

Media Practice and Theatre in Conversation: Co-Creating Narratives for Positive Social Change

[JACKIE KAULI](#)

[VERENA THOMAS](#)

QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

ABSTRACT

In Papua New Guinea, a country in the South Pacific, performance and ritual are part of day-to-day life through which social and cultural relationships are mediated. Understanding the way in which performances are woven into day-to-day experiences and political spaces lets us explore communal and indigenous processes around social change. Yet to date, there has been a very limited understanding of the value of performance for social change among development practitioners and those seeking to work with communities to impact on positive social change around certain issues.

Based on over a decade of engagement in arts-based research and development practice in the Pacific, we explore the way in which indigenous knowledge systems and performances can be harnessed to co-create narratives and performances for community audiences. Among others, we explore the model of Theatre in Conversation (TiC)

(Kauli 2015), an arts-based approach developed as research and a theatre for development model, to overcome some of the complexities linked to achieving social change. TiC is used in Papua New Guinea to assist community organisations and individual facilitators develop narratives of strength and resilience that highlight the challenges, create the conversations, and deepen understanding around sensitive issues. These narratives are further captured through other media such as photography or film. Workshops are designed to improve artist-facilitators' community engagement skills and artistry harnessing indigenous ways of learning and engagement in social change. In this paper, we highlight projects on gender-based violence and sorcery accusation related violence, as examples to explore the key aspects of this approach.

INTRODUCTION

International development projects are characterized by uneven power dynamics between those who fund programs and those who are regarded as beneficiaries of such initiatives (Escobar, 2011). A gap often exists between western frameworks and developing locally appropriate approaches to development. This might in part have to do with the need to justify impact of such initiatives within frameworks that make sense to those providing the funding, and in part due to the inherent complexity of local contexts. On a day-to-day basis people perform, negotiate and enact engagements within their local spaces, to establish and reconfirm relationships and to negotiate their positions within society. Entering these spaces requires careful introductions and negotiations around shared objectives and possible processes of engagement.

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a country in the South Pacific that receives large amounts of foreign aid.¹ At the same time, with over 800 different ethnic groups in a country of 8 million people, the cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity in Papua New Guinea is unique in many ways. In this setting, which foregrounds a communal culture, artistic performances and rituals are part of day-to-day life through which social and cultural relationships are mediated. Through intangible artistic

¹ Australia is PNG's largest donor with amounts of over 500 million per year.

creations people establish and maintain their connection to others (Leach, 2012).

In PNG, performances are enacted as activism when they serve a collective political agenda, for example when the rights of a community are impinged upon or when communities collectively engage in promoting a certain agenda. Understanding the way in which performances are woven into these political spaces lets us explore communal and indigenous processes around social change. Yet to date, there has been a very limited understanding of the value of performance for social change among development practitioners and those seeking to work with communities to impact on positive social change around certain issues.

The approach highlighted in our paper presents arts-based strategies for research and community engagement that harness indigenous world views and pedagogies. It builds on local understandings of performance and activism and creates further tools to expand the engagement to address specific social issues. Performances are interspersed with narratives of hope and resilience embedded in local contexts. We provide examples from projects seeking to address issues around gender and sorcery accusation related violence which integrate the model of Theatre in Conversations (Kauli, 2015a) with participatory media practices. Our aim is to provide examples of projects that harness oral and performative processes for community and collective agendas to address issues of violence.

BACKGROUND: ART AND ACTIVISM IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Art and art processes have been an integral part of PNG culture and society, and have been shaping social and cultural processes within communities for thousands of years. Since the 1960s, art and activism have drawn on contemporary art forms and integrated indigenous knowledge, creativity and relational systems in artistic formats such as plays, poetry books, sculptures and paintings. Contemporary art emerged in the pre-independence times² and this is where activism and the products associated with it were most visible (Beier, 2017). Artists were working to create a national consciousness and a national identity

² PNG gained independence in 1975.

and creating counter-narratives to the Australian colonial administration (May, 2013).

Literary works such as the Papua Pockets Poets or contemporary painters such as Matthias Kauage addressed issues around education and the challenges in understanding and learning about two different worlds. The play *The Unexpected Hawk*, written by John Waiko, captures a conversation between a mother and son, also noted in May's account of literary works in PNG (2013):

Son: Why do they treat us like this?

Mother: No one knows why. We do not understand them, and they do not try to understand us. But every tree has its roots deep down in the ground. Even their actions must have roots. I want you to go to school, so that you can dig out the roots. Do not hesitate to uproot their tree and drink their wisdom.

