unique Identity of PNG Folk Opera

The original performances that conclude Awi's use of the Life Drama Curriculum are created through the concept of Folk Opera (Murphy, 2010; Baldwin, 2010; Haseman et. all, 2014; Awi, 2014, 2018). This

approach, unique to Papua New Guinea, encourages people to express their ideas and feelings through their own cultural means of expression. Developed in the 1970s by the Ruan Ruan Theatre, Folk Opera draws on traditional folk tales, music, dance styles, and costumes of traditional dress to create a performance or scene. Folk opera is driven by three key elements:

- **Story force** – which refers to the impact of the events that unfold
- **Picture force** – highlighting the visual and auditory power of the spectacle
- **Feeling force** – encompassing the emotions and the way they resonate with both participants and the audience

In Papua New Guinea, *Folk Opera* functions as a potent vehicle for storytelling that incorporates traditional music, dance, oral history, and communal participation. Unlike Western operatic traditions that often focus on high drama and formal compositions, PNG's Folk Opera serves as an immersive experience rooted in cultural practices and community rituals. For instance, *Folk Opera* often weaves ancestral tales, contemporary social issues, and communal concerns into a single performance, creating a narrative that is both reflective and forward-looking. Through songs, chants, and dances, Folk Opera becomes a living archive of communal memory and a space for intergenerational knowledge exchange, emphasizing values of kinship, resilience, and cultural pride.

Performers blend cultural practices from different provinces and communities across Papua New Guinea, which, while unique to each community, are generally understood by most. These practices may include the Siassi dance, the art and ceremony of the Gulf, the farce traditions of the Eastern Highlands and Simbu, as well as Manus dance and Garamut music. As a "folk" art form, Folk Opera sidesteps the hierarchical nature of formal theatre spaces, making it accessible to wider audiences while serving as both entertainment and activism. In doing so, it transcends performance to create a communal space for cultural reclamation and resistance. This aligns with many of Tuhiwai Smith's decolonizing principles, such as sharing, storytelling, celebrating survival, indigenizing, revitalizing, connecting, representing, and envisioning.

Awi's use of Life Drama combined with Folk Opera works to decolonize both theatre and education in Papua New Guinea by "disrupting the dominance of Western narratives and aesthetics, foregrounding the diversity and richness of indigenous and formerly colonized cultures in performance" (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996). *This work* fulfills a dual purpose: it honors traditional narratives while enabling a critical examination of contemporary social issues, from environmental concerns to economic hardships. With YAP students, themes and stories drawn from earlier applied drama techniques—such as reflections, poems, stories, or moments—are used as stimuli to create original works. In 2023, over 30 original performances addressed topics like domestic violence, food insecurity, teen pregnancy, arts in education, the pressures of continuing education, social media footprints, alcohol/drug use, and climate change. Each performance wove together the elements of Folk Opera, integrating song, dance, traditional craftwork, and ceremony into relevant, modern pieces.



Figure 4: YAP performance blending tradition with modern performance

One notable performance from Bethel Sunrise School, entitled *For the Future*, explored the balance between tradition and modern

progress, achieving a strong and supported 'feeling force' that idealistically represented the principles of *democratizing* and *envisioning* to influence change. This montage began with a call for national unity, spoken in multiple languages and dialects, and incorporated tribal symbolism from across the country. This, with the use of pictures projected from different provinces, drove the 'picture force'. The performance's compelling 'story force' blended Christian missionary beliefs with satires of prominent political leaders to tell the stories of individual students on stage, highlighting their origins, ancestors, and aspirations for the future. The Folk Opera structure allowed the students at Bethel to actively seek out and elevate "the narratives of those who have been silenced by colonial histories, ensuring that the stage becomes a space of representation and resistance" (Young, 2010).

Collectively, each YAP performance contributed to the decolonization of education and theatre in Papua New Guinea by elevating these stories and "confronting and dismantling the colonial mindset, making space for indigenous and marginalized voices to reclaim their stories and their stages." (Moraga, 2011) The Youth Arts Program exemplifies Smith's (2012) decolonizing methodologies by promoting equal representation of voices, reclaiming ancestral and cultural performance styles, envisioning aspirational futures, intervening to drive societal change, and advocating for the rights of youth, education, and citizenship. Arguably, the propensity of all-male and all-female schools also embodies Smith's idea of *gendering*, wherein acting out roles (both male and female) interprets the actions of each gender and empowers both performers and audience.

