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The Ongoing Need for the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau

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Abstract

The recent civil unrest in the French external territory of New Caledonia is the latest reminder that documentary heritage in the Pacific is continuously at risk of damage or destruction from both environmental and human threats. Humidity, cyclones and rising sea levels are all very real threats to archival collections in the Pacific, as are human factors such as civil unrest, lack of relevant training and short-term development projects. In a region shaped so quickly and drastically by colonisation, missionisation and globalisation, documentary heritage can provide important throughlines to lost land, languages and cultural practices; to challenge imposed narratives and build new, overlooked and empowering narratives.

Since its establishment at the Australian National University (ANU) in 1968, the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (also PMB, Pambu or the Bureau) has developed a practical understanding of this spectrum of threats to Pacific archives. This has developed over decades of regular and documented field trips with portable reformatting equipment to copy at-risk collections across Oceania. The Bureau has copied private collections whose originals can no longer be located; records that have since been destroyed by fire due to civil unrest or faulty electrics, and most recently in the aftermath of a submarine volcanic eruption. Yet, in 2024, there is still no dedicated archives qualification on offer at tertiary level in the Pacific Islands. Archival institutions remain widely under-resourced and the digital turn presents new challenges such as access to equipment repairs and reliance on unstable carriers for digital storage. The ongoing existence of these challenges means there remains a high demand for Pacific Manuscripts Bureau services. Until there is sustained investment in the infrastructure and resources needed to support archives in the Pacific, the Bureau, with its small team of approximately 1.5 full-time equivalent staff, will continue to have a role in preserving Pacific documentary heritage.

Keywords

Documentary Heritage, Pacific Islands, Preservation, Digitisation, Climate Change

Introduction

It has been almost thirty years since an extensive piece was written by and about the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (Cunningham & Maidment, 1996). The authors of that piece, Adrian Cunningham and Ewan Maidment, were emerging from a period of transition from Adrian's secondment to the Bureau from the National Library of Australia, to Ewan's ongoing appointment at the Bureau's helm; a position he went on to hold until 2011. Detailing the Bureau's transition from an Australian National University (ANU)-funded organisation with international partners, to an international consortium with vital, but in-kind-only support from the ANU, they characterised the Bureau as a "barefoot doctor" (p.450). Minimalist, but skilled and willing to help.

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In the intervening years, there have been two further Executive Officers (Kylie Moloney and myself), a change from microfilm to digital, an expanded range of membership options, a global pandemic and growing awareness in the academy, and the GLAMR (galleries, libraries, archives, museums and records) sector of the need to decolonise our practice. This paper will give an overview of the Bureau's origins and purpose, its recent changes, current work, longitudinal observations and its future sustainability. This paper will consider the current threats to archives in the region, including the environmental and human drivers that keep the Bureau busy at work.

Method

This paper is an autoethnographic piece which draws on my experience as Executive Officer of the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau for the past seven years, my previous experience with Pacific archives, along with the Bureau's institutional knowledge which has been documented in trip reports and the *Pambu* newsletter. I am not drawing on any formal data collection, but conversations and observations from my fieldwork in different islands in Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. This paper sets out to encourage greater investment in archives in the Pacific and it will use the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau as a case study to highlight needs across the region.

The work I do, and the opinions expressed in this paper are entirely my own and they are shaped by my experiences. I am a fourth generation settler colonial Australian with English and Scottish heritage. I have tertiary qualifications in media, librarianship, archives and records management. I have worked in fields as diverse as television and Native Title but have spent most of the last decade working with archival collections held in, or about, the Pacific Islands. This started with eighteen months on the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) skilled volunteer program in Solomon Islands, where I quickly learned that my colleagues were working without a lot of the resources we take for granted in Australia, from networked computers to archive boxes. This is also, to my shame, where I first learned about blackbirding – the trade in indentured labourers from the Pacific Islands to work on Australian farms – and subsequently I became interested to learn about Australia's many shared histories with the Pacific Islands. The views expressed and any errors in this paper are mine alone and are based on my observations, many conversations, trips to the Pacific, and reflections in my role as the Executive Officer of PMB.