In the play the mother asks the son to learn from the colonial administration. While Papua New Guineans adapted to new systems, it can be argued the colonial power did less so, in terms of understanding and learning from the existing indigenous systems. Papua New Guinea adapted to a western system of education and subsequently worked on re-integrating indigenous practices within the education system (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2003). Similarly, international development practice historically has been characterised by promoting external knowledge and understandings. Increasingly, recognising that understanding and engaging with local solutions and listening might present key factors for sustainable development partnerships. In this space, representation and performance are key aspects in understanding community engagement.

As a sovereign nation, Papua New Guinea continues to seek to counter the narrative of the Other and produce representations that acknowledge its history and strengths (Stella, 2007). Throughout PNG's recent history there has been collective actions to address political structures and bring inequalities to the attention of decision makers. The performativity of these collective actions provides an important understanding of social movements and change.

For example, in 2013, people united for the Haus Krai movement. A Haus Krai is a traditional mourning ritual played out by relatives of the deceased, it is infused with singing, crying and lamentations, contained within them stories about the deceased (Gillespie & Hoenigman, 2013).

These are sung in mournful acts of sorrow, displayed publicly for all to witness. These mourning rituals are practiced throughout the country. To protest against weak laws in relation to domestic and sorcery related violence people marched the streets of PNG towns to demand policy change. In this case the ritual served as a performance addressing a national issue, highlighting that too many lives had been lost to violence (Kauli, 2015b; Nayahamui Rooney, 2017).

This provides one example in understanding the link between activism and performance and using rituals to create social change. We argue, that to date, development practice has not sufficiently engaged in the potential of indigenous performance to understand social change and social relations more broadly. Paying attention to performance and ritual means observing every day practices and engagements and providing strategies to uncovering tacit knowledges embedded in the individuals' and communities' activities.

In the following sections we discuss the Theatre in Conversation (TiC) model and its integration with media practice based on our shared work around gender-based violence and sorcery accusation related violence to illustrate how development practice can harness and engage in indigenous performativity at community level.

UNDERSTANDING PERFORMANCE AS ACTIVISM IN DEVELOPMENT: CO-CREATING NARRATIVES FOR POSITIVE SOCIAL CHANGE

Our approach draws on a variety of forms and formats which foreground co-creativity and relationships, integrating research and advocacy within action research and practice-led approaches. Here, we merge the model of Theatre in Conversations (Kauli 2015) with participatory and community media strategies to create hybrid forms of media practice. These hybrid forms of practice were developed to attend to the challenges of development practices in trying to affect change in communities. The objective of TiC was to create spaces where collective learning and sharing can take place while co-devising artistic performance that stimulate conversation within a community. The TiC model combines three established genres of practice: process drama, community theatre and community conversations. There are key

principles that the three genres share but also key components that each of these components brings.

Community theatre promotes the inclusion of indigenous performances and local participants. It utilises community cultural advisors from the community and integrates an appreciation of aesthetic and pedagogical possibilities embedded in indigenous performance (see Murphy, 2010; Van Erven, 2002).

Community conversations privileges knowledge and understanding of communities and aim to harness this knowledge for dialogue and problem solving. According to Reid (2009):

The power to change lies within: within communities, within groups, within people [...] The answers to what needs to be done lie within: communities can work out for themselves what needs to change, what needs to be done. (p. 7)

Process drama focuses on process (using dramatic forms to understand a subject) rather than product (theatre production) as a way to increase participants understanding around issues. The curatorial processes of using drama forms frames dramatic experiences. When utilised well it integrates experiences from all participants, focusing on elements such as power and agency to ensure a rich experiences of the issue or subject being explored. It is therefore an important approach when dealing with sensitive social issues and different power dynamics. A key component of process drama is the role of the facilitator as leaderly-led facilitator (Haseman, 2002). A leaderly-led facilitator both leads and guides the experience of participants through an issue, but is also comfortable at being led by the experiences of the participants. Their artistry is demonstrated in how they bring together and highlight intersections of knowledge that emerge from the experience and how they address beliefs, perceptions, power and agency within the workshop spaces.

The genres of community theatre, community conversations and process drama are merged in the TiC model. In the following section we share an example of using the TiC model in practice. We then expand our understanding and use of TiC to participatory media practices including photovoice, filmmaking and digital storytelling to point towards opportunities in creating and activating collective learning spaces locally, nationally and internationally. Photovoice and digital storytelling

use a similar approach as people themselves take photographs to creatively express their personal stories. Photovoice is often outputted as a single photograph or a series of photographs accompanied by a written narrative, whereas digital storytelling makes use of the digital format and combines an audio narrative with a variety of visual media materials and is edited into a short personal film. Our processes of engagement serve both to reflect on and respond to power dynamics and experiences within groups and how groups can represent their own experiences as forms of resistance and collective action.

