

Mission Journalism in German New Guinea Pioneering Mass Communication

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Introduction

The role of the mainstream churches in contemporary Papua New Guinea media is well known. What is often less well appreciated is that Kristen Pres, *Wantok*, and *The Time of Papua New Guinea* did not spring fresh from the developments of the post-war years, but are the lineal offspring of the hand-operated presses of the 19th-century missionaries.

On these unreliable and demanding machines, early Protestant and Catholic missionaries produced news sheets, tracts, and dictionaries. They did not print what we would call newspapers today, but, by mixing news of the outside world, with Bible stories and sermons, they filled, to a greater or lesser extent, the same function. That is to say, they told their readers about what was happening in the outside world, bringing them stories about things, which affected their lives, and the world they lived in. They were not the result of commercial enterprise, but a natural outgrowth of the desire of Christian missionaries to spread the gospel to the indigenes.

These publications were the beginning of a long tradition, in all the mainstream churches in Papua New Guinea, of using the press, as a tool of proselytisation and communication. They all shared a commitment to the apostleship of the press.

This use of the vernacular, strengthened the position of the church at the village level, and also reinforced that link, when vernacular newsletters, or news sheets, were produced by mission stations, or mission schools, for distribution in the area, where tok ples used, predominated.

As Litteral points out:

[Vernaculars] are the language of closest identity and intimacy – dominant in the home and the village. Vernaculars are the means of enculturation, and, as such, provide the greatest freedom of expression for daily life, from essential vocabulary, to expressive songs and oratory. Except for the work of the churches (my emphasis), vernaculars have been used little in the written form.¹

In choosing to communicate with their prospective parishioners in the vernacular, and to print material for them in the vernacular, the missionaries chose the most-powerful form of communication available to them.

The importance of learning, and using, the local language for evangelists, can be seen in this warning from the Sacred Heart Missionary, Andre Navarre, who wrote:

Until the missionary knows the language, he will be in an inferior position, and this will be detrimental to his ministry; the Protestant catechists, and even the least of his people, however ignorant, will have an advantage over him.²

The paper will examine the development of the missionary press, in three broad areas: the development of the press in each of three main missionary groups: the Lutheran, Catholic, and Methodist churches; the way the missionary press presented the outside world to its readers; the way the missionary press reflected the pastoral, and temporal, concerns of the missions, and the long-term effects of the missionary press on journalism in New Guinea, and on the use of the vernacular, as a means of mass communication.

Colonial History

There had been sporadic contact between the people of New Guinea and Europeans before the Deutsche Neu Guinea Compagnie begin its operations. Labour recruiters had cruised New Ireland waters, looking for people willing to sign-on for the Queensland cane fields, and American whalers had also anchored there. There were also some small, private plantations.

However, the first attempt at colonisation – if so cruel a fraud can be called that – occurred in 1882, when the Marquis De Rays, a bogus French

¹ Robert Litteral, “Language Policies in Melanesia”, in *Media Development* (1/1992), p. 14.

² Andre Navarre, *Handbook for Missionaries of the Sacred Heart Working Among the Natives of Papua New Guinea*, Sr Sheila Larkin, tran., from the second impression, published by the Catholic mission on Yule Island, 1896, Sydney NSW: Chevalier Press, 1987, p. 25.

nobleman, lured 1,000 French, Belgian, Spanish, and Italian settlers to the shores of New Ireland.

Less than 70 are said to have ever again seen their native lands. . . . By the turn of the century, only three of the thousands of individuals, who had come, remained in the archipelago.³

It was against this background of blackbirding, isolated settlement, and wholesale disaster, that German New Guinea began life in 1885, as a protectorate, administered by the Deutsche Neu Guinea Compagnie. For the next 14 years, it was administered as a private venture.

Despite pressure from commercial, and patriotic interests for overseas colonies, the expense and difficulty of undertaking such enterprises did not fit in well with Bismarck's view that the Second Reich should concentrate on internal development first.