Origins of the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau

The Bureau had its antecedents. In the aftermath of the Second World War, there was growing realisation of the importance of records about the Pacific region, the need for their proper care and management, and the difficulties of accessing them. In 1948, the Australian Joint Copying Project (AJCP) was established by the National Library of Australia and the State Library of New South Wales to microfilm records about Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands that were

held in the United Kingdom. In 1950, the Department of Pacific History was established at the ANU. Its founding department head was Professor Jim Davidson, and Dorothy Crozier worked in the new department as a Research Assistant. In 1952, Davidson sent Crozier to Fiji to survey and list the records of the Western Pacific High Commission (WPHC) that had been left behind in Suva when the WPHC moved to Honiara. In 1954, Crozier was appointed to the role of Archivist for the newly established Central Archives, which encompassed the government of Fiji and WPHC archives (Diamond, 1965; Diamond, 1966).

During the 1960s, Pacific historians and librarians in Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii were discussing the difficulties of locating and accessing primary documentation about the Pacific Islands, and how this would limit the “advancement of knowledge” (Maude, 1967, p.8) about the region. This was a long time before the internet and email, listservs and social media. The Pacific Islands, and information about them, was more difficult and much slower to access. It was a time when most Pacific Islands were still under colonial rule; Christian churches of various denominations had become well-entrenched in society and foreign-owned businesses from plantations to phosphate mines were operating - and all were actively generating paper records. This mass of paper documentation was being generated in, and about, islands whose Indigenous people had previously recorded and shared knowledge through oral and other traditions. Scholars wanted access to all this new written information about the region, but it was difficult to know exactly what records had been created and where they were held, especially as many records were also held abroad in church and business headquarters and in colonial metropolises.

Henry Evans “Harry” Maude was a senior Research Fellow with the Department of Pacific History at the ANU and a central figure in the discussions about the challenges of accessing primary documentation. Maude had previously served as a colonial administrator in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, had played a role in the establishment of the Central Archives in Suva (Diamond, 1966) and with Davidson, was the founding editor of the newly established *The Journal of Pacific History* (Munro and Gray, 2013). In 1967, Maude wrote a lengthy paper outlining these problems facing scholars and proposing a solution in the form of a Pacific Islands Clearing Centre (Maude, 1967). Maude’s paper was well-received and the ANU agreed to establish this clearing centre, with financial contributions also coming from the National Library of Australia, the Mitchell Library in Sydney, the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington and the University of Hawaii at Manoa Library in Honolulu. Robert Langdon, assistant editor with the *Pacific Islands Monthly* magazine, was appointed as the first Executive Officer and tasked with the establishment of this clearing centre.

Unsure where to begin, Maude advised Langdon to seek guidance from the then Mitchell Librarian, Gordon Richardson (Langdon, 1993). The advice from Richardson shaped the Bureau into what it is today: a mobile preservation reformatting archive. Richardson advised Langdon that because of:

“the ravages of silverfish, white ants, mildew, floods, hurricanes and other paper-destroying agents in the tropics...the first priority should be to locate and obtain copies of documents of value in the Pacific Islands. Of almost equal urgency was the location and copying of documents in private hands outside the Islands”. He also advised that *“far more material would be found on the spot than by sitting in Canberra writing letters* (Langdon, 1993 p.58).”

Langdon took Richardson’s advice and bought a microfilm camera. Over the eighteen years at the helm of the Bureau, he made nine fieldtrips to various Pacific Islands with the camera, creating preservation copies of records by missionaries, plantation owners and more (Maidment, 2009). Langdon also wrote many letters to archives and museums in Europe and North America to commission copies of materials held in their collections that were inaccessible to researchers at the Bureau’s funding institutions. He also sought out materials held by individuals around the world, and particularly here in Australia, where their personal accounts of time spent in the Pacific could be microfilmed and shared with the sponsoring libraries (see PMB MS 1000).

When Langdon retired in 1986, the ANU decided to stop funding the Bureau, but agreed to continue as host, providing vital in-kind infrastructure, without which the Bureau could not have continued. This change meant going forward with total reliance on contributions from the supporting libraries to cover fieldwork costs, the duplication and distribution of microfilms, the Executive Officer’s salary, and any support staff (if the budget allowed it). This meant increasing the financial contributions from the supporting or ‘member’ libraries and introducing a Management Committee with representatives from each of these member libraries serving on the committee to oversee the finances, operations and direction of the Bureau.

For almost three more decades, the Bureau continued to operate as Langdon had for the first 18 years; with the Executive Officer taking regular field trips to different Pacific Islands to make microfilm copies of archival materials, then distributing copies of the microfilms to the sponsoring libraries and an institution in the source country. Over time, more libraries joined the consortium: the State Library of Victoria (for a period), the University of California San Diego, the University of Auckland, Yale and Macmillan Brown library (both for a period), the University of Otago and the University of Michigan.

