

5. 'Food is life'

Documenting the politics of food in Melanesia

Abstract: In this abstract, I discuss two recent examples of women's filmmaking in Melanesia. The documentaries are *Tanah Mama* (2014), focused on West Papua and *Café Niugini* (2015), set in Papua New Guinea. Both films explore and represent food in profoundly different ways. Here, I consider their respective depictions of food, demonstrating that *Tanah Mama* represents food as sustenance while *Café Niugini* renders food as 'cuisine' through the 'creative performance' of cookery. Nevertheless, and as I argue, both documentaries reflect the filmmakers' interest in representing issues associated with food in the Pacific, including the importance of Indigenous access to land, population management, gender roles and the impact of changing cultural values on food consumption and health.

Keywords: cultural values documentary, food, gender, health, Melanesia, politics

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OUTSIDERS have dominated the history of filmmaking in both Papua New Guinea (PNG) and across the border in West Papua. But the increasing accessibility of filmmaking equipment is starting to result in the production of more films by Papua New Guineans and, if not West Papuans themselves, their sympathetic Indonesian counterparts. Despite the financial and cultural odds against them, a small number of these filmmakers are women. It is valuable to consider what women choose to represent when they use the medium of film to depict their concerns and passions in the public sphere.

In this article, I discuss two recent examples of women's filmmaking in Melanesia. Both films take the theme of food to be central, with the subtitle of the *Café Niugini* series being 'food is life'. But as I demonstrate here, the documentaries *Tanah Mama* (2014), focused on West Papua, and *Café Niugini* (2015), set in PNG, explore and represent food in profoundly different ways. Here I consider their respective depictions of food, demonstrating that *Tanah Mama* is centrally concerned with women's access to land, the precarity of their lives in the face of changing gender roles and expectations as shaped by modernity, and the increasing significance of the cash economy. While *Café Niugini* renders food as 'cuisine' through the 'creative performance' of cookery (Ghosh, 2012), *Tanah Mama* explores the central role women play in food production and their reliance on men to allocate and clear land for cultivation. Where the gendered societal tensions

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generated by the mutual interdependence between men, women and the land lie at the heart of *Tanah Mama*, such difficulties are not explored in the *Café Niugini* series. This is because the made-for-television food tourism documentary series has a different agenda: namely to present and promote the worth of traditional food production and consumption practices so as to encourage the continuance of these among local people. Despite these differences, both films explore the politics of food in Melanesia, including issues such as the importance of Indigenous access to land, population management and the impact of changing cultural values on food consumption and health. In what follows, I discuss *Tanah Mama* (2014) and *Café Niugini*, highlighting the different ways in which food is represented as a result of the respective filmmaker's approach and beliefs.

Tanah Mama

Tanah Mama (meaning Mama Soil) is a one-hour film in the classic documentary style. It opens with footage of the mountains and people engaged in everyday activities in the Wamena region in the Highlands of West Papua. The film has a powerful soundtrack including local women, singing in their local language, accompanies the opening scenes. The words of the song (which are translated using subtitles) are as follows:

*Wamena people are accustomed to work
In Wamena people plant their soil
Girls work together with their brothers
Wives work together with their husbands
Wamena people are accustomed to work*

We are then introduced to the central protagonist, Halosina, who is shown working in a garden digging up yams. In a voiceover, she says:

Here husbands clear the soil. Until ready for planting. Afterwards the wives plant accordingly. The usual are veggies, yams, carrots, etcetera. Because I didn't have my land and it was getting dark. My kids had not been eating. So I took some yams from my sister-in-law's land. But they accused me of stealing (*Tanah Mama*, 2015).

