

## The Melanesian Archive

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Many years ago, during the summer following my first year in college, I participated as an unskilled crewman in an archaeology dig in southern Ohio. It was a Late Woodland settlement site; the work was dreadfully hot and arduous, but the expedition leader — a noted professor of German origins with a quick, sassy, somewhat cynical wit — labored with irritating cheerfulness alongside us. It was while wiping the dirt and sweat off my neck, I recall, that I finally asked him why he or anyone else would choose to spend summers in this way. Instead of the bantering reply I expected, he paused for a moment, shrugged, and resumed shovelling, saying, "You know, millions of people have died unremembered by those who came afterwards. I suppose I do this in order that at least some of them will not have lived in vain."

Ethnography, surely far more than archaeology, is an intensely moral activity, engendering a distinctive kind of commitment — indeed, identification — on the part of practitioners toward their subject-matter. Ethnographers are quite energetic, in my experience, in defending the interests and lauding the moral validity of the cultures they study. Understandably so. When one has sojourned for years among another people, depending on them for food, shelter, protection, information, and simple human contact, one is likely to form attachments to individuals and, at some intellectual remove, the values they hold. With such involvement comes a sense of obligation to repay this generosity in some way. For many practitioners, ethnography and the act of writing it — whatever other incentives exist — is a gift in kind to the people who made it possible. Never mind that they may not be able to read it; their literate children or grandchildren will appreciate it as a record — often the *only* record — of a way of life now lost to them, which is generally the fate of peoples ethnographers have traditionally called their own. Never mind, either, if no member or descendant of the group in question *ever* reads the account; the gift is made by way of memorializing to others, remote in space or time, this instance of cultural humanity. Taken to extremes, this moral imperative to "tell the story" can be so intense as to produce scholarly paralysis; we have all known colleagues who care so much, are so overawed by the gravity of their mission, that they never do dare to write up or write down (let alone publish) their ethnographic findings.

If it is true that one of ethnography's distinguishing features is the moral cloak with which it wraps itself, then it is all the more surprising and ironic that the record of ethnographic conduct is abysmal concerning the



Rendova Islanders, Solomon Islands, circa 1968. Harold Scheffler Papers. MSS 481. Melanesian Archive, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego. Copyright Harold Scheffler.

preservation and dissemination of its findings. There are notable exceptions, of course, scholars who dispose of their materials in a responsible way. But in general, juxtaposed to the professed moral commitment to the peoples themselves and to the mission of entering them into the human record, the immense collective waste of ethnographic information appears wanton and hypocritical. While it is tempting to judge the matter in such *ad hominem* terms, the more significant locus of blame and possible correction is the haphazard, self-defeating state of anthropological professionalism as regards scholarly communication. The problem is not so much the personal failings of individuals, as it is the lack of an articulated policy and collective strategy for managing the ethnographic record. Without a professional routine for dealing with this issue, many scholars who would wish their notes and papers to be preserved and available, pre- or posthumously, do not know how to proceed. In this paper I shall examine this problem in the context of describing the Melanesian Archive, a project of the University of California, San Diego, that has achieved some success in systematically preserving, disseminating, and repatriating ethnographic materials.

### **Ethnographic Loss and Scatter**

The Archive was conceived by my colleague Fitz John Poole and me in 1979. Our objective was to establish a central repository of unpublished ethnographic materials concerning the societies and cultures of Melanesia, a region bounded by Fiji in the east and Irian Jaya in the west, and including Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and New Caledonia. We were inspired by the realization that a good deal of ethnographic information on that region — irreplaceable information collected at enormous expense and effort — has been, and is continuing

to be, lost. Furthermore, the more data-rich or strictly descriptive these notes and writings are, the more likely they are to be lost. Pressured by cost limitations, and yet wishing to provide space to as many authors as possible, publishers and journal editors discourage lengthy descriptive pieces. Scholarly convention is equally impatient with "unnecessary" details: "Focus on your analytical problem and adduce facts only according to it...don't tell me more than I need to know...where is this description leading?...WHY ARE YOU TELLING ME THIS?" — we fill the margins of our students' papers with such comments, teaching them intolerance toward ethnographic detail for its own sake. In itself, there is nothing wrong with this view; many (myself included) accept it as consistent with anthropology's long-term theoretical goals, representing the shift from the idiographic to the nomothetic. But if, as sometimes happens nowadays, this view is radicalized into a dismissal of ethnographic accounts as somehow ideologically objectionable, the effect is to add to the vagrant standing of the informational base on which anthropology's future, with increasing urgency, will depend.

