

## **Connections & Conversations**

### **Australian Society of Archivists Conference 2006**

#### **Recordkeeping in the Pacific**

#### ***Canoeing in Cyberspace: Recordkeeping in the Pacific***

#### ***A Fiji Case Study***

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Setareki Tale joined the National Archives of Fiji in 1986 and was appointed its head in 1998. Currently he is also President of PARBICA, a member of the Executive Board of the ICA, a member of the Executive Committee of the Association of Commonwealth Archivist and Records Managers (ACARM) and an associate member of the Training Commission of the International Federation of Television Archives (IFTA)

*Institutions the world over are becoming more and more aware that authentic records are vital to achieving effective governance. Good decisions can only be made based on accurate information from genuine records. But the manner in which records are being created is changing rapidly. We live in a world that is very technology dependent and this has had a major impact on records. For Pacific Island archivists and recordkeepers this provides an epic challenge.*

*Already dealing with issues of isolation and meagre resources, the cluttered dash to maximise opportunities presented by Information Communications Technologies (ICT) has warped our canoes from the volatile but familiar ocean out in to the unforgiving and unfamiliar territory of cyberspace. This paper will trace our journey of records and records management in the Pacific, explain the current situation, investigate a way forward and seek possible steps to help us manoeuvre our canoes safely in to the future.*

## Introduction

The journey of official recordkeeping began in the mid 1800s with the arrival of Wesleyan missionaries in Fiji. William Cross and David Cargill arrived in Lakeba on 12 October, 1835<sup>1</sup> and started work on their mission. These were not the pioneering missionaries but their arrival impacted the course of recordkeeping in Fiji.

Fiji is made up of 330 islands out of which one third are inhabited. The total population as of today is a little less than 840,000.<sup>2</sup>

Archaeological research so far suggests that the islands were settled some three and half thousand years ago. There are various theories about how Fiji was settled, and despite numerous studies there is no conclusive finding that enjoys a dominant support base among the population. It may be that a degree of truth can be found in all the theories.

It was, however, not until the mid 1600s when the group of islands were first sighted by Abel Tasman.<sup>3</sup> It was also reputed that Captain James Cook has passed through the islands earlier. But it was William Bligh who was the first to have thoroughly surveyed the islands. Interestingly though, while these arrivals fell well within the period of recorded history, there are very little extant records on them.

This is why the arrival of missionaries is viewed as significant as they started work in spreading the gospel and at the same time ensured that records of their activities were created and maintained. These records are extremely important and hold pride of place among archival records held in the National Archives of Fiji.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wood, Harold. A., *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church Vol. II*, The Aldergate Press, Melbourne, 1978, p 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Fiji Today 2005/2006*, Ministry of Information, Communications and Media Relations, p 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p 9.

<sup>4</sup> The first Missionary record created for Fiji was the Wesleyan Register of Baptism 1835 which is now held and available for research in the National Archives of Fiji

## Culture of Recordkeeping

Before the arrival of European settlers in Fiji, we had our own way of recordkeeping. This is best described by Chief Reklai Raphael Ngirmang a leader in the neighbouring island of Palau, who when addressing Pacific Archivists in 2001 said:

Our archives does not have written documents and books. Our culture and historical records are contained in oral histories and legends, which are stored in the collective memories of the people of Melekeok and which have been passed from generations to generations over the centuries.<sup>5</sup>

These types of histories and legends have tended to be trivialised as fanciful and random, as romanticised self-conceptualisations by others. In reality, our legends hold scientific and technological methods relating to seafaring and navigational practices, medicinal preparations, fisheries, agriculture and so on. This information is also recorded through dance, songs, poems, and handicraft (woodcarving, weaving, pottery etc).<sup>6</sup>

The knowledge is dynamic – evolving, as Chief Ngirmang said, through phases of transmission between generations. It is passed on within the family, clan, village, tribe, or whichever unit this knowledge resides in. It is seen to be communally owned, a composite of ideas and experiences, not the sole property of an individual, and the inherent value of a particular item or artistic expression is the pride of the unit or community which has ownership of it.<sup>7</sup>

Oral traditions and cultures have governed the way of life until today and continue to play an important part in the existence in the islands.

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<sup>5</sup> Wareham, Evelyn, 'From Explorers to Evangelists, Recordkeeping and Remembering in the Pacific Islands', *Archival Science: International Journal on Recorded Information*, Vol. 2 Nos. 3-4, 2002, p 194.