RESPONSES FROM THE FIELD—MODELS IN PRACTICE

Theatre in Conversations in Rai Coast, Madang

An example of TiC in practice is demonstrated in a community engagement program addressing gender relations in the Rai Coast district of Madang. TiC was used as a way to understand the various manifestations of violence towards women and how families and men responded to the issues. A performance was created focusing on the impact of violence on women with the goal of creating empathy among the community audience.

Context specific challenges around gender and power were addressed as part of the script development workshop. Prior to the actual performance the audience was briefed to intervene and participate at key points in the story. The main character who played the abusive husband would continue to play the antagonist as a strategy for provocation creating and maintaining dramatic tension.

On one of the days the play was performed, an older male community member responded to the performance with deep, moving reflections about men's violence towards women. The performance became a catalyst for a nagging question that perplexed him for the duration of the performance:

What kind of life, what kind of life are you looking for, you leave your wife and take another woman, what kind of life are you looking for?
(Older Male district officer, Saidor 2012)



Fig 1: Theatre in Conversation, Saidor District Station, 2012

The TiC approach in this scenario highlighted two key components. Firstly, the performance implicated the behaviours of men in the district who had come to normalise the issue of wayward deviant men, and secondly, it made visible the trauma, shame and pain women go through in silence. It was not until seeing the character of the woman visibly struggling to make ends meet, while the husband chastised and abused her, that many of the men in the audience realised the demeaning and demoralising ways they treated their wives. Schiefflin (1998) has discussed 'the creation of presence' as core component of performance:

Performances, whether ritual or dramatic, create and make present realities vivid enough to beguile, amuse or terrify. And through these presences, they alter moods, social relations, bodily dispositions and states of mind. (p. 194)

TiC engaged audience feedback while utilising a repertoire of indigenous performances drawing on context bound narratives to create a public dialogue debating the implications of men's violence towards women within a safe space. The community agreed beforehand that conversations generated during the performance and community discussion would be respected and safe. In this space, women also

weighed in on the discussions asking why they were being mistreated. As a process, TiC engaged community members as performers and audiences to reflect on a present issue.

TiC as an approach serves to provide an in-depth understanding of local context harnessing indigenous performances, local knowledge and practices to generate dialogue and create safe spaces for communities to discuss relevant social issues. We combine this approach with audiovisual media processes to work with community groups to represent the issues they have explored to a wider audience.

Photovoice and Filmic Narratives to Support National Strategies on GBV

The *Yumi Kirapim Senis* initiative was developed involving six community based organisations addressing gender-based violence in their communities (Thomas & Kauli, 2015). In workshops with participants from the organisations we used photovoice as a research process and represent people's individual experiences and stories. In addition, six documentary films were produced as part of the initiative, highlighting relational aspects and showcasing locally developed solutions to gender-based violence (Thomas, Kauli, Munau, & Fernandes, 2015). While the films involved a production team, processes from TiC were used in the workshops as foundational processes to draw out narratives and tacit knowledge. The program ran parallel to the development of the National Strategy to Respond to Gender Based Violence (GBV) and supported the advocacy efforts to get the strategy passed by the PNG government (GoPNG, 2016).

Working with advocates was strategic as we were asking people to share and document their personal experiences (compared to predominantly fictional character narratives in TiC) and therefore it was not only important that their stories and experiences were validated by their work within these organisations but also that the organisations provided the necessary support networks for those exposing their stories.

In workshops we facilitated the sharing and narrating of stories collectively. What emerged from the personal narratives was that the large majority of participants had experienced GBV themselves and were working in these organisations with a vision to create safer communities.

The inspiring thing that I learned from this workshop is that all of us have been living with all forms of violence but nobody knows. Through this workshop I can openly share my problems through the photovoice which might help others who view it to obtain information from it. (Participant, Simbu, Workshop 2014)

After the production of the films as part of the initiative, we brought the organisational partners together to share their stories with national stakeholders in the capital Port Moresby. These stories were curated through both a photo exhibition—with photographs being exhibited together with short written stories—and the screening of the films. The collective understanding that there were key local solutions within communities that could be harnessed as key knowledge in addressing GBV was supported by the advocacy tools such as the films and stories. These advocacy tools importantly offered a contextualised understanding of each of the situations, whether it was situated in an urban or rural area, whether it affected women or children, and whether advocates were addressing predominantly the legal system, providing police or medical support. The media products were curated stories based on everyday indigenous practices and performances.