The transition to digital

In 2013, under the leadership of Kylie Moloney, the decision was made to retire the microfilm camera and transition the Bureau’s future copying projects to digital capture and delivery. A year was spent dedicated to researching new portable image capture equipment, creating workflows, researching technical and metadata standards, and adapting a new archives management system to suit our membership model. The Bureau’s new catalogue is available and searchable online, but access to full-size images, or full-text documents, is only available by internet protocol (IP) authentication to users of our member libraries. Those researchers who are unable to access a member library can contact the Bureau directly for access, though cost-recovery fees

may apply, as is common practice for document delivery services to people unable to visit an archive or library in person.

In the microfilm era, the cost of duplicating and shipping microfilms to member libraries made the cost of membership prohibitively high to most institutions in the Pacific. The transition to digital, however, enabled the Bureau to provide access to libraries in the Pacific at a much lower cost. A new category of membership was introduced for institutions in low-income Pacific Island states for just 5% of the full membership fee. This led to the libraries of the National University of Samoa (NUS), the University of the South Pacific (USP) and the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) joining the consortium. The University of Bergen Library also joined at this time, on the encouragement of Professor Edvard Hviding, the Director of the Bergen Pacific Studies Research Group.

The impact of the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau

Since 1968, the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau has reformatted archival materials about the Pacific totaling 4,000 reels of microfilm and around 200,000 pages of newly digitised documents and photographs. Most of the original materials are held in organisations in the Pacific, or in private homes beyond the region, particularly Australia. These materials might not otherwise have been discoverable or accessible. While most collections are identified for copying through outreach, networking and on request, a number of collections have been copied in response to disasters or threatening activities.

In 1996, the archives of the Fiji Trades Union Congress (PMB MS 1085 and PMB DOC 433) were copied out of concern for their safety after an earlier firebomb attack on the building during the 1987 coup. In 2004, Cyclone Heta caused considerable damage to the offices of the Niue Department of Justice, Lands and Survey, and many records were destroyed. The Bureau was invited to travel to Niue to microfilm the surviving land records (PMB MS 1239-1242, PMB MS 1259). The copying was done in a shipping container alongside waterlogged records in extreme heat and with the shipping container door propped open to counter the strong odour of mould. In April 2024, as current PMB Executive Officer, I travelled to Tonga to digitise unique student theses held at the Sia'atoutai Theological College (PMB MS 1450). These student works are important documents about Tongan history and culture, written by Tongan students and often in Tongan language. This request was made to the Bureau in response to the 2022 eruption of the Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha'apai submarine volcano which showered the island of Tongatapu in ash.

In some cases, the microfilm copies made by the Bureau are now the only extant copies. In 2006, the company archive of Levers Solomons in Yandina was destroyed by fire during civil conflict. The ten reels of microfilm previously made by the Bureau (PMB MS 1121) are now the only known extant copies. Also in 2006, there was an arson attack on the Vanuatu Supreme Court which destroyed many court records and the court's library (Radio New Zealand, 2008).

PMB had previously microfilmed some of the archive held at the courthouse (PMB MS 1145, PMB MS 1254 and PMB MS 1262). Anecdotally, it is believed that some records survived the fire, but those microfilmed by the Bureau should at least fill some gaps in the court's records. In 2010, the library of the Papua New Guinea National Fisheries Authority's (NFA's) National Fisheries College (NFC) burned down - allegedly due to a fault in a drink vending machine - destroying all of the library's collection. As part of this library content was the 'P' series - a set of hard copy reports, research findings and conference papers. Some of the earlier P files had been microfilmed by PMB in the 1990s (PMB MS 1116) when the library was housed at the then Department of Fisheries and Marine Resources' Kanudi Research Station. The rest of the P series was digitised under the Asian Development Bank's Coastal Fisheries Management and Development program in the early 2000s. During 2021, I worked with the then Principal of NFC, Dr Jeff Kinch, to supply digitised copies from the PMB master microfilms, to assist the NFA to rebuild its important P series.