<sup>6</sup> Briggs, B., 'What is Oral Tradition' in Vatu S. (ed.) *Talking About Oral Tradition*, University Printing Unit, Extension Services, University of the South Pacific, Suva, 1977, pp 1 – 5.

<sup>7</sup> Peteru, C., 'Protection of Indigenous Knowledge', Uluinaceva A., 'Copyright Law in Fiji and how it impacts on the protection of traditional knowledge, innovation and practices', (Paper presented at the WWF and Department of Environment (Fiji) Preservation of Local and Indigenous Knowledge Workshop, Suva 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> November, 1999), pp 9 – 10.

In speaking of recordkeeping, therefore, in the context of the small Pacific Islands, it should be noted that formally recognised recordkeeping systems of today cannot be totally dissociated from oral traditions, and vice versa. A picture of an event is not complete without oral history.

### **Governance and Recordkeeping**

The establishment of Consular offices around the 1850s saw the introduction of new recordkeeping strategies. The establishment of formal government administration in 1871 with the setting up the Cakobau Government<sup>8</sup> further inspired recordkeeping and provided some continuity in how records overall were being generated.

What has been observed from records is how meticulous the colonisers and early administrators were with recordkeeping. Records of the theses administrations – which included those of the Cakobau Government and the subsequent government up to the Colonial Government which governed Fiji from 1875 to 1970 – survived difficult conditions and their importance are being increasingly recognised by the public of Fiji.

These records were systematic and detailed, and today their completeness makes them some of the most useful and sought after resources for research.

The emphasis placed on recordkeeping by administrators was significant and an indication was the secondment to Fiji in 1930 of a Records Clerk<sup>9</sup> with experience in the management of official records. The effectiveness of his work was felt immediately with the reviewing of the records registration system of the Colonial Government and a new system was adopted from 1931. The system is still widely used today!

Things however seemed to have slackened off after Fiji's independence in 1970.<sup>10</sup> It appeared that from a certain point recordkeeping was relegated to the back seat. It

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<sup>8</sup> Brown, Stanley, *Men from Under the Sky: The Arrival of Westerners in Fiji*, Charles. E. Turtle Company, Tokyo, 1973, p 299.

<sup>9</sup> John Murray Jardine assumed duties as a Records Clerk in the Colonial Government on 21 March, 1930.

<sup>10</sup> Fiji gained independence from Great Britain on the 10<sup>th</sup> October, 1970.

would be understandable, however, as this was probably the period when all sectors were competing for attention and for a fair share of resources from government.

### **The Current Situation**

In the past few years Information Communications Technologies (ICT) have invaded government and the private sector in a big way. ICT has reached almost all sectors of community.

Government agencies and users now recognise the potential of ICT and the opportunity it provides for development where distance – which characterises the Pacific – and traditional methods have tended to hamper progress.

On the other hand there are challenges and issues that need to be considered. The increased usage of ICT has decentralised recordkeeping more and more. Proven manual systems are becoming redundant to some extent.

It would be inconsiderate, however, to disregard that many recordkeepers in the island states have very little or no support and do not have the capacity and skills to effectively carry out the basic recordkeeping tasks required of them.

The challenges they face are many. This includes the “Tyranny of Distance”, condemning records officers to operate with meagre resources and without the benefit of interaction and advice of experienced colleagues. One of the other difficulties that they face is the non-recognition of recordkeeping as a profession. The introduction of technology is only exacerbating the situation.

### **Recent Developments**

There are some very positive developments in the recent past that are very encouraging indeed for Fiji. Amendments to the Fiji Public Records Act were passed by Parliament in September of this year<sup>11</sup>, which will allow the Archives to take a more active role in the management of records, from creation, while in current use, and then disposition. This

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<sup>11</sup> The Public Records (Amendment) Act became Law after its passing on 08 September, 2006

should improve the quality of records when they reach us and set the tone for better recordkeeping throughout the government apparatus.

In their report to Parliament the Sector Committee appointed to deliberate over the Amendment Bill emphasised the importance of recordkeeping in supporting transparency and accountability in governance. Further, they raised the need for capacity building within the National Archives in order to stay relevant in the changing recordkeeping environment, and of course in light of the added responsibility that the amended legislation will bring about.