It is an obvious fact but one worth recalling in the present context that small, isolated cultural groups in places like Melanesia are rapidly changing in response to increasing involvement in political and economic relationships with the world outside their boundaries. Back at the beginning of this century, Franz Boas saw a principal mission of anthropology to be the recording of those lifeways before they expired — as they were doing in his day, as in ours. One might quibble over the time it will take before, say, autonomous tribal peoples no longer exist, but there is no possibility that the kinds of people on whom nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropology staked its identity will survive indefinitely; new items in the distinctive agenda of post-colonial anthropology suggest that the discipline is already positioning itself for this eventuality. One can be equally certain, however, that many ethnological puzzles will continue unsolved long after the opportunity to study them first-hand has disappeared. To the extent that anthropology remains interested in these problems, it will become an archival science; then will not be the time to *begin* developing the collections needed to support serious, cross-cultural studies. Preservation alone is not enough; an ethnographic legacy packed in shoe boxes and tea chests scattered across the six inhabited continents is no legacy at all. As ACLS Vice-President Douglas Greenberg notes (1992) with reference to the archival needs of the humanities disciplines, "Access is the great desideratum." It is not yet too late, but we must proceed immediately and aggressively to assemble the unpublished material and render it accessible not just to scholars handy to the repository, but to the whole world of scholarship on that subject.

In the realm of ethnographic scholarly communication, a common pattern is for papers written for conferences, seminars, and classes to circulate for a time in the author's professional network, and then disappear, never to see the light of published day. The greater loss, however, probably involves information that never makes it out of the notebook. Even the most productive writers leave unconnected tidbits, detritus from the methodologically formed concretions of one's ethnographic focus. At the other extreme are researchers — few in number, perhaps, but one is too many — who never develop their

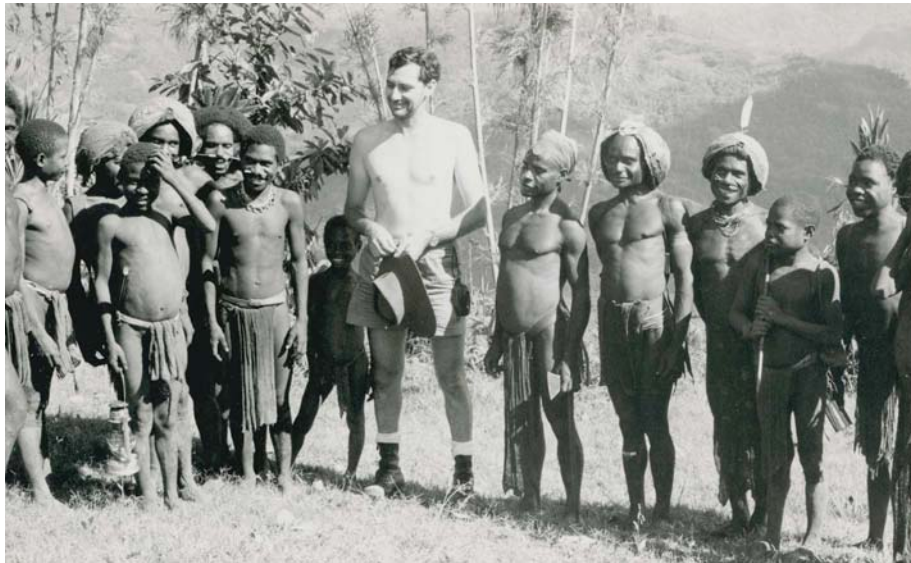
material into analytic or expository form. A central repository would rescue information of this sort from oblivion, accepting the inherent inefficiencies in preserving fieldnotes in their pristine — often inscrutable and always idiosyncratic — form.

The common alternative is for such materials to accumulate in cabinets and file drawers. Someday, thinks the well-intentioned but falsely conscious author, the notes and papers will find their way into publication. Eventually, retirement or death forces the issue of what should be done with them. In the absence of a routine procedure for disposing of the materials, the retiree or surviving family member has only a few options: (1) donate them to the author's present university or alma mater; (2) offer them to a colleague or student for whatever use they may deem appropriate; (3) deposit them with an established collection; (4) destroy them.