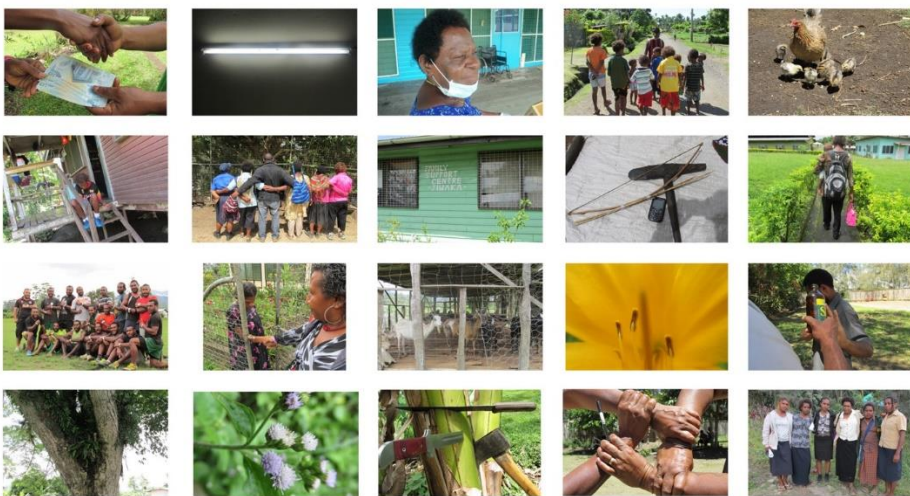


Fig 2: Examples from the 60 photo stories produced in six workshops (Thomas & Kauli, 2015, pp. 52-53)

Collectively people's stories presented holistic solutions, supported by a strong coalition of people who joined the movement of holding national stakeholders accountable for the way GBV was being addressed in PNG. The presentation of these collective narratives at a national launch demonstrated the innovative work of the community-led organisations while advocating to the government to do more to address GBV in PNG communities. The films revealed to government the possibilities for creating change through coalitions and how locally led endeavors are producing action:

The *Yumi Kirapim Senis* films are actually implementing what the GBV strategy [policies] is talking about, communities out there are already there doing it. People of Papua New Guinea actually own those processes and policies that roll within and we don't expect someone from outside to come and help us address GBV. The solution often lies within here, we just need to identify the way and recognize where those solutions are and mainstream those best practices. So the films are definitely a plus in terms of rolling out the GBV strategy for us in the country.³

The concept of representation requires careful examination given the experiences of colonialism. By engaging in a TiC approach local narratives and forms are harnessed. When these are integrated in media products, such as performances or audiovisual representations, they represent an in-depth perspective of an issue which mass media often does not account for or acknowledge. Such representations require careful considerations and they are discussed between facilitators and participants as they emerge as co-creative media products.

Addressing Representation of Sorcery Accusations and Violence

The Yumi Sanap Strong initiative, which sits alongside Yumi Kirapim Senis, was developed taking into account previous experiences. It specifically targets sorcery accusation related violence in PNG. Undertaking a media analysis of newspapers we found that there was limited representation of those seeking to address the issue within their

³ Gayle Tatsi is the Executive Director of the Office for the Development of Women at the Department of Religion, Youth and Community Development, Yumi Sanap Strong National Launch, Port Moresby, 2015.

communities, in particular human rights defenders who have established a strong network in PNG. Despite their many advocacy efforts their voices were often not accounted for in dominant media representations which focus on the often gruesome incidents with little analysis of the causes of the crimes. Behind this backdrop we worked with four organisations in different provinces in PNG to create digital stories.

Similarly to the photovoice approach we discussed under the Yumi Kirapim Senis initiative, digital stories encourage the sharing of individual personal stories. This was at times challenging to participants who had not shared their stories with others, but the potential of capturing their own story audio-visually often encouraged people to narrate their stories. As one participant commented:

It was a challenge for me to share my story and I was hesitant as I have not told my story to people like this. But then we took photos, I felt that I want to share my story and that I can really capture it with photographs. (Workshop participant, Simbu 2017)

To support a 'do no harm' approach we briefed participants about the possibility of sharing stories while keeping the anonymity of the storyteller. Some participants wanted to be identifiable in the story while others decided to remain anonymous. Those remaining anonymous could use different creative techniques to achieve this in their stories. For example, they could chose to have the story read by an actor and select photographs that would not in any way identify them or their location. In discussing the visual representation of the stories, the concept of metaphor was important to ensure anonymity but also in most cases to create a stronger feeling of empathy among audiences. Here, indigenous aesthetics and knowledge were embedded in the narrative, performative and the visual representation.

