

‘We want a good mission not rubbish please’: Aboriginal petitions and mission nostalgia¹

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When Yulgi Nunggumadjbarr, a Nunggubuyu woman, described the Angurugu mission where she grew up, her memories were fond.

Everything was free not with money. People never been getting money yet, only just little bit ration. Fish, vegetable, sugar, flour, milk, tobacco ... Today is very hard. Before it was easy, it was good ... Work and get ration.²

Though rations fostered dependence on missionaries, her memories were overwhelmingly positive. On the Tiwi Islands, Barry Puruntatameri and Teresita Puruntatameri made a similar point about the goods and lifestyle missionaries brought:

Teresita: In the mission time, lotta people had jobs. Farm, they work in the farm, they work at timber, saw-mill, they made bush roads, picking up rubbish. A lotta people have jobs, but they were given \$14 plus rations. Because it was mission.

Barry: But that was better. It was better.

Teresita: Because ration got a lot of food and then there was \$17, \$14 whatever. And everybody enjoyed themselves, you know, people were happy.³

1 All spelling in this article is consistent with the original sources.

2 Yulgi Nunggumadjbarr, oral history interview with author, 9 September 2012.

3 Teresita Puruntatameri and Barry Puruntatameri, oral history interview with author, 23 November 2015.

Although Nunggumadjbarr and the Puruntatameris were among those who benefited most from missionaries – they adopted the missionaries’ religion and took positions of responsibility – they were not alone in their praise for the mission era. In my experience conducting oral history interviews with Anindilyakwa, Nunggubuyu and Tiwi people, I was surprised by the ways old people spoke highly of the missions. I was aware of the danger of mistaking what people thought I wanted to hear for their own views and especially of the gratuitous concurrence in Aboriginal cultures.⁴ But as I talked to older people I struggled to find anyone old enough to remember the 1950s and 1960s who did not see that period as better days. A number remain angry at how some missionaries treated their old people, silenced their languages and disrespected their culture.⁵ Their memories are mixed. Still, the majority would consider that time, on the whole, ‘the good old days’.

I am not the only one to be puzzled by such fond memories of the missions. A number of historians and anthropologists have been troubled by an older generation of Aboriginal people describing arguably paternalistic missions as an idyllic ‘golden age’.⁶ The issue is fraught. By acknowledging many Aboriginal people’s fondness for the past, as Tim Rowse argued, historians risk minimising the harms of colonisation.⁷ Some suggest that perhaps the older generation views the missions through rose-tinted glasses due to dissatisfaction with current government policies. Though dissatisfaction is strong, I am hesitant to dismiss Aboriginal understandings of the past as only ‘nostalgia’, especially where these understandings can serve as a corrective to stories of the missions that privilege non-Indigenous agency, that is, stories which cast Aboriginal people as only either victims or beneficiaries of the actions of missionaries.⁸

This article seeks to understand these positive memories of missions by examining a set of texts produced by that generation itself during the mission years: their letters of petition to the mission authorities. These petitions – in the form of letters – are an important rare example of Aboriginal voices within the missionary archives that shed light on the nuances of oral histories. I am not seeking to validate oral histories by whether they measure up to the archival record. Instead, I use the petitions to find continuities between Aboriginal voices from the recent and more distant past, to better understand Aboriginal experiences.

4 Eades 2013: 101, 176.

5 Rademaker 2014: 91–93.

6 Baker 2005; Cowlishaw 2006; Morphy and Morphy 1984.

7 Rowse 1988b: 28–29; Rowse 1988a: 57.

8 See also Riseman 2010: 183.

Looking at petitions deriving from three different Christian missions of different denominations in the early 1960s, I argue that this string of petitions indicate that some Aboriginal people felt ownership over these missions and had high expectations for the material, spiritual and social benefits missionaries could bring their communities. Though they express some concerns, they also demonstrate mission residents' sense of their own agency. Writing letters was part of the hard work people did to maintain the quality of the missions and extract value from missionaries. First, I discuss the question of nostalgia for eras historians might associate with oppression. I suggest the many ways people found meaning and expressed agency in difficult circumstances can explain, to some extent, fond memories of challenging circumstances. Then, I turn to the petitions themselves, finding these texts reveal consistencies with today's positive memories of the mission past. I also find that missionaries failed to grasp the extent of Aboriginal people's ambitions for themselves and expected Aboriginal people to be submissive and compliant. Both parties were in for a rude awakening.

