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Archives in a Developing Country: The Papua New Guinea Situation

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As a student at the 1976 Institute held at the Georgia Department of Archives and History in Atlanta, I came to realize that, while discussions on ethics, security, privacy, access, conservation, and other theoretical matters were applicable to my situation and those of other students, the implementation of these ideals is often difficult because of limited resources in smaller or new repositories and in developing countries. Most of the people attending the Institute, including myself, were somewhat familiar with large repositories and their functioning; but few, if any, of the other participants had any knowledge of the conditions or collections existing in smaller developing areas. Consequently, the Institute examiners felt that this report, written as a course requirement, should be submitted for publication.

In the hope that our experiences in Papua New Guinea might be of interest and value to archivists in the United States, I should like to describe the

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conditions leading to the establishment of archival collections, both governmental and private, in our nation.

Papua New Guinea became an independent nation on September 16, 1975, after nearly one hundred years of rule by three different colonial powers. The western half of the island of New Guinea had been claimed by the Dutch as part of the Netherlands East Indies in 1828. At this time Australia, New Guinea's nearest neighbor, was still a collection of isolated colonies; but as the century wore on Australian national sentiment grew, and by the 1880's, Australia was looking askance at the intrusion of foreign powers, mainly France and Germany, into her area. Attempts were made to persuade Britain to proclaim a protectorate over the eastern half of New Guinea, but Britain wanted no more colonies. However, when Germany annexed the northeastern quarter, together with the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago, Britain moved to take over the southeast and the Louisiade Archipelago. In this way the largest island in the world (if you discount Australia as a continent and Greenland as mostly ice) was carved up to become Dutch, German, and British New Guinea. The British still were not interested in maintaining a colony that was very expensive and of doubtful strategic value. They agreed only to act for Australia until it became a federation in 1901. It took another five years for Australia to iron out its teething problems, take full charge of British New Guinea, and change its name to Papua.

In 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, Australia, at the request of Britain, took over German New Guinea. The League of Nations became trustee for the defeated German colonies after the war, and Australia won the mandate for German New Guinea, which became Australian New Guinea. A tidy political mind at this stage would have amalgamated the two administrations, but economic considerations were victorious. Germany had ruled its colonies in order to get the maximum financial return, and the place of the New Guinean was limited to that of unskilled labor. In Papua, while the administration was more benevolent to the natives, white settlement was neither discouraged nor given priority. Furthermore, New Guinea had more and better land and more people; and more internal revenue could be expected from its natural resources. On the excuse that one area was Australia's colony and the other was a trust territory, two separate administrations were continued, and
the people themselves accepted the myth that they were inhabitants of different countries.

The Japanese landed in New Guinea only six weeks after Pearl Harbor, and the local administration immediately became defunct. Parts of northern Papua were also quickly overrun, but the Japanese were defeated in Milne Bay and the Coral Sea. Unable to get at Port Moresby by sea, they could only attack by air and endeavor to reach it by land across the rugged Owen Stanley Ranges, where the famous battles of the Kokoda Trail were fought.1

With the breakdown of civil administration in Papua, as well as in New Guinea, a military government was set up to govern the two. At the end of the war, the Australian government simply converted this machinery to a single civil government. New Guinea remained a trust territory and Papua a colony; but, since colonialism was suddenly a dirty word, the aim became self-rule with the two territories achieving independence as a single nation. But what to call it? For a long time the potential state was referred to as "Papua and New Guinea." The national newspaper ran a competition for a name. Everyone had an opinion, but no two were the same. Papuans did not like to be called New Guineans, and vice versa. Finally the "and" was dropped, and it became Papua New Guinea.

Papua New Guinea (PNG) has an estimated population of two and one-half million indigenous people and forty-two thousand expatriates. Nearly all of the former live in rural areas, divided into small groups, isolated by mountain ranges, rivers, and swamps. Before the intrusion of Europeans, these groups lived in a state of constant warfare with each other, and while there is an underlying Melanesian similarity, shared also by the Indonesian province, Irian Jaya (formerly Dutch New Guinea), the Solomon Islands, New Hebrides, and New Caledonia, the groups vary considerably in cultural detail. There are seven hundred to eight hundred distinct dialects spoken in PNG. While the country may be a paradise for the linguist or anthropologist, it is a headache to govern; every group or region wants its own laws and does not recognize the legality or authority of a central system of government. On the positive side, since no group is strong enough to dominate the
others, as has been the case in some African countries, there is less chance of civil war.