The Bureau is uniquely able to assist in these types of situations. It has always been a small, agile unit, with portable equipment and extensive experience in field digitisation in remote locations. PMB's regular presence throughout the Pacific region, and the documentation of these trips, gives unique and longitudinal insights into organisations across the Pacific that care for documentary heritage. PMB has developed an understanding of some of the everyday barriers to building strong archives. There are practical challenges such as power outages; lack of physical and digital storage; difficulty in accessing training opportunities; limited IT support; high costs associated with importing basic archival supplies such as boxes and heavily bureaucratic procurement systems. On fieldwork, my predecessors and I also see the impacts of poverty in places and the lingering effects of colonialism. Archival structures are themselves a colonial inheritance grafted onto contemporary Pacific life (Cunningham and Ware, 2011). The languages and the processes of recordkeeping and archives are all legacies of colonial bureaucracy that were too often inherited without the ongoing supports needed to maintain them. The Bureau works with an awareness of these issues and walks a fine line in trying to provide support while avoiding reinforcing colonial power structures and neocolonialism.

The Bureau also works with materials held in private homes. In Australia, where the Bureau is based, there are many people who have lived and worked in the Pacific region, having served in the military, colonial administrations, religious missions, aid programs, scholarly research and in business. During their time in the region, they may have taken photographs, collected community newsletters, written letters home or collected research data. These records often have high research value, whether for scholarly, community or family research. These records can often be throughlines for land, languages or cultural practices in decline since the disruptions of missionisation, colonisation and globalisation. These records can also be considered at risk of damage due to extreme weather events, imperfect storage conditions in garages, and are at high risk of loss when the original collectors die and their families throw

these resources away without recognising the value of the archives. Private collections also become very difficult to trace over time. The custodians may have changed their name or address, or died, and locating next of kin is often beyond our resources. The original versions of many private collections copied by the Bureau may or may not exist anymore, but for the sake of researchers, the PMB microfilms are often the only discoverable copies.

The archival content copied and made accessible by PMB can also have a significant impact on Pacific Island communities. Recently, I took a Papua New Guinean colleague, Deveni Temu, to assist in assessing the papers of the late Robert Pulsford that were in the custody of his son. Pulsford had served as an agricultural officer and educator in what is now Papua New Guinea in the 1950s-1970s. Amongst the Pulsford family photos, Deveni found photos of his own family in their village, prior to independence. These photos have now been digitised and will be online in early 2025. He has taken copies of these photos home to his village, which has brought much joy to his family and sparked discussion about reviving lost traditions as captured in these photos. Of his work with PMB collections, Deveni says:

“Whether it is photographs taken in the colonial days, government records produced during the colonial rule or reminiscences of officials or ordinary villagers, these resources help me know myself and the world I came from, remembering my forebears with humility, integrity and dignity.” (Temu, 2023. Cited with permission.)

Some ANU scholars will take photos and documents from our collection back to their source villages during fieldwork. The responses from the communities are always emotional but grateful to have had the opportunity to see images of their families and forebears. Many have never seen photos of their ancestors and accessing archives online is not always an option. Internet coverage is by no means universal and data can be very expensive in many parts of the region. The PMB archives are also used as a teaching resource in the Pacific and in former colonial metropolises. I am often asked to speak to classes about primary documents from our collection on subjects such as the Second World War in the Pacific and I know of photos from our collection being used to teach German students about the colonial history of Papua New Guinea.

In addition to preservation copying, PMB also offers hands-on digitisation and archival processing training to host institutions during fieldwork and provides advice on strengthening individual archives and libraries in the Pacific. The Bureau plays a role in advocating for archives in the Pacific through guest lectures; assistance with grant applications; sharing stories of Pacific archives in the *Pambu* newsletter and on social media; writing submissions to government inquiries; sponsoring conferences and involvement with relevant boards and committees. PMB offers employment opportunities to ANU students from the Pacific, who share their cultural expertise with the Bureau while also learning hands on skills in archival processing. We also hope this exposure to the archive goes some way to demystify colonial institutions such as archives and museums for these students and helps to break down barriers between institutions

and communities. We have recently had approval for a series of short, paid internships for Pasifika students at the ANU. We also respond to dozens of reference enquiries each year from people in the Pacific Islands.

Risks to Pacific archives (active)

Since its inception, the Bureau has focused on the risk to records caused by environmental conditions, from the everyday threats caused by high heat and humidity, to extreme weather events such as cyclones and floods, and other naturally destructive forces such as pests, earthquakes and volcanoes. These are very real risks and our concerns are justified. With the effects of climate change already observable in the region, these concerns are growing more urgent. The Bureau has already worked with a number of collections damaged by water and mould and copied materials at high-risk sites such as the Tuvalu National Library and Archives, which sits across the road from the ocean on a low-lying atoll (see Endangered Archives Programme EAP005 and EAP110) - but there is still more work to do. What is discussed less is the human risks to archives. People's actions and decisions bear responsibility for complex and extreme acts such as arson, civil unrest and environmental damage, through to the more mundane but systemically and cumulatively serious risks caused by perpetual underinvestment in the archives sector.

