

PUBLISHING 'HOMEGROWN' PAPUA NEW GUINEAN BOOKS

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Paper prepared for 'Book2Buk – Talking about PNG Books'

Waigani Campus
University of Papua New Guinea

11-12 August 2008

Introduction

The University of Papua New Guinea, with the generous support of the PNG Sustainable Program Ltd, will shortly be publishing a series of 'home-grown' works by Papua New Guineans. This short paper is intended to outline the context and character of the project.

Context

The existence, spread and development of the Internet, together with improved means of access, mean that humanity may well be at an historical turning-point as significant for the dissemination of information, ideas, and products of creative imagination as the discovery or acquisition of literacy, or the invention of the printing press.

On the one hand, some custom-bound, sceptical readers, writers, and publishers might feel that the Internet will prove to be a passing fad. In this way, they will resemble scribes who had previously written on vellum and were reluctant to change when the first printing presses appeared (much as schoolteachers in Australia, or at least NSW, insisted more recently that students continue to use pens with nibs and inkwells long after ballpoints became readily available).

However, on the other hand, it could be that the book, at least in the form in which it is currently known – as a number of pages bound together – is destined for what has been called that 'great dust-heap of history'¹. The garbage is, certainly, the place where many

¹ The expression has been attributed variously to Augustine Birrell (1850-1933), a British essayist and politician, and to the Russian revolutionary, Leon Trotsky.

librarians consign increasing numbers of books and journals that they believe (not always correctly) are available online. In doing so, they display little regard to possible future changes in technology – which have already meant that materials which were once available in one medium only a few years ago are not always readily accessible when the technology and the medium change. One outcome is that readers and researchers who rely on the Internet tend to be limited to those sources which are available online (which, at least until recently, has often meant classics already out of copyright, and, in the case of many scholarly journals, only comparatively recent issues). Another outcome of relying on the Internet, a product of its relative openness to public participation, is that it is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between self-published and other, professionally edited and / or refereed works.

In Papua New Guinea, as in many other developing countries, access to the Internet is still available to only a very small part of the population. According to figures which are themselves available on the Internet, 170,000 people or 2.8% of people in Papua New Guinea (including both citizens and non-citizens) had access to the Internet as at the end of 2007; this is the second lowest percentage in the South Pacific (after Solomon Islands), and one of the lowest in the world - though the number of Papua New Guineans with access to the Internet appears to be growing quite fast (by 25.9% between 2000-2007).² In areas of Papua New Guinea where people do not have access to electricity, telephone-lines or affordable computers, which is probably the case in most rural villages, access is probably close to non-existent. However, the invention and manufacture of solar-powered computers costing as little as US\$100 – and their distribution to schools, where children can be taught how to use them – means that current low access to the Internet could be no more than a passing phase³ (similar to the time when access to radio was limited before transistor radios – and now wind-up and solar-powered radios - became readily available at prices which many Papua New Guineans can afford).

We do not yet know the impact that access to texts by portable or hand-held receivers is likely to have on reading. Is the contemporary preference of many adults to print out what they intend to read – thereby increasing demand for paper and ink⁴, and, as a frequent consequence, the costs of reproducing individual texts – an innate human characteristic? Or is it generational? Will children who grow up with devices such as

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Internet World Stats, at online <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats6.htm>; accessed 10/8/2008.

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See ‘One Laptop per Child, at online <http://laptop.org/>; accessed 10/8/2008.

⁴ Thereby rendering the long-promised ‘paperless office’ an ever-more distant prospect at a time when resource use and environmental sustainability are increasingly critical global issues.

Amazon's Kindle or SONY's PRS-500 feel as comfortable reading on a screen as many older people feel when curled up with a good book? Is the way in which people read texts on the Internet changing the way that we read – and so really 'making us stupid', as a recent writer on the subject has suggested?⁵

In any event, the reality is that, even as the volume of literature on the Internet grows, there are still many works not available online. Even when they are, books and other documents which were once – and sometimes still are – readily available in libraries, where they can be read without hindrance or charge, are increasingly limited to people who are privileged to have passwords or the ability to pay for access (in some cases, they are put online, and then, in effect, taken off as far as many prospective readers are concerned). This is true even of documents produced by bodies like the United Nations, which claim to promote transparency and accountability, and are, in practice, actually limiting access – and so the public's right to know. The growing practice of placing such vitally important documents as Papua New Guinea's laws online⁶ – and ceasing to publish or, at least, to distribute the print copies which were once held at government posts around the country – is, in effect, limiting public access, at least until access to the Internet becomes more widespread.⁷

Literacy has been a critical factor in many different aspects of development: the imposition of uniform laws throughout Papua New Guinea; dissemination of information about health risks and ways of improving human wellbeing, as well as knowledge and skills which contribute to human mastery over nature through enhanced agricultural practices and technology; the spread of religious doctrines; and the ability of people to acquire and contribute to knowledge, and enjoy texts. Literacy is critical to many forms of education, aspects of government, and, especially, bureaucracy.

Available statistics show that 57.3% of Papua New Guineans aged 15 and over and 66.7% aged between 15 and 24 are literate. Sixty-nine percent of children who enter grade 1 progress through to grade 5 at primary school. When compared with other

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Nicholas Carr, 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?', The Atlantic Online, July-August 2008, online <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/200807/google>; accessed 10/8/2008.