"The unspoken is very controversial.": Post-YAP Development of New Works

"I know this, his story will help heal others, but before it does, it needs to help heal us... it's not about just showing the mistakes and the wrongs. It's about what comes after; seeing all that what comes after is healing." (*He Is Victor*, Kuliniasi, 2020)

He is Victor (HIV) boldly delves into taboo subjects such as mental health, suicide, discrimination against people with HIV, and tuberculosis. The play challenges perceptions of how these diseases

are contracted, addresses issues of sexual contact, LGBTQIA+ communities, gender roles, and family secrecy, while critically questioning aspects of Papua New Guinean culture. During the premiere of *He Is Victor*, Nelson Kokoa embodies a judgmental pastor, Hananiah Dickson drives the narrative as a truth-seeking journalist, and Andrew Kuliniasi brings ancestral wisdom to life as he portrays the family matriarch, Nagi. Two of these talented performers began their journey in the YAP program during Year 9, all three have served as YAP mentors, and are now leading sessions and workshops in addition to their own work as professional artists. In a discussion about the influence of YAP on their lives, each responded:

Nelson: The Youth Arts Program (YAP) at the Moresby Arts Theatre has honestly been a great and profound experience for me. Although I never had the opportunity to participate in this program during high school, I've been fortunate to be involved as a speaker for the NGO sessions over the past [...] serving as a mentor and being in the thick of it. I've seen firsthand how performance and art can be powerful tools for building confidence in young people.

Hananiah: YAP has made a significant impact on me. I've grown to be more confident in who I am. Learned how to work in a team and picked up so many skills.

Nelson: It really allows [the youth] to tackle important topics, as each year, YAP focuses on a different theme. It gives them the chance to dissect these important issues and relay their thoughts and feelings through art, theatre, and performance.

Andrew: The most important thing about sharing stories is, I guess, what everyone nowadays has been fighting for: inclusivity. Papua New Guinean storytelling in the form of theatre, film, and voice is almost nonexistent, so the art of it needs to be captured in order to inspire Papua New Guineans to listen to their own stories. Right now, we are inundated with stories and entertainment from other countries and often try to replicate them, but we have our own stories, and they need to be told.

Nelson: I believe this [YAP] process not only enhances their creativity but also equips them with the crucial skill of critical thinking, which is needed to navigate the world around them. In PNG, this skill [critical thinking] is lacking, not just at the grassroots level but across all levels of society. Programs like Arts Activism PNG and the Youth Arts Program allow young people to not only practice their art, but also to engage in critical thinking, while encouraging audiences to critically analyze the art presented to them. It's inspiring to see how these young artists grow and transform through the program, and it reminds me of the importance of nurturing the next generation of creatives.

As they have transitioned into adulthood, these three Papua New Guineans have remained deeply connected to performance, their community, and the pursuit of new works that champion decolonization and empowerment through the arts in Papua New Guinea. Their journey from YAP participants/mentors to community leaders in theatre underscores how the program equips young artists to reclaim the narrative, decolonize performance, and inspire social change through the authentic representation of Papua New Guinean voices.

Andrew Kuliniasi describes himself as “a director, scriptwriter, producer, and dramatist” from the Meisoga clan of Suau Island in the Milne Bay Province. He has been a prominent figure at the Moresby Arts Theatre for nearly a decade, starting as a youth volunteer, advancing to a participant in high school, then becoming a mentor, and now emerging as a leading director, actor, and playwright. His playwriting debut, *Meisoga*, was produced on the mainstage when he was 16 years old. In the spirit of YAP’s Folk Operas, *Meisoga* interweaves cultural taboos, witchcraft, intertribal bloodshed, folk stories, and ancestral knowledge to tell the story of the Meisoga clan’s matriarch, Sine Kepu. Kuliniasi describes it as “a story about survival, and what people will do to survive and how it changes them.” Reflecting on the pre-missionary setting and the ancestral knowledge in his work, Kuliniasi emphasizes, “There is so much material out there to write songs, books, and plays—but if we don’t do that, our culture dies. Who we are dies. There won’t be anything unique about us.” Kuliniasi, as a playwright, director and dramatist, embodies the decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 2012) of *discovering* by unearthing histories, *restoring* the healing of communities, *writing* the

documentation of culture and injustices, *remembering* and *naming* the traumas of the past, the present and potentially the future.

