

TOWARDS A “NATIONAL REGISTER OF THE ARCHIVAL SOURCES ON PAPUA NEW GUINEA”

by Kevin Green

Introduction

Since I left Papua New Guinea, I have been consulted on numerous occasions for advice as to the record sources that might be available for the study of various aspects of Papua New Guinea in numerous disciplines. I quite enjoy the status of honorary adviser on Papua New Guinea’s historical sources (a status, I might add, which I share with many others). I am, however, very conscious of my lack of knowledge in this area, which is due to the two facts that so much of the documentary sources have been lost, and that there has been no attempt to develop a detailed and total “Guide to the records of Papua New Guinea”.¹ This is much the same situation which I faced when I became Chief Archivist of Papua New Guinea in regard to the holdings of the National Archives of Papua New Guinea,² so in this article I wish to describe the system developed in the National Archives, which provided record control and to a certain extent an information retrieval system. I believe that some aspects of this system should be adapted to create a “National Register of Archival Sources on Papua New Guinea”.

The system that was developed is based largely on the principles which I suggested might be possible if the “series” is used as the basic unit for archival description and control rather than the “Record Group”.³ I believe that the system has been successful; and those aspects of the system relevant to researchers making use of the Archives now form part of the *National Archives Handbook*.⁴ The degree of flexibility that is possible by being able to group series much more in accordance with a researcher’s interests in addition to the more usual approach to the archival sources through administrative history and arrangement of a fixed “record group” could be usefully applied to other archival repositories (no doubt through more sophisticated systems, as have been developed elsewhere). This flexibility, plus my overall knowledge of the records held in the repository, was particularly valuable in the situation where considerable quantities of records have been lost or destroyed — frequently it was possible to suggest an alternative source where the most obvious source was no longer available. All we were doing was to limit the parameters of any search, but this often suggested other possible sources for the required information.

Historical Development of the System

For some time prior to my appointment as Chief Archivist in 1967 I had been unhappy with the concept of the record group, in particular with its use in the description of business records. The ideas in Peter Scott’s article “The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment”⁵ appeared to provide a satisfactory practical solution to the problem that I had encountered in much the same way as they

had done for the Commonwealth Archives Office. I therefore turned to a consideration of the theoretical basis of the record group; the results of which were published in this journal in November 1967.⁶ The conclusion that I reached was that there was *no* organic link between the record group and the record series. I went on to suggest that if we view the record series as *one* grouping of records (albeit *the* fundamental grouping) “we are then in a position to make other groupings of records to make known the contents of archival institutions”. It also made possible the use of a card sorter system as a practical medium by which a variety of groupings could be made.

In 1967, the National Archives of Papua New Guinea was already using the series as the basic unit of control for its records, but as my knowledge of the records of Papua New Guinea was rather limited, I made use of an excellent (though never published) *List of Series Titles* of records held in the Archives Office of Tasmania (arranged under record groups). Using this list and my own knowledge of the records in Tasmania I devised a rudimentary card sorting system which I applied both to some of the record series of the Archives Office of Tasmania and to some of the series lists of deposits in the Australian National University Archives. These trial runs showed that the system was practical and was likely to provide the sort of control over the records which I desired for the National Archives of Papua New Guinea.

Description of the Card Sorter System

Cards were prepared for each of the approximately 1,000 series and punched according to the following:

Accession (Series) number

Date range (contents): a period classification was devised on part constitutional and part chronological basis as follows:

Papua prior to 1888

Papua 1888-1906

Papua 1906-1942

New Guinea prior to 1914

New Guinea 1915-1941

Papua New Guinea 1942-1945, 1946-1949, 1950-1959,
1960-1969, 1970-

Agency creating: when the series was created by more than one agency it was necessary to make a duplicate card punched for agency and series number only.

Agency controlling: duplicate cards similarly required but duplication more rare.

Size: three categories — (a) standard box size 1
(b) standard box size 2
(c) non standard

Prospect of further parts of series being received: Yes/No

Destruction review: Yes/No

Conservation: Yes/No

Access: three categories

Type of record: on limited basis mainly to allow indexes and registers to be easily located and stored in the “control centre”.

These cards were then used in the manner of a stock control making use of factors that affect orderly storage of records such as size, destruction, possibility of further parts being received, access, etc. The system was put into operation immediately prior to the move from three separate locations around Port Moresby to the newly constructed building at Waigani. Having the necessary information punched on the cards made the task of planning the move a straightforward one. Information was also easily at hand to determine what records needed conservation treatment (fumigation, repair, etc.) and to prepare information for periodic destruction reviews. The information proved also to be particularly helpful in the identification of series when material came into the archives and in determining whether certain records were parts of series already held in the archives since it was possible to obtain quickly a list of all the records created by a particular agency or perhaps those series created within a chronological period. Changes in control of series brought about by administrative re-arrangements merely involved re-punching the series cards to indicate the new controlling agency.

It was perhaps in the realm of research that the system was most used and most helpful. Since additional material was continually being added to the Archives, no attempt was made to publish a complete list of the series titles—instead it was aimed to produce an up-to-date list of series produced according to the particular requirements of the researcher. The initial identification was either by agency or by the period classification (or both) depending on the scope of the research inquiry. Further elimination of unlikely series (or selection of likely series) can then be made.⁷

Consideration was given to two further types of information which could have been coded. One was a subject classification (a difficult area and one which, in the context of a government organisation, it might be easier to approach through the functions of each agency rather than by a subject analysis of the records themselves) and secondly in relation to the record type. In regard to the record type I was not able to get very far due to the lack of precision in the use of terms describing the record type; a problem which I attempted to highlight in an article published in this journal.⁸ It might be useful to comment on what I had hoped to achieve through providing coding for record types. It seems possible that such coding would assist in identifying series by (a) matching separate parts of the one series; and (b) helping to determine the correct record type description by providing a facility to inspect a similar record type which would at least provide a consistent description, even if not accurate! In research activity the grouping of series of common record types could be of advantage — examples might be common records of District Courts, municipalities and businesses.