Oral histories and the 'golden age'

Memories of idyllic golden ages can surface in what might be surprising places. This, I suggest, is in part due to the ways people have seized opportunities and made meaning in hard times. Dennis Walder pointed out nostalgia can be found, unexpectedly, among both oppressors and oppressed.⁹ Jacob Dlamini, for example, found black South Africans who remembered the apartheid years with fondness. Even his own childhood, he remembered, was happy. He argued that these feelings challenge the master-narrative of South African history as only redemptive struggle. They point, instead, to a more complex story where collaboration and resistance could coexist, even in the one person.¹⁰ In Australia, David Potts was similarly surprised to hear in oral histories among the working class that the Depression 'gave life meaning' and 'people were happier then'.¹¹ He argued that the popular 'myth' of the Depression as trauma functions to uphold community values but that personal memories of dignity in poverty are also true.¹² His critics subsequently pointed to the tendency of interviewees to be swayed by leading questions, the selectiveness of memory and the pervasiveness of nostalgia as reasons his evidence was unreliable.¹³

9 Walder 2010: 18.

10 Dlamini 2009: 81–82.

11 Potts 2009: 1.

12 Potts 2009: 4, 325.

13 Scott and Saunders 1993: 13; Spenceley 1994: 42.

There are many theories as to how people might remember hard times fondly. Older people might remember their youth as a time when they were strong and hopeful. People also make personal meaning by what they remember and how. For some scholars, nostalgia is rooted in critique of the present.¹⁴ But as Svetlana Boym pointed out, nostalgia's relationship to present dissatisfaction is complex; nostalgia is not necessarily for the past itself, but can be for unrealised dreams, alive in the past.¹⁵ Postcolonial nostalgias, for example, might remember fondly the solidarity and moral certainty of anti-colonial struggles.¹⁶

In Australia, the argument that nostalgia functions mainly as an Aboriginal critique of the present also has traction. Howard Morphy and Frances Morphy argued that Ngalakan people remembered the 1920s to the 1950s on the cattle stations as a 'golden age' to distinguish themselves from the supposedly 'wild blacks' of an earlier period and to criticise the present.¹⁷ On the other hand, historians Ann McGrath and Minoru Hokari found that Aboriginal people's experience of stockwork as meaningful work explained, in part, how Aboriginal descriptions of a 'golden age' on cattle stations operate simultaneously with memories of mistreatment.¹⁸ As part of a project of 'cross-culturalising' history, Hokari rejected what he described as 'the academic politeness of "we respect your story as 'memory' or 'myth',"' arguing that historians must recognise Aboriginal historical knowledge to avoid reproducing a power relationship that silences Aboriginal voices.¹⁹ Tim Rowse, however, expressed concern that such interpretations might minimise the colonising impact of paternalistic policies.²⁰

With regards to the missions, there has been similar debate as to how to explain the positive accounts from an older generation of Aboriginal people. Morphy argued that, as for the cattle stations, the violent period which preceded and the social disruption which followed the Yolngu missions of the mid-twentieth century 'biased oral accounts in the missionaries' favour'.²¹ Gwenda Baker also found that the mission time is now 'seen in a better light' due to dissatisfaction with current government policies.²² Gillian Cowlshaw concentrated on intergenerational difference in Aboriginal memories of mid-twentieth-century western New South Wales. The older generation, who do not remember their youth as marked primarily by anger and suffering, resist their memories being co-opted by a younger generation whose activism feeds

