

The infallible engine: indigenous perceptions of Europeans in German New Guinea through the missionary press

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Abstract

Newspapers provide a vital record of how a society sees itself, but in colonial history this usually means that the view of political, social and historical developments is slanted towards the colonisers who made up the audience of the commercial press. A source often badly neglected by historians is the missionary press. Although established by western missionaries, it was usually sympathetic to the indigenous people and often produced and written with their help. The Methodist mission newspaper *A Nilai Ra Dovot*, which circulated on the Gazelle Peninsula in German New Guinea, offers a rare insight into how the outside world was interpreted for the Tolai people and how they saw their own world. I am indebted to the Rev. Neville Threlfall for making his notes on *A Nilai Ra Dovot* available to me.

Introduction

In 1859, the editors of the Methodist missionary James Calvert's notes on his life and work in Fiji wrote the following sturdy phrase:

Great was the astonishment and delight of the people as they saw the marvels of the Mission press. The Heathen at once declared it to be a god. And mightier far than their mightiest and most revered deities was the engine at which they wondered. In the midst of their barbarous people it stood, a fit representative of the high culture and triumphant skill of the land whence it came ... (the) Mission press began, with silent power, its great and infallible work. (Calvert, 1985/1859)

It was a phrase intended for home consumption, of course, a phrase to convince the supporters of the mission's work in the Islands that God, helped by Godly English mechanics, was spreading his message inexorably through the South Seas. And yet the image this paragraph conjures up, of the mighty and infallible engine thundering like Jehovah beneath the palm trees, begs a question. How infallible was the mighty engine of the mission press? In terms of the utter transformation of Island life, there can be no doubt of its might. The missionaries brought literacy, education and a wealth of skills to the Islanders who had hitherto encountered Europeans only transiently and sometimes disastrously. In German New Guinea, as elsewhere, the Protestant and Catholic missionaries were the first to introduce the printing press, and, as Walls has noted, 'the first creators of literature of any sort' (Walls, 2006).

There can have been no doubt at the time about the infallibility of the printing press's evangelical message, but we may ask, more than a century later, about the other messages it brought, about the new world, about the Europeans and their power. In this instance, what did the Methodist mission press through its newspaper, *A Nilai Ra Dovot*, tell the indigenous people when it was transplanted from Fiji to German New Guinea? I would suggest that the message it presented was not always one of infallibility and that it actually subverted – albeit unintentionally – the image of European superiority.

A study of *A Nilai Ra Dovot* affords us a rare opportunity to glimpse some idea of what image of the outside world was being presented to its readers and allows us to make some guesses about its affect. It also allows us to place its work in a broader, global context of missionary newspaper printing and to consider its value as a source to historians and social scientists.

Some attempts have been made to present a version of the encounter of indigenous Papua New Guineans and Europeans in the 20th century from an indigenous point of view; either through interviews with surviving indentured labourers or through oral histories of larger groups. (Newman, 1995; Meleisea, 1976)

One must be cautious, however: Oral histories can be problematical, since they tend to be based on very limited viewpoints or on versions of history which are acceptable to a community, no matter how mythologised. The acceptable version of history may even deny the existence of certain patterns of behaviour or events which have been quite indisputably recorded elsewhere, either because they are regarded as shameful or simply inconvenient to the group's present self image.

Even written accounts of these first encounters between two cultures have to be treated with circumspection because they too may present events in a very particular way. Missionary histories are no exception. Calvert's notes were edited for publication and Barringer quotes a passage from the Children's Missionary Record in connection with the Church of Scotland which describes precisely how such writings were used for what were essentially propaganda purposes among those who might potentially provide financial support to the missions:

After these Missionaries have gone to heathen countries and have entered upon their work, it is their common custom to send long letters to their friends at home describing the condition of the poor dark people among whom they live and telling them the work of the LORD ... This is called MISSION INTELLIGENCE. And the object of a MISSIONARY RECORD is just to gather into one little book all the most interesting portions of this intelligence; and present it from time to time, to the friends of Jesus, that they may be stirred up to work and pray without ceasing for the perishing souls of these poor heathen. (Barringer, 2006)

It can be argued that many of these mission histories and reports used the same basic framework. It can also be argued that they used the same images and the same story patterns. Consider, for instance, the way in which such reports described the printing presses in the Islands. For Walter Lawry, writing about his visit to Fiji in 1847, the press was 'another agency in this great work' (Daly, 2008), an almost living thing comparable to Calvert's 'infallible engine' (Calvert, 1985/1859).