Considerations for a listing of records relating to Papua New Guinea

In this article I have used the phrase “records relating to Papua New Guinea” rather than “records of Papua New Guinea”. This is because so much of the documentation that ought to be available in Papua New Guinea is not in fact available—and this refers to private as

well as Government documentation. When I was asked to present a paper to be entitled "National and Local Collection of Pacific Manuscripts" for the UNESCO seminar on Source Materials related to Research in the Pacific Area,⁹ I put forward the proposition that attempts should be made to re-create from sources available elsewhere the records which would have been available had it not been for the losses due to war and other causes. Perhaps I overstated the case — but I still hold to the view that such a re-creation is possible and desirable in certain cases. Certainly it is most desirable that much more of the documentation available in Australia and elsewhere should be copied and made available in Papua New Guinea. But first it is necessary to identify the sources of material relating to Papua New Guinea.

The Papua New Guinea Records Project organised by the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (a co-operative venture involving some nineteen libraries in Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and the United States) which operated for two years from May 1973 attempted both to locate records relating to Papua New Guinea and to make them available on microfilm to the sponsoring libraries for research purposes. The Pacific Manuscripts Bureau still continues its interest in records of Papua New Guinea and it can be expected that the Bureau will provide microfilms of Papua New Guinea material to its members. It may also be able to organise another special effort concerning records of Papua New Guinea in the future.

There are many institutions which have records relating to Papua New Guinea amongst their archival collections, and the field for records held by private individuals is still wide open. (I might comment in passing that I have been astonished at the amount of material relating to Papua New Guinea contained in the records of C.S.I.R.O.) The task of providing any listing of the records relating to Papua New Guinea would involve not only those records in the National Archives of Papua New Guinea, the New Guinea Collection in the University of Papua New Guinea and other Papua New Guinea institutions, but a large number of "Overseas" (*i.e.* from the point of view of the new country of Papua New Guinea) institutions. The task would be immense, and probably never-ending. But interest in Papua New Guinea has been increasing rapidly over the past ten years and can be expected to continue in the near future. I would also expect that Papua New Guineans will be increasingly keen to make use of documentary as well as other historical evidence in determining their national interest and identity. Therefore I must reject any idea of a long-term project to produce "A Guide to Sources relating to Papua New Guinea available in Australia (or Germany) etc." and seek instead some method by which the existence of relevant material can be noted in one "master file" as and when it becomes available; and secondly some methods would need to be adopted to provide flexibility in the way the material could be grouped for the use of researchers.

"A National Register of the Archival Sources on Papua New Guinea"

My proposition is that a National Register of Archival Sources on Papua New Guinea should be established. Its aim would be to create

and maintain a "master file" of the basic information concerning series of records wherever held so that this information can be made available to researchers interested in topics on Papua New Guinea. In order for such a register to be successful it is necessary to obtain the co-operation of all institutions. This in turn depends on the type of information sought being a natural process, and not something that has to be specially researched and prepared. For this reason the information required would be:

1. The Institution
2. The series identification provided by that institution
3. The agency, company, individual etc., creating the series
4. The series title
5. The date range.

This information is readily available for most records held in the various archives and manuscript libraries, but in cases where sorting and listing of the material has not been carried out to the series level it would still be possible to create an entry in the "National Register" providing the same information with the exception that some general description ("Papers" or "records") would need to replace the more specific "series title".

The obvious starting point would be to combine the information currently available concerning the records held in the National Archives of Papua New Guinea and the New Guinea Collection. As the "master-file" builds up with entries from other institutions groupings of record series can be obtained from this "master-file".

From the very limited information which it is suggested should be fed into such a "master-file" it would be possible, as has been shown in relation to the records held in the National Archives of Papua New Guinea, to produce a list by provenance or on a chronological basis, or both, of potential source material which would enable any archivist to give real advice to researchers concerning records (and not merely those of his particular institution) that are likely to be of interest for a research topic on some aspect of Papua New Guinea.

REFERENCES

1. I must, however, mention in this connection, the interest in sources relating to Papua New Guinea which Mr H. J. Gibbney has shown and the work he has carried out. That he has not done more is due to the number of other "hats" that he wears and possibly to the realisation that the task is so immense that no one person could ever finish it.
2. The title "National Archives of Papua New Guinea" was adopted in 1972.
3. "The Series—a Specialised 'Record Group'." *A. & M.* 3(5) Nov. 1967, pp. 13-15.
4. *National Archives, Handbook—1974*. Department of Social Development and Home Affairs, Port Moresby.
5. *American Archivist* xxix, October 1966, pp. 493-504.
6. "The Series—A Specialised 'Record Group'," *loc. cit.*
7. As a by-product of this exercise, a part of the bibliography of any thesis or other study is automatically prepared merely by eliminating those series which proved not to be relevant.
8. "Some Comments on 'Record Types'," *A. & M.* 5(5), Nov. 1973, pp. 115-123.
9. *Source Materials Related to Research in the Pacific Area*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra 1973, pp. 33-40.