Interview with Yauka Liria

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EE. Yauka, had you done any writing before the book?

YL. Before I started writing *Bougainville Campaign Diary*, the idea of me trying to write something came in early 1989 or early1990, when I was on a break from my deployment in the Bougainville crisis. I haven’t had any formal training in writing.

DM. Were you writing a diary?

YL. I did keep a diary.

DM. And what impelled you to do that? Did many people keep diaries then… or were you are alone in that?

YL. I think it probably came through my Army Intelligence training. We used to be trained at the Military Intelligence school up at Canungra [Queensland], that’s west of the Gold Coast. And Military Intelligence people were trained to maintain diaries because we worked close to the battlefield commanders.

EE. Oh, that’s interesting. So it’s part of military intelligence.

YL. It was part of Military Intelligence training that we had to keep diaries; but, I guess, out of that training I just thought I should keep my own personal diary. It wasn’t for any purpose or anything. I just thought that I should, because there were major things going on: us killing the rebels and rebels killing us and lots of wounding and ambushes and major political events and so forth. Many big things were going on. I thought I should just maintain a diary for myself.

EE. So the book that you eventually published, was that culled directly from your own diary or did you talk to other people that you worked with at the time to get other people’s perceptions at well. I’ve read most of the book now and it seems to me it’s very personal.

YL. The book, actually, is a personal account. I did not talk to other servicemen during the writing for the purposes of extracting information or clarifying other things I wanted to know. Most, if not all, of what I have written in the book is based on my own personal diary notes as well as my own memory. I would do a timeline sketch of the major events as I covered the chapters and then try to recall what happened during those various events, who was involved, where and whatever. And then, because the chapters came in a sort of chronological order and follows the diary, it was easy to prompt my memory to recall what happened and because it was also fresh, just several years back.

EE. One of the things that struck me in reading your book was that there’s a point where you’re talking about the situation in Panguna and where you say that 30 years ago, certain decisions were made, when you were just being born, that led inevitably to this moment, this particular time. And I thought that was one of the most effective parts of the book. It really made me think that every time you’re involved in something, history is involved there and it isn’t just you travelling down that road… that in fact, many people are drawn to that spot because certain decisions are made that bring up this terrible situation and you end up there. I was just wondering whether that was something that was occurring to you at the time while you were there, or whether on reflection later when you were thinking about the whole historical sequence.

YL. No, it didn’t occur to me during the deployment. We were too busy fighting the war and even during the short break periods there was really no time to reflect on why this crisis was going on, the politics of it and so forth. But this reflection came later during the writing part of it, as I had the time to reflect on it. I guess those reflections took place when I was trying to assess the performance of the politicians and the decisions that they were making. I thought about why they were making some of the decisions which I thought were contributing towards making the crisis get out of hand and not really resolving it. And I was also pretty dissatisfied with the performance of the senior officers. I thought that they should have done a bit better but they didn’t handle the crisis well and it got out of hand.

DM. What did you feel that they could have done better?

YL. Well, I thought that senior officers had attended various senior officers’ courses in Australia, UK, the US. They were trained to fight a conventional war as well as an insurgency, a gorilla type war and this was very much an insurgency war.

DM. And a civil war!

YL. A civil war, yes, that’s the nature of it. It is very much smaller than a guerilla war. There’s really no real battlefront. Enemy is everywhere and can strike right at your back; it’s difficult to fight this sort of war. The best way to fight it, many people tend to argue, is to try not to fight it, actually, not to fight the war and stop it at the initial phase and use the political options.

DM. And did you feel that the senior officers were not trying to resolve it politically or giving advice to do that?