For the Protestant missions, for whom the Bible was central, a printing press was a vital tool because it allowed them to print works in the local language.

Whatever their shortcomings, mission publications such as *A Nilai Ra Dovot* are an important source for researchers from a number of fields. While mission archives have perhaps been treated more seriously in Pacific history than elsewhere, I agree in general terms with Casson's statement about the need to engage more seriously with mission archives as a historical source (Casson, 1997). Although European in origin, the products of the mission press were printed in the indigenous language and was usually the first place where the work of indigenous writers appeared.

The value of missionary documents to historians has been recognised by writers such as Whiteman (1986), who described them as a 'veritable gold mine of resources for the ethno-historian ... specially helpful in the study of cultural change over time, for documents will frequently shed light on why certain cultural changes have occurred'. He believed that the really valuable documents were those that 'were created in action, in missionary endeavour itself, in the conversion of the islanders, in the planting of their churches' (Whiteman, 1986).

Lewis argues that missionary printing activities offer complex subjects of enquiry that demand close and careful consideration:

In themselves each topic, translation and distribution is a substantial subject, but then add the ingredients such as the local perception of the missionaries' motives, the consequences to the community of the availability of the writing, and shifting social, political; and economic circumstances, then the outcomes become an enormous specialist project. (Lewis, A., 2003)

Whiteman advocated that attention be paid to the work of evangelists other than Europeans, noting the work of Tongan and Samoan missionaries in New Guinea. He lists the kinds of material that could be useful – letters, official reports, diaries and journals, notebooks and ethnographic descriptions – but does not mention newspapers. In the case of the Methodist mission in New Guinea, this is clearly an oversight, but one which this paper hopes to correct. Whiteman's attitude is refreshing, given the sometimes hostile and contemptuous attitudes towards missionary literature by people like Beier (1971) and the misunderstandings displayed by researchers such as Mosel (1982):

Natives ... wrote articles for ... *A Nilai Ra Dovot* but one can hardly speak of indigenous creative writing in these cases, as the articles followed the pattern of European Christian literature.

As this article will show, this is not entirely correct. Mosel's misunderstanding of the role of *A Nilai ra Dovot* is compounded by the declaration that:

A dangerous effect of the churches' language policy was that it failed to develop critical reading skills. People were taught to believe everything they read and written words were equated with true words. (*Nilai ra Dovot* = Voice of the Truth!)

Indeed, and the Methodists had first called their newspaper *A Nilai Ra Lotu Tuna*, which meant *Voice of the True Church* in case any of their flock were misled by the Romish doctrines being preached at Vunapope. This was a sturdy expression of belief, not a plot to deprive the Tolai of their right to a post modernist education. Fortunately, even researchers (such as anthropologists) from disciplines which have been historically hostile to missions have begun to advocate a more nuanced approach. Douglas (2001) acknowledges the secular and anti-mission tendencies of most anthropologists and their reluctance to engage with local Christians as what they are, instead of ignoring their religious beliefs or seeing them as dupes. He goes on to say, in rather tortuous academism that it could be useful to read missionary writings and reports because they reveal something of how the indigenous people reacted to the Europeans by the way in which the Europeans wrote about them:

...colonial texts encode cryptic traces of indigenous actions, desires and patterns of social and gender relations, which in unintended, muffled but sometimes profound ways, helped formulate colonial experiences, strategies, actions and representations. (Douglas, 2001)

A study of *A Nilai Ra Dovot* opens up a range of possibilities for study. These include questions of the effect of the mission press on indigenous literacy, such as have been explored in relationship to Tonga by Daly (2008) and to Fiji by Romaine (1992). It also opens up the possibility of comparison with the situation in other countries where the missionary press often pre-dated the commercial press of the settler or colonial government and where it played a significant role in the cultural, political and literary lives of the local people.