14 Todorova and Gille 2010: 7; Velikonja 2009: 548; Walder 2010: 10.

15 Boym 2001: xvi.

16 Bonnett 2010: 87. See also Dlamini 2009: 17.

17 Morphy and Morphy 1984: 473.

18 Hokari 2002; McGrath 1987.

19 Hokari 2011: 252.

20 Rowse 1988b: 28–29; Rowse 1988a: 57.

21 Morphy 2005: 42.

22 Baker 2005: 26.

on narratives of colonisation and oppression. She argued that autobiographical stories demonstrate a more complex experience. Yes, Aboriginal people were oppressed at missions and reserves, but they also formed respectful, productive relationships with mission officials and took pride in their work.²³

Cowlishaw's findings match what historians of Christian missions around the globe are increasingly discovering; despite missionaries' often colonising intentions, Indigenous peoples found ways to utilise missions in their own interests. Although missionaries may have longed for compliance from their 'flock' (and may have even believed they achieved this), Indigenous people were always agents, manoeuvring to reap spiritual and material benefits from missionaries.²⁴ Tony Ballantyne, for example, criticised the 'fatal impact' model of Pacific history, arguing that the Maori people 'co-opted missionary teaching' as well as skills, resources and ideas.²⁵ I am careful, therefore, not to take missionaries' sometimes paternalistic assumptions at face value. Indigenous people acted in ways missionaries could not always accept or even perceive. With these possibilities in mind, I turn to petitions composed during this period.

Aboriginal petitions in the mission archives

In 1960, some of the residents of the Church Missionary Society of Australia's (hereafter CMS) Angurugu mission on Groote Eylandt had a complaint. The superintendent of their mission had been sacked and replaced by the chaplain, a young man with little experience. Disappointed with the direction the mission's administrators were taking their community, they wrote letters. There are other similar writings from other Northern Territory missions during the same period. The archives of the Methodist Overseas Mission (MOM) contain a 1961 petition requesting the return of a sacked superintendent to Yirrkala. The archives of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (*Missionnaires du Sacré-Cœur* or 'MSCs') also contain a petition written in 1964, demanding the return of a favoured priest.

Aboriginal people have long turned to petitions to make their grievances known to colonising authorities, demanding humanitarian assistance, land or political representation.²⁶ They turned their new English literacy against the colonisers to challenge their impositions on their lives.²⁷ Their petitions also

23 Cowlishaw 2006: 188–90.

24 Elbourne 2012: 79; Samson 2004: 3.

25 Ballantyne 2002: 146–47, 151.

26 Attwood and Markus 1999, 2004; Barwick 1998; Curthoys and Mitchell 2011; Gamboz 2012; Goodall 2008; Horton 2012; McGregor 1993: 567.

27 Van Toorn 2006: 23; Morgan 2009: 45.

functioned to put complaints ‘on the record’ and to bind Aboriginal people together under a common political objective.²⁸ Petitions reveal Aboriginal people’s conceptions of their rights and the particular nature of the grievances they perceived colonisers inflicted. Many concern land and self-governance. The Tasmanian exiles on Flinders Island petitioned Queen Victoria in 1846, insisting that a former superintendent not return, presenting themselves as ‘free Aborigines’, not captives and, therefore, deserving of rights.²⁹ The residents of Coranderrk wrote letters asking to retain land and for the return of John Green throughout the 1880s and 1890s.³⁰ In 1887, the residents of Maloga Mission, including William Cooper, demanded rights to their land.³¹ Cooper also coordinated a petition to King George V in 1934, arguing for Aboriginal political representation. Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus point out that this request was an implicit assertion of Aboriginal sovereignty.³²

Ravi De Costa argued that Indigenous petitions show us how it felt ‘to represent oneself and one’s community in the face of great power that denies your claims and even your existence’.³³ Yet the petitions I have uncovered suggest that this was not always the case. Some petitions function primarily for their symbolic value, but others are primarily practical, expecting their complaints to be redressed. The letters I found are the latter type. Unlike those above, they did not base their claim on having suffered injustice at the hands of colonisers. An important difference is their readership: they were addressed to mission authorities, known to the authors, not the state – so were presented in the form of letters and were more practical in their demands. They did not make grand statements, nor do they claim compensation or relief. But they are political acts and shed light on the complexity of Aboriginal experiences of colonisation.