Let us look first at the complex and extreme. The recent civil unrest in the French external territory of New Caledonia is an example of the risk of conflict to heritage materials. The Bureau was scheduled to return to Noumea in August to continue the digitisation of what is possibly the most extensive photo collection of life in the Pacific region since the Second World War. This collection had previously been considered at-risk due to a lack of institutional resources for digitisation and its proximity to an eroding seawall. The recent violence has put this collection at greater risk but also made it impossible for us to travel to Noumea to continue this work. During this recent outbreak of violence, heritage sites have been targeted, including arson attacks on two Catholic churches (CathNews, 2024) and the desecration of the monument to Chief Atai (Fillet, 2024). This is a more complex conflict than Kanak versus France, and it is difficult to see any cultural heritage site as free from risk. Even if not targeted, risk of accidental damage from burning cars and buildings is significant in itself.

This situation is not unique in the region. During the era known as 'the tensions', Honiara was a city in conflict between 1998-2003. During my time working in Solomon Islands, I heard anecdotal accounts that the National Archives of Solomon Islands was used as a militia base for a time, and that militia members from both sides often wandered the grounds with weapons. To think this institution and its extensive collection could have come to harm is not a huge leap. In the years since those ethnic tensions, Honiara has seen riots, including arson attacks on businesses in 2006, 2019 and 2021. In 2006, pro-democracy riots in Tonga saw buildings destroyed by fire. In 2016, the Book Nook at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) was

burned down in anti-government unrest, destroying the repository for many rare and locally-published books (Bablis, 2016). That same year, academic buildings were burned down amidst unrest at the PNG University of Technology in Lae (Kisselpar, 2016). In early 2024, there were more riots in Port Moresby and Lae. In my capacity as Executive Officer, I am now actively trying to get projects off the ground to digitise collections of national significance held in both Port Moresby and Lae.

Fire has demonstrably been a problem for heritage collections in the Pacific, whether from faulty electrics, arson or civil unrest. In 2023, wildfires on the Hawaiian island of Maui, which destroyed much of the historic town of Lahaina, claiming 102 lives and the town's library, demonstrated another way that fire has become a risk in the contemporary Pacific. The Lahaina fire is believed to have been sparked when strong winds from Hurricane Dora felled power lines that sparked dry, drought-stricken grasses (McDermott, Condon and Biesecker, 2023). This is a scenario we know all too well in Australia, but this is a new phenomenon in the Hawaiian Islands. In Australia, where Indigenous land management practices have been largely replaced by agriculture and urbanisation, bushfires are not uncommon. As we begin to see the impact of climate change, we also see bushfires so intense they become firestorms.

Climate change may well be a factor in Lahaina's dry conditions, but the fires also brought long arguments over water rights to a head. In the 1790s, British Captain George Vancouver visited Maui and described Lahaina as the "Venice of the Pacific" for its freshwater streams and canals (Young, 2019). Settlers have since diverted these natural watercourses for use by sugar plantations, then pineapples, then tourist resorts and urban development (Hiraishi, 2023). Over the years, Indigenous and environmental activism has led to some water being returned to these waterways. There are now claims and counter claims about who is to blame for the Lahaina fires. Representatives of business and local government argue that water reclamation has gone too far and stopped the release of water for fighting fires. Those on the side of stream restoration claim there would not have been so much dry, invasive vegetation to burn if the waterways were in their natural state (Hiraishi, 2023). Whatever the cause of the fire, history suggests this is a new, unexpected and human-induced threat for Hawaii to contend with.

Risks to Pacific archives (passive)

Other risks to archives in the Pacific region may be less dramatic than riots and altered climates, but they are systemic and their impact is cumulative. Broadly, these risks can be categorized as underinvestment. This refers, of course, to lack of required financial resources to run an archive, but it also refers to a lack of investment in the concept that archives are themselves a resource. This may stem from Pacific cultures having longer oral traditions than they have written traditions, or the association of written records with colonial scrutiny and subjugation (Cunningham and Ware, 2011). I am not the appropriate person to speak on this but I am excited by research in this area currently being undertaken by former Director of the National Archives

of Fiji, now PhD candidate, Opetia Alefaio. The late Sam Kaima, an archivist from PNG, also wrote about department heads not understanding the importance of records and how this has often lead to archival neglect (Kaima, 1999). Underinvestment in archives is not unique to the Pacific and it is understandable in these smaller economies. Archivists the world over are familiar with underinvestment and expect to be the first on the chopping block when savings need to made. We are seeing this now at our own host institution with recent cuts to ANU archives and library services.