Through Halosina's words, the cooperation between men and women celebrated in the opening song is immediately undermined. As the film unfolds, we learn that the reason Halosina had to take a yam was that her husband, Hosea, had failed to clear ground for her to use as a garden. Privileging his second wife and the children he has with her, Hosea takes no responsibility for helping Halosina meet their children's needs. Moreover, rather than defending Halosina against his sister's claim for compensation through the village court, Hosea fails to assist Halosina to raise the money for the fine or to clear her of the charge of stealing the yam. In these ways, the film frames her need to 'steal' from her sister-in-law's garden in order to feed her four children through reference to myriad

social changes, including Papuan men's desire to have multiple wives—whether or not they can afford to do so—and the fracturing of the broader social networks on which Papuan women continue to rely. Though some men may create pathways to modernity and the cash economy by finding work in town, in rural West Papua, women are less able to access these possibilities but also less securely placed in relation to 'traditional' social networks.

These challenges are evident when, halfway through the film, Hosea comes to see Halosina in her sister's house. During this visit, he admits, 'the problem is I don't work in the fields anymore'. Directing his attention and energy to earning money in town, Hosea gets work only sporadically and, according to Halosina, does not share any of the earnings with her when he does so. Through a focus on Halosina and Hosea's separation, the film explores the changes in men's roles, their preference for going to town (rather than remaining in the village) and the challenges associated with these changes that are presenting new problems for married couples in various parts of Melanesia (see Wardlow, 2006; Macintyre, 2011; Spark, 2011). Where once, as the song suggests, men and women cooperated to produce food for their families, in the contemporary era this cooperation is often undermined by conflict about how to spend the money that is earned. In the patriarchal societies of Melanesia, it is not usually women who make such decisions, with one consequence being that they and their children go hungry. Hosea's failure to protect and provide for his family underlies Halosina's discontent and hence when we meet her she has left him and is living with their four children in her sister's house and village. As Halosina tells Hosea when he comes to visit: 'I have a strong reason for being here'.

For Asrida Elisabet, an Indonesian journalist and the director of *Tanah Mama*, the story of Halosina's struggle to provide food for her children is universal. When I interviewed her during a visit to Melbourne in June 2015, Asrida described the film as being about 'how to be responsible for and feed a family' (interview with Asrida Elisabet, 2 June 2015, Melbourne).¹ She said that this is something that affects 'all women in Indonesia'. Likening women to soil, she explained that when women are healthy, so too are the children and the community that depend on this 'soil'. Conversely, as Halosina's story illustrates, when women are not supported to cultivate food, both they and their children suffer.

Continuing the theme of women as soil, *Tanah Mama* also addresses the vexed problem of fertility decision-making in West Papua through its consideration of the relationship between family size and the availability of food. Cultural anthropologist Jenny Munro (2014) suggests that historically the men and women of West Papua have resisted Indonesian fertility control practices on the basis that these are seen as a 'genocidal measure' against Indigenous peoples (see also Butt, 2001; 2005). Demonstrating that, for some Papuans, 'having children ...[is] a way of responding to Indonesian dominance', Munro (2014) notes that it 'was male students who primarily espoused the racial value of reproduction'.

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In Asrida's observation, the Papuan nationalist movement's emphasis on having many children prioritises anti-colonial politics over women's experiences and struggles. Listening to a talkback show about fertility galvanised Asrida to tell the story she does in *Tanah Mama*. Observing that all those who called in to the talk show were men who wanted to prohibit fertility control, she realised 'we never hear about the women's voice'. After interviewing rural West Papuan women, she learned that many want to take contraception but are afraid of violent punishment by their husbands if they do so. Asrida also discovered that for women to access contraception at the health centres, their husbands have to indicate their permission by signing a form. For Asrida, the women's perspectives are especially pertinent because they would be primarily responsible for feeding and caring for children once they were born. As she said: 'I think we have to take a look at women's situation, they are struggling everyday. Hard to have more children if we have to work everyday to feed them all'. Asrida observed the gender dimensions of this struggle first-hand during two years spent living in the Highlands of West Papua.