Switzer's (1984) study of the missionary press in 19th century southern Africa is a case in point. It provides an invaluable comparison with the situation in German New Guinea. Just as in German New Guinea, the linguistic situation in southern Africa was complex, with 2000 languages and 34 dialects (Lewis, A., 2003). In southern Africa, Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Swiss evangelical presses produced literature in English, Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho and Tswana. Protestant missions 'were instrumental in promoting the works of African creative writers – especially those writing in Xhosa and Sotho', (Switzer, 1984).

It also throws open questions about whether introducing literacy was purely an evangelical project, or whether it was part of a wider social agenda. Given Methodism's links with the anti-slavery movement and the political role ascribed to the African mission press by Switzer, an examination of the political implications of literacy and the missionary press in New Guinea may well be warranted.

The Methodist mission press in German New Guinea gives us something else – a chance to see what the Tolai wrote themselves and the opportunity to speculate on how they might have reacted to the news from the outside world that was presented to them.

The pioneer Methodist missionary George Brown brought to New Guinea a tradition of printing and of using the printing press as a weapon of evangelisation. In Fiji, from which the New Guinea mission sprang, the Methodists had built on the success of their operations in Samoa and Tonga.

The Methodists first established themselves in New Guinea in 1875 when George Brown, accompanied by nine Islander volunteers, established a mission at Port Hunter in the Duke of York group between New Britain and New Ireland, (Threlfall, 1975; Garrett, 1978; Whittaker et al., 1974; Lewis, F.W., 1934). The Methodists' position was generally precarious and in 1882 only one white missionary, Isaac Rooney, was in the district. The mission station on mainland New Britain had been un-manned for two years and the supply of islander volunteers was dwindling as they succumbed to sickness and cannibalism or simply gave up in despair and went home.

By the beginning of the new century the Methodists had established three head stations and 101 outstations, the main centres being at Ulu, Kabakada and Raluana. More importantly, for the purposes of developing a readership of the missionary translations, there were 100 village schools, a larger school at Raluana and a seminary at Ulu. (Sack and Clark, 1979)

The education offered by the Methodist mission had a profound effect on Tolai society, especially once the missionaries were sufficiently sure of their grasp of Kuanua to put it into writing. The effects of education spread beyond the classroom:

Those who had not been to school asked their friends to show them how to read ... and little groups sat about the villages reading to each other. One day, when (the Rev. B.) Danks was tired and wondered if his work was indeed any use, he was cheered by hearing verses from John 3 being read aloud in this way, which meant the books were being used to proclaim the Gospel message. (Threlfall, 1975)

The mission school began to empower the local people to deal with the colonial authorities on a slightly more equal footing. The Rev. H. Rickard reported two cases of indigenous big men who put the new teachings to practical purposes.

One Big Man, Tobola, asked his son to write down the names of some who had been taken away in a labour recruiting vessel and who should have been brought back by then. He took the list of names to the German consul so that some action could be taken. Tobola reportedly told the school teacher that while he had often complained about the tithe he had to pay the mission, he was now glad because its teaching had allowed him to do something for his people. The Consul congratulated the mission on the efficacy of its educational methods, which, Rickard noted with some irony:

Germans can appreciate as well as any other nation, even if they do not much appreciate our spiritual aim. (Danks, 1933)

Rickard also told the story of another Big Man, Tokinkin, who demanded that he be taught to read so that he could write his own orders and send them to the local trade store, (Danks, 1933). Many years later, when the children of the first converts went to work on the mainland goldfields, they could write home because the mission had made them literate in their own language, (Threlfall, 1993).