To preserve and document the true stories and experiences of Papua New Guineans, Kuliniasi's works embed historical accounts and societal snapshots infused with the supernatural elements of folk culture and community. His *Pearly Shells Trilogy*—which includes *He Is Victor*, *For My Father*, and *Letters from Bradley*—is connected through themes of modern trauma and tragedy. These plays are structured around the concept of *hauskrais*, where family, tradition, and the passage of time converge to reveal the stories that “Papua New Guineans are afraid to talk about.” By using theatre to unearth and share these often-silenced narratives, Kuliniasi not only keeps the cultural memory alive, but also advances the decolonization of theatre in Papua New Guinea, reclaiming the stage as a space for authentic Papua New Guinean voices and stories.

“PNG Ways”: Arts Activism in Methodologies

“We draw inspiration from the resilience and strength of the people of Papua New Guinea, and we are dedicated to amplifying their voices through art. Our movement aims to empower citizens with information, enabling them to make informed decisions and take meaningful action. Together, we can create a society where art is not just a form of expression but a force for positive change. We're not just a movement; we're a community where every artist, supporter, and contributor plays a crucial role in shaping our narrative.” (Arts Activism PNG Mission Statement, 2024)

Nelson Kokoa is the co-founder and director of Arts Activism PNG and the current Senior Coordinator, managing the facilities of the Moresby Arts Theatre. His work “centers around empowering young people and communities through the transformative power of art” (personal communication, 2024). Onstage, Nelson has presented NGO material to hundreds of youth and portrayed a range of characters, from an evangelical preacher and a youth caught in police corruption to a hopeless romantic Elizabethan lyricist. He has performed hip-hop, traditional, lyrical, and interpretive dance, while also managing backstage set pieces and overseeing daily maintenance. In many ways, he is a passionate quintuple threat: singer, actor, dancer, coordinator, and activist.

Nelson describes himself as “deeply passionate about using art as a tool for social change, promoting and fostering critical thinking, and giving a voice to those who may feel unheard. In PNG, there is not just a generational barrier, but also a significant communication barrier between generations. I feel that many young people, because of the values they have been taught growing up—such as respect and respecting your elders—may feel held back from speaking their minds freely.” Members of the Arts Activism PNG collective include Moresby Arts Theatre members, university students, former YAP participants, community leaders, and other stakeholders from across the capital city. Reflecting the call for decolonizing methodologies by Smith (2012), Arts Activism PNG brings together diverse voices from multiple disciplines (Louie et al., 2017).



Figure 5: An Art Activism artist adorned with traditional bilas holding a woven bilum bag.

As a grassroots performance movement, Arts Activism PNG creates “a space where thoughts and opinions are celebrated, especially among young people, to speak about issues” such as

mental health, sexuality, abuse, and addiction. The organization is committed to empowerment, creativity, collaboration, advocacy, inclusivity, resilience, hope, integrity, education, and celebration. Currently, the collective is addressing the “challenge of youth unemployment” by envisioning “a world where art could be a viable career path, a world where creativity could fuel economic and cultural growth. The creative industry has untapped potential, and [Arts Activism PNG aims] to unlock it, nurturing a thriving community of young artists and creative professionals” (Dickinson et al., 2024). The group's work reflects Smith's decolonizing methodologies (2012) and represents a culmination of the YAP-to-Activism and community leadership pipeline.

