

PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA **- the poor get poorer**

John Evans

Events in Papua New Guinea should be of interest to those involved in issues related to rural and isolated libraries. Given the nature of the terrain in the country, communities and their libraries are guaranteed a significant amount of isolation. However, until 1978 they were part of a national service and were thereby strengthened in terms of having access to centralized services. In 1978 they became truly isolated by the breaking up of that national service and in most cases those that had little have had that little diminished further.

A Public Library Service was set up in Papua New Guinea in 1936. The early origins of this are outlined in the comprehensive articles on libraries in Papua New Guinea (1) and make interesting reading. The system developed into a comprehensive one - thus, in 1974, Avafia found a highly centralized Public Library Service of 24 country wide branches with selection, ordering and processing taken care of at a central point. Although those in charge were not as sanguine about the state of the public libraries (2), he commented:

"With an annual budget for books/periodicals and other library materials during 1974/75 amounting to \$A74,000 the Public Library Service could be considered rather well placed... The total books stock of 155,000 and about 1000 different periodical titles with an average 8,000 per annum book stock growth rate are all impressive indeed." (3)

National Library Service

A major event in library development in Papua New Guinea was the decision, made in 1975, to set up a National Library Service. A national library building, funded by Australia, opened in 1978. The formative years of the National Library Service have been documented in a report of the first seven years. (4) In advancing the idea of a National Library Service it was hoped not to have a national library in the conventional sense but a truly national service extending country wide. The need for this in a situation of scarce resources for library service was made plain. As a result the National Library building incorporated facilities to back up the public libraries elsewhere in the country, for example, a general collection to back up loan requests from outlying libraries. Books and materials are bought and processed not only for its own collections, but also for all the provincial public libraries who choose to use the service. In addition the National Library also serves as a central agency for donations from organizations such as Asia Foundation, Ranfurly, Canadian Organization for Development Through Education, etc. It was felt that the National Library Service could incorporate the Public Library Service and branches, and this event did take place in 1978. However, this aspect of the National Library Service was not to endure owing to the impact of a policy of decentralization of Government functions pursued by the Papua New Guinea government. After independence in 1975 moves towards the decentralization were made and a system was introduced in 1976 to bring administration closer to the people. Nineteen Provincial Departments were created plus a National Capital District. Each province has a provincial government with control over its administration and budget.

This change was to have an impact on the centralized Public Library Service, as in 1978 this was split up, with the responsibility for each library being given to the province within which they lay. Only Hohola, Waigani and Port Moresby (Ela Beach) Public Libraries remained with the National Library Service as falling within the National Capital District. Waigana public library is housed within the National Library building. Port Moresby (Ela Beach) Library itself was burnt down on 13 December 1986 and replaced by a temporary service operated from the old Library Institute building in Port Moresby. The National

Capital District libraries are administered by the Government Advisory Services Branch of the National Library Service.

Whatever may be said of the effect of decentralization in other areas of government it has resulted in complete stagnation of most of the provincial public libraries.

Comparative figures for the public libraries from 1973 - 1985 are given in Table 1. While an encouraging growth is seen between 1973 and 1977 this trend halts or is reversed in the period to 1985. Although funds are mentioned, generally these seem to have unprovided or unspent.