At a foundational level, there are very limited training options to qualify as an archivist in the Pacific region. The University of Hawaii at Manoa and the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) teach units on archives, but these units are taught as part of librarianship or communications degrees. Anecdotally, these graduates from UPNG tend to take up jobs in the mining sector where the salaries are higher. The regional university, the University of the South Pacific (USP), offers library and information studies courses via Pacific TAFE (its vocational program), but has no dedicated archives course. Numerous efforts have been made over the years by archivists in the region to develop an archives course to be taught at USP, but these efforts have been rejected by USP. The nearest dedicated archives degrees are in New Zealand and Australia, but undertaking overseas study is both a major commitment and a cost that is unattainable for many. Online study at international universities is now an option, but students will likely need a scholarship or be faced with full up-front fees.

Many state or government archives in the Pacific were established by colonial governments and left in local hands at independence, while others were established in the independence process (Cunningham & Ware, 2011). In some cases, archives legislation did not follow until many years after independence (see <https://www.paclii.org/>). Legislation should guide the operations of a state archive. Absent or inadequate legislation will leave state archives staff with uncertainty about fundamental aspects of their role. It will almost certainly impact on how the public service maintains records, including what and when they transfer to state archives for permanent retention. While this is not a research report and I do not have data to back up this claim, there are certainly signs and anecdotal claims in some places that transfers from the public service to state archives are ad hoc at best. I have seen repositories full of colonial era records and little since. I have seen precariously stacked boxes of unprocessed collections blocking corridors and foyers rather than stored securely; often these have been left by government departments without prior consultation with the state archives staff, sometimes left on the doorstep overnight. The frequency with which I have had archives staff, in different countries, confide in hushed tones that they know of records being burned due to lack of storage space, or uncertainty about what to do with them, is concerning. This is not hard data, but it suggests there are either widespread problems with retention and disposal processes or a desperate lack of space – or both.

I am writing here in generalisations based on observations and conversations in a range of

different places in the region over a period of almost ten years. Of course this is not all true of all places. The Pacific is a diverse region. Nor are these observations intended in any way to shame or belittle the work of archivists in the region; it is to highlight that most of them have been working for decades without all the tools they need to do their jobs. This is a call for long-overdue assistance to enable them to perform this important public service to the standard they and their communities deserve. Over the years, I have met staff of Pacific archives who have become disengaged and disheartened because they lack the resources to properly preserve important national heritage documentation. Training, clear legislative direction and sufficient resources could make a real difference to these feelings. I have also met many dedicated and hardworking staff who show amazing persistence and grace in the face of constant challenges. Many of them are working in very small teams of only two or three people. Some are responsible for both the national archive and the national library or museum. Most of them are working without any formal archives education. All of them understand that they are working without all the resources they need being made available to them. This remains true of the paper era and it is worryingly true of the digital era as well.

Risks to Pacific archives (digital)

It is becoming more common for institutions with archives to acquire digitisation equipment such as cameras and scanners to do their own digitisation of paper records and photographs. This is an important development for Pacific organisations for both preservation and access purposes, but most importantly, for having control over their own records. However, this work is not always supported by the necessary digital infrastructure. Many organisations, even government institutions, do not always have the storage capacity for these high-resolution files so there is an over-reliance on short-term storage devices such as external hard drives or optical discs which are vulnerable to failure and obsolescence. Digital capture is an important start but it is far from the end goal. Digitisation also requires archives management software, online delivery platforms, secure storage and resources for the ongoing care of the digital files themselves, through processes such as fixity checks and file normalisation. This increase in digital capture facilities in the Pacific is starting to change how some organisations seek to partner with PMB. As Executive Officer, I am in ongoing discussions with at least one organisation who has the resources to carry out the digital capture and description stages of a large-scale digitisation project but is turning to the Bureau for ongoing file storage, an online delivery platform and digital file preservation.