Drawing on Asrida's awareness of the labour involved in producing food, *Tanah Mama* centres on Halosina's daily life, which involves constant childcare, working in the garden and returning to the house to prepare the food that has been harvested for her children. The scenes filmed in the hut belonging to Halosina's sister and her family are especially intimate because we see the extended family sharing the labour of food preparation and childcare amid the cramped circumstances in which they live and sleep. While sometimes humorous, conflict between the children and their cousins also suggests of the vulnerability of Halosina's circumstances in that she depends entirely on the good-will that her sister and brother-in-law demonstrate by sharing their home and garden with her and her children.

In these quotidian but also profoundly revealing and intimate scenes, the film conveys the exhausting nature of women's lives and work in West Papua. Rather than being romanticised for its role in sustaining traditional culture, the physical and emotional labour women perform so that their children will have food is represented as intimately linked to their increasingly precarious status within modernity. As husbands take multiple wives and have more children without due consideration of the needs of those already in existence, and spend less time clearing land for the cultivation of food, it is women and children who bear the pain of the resulting hunger and humiliation.

These are difficult issues and the intimacy of *Tanah Mama* is testament to the depth and trust of Asrida's relationship with Halosina, as well as to Asrida's success in conveying the importance of the story to Halosina. Discussing West Papuan women's heavy load and how it impacts on their health, Asrida said:

I always see that they have really big responsibility that make them you know, look not healthy, I see so many of them: they look older than their age because there is so much responsibility. ...And I go to talk with Halosina because I tell her it's also

a women's issue in all areas about the responsibility for food for family, and I made her think that it's not bad but it's about humanity. ...I said to her, this is not about your story, this is about all women's struggle here.

Asrida also commented that even before making the film, she was close to Halosina and her family including her husband, Hosea. She said the couple treated her 'like a daughter' and that she slept and ate with Halosina's family throughout the filming process. Consequently, when Asrida spoke with Halosina about making this film, Halosina trusted her to do this appropriately. Halosina allowed the camera crew to follow her everywhere and the film offers striking insights as a result of this access. Asrida described the process: 'everyday we start in the morning and in the night they sleep, eat, we just come with camera and she is okay'.

Because of her close relationship with Halosina and her family, Asrida has succeeded in telling a story in which what she calls the 'big issue'—Indonesia's occupation of West Papua—takes second stage to an everyday story about a rural woman struggling to meet the needs of her four children. The story, which Asrida said she made because she wanted local Papuans to see themselves and their issues represented on screen, has resonance in Melanesia more broadly while also addressing the politics of food production and reproduction in West Papua particularly. Discussing *Tanah Mama*, a reviewer in Indonesia commented that '[Asrida's] female-centred approach is not a feminist ruse; it is an undeniably valid pathway to delve into the texture of contemporary rural Papuan family life' (Ray, 2015). Representing conflict around rights to land, women's unequal status and a woman's perspective on the challenges of having many children when she has nothing to feed them, *Tanah Mama* constitutes a moving and dignified challenge to male-dominated politics of Papuan nationalism, demonstrating that it is women who bear the brunt of having—and feeding—children.

Café Niugini

Café Niugini is an eleven episode series made for television in PNG. Shown on the national station EMTV in early 2015, the series documents cooking traditions from nine provinces in PNG. Firmly in the infotainment genre, a sub-category of documentary, it echoes the conventions of myriad cooking shows around the world. The show introduces audiences to 'renowned local chefs', takes them on 'unique culinary journeys' into nine of the country's provinces and demonstrates how to cook a variety of local 'delicacies'. In doing so, it reframes food in PNG as exotic cuisine rather than standard fare. While the close up shots of ingredients and forms of address are familiar—derived as they are from other shows in this globally popular genre—Papua New Guineans form the audience for *Café Niugini*. For example, much of the dialogue between Jennifer Baing (presenter and director) and the people with whom she is preparing food takes place in the lingua franca, *Tok Pisin*, with no subtitles provided.