Public Libraries	1973		1977		1985		1985	
	Books	Staff	Books	Staff	Books	Staff	Bookfund [Kina]	Loans
Alotau	1,336	1 PT	3,984	1	2,770			
Arawa	3,330	2	7,764	1	8,487	3	1,121	9,021
Bulolo	6,106	1 PT	8,581	1PT	9,737	1	Nil	6,811
Daru	2,920	1 PT	4,203	1	4,000	1	3,000	
Gavien Community Library					2,000	1	2,000	No figs
Goroka	8,522	2	11,374	2	8,262	2	10,000	7,596
Hohola	2,109	2 PT			3,100		6,000	6,535
Hutjena	2,700	2 stdnt	5,324	1	4,500	1	2,000	No figs
Kainantu			2,332	1				
Kavieng (Admiral Carteret)	4,564	1	7,573	1	8,446	1	2,000	6,501
Kerema	4,000	1	5,510	1	6,884	1	Nil	19,000
Kimbe	2,000	1 PT	1,780	1	2,100	1	-	2,300
Kundiawa	3,474	1 PT	5,262	1	5,192	1 PT	2,000	11,055
Lae	13,070	5	15,134	4	14,000	5	Nil	10,862
Lorengau	1,860	1 PT	2,999	1 PT	2,845	1	500	1,416
Madang	9,147	2	9,594	2	8,500	2	Nil	6,865
Mendi	3,136	1 PT	5,232	1 PT	5,200	2	3,000	19,200
Mount Hagen	4,310	1	6,855	1	6,823	2	Nil	13,127
Popondetta	3,819	1	5,548	1	6,000	1	Nil	2,000
Port Moresby (Ela Beach)	24,000	18	19,242	18	13,805	6	10,000	36,469
Rabaul	20,307	5	21,963	5	19,060	7	7,000	13,842
Samarai	6,350	1	7,559	1 PT	8,500			
Vanimo	2,104	1 PT	4,843	1 PT	3,000	1	2,000	3,728
Wabag PL	2,000	1 PT	5,121	1	5,000	1	-	No fig
Waigani PL					10,000	2	8,000	24,781
Wau PL	6,149	1 PT	10,303	1	No fig.	1	-	No fig.
Wewak PL	6,138	1 PT	8,250	2	10,000	2	2,000	3,000
TOTALS:	143,451	39 +15 PT	186,330	46 +5 PT	183,211	46 +1 PT	60,621	204,109

Table 1. Public Libraries.

[Figures taken from first 3 editions of Directory of libraries in Papua New Guinea. PNGLA, 1974, 1976, 1986.]

In addition to the evidence in Table 1 (above) further evidence of the decline is provided by the National Library Service. The provincial public libraries can deposit money for the purchase of materials in the National Library Trust account and in the manner of the previous centralized service get free processing and advice on selection. The amount

deposited in this account is presumed to give an accurate picture for expenditure, as few local purchases are made. These expenditures can be compared with the minimum standards for public libraries adopted by the National Library Service and the Library Council of Papua New Guinea and produced in 1983. (5) These provide for a certain minimum stock and seating space for the various categories of library, as shown in Table 2.

Category	Seating	Stock	Annual Purchases	Magazines	Staff	Opening Hours
Small [<4,000]	12 adult 12 child	7,500 100 ref.	375	15	1	15
Medium [4,000-10,000]	16 Adult 16 child	12,500 200 ref.	625	20	3	35
Large	20 adult 20 child	17,000 300 ref.	1260	25	5+	46
Very Large [Lac, Port Moresby]	20 adult 20 child	20,000 325 ref.	1680	25	6+	46

Table 2. Minimum Standards for Public Libraries (1983)

The standards also specify a convenient location for the library. Medium and large libraries are expected to have a range of a/v equipment and to operate extension services. Qualifications are also specified, librarians in charge being expected to have the Diploma in Library Science (large units), Certificate in Library Science, or Library Technician's Certificate (small unit). Minimum annual purchases are to be introduced when the basic level of provision is reached, actual suggestions of titles per 1000 population purchased each year being small 175, medium 100, large 100. Standards were to be reviewed every two years.

However, comparison for 1984 and 1985 (6) confirms a low level of expenditure on the provincial libraries. In 1984 of the 23 libraries listed only four spent 50% and upward of the minimum standard and in two instances these were the first expenditures since 1979. In 1985 five libraries spent 50% and upward of the minimum standard. The total amount spent in 1985 was some K45, 000, and in 1984 some K27, 000, while standards would recommend an expenditure of K129, 000 for the 25 libraries normally in operation. A survey (7) indicates declining usage for the unfunded libraries.