YL. Yeah, this was a later reflection when I sat back and looked at how the senior officers had performed. I mean the military didn’t have the capacity in terms of manpower, equipment as well as training, so my assessment was that we couldn’t beat the Bougainville rebels. And the senior officers, with their level of training, should have assessed that during the war itself, during the fighting; it didn’t need five, six years of fighting for them to come to that sort of analysis and conclusion. They had the training and knowledge which leads to analysis and should have led to giving advice to the commander and the cabinet that this option probably was not winnable, so we should pursue another option, the more political option. So both sets of options were not put forward to the politicians. I think the senior officers were suggesting to the political leadership that we were able to beat them. And the politicians being ignorant about emergency warfare -- civil war -- thought that the military were able to beat the rebels, that this was a nuisance that we could shut up in a number of months and of course we were all misled and we just got stuck into it further and further.

DM. It must be emotionally distressing to be fighting your own people.

YL. In the initial phase, there was reluctance on the part of the troops to actually engage in fighting the rebels because we knew they were our people and we didn’t want to open fire on them. But we just took the government orders and started engaging them and using military tactics to fight them and so forth. But as the months rolled on and the rebels started ambushing and killing our men, slowly the tension rose and we came to realise more and more that they were the enemy we were fighting.

DM. What was the effect on the troops?

YL. There was this psychological sort of turnaround. I mean, during the initial deployment the mentality, the perception was that we would not fight and kill them. We were just being there to support the police, provide manpower, show strength. This was our people and they would not shoot and kill us. We were just there as a show of force and we didn’t expect this to blow up into full-scale warfare where the troops would hunt down their own countrymen and start killing them and so forth. But as the time went on and hostilities went on and people got shot up on our side, slowly it developed into full-scale guerilla warfare.

DM. And when you were writing about that, what affect did it have on you? Did it release tensions for you that had built up during that time? Or was there a kind of emotional re-engagement with it?

YL. Because I was actively involved in it myself, it was more of a self-reflection than self-criticism and analysis of my own participation in that crisis, as well as that of my own colleague officers, other colleague officers, and also of the senior officers. I began to think about the officer corps, which provided leadership in the warfare of course, and where we really underperformed, thought we could have done better and didn’t. And also where we simply just couldn’t do anything because of constraints: for example, with the size of the troops deployed. We only had an under-strength battalion. Battalions are close to 1000, but we were half the strength at 500, and that wasn’t enough to contain the situation on Bougainville. When you started spreading them out, we were very thin on the ground; most areas that we wanted to cover could not be covered. I came to realize that this was dependent on the strength of the economy. In order to increase the size of the military, you had to have more money and the Papua New Guinean government was feeling the pinch budgetwise.

EE. The experience of being there for you and most people who were there, I’m sure, was quite traumatic and it really comes through in your work. Are you finished with that Bougainville experience now? You’ve written a book that is a way of sorting things out in your own head and your own heart, but sometimes when people go through momentous events, it takes more than one attempt to write it out or to deal with it. So I’m just wondering whether you feel that you still have things to say about that time or whether you feel, “That’s OK, I’ve done that now and I’ve dealt with it.”

YL. I feel that I should revise the book by now and include a few chapters on the current movements that have been significant, especially the activities that have led to the political settlement. Some people have also suggested that I should do a revision and include that bit at the end. I wanted to do that but as I said during the conference, I felt a bit insecure trying to work on it because inevitably I will be covering political subjects. That would mean that the key people who were involved because the Sandline affair would have to come forward. It would take several chapters to update everything. I have to do some work on who did what, but I’ve already lost out on a lot of military friends who are not in the forces any more.

EE. So something you just need to let sit for now.

YL. I wanted to do it but I realised that, because they were very big things related to the Bougainville crisis (Sandline being one of them) I would be touching on, you know, some of Papua New Guinea’s top people. As for writing fiction, yeah, I would like to come to that question. I need to attend some writing courses first before I can attempt that.

DM. Have you worked with an editor?

YL. Yes, I do have an editor but I feel that to attempt a work of fiction, I would be a lot more confident if I attended some basic writing courses. I think that would help me to sharpen up my work.

