

PNG@50: Why our GLAM institutions must be part of the reset

by Allan Donigi

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The Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery, 1983

Photo Credit: PNG National Archives

Papua New Guinea has reached a significant milestone — 50 years of independence. This moment invites reflection not only on our achievements but on the foundations that hold our national story together.

Among these are our galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM). They are institutions that preserve the evidence of who we are and where we've come from. As we look ahead through the national government's [PNG Reset@50 and 20-year roadmap](#), officially launched by Prime Minister James Marape on 9 February 2025 to guide national reflection and chart strategic priorities through to 2045, a review of these institutions and the policies behind them should be a priority. History teaches us that progress often builds on earlier efforts; many things we celebrate today were first attempted, or even achieved, by our pioneers decades ago. Strong GLAM institutions ensure those lessons are not lost.

Half a century into independence, PNG stands at a crossroads: we can either let our collective memory fray, or we can invest properly in the institutions that safeguard it. GLAM institutions are the memory infrastructure of a nation: they collect, preserve and make accessible the materials that tell us who we are and where we came from.

For me, this isn't abstract. I've been piecing together my family genealogy since 2012. Patrol reports held at the National Archives in Waigani have given me dates, place names and verbatim written accounts from elders — details that shifted stories I'd only heard orally into documentary evidence. The different weighting given to history when it's written down is real. Patrol reports were designed as comprehensive, on-the-ground records of village life, land use, boundaries and administrative contact; they are a major source for events in PNG's colonial era.

Recently, I contributed as an author to the [PNG Dictionary of Biography Volume One](#), a resource that is now available free for anyone to download. That experience reinforced how fragile and scattered our historical record is. Writing an entry often

meant starting with oral accounts and then painstakingly cross-checking them against published works and any surviving documentation, particularly for events tied to national or historical milestones. In many cases, the University of PNG's Michael Somare Library was a lifeline: its physical collections and online catalogue provided critical sources that helped to validate oral narratives and fill information gaps. Without that institutional support, **producing accurate, evidence-based biographies** would have been nearly impossible.

One of the figures I wrote about, Tamo Mai, was a trailblazer in her own right. In December 1974, she became one of the first Papua New Guinean women appointed to the board of the PNG Development Bank, a groundbreaking achievement at a time when women's participation in national decision-making was rare. Her appointment reflected the government's trust in her judgment and her growing influence on national affairs. Stories like hers remind us why preserving and highlighting these histories matters.

As we mark 50 years, a review of our GLAM institutions and the policies that underpin them should be a government priority. History has a way of repeating itself, and these collections show us that many achievements we celebrate today were first attempted (or even accomplished) by our countryfolk decades ago. Too often, those milestones were never highlighted or widely known. Looking back is not about nostalgia; it's about learning what worked, what didn't and how to build on foundations already laid. Strong archives and libraries, combined with policies that institutionalise regular documentation and programs to train and upskill local staff (while incentivising continuous record-keeping) make that possible.

While our local infrastructure struggles, international platforms have stepped in to bridge gaps. The National Library of Australia's Trove is a prime example: it aggregates millions of digitised newspapers, photographs and manuscripts, including Pacific-related material that researchers in PNG can access remotely. Trove, alongside initiatives like University of California San Diego's patrol report digitisation and the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (PAMBU), demonstrates what is possible when digitisation and open access are prioritised.

In my own research for the Dictionary of Biography, one challenge was the lack of subscription access to resources held by the National Library of Australia (NLA). Many critical materials (archival newspapers, rare books and digitised manuscripts) are available through NLA's platforms but cannot be physically accessed in PNG. If our libraries were up to date and had institutional subscriptions, these resources could be accessed easily and legally from here. This gap highlights why investment in digital connectivity and licensing agreements should be part of any GLAM review: it's not just about buildings and shelves, but about linking our researchers to global

knowledge networks.

The government's PNG Reset@50 and 20-Year Roadmap (2025–2045) is a comprehensive effort to review our first 50 years and set practical priorities for the next two decades. It is exactly the policy window we need to elevate GLAM as core nation-building infrastructure rather than optional extras. If Reset@50 is about strengthening governance and building a smarter, fairer future, the roadmap should include concrete, funded commitments to:

- stabilise access by ring-fencing operational budgets and service-level standards for archives and libraries;
- digitise at scale by establishing a multi-year program to digitise priority collections accessible via public portals; and
- modernise preservation by introducing climate-adaptive storage and pest management at the PNG National Museum and Art Gallery and the National Archives.

At 50, PNG has been reflecting publicly on identity and institutions, from celebrations of cultural resilience to hard-edged debates about constitutional practice in Parliament. Those reflections only matter if we can ground them in evidence — records, artefacts and narratives that are protected, accessible and trusted.

Reset@50 talks about honest review, accountability and big bets. One of those big bets should be simple: treat GLAM as essential public infrastructure. Fund it, modernise it, decentralise it and digitise it — as a practical way to protect our past while building our future.

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