Eventually the Methodists felt confident enough to start a newspaper. They had long used a hand operated press, but in 1907 they acquired a more sophisticated machine. The following year it was suggested that a monthly newspaper in the vernacular be printed. *A Nilai Ra Lotu Tuna* only ran a few issues and was succeeded by *A Nilai Ra Dovot* in February 1909. *A Nilai Ra Dovot* was a natural outcome of the mission's determination to preserve the local languages and to make their congregation literate in their own language. Had it not been for the spread of literacy through the religious and school publications, there would have been no market for *A Nilai Ra Dovot* when it was eventually printed.

According to Sack and Clark (1978), German New Guinea was the only one of the Kaiser's domains without a newspaper. While the protectorate covered an enormous area, it had a tiny European population, with 1427 settlers spread from Aitape and Dallmannhafen (Wewak) in the west to the protectorate's headquarters at Herbertshoehe (Kokopo) on New Britain and Kieta on Bougainville. Most of the population was centred on Kokopo and the Gazelle Peninsula. The population was too small and the distances for distribution so great that it was probably not possible for anybody to successfully run a commercial newspaper.

A few hundred kilometres to the east, Germans could read the *Samoanische Zeitung*, while in China, residents of Kiautschou could read *Der Ostasiatische Lloyd*, which Sack described as 'the closest equivalent of a private, local...newspaper' (Sack, 1980). This discounts the likelihood that German settlers had access to the *Nord Australische Zeitung* from Brisbane or the other German language papers printed in Australia.

The only locally produced German publications were the government gazettes, *Nachrichten uber Kaiser Wilhelms-Land und den Bismarck-Archipel*, which

was printed by the German New Guinea Company from 1885 to 1898 and the *Amstblatt fur das Schutzgebiet (Deutsche) Neu Guinea*, which was printed from 1909 by the imperial government after it took over the running of the colony. There was no newspaper in New Guinea for expatriates until the advent of the *Rabaul Record* in 1917, three years after the Australian occupation, (Sack, 1980; Sack and Clark, 1979; Rowley, 1958). The only newspapers in German New Guinea were the mission papers. The colonised people had their own newspapers well before their colonisers.

A Nilai Ra Dovot which first appeared in 1908 was not the first mission newspaper in German New Guinea, that honour falling to the Lutheran *Jaeng Ngajam*, which appeared in 1905. The other Lutheran papers were *Krist Medain Totol* (1909) printed in Graged, and *Aakesing* (1911) printed in Kate. The Sacred Heart missionaries at Vunapope seem to have published some kind of publication around the same time as *A Nilai Ra Dovot*, Archbishop Couppe noting in a letter to the Propaganda Fidei in 1911 'Nous faisons fidelement une seule publication', (Waldersee M.S., n.d.). The first edition of the Sacred Heart mission's Kuanua newspaper *Tailaqu: A ga na pepe ai ra Qumuntuna* does not seem to have appeared until 1917. The Divine Word missionaries at Alexishafen do not seem to have produced a newspaper at all during the German times, the *Tok Pisin Frend Bilong Mi* first appearing in manuscript form only in the mid 1930s, (Baker, 1944).

The function of the missionary newspapers was to evangelise, to inform and to create a sense of community among the new believers. Wagner and Rainer (1986) wrote of the Lutheran press:

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 Guinean touch were published.

Thanks to the Uniting Church historian, the Rev Neville Threlfall's work in compiling an appendix to *A Nilai Ra Dovot*, we know at least what sort of articles were in the paper during the German times and can perhaps make some guesses based on this material. His exhaustive cataloguing is especially valuable as a guide to the way in which New Guineans were introduced to the outside world and how local political issues were dealt with in print.

A study of the contents of *A Nilai Ra Dovot* reveals much of what we would expect in a mission newspaper, but there is more, because it a vehicle by which the missionaries could introduce the outside world to the villagers. The glimpses of the outside world they allowed are instructive, for they tend to be either of events which show the world of the Europeans or of natural events with which the locals would be familiar.