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Café Niugini has a straightforward message: local food production is important for cultural, health and environmental reasons. The background to this argument is familiar. Modernisation, in the form of wage labour and a cash economy, separates people from their land and transforms long-term eating habits (Harari, 2011). As a result, populations who, for centuries, lived on vegetables, fruits and whatever protein was available, suffer new health problems as they purchase and consume highly processed foods with little nutritional value. Because of its cost, eating organic locally grown food tends to signify higher status in advanced capitalist societies. Contrastingly, in PNG, the consumption of garden food is often associated with those who cannot afford to purchase imported food. *Café Niugini*, made by the globally aware and overseas-educated Jennifer Baing and her similarly positioned husband, Bao Waiko, sets out to change this pattern (for further information about Jennifer Baing, see Spark 2015; *Pawa Meri* DVD Series). Through its exoticisation of common local foods such as coconut, banana, yams and fish, the show transforms the everyday sustenance of these communities into culinary delicacies.

The educated middle classes in PNG have been quick to appreciate *Café Niugini*'s message. This is evident, for example, in a blog posted by the editor of *Stella*, the women's magazine for educated, urban Papua New Guinean women (for discussions of *Stella*, see Spark, 2014; 2015). Written just before the first episode of *Café Niugini* aired in February, the blog reads:

In creating and hosting this series, Jennifer has found a thoroughly entertaining way to bring her advocacy for sustainable living—and a self-determining, self-confident Papua New Guinea—before a national audience. And the take away message is simple: *preserve and embrace our delicious local food cultures!* Your body, local farmers, and future generations will thank you for it.

As with *Café Niugini* itself, the *Stella* blog presents eating local foods as a decision that is as much about ethics as health. Moving beyond the politics of food production explored in *Tanah Mama*, the *Café Niugini* series aestheticises food as part of a broader valuing of local indigenous traditions within global discussions about sustainability.

It is only possible to discuss one episode of *Café Niugini* in this brief paper. For the purposes of analysis, I have selected the 25-minute episode about Markham Valley because it explores food and cooking in the home community of the series' presenter and director, Jennifer Baing. Introducing this episode, Jennifer says:

On this episode of *Café Niugini* I'll be showcasing my own food culture from the Markham Valley of Morobe province. We'll be cooking up ripe banana with coconut cream, jankum runga, a special dish cooked with corn, and we'll also be trying some banana flowers and taro leaves cooked up with traditional salt. Come with me as I show you what the Markham Valley has to offer. (*Café Niugini*, Markham Valley, Episode 2).

As Jennifer and her uncle prepare a local dish made from corn and coconut milk, Jennifer describes a coconut husk as a ‘traditional strainer’, declares that ‘in Markham we still prefer to cook with the traditional claypots’, and tells the audience that a small piece of carved wood called a *sama* is the ‘traditional tool’ used to stir the dish. Another example of *Café Niugini*’s revaluation of the local and traditional is provided minutes later when Jennifer talks about scraping off the coconut oil once it has boiled and separated from the corn mixture. Carefully storing this in a jar Jennifer says: ‘this oil can be used as a moisturiser for either your hair or your skin’. Later in the episode she and her cousins demonstrate how to make ‘traditional salt’ from ‘the ash of a coconut husk’. This emphasis on the worth of local materials is not foregrounded in *Tanah Mama*. Indeed, Halosina uses some of the meager amount of money she earns selling vegetables at the town market to purchase imported cooking oil and salt, presumably to reduce her workload.

Whether or not Jennifer’s family use traditional tools and reclaimed coconut oil in their everyday cooking and self-care is immaterial; the implements and products are a key part of the episode’s construction of the traditional *as valuable*. Arguably, this reframing of the traditional is most likely to be promoted by educated, middle class Papua New Guineans like Jennifer. Increasingly, men and women in this cohort are placing a value on cultural distinctiveness and ‘heritage’ in the face of undifferentiated global culture, including in the production of food (Spark, 2015). As Ton Otto (2015) has noted, this contemporary concept of ‘cultural heritage’ emphasises the idea of ‘ethnic connections ... of making connections between people of different traditions’. Because of this emphasis on connection, *Café Niugini* engenders cultural and even national pride precisely by celebrating the local in the form of ‘food traditions’.

