Papua New Guinea’s national elections are coming up in 2022, and the national women’s political empowerment movement is gaining momentum again. PNG women leaders will drive the direction and pace of these debates.

The late Nahau Rooney’s haus krai illustrates the leadership that women in PNG exercise to advocate for women’s political representation. Although Nahau Rooney’s passing did not receive the wide national media coverage extended to her male colleagues, her death was an important moment in PNG’s political history and its women’s political representation movement.

This article is part of a series of visual and written reflections, titled Nahau’s haus krai, prepared by a co-author of this blog, Michelle, who is one of Nahau Rooney’s children and a member of her large extended family. The Nahau’s haus krai series aims to contribute to our understanding of PNG’s political history, and women’s social, cultural and political engagement.

Haus krai, in the contemporary PNG context, refers to the attendance to the social and cultural obligation of burying loved ones. Haus krai is more than just paying respects to the deceased, attending a funeral, or burying the deceased; it is the expression of the collective love and obligation to bury someone.

Nahau’s haus krai was a highly gendered affair. Everyone grieved. Men dominated the public decision-making process, but women also claimed their space in this process. Men and women were involved in different ways in the logistics of managing the haus krai contributions: cooking, cleaning, preparations, planning, keeping records, decision-making, keeping vigil near her casket, and the burial.

In Manus, proceedings included a hand-over ceremony by the provincial government, led by
the Manus MPs Charlie Benjamin and Job Pomat. Separate events were led by the executives of Pihi Manus Women’s Association for Manus women to pay their respects.

The tributes and customary exchanges provide insights into women’s political leadership in PNG and Manus.

A video shows parts of a speech made by the Prime Minister (PM) of PNG, Hon. James Marape, on 7 October 2020 at the haus krai venue in Port Moresby. He noted that he was speaking as the PM, as the leader of the Pangu party, as the elected Member for Tari electorate, as a son of the nation acknowledging a founding mother of the country, and as a member of his own family.

The PM’s presence at the haus krai highlights the interwovenness of PNG’s political history and its women’s political representation movement. The late Nahau Rooney’s political career is embedded in the history of the Pangu party, and in particular the late Sir Michael Somare’s political legacy. Somare was an unapologetic supporter of strong PNG women’s leadership.

Rooney first contested and won an open electorate seat in the 1977 elections when she was recognised as being closely affiliated with the Pangu party. In 1979, her role in the controversial ‘Rooney affair’ saw her sentenced to jail, Somare lose his leadership, the resignation of the panel of foreign judges, and the subsequent indigenisation of the PNG judiciary.

Despite these controversies, she was supported by Somare and Pangu in the 1982 national elections. She was declared Member of Parliament for the open seat of Manus by the court of disputed returns, and was part of Pangu’s return to power. In 1985, Rooney co-founded the People’s Democratic Movement (PDM) party with Paias Wingti, Tom Awesa and others. PDM ousted the Somare-led Pangu government through a vote of no confidence. In 1987 she contested the elections as a PDM candidate and lost. In the 1997 national elections she contested as an independent candidate and lost.

The video of Nahau’s haus krai shows a response to the PM by Dorothy Tekwie, founder of PNG Women In Politics, President of the West Sepik Provincial Council of Women, and former leader of the PNG Greens Party (and co-author of this blog). She was part of a contingent from PNG Women In Politics, which included Maria Hayes and others who also paid their tribute.

Tekwie noted Pangu’s support for her own political journey. From the perspective of Papua New Guinean women, she pointed out that Marape’s attendance at the haus krai was
Dorothy Tekwie’s speech and customary gesture demonstrate how PNG women operate in diverse social, cultural and political spheres of life to advocate for women’s political representation. Political histories, haus krai and other events can create opportunities to draw on cultural and social knowledge to legitimise and authorise politik meri to advocate for women’s political representation.
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