A new 3 level National Archives building is currently being constructed with full funding from government. The building is on schedule to be completed in 2007.<sup>12</sup>

Public Sector Reform Programmes currently underway require proper documentation of activities and for the records to be securely maintained. These changes provide the opportunity for more recognition of recordkeeping as a tool that support governance.

### **PARBICA Initiatives**

Formed in 1981, the Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (PARBICA) is the organisation that represents government agencies, non-government organisations and individuals working in the field of archives and records management in the Pacific Region. With a membership base of twenty two nations, states and territories, it is one of the thirteen regional branches of the International Council on Archives (ICA).<sup>13</sup>

The PARBICA conference is a major activity carried by the organisation. Training opportunities are few for archivist and records managers in the in the region and these conferences combine strategic discussions on current issues with training workshops. To most these are the only form of accessible training. It should be acknowledged that these conferences are made possible through the support and assistance of

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<sup>12</sup> Construction of the building which was designed by the Fiji Public Works Department began in 2005 and is phased over a three year period.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.parbica.org>

governments, funding agencies, archival institutions and professional organisations in the region and internationally.

PARBICA continues to consider possibilities for a Pacific archives education programme that is relevant, affordable and accessible to the islands.<sup>14</sup>

Organisations are underway to establish a project to develop a toolkit of manuals, guides and brochures that can be used to support the promotion of records management, improved systems and training in Pacific Island countries.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Way Forward**

Governments and civil society in the global community are increasingly recognising the importance of information for good governance. Quality information enables government to function properly and to make sound decisions.

Authentic and accessible records are authoritative sources of information that support government's activities and provide evidence of its transactions. They support fundamental values such as the protection of rights and entitlements, openness in governance and public participation in the process of governance.

In light of global developments a good strategy would be to emphasise the business benefits of good recordkeeping. Taking this approach – as opposed to the “big stick” approach – leads to an organisation wide culture reflecting an overall willingness to practice good recordkeeping and records units are seen as provider of solutions to the information challenges faced each day.<sup>16</sup>

The first step therefore would be to make a concerted effort raise the profile of recordkeeping across government. Without proper recognition we are doomed.

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<sup>14</sup> Intensive discussions on this subject started in 1999 with the University of the South Pacific, Suva.

<sup>15</sup> This project is being coordinated by Mr Adrian Cunningham of the National Archives of Australia.

<sup>16</sup> Sweeney, Peta, 'Corporate Compliant Without Burdening the User: Change Management Lessons from the Ergon Energy', *InfoRMAA Quarterly*, Vol. 22, November 2006, p 26.

It is noted that many problems that affect recordkeeping in Fiji and the Pacific such as limited resources, lack of training, tendency of staff to leave after training etc are related to the lack of recognition of the profession.

Vigorous awareness and marketing programmes properly planned for specific target audiences are avenues that can be utilised to address these issues and to propel the profession forward.

## **Conclusion**

The general perception in the assessment of the state of recordkeeping in the Pacific at PARBICA 12<sup>17</sup> was that many island states in the Pacific, like Fiji, lack the fundamental components of the archives and recordkeeping infrastructure required to support government recordkeeping.<sup>18</sup> They lack the resources, skills and legislative frameworks. There is no proper housing, let alone environmental control equipment and other basic recordkeeping tools.

In the face of all constraints and difficulties I would like to believe that the solutions to the problems in Fiji – and perhaps all small island states of the Pacific – do not lie in overhauling the system, jettisoning our canoes and acquiring a space-fleet.

Space-fleets will require specific skills, additional crew, costs for fuel and maintenance, etc for which we do not have the resources.

What is needed is assistance for capacity building to enable us to negotiate and manoeuvre our canoes better in this new age, within the meagre resources that are available to us. This is not to say that we do not need space-fleets, it's that we would prefer to master the technique of canoeing while gradually investing in a fleet.

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<sup>17</sup> PARBICA 12 was the 12<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives on the theme 'Recordkeeping for Good Governance', which was held in Nadi, Fiji in September, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Report of PARBICA 12, p 4.

I agree therefore with the notion that the first lesson from such a journey is to realise that evolutionary change is better than revolutionary change – where evolutionary change equates to a gradual adaptation to the environment or specific requirements.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Sweeney, Peta, 'Corporate Compliant Without Burdening the User: Change Management Lessons from the Ergon Energy', *InfoRMAA Quarterly*, Vol. 22, November 2006, p 24.