The Angurugu petitions

The CMS was an evangelical Anglican society and, as a low-church organisation, prided itself that it was governed by a committee of lay people, free from the church establishment. Its work with Aboriginal people fell under its Aborigines Committee, led by the Secretary for Aborigines, who dictated mission policy to superintendents in the field.

28 Van Toorn 2006: 135.

29 Reynolds 2004 [1995]: 7–9.

30 Barwick 1998: 272.

31 Attwood and Markus 2004: 27, 305.

32 Attwood and Markus 2004: 9.

33 De Costa 2006: 694.

The CMS presence on Groote Eylandt began in 1921 with the establishment of the Emerald River mission for children of mixed racial descent. From around 1932, Anindilyakwa people moved into camps around the mission. During the Second World War, the children evacuated the island and the CMS established a new mission station – Angurugu – specifically for Anindilyakwa people of Groote Eylandt in 1943. The new mission adopted a policy of assimilation, considered a progressive, anti-racist approach in its day. Christian conversion and training in 'civil' behaviour would, missionaries hoped, allow Aboriginal people to realise their status of Australian citizens and be absorbed into white Australia. In pursuit of these ends, the missionaries established a dormitory for children, founded a school and enforced church attendance and work through the provision of rations.³⁴

Anindilyakwa people witnessed a rapid influx of staff and resources following the war as the Commonwealth Government increased its expenditure on missions. From July 1942, Child Endowment payments were available from the Commonwealth Government for children in institutions, so the CMS began receiving 10 shillings per week per child in the dormitory. This was in addition to its annual government subsidy of £725.³⁵ During the 1950s, there was heavy investment by the Commonwealth Welfare Branch in the mission. Capital grants in 1956–7 alone covered the costs of purchasing livestock, sawmill equipment, sewing machines, a new hospital and houses.³⁶ The range of government subsidies for missionary staff expanded, from covering teachers and nurses (who earned £250 per annum for the mission from 1951) to a number of other roles. By 1959, Angurugu had three teachers, one nurse, an agricultural supervisor and two hygiene assistants – all attracting government subsidies – and was expecting further subsidies to be granted for an agriculturalist, nurse and mechanic.³⁷

Though the mission imposed strict rules and discipline, Anindilyakwa people could and did act politically to shape the mission. In 1958, for example, they boycotted the church to protest the mission's policy on monogamy, leading eventually to government recommendations the mission abandon its stance.³⁸ In 1959, they effected the resignation of an unwanted superintendent. Superintendent John Mercer cited 'ward complaints' among his reasons for

34 Rademaker 2014: 81–83.

35 Minutes of the Aborigines Committee 9 September 1942, Mitchell Library (ML) MSS 6040/4a; Chinnery, 25 March 1942, National Archives of Australia (NAA) F1 1944/193 Part 1.

36 'Capital Grants and Operational Subsidies to Missions, 1956–1957', NAA A452 1957/638 Part 1.

37 Gallacher, 13 October 1958, NAA F1 1958/554; Long 1963: 2–11.

38 S.R. Warren, 'Chaplaincy Report, January 1958', Northern Territory Archive Service (NTAS) NTRS 1098, Box 1.

quitting and was reported to have been 'in an agitated state over unrest among the natives'.³⁹ Their letter-writing in 1960, therefore, was a continuation of this work of political manoeuvring.