Local concepts were expressed in local language and represented visually where appropriate. These were linked through personal stories of impact, such as Mary Kini's story (see Fig. 3). Indigenous aesthetics in this case capture relevant narratives embedded in social and cultural experience while becoming an expression of social relations in past, present and future (see Leuthold, 1998).



During my father's wake the community said my mother gave him kaukau (sweet potato) and he went off to fight and then got killed. The community planned on killing my mother because she gave my father 'kol kaukau.'



When my mother heard about this, she feared to join the wake of her husband. She just left.

I waited for one day, then another day passed and then a week passed, she was gone for good.

Mary Kini

Fig 3: Excerpts from the digital story by Mary Kini 'Stori bilong Mary Kini' (2017) as part of the Yumi Sanap Strong initiative.

With the production of the digital stories and through the collective work of the human rights defenders the opportunity emerged to present these representations at national and international levels. This included a forum at national level in Port Moresby and attending the Women of the World Festival in Brisbane, Australia.

In these spaces Mary Kini shared her own story of human rights abuse to advocate for the need for change. Mary spoke about the issue of the security of human rights defenders and the need to establish a human rights commission in Papua New Guinea:

I have to say something which I felt was very important for me to say. In PNG at national level as a voice for the other human rights defenders, and here I felt that that's another country and more over it was a commonwealth gathering and Australia is part of it, PNG is

part of it, so I really wanted to push for PNG to establish a national human rights commission (Mary Kini, at the Women of World. Festival, Brisbane, 2018)



Fig 4: Mary Kini and other human rights defenders speaking at the photo exhibition of Yumi Sanap Strong in Brisbane, Australia.

Emerging from these processes—the sharing of stories and collective responses—was that these representations harnessed the strength of individuals and communities to promote change. In these spaces, activists are countering a long tradition of representation of Papua New Guinea, based on a deficit model that often portrays Papua New Guineans as passive observers to their development changes. These representations emerging from collective workshops were developed on the basis that knowledge was harnessed from within and that those experiences and understandings are key to providing solutions. As such they countered dominant narratives many of which remain a legacy of colonialism and top-down development approaches.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have highlighted examples from projects in Papua New Guinea working in the space of international development practice. We have argued that development projects seeking to address social issues

within communities have an opportunity to harness local knowledge and indigenous performativity. We have outlined the TiC model for community engagement and have demonstrated how this model can be integrated with a variety of media forms to support the activist agendas of individuals and communities. This might include opening up spaces at local, national and international levels to discuss topics previously not highlighted and to ensure appropriate representation of local knowledge systems and understandings. As such, these arts-based processes have the potential to bridge power dynamics in international development practice, as they co-create and co-facilitate shared learning spaces and a collective consciousness.

These processes rely on the willingness to listen to and to value people's voice and story. With this approach arts-based processes can create safe spaces for people to discuss issues that might be normalised with the community and difficult to talk about. Further, media practices can provide processes that support co-creating narratives and collaborative problem solving. Indigenous performances can be harnessed because embedded within these are knowledge systems that are part of lived experiences. Capturing these stories and processes can inspire others to create change. The bringing together of advocates and strengthening coalitions among people, as we have demonstrated, can make a strong contribution to impacting policy makers and creating change at multiple levels.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Jackie Kauli is Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology. She leads a number of research projects funded by development agencies which support the use of indigenous and arts-based research approaches. Jackie's work focuses on harnessing drama techniques, creative practice and communication strategies to contribute to development practice and theory. She holds a PhD in Creative Industries from Queensland University of Technology and has over 15 years experience working in international development on issues around health, education and gender. She works across PNG and Australia.

Verena Thomas is Senior Research Fellow in the School of Design, Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology. Her research interests include communication and social change, communication for development, health communication, arts-based

research approaches, visual methodologies and participatory design. Verena has developed innovative and creative approaches to localising research in cross-cultural contexts. She is the founding Director of the Centre for Social and Creative Media at the University of Goroka, Papua New Guinea, which she led from 2012-2016. Verena has led numerous projects funded by donor agencies, government and non-government partners. She has extensive experience in research and media capacity building in the Pacific region.