With the possible exception of option 3, none of these alternatives serves the long-term archival interests of the ethnographic community. Unless the grantee institution in option 1 is prepared to process, catalogue and arrange orderly access to the materials, their continued existence has little utility for ethnographic colleagues, especially if they do not live in the vicinity. What usually happens, instead, is that libraries, pressed for space and short on personnel, either decline such donations or accept them merely as an act of courtesy, thereafter not taking any special pains to organize, store, or present them. At best, option 2 merely postpones the final reckoning; at worst, it disperses the collection among recipients who keep some items and pass on or discard others. The Melanesian Archive offers a version of option 3, but it is a *specialized* version, and therein lies its potential effectiveness. A few examples from Melanesianist scholarship will indicate the value of an ethnographically specialized facility.

Margaret Mead's papers were deposited, posthumously, in the Library of Congress, where they were carefully catalogued and made available to scholarly users. A fitting arrangement, perhaps, for the remains of a multifaceted career so visible to the American public; it would not have made sense to divide the collection according to Mead's several anthropological personae, including that of a Melanesian ethnographer. Still, having Mead's papers in the Library of Congress does limit their use by others, especially those unable to journey to Washington. The papers of Gregory Bateson, Mead's former husband and co-worker among the Iatmul and the Balinese, are divided: those dating from the period of his ethnographic involvements are conveniently (from the standpoint of Melanesianist scholars) deposited in the Library of Congress; those covering his career from the mid-1940s onward are deposited at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where Bateson held a faculty position at the time of his death. Less usefully, the unpublished works of New Zealand-born anthropologist Reo Fortune — ethnographer of Dobu, and co-worker with (his then-wife) Mead on Manus and in the Sepik region of the New Guinea mainland, are deposited in the Turnbull Library in Wellington, New Zealand, where there is no present intention to process them.

Let me not belabor the point. If the papers of close fieldwork collaborators and erstwhile spouses can be strewn so widely, how great must be the scatter within the Melanesianist community as a whole! The problem is, unpublished ethnographic materials of a particular region (in this case Melanesia) are highly dispersed; and unless authored by someone of the public stature of Margaret Mead, they are also likely to remain difficult of access. A central repository, one content to hold photocopies of the material and equipped to provide remote access, would have much to recommend it.



Anthropologist Roy ("Skip") Rappaport with Maring men and boys of Tsembaga, Madang Province, Papua New Guinea, circa 1963. Photo by Ann H. Rappaport.

### **The Melanesian Archive**

Originally, the plan for the Archive was three-pronged: (1) to recover as many extant items as possible, with emphasis on informational content rather than artifactual significance; (2) to establish a procedure whereby present and future works would be routinely deposited with the Archive; (3) to create a journal that would publish outstanding pieces from the collection.<sup>1</sup> Knowing that the success of the project would require scholarly and financial support from the community of Melanesianists, we wrote to about a dozen leading area scholars in the United States, Great Britain, France, Australia, and Papua New Guinea, describing our plan, soliciting their comments, and inviting them to serve on a permanent advisory panel for the Archive. The response was enthusiastically positive, except toward the proposed journal component, which some colleagues suggested be scrapped. The reasons: (1) there are already more journals than the world can comfortably accommodate; (2) any journal based on items that are, by definition, not fit for publication elsewhere is doomed to fail; and (3) preservation being so much the heart of the project, and so vastly more important than publication, we should not subject ourselves to the substantial burden of editing a journal, possibly for the rest of our careers, for the

sake of gain that is, at best, marginal. If part of the reason for the journal was to earn operating funds for the Archive, advised one respondent, a better approach would be simply to solicit donations, which, given the merits of the project, would surely attract a generous reaction from the Melanesianist community.

The news that we could virtuously eliminate the journal component from our planning came as a relief, both for the reasons given, which had already begun to occur to us, and because other developments at this time were pushing the nascent project in a new and better direction. Realizing at an early stage that a properly run archive needs librarianship skills we did not possess, we had informed the UC San Diego Library authorities of our intentions, hoping to receive technical guidance as the project evolved. Not only did George Soete, Associate Librarian for Collections Development, pledge the Library's support; he quickly perceived that the Melanesian Archive could become the nucleus of a larger initiative to develop the Library's collection of Melanesian publications. The ensuing, intense collaboration between anthropologists on the one side, and librarians on the other, shortly resulted in a Title IIC grant application to the U.S. Department of Education. The application was successful, bringing the Library \$385,000 over a three-year period (1983-1986), and enabling the formation of the Melanesian Studies Resource Center (MSRC) — an entity which, despite its unlovely name, proceeded to assemble a quite beautiful collection of Melanesian books, monographs, dissertations (from the U.S. and abroad, the most complete collection in existence), maps, aerial photographs, and government documents. For the Archive, *per se*, the grant financed further start-up activities, greatly relieving strain on the shoestring that had supported us until then.<sup>2</sup>