German New Guinea consisted of the northern mainland of New Guinea, known as Kaiser Wilhelmsland, and the Bismarck Archipelago, consisting of Neu Hanover, Neu Mecklenburg (New Ireland), and Neu Pommern (New Britain). In 1886, the northern section of the Solomon Islands was added, but, in 1900, the border between German New Guinea and the British Solomons was changed in Britain's favour, and only Buka, Bougainville, and a few smaller islands remained German.⁴ The colony was administered by the Reich from 1899, apparently the result of the company's desire to cut costs. It had lost heavily in the protectorate, despite the optimistic tone of its annual reports.⁵

It may also have been the result of concern that, with British colonies adjacent in Papua and the Solomons, the protectorate would be better run by the government, than by a mercantile consortium. After the protectorate became a "proper" colony, German New Guinea began to expand. Germany bought the Palau, the Marianas, and the Carolines, from Spain, which had

³ Jinks, B., P. Biskup, P., and Nelson, H., eds, *Readings in New Guinea History*, Sydney NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1973, p. 13.

⁴ Peter Sack, and Dymphna Clark, eds, *German New Guinea: The Annual Reports*, Canberra ACT: Australian National University Press, 1979, p. x.

⁵ James Griffin, Hank Nelson, Stewart Firth, *Papua New Guinea: A Political History*, Richmond Vic: Heinemann Education, 1979, p. 39.

already lost the Philippines in the Spanish-American War. In 1906, the Marshall, Brown, and Providence Islands were also added.⁶

The colony faced tremendous problems. It was probably undercapitalised, and predictions about its success must now be seen as over-optimistic. The scandal of the Marquis De Rays expedition to New Ireland (Neu Mecklenburg), which occurred only three years before the Deutsche Neu Guinea Compagnie set up its headquarters in Rabaul, must still have been fresh in the minds of the public, and cannot have helped to bolster the confidence of investors in prospective immigrants.

The indigenes appear to have been largely hostile, except for those who sought German protection from their fiercer neighbours, seeing:

advantage in cooperation with the government, especially if the government helped them fight traditional enemies. Their cooperation was welcomed by the Germans, as evidence of “control”.⁷

Communications with the outside world, and within the colony, were all by sea, and were occasionally hazardous. New Guinea was notoriously unhealthy, and the climate, and the soil, seemed to mitigate all the colonists’ best hopes. Hopes of turning Kaiser Wilhelmsland into another Java were defeated by the high death rate among labourers, and the lack of colonist from Germany. Recruitment of native labour was difficult, despite the efforts of Governor Hahl (who, by the standards of his own time, was a progressive and enlightened man) to control the trade.

Ultimately, it was the plantations around Rabaul, plated by a more-cosmopolitan selection of colonists, which showed how the colony could have become economically self-sufficient.

It is ironic – and, from the German point of view, tragic – that, just as all the hard work was about to pay off, and planters in New Pommern could look forward to profitable copra harvests, the Great War broke out, and the colony was lost to Australia.

⁶ Sack, and Clark, *German New Guinea: The Annual Reports*, p. x.

⁷ [The text for this footnote is missing from the original article. –Revising ed.]

The Churches in German New Guinea

The missions in New Guinea followed the same pattern as elsewhere in the South Pacific, with a variety of Protestant groups competing with each other, and against the Catholics.

The Protestant church was represented in New Guinea by the Lutheran and Methodist missions. The Methodist missionaries were under the control of a missionary board in Australia, and their staff were largely islanders, under the direction of English-speaking Australians.

The Neuendettelsau Mission appears to have been the most successful of the Lutheran groups, and is subsequently the one to which I have paid most attention. The Rhenish Mission should, by rights, have spearheaded the work of the German missions in New Guinea, given the relationship between its head, Friedrich Fabbri, and Adolph von Hansemann, the force behind the Deutsche Neu Guinea Compagnie. However, Fabbri's obsession with using the Rhenish Mission to prepare the indigenes as a malleable taskforce for the company, seems to have undermined its pastoral work, and to have eventually undermined Fabbri's position with colonial interests in Germany.⁸ The Catholics in New Guinea, were, as we shall see, below, from two different orders, one French-speaking, the other German.