In 1960, when the CMS appointed the newly arrived 28-year-old chaplain, Jim Taylor as Acting Superintendent over the older and more experienced Arthur Howell, many Anindilyakwa people were angered by Taylor's appointment, believing that he was too young to be their 'boss'. They wrote, anonymously, to the man responsible for the decision, J.B. Montgomerie, the CMS Secretary for Aborigines in Sydney.

Dear Mr Montgomeriey. Just a few words from us and to you saying that all the people doesnt want Mr Taylor becuase we have find out that he is no good. All ready we dont wont him to be our boss put somebode as man please not young boy please. A lik mr Harris and Mr Howell a big man got lots of understanding and knows for people more about this place.

So I am tell to do something for us pleas if you dont well he is looking for a belting from the peopl here in this mission.

That if he is going to be the boss much to longer but wee dont want him to be boss. every body wants mr Howell when we had a meet last month because he is the only older man here in this mission and he knows more lots then other so wee all wont him and Mr Taylor can be our minister but we don't want him to be the boss he macks it to hard for the people and macks lots of mistak too and that what people don't want we want a good mission not rubish please so there will be more letters asking for your helpe.

May God bless and keep you all ways and tell wee meet in haven

Letter from all the people

At Groote Eylandt⁴⁰

The four petitions remaining in the archives share a number of themes. They drew attention to Howell's knowledge, age and experience: important qualities in Anindilyakwa culture. He was 'a big man got lots of under-standing'. They explained that 'he is the only older man here in this mission and he knows more lots'. They also raised their concerns about Taylor: he 'macks lots of mistak' and his mistakes meant the 'mission getting head [hard] for the people'.⁴¹ Taylor, they claimed, had started 'to change things aroun. And people doesnt like the way he doing things here'.⁴² He did not acquiesce to local people's requests as they believed he should. 'We ask him some thing that we want, and he say no.'

39 Morrison 1959, NAA F1 1957/1975; Bradford 1959, NAA F1 1963/1631.

40 'All the people at Groote Eylandt' to Montgomerie, n.d., ML MSS 6040/33.

41 'CMS Aborigines' to Montgomerie, n.d., ML MSS 6040/33.

42 'All the people at Groote' to Montgomerie, n.d., ML MSS 6040/33.

On one occasion, they had requested that he drive them to the Old Mission site, but he refused, making 'all people not happy'.⁴³ They also raised their concerns about the mismanagement of leadership appointments. 'We want only one boss in this mission' and 'not two or three boss.' They thought it a conflict of interest that the superintendent also be the chaplain. It was 'no good' for one man 'same time run this mission and same time work in the church'.⁴⁴ The petitioners emphasised that they represented the whole community, men and women. 'All the people doesn want mr Taylor', one wrote.⁴⁵ Another specified that 'men and women and old people don't lik mr taylor'.⁴⁶ Instead, 'man and woman like to be Mr Howell Boss'.⁴⁷ One was signed, 'From all the people at Groote'.⁴⁸ Finally, they included statements of goodwill; Taylor could still be the minister in their church. He was 'all right for church' 'because is good man'.⁴⁹ They emphasised that they were motivated by a shared concern for the quality of the mission, 'we want a good mission not rubish please'. Then, they closed with Christian blessings: 'May our God bless you all there in your office'.⁵⁰

Yet, the CMS did not welcome these petitions. Instead, the CMS Aborigines Committee doubted their authenticity. They consulted their most experienced missionary regarding the letters. He inferred that the letters were prompted by Howell: 'Arthur's conduct is not Christian and is not "cricket"'. It is not clear whether or how Howell may have been involved in the letters. For the CMS, the question was, how could Aboriginal 'wards', who they expected to be submissive and grateful, be so bold in their demands?⁵¹ Rather than exploring the ambiguities of the relationship between themselves and Aboriginal people, and the mismatch between their expectations for Aboriginal people and Aboriginal people's visions for themselves, it was simpler to dismiss the letters. Taylor remained superintendent.