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At online <http://www.paclii.org>

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Edward P. Wolfers, 'Issues and Challenges in Access to Law via Computers and the Internet in Papua New Guinea – A consumer's Perspective', paper presented for the 7th Conference on Computerisation of Law via the Internet, University of the South Pacific – Emalus Campus, Port Vila, Vanuatu, 17-19 November 2005; available online at <http://bar.austlii.edu.au/other/CompLRes/2005/24.html>

developing countries, these figures suggest that promoting mass literacy is truly a national challenge in Papua New Guinea.⁸

However, limited though its distribution might be, literacy has had a significant impact on the lives of many Papua New Guineans, both those who are themselves literate and others whose lives are affected by the presence and activities of literate people among them. While other media have been important – especially radio, but recently television, and newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, posters, and other print media for even longer – books have played a significant part in reshaping many Papua New Guineans' lives. Literacy has tended to privilege people who acquire it over those who do not. People with ready access to books often enjoy additional advantages when, for example, certain information is available, at least locally, only in books.

Books by Papua New Guineans

Most – in fact, an altogether overwhelming proportion – of the books available in Papua New Guinea are by foreigners (or are, in some cases, believed to be divinely inspired). But an increasing number of books have Papua New Guinean authors, though none of these authors has written anything approaching the 44 books by the country's most prolific author, the former schoolteacher, diplomat, departmental head and energetic traveller (to all six continents), H. E. Grand Chief Sir Paulias Matane, the present Governor-General.

Moreover, Papua New Guinean writers have been writing and having their words published for very much longer than is widely appreciated. They have been contributing to government and church publications since mission, then government, schools began to teach literacy. Other Papua New Guineans had their words published earlier – when government officers, missionaries, or others recorded what they heard. A number of anthropologists have also recorded and reproduced almost verbatim accounts by informants, some dating back 100 years. However, even close family members do not always know of the existence of their relatives' published words (I have personally had the privilege of informing some of works by parents and other relatives of whose publication they were previously unaware).

The people whose words were reproduced in print were not always literate themselves. This was true, for example, not only of many anthropological informants, but also of Members of the Legislative Council and the House of Assembly whose words were recorded in *Hansard*.

In this regard, I am reminded of a personal experience when a Member of the first House of Assembly, a man with no formal schooling, learnt that I was interested in securing

⁸ United Nations Development Program, 'Fighting climate change: Human solidarity in a divided world', *Human Development Report 2007/2008*, New York, 2007, page 271.

articles by Papua New Guineans for publication in the former *New Guinea Quarterly*. He brought me a clearly much-handled piece of paper with some marks on it which I could not decipher. But, when asked to help me understand what the marks represented, he ‘read’ out what he had intended to say while I wrote down what he said. The short manuscript which resulted was eventually published. It will be republished in a collection of articles which are being put together for republication in a volume of reprints from the *New Guinea Quarterly*.

One of the surprises in this volume will be the identification of some now-prominent Papua New Guineans who wrote under pseudonyms at a time when they were employed as public servants by the Australian Administration, and were not supposed to be making public, political comments – and, certainly, not comments critical of the Administration. A very particular source of surprise will be the revelation how wrong Australian officials could be when it came to identifying who was responsible for writing which article. This is, in certain respects, testimony to the trust that existed among members of what is now sometimes called the ‘independence generation’ (although ‘independence’ was not always clearly on the horizon until the early 1970s), and between them and their editors and publishers. Evidence of the officials’ mistakes has recently become available following publication of a volume of Australian official documents concerning Papua New Guinea in the period 1966-1969.⁹ However, the negative side of such pleasure as there might be in revelations of this kind is to wonder who might have been unjustly disadvantaged by such mistakes (and whether similar mistakes and unfortunate consequences might still be occurring at a time when the Internet makes it possible for others to track both what others may write and what they may read).

The book just mentioned will be a volume in a series of reprints which the University of Papua New Guinea will be reproducing, with the generous financial support of the PNG Sustainable Program Ltd, in order to help to make some early published texts by Papua New Guineans available to a wider audience. Another volume in the series will include the memoirs of a former village constable from Hanuabada, Ahuis Ova, previously taken down and published in a scholarly journal by the pre-war Government Anthropologist for Papua, F. E. Williams. The text will be supplemented by photographs of the original author taken by members of a pre-war American expedition.

A third very important volume will be what is believed to be the first complete book by a Papua New Guinean author. Originally written in Kuanua in the author’s own (very stylish) handwriting, the book was first translated and published in 1932 under the title, *The Erstwhile Savage. An account of the life of Ligeremaluoga (Osea): an*

⁹ Stuart Doran, ed., *Australia and Papua New Guinea 1996-1969. Documents on Australian Foreign Policy*, Canberra, 2006.

autobiography.¹⁰ It was subsequently re-translated and edited to very different effect by Reverend Neville Threlfall and published as *An Offering Fit for a King*.¹¹

Conclusion

The three volumes just mentioned are intended to pave the way for publication or re-publication, as the case may be, of books of significance in the history of Papua New Guinea. If the written texts I have seen prominent Papua New Guineans make without publication in mind (but so they could refer to what they were told, learnt, or experienced) and others create for diverse creative and other personal purposes (perhaps with eventual publication in mind) are any guide, then there may well be quite a trove of very worthwhile manuscripts out there in the community. The purpose of the series is, authors or their families permitting, to make those manuscripts likely to be of wider interest publicly available in book-form. The series will not only be as 'home grown' as the books to be published, it is intended to stimulate and provide an outlet for further growth in the writing, publication, and, above all, the public availability of books by Papua New Guineans.

¹⁰ F. W. Cheshire, Melbourne.

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United Church New Guinea Islands, Rabaul, 1978.

The two editions are compared in Edward P. Wolfers, 'Ligeremaluoga – life and story of a pioneering Papua New Guinean writer' (Review of *Ligeremaluogo of Kono* (*Hosea Linge*) by Eric Johns), *Savannah Flames* (forthcoming)

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2009.02.05