

Over the last twelve months, scholars at SSGM, in conjunction with colleagues from other Australian and regional universities, have been involved in a number of projects related to life writing in the Pacific region, including a workshop held at the Australian National University in October 2012 and another at the Pacific Adventist University in December 2013. A number of publications will arise from this work, but in this note we briefly outline why we think this area of research is important.

## The State of the Art

The state of life writing in the Pacific Islands presents us with something of a paradox. On the one hand, on a country-by-country basis, there seem to be numerous gaps, with academics the primary authors of the few lives that have been written. On the other hand, as Doug Munro (2001) has remarked, when taken as a group, the corpus of life writing in the Pacific is one of the most substantial bodies of work about the politics and history of the region.

This point is illustrated in Papua New Guinea, where it is commonly perceived that little, if any, life writing has taken place outside of the widely known examples such as Michael Somare's *Sana* or Maori Kiki's *Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime*. As Jonathan Ritchie (forthcoming) has observed, this belies the copious amount of life writing that has taken place in Papua New Guinea since Osea Ligeremaluog's 1932 autobiography *The Erstwhile Savage*. Since then, at least 37 books of life writing have been published, by or about Papua New Guineans — inconsequential perhaps when compared to the same period in Australia, but a surprisingly large amount nonetheless.

Largely, political life writing in the Pacific has taken on literary and empirical rather than theoretical forms. Critics argue that life writing is

overly subjective, is not explanatory in orientation, and does not articulate a rigorous methodology (Arklay, Nethercote & Wanna, 2006). In particular, the strong relationship between the author and their subject is the source of some ambivalence as the single person narrative sits in stark contrast to conventional disciplinary approaches that portray Pacific peoples as products of cultural, economic and political forces. Conversely, life writing has many strengths, not the least of which is its capacity to reveal the human dimension of everyday life that is often missing from more 'structured' analysis.

## Life History as History

In the Pacific as elsewhere in the colonised world, the wave of nation-forming occurred alongside the flourishing of nationalist literature in which life history writing featured prominently. The practice of using life history as metaphor for national narrative has since declined, with the result that many of the important stories of the birth of nations, featuring the founders' visions, alternative outcomes, and political challenges, are now not widely known, at least among the post-independence generations. On the principle of nature abhorring vacuums, this gap has enabled current political leaders to create their own versions of their nations' beginnings, in an Orwellian attempt to control the future by controlling the past.

## Who Should Write and Whom Should They Write About?

Without dismissing the limitations of the genre, it is important to encourage Pacific peoples to write for many reasons, but perhaps chiefly because to become a nation a people must tell their own stories. Likewise, decisions about who is a 'worthy subject' will also be culturally determined. In

the course of deciding on the subjects for the forthcoming 'Pawa Meri' films for example, various Papua New Guineans made clear that 'they valued leaders who remained connected with the "grass roots", as opposed to those who direct their energies to shoring up their own privilege and power' (Spark, forthcoming). On the other hand 'the exploration of exceptional lives can reveal a privileged person's very ordinariness and humanity' (Ibid).

### What We Learn from Life History

Life writing asks us questions about identity and the construction of self. One of the most pervasive ways of describing Pacific identities in the last century was that they live between 'worlds'. Common titles include: 'ten thousand years in a lifetime', 'the stone age to the space age', 'man of two worlds', 'one woman, two cultures'. Steeped in modernist precepts, the use of the metaphor is both pervasive and revealing (Corbett 2012). However, despite its appeal, it has obvious limits and increasingly these latest workshops have asked whether it remains useful for understanding Pacific peoples into the future, if it ever did in the past.

In seeking a more nuanced and sophisticated way of understanding individual lives, scholars have turned to ideas like intersectionality to describe overlapping and multiple identities that might include family, place, language, spirituality, work etc., but not be bound to them as reified categories. In turn, this conceptual shift raises questions about the way individuals relate to, interpret, and recreate broader ideas and theories

like development, the state, leadership, service, gender and so forth. To that end, life history is a fundamentally important endeavour that has significant scholarly and practical applications.

### Notes on Authors

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