The Press in German New Guinea

The mission press filled a role in German New Guinea, that had not been met by the colonial or company authorities. According to Peter Sack and Dymphna Clark's bibliography of German New Guinea, it alone, of all the Kaiser's colonies, had no newspaper.

A few hundred kilometres to the east, Germans could read the *Samoanische Zeitung*. In China, residents of the German concession at Tsing Tao could read *Der Ostasiatische Lloyd*, which Sack and Clark describe as "the closest equivalent of a private, local German New Guinea newspaper".⁹

The Germans in New Guinea had to make do with these papers, arriving weeks, or months, late, and with copies of such publications as the *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung*, which dealt with the German empire, as a whole.

⁸ Moses, and Kennedy, *Germany in the Pacific and Far East*, pp. 313-341.

⁹ Peter Sack, ed., *German New Guinea: A Bibliography*, Canberra ACT: Australian National University Press, 1980p. 42.

Considering the uncertain state of the protectorate's finances, and the widely-spread immigrant population, it is not really surprising that there was no commercial newspaper.

At its greatest, the European population was only 1,427, and the settlers were spread right across New Guinea, from Dallmannhafen (now Wewak) to Kavieng, to Friedrich Wilhelmshafen (now Madang), and to Rabaul.¹⁰

There were two official publications for German New Guinea. The Deutsche Neu Guinea Compagnie published the *Nachrichten uber Kaiser Wilhelms-Land und de Bismark-Archipel*, "a combination of government gazette, and specialised journal", from 1885 to 1898.¹¹

After the imperial government took over the running of the colony, it was, for some years, without its own publication, but, in 1909, began printing the *Amtsblatt fur das Schutzgebiet (Deutsch) Neu Guinea* in Rabaul. Like the missions, the German administration trained indigenes as printers, in this case, students, under the guidance of their teacher, Paul Barschdorff.¹²

The honour of producing the first publication in New Guinea, that, in any way, resembles a newspaper, probably falls to the Lutheran Neuendettelsau Mission. It was not commercial, and, certainly, it was not entirely what we would consider a newspaper, but it fulfilled much-the-same function. The first edition of *Jaeng Ngajam* was printed in the Jabem language in 1907. It included, among its Bible stories and lessons, reports of missionary activities in other areas. If the purpose of a newspaper is to tell its readers about things they didn't know about, then, to this limited extent, *Jaeng Ngajam* was a newspaper.

There is, however, compelling evidence to suggest that the missionary vernacular press only came into its own with the Methodist *A Nilai Ra Lotu Tuna*, in 1909.

Why Publish?

The question, which immediately springs to mind is: why publish newspapers or newsletters at all? And why publish them in tok ples? The missionaries seem to have been driven by three main impulses. Firstly, the

¹⁰ Sack, and Clark, *German New Guinea: The Annual Reports*, p. 358.

¹¹ Sack, *German New Guinea: A Bibliography*, p. 7.

¹² Albert Hahl, *Governer in New Guinea*, Sack, Peter, and Clark, Dymphna, eds, Canberra ACT: Australian National University Press, 1980, p. 133.

power of the written word, is a permanent record of ideas and information. Once a language is written down, and codified, it is preserved indefinitely, even if it is no longer spoken. Once the Bible, or any work, is translated into the language, it becomes part of the language, and part of the culture. Secondly, the missionaries knew, from, often bitter, experience, that they had to be able to speak and preach in the local language, if they were to have any chance of success. This is certainly borne out in the instructions to Sacred Heart missionaries.¹³ Thirdly, a printing press was something of a status symbol among missionaries. While translating and publishing in local languages had very practical benefits, it also added a certain air of academic respectability to mission work.