DM. Would that be possible thing for you to do at the UPNG?

YL. I’m not sure. I think that at UPNG they don’t offer short-term courses. It’s all as part of a degree course. So if I wanted to do a short-term course I would have to look elsewhere. I’m looking at basics. I don’t know whether this sort of course that I am looking at is offered in Australia. But if there is, I am looking at a basic writers skills course for writing novels, maybe up to 6 months or less. I don’t know whether such things have been offered.

EE. In Australia, you would be able to get them.

DM. Yes, I think that there are some courses like that online.

YL. I think that’s really what I need because I have been trying all sorts of things. I have had a very unstable life for the last four, five years and, as a result, my attempt to do writing has suffered as well.

EE. It’s something to look at and perhaps Steve [Winduo] or Regis [Stella] or somebody at the University would know of something. They could indicate something to you if you find at some point that you are ready to do that. You mentioned in your talk yesterday that you received encouragement from certain people in PNG. I think you mentioned Sir Paulias Mathane and I wondered if you could expand on that. Did that make a real difference to you?

YL. I think it had major significance.

EE. Would you have gone ahead anyway?

YL. I don’t know. You know, I could have, but I mean there was so much uncertainty in me, I didn’t really know what I was doing. I knew I wanted to try and write and get the book published and this sort of initial excitement that anybody would have when they think they have something to write about. But, not having attended basic writing training, and so forth, I had no idea about writing, how to get started, what to do, how to organise my work and all this. In that context, talking to a publisher was extremely helpful. It sort of enlightened me to see some very basic functional stuff.

EE. Your writing has taken a turn in other directions; you wrote two books for the school system afterwards. I wonder if you could talk about those books, what they were about and why you chose to do that?

YL. Basically after my first book came out I got pretty good comments from people that my writing was good reading, clear and so forth. And it encouraged me and I thought, “Maybe that’s your ‘strength area’ and you should try and develop that and write some more.” So it was that encouragement and a decision to make some sort of achievement in life, that drove me. I talked with various people like Paul Duffy who indicated that they did have a need for certain books and if I wanted to I could make an attempt in those areas. That’s how I got myself into writing those two small books for the school market.

EE. OK. So they indicated to you what they needed and then you decided……

YL. I responded to a market need, yes.

DM. What would you like to do? What are your own ideas, what would you like to do as a writer?

YL. Well, for the last four years, I have been really all over the place and I have been doing, you know, some soul-searching over the last 5 to 6 months. I’m even supposed to have gone for the elections, the current election. I left New Zealand. I worked at the New Zealand High Commissioner for elections. So as you can see I have been really all over the place and I don’t seem to have a direction that I want to go to. So I’ve been really thinking about it and talking to some close relatives and so forth. But I guess the good decision I’ve taken is not to be involved in politics. So that’s a definite decision in my life. So now I can try to think about what I want to do. And I been looking at trying to go for further studies or just try and continue writing.

EE. What’s your degree in?

YL. First degree, political science.

EE. Political science and…

YL. Arts actually, but I majored in political science, although that doesn’t show on my degree certificate.

DM. At the UPNG?

YL. Yeah. I’m not going to attempt novels as yet. My interest probably is to produce some more books responding to the market. I might do the “movement” type of literature, responding to the needs of the PNG community and including the schools market and trying to produce works to meet those sort of market demands. At the same time to get myself involved in writing and then as I move along I might start considering novels but at this point of time, my plan is to try and publish this current book. That’s more in the area of the “movement” type writing as well, responding to what’s needed in the country, in terms of intellectual development.

