

International Notes

Edited by Ewan Maidment

National Archives in Vietnam

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Writing and literature appeared very early in Vietnam. At the beginning of the Christian era Chinese characters were used widely in this country. As a consequence of the climate, too much sun and rain, the lives of Vietnamese archival documents have been shortened. The most ancient document which is now kept in National Archives storage is a sheet of a decree, written in Chinese, of the Emperors of the Le Dynasty of the fifteenth century. Most of the older documents held by the National Archives date from the nineteenth century. These historical documents have been preserved in two National Archives Centres: one in Hanoi and the other in Ho Chi Minh city.

The National Archives Centre I, in Hanoi, was founded in 1924. It preserves the documents of many historic periods. The earliest are the documents of the Vietnamese Feudal Dynasty, consisting of 4 845 shelf metres of documents making up forty fonds of which two blocks are especially precious.

The first block is 'Chau ban' of the Nguyen Dynasty which now has approximately seventy tomes. These documents were written in Chinese. Their contents reflect the political, legal, economic, cultural, military and the other activities of the whole country. As these documents were written in old Chinese they have rarely been read and, thus, their publication is still very limited.

Due to high humidity and poor storage conditions a great many of them have been 'bricks of paper' for a long time which prove almost impossible to open. The Vietnamese Government has implemented a preservation program for 'Chau ban' documents. Its aim is to preserve these documents in a safe way and to publish them widely. However, this is difficult work as it takes a long time and is very costly.

The second block is about 10 000 tomes of documents on land registration which were created under the Emperors of the Nguyen Dynasty. Their contents reflect the situation of public and private cultivated land management in the rural areas of Vietnam. Each plot of land is described in terms of its area, borders and level of fertility of the land (classes I, II, III...). Some Vietnamese, Japanese and French historians have been interested in and published a few of these documents.

During the period from the French rule to the August Revolution (1859–1945) Vietnamese archival documents were essentially written in French. This block has about forty-nine fonds some of which are of enormous historical and scientific value, such as the 'Indochinese Full Power' fond and the 'Governor Bac Ky' fond. These fonds have been arranged and appraised, and glued with labels to facilitate readers searching through them. So these fonds in French have been compiled and an archives guide book was published in 1955.

The National Archives Centre I also holds archival documents produced since the formation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, amounting to 166 fonds. Most of these fonds are documents of state organs. Their contents reflect many activities and historic events in the country during war times, economic construction and cultural development.

The National Archives Centre II was established in Ho Chi Minh city in 1976. At present this centre holds thirteen fonds of the French rule period (1861–1954) of which the most important fonds is the 'Nam Ky Governor' fonds (1861–1945). The Centre also holds, at a rough count, about twenty-five fonds of the state management organs of the Republican Government of Vietnam (1954–1975).

The important fonds of this period include the fonds of the Presidential Palace of the First Republican period; fonds of the Revolutionary Council (1963–1965); fonds of the State Management Committee (1963–1965); fonds of the President of the Second Republic; and the fonds of the American Economic Assistance Organ. This Centre also preserves documents from 1975 till the present. It has some fonds of the South Liberation Front Line of Vietnam and some documents of the South Provisional Revolutionary Government of Vietnam.

Both centres have also preserved documents, films, photographs, magnetic tapes, maps and many literary and art works of a great number of writers, poets, photographers and painters.

In June 1995 the State Archives Department of Vietnam established the National Archives Centre III in Hanoi. According to the assignment of duties this Centre is to keep documents from the August Revolution (1945) till now. At present the Centre has just come into operation.

Pacific Collection, University of the South Pacific Library, Fiji

Correspondent: Elizabeth Reade Fong

Library Staff—training

Earlier this year, from 10–19 March, Elizabeth C. Reade Fong, Librarian responsible for the Pacific Collection of the Library of the University of the South Pacific (USP), attended the Summer Institute in the Preservation of Library Materials for preservation and conservation managers from the Asia-Pacific Region conducted by staff of the State Library of New South Wales.

Attendance at this Institute has raised considerable awareness in the library of the treatment and handling of the various formats of materials in the collection. As a result work is being conducted in three areas at present:

- maintenance of controlled environment for Pacific materials;
- creating an awareness amongst library staff of the normal treatment of library items given their material composition; and
- a draft preservation policy for the USP Library.

Membership of PMB

The library of the University of the South Pacific will become a member of the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau for the first time in 1996 after seeking funding over a number of years. Funds have been made available through the Planning Office of the University to meet the membership fees of PMB. It has also been agreed that funds for a further two years following 1996 will be made available. Membership in the years following 1996 will be dependent on the work program of the Bureau remaining in line with the collection development program of the Pacific Collection of the University of the South Pacific.