The National Library Service has produced another analysis of the problem it faces in realizing its full potential. (8) Problems relating to the public libraries are:

- * decentralization of the provincial public libraries in 1978 and their consequent decline. While the NLS continues to provide centralized processing services and advice these services are barely taken up.

- * variable funding and problem areas within that funding (total budget has varied from K405,914 in 1979 to K695,300 [K134, 900 of that for materials and supplies] in 1985). In 1985 that represented 1.65% of the Education budget and 0.08% of the National budget. Declining purchases by provincial public libraries and government libraries place extra burdens on the limited resources of the NLS.

Prior to decentralization another unfortunate event took place in the public libraries which also has been recorded in the PNG literature. Thus, in 1975 Government decided to close down 12 of the 24 libraries in the system (Popondetta, Mendi, Lorengau, Wabag, Kerema, Samarai, Vanimo, Kimbe, Daru, Wau, Bulolo, Kundiawa) for budgetary reasons (to save K40, 000). Spence has recorded the press stories and reactions to this issue - which forced a change of the Government mind as, on October 10, the libraries were reopened. Of particular concern to her was:

"Closing down of three brand new buildings among the twelve, apparent lack of provision for the care of deserted buildings, collections and borrowers." (9)

While this situation had been retrieved, a similar service still has to be done for the post-1978 era public libraries. Some surveys taken shortly after show just how quickly the rot set in. In a 1979 survey, Mehegan (10) catechized fifteen libraries (of which only four had subscriptions to Papua New Guinea newspapers). The article abounds in dismal quotes, for example:

"Q. Are you satisfied with your library?"

"A. No, because there is no stock and no-one to give service."

"Q. How do you think your library could be improved?"

"A. More books, more staff, more opening hours."

"Q. Do you have magazines?"

"A. Yes, but they are not up to date."

"Q. How long is it since you had new books?"

"A. 1977."

Ela Beach Public Library users were also surveyed by the same writer:

"The overall answer which I received was that virtually all of them were dissatisfied. Of all the responses I received, there was a constant theme - the library was important in their lives, as it had something to offer, could give them information which they could not find elsewhere, and it also helped their children."

A case for the declining public libraries has been made by the Papua New Guinea Library Association (11) and at times in the press. (12) It cannot be said that the government is unaware of the situation. Two ministers can be quoted as follows:

"Since decentralized in 1978, funds for public libraries have been the responsibility of provincial government. As a result, library and information services in most provinces have deteriorated to a critical level." (13)

"I am aware of the generally depressing situation in public libraries in the provinces where, in some instances, no new books have been purchased since the takeover of public libraries by provinces in 1978." (14)

"Our libraries are, depending on who you listen to, static or slipping backwards. Lack of funds, difficulties with distribution, decentralization to provinces and rapid localization all have placed strains on the system... We must ensure that our libraries do not become poorly-used museums of a dying culture." (15)

Role of the public libraries in PNG

The troubled times of the provincial public libraries can not have been helped by a continuing debate as to what they should be doing. Both of the above Ministers continue to take up these points:

"...in most provinces libraries are not carrying out their function. Even when they are working properly, the public libraries, which are all in urban centres, do not cater for the widely dispersed rural areas of each province." (16)

"Perhaps we should change lending libraries into reference ones and concentrate resources on specific services or hand libraries over to private enterprise... If libraries are to be tools for development we will have to face up to these opportunities and these decisions." (17)

This debate also existed pre-decentralization. Thus, a 1975 submission on the issue (18) suggested that the existing town branches provide a central book collection and staffing service for village and community libraries in their area. One of the authors of that submission states elsewhere that library service should be

"radically reconstructed so that its content does reflect the needs of the nation at large...change is in the air. Libraries in Papua New Guinea need to re-examine the reason for their existence...must adapt or perish." (19)