It is the result of my own efforts to work in all sorts of fields, various and I’ve come to realise that to work in a number of fields, or to work in any particular field you need a number of skills, not just one skill. Multi-skilling if you like. And so, since I told you, I’m thinking of how I should title it. But basically it’s about modern life skills. Very basic and it’s meant for people who are self-employed in the country or Grade 10 leavers or Grade 12 leavers. But even my own brothers who graduated from university have had a look, gone through it, and they think it’s relevant for graduates as well. It covers basic things like problem solving, marriage to women, children, small-scale business for self-employed people. I cover business subjects like “What is profit?” “Market surveys,” “feasibility studies,” “advertising,” these sort of things. Explain and then outline how it can be done in the PNG context.

EE. Is this common amongst PNG writers? I think that Paulias Mathane does the same sort of thing with some of his writing. He’s got books on management skills, and so on, and he’s always been interested in that field. In your experience and knowledge are there other writers in PNG who have come to the conclusion that, if they’re going to make a living from writing, there are certain ways to do it.

YL. I’ve been in touch with others who are attempting to write, but I can’t say. But there are a few people trying to write, I think they are responding to the education market.

EE. Another way that people make a living is to write as journalists to pay the bills and then write their creative pieces on the side. There are lots of papers, regional and national newspapers, in PNG. Is that something that has ever interested you, or do you know journalists who do that?

YL. I’m not aware of any and I have come across some journalists, met some and talked to them, but nobody has indicated that they’re doing something like that. We need more professional journalists in this country. I mean, there have been major problems like the Bougainville crisis. If this had happened in some other countries, we would’ve had some major works come out from the journalists because these people have the investigative journalism training, research, writing skills and so forth. And I think that the PNG journalists individually or together would have produced something. This has not happened, so most PNG journalists, I think, are just doing journalism work and not really doing any writing.

EE. I think I remember you saying at the conference that you are not a member of the Writers Association, at this point.

YL. No.

DM. You were saying, just before we turned the tape on, that one of the things that has come out of the conference for you was perhaps that there could be more networking or unity between the people writing or working in the culture. Can you talk a bit more about that? What were you thinking along those lines and what direction should it take?

YL. I’ve just come to realize that many Papua New Guineans might call me a writer because I have written three books. Not many people are published authors in the country and so there aren’t many to encourage others and motivate and clear up their doubts on basic things, the sort of doubts that I had when I was trying to start out. I think those things can come about only when we start organising ourselves with associations or groups, visiting schools and producing small newsletters that can go out to school. Then it can further develop into promoting competitions, contests and so forth. When we are organized, we may be able to even do some advocacy work with government and donors.

DM. Sir Paulias Mathane and Michael Mel were speaking yesterday at the conference about trying to re-engage with the values that come out of village and traditional life and take them into the modern world.

YL. Yes, I think they were worried that much of our own values which were physically demonstrated or shown through works of art and music and dance would gradually die away. They don’t want to lose that, so we can keep our identity, but not to shut out the outside forces completely.

DM. This was an issue at the time of independence, when there were attempts to use cultural expression and various forms of writing in art and drama as a way of bringing the traditional into a relationship with the contemporary so that some of those values would come through, partly to make sure that the old forms were kept and not lost, but partly also to create something that might take people forward by drawing on the strengths that were already within the culture. That’s how I understood Michael Mel. I find it really an interesting idea but don’t quite see what it would look like and was wondering whether you see some way in which cultural things might be a vehicle for retaking, for re-connecting people to those traditional values but allowing them an expression that works in the modern world.

YL. Well, that is one of the conflicting situations we find ourselves in, and why we want to build onto our identity and our values. We find that sometimes it’s not conducive or helpful for building a nation or even helpful for an individual. It’s not always the best thing to hold on to. For example, at the national scene, if we start promoting languages as they were suggesting, promoting individual languages vigorously, it can only create this notion of different communities and different ethnic groups, which is really playing havoc at the national scene. Most of the politicking that’s going on is based around different ethnic groupings and the corruption, so a focus on indigenous languages would entrench that. The corruption that takes place is all done within Wantok groups.

DM. Oh, I see. If you’re in a position of power, you put your Wantoks in before you allow that opening to the best person who might be from somewhere else.

