

# Approaching 50 Years: the challenge of building a national identity in PNG



by Theresa Meki

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Papua New Guinea will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary as an independent nation in September 2025. This momentous milestone will undoubtedly be marked by jubilant celebrations. However, it also prompts reflection on the country's path to independence and the prominent people who built the nation and continue to shape its future.

The [Revitalizing the PNG Dictionary of Biography \(PNGDB\) Project](#) is an attempt to celebrate Papua New Guineans from various sectors of society who have contributed to progressing the nation's development. This project, funded by the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University (ANU) and convened by Nicholas Hoare (an ANU Pacific historian), Keimelo Gima (a University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) PNG historian) and me, commenced in 2023. It is an attempt to revitalise the original dictionary project, known as the PNG Dictionary of Contemporary Biography (PNGDCB), that started in the 1980s.

In 1984, the government of PNG formed the Centennial Committee with the purpose of organising a series of cultural heritage projects of national significance to mark 100 years of colonial administration and modern government in the territories of both Papua and New Guinea. The PNGDCB, hosted by UPNG, was designed to be a scholarly work of reference. The project was chaired by PNG historian John Waiko and managed by Australian historian Jim Griffin. It was an ambitious project that had the support of UPNG Vice Chancellor Elton Brash as well as that of Deputy Prime Minister Paias Wintgi as patron.

The project's initial deadline of 1986 was postponed to 1988 and archival records indicate that by 1990 the project had come to a halt. The project experienced practical challenges such as limited funding and a shortage of editors and researchers. In 2000, UPNG librarian Sam Kaima tried, unsuccessfully, to revive it. Both Jim Griffin and Sam Kaima passed away in 2010. More recently, [John Waiko](#) also passed away.

## DEVPOLICYBLOG

Having a national dictionary of biography is a significant marker of nationhood. In the case of the PNGBCD, it included the likes of Michael Somare, Josephine Abaijah, Paul Lapun (the first PNG citizen to be knighted), Anna Solomon (first national editor of *Wantok Niuspepa*), Albert Maori Kiki, John Guise (first Governor-General), Florence Griffin (first woman librarian) and many others who helped to build the nation in various capacities. The impacts of their contributions to the country are today enjoyed by many. There are over 2,000 draft entries about these remarkable people available in a database at the UPNG library. They are currently just sitting there, collecting dust.

The original architects of the project were motivated to document and celebrate the pioneers who were instrumental during the transition to independence. Being a “first” was certainly celebrated in the early days. However, since then, countless Papua New Guineans in various fields and occupations have contributed tremendously to maintaining the country and pushing it forward. They too need to be documented. That is the aim of the revitalised project — to produce fifty biographical entries to mark the 50 years of independence in an edited volume. Additionally, we hope to encourage young Papua New Guinean writers to write their own stories and by extension their own history.

Applications for the new PNGDB opened in April 2024, with almost 100 writers expressing interest. Only 25 were selected due to budget constraints. In June, the first workshop was held in Port Moresby and included training in ethical data collection, archival research and consent. At the end of the workshop, the writers had outlined their criteria for a “nation maker” and were tasked to research and write a short biographical entry (at least 1,500 words) about the nation maker of their choice, whom they affectionately dubbed “nameless champions”.

Eight weeks later, at a second workshop in August, the writers met in again in Port Moresby and presented their subjects to the group. Many captivating and heart-warming stories about hardworking Papua New Guineans were shared and appreciated. I learned of amazing Papua New Guineans such as the late Jacob Luke, a philanthropist and entrepreneur whose company Maipai Transport is synonymous with the highlands Okuk highway. Luke, from his own pocket, put hundreds of children through school and brought services to his district. Or the late Beverly Kaleva, a lifelong educationist who opened her home to struggling day students, many of whom were unrelated to her, so that they could have a place to eat, rest and comfortably continue their tertiary studies.

I also learned new fun facts about Papua New Guineans who have represented us internationally. For example, in 1971 Dame Meg Taylor represented the territory as an athlete in the South Pacific Games in Tahiti. She won a bronze medal in the

4×100-metre race and a silver in the pentathlon. Another interesting fact relates to the late Ambassador Peter Donigi, who at the tender age of just 23 represented the country at the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea in 1974. He was instrumental in the development of the body of international sea law that derived from that conference.

But, while it was exciting for the group to reflect on and reminisce about the lives that they planned to document, the writers also reflected on the constraints of doing such historical and archival research in PNG. The most glaring of these was the closure of the PNG National Archives from October 2023 to September 2024. Most historical material had to be researched and gathered from online archival sites such as [Trove](#) and the [Pacific Manuscripts Bureau \(PAMBU\)](#). Many of the writers had their own challenges, ranging from setting interview appointments to finding time to write, as this was a side project on top of all their other work and life responsibilities. The project is now at its editorial stage. We plan to have an official launch towards the end of this year.

The prerequisite for building a national identity is to have and share some level of collective national memory. Sadly, the country's institutions that house national and cultural memory such as archives, museums and libraries, and the technicians that work within them, are struggling because they do not receive the same level of attention or funding from government or donor agencies as other arms of government. For a country as ethnically diverse and socio-economically fragmented as PNG, there needs to be concerted effort to forge a united national identity, particularly as we turn 50. It is important to invest in these institutions because they help to facilitate our sense of national identity by recording, maintaining and showcasing stories of the past.

If we do not seriously reflect on what Papua New Guineans have built and strived for over the past 50 years, we will continue to stagger and stumble forward instead of charting our own positive and constructive path into the future.

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