The missionaries stated that the purpose of the paper was:

...to preach, to teach, to provide sermon outlines for preachers, to inform the Church people of what was happening in their country. Those who could read should read it aloud to others who could not. The people [of the New Ireland circuits] could learn Kuanua ... and people of all Circuits should learn about each other and learn that we are all one in Jesus Christ. (Threlfall, 1993)

The contents of first issues were diverse, featuring notes to preachers, Christian teachings, news from within the district and about the church and news of the outside world. From his description of the contents it appears that the first issue in February 1909 was a double sided sheet with the first page devoted to the Rev. Fellman's letter of greeting and an account of his trip around the world. The second page carried news items. By April that year the paper had expanded to four pages. Threlfall gives the contents of three pages, but presumably the reverse side of the third page would not have been left blank. By May of that year the paper had settled down into its standard format for a number of years, with the first three pages taken up by pastoral news, addresses and sermons by Fellman and his fellow missionary the Rev. William Cox and news on the fourth page (Threlfall, MSa, n.d.). The newspaper expanded to eight pages only in August 1918 (Threlfall, MSb., n.d.). The faithful were kept abreast of events in the wider community and in September of the first year were told of the death of the missionary's wife Mrs Pearson (Threlfall, MSa, n.d.)

Sometimes the news had political overtones, two pages of the December 1909 issue being devoted to a celebration of the anniversary of the German proclamation of the New Guinea protectorate. The December 1910 edition carried an article about a journey down the east coast of New Ireland in Patpatar. The first photograph appeared in the September edition, a picture in 1902 of the first minister's house on New Ireland (Threlfall, MSa, n.d.).

As the little paper prospered, it drew praise from the sending mission. Writing from Sydney, Danks heaped praise on the paper, assuring Cox, who was now in charge of the paper, that he read every issue and, more importantly, affirming his belief that it would be of immeasurable benefit to its indigenous readers, (MethChOM, 1911).

A Nilai Ra Dovot brought the outside world to the local people. Some of the stories would have been easy enough to comprehend. Before the Great War the world outside New Guinea was brought into focus with overseas news items. In May 1910, readers were told of a hurricane in Fiji, something with which they could identify through the Fiji catechists still among them (Threlfall, MSa, n.d.). The next month they were told about Halley's Comet in a story headed 'A Great Star' (Threlfall, MSb, n.d.).

Contemporary accounts say the comet was visible in daylight and lit up the night sky as if it was day, so presumably the purpose of the story was to

explain the nature of the phenomenon. Useful lessons could also be drawn from natural phenomena. An eclipse of the moon on March 22, 1913 was explained in the April issue (Threlfall, MSa, n.d.). The death of Edward VII was the death of a big man and the Kaiser's birthday was probably explained with references to feasting, at least if the missionaries had continued with Danks method of finding suitable local similes for translation. But how would they explain Florence Nightingale? Could she have been explained as a missionary sister looking after the warriors of England – and if so, why did the English need missionaries?

The Titanic was probably easier to understand – after all, ships sank all the time – but how to explain an iceberg to people living in the tropics? *A Nilai Ra Dovot* also engaged in what we would today call developmental journalism: In November 1913 it carried a four page supplement giving the government health officer's warning of a dysentery epidemic and ways of preventing its spread (Threlfall, MSb, n.d.).

Almost from the start *A Nilai Ra Dovot* contained articles written by Islander catechists and Tolai converts which would be read by and read aloud to other indigenes. These proto-journalists would certainly have been drawn from the ranks of the most literate and most trusted converts and at first wrote about each other and then about the world around them. The June 1909 issue contained a report on meetings with village head men of the Raluana circuit by Ioeli Vaudreu. In the November edition of that year a report on prayer meetings was written by Mika Fili, a Fijian. The following year the death of a Fijian missionary was reported by Tikiko Makadre. The first clearly Tolai name to appear in print was that of the catechist Isimeli To Puipui, who reported the death of the Valaur headman Kapinias To Vakok. Other Islander and Tolai writers of this period included Devita Taraik and a person Threlfall believes to have been Rupeni Nagera. Other Tolai writers included Misa Karam To Voivoi who wrote about a new church building at Karavia in the August 1911 edition. The missionaries cast their net wide for local contributors, publishing, in March 1912, a student essay by Apelis To Maniot on the hermit crab. (Threlfall, MSa, n.d.)