The Title IIC application succeeded<sup>3</sup> largely due to a particular feature of the Archive project that has yet to be mentioned: provision for the systematic repatriation of cultural texts to the new nations of Melanesia. Though philosophically and politically akin to publicized debates about the repatriation of museum artifacts and skeletal remains, the issue concerning proper placement of *textual* materials is far more manageable. By virtue of the low cost of microfiche technology,<sup>4</sup> the Melanesian Archive is able to provide updated copies of its entire holdings, free of charge, to a dozen academic institutions in Melanesia. The facility thus provides a conduit through which scholarly productions contributed from the entire international community of Melanesianists find their way back to the region that hosted the research. Instead of the previous system, in which individual scholars haphazardly did or did not send copies of their writings to Melanesian academic libraries, and in which the Melanesian authorities lacked the funds to monitor overseas scholarly activities and solicit their productions, a single copy deposited with the Melanesian Archive will be reproduced and forwarded not just to the particular host country but to all of the countries in the region. This service, which has been gratefully acknowledged by Melanesian scholars and librarians, is an affirmative step toward allaying the resentment that indigenous and expatriate scholars are inclined to feel toward well-heeled foreign researchers who neglect (or have given up trying) to supply copies of their writings to institutions in the host country.<sup>5</sup>

Support from the Title IIC grant enabled us to write to everyone we could identify who had conducted research in Melanesia, advertising our intentions and soliciting their suggestions and overall support for the Archive. As before, the response was overwhelmingly positive, except for one Australian faculty member at a Melanesian university, who darkly hinted that we were agents for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. In addition, rumor reached us that a distinguished anthropologist from Western Australia was grumbling that the true and correct place for such an archive was Australia. Being in full agreement with this view, we waited eagerly but in vain for this person (who is now dead) to offer himself or his nominee to replace us. What this person failed to accept (or believe) was that, unlike most other archives, our object was not to hoard knowledge but to extend its availability to the widest possible audience. For this reason, whatever may be the political value of repatriating ethnographic texts, this activity is, more significantly, an expression of the Archive's mission to universalize access to the knowledge of Melanesian societies and cultures. Placing whole sets of the Archive in Melanesian countries is a major contribution to this goal; another is the issuance of an Accessions List and Microfiche Catalogue — the latter a subset of the former, and both updated on a schedule tied to the volume of acquisitions by the Archive. At present, approximately 200 individuals and institutions receive copies of these lists, free of charge, from which they can order individual titles at nominal cost.<sup>6</sup>

Let me pause to praise the low-tech features of microfiche as a medium of long-term archival storage and dissemination. To begin with, if important constituencies of the project are resident in non-industrial countries, one is advised to adopt a technology that is appropriate to the constraints of cost and expertise in those settings.<sup>7</sup> Microfiche readers are not expensive pieces of equipment, and one can expect to find them in academic libraries throughout the world. Highly advanced technologies become obsolete relatively quickly. All too soon, outmoded hardware and the lack of spare parts and repair facilities can force expensive upgradings of entire collections, or, worse, render the materials totally inaccessible. Microfiche is not subject to such hazards, requiring nothing more than a glorified magnifying lens to be read. Furthermore, a prepotent, at-one's-fingertip retrieval capability goes beyond the practical requirements of an ethnographic archive. The audience will never be so massive, the consultation rate never so constant, as to call for the kind of on-line data bases that are becoming a standard fixture in many research libraries. Rather, the optimal system would efficiently store material that someone, someday — and possibly no one, ever — may wish to consult. Under such practical conditions, state-of-the-art technology goes far beyond what is needed — and, as noted, it is likely to become obsolete before most of the archive is ever even used! Finally, advanced technologies are, by definition, relatively untested under naturalistic conditions. Compact disks, for example, were originally hailed as the answer to an archivist's prayer: a cheap, indestructible medium for audio, visual, and textual materials. Now, however, only a decade after their introduction and widespread adoption, it is being discovered that aluminum-coated CDs are liable to begin to deteriorate after only five to ten years.<sup>8</sup> Again, one faces loss of material or expensive conversions. Microfiches, by contrast, are virtually inert, and with routine care can be expected to last a very long time.