Another author of that submission also comments:

"But it is clear that libraries in Papua New Guinea, specifically public libraries, do not meet the needs of most Papua New Guineans, and won't do so until radical departures are made from the existing 'There are libraries in the main urban centres and if you want library service, come and get it' approach." (20)

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That the public library was a haven for the expatriate and the Papua New Guinea elite was apparent from the available data in 1971 (21) and was a situation confirmed by Afavia in 1974. Since then a series of modest surveys of users of these libraries by Flower (22) and Redman (23) allow one to be more optimistic as to their role. A 1980 survey of Waigani and Ela Beach gave 5% nationals to 43% expatriates as users (given that expatriates constituted 7.7% of the city population). The majority of national users were under 25 (mostly school children). A common frequency of use of once a week or fortnight applied to both groups. Borrowing habits surveyed showed 90% of borrowing of adult fiction attributable to expatriates. The younger age of the Papua New Guinea user is cited as part of the reason for this.

A 1981 survey outside Port Moresby (24) of 16 libraries was based on a count of people in the libraries at particular times each morning and afternoon. Of a total of 9154 users counted the percentages national child: national adult: expatriate child: expatriate adult were 49: 29: 8: 14:. The figures are held to counter the expatriate haven hypothesis, and also show similarities between country and capital use - a situation not expected.

While the situation is grim it would seem fair to provide some happier news from the public libraries in Papua New Guinea. The struggle continues at Rabaul (25), for instance, and a mobile book box delivery service long spoken of for areas of Papua New Guinea (26) is in operation. There are the good folk of Bulolo apparently making the most of their non-standard set-up:

"We only withdraw books which have degenerated through repeated handling. Out of date books which are rarely used contribute to the charm of our library and members are constantly on the look out for these gems. In this way members are able to re-enjoy many a forgotten favourite." (27)

The record of progress at the provincial library at Kavieng is particularly relevant. (28) For a long while the librarian fought to change the situation there - one that we have seen to be characteristic of so many of the other libraries. For years things continued in the doldrums but eventually persistence, enthusiasm and the application of good management techniques produced results. The library now has a budget of its own (K6,000 for 1986), plus a programme of outreach to the community schools and to the prison. Service to a settlement and hospital were provided but withdrawn owing to staffing problems. The librarian concerned, however, has since left to an administrative post.

Conclusion

It would appear that decentralization left the libraries in the hands of those who had a lack of understanding of this basic service. It is not exceptional in Papua New Guinea for local politicians to be without a great deal of formal education or for the public servants to have no personal experience of what good library and information services could provide. The educative role on these matters that could be provided in a centralized system by the National Library Service was too soon withdrawn. It would appear that from the Kavieng experience this role must now to be taken up by the provincial librarians themselves. Two quotes from the Kavieng paper (29) are particularly relevant:

"Librarians have a responsibility in this process... You are the source of information for the lenders and that information has to be updated and in good condition. There is a problem in other provinces. The buildings are nearly falling down. There are no adequate materials. The reading books are out of date. Who is to care? Who makes a report to the appropriate body? It is you as the librarian. The provincial government is responsible to finance your service to the rural communities and the province as a whole. Who then is to advise it that you need financial assistance. The government does not know your needs. Officials have other matters to look into."

"As librarians ... , your responsibility is to see there is finance, your work is effective, you have the government support in your implementation of the types of service you can offer in the public library and to the rural communities. But you must know how to plan, budget, manage and administer well."

The redemption of the provincial services, therefore, could be within the reach of Papua New Guinean library workers themselves, given new enthusiasm, training and the hope of eventual success. This needs to occur in a situation where they can obtain the maximum possible amount of support from bodies such as the National Library Service and Library Council of Papua New Guinea. In addition the role of the public libraries will have to be clearly defined and their assistance in developing outreach programmes to rural areas secured.

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