Relations Between the Missions

Before turning to the work of individual missions in the printing field, it is necessary to understand something of the relations between the various missionary groups. It is logical to expect that these attitudes were reflected in the press, as much as in their daily lives. The missionaries came to German New Guinea with all the prejudices and preconceptions of their homelands. They also brought with them feuds that had developed elsewhere in the Pacific.

Before the beginning of missionary activity in New Guinea, strife had often occurred between competing missions in various parts of the South Pacific. The London Missionary Society (LMS), and the Methodists, were rivals in Samoa; the French Catholics, and the LMS, on Tahiti. Nineteenth-century Europe was afflicted by interdenominational hostility and strife, and European missionaries, who came to the South Pacific, brought, with them, the interdenominational attitudes, that were current in Europe.¹⁴

Such hostility obviously affected their attitudes towards each other, and the way their parishioners behaved. The belief among Pacific Islanders, converted to certain Protestant sects, that *"the pope ate babies"* is a case in point.¹⁵

¹³ Navarre, *Handbook for Missionaries of the Sacred Heart*, pp. 25-30.

¹⁴ Hermann Reiner, and Herwig Wagner, eds, *The Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea: the First Hundred Years: 1886-1986*, Adelaide SA: Lutheran Publishing, 1987, p. 329.

¹⁵ John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars: Christian Origins in Oceania*, Geneva Sw: WCC Publications, 1985, p. 91.

Relations between the missionary churches in German New Guinea were undeniably bad. The German administration tried to curb the bitter feuding, by dividing the territory into “areas of influence”; the idea being that the missionaries would tend to their own flocks, and not encroach on other missions’ fields. However, poaching was widespread, and the missionaries stirred up their newly-converted flocks to such an extent, that families and villagers were often split.

The official Lutheran history of its church in Papua New Guinea details decades of competition with the Catholic church, blaming the Romans for the failure of the “spheres of influence” policy on the Gazelle Peninsula. Even the Lutherans were kept apart, as when the ill-fated Rhenish Mission arrived in Finschhafen in 1887, and were told to find another base for their work, because Finschhafen belonged to the Neuendettelsau Mission. Evidence suggests that the relationship between the Catholic and Methodist missions was the worst possible.

It appears, from contemporary accounts, that the Methodist missions board saw the Pacific as its own fiefdom, and resented intrusion by any other group. There are terse comments in the mission’s centenary history about the necessity to compete in Samoa with the London Missionary Society, whose agents had been expected to stay out of the way.¹⁶

If competing for souls with the LMS was a problem, then the Catholic church presented as great a competitor as Satan himself. The conflict with the Catholics can be traced back to Fiji, where the small Catholic mission was regarded as an affront to Methodist domination. The Methodist English-language press, both in Australia and Fiji, was vituperative in its attack on a body it seems to have regarded as the Antichrist of the South Seas.

This animosity (reciprocated, it must be said, by the Catholics) was carried to German New Guinea. The English/tok ples dictionaries reflected this. The word for Catholic was the perjorative “Popey”, and “Romish” and “Popish” were the vilest adjectives.¹⁷

¹⁶ John Wear Burton, *The First Century: The Missionary Adventure of Australasian Methodism: 1855-1955*, Sydney NSW: Methodist Overseas Missions, 1955, p. 29.

¹⁷ *Methodist Church Overseas Mission Archives*, Meth Ch OM, Danks to Pearson, September 17, 1903.

Even the original name of the Methodist newspaper, *A Nilai Ra Lotu Tuna*, was suggestive of this hostility. In translation, it can be read as “Voice of the True Gospel”, or, more meaningfully, “Voice of the True Church”.

The animosity between the Methodist and Catholic missions in New Britain degenerated to a state, where fisticuffs broke out between lay people of different denominations, missionaries took each other to court to protest perceived slanders, and the Methodists complained that the Catholics were kidnapping children from villagers, to forcibly rear them in the church of Rome.¹⁸ One can only wonder how the local people reacted to the missionaries’ stories of Christ’s love and forgiveness.