I am also concerned about the sustainability of collection management software in many institutions across the region. Some institutions have no archives, library or museum collection management software and rely entirely on collection lists. These lists are incredibly important foundations, but do not provide the full benefits of collection management software and they aren't always accessible to researchers, even in public institutions. Again, I have no data on

this, but I have been told too many anecdotes from archives, library and museum professionals who have lost access to their own systems due to issues that could have been avoided if the necessary supports were in place, such as the expiry of software licenses without funds for renewal, or simply from a lack of IT support for software upgrades, or fixing glitches that have led to system failures. One museum professional recently expressed to me their utter despair at not being able to access the inventory for their museum's holdings after such a system failure. How can they be expected to respond to enquiries about human remains when they cannot even access their collection inventory? In another context though, I have heard there is a sort of resignation to starting all over again.

Digitisation equipment also seems to be vulnerable in the tropical climate. When equipment breaks, there are often no local options for repairs, or very high costs for parts or repairs from overseas. I cannot speak to the situation with the transfer of born-digital records because I do not work in this space, but from what I know of working with the digitisation of paper records, I do have concern for the archiving of born-digital records. Many professionals in the region, even senior government officials, have long worked without an official work email address and are required to use their personal email accounts for business correspondence, so how will these records be captured? Born-digital is not the Bureau's area of work, but based on my observations, I do hold concern for the capture and archiving of born-digital records in some places.

What needs to change?

As described above, the management of physical and digital archives could be improved with appropriate legislation, training and commitment from those in leadership positions (government, organisations, donors etc) to the importance of archives. These are all changes that will need to be made by the responsible authorities in the Pacific. As neighbours, donor partners and collaborators, what can be done to assist? As a starting point I make two very general proposals: long-term engagement and widespread engagement. Firstly, I would encourage donors and development partners, both government and non-government, to commit to understanding the full picture of what is needed locally and, where possible, supporting the needed infrastructure for the long-term. Too many projects do good work over a two- or three-year period, then fall by the wayside because the necessary ongoing supports are not in place. Often these supports are just the basic operating expectations we have in Australia; things like IT support, ongoing assistance with software upgrades and supply of digital storage space.

When I worked as a volunteer archivist in Solomon Islands, I was able to assist the National Archives to be integrated into the government IT network. The Solomon Islands Government Information and Communications Technology Support Unit (SIG ICTSU, now SIG Support Services) provides connected government agencies with government email addresses,

networked computers, anti-virus software, storage space and regular secure backups. SIG Support Services has been supported in part by the Australian government for 20 years. This is an important example of long-term, practical support that can enable all sorts of projects, including collection digitisation projects.

Second, I would encourage more individuals and organisations to be active, goodwill partners in the Pacific. For a long time, there were very few people or organisations working to preserve the documentary heritage of the Pacific and contributing to strengthening the documentary heritage sector across the region. The libraries that fund the Bureau's work have been enabling improved preservation, discovery and access since 1968, through their support of the Bureau and through their own institution's initiatives. Since 1981, the Pacific and Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (PARBICA) has been a much-loved institution in the region and has supported Pacific archivists through hosting conferences, funding conference attendance, facilitating workshops and of course its excellent and practical *Recordkeeping for Good Governance Toolkit*. I encourage more individuals and institutions in the region to join PARBICA. Your experience and your fees can help our archivist neighbours. Since 2003, the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC) has been doing outstanding work in digitising recordings and documentation in Pacific languages. While they too have considerable longevity, their funding is also grant-dependent. The tiny NGO, Island Culture Archival Support, run by San Diego librarian, Brandon Oswald, has been giving hands-on assistance to Pacific Islands information institutions for more than a decade. Most projects are undertaken with small grants and carried out by Brandon on his vacation leave.

It is a less lonely space now. The rise of China as a regional power has elevated the Pacific Islands in the consciousness of governments like Australia, leading to what the previous Australian government described as the 'Pacific Step-up'. Competition between China and Taiwan may also see more partnership options for collecting institutions in the Pacific, though these geopolitical tensions may also become a risk factor in future. In 2020, the Australian government funded the Pacific Virtual Museum Pilot Project (see digitalpasifik.org) to aggregate metadata from digitised Pacific collections in institutions around the world to make them more discoverable by Pacific audiences. This project has done outstanding work in connecting Pacific communities with collection materials. This project only has short-term funding under the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda. With an election due early in 2025, its future is uncertain. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation International Development (ABCID) has also partnered on some audiovisual digitisation projects with the National Broadcasting Corporation of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (Bieundurry, T. and Tuhaika, 2024). Other partnerships of note include Australia and New Zealand continuing to send volunteers to work on archives and library projects under their skilled volunteer programs, with recent successful projects such as work on the Ron Crocombe collection at the USP Cook Islands Campus (Jones, 2023).