I have outlined this administrative history of the country, in order to place the archival situation in proper context. Before European government, the country was a multitude of preliterate societies based on subsistence agriculture. Any records prior to the 1880's were kept by navigators who sighted or briefly visited the country, usually meeting a hostile reception. What material has survived may be found in the archives of the European countries for which these seamen sailed. The records of British New Guinea, later Papua, are reasonably continuous except for what may have been lost by misadventure or from the ravages of the climate, especially in remote areas. Because the Japanese were prevented from reaching Port Moresby, there was time to transfer the archives to Australia.2 The establishment of a true PNG National Archives program began with the end of the war; and as a result most of the original records alienated by the fighting have been returned from Australia after microfilm security copies had been made.3

On the New Guinea side, the archives were less lucky. The Japanese landing at Rabaul was so sudden that whatever records had survived the volcanic eruption which ruined Rabaul in 1937, were destroyed by the ravages of total war. Further disasters occurred after the war; in 1949 a fire broke out in the Government Secretary's Office which housed the archives. More records were lost in 1958 when fire ravaged the Crown Law Office and the Supreme Court.4

Having survived war and fire, the National Archives found itself embroiled in a new struggle against political dismemberment. The opening of a new building in April, 1972, coincided with the discovery that some archives officers had been sent from the Australian government to go through the records in the various PNG administrative departments with the aim of removing "sensitive" files to Canberra. Coming as it did just before self-government, this action was interpreted as a political move by Australia to protect itself from future accusations of maladministration in PNG. Australian librarians and archivists, as well as historians and the press, rallied to the cause and

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raised a furor during which the ethical issues were fully discussed. Fortunately a reshuffle in Australia brought in a new Minister for External Territories who enabled everyone to save face by labeling the whole affair as a "misunderstanding" with assurances that no files would be removed.\(^5\)

The PNG National Archives continues to function under extreme handicaps, the greatest of which, in my opinion, is the lack of trained staff or any training program. In 1972 the last expatriate archivist left, after having trained his national successor, a graduate of the University of Papua New Guinea. Unfortunately, the country is so short of university graduates that the archivist was soon made acting head of a major government department without providing the archives with a professional replacement. This situation continued for several years, and although the remaining staff carried on as best they could, morale was very low because of the lack of leadership and the indifference of other government departments. At present all government service is in the throes of a major reorganization and the archives seems to be last on everyone's list, as funds have not been set aside for it. Recently the national archivist has been returned to his post, but it is likely the previous pattern of pulling him away when needed elsewhere will be repeated. Although the problem might be solved by training a back-up archivist, the original difficulty of obtaining one again comes into play. A university graduate will just have to be found, then sent overseas for archival training, all of which takes time and money.

The only other institution in PNG which systematically collects archives and manuscripts is the University of Papua New Guinea, whose library houses the New Guinea Collection,\(^6\) of which I am the Librarian. The term "New Guinea" as used here refers to a geographical and cultural entity, not a political state. It incorporates the whole island of New Guinea plus many offshore islands which transcend the political unit of PNG. Inevitably political considerations may force a change in the present name of the collection, but for the present it stands as is.

Apart from a large collection of New Guineaana, we care for a large collection of documents. The
majority of these are the archives of two major churches in the country, the Anglican and the United, which have deposited their records with us. We confine ourselves strictly to nongovernmental archives and manuscripts relating to New Guinea; nothing else is accepted. Private manuscripts, such as the diaries or letters of old prospectors, explorers, or missionaries, or the reminiscences of a trader, are actively sought in the original or in the form of copies. The search for material takes me to many parts of the world and is one of my most rewarding duties.

Because written records in PNG have such a shallow documentary time depth, our archives necessarily includes oral history. The program is organized as an important undergraduate subject at the University. Students intending to take the course notify the lecturer a semester in advance and receive basic instructions. During vacation they are lent a cassette recorder and issued tapes. At home in their villages they tape the reminiscences of their elders, usually in the vernacular. Upon returning to the University, they transcribe the tapes in translation and are instructed in the use of relevant documentary and secondary sources to support the oral information they have collected. They combine the oral and written source material into a paper as a final project. Good tapes become part of our New Guinea Collection, together with the translation of the transcription, and good essays are frequently published. In this way the history of PNG is being recorded and written at the grass roots level. The Collection contains many other sorts of tapes; for example, traditional stories, songs, public lectures, and seminars. We also have a large collection of photographs.