Archives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Papeete, Tahiti

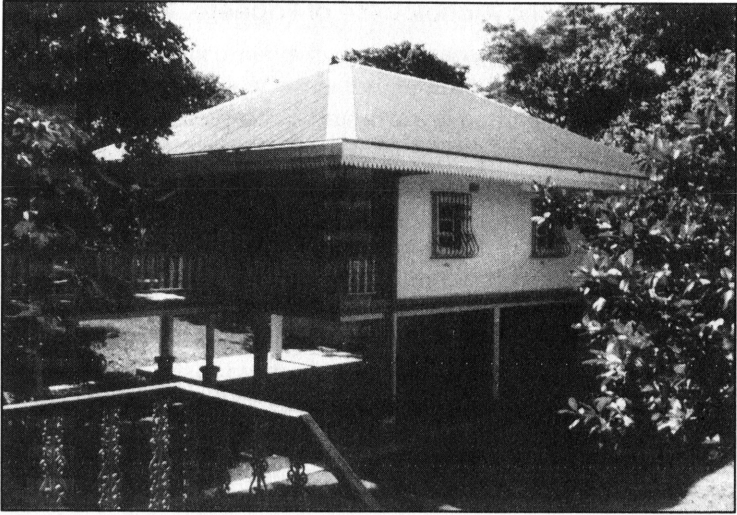
Correspondent: Ewan Maidment

In June/July this year Barry Howarth and I completed the first stage of a Pacific Manuscripts Bureau project aimed at making preservation microfilm copies of the archives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Papeete. The Archbishop of Papeete, Monseigneur Coppénrath, has a serious concern for the preservation and security of the archives of the archdiocese. He took a personal interest in the shape and progress of the microfilming project and gave it what time he had available freely. His staff, especially Mlle Marcelline Heitaa who is in charge of the archives, did everything possible to facilitate the success of the project. Monseigneur Le Cleac'h, the retired Bishop of the Marquesas Islands, who is a resident of the *évêché* also took a strong interest and gave us kindly encouragement.

The archives and manuscripts are housed in a purpose built repository which was constructed in the early 1990s in the same style as the *évêché* to which it is annexed. The repository is a light, airy, pagoda shaped building consisting of one large room (about 12 x 10 metres), constructed level with the first floor of the *évêché* and separately from it. It has securely barred windows and a heavy door. Although the repository is not air-conditioned, it does protect the archives from flood, fire and the attacks of termites.

The administrative archives are held in a bank of twelve 4-draw filing cabinets which also hold semicurrent records of the archdiocese. The manuscripts are stacked on open shelves. The condition of the records is generally sound and stable. There is little active mould or evidence of currently active termites. Some older documents are very brittle and deteriorate with handling particularly where the acidic ink which was made in French Polynesia during the nineteenth century is eating into and fragmenting the paper. A good bound set of *Le Messager de Tahiti* is held in the repository, but large parts of it are very brittle and deteriorate with handling. The repository also holds some uncatalogued manuscripts.

The archives and manuscripts were arranged and described by Fr Amerigo Cools, a Picpus archivist, who also arranged and described the Rarotongan and Marquesan Diocesan archives. The arrangement, which imposes the same universal classification system on the archives of all three dioceses, is exhaustive and meticulous. (An apparently similar system has been used to arrange the archives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Suva.) All items are listed and almost every page of each document folioed. Fr Cool's *Répertoire des*



The Archives repository at the *évêché*
Catholic Archdiocese of Papeete, Papeete.

archives de l'archidiocèse de Papeete is rich with administrative and biographical notes, is well illustrated and thoroughly indexed. Unfortunately, however, the *Répertoire* is not published.

The general categories of the archival arrangement are as follows:

A	Autorités supérieures
B	Archidiocèse de Papeete
C/D	Personnel missionnaires
E	Enseignement
H/K	Rapports
L	Administration temporel
MS	Manuscrits
N	Aide
P	Géographie, histoire, &c
Z	Histoire de la Mission.

Selected archives of the Archdiocese of Papeete had been transferred to the archives of the Generalate Archives of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in Rome, particularly very early material. The remaining records were arranged by Fr Cools into three early groups, always following the same classification system. The first group covers the period from 1833 to

1970, at which date the arrangement and listing were completed; the other two groups, which were listed in 1977 and 1981 respectively, mainly cover the period since 1970, but there are a number of earlier documents included.