One of the most striking differences between *Tanah Mama* and *Café Niugini* can be found in their respective depictions of yams. As noted above, in *Tanah Mama* food is represented primarily in relation to survival and never as cuisine. This is the case throughout the film but a memorable example occurs when Halosina is shown making the long walk home after attending village court to discuss the fine her sister-in-law seeks as compensation for the ‘stolen’ yam. Halosina and her oldest son have a rest from walking so Halosina can breastfeed her baby. When they get up again, Halosina gives the baby boy to her oldest son to carry and he asks ‘Mum, can I have some small piece of yam?’. Halosina gives yam to both him and the baby who is now on the older boy’s back, at which point the older son laments: ‘I don’t want his yam getting in my ear’. As with *Tanah Mama*’s overall depiction of the labour involved in producing, carrying and preparing food, this moment is notably unromantic, presenting food as necessary for sustenance, as annoying when it is in one’s ear and as something that mothers distribute when they can.

Yams are represented rather differently in *Café Niugini*. During the second half of the episode on Markham Valley, Jennifer goes with her uncle to his garden to see what ‘can be learned’. Together they visit the yam garden and Jennifer listens to her uncle talk

about the different types of yams he grows, the variability of their sizes and how they are prepared as ‘special meals’ for visitors. Discussing ‘the dari’ yam she says it is ‘a special type of yam that is cooked up when we have special guests that come into the village or when there’s a family member that comes over ... That indicates that we respect them’. In this way, yams serve a symbolic as well as satiating purpose. Later the yams ‘are completely peeled, diced and tossed into the claypot’, then, once coconut milk is added, ‘slowly cooked over the hot coals until the coconut milk is boiling and thick’. The yam dish is laid out alongside local fish and banana flowers and Jennifer says: ‘[A]s you can see the traditional salt made from the coconut ash has really brought out the colour of the vegetables’. Tasting the yam, she describes its ‘tang’. The emphasis on the look, texture and taste of the food is consistent with cooking shows globally and is designed to create desire among the audience (Ketchum, 2005). Similarly when, towards the end of the show, Jennifer again eats yam, she highlights its colour—noting how ‘the purple yam contrasts with the yellow marita’ (pandanus fruit). Thus, *Café Niugini* not only constructs yams as beautiful, appealing and delicious, it endows these and other everyday foods with the status that arises from the capacity to embody cultural heritage. Unlike *Tanah Mama*—which depicts the politics of food as involving conflict over resources, gender roles and livelihoods—Baing’s television series presents a world in which food is not only plentiful and tasty but also meaningful.

Of course West Papuans also have food traditions, but this is not what Asrida Elisabet seeks to explore. Rather, Asrida focuses on the question of how rural women can sustain themselves and their children in the face of the various threats colonisation and modernity present to their lives as subsistence farmers. Baing, concerned that the food, knowledge and cultures associated with subsistence are already undervalued in PNG, seeks to re-present the food associated with these lives *as lifestyle* in order to achieve a reevaluation of the quotidian and local as desirable and thus worth keeping. In essence, to borrow a cooking phrase, while both films and the women who have directed them are concerned with food, they have different things to say about it. Both filmmakers’ perspectives, however, are powerfully shaped by their intimate grasp of the politics of food production in their respective contexts and their passion to communicate with local audiences. Given the colonialist and masculinist history of filmmaking in Melanesia, in which the primary audience is construed as international (Spark, 2013), both women’s films are welcome and important.

Note

1. All subsequent quotations from Asrida Elisabet are from this interview.

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