The University is now ten years old, and well established; but its most difficult times are probably ahead of us, not behind, though we have come through some problems. The first problem was the argument in 1964 about whether there should be a University at all, but a Commission was set up to inquire into the matter and its report recommending an institution of higher learning was accepted. Before the war, secondary education was practically nonexistent, and what primary education there was, was provided by the missions. Even today it is estimated that only 35 percent of school-age children receive any education at all, and of these the
majority are pushed out at the end of standard six because there are so few places in the secondary schools.8

Those who did go to high school had only a four-year course, not up to matriculation standard. A very few won scholarships to schools in Australia, and by the time the University was established, the country could boast of having four indigenous people who had graduated from universities overseas. With the brisk advances toward independence, political expediency and the satisfaction of demands of the United Nations required that something be done; the University was subsequently established in mid-1965 and enrolled its first students in 1966. These students were required to do a preliminary year course which brought their four-year course up to matriculation standard, and this course still exists, though now three six-year high schools have been established.

During the first few years, the entire superstructure of this expensive institution was being built at the same time classes were being held. There are now over five hundred graduates, who have rapidly been absorbed into all sectors of the community, but mostly into public service, where a good person may find himself head of a department within a year or so of graduation.

But University students, here as elsewhere, are vocal about political events, and such unrest causes resentment amongst the more conservative uneducated population. Port Moresby is rapidly being expanded with prestige government buildings and new paved roads, while the entire country of 178,260 square miles boasts only 10,228 miles of roads of any description.9 Thousands of villages take several days of walking to reach, are without electric light or any mechanical equipment. Even if crops are grown, produce cannot always reach the market; as a result internal revenue is very low and the budget is largely reliant on overseas aid. The Education Department wants more money to introduce universal education—it should have it—and the Public Health Department needs more money. In a rapidly changing country, there are law and order problems; the police need more men. Agriculture, business development, transport, all need extra funds to set up the superstructure of the economy. With most of the population illiterate and

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living on what they themselves grow for their own needs, income tax is not a great source of revenue. Everyone wants a piece of a pie that is becoming smaller each year as Australia cuts down her aid.

We are fortunate that the National Archives is an established institution, even if it has no funds to develop as it should. We are fortunate that the University's New Guinea Collection has bought most of its basic stock--of second-hand books--and that most manuscripts are donated, not bought. We are fortunate that both institutions are housed in air-conditioned buildings in a country whose year-round climate is hot and humid. Unfortunately, we do not have enough money to develop much further. Such items as acid-free folders or containers are not produced in Papua New Guinea, and the prices quoted to inquiries overseas are often equal to half our total budget; furthermore, freight costs are prohibitive. Conservation is another tremendous problem. Manuscripts arrive full of bugs after years of rotting away at outstations; we have no means of restoration, though our Chemistry Department can do limited fumigation. Staffing continues to be our major handicap; for archives, even more than libraries, need university graduates to handle the reference duties. The demand for such graduates is so high and the rewards so much greater in other fields that archives and libraries will have a long wait for a full complement of professional staff. After ten years, we have only two national graduate librarians for the whole country; both work at the University.

It must not be thought that it is a continually depressing experience to work in such a situation. Indeed, the satisfactions of improvisation and of seeing one's own brainchild produce results are very great. PNG is a natural, beautiful country with friendly people and a relaxed way of life. We do have our excitements with intertribal fighting using bows and arrows, spears, sticks, and stones, during which someone occasionally gets killed; but we do not have organized crime, bombing, or terrorism, nor the nastiness of industrial pollution and strip development as many more developed countries do. Still it is true that the ideal archives institution can only exist in an affluent and educated society. We, in developing areas or in small towns and countries, can only do what we can and hope that historians will appreciate our efforts.
NOTES

1 American and Australian troops fought side by side in campaigns in New Guinea, and American ex-servicemen seem to remember their time in New Guinea with nostalgia. Several total strangers have from time to time written to me from America asking for information about conditions today. During my stay in Atlanta, one group of veterans not only sought me out, but presented me with photographs and other mementos for the New Guinea Collection.

2 Kevin Green, "A Group of Archives Received from War-Damaged Port Moresby," Archives and Manuscripts 3, no. 8 (May 1969): 23-30.


4 Ibid.

5 Library Association of Australia. P.N.G. Branch. Records 1967-1974, New Guinea Collection, UPNG Library. This file contains a complete history of the affair, including clippings from the Sydney Morning Herald, the Australian, the Papua New Guinea Post-Courier, and other media which published letters to the editor or made editorial comment during February and March, 1972.

6 A more detailed description of this may be found in Nancy Lutton, "The New Collection: University of Papua New Guinea Library," Archives and Manuscripts 6, no. 4 (August 1975).


9 Ibid., pp. 7 and 167.