

The Bible in Buffalo Country: Oenpelli Mission 1925–1931

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The Bible in Buffalo Country is primarily a publication of the large amount of correspondence produced by the early missionaries at Oenpelli mission between 1925 and 1931. This work opens with a note by Julie Narndal Gumurdul who, through her own familial connections with the Oenpelli mission, speaks to the complicated relationships shaping the community that remains today on Mandjurlingunj land. Despite the challenges that often accompany reading records produced about them, Gumurdul asserts the value of such a collection for ‘bringing back many memories’ to the many descendants today whose lives have been entangled with the history of Oenpelli mission – a history of ‘dynamic innovation and adaption’ (p. 20) while also continuing their foundational connectedness to tradition and identity.

The collection of mission documents that forms the largest part of this book are from the Church Mission Society (CMS) archives held at the Mitchell Library. They comprise letters and station reports written from the Oenpelli mission during the opening years of the mission (1925–31). With some helpful clarifications added, these records have largely been reproduced as they were written. The seeming monotone of the dominant missionary’s voice is interspersed with many of the photographs taken at the mission during this same period. Mainly produced by Alfred and Mary Dyer, these records reflect their view from the ground during the mission’s formative years. These mission documents are strategically encased between contextualising chapters that help reframe the lens of the reader to ‘see within’ the record and notice ways that Aboriginal peoples were always present and finding ways to engage with the newcomers.

The first chapter sheds light on the gap between missionary intent and their capacity to deliver their vision for the Bininj people of the region. This is methodologically significant for reading missionary accounts generated by a belief in their own capacity to know what Aboriginal people needed. In reality, the rollout of such a concise agenda was not so straightforward. Missionaries arrived on Mandjurlngunj land, where the Bininj people were well accustomed to dealing with visitors and negotiating in intercultural spaces (Chapter 2).

As the authors of this book highlight, the missionaries ‘began on the back foot’, having to navigate complex Bininj kinship networks and connections as well as dealing with previous settler impacts in the region – from the buffalo encroachment to the troubling Cahill era (Chapter 3). In all this, Bininj were present ‘working hard to make the most of a difficult situation for their community’. Rather than a simple roll out of their agenda, the missionaries who arrived to set up the mission in 1925 needed to negotiate with Bininj to establish some common and tradable ground.

Likewise, the missionaries who arrived at Oenpelli were also part of a larger story of missionary practice entangled with colonial purpose. Chapter 4 grounds the ambitions and agendas of the CMS – the Anglican missionary society responsible for establishing the mission at Oenpelli – within the unfolding colonial story.

These historical details help quarantine the missionary’s words, sense of purpose and capacity to fulfil the expectations of their sending organisation. Framed through their correspondence with a faraway audience, notions of their missionary work articulated through the enormous number of personal letters, station reports and fundraising helped to reify their rigid gaze and gendered norms. Such expectations attached to the work of the missionary overlooked their personal capacity to survive and adapt to their new surroundings, on someone else’s land and isolated from their own families and culture.

Notwithstanding the human experience behind these mission documents, they are intense to read and unrelenting in their conversations about, not with, the Bininj people. What I am most interested in reading in the accounts by the Dyers is that they appear so consumed by the routine of correspondence with the outside world rather than with establishing connections with the place and people. Consequently, their record effectively diminishes the participation of other people in these same encounters and obscures the view of those who in some instances were a significant support for these missionaries who were finding their feet in an unfamiliar place. Considering the various ways that Bininj interacted with missionaries, a nagging question lingers about how the missionaries at Oenpelli continued to believe the best way to educate their children was to separate them from their families, languages and culture.

Careful consideration, then, of the material contained within these mission documents is vital for the insights they reveal about the intercultural spaces that were formed and sustained over time. Within these records are names, reflections, events and ideas earnestly scribed in time to be sent off with the next boat. They hold important details about the developing networks both within the mission and with other nearby missions. They also contain many names of Aboriginal people, which have been collated and listed in the appendix.

Even so, these mission documents have limited capacity to reflect the different ways and reasons that people connected with and attached meaning to the place that was known as Oenpelli mission. As Gumurdul and Manakgu show, the memory of the mission days carries profound import for descendants, whose lives were and continue to be entangled with the story of Oenpelli. This book fittingly concludes with insights by Ester Manakgu about her memories of growing up on the mission at Oenpelli. These memories put flesh on the bones of details contained within the mission record, which reflect the Bininj experience of engaging both with the mission routines and expectations while continuing the cultural and familial connections to the place. Well placed to conclude the contextualisation of the mission documents, the stories told by Esther situate Oenpelli within the larger story of the Bininj people and Gunbalanya – their place.

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