The Yirrkala petitions

Before writing their more famous petition in 1963 – that is, the Bark Petition to the Commonwealth Government demanding rights to their land – the people of Yirrkala wrote an obscure petition asking for the return of a favoured superintendent, Rev. Alan Rankine.

43 'Aborigines Native' to Montgomerie, n.d., ML MSS 6040/33.

44 'CMS Aborigines' to Montgomerie.

45 'All the people at Groote Eylandt' to Montgomerie, n.d., ML MSS 6040/33.

46 'CMS Aborigines' to Montgomerie.

47 'Aborigines Native' to Montgomerie, n.d., ML MSS 6040/33.

48 'All the people at Groote' to Montgomerie, n.d., ML MSS 6040/33.

49 'CMS Aborigines' to Montgomerie.

50 'All the people at Groote' to Montgomerie, n.d., ML MSS 6040/33.

51 G.R. Harris to J.B. Montgomerie, 3 November 1960, ML MSS 6040/33, Box 28.

The MOM established its first station in the Northern Territory on Goulburn Island in 1916. After that came its missions to Yolngu people: Milingimbi Mission in 1923; Yirrkala in 1935; and Elcho Island (Galiwinku) in 1942. The MOM was similar to the CMS. It drew its missionaries from the same pool of evangelical youth. Some of them even dated each other. Like the CMS, the MOM was governed by a committee, the North Australian District Board. This operated under the MOM Board in Sydney. Unlike the CMS, however, superintendents had much more freedom to shape the course of the mission.

The Methodists were more moderate than the CMS and more open to Aboriginal cultures and practices, to the extent that, as Ronald Berndt reported, they faced accusations from governments of being too sensitive to Aboriginal traditions.⁵² This was perhaps, in part, due to their governance whereby superintendents were freer to respond to local cultural preferences. Nonetheless, the MOM policy documents on assimilation are almost identical to the CMS (it seems the CMS based their 1944 assimilation policy on the MOM's).⁵³ The MOM affirmed the 'aim of the ultimate assimilation of the Aboriginal population within the life of the Commonwealth'.⁵⁴ Some MOM missionaries, most notably Arthur Ellemor, wanted to limit assimilation to legal and economic rights, claiming Aboriginal people did not want cultural assimilation.⁵⁵ The MOM also opted, generally, for slow assimilation. Missionary Gordon Symons later commented that the MOM's slowness to force change in Yolngu society limited the mission's achievements.⁵⁶ Perhaps this was exactly what Yolngu people themselves wanted: to engage with missionaries, but with minimal missionary intrusion.

The MOM abolished the dormitory system in the late 1920s and replaced it with a 'cottage' system whereby they focused on a few key families who became permanent residents at the mission.⁵⁷ The disavowal of dormitories initially made the MOM ineligible for child endowment payments (though it did receive this payment in later years).⁵⁸ Nevertheless, it too received a large influx of government money through the 1950s in the form of capital works assistance and staff subsidies. Yolngu people, like Anindilyakwa people, quickly gained access to new Western goods, new skills and knowledge and educational opportunities. 'I want[ed] to learn more about the other life, *balanda* world,

52 Berndt 2004[1962]: 29.

53 Minutes of North Australia District, 2 November 1929, ML MOM Meth CH OM 313.

54 'North Australia District Synod', 1952, NTAS NTRS 52, Box 11.