## Accomplishments and Frustrations

Under the operational direction of librarian Kathryn Creely, who joined the staff in 1983 from the South Pacific Commission in Noumea, the Melanesian Archive has accumulated a collection of unpublished materials that includes the following:

(1) Papers and notes from individual contributors — approximately 75 cubic feet. About half of this total consists of textual materials from a single acquisition: the voluminous John Layard Collection, donated by the author's son, Richard Layard, Professor of Labour Economics in the London School of Economics.

(2) Dissertations on the region — over 700.

(3) Papua New Guinea administrative patrol reports from the era of Australian mandated rule — pre-World War II, approximately 5,000; post-World War II, approximately 12,000, to grow to approximately 30,000 in the near future.<sup>9</sup>

(4) Materials acquired from other collections — approximately 3,500 microfilms and approximately 1,000 microfiches. These include items produced by the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau, of which UC San Diego is one of seven member institutions; the Australian Joint Copying Center, which receives materials from the British Colonial Office, among other sources; and the Fiji National Archives. Eventually, trade partnerships will be established between the Melanesian Archive, the Summer Institute of Linguistics, and various mission organizations. In instances where the partner collection is equipped to provide remote access, the Melanesian Archive, rather than duplicating that collection, seeks only to inform its subscribers about how they may gain access to it.

The role of the Archive as an intermediary between area scholars and the Melanesian host countries is applicable to a potentially wide range of service functions. One thinks immediately of an Archive-sponsored campaign to raise scholarship funds for Melanesian students wishing to study overseas; another possibility might be an Archive-based arrangement to facilitate applications for research visas. With the existence of a defined *center*, projects involving coordination or collective action are relatively easy to conduct. All that is needed is a broad base of active support for the Archive on the part of members of the Melanesianist community. This leads me to a question that I can no longer avoid asking: why are Melanesian scholars, on the whole, passively resistant to what the Archive is attempting to do?

The story of the Melanesian Archive would not be complete without recognition of this problem, which is troubling and seemingly intractable. At certain levels, the Archive has enjoyed thunderous support from the beginning. When polled, Melanesianist scholars loudly applaud the idea, offering moral and financial support; scholars at home in Melanesian colleges and universities, at least those who know about the Archive, admit that its operations are a sincere and reasonably effective effort to counteract the imperium of metropolitan anthropology; research librarians hail the Archive as a "model project"



(Gould and Handler 1989:48) for the repatriation of ethnographic scholarship; the U.S. Department of Education and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research have given generously in support of the institution, as have academic authorities at UC San Diego. There would seem to be nothing in the Archive's concepts or operations that could be found objectionable on any grounds; on the contrary, it is an institution capable of doing great good for the Melanesianist community and the Others it cares most about.

The problem, however, is that Melanesianist scholars have thus far been much more vigorous in voicing support than in contributing their materials to the Archive. Early detection of this problem led us to institute various measures designed to remove possible obstacles.

(1) Submitting items to the Archive involves no loss of copyright by the author, and no restriction on his or her part to revise and/or publish the item at a later date.

(2) Though the Archive requests permission to disseminate submissions through normal channels, it accepts whatever restrictions the author stipulates concerning access.

(3) If for any reason (hazards or ethical problems involving individuals or social groups, publication intentions, etc.) the author desires access to submitted materials to be delayed, the Archive provides a time-lock of whatever duration the author stipulates.

(4) If an author wishes to retain the originals, the Archive is pleased to accept copies, or to make copies and return the originals to the author. All costs associated with the copying or shipping of materials are borne by the Archive.

In the light of such safeguards, it is difficult to imagine defensible reasons for authors to resist sending materials to the Archive, and yet there it is. Sloth and procrastination? Embarrassment by some over the rough condition of their notes and papers? A vague fear that control over the materials will be lost? Whatever the reason(s), the root cause seems to be a confusion between ownership and stewardship. What *are* a researcher's proprietorial rights over materials collected (usually) with public or foundation monies, granted with the understanding (if only tacit) that the fruits of the research should be available to the scholarly community and wider public? If the appropriate rubric of an ethnographer's control is stewardship, when does stewardship graduate into ownership? The demarcation line may not be readily definable; but, as shown in the recent furor over the Dead Sea Scrolls, most scholars know when it has been crossed. This is a touchy issue; most ethnographers would probably prefer to keep the distinction vague, continuing the "gentlemen's agreement" that has permitted *de facto* ownership of ethnographic materials. Perhaps it is better this way; perhaps moral suasion is preferable to professional rules and guidelines when it comes to encouraging responsible scholarly conduct. Perhaps nothing will change. Nonetheless, the question of ownership is something to consider, for it is anterior to the practices and philosophical arguments in support of anthropological preservation.