Arts Activism PNG celebrates the rich cultural diversity of Papua New Guinea and strives to foster unity, understanding, and empathy through artistic expression. The collective embodies many of the twenty-five principles established by Smith (2012): *negotiating* solutions to issues such as unemployment and violence, *creating* innovative art and performances, *representing* and reimagining Papua New Guinean identity, *revitalizing* artistic and cultural traditions, and *testifying*, by giving voice to the lived experiences of the community. In practice, Arts Activism PNG hosts performances focused on themes like gender-based violence, addiction, hope, or aspirations. These events create a distinctly Papua New Guinean mosaic of arts to promote dialogue, normalization, and visibility around the chosen themes, featuring spoken word, music, dance, monologues, scene work (both indigenized adaptations and new works in progress), film, and visual art installations. Performances at the Moresby Arts Theatre are often sold out, with standing room only, and Arts Activism PNG also ventures into community spaces as frequently as possible. They have performed for conferences, both international and domestic, as well as for prime ministers, schools, and NGOs. Most significantly, Arts Activism PNG is working to continue education and empowerment to further decolonization through arts and education in Papua New Guinea. “Art and theatre have become powerful mediums for addressing social issues here in Papua New Guinea. Whether it's through a play that sparks conversation or a dance that challenges the norms, the impact is tangible. We've created a space where people can express themselves, explore topics, and connect with their culture in ways that are both meaningful and transformative” (Kokoa, personal

communication 2024).

“We are weaving a fabric of change”: A Conclusion

The final principle of indigenous decolonizing methodologies to consider is the protection and safeguarding of knowledge. Nelson Kokoa eloquently reflects on this: “I believe that preserving our culture, cultural art, and stories is incredibly important. As my mentor, Serena Sasingian, always says, they are the threads that weave our identity as a people—from our stories to our sing-sings to our traditional *bilas* [body decoration or adornment] . Art has been part of our people for generations; it connects us to our ancestors, our land, and our heritage” (personal communication, 2024).

The work at the Moresby Arts Theatre, through YAP, local artists, and Arts Activism PNG, exemplifies a commitment to reclaiming performative traditions, nurturing youth leadership, and fostering cultural pride and identity. Each performance, workshop, and initiative are an act of resistance against the silencing effects of colonial legacies, demonstrating the power of storytelling to bridge divides, heal wounds, and promote understanding across generations and communities.

By employing Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (2012) framework for decolonizing methodologies, these initiatives have created a platform where Papua New Guinea’s diverse narratives can be shared with authenticity and integrity. Smith’s 25 projects serve as a guide to weaving these narratives into the community’s fabric: by reclaiming traditions, envisioning new futures, and speaking truth to power. The collective efforts of YAP, the MAT, and Arts Activism PNG show that decolonization is not merely theoretical but an ongoing, lived practice that challenges colonial legacies and amplifies marginalized voices.

However, as Kokoa cautions, “Some stories are sacred and should remain within the confines of our tribes, villages, and communities to maintain their integrity and meaning. That said, I also believe that through modern creative arts, we can find innovative ways to preserve and share cultural treasures without diluting their essence. We can ensure that while we innovate and share with the world, we do so with respect and mindfulness of the significance of these traditions. In this way, our art and stories will continue to be passed on and inspire future generations” (personal communication, 2024).

The trajectory of the Youth Arts Program at the Moresby Arts Theatre, alongside the work of Arts Activism PNG, reveals a dynamic interplay between traditional and contemporary storytelling, grounded in Smith's framework for decolonizing methodologies. These projects create spaces where young people's voices are not only heard but amplified, allowing them to "Tokstret"—speak truthfully—about their lived realities and challenges in a rapidly changing world.

Ultimately, decolonization in arts and education is about honesty—telling the stories that matter, that resonate, and that reflect the complexities of life in Papua New Guinea today. As Kuliniasi (2020:1) reminds us, “I believe in one thing, stories should reflect the truth.” And so, the artists at the Moresby Arts Theatre continue to "Tokstret," forging a path toward a more inclusive and equitable society, one story at a time.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Orlena-Kearns Jaskolski, K. (2024). *Tokstret: Youth arts, activism and decolonization in Papua New Guinea*. *ArtsPraxis*, 11 (2), pp. 117-140.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Informed consent and signed consent forms were obtained from all participants, who were given the option to be identified by name, pseudonym, or to remain anonymous. Each participant was fully briefed on the study's purpose, scope, and the potential use of their contributions. Only those who explicitly consented to be named are identified in this research. The author reports there are no additional financial or non-financial interests to declare.