In June 1912 Apisai To Uradok had his student essay on the shark printed, so perhaps students were encouraged to write with the chance of having their best work set in type. The editor also called for contributions and articles by readers, although they were warned to write on only one side of the paper on which they submitted their work (Threlfall, MSa, n.d.). None of this was material to make an Australian editor hold the front page, but it was not meant to be and its effect was more subtle and long lasting than a sensational news story. For the first time the local people could express themselves through the new medium and see their work placed with equal prominence beside that of the white missionaries.

When Governor Hahl left in May 1914 *A Nilai Ra Dovot* reported that local people and Europeans packed the wharf to see him off and 'no one could fail to see that they loved him' (Threlfall, MSb, n.d.). Given the controversy

surrounding Hahl's departure, this demonstration of loyalty had some significance. When war came on August 1914 the Methodists faced the dilemma of what to tell their readers about this war between the white men? The paper's readers were told:

...it is a war of Europeans and the local people should go on with their ordinary work and not be disturbed. They must still obey all the laws of the administration and do whatever they were asked to do; if they are asked to take bigger responsibilities in looking after the community, they must obey. The Administration looks after them, so they must respect the Administration and must obey and help it.' (Threlfall, MSb, n.d.)

The Australian occupation of German New Guinea did not pass without bloodshed. New Guinea auxiliaries fought alongside German troops against the Australian and some German settlers assaulted the Rev. Cox because they suspected that he had passed information to the Australians. The settlers were publicly flogged by the Australian military administration, a clear breach of the rules of war. The incident does not appear to have been mentioned in *A Nilai Ra Dovot*, although everybody in the town must have been aware of it and at least one photograph was taken of the flogging (Rowley, 1958). Instead, in the next edition, Cox contented himself with telling his readers that German rule in the colony had ceased.

People were urged to respect the new government and obey all its laws as before, to remain peaceful and go on with their own work as before. If they behaved themselves and obeyed the government, it in turn would take care of them (Threlfall MSb, n.d.). The local people were faced with a far more serious problem than a change in European administration. No rain had fallen on the Gazelle for six months. Creeks ran dry, food gardens failed and many people died of hunger. It seems likely that this was of greater concern than the war. The only advice Cox could give was that the war was continuing with great loss of life and that the people should wait and obey the administration. The paper did not appear again until April 1915 and in the meantime the mission press was devoted to more prosaic duties such as producing vernacular booklets and teachers' regulations (Threlfall, MSb, n.d.). In 1917 *A Nilai Ra Dovot* was joined by New Britain's second newspaper, *The Rabaul Record* and *The Namanula Times*, garrison news sheets which also contained overseas news drawn from the Rabaul radio station (Rowley, 1959).

The end of the German administration effectively marked the end of the first period of modern New Guinea history. Thereafter conditions were very different under the Australian administration and the place of the indigenous people not always as certain. What then can we learn about indigenous perceptions of the world through *A Nilai Ra Dovot*?

I would suggest that the picture of the outside world was presented largely in terms that would have been comprehensible and which would have made the Europeans more easily understood. They had Big Men, they died, they fought

wars. There was obviously a great concern on the part of the Methodists to ensure that the transition from German to Australian rule was smooth, particularly since indigenous troops had fought alongside the Germans against the Australians. I would suggest that the existence of the paper and the Methodist schools empowered the Tolai and helped them to deal with the Europeans. Indigenous were trained to run the mission printing press, a practice followed by other missions and by the German government.

More importantly, the preservation of Kuanua meant that the Tolais were able to preserve their cultural identity and not regard themselves entirely as a subject people.

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