This gloomy predicament reminds me of an incident that occurred in 1985, when I returned after an absence of thirteen years to Ilahita, an Arapesh village in the East Sepik region of Papua New Guinea that had been my principal field site. Ten months before my return, during a wave of Christian conversion, the villagers had obliterated the Tambaran, the elaborate men's cult that was the society's spiritual anchor and guide. My good friend Supalo had been one of the few traditionalists protesting (without effect) this action, and he was still shaken by it. Privately, he confided that he intended to see the Christians punished in court for destroying masks, carvings, giant shell rings, and other ritual paraphernalia.

"But did these objects not belong to them?" I asked, knowing that they did. "Were the rings not theirs to save or destroy, as they chose?"

It is true that the rings came to them from their fathers," Supalo replied, his eyes glistening. "But the rings are not theirs to destroy, only to hold and polish and protect, before passing them to their sons. The rings are the custom that belongs to all of us. To attack the rings is to attack our custom, *my* custom; to destroy the rings is to destroy me. Ownership does not give the Christians the right to do this."

I don't know whether Supalo ever presented his reasoning to a court of law; if so, I doubt that the magistrate would have been persuaded by his distinction between mundane ownership and sacred custodianship. But to me, Supalo's argument has the ring of anthropological truth, one that ethnographers might bear in mind when deciding what to do with the cultural mementos they acquire and control.

## Summary

- One model for archiving is the specialized, regionally based repository exemplified by the Melanesian Archive.
- A key feature of the Archive that might be emulated by others is the "repatriation" of appropriate materials to the country of origin.
- The experience of the Melanesian Archive underlines the importance of recognizing the anthropologist's role as one of stewardship, not ownership, of records.

## Notes

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1. In visualizing this as a "living archive," we ran afoul of common library usage, which applies the word "archive" to a closed, finite set of materials. Preferring the ring of "archive" to any of the alternatives, we made bold to call our project the Melanesian Archive, hoping that as our colleagues came to understand what we were about, they would permit the license.

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2. This episode underscores the crucial importance of collaboration between scholars and librarians in devising innovative strategies for the preservation of anthropological materials. Library technology, not to mention the professional networking in which librarians engage, is far beyond the ken of practicing anthropologists, thus requiring much closer cooperation between these parties than has been customary in the past.

3. Those interested in obtaining a copy of the successful Title IIC grant application, should write to Mr. George Soete, Central University Library, UC San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093.

4. At current prices, the cost of producing a master fiche is five cents per page, or \$3.75 for a master fiche containing 75 pages of text. The cost of *duplicating* the master fiche is only twenty cents, which comes to about a quarter of a penny per page.

5. This relates to the issue of the general antagonism felt toward foreign researchers under postcolonial conditions. For a useful analysis and discussion of this matter as it stood in Papua New Guinea in the late 1970s, see Morauta (1979).

6. Initially, the Archive charged a subscription fee for the Accessions List and Microfiche Catalogue. When it was discovered that the costs of collecting the fee nearly equaled the income realized from it, the fee was abolished. If the title in question already exists on a master fiche — and not all do — the cost is \$2.50 per fiche. If the title has not yet been microfiched — and there is no immediate plan to do so — the cost of providing a xeroxed hard copy is \$.20 per page. In both cases, the excess of sale price over cost of production is calculated to help defray the general expenses of the Archive. Orders are filled virtually by return mail, in the case of microfiche, somewhat longer if unfiled papers must be located and xeroxed. Thus far, the system appears to be working well, and we have had no complaints from customers over the cost or the time it takes to fill the order.

7. The cost of using high-technology software and data bases can restrict access even in relatively affluent settings. Greenberg (1992) reports that access to the computerized Arts and Humanities Index costs "95 cents a minute, \$57 an hour for subscribers; \$2 a minute, and \$120 an hour for non-subscribers." "No humanities scholar, no matter how prosperous," Greenberg observes, "can long afford prices like those."

8. A recent issue of *OCLC Pacific Network News Update* quotes Ken Thibodeau, of the National Archives and Records Service, as saying that CD-ROMs have a three- to five-year expected life, before the aluminum coating begins to lose its protective properties. Gold-coated CDs reputedly have a much longer life, but they cost \$1000 apiece, rather than \$1.25 for the aluminum version.

9. The processing and microfilming of these administrative patrol reports by the Papua New Guinea National Archive was materially

assisted by the Melanesian Archive. By agreement, the master microfiches resulting from this massive project remain in Port Moresby.