YL. I’m not saying that that’s the way everybody does it, but it seems to be the way many people are starting to, many of the top leaders and senior public servants, are starting to behave now. We don’t want to promote something that will encourage that negative movement. I mean, we may be trying to hold on to our identities and languages but without meaning to, we may be allowing the situation where different language groups who come to work in government, don’t see themselves as a Papua New Guinean but as little communities and tribal groupings.

DM. How did it work in the army? Because the army must have had mechanisms to break that down?

YL. Nowadays, there are no groupings of Wantok groups into ethnic communities, ethnic groupings… and it was forbidden to have beers, and drinks and so forth, sit around and tell stories in tribal groupings.

DM. Oh really. Forbidden to use language.

YL. By law, it was forbidden.

DM. But could they forbid you to sit with your Wantok and talk English?

YL. In social settings like in the bars, and all that, it was discouraged. You were encouraged to go and have drinks, and play sports and whatever in your either age group or in your different units. They made sure that the platoons didn’t have any one particular tribe, for example.

EE. And did that then work to produce a national culture in the army

YL. It did. It did. And probably the military style, military environments further assisted in forging a national, a more common identity.

DM. But, of course, in the army you have the advantage of very tight discipline, which doesn’t happen outside.

YL. But it appeared to be a superficial one because when the tensions arose through politics as we have seen in Sandline and in Bougainville, I could see those cracks opening up and the underlying tribal groupings starting to show them, display themselves.

EE. That’s very interesting. So it didn’t entirely work.

YL. The military discipline gave an illusion of a unity that wasn’t very deep. Even when they were not speaking, the general individual belief and perceptions were that they were more closely associated with their tribal groupings. That was evident in Bougainville when, for example, a Papuan guy was killed, all the Papuans tended to be grieving. They would work together as a lobby group to convince the commander to give them a break from the war. Suddenly, from different platoons, they would start to have meetings. So the tribal groupings came out.

EE. Were there any people in the army who were from Bougainville?

YL. Oh yes, there were many. Officers and soldiers.

EE. And how did that …

YL. We just continued with normal operations.

DM. That must have been hard.

YL. Yes, it was very difficult for them because they became key sources of information.

EE. They were informing on their own people.

YL. And it had wider implications. If the rebels knew what they were doing, it put the soldiers’ own relatives at a big risk for punishment.

EE. Are there any other structures in society that have managed to cross those tribal lines the same way the Army has? Obviously it hasn’t happened in politics but are there any other major areas like the police or the education system?

YL. The police have also attempted to do that and I don’t think they’ve succeeded.

DM. What about things like education or the health department? Do they have a sense that they’ve got to get education everywhere or if there is somebody in a powerful position in education or health, will they give more schools or hospital to the area? Are they able to do that?

YL. They generally try to distribute the government services equitably across the country but I guess there is still a perception, and it’s probably perpetrated by the strong politicking that’s going on within the government circles -- government ministers making political appointments when the previous government gets defeated. They come in, they push out most of the departmental heads and start appointing their own and when the general public looks at the appointees, qualifications and so forth, they see nothing that’s worthy of being considered and they know the only reason why they are there is because they are a political crony. So this perpetuates this community perception that politically they are appointing their own tribesmen and those tribesmen in turn are involved together with the government ministers to defraud government by diverging resources to their own areas or to contractors outside, and stealing from the public purse and all this. So this bad politics that is going on in our country is very negative and compounding influence across all sections of the society.

DM. Can anything be done with culture to reverse those trends?

YL. I don’t think culture can undo what politics is doing or become a positive force to create nationalism of the unity. I think that basically what [Paulias] Matane and [Michael] Mel were expressing was their desire or wish that these traditional things were in place, that this is the way we have existed before and that should be the way we are now.