55 Ellemor, December 1953, 3-6. NAA A452, 1955/368 Part 1.

56 Gordon Symons, oral history interview, NTAS NTRS 226, TS124.

57 Kadiba 1998: 99.

58 Yolngu mothers at Yirrkala were also ineligible as they were deemed 'nomadic'. G.S. Knowles, 2 March 1942, NAA A432, 1941/976; Rowe, 31 October 1941, NAA A432, 1941/976.

they teaching how to read and write', Wandjuk Marika remembered.⁵⁹ Senior Yolngu man, Dick Yambal also explained that the missionaries brought many benefits: tobacco, tea, flour, clothing and teaching people to read and write.⁶⁰

In 1961, Superintendent Rankine's contract was not renewed. His superiors thought him capable of 'spiritual leadership' but believed he lacked 'qualities of leadership of staff and controlling and handling the people'.⁶¹ In late 1960, Rankine was assaulted by a Yolngu man whom Rankine had exiled from the mission as punishment. Some fellow missionaries thought Rankine's mismanagement of the situation was to blame.⁶² The MOM looked for a new superintendent to 'stabilise matters'.⁶³ Rankine acknowledged his difficulty in 'finding the balance between discipline and control' and asked to be given another role, perhaps chaplain.⁶⁴ Instead, he was refused further employment at the mission in any capacity.

On his departure from Yirrkala, Rankine sold his typewriter to Wandjuk Marika.⁶⁵ A letter to the Mission Board, protesting Rankine's removal, was one of the first things Marika typed (he later used it for the Bark Petition).

AUGUST 14th, 1961.

METHODIST OVERSEASE
YIRRKALA MISSION VIA
DARWIN N.T.

Dear Mission Bord here is the word-

for you that we going to talking to you with this-

a letter what we want SIR? Yes this is the words now for you

please we want Reve. Rankine to come back again to here Yirrkala.

Mission because he is a good Tecaher here in Yirrkala that why we want - him to back again he tecahing us good and away and babetter to living we can not see this kind of man before ---- E- Like Mr. Rankine. All the people want him very much please Mission bord - and-sent Rev. Rankine back to Yirrkala again Please Rev. W. Chaseling. he going to staying with us for abotheranther 5 years Please all the -

Mission bords WE just let him go for holidays pLease all the Mission bord.

59 Marika 1995: 75.

60 Slotte 1997: 34.

61 Symons to Gribble, 14 January 1960, ML MOM 460.

62 Symons to Gribble, 22 January 1961, ML MOM 460.

63 Symons to Gribble, 5 August 1961, ML MOM 460.

64 Symons to Newman, 27 March 1961, ML MOM 460; Rankine to Gribble, 3 August 1961, ML MOM 460.

65 Symons to Gribble, 26 August 1961, ML MOM 460.

This is ~~swis~~ words ~~frm~~ from Two Old ~~Man~~ Man here is thir Name

The frist one Mawalan and Mungurawoi. this ~~2old~~ TWO old Man want Mr. – Rev. Rankine and his wife to come back again to Yirrkala Mission.

IF he going to Living us then this Mission will be very DIRrfrin law.

~~Tha t~~ That ~~wht~~ why we want him to come back again to Yirrkala Mission

Please all the Mission bord. This is from Mawalan and Munguraoi.

To your all please do that for me and Mungarawoi because ~~him~~ want him to come back again here to Yirrkala. . Mission please all the mission ~~ben~~ again all the Mission Bord. and all the people want ever so much fefor Rev. Rankine and wife and his ~~c~~ ~~EH~~ Children.

Because we are very interesting ~~fo~~ ~~him~~ for him that why we want him to come back again and staying with us. please Rev. ~~E~~-W. Chaseling. [??] all the other ~~m~~ Missionearse so you all can read this a letter – from this people on Yrr Yirrkala Misison IF not writing to us?

SO we can know. BUT we still want Rev. Rankine TO come again here?

Because he very good teacher on here show us ~~about~~ about the love of God and his son Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

I think that all the words for now from the people which the best to

YOUR all the Mission Bords Down N.S.W. of SYDNEY

Yours best friends⁶⁶

Marika wrote on behalf of Mawalan and Mungarawoi to C.F. Gribble, the MOM General Secretary in Sydney. He also wrote similar letters to Gordon Symons, the chair of the Board for the North Australia district and to the President of the West Australian Methodist Circuit ('it looks as though two of the locals have raided the typewriter!' the president remarked, presuming Aboriginal people would have no interest in owning a typewriter themselves⁶⁷).