The documents are held in files which remain in the order in which Fr Cools listed them. However, some files of documents listed by Fr Cools are missing, probably having been subsequently transferred to Rome, notably the correspondence of Fr Laval, a famous missionary and scholar.

The archives give meticulous documentation of the Catholic Church policy in French Polynesia, the Church's parish and educational activities and its interactions with civil authorities, especially from the late nineteenth century to the present. The manuscripts include accounts of missionary activities in Tahiti, the Tuamotus and Easter Island. There are also manuscript accounts of the pre-Christian times in the Tuamotu and Mangarevian languages, together with dictionaries, vocabularies and grammars of several Maohi languages. The *évêché* also has a wonderful library, though its contents are more vulnerable to attacks by termites. Together they constitute a major resource for Pacific scholarship.

Records of the Lands and Titles Court, Western Samoa

Correspondent: Nancy Lutton

Late in 1994, I was approached by the Australian Executive Service Overseas Program (AESOP) to carry out a project in Western Samoa. AESOP, in its own words 'is a non-profit organisation providing assistance to the management of business, organisations and institutions in developing countries. AESOP arranges voluntary assignments through which Australians assist with the development of skills and expertise. AESOP receives financial support from the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB) and Australian Business'.

The project was to assist the Lands and Titles Court of Western Samoa, with repair, filing, data protection and a disaster plan for their archives and it was to last eight weeks. The time agreed upon was mid May to mid July 1995.

I was aware, through my involvement with PARBICA, that Western Samoa is one of the very few independent countries in the Pacific which has no national archives, so as preparation for the project I read several reports written in previous years following surveys. These were Glenda Acland's 1978 report, one by D. L. Thomas, *Establishment of a National Archive*, published by

UNESCO in 1986, and the part relating to the Lands and Titles Court of the 'Report on the survey of the National Archives of Western Samoa' by Peter Orlovich and Karin Brennan, written for PARBICA in January 1991. There are other reports as well. All repeat the same message, that the establishment of a national archives is of utmost importance to the survival and organisation of Western Samoan records. With this I would heartily agree.

The office of the Lands and Titles Court is a very old wooden colonial building on the Mulinuu Peninsula which juts out from Apia. It is immediately opposite the Fono, or Parliament of Western Samoa. Next door is a *fale* type building, that is open sides, which is the Court itself. Here disputes over land or *matai* titles are heard. There are no lawyers and the President acts as an arbitrator rather than a judge. The disputes and the case records are referred to and documented in detail, and it is these documents which are at risk. The court was originally established during the time of the German Government in 1903, and whenever a new dispute arises, any old records dealing with the same piece of land or the same title are accessed, and the new case just added to it. This means that this series of records has never become non current, or treated as archives though some are very fragile and are in the old German language handwritten script. It also means that files are frequently 20cm or more thick! Because of this, archive boxes are not used, instead pigeonhole shelving is relied upon with all the attendant hazards of rough handling and exposed files.

A strongroom, made of concrete, has been built on to the old wooden building, and apparently this stood up to the last cyclone, the records in it remaining safe while the roof was lifted off parts of the rest of the building. The building is situated about ten metres from the sea, delightful in sunny breezy weather, but also enhancing the humid atmosphere. Several rooms in the building are air-conditioned, including the strongroom. However, in the latter case, there is only one air-conditioner for a space of approximately 10 x 8 metres and once the door was opened in the morning, it was left that way all day while the staff attended to and fetched files for a continual stream of clients.

Records handling left a great deal to be desired and three talks were given on this subject to groups of staff. There was nowhere for staff to have lunch, and no shops nearby, so they tended to buy takeaway pies which itinerant salesmen brought around each day and to eat them at their desks. While agreeing with everything I said about gentle handling, keeping away from food, washing hands etc. nobody with authority seemed to have the energy

to enforce any changes, and indeed, these would require structural changes both to the building and to attitudes.

The records system worked quite well except that the index was on foolscap size bulky cards, which kept getting misplaced and themselves became fragile and almost unreadable through constant handling. The answer to the index problem was obvious—put it on computer, and in fact someone had thought of that before and typed it onto a *Rapidfile* database. However, they had never printed this out and by the time I arrived, the hard disk on this computer was defunct. There was a copy on floppies but not of the software, so I arranged for a computer firm to retrieve the data using dBase and we at least had a printed index, though it still needed checking, proofreading, bringing up-to-date, and eventually a computer with a larger memory to operate it. Instructions on what was to be done were left.

Some years previously someone had attempted to completely revise the records system and carried out the changes on about one third of the files. However, the staff did not like the new system so they carried on with the old, simply using the new filing number alongside the old for those files so changed. I also could not see any advantage in the new system and since my time was limited I could see no point in spending most of it revising a system which would likely simply create yet another order which would become a nuisance when I was not there to oversee it.