DM. I understood Anna Solomon to be saying there’s a plan for *Wantok* and *The Independent* to make war on corruption. They’re going to try to expose as much as possible.

YL. Cultural institutions can contribute to fighting corruption, but the other forces also need to contribute. There needs to be good leadership to provide the necessary political will.

EE. Bernard Narokobi has always taken that stance, hasn’t he? He is a politician, but he is also very strongly in favour of Melanesian values. To my knowledge he’s a man who has made a difference, so it is possible. You said that you made a decision not to go into politics. Can I ask you the reason?

YL. I did run in the last elections. I came second and I felt the effects of that for four years, trying to meet the demands of all my supporters coming to my door almost every day, knocking on the door, writing letters, phone calls, messages, physically being there. There is so much pressure and it was so stressful. It was difficult to concentrate on my work and my writing. Eventually I came to realise that the little I was making was just going out through the window. I even started to entertain the idea of stealing.

EE. That kind of pressure lands on the shoulders of a lot of PNG politicians.

YL. I know why they are stealing. Some of them want to steal because they want to steal, but many are doing so to feed all those people knocking on the door. These are human beings, they eventually break you down and…. It’s because of the Wantok system and also because of the political culture that is evolving up there. It’s especially election related. It starts off in the election period where lots of pigs are killed and money, bribe money, is used to buy votes and a lot of wild promises are made. They come back after the promises you’ve made, as well as the winners go after whatever they can grab to replace what they’ve used, because much of what they use is, or should be, their own money. So naturally, they try to recover what they’ve lost as well as make a lot more for the next time around. And it results in them looking at illegal ways of getting resources. So the type of election politics that is evolving up there is very destructive, not conducive for development.

DM. You are Southern Highlands. Is it only in your area?

YL. It’s not only in the Southern Highlands. Southern Highlands is probably one of the most violent. But it is happening everywhere. Ballot boxes are stolen and burnt. That’s all related to the feelings between the candidates because the candidates represent the tribal groupings, and the feelings are very strong. The old rivalries suddenly find their way through different dimensions in the modern era.

The electoral system started to promote tribalism in a new dimension and a much stronger one, too. We’re talking about big government resources so the competition is very strong. That’s why you see all the killing and all out effort at doing all sorts of absurd things to try and get into power because the benefits for the tribe are so strong. The tribal elders and tribesmen are part of the group that schemes and persuades you to commit the offences; they come up with illegal plans and so forth. They’re part of it. It’s not the candidates and MPs doing it on their own.

EE. It becomes institutionalised after a while then.

YL. It is. The tribe gives its blessing for you to do all these things.

DM. So to talk about the values, village values or tribal values is a kind of idealism.

YL. That is what I was saying. We should be careful about what sort of values we try and promote. It’s good that the Melanesian people want to preserve their culture, but some of these things may end up promoting tribalism and regionalism in a modern context, which is already starting to evolve in modern politics and is proving to be pretty destructive.

EE. Is there any sense, Yauka, that the political stance that Narokobi takes could ever dislodge that or change that at all. I mean the Melanesian Way has been around a long time as an ideal.

YL. Well, I worked briefly for John Momis and I’ve been working on the Bougainville crisis for the last four, five years since I graduated. I mean as long as Momis and Narokobi have been around in politics they have been pushing this line but, in spite of all their talk, we haven’t really seen anything. But over the last few years, there has been a strong campaign against corruption and we’ve seen a few people been thrown behind bars as a direct result of that campaign; we hope some more will go in as well. But this I think is not really a result of Narokobi and Momis campaigning. It’s a result of people in business as well as some people in government and other people in civil society, media and community leaders starting to form groups or associations and actively advocating and lobbying with the government and probably in a way pressuring the judiciary as well taking a strong stand. So that’s why we here are starting to see a result. I think the community coalition seems to be more effective than the political parties taking on the fight as part of their policy.