The Neuendettelsau Lutheran Mission

The Neuendettelsau Mission was active in publishing church papers from the beginning of this century, all of them in ples tok. These were *Jaeng Ngajam* (1907), printed in Jabem, *Aakesing* (1911), printed in Kate, and *Krist Medain Total* (1909), in Graged. While these newsletters were devoted chiefly to tok ples translations of Bible stories, and explanations of Lutheran beliefs, they also carried information about the activities of missionaries in other areas of German New Guinea.

It was the missionaries, who attempted to create a feeling of solidarity among the widely-scattered congregations . . . by publishing a monthly or bi-monthly paper. . . . News from the newer (mission) areas was printed . . . and devotional articles, and biblical meditations, with a typical New Guinea touch were published.¹⁹

To this extent, they filled the role of newspapers, by informing their readers about events in areas, other than their own. The extent of their readership is difficult to assess, and it seems likely that the few literate indigenes would have read from the newsletters to other members of their congregation. Thus, these publications would have fulfilled an oral, as well as a written, role in the transmission of information.

The Methodists

As an evangelical movement, the Methodist church was filled with a desire to spread the Word to the Pacific. The Methodists’ work was facilitated

¹⁸ *Methodist Church Overseas Mission Archives*, Meth Ch OM, Fellman to Danks, December 3, 1909, April 7, 1910, May 6, 1910.

¹⁹ Reiner, and Wagner, *The Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea*, p. 447.

by their use of native catechists, sent with white supervisors, into new territories. The impact of the native catechists on new territories was profound, in temporal, as well as spiritual, areas. To German New Guinea, they brought the word *lotu*, which survives in Tok Pisin as the word for “church” or “gospel”. The introduction of new house-building techniques, and better methods of growing taro, are also attributed to the native catechists.²⁰ The Methodists’ work in German New Guinea began in 1875, when George Brown arrived in the Due of York Islands, with nine Pacific Islander preachers. The mission early produced a “copious vocabulary” of the local language, and, by 1885, had a printing press – a glorious name for a seemingly cantankerous hand-operated machine – at Kabakada.²¹

Apart from the privations experienced by all the early missionaries in New Guinea, the Methodists suffered from the added disadvantage of being unable to speak the official language of the colony: German. But, if they were not conversant in the official colonial tongue, they mastered the local tok ples as quickly as possible. To the Methodists, the local languages were the key to the propagation of the faith. They saw no point in trying to teach the locals English, and, thereby, wasting years of their work.

They prided themselves on being able to conduct simple conversations in a mixture of tok ples and Tok Pisin within a few months, not only because they could then talk to their prospective parishioners, but because they could then preach in a language that everybody understood.

What is more important, at least for the purpose of this paper, is that they saw great value in spreading the word of God in tracts, printed in the local languages. The Methodist church saw the printing press as a vital implement in its battle to win souls, and produced a number of publications. The press, originally “a boon to teachers”, was soon called on to produce a newspaper for the Methodist parishioners.²²

More than any other publication, the Methodist paper, *A Nilai Ra Lotu Tuna*, was closest to a traditional newspaper. First published in 1919, it carried news from other areas in the protectorate, and from outside New Guinea, apart from the usual Bible stories, and religious educational material. The

²⁰ Jinks, Biskup, and Nelson, *Readings in New Guinea History*, pp. 24-25.

²¹ F. G. Lewis, *Methodist Overseas Mission, New Guinea District: The First 60 Years*, Rabaul PNG: unpublished MS, 1959, p. 2.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

newsletter, which soon changed its name to *A Nilai Ra Dovot*, offered the indigenous people a world they had never known.