What I could do was to smarten up the records control system and to do this I called a meeting of those most senior in the section concerned and between us we worked out one. I understand from a correspondent that this is now working quite well. Formerly, records staff would spend hours wandering around the offices searching for files. Nevertheless, files do go missing permanently, and there is a need for greater security. In a society, where the ownership of land, or the possession of a title is so important for one's status in it, it must be very tempting to have files which do not support your case disappear. It seems that a number of employees have had their services terminated when found to be aiding such activities in the past.

The Orlovich/Brennan report had identified eighty-eight series at the Lands and Titles Court. Of these, I found that eighty-four series could be considered archives while the other four, including the case files mentioned above, were current records. The problem is that the eighty-four series occupy about twenty-five metres of shelving while the four series occupy about 220 metres. The Court had grandly appointed an 'Archives Supervisor' but she was given nothing to do except to supervise two repair workers and presumably, the

twenty-five metres of archives which were packed in boxes on top of shelves and never accessed, though the latter was not mentioned in her duty statement. The Records Supervisor and three assistants were the key staff as far as I was concerned. A conservation officer from Wellington, New Zealand had spent two weeks there in 1991 teaching how to repair documents and leaving them with supplies of methyl cellulose, lens tissue, tacking irons, blotting paper etc. As most of the supplies had long since been used, I found them pasting old one-sided documents with local paste onto ordinary paper, or double-sided documents onto lens tissue, of which there were still supplies. When dried, a long business as there was no blotting paper, they were simply pinned back into the file. Usually, a whole file was done at once. The first few days, therefore, were spent identifying conservation materials for urgent supply, and the Registrar approved the order. I fully expected the order to arrive before I left and was frequently asked about it and when I did leave, I suggested that it be followed up through the bureaucracy. It was found still sitting on the accountant's desk!

The case files have all been microfilmed onto 35mm film between 1977 and 1980, but the microfilms had never been checked because there was no microfilm reader let alone a reader printer. It seems also that the films were not stored in air-conditioning until about 1989. I had intended to try find a donor organisation for a reader printer but gave priority to checking the films first. The Public Library had one so the films were checked and found to be almost unreadable. Between 1989 and 1992, another microfilm project was carried out, this time on microfiche, when about half of the above were done before the project ran out of money. These seem to be readable, but consist of only about one third of the series. Meanwhile, the Court was expecting a team of experts from the New Zealand Overseas Development Assistance Agency to carry out a feasibility study on document imaging processing. They were supposed to come while I was there so we could work together, but they never arrived. Until a final decision is made on which way to go with document imaging, there is no point in making recommendations about equipment.

The care and maintenance of equipment in any developing country always leaves a lot to be desired. Apart from the generally humid climate, the owners are careless about daily maintenance, seem not to have enough funds for repairs, and firms that should carry out the repairs or maintenance take ages to attend. Then if it is too difficult, of course they will always prefer to sell you a new one, which a developing country government department simply cannot afford. The computer mentioned above is a good example. It was well

out-of-date and neglected, and if an index system was to be installed, a much up-graded computer was needed.

To endeavour to write a submission for Australian aid to up-grade the storage of the records, meaning standard recommended archive files, archive boxes and shelving, was another thought. However, I was not in a position to find out whether the concrete strongroom had adequate floor loadings, besides which it had so many jutting pillars, standard shelving would not fit easily. There was talk, besides, that a new building is planned, but nobody could say for sure. So this had to be left, and very strong recommendations were made in the final report that expert advice must be sought when planning the strongroom area of the new building.

Disaster planning created some interest, possibly because it was necessary to involve the more senior and better educated staff. These were formed into a committee and I started off with a single page summary of what needs to be done to draw up a plan. Out of that meeting the summary was greatly enlarged by their suggestions. At the second meeting, this was further enlarged and various members had taken up various aspects to follow through. There was great enthusiasm for drawing up a plan of the building, for instance, so that it could be marked with exits, and for having a practice fire drill, and deciding what could be used for a siren—a bell or a drum. I hope that this enthusiasm will continue until a viable plan exists. Unfortunately, the availability of other bodies able to help in an emergency is almost non-existent, for example drying of documents. A fire service is available, but the building is of wood and situated out on a peninsula so one doubts that they would get there on time.

I wrote for the Registrar, the most senior officer in the Court, a thirty page report, in the form of a handbook. This included thirty-eight recommendations which I hope will be adopted by the Court.