EE. So you feel at this point that politics is just not likely to be the best way for you to make a contribution and to have your voice heard. You haven’t quite figured out where you’re going to go yet, but politics is not the way.

YL. No, no, personally it’s not. I feel that it’s too much, it’s so stressful and I found myself very much on the street really, after so much hard work. I make a bit of money doing free-lancing work from my books and so forth, but it all disappears in no time. Standing for election cost me a lot of money and I’ve got so many obligations to people for the pigs they have killed and burned … There’s a general belief up there in PNG and especially in the Highland communities, if they fought for you it’s an obligation you will repay. They don’t see it as voting for you because they believed that you are the better person to lead them.

It’s a kind of exchange, an exchange item, it’s a traditional concept applied in the modern. So there needs to be a lot of political education at the grassroots level to educate against this view, and how these traditional values have been taken on. People need to understand modern politics and how exchange values have been carried into the political arena and how it’s destructive to modern politics.

DM. So in fact, the call for a return to traditional values is very difficult if those traditional values have in fact been corrupted by modern pressures that have been put on them.

YL. No. It’s the other way around. The traditional values are actually responsible for the very destructive nature of PNG politics. I’ve been talking around in circles, but basically that’s what I’ve been trying to say. Tribalism, the concept of exchange between individuals, has found its way through election politics. When they give you their vote or their support for your campaign, that is an exchange of services, so you are obliged to repay them. And you have that obligation to 5000 or 6000 people. And you are also obliged to look after the tribal affairs or matters, but not the rivals who are the other tribes.

DM. So even if you lose, you still have to pay back.

YL. You have to. It’s a special obligation. You can’t run away.

EE. It’s tribalism made into a modern institution and then it comes back again. It’s really circular.

YL. Yes, it’s circular and it’s destructive. I was trying to comment yesterday, but didn’t have the opportunity when people were talking about going back to the cultural values. We really have to be careful that we don’t, without meaning to, go back and promote values and processes that are proving to be pretty disruptive.

I think they’re looking for solutions for all the destructiveness that is around the country. And the natural thing to do is, like our colonial masters, say, “It was far better when we were around.” It’s sort of a psychological thing to think that if it’s not going well now, but was alright the last time, what’s gone wrong. That’s what our colonial masters are saying, whereas for ourselves we try to look for a more peaceful environment or context when everything was alright. Our only answer is that it was the traditional environment because we can’t find anything else. But people fail to realise that we can’t go back; the context was very different.

DM. And also, there was payback and all that inter-tribal killings that went on in traditional cultures anyway.

YL. Yes, yes. We don’t want to go back there.

EE. So the idealism that we are hearing at this conference from time to time shows people looking back to a Golden Age in times of trouble. There’s a natural reaction for people to be romantic about some perfect past. But what other themes or trends do you come across talking to people and reading the press?

YL. I think that in the PNG community at all levels of society: the political elites and the average working class as well as the village level, we all tend to suffer from lack of understanding of the key forces at work in our political environment and how those major factors are driving the things that we see. So decisions are reached on the spur of the moment; Papua New Guineans are known for that sort of thinking and behaviour. We live for today, whatever we see today. So I think there isn’t much critical analysis and thinking about what’s going on to suggest more intelligent approaches and so forth. The popular notions, popular views held by grassroots are largely influenced by peer opinion leaders at the grassroots level, who get influenced by the university students, the NGOs, or the media stories and some of these are driven by political interests or university students themselves. You know, year 1 or year 2 students. What do you expect them to understand? Or by media people who do sensational reporting. So there is a high level of ignorance in the situation that we find ourselves in and a multitude of interacting factors that create the situation we are in.

EE. How strong do you think that theme we were hearing in the conference from people, that Golden Age theme, how strong is that among ordinary people?

YL. That’s a popular view. Because people are looking for solutions, there is a tendency by just about everybody to look for something that will give us psychological peace, mental peace of mind.

EE. Yauka, than you!