Among the events reported on were:

hurricanes in the Pacific Islands, Halley's Comet, the deaths of Edward VII, and Florence Nightingale, the Kaiser's birthday, the losses of ships by storms, and the sinking of the Titanic.²³

The Methodist newspaper played another very important role in training indigenous people as printers. Penias Vatongnasoi and Benjamin must have been among the very first local printers in New Guinea. Even more importantly, it provided an outlet for local writers.

At first, the material was all by Europeans and South Sea Islands missionaries, but, within two years, articles by local writers were included, and quickly took up a large part of each issue.²⁴

It is not too extreme to think that Papua New Guinea's first local journalists were among the writers of *A Nilai Ra Dovot*.

The Methodist church has an interesting connection with the first English commercial newspaper in New Guinea, the *Rabaul Times Courier*, which later merged with the Port Moresby *South Pacific Post* to form *The Post-Courier*.

Gordon Thomas, who was later editor of the paper, was in charge of the New Guinea Methodist press from 1911-1912, but left after a scandal involving himself and missionary, Sr Nichols. Sr Nichols, who had been involved in an earlier scandal, which had ended in the departure of the previous printer, a Fijian, left the mission and married Mr Thomas.²⁵

The Catholics

The Catholic church arrived in German New Guinea from two directions, with missionaries from two orders, and with the missionaries speaking two parent languages. This cannot have made their work easy,

²³ Neville Threlfall, *One Hundred Years in the Islands: The Methodist/United Church in the New Guinea Islands Region: 1875-1975*, Rabaul PNG: United Church, 1975, p. 87

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Methodist Church Overseas Mission (documents relating to these incidents are scattered across several volumes of the Methodist archives relating to 1911-1912).

especially since Catholic orders are often rivals, as much as two branches of the same firm can be.

The first entry into German New Guinea was made by French-speaking Sacred Heart missionaries, who established themselves in Rabaul in 1882. The second wave of Catholic missionaries came from the German Divine Word order, who chose, as their field, the mainland of New Guinea, then called Kaiser Wilhelmsland. They set up their first station on Tumleo, an island off the Sepik coast, near Aitape.²⁶

We know that the church had a number of printing presses. There was one on Tumleo Island, although the only evidence extant about the press is a photograph of the printing room showing Sr Cherubina Frings, who was in charge of the press, with a local girl, who may have been trained as a printer's devil.²⁷ The SVDs printed the Tok Pisin *Frend Bilong Mi*, although I have not yet been able to establish its first publication date.

Unfortunately, most of the church records on mainland New Guinea were destroyed during the Japanese invasion in 1942. No copies of early missionary newspapers survive in the church archives in Wewak.²⁸

The Sacred Heart missionaries established a printing press at Vunapope, on the Gazelle Peninsula, in New Britain. While its nature is unclear, it is known that the Sacred Heart Mission produced at least one publication there. In 1911, in a letter to the Proleganada Fidei in Rome, Archbishop Couppe wrote "*Nous faisons fidelement une seule publication*" (We faithfully keep one publication).²⁹ This may well have been the fortnightly *Talaiqu* – "My Friend".³⁰

The Sacred Heart missionaries also had a printing press at their station on Yule Island, in the Gulf of Papua. While not geographically part of this survey, material from the Yule Island press was circulated to the order's missionaries in German New Guinea. There is, therefore, a slim chance that

²⁶ Francis Mihalic, "It all began on Tumleo", in *Papua New Guinea Post-Courier*, August 25, 1971.

²⁷ Noel Gash, and June Whitaker, *A Pictorial History of Papua New Guinea*, Brisbane Qld: Robert Browne & Associates, 1989, plate 358.

²⁸ Kalisz, Bishop Raymund, correspondence with author, February 12, 1991.

²⁹ John Waldersee, unpublished MS, being prepared for publication by Fr John McMahon, archivist at the Sacred Heart Monastery in Kensington, Sydney.

³⁰ Theo Aerts, correspondence with author, May 15, 1992.

some publication, intended for use by the Sacred Heart fathers, or printed on their behalf, in New Britain, may have been produced at the Yule Island press.

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