These projects are important for cultural preservation, but archives are also about good governance. Managing information such as statistics, electoral roles, maps, reports, financial records and the like enable a government to have informed, locally-appropriate responses to events like pandemics; to make good planning decisions and to identify corruption. Maintaining records is a part of this. Enabling countries to manage their own information over the long-term is an important tool for self-determination.

What does the future look like?

There is a lot of excellent work being done to protect the documentary heritage of the Pacific Islands today. The National Archives of Samoa has a new building and the Kingdom of Tonga has just opened a new repository to hold the Palace archive. The National Archives of Fiji are in high demand to deliver records management training to Fijian government agencies and conservation training to other archives in the region. The Cook Islands have recently taken custody of audiovisual digitisation equipment, supplied by Nga Taonga Sound & Vision, so this work can be done in country (Etches, 2023). Some Pacific organisations that previously had no online delivery platform are now using free platforms such as Flickr and YouTube, enabling them to become content partners on digitalpasifik.org. More institutions are digitising their own collections and for those who are not, there are more options with emerging commercial providers and more donor partners due to shifting geopolitics. So where does the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau fit into this now and into the future? The Bureau is as busy as ever and I believe there is still a vital need for us in the region. As digitisation equipment becomes more affordable, some gaps are closing, but post-pandemic some Pacific economies are struggling and technology is moving rapidly; so other gaps are widening. Climate change and a world in polycrisis means there are considerable and growing risks to documentary heritage in the region.

The Pacific Manuscripts Bureau is very mindful that it has a responsibility to decolonise its practice. In our day-to-day work, we can be agile in our response to current events, to take on new projects as needed and adapt when new opportunities arise. On bigger picture changes, things move more slowly and require more support. Keep in mind we have been a team of about 1.5 full-time equivalent staff for most of our history. The Bureau is working towards improving access options in Pacific communities; improving Pacific representation in staff and governance; including more representative voices in collection materials; drawing on Indigenous expertise for improved metadata and cultural considerations; and using our regional networks to improve consultation and knowledge sharing with Pacific communities with representation or interests in collections copied by PMB.

The Bureau understands the expectation is now for open access to content (though there has been some recent pushback against this with the rise of artificial intelligence), but PMB is funded entirely by a membership model. The Bureau periodically reassesses its funding options

but keeps returning to a membership model as the most sustainable. Government funding is short-term and can be subjected to the changing priorities of governments of the day. Could we consider West Papua a Pacific Island state if we were funded by a government? Large grants are relatively short-term and need to be tied to major research projects, not necessarily where there is immediate need. Philanthropic funding is something the Bureau is exploring, but unless we are directly approached with a donation, the process is prohibitively difficult for our small team. The membership model though has worked for 56 years.

PMB members are all libraries; places where researchers can, in theory, access PMB collections for free. I acknowledge that access to libraries, especially university libraries, can be inequitable in itself, with access often restricted to those with a formal affiliation to the university. The PMB Management Committee is working towards lower membership rates to make them more affordable for more institutions. In 2023, the committee introduced new categories of membership that take into account an organisation's size and also distinguishes between settler colonial, independent and non-independent states and their corresponding economic circumstances. We see this recognition of settler colonial wealth as an important way of acknowledging that places like Aotearoa New Zealand and Hawaii have strong Pacific identities, but they also have settler colonial resources to contribute to the consortium. The Bureau also introduced a lower-fee subscription category for institutions that are only interested in accessing our digitised content (the University of Melbourne Library has since joined the consortium as a subscriber). Full membership enables access to digital content as well as professional learning opportunities and representation on the Bureau's Management Committee. There is also a category for fee-free or reduced-rate subscription for institutions in the Pacific that are experiencing financial hardship. In recent years PMB has also partnered with open access platforms such as PARADISEC and ANU Open Research to digitise more than 10 percent of our microfilm collection and make it freely available online. The Bureau is open to similar partnerships and collaborations in future.

Conclusion

There is an ongoing need for the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau into the future in support of archives in the Pacific, and in support of community and scholarly research in and about the Pacific. As the Executive Officer, it often feels as though the Bureau is carrying a disproportionate weight and would benefit greatly from additional assistance to do more and do it better. Those truly carrying a disproportionate weight though are our Pacific colleagues who are managing collections of unique materials of their people's history and culture in what are too often under-resourced institutions that face high risks and higher challenges. Personally, and as Executive Officer of PMB, I encourage individuals and organisations with connections to the Pacific to consider ways to provide support to preserve the region's history.

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