The letter is bold; 'here is the word', it begins. The authors explained that they had 'let' Rankine go on holidays, but expected him to return. Rankine was a good teacher and the community liked him. Moreover, the petitioners were concerned that a different superintendent would make different rules. Like the

66 Letter to Mission Board, 14 August 1961, ML MOM 460.

67 Symons to Gribble, 26 August 1961; Sutton to Symons, 29 August 1961, ML MOM 460.

Angurugu petitioners, they emphasised that their views are shared by 'all the people'. They also emphasise their authority as old men, as is appropriate in Yolngu culture.⁶⁸

Symons reassured Gribble that he could safely ignore the letters. Mungarawoi and Mawalan, though influential, did 'not represent half the population of Yirrkala'. The men only wrote for personal gain (as if personal and community interests were mutually exclusive). Mawalan, he believed, was more concerned about payment for his bark paintings, which Rankine managed, than Rankine himself. Besides, they had not demonstrated affection for Rankine in the past; their relatives in Darwin made no efforts to farewell Rankine and Marika had complained about the exorbitant price Rankine charged for the typewriter. It was 'more probable that the matter has been organised by a missionary', he advised.⁶⁹ There is no response to the letters mentioned in the archives, but Rankine did not return to Yirrkala.

The Port Keats petitions

In 1935, Fr Xavier Gsell, the Administrator Apostolic of the Northern Territory, sent Fr Richard Docherty (MSC) to establish the Port Keats mission in 1935. Nuns from the congregation of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart joined the MSC priests at Port Keats in 1941. Most of the Port Keats community were Murrinh-patha speaking people, but there were also Marri Ngar people and people who spoke MagatiKe, Marri Tjevin and Marri Amu.⁷⁰ In its early years, the Port Keats mission ran on a tobacco economy. Aboriginal workers, paid in tobacco, moved into the mission, bringing family with them to enjoy the benefits of mission foods, healthcare and education for their children, as well as protection from settler and intertribal violence.

The MSCs staffed the missions from Sydney under the Father Provincial Mortimer Kerrins. But the missions were controlled by the Diocese of Darwin under Gsell (who became bishop) and, from 1950, his successor Bishop O'Loughlin.⁷¹ The Bishop made all decisions about staff placements and mission policy – there was no mission committee as with the CMS and MOM – but the Father Provincial could, nevertheless, influence decisions due to his financial resources and supply of staff.

68 Letter to Mission Board, 14 August 1961, ML MOM 460.

69 Symons to Gribble, 26 August 1961, ML MOM 460.

70 Furlan et al. 2008: 156.

71 Tatz 1964: 50.

Wanting to prevent the state from meddling in what he considered church matters, Bishop O'Loughlin refused government financial assistance for capital works on the missions. Fears of meddling from the secular government, however, did not prevent him from accepting government subsidies for the work of the priests, brothers and nuns in the school and hospital as well as child endowment payments for children in the dormitory. Like those at Yirrkala and Angurugu, the people at Port Keats experienced a rapid influx of new resources and opportunities to gain new knowledge through this government financial assistance.

Father John O'Bryan's placement at Port Keats in December 1963 was sudden. Bishop O'Loughlin needed to quickly replace another priest who he considered disobedient.⁷² O'Bryan himself did not stay at Port Keats long before he too was moved on, after only a year, in 1964 and relocated to a teaching position in Darwin. Brother John Pye remembered O'Bryan as 'young and vigorous'. His main contribution to the Port Keats Mission as superintendent was on the cattle run, relocating cattle to the Marchellindi Valley where there was permanent water. His successor, Father John Flynn, was very 'practical'. He ran an efficient mission and concentrated on securing the water supply, electricity, and improving the jetty and garden.⁷³

The MSC archives contain five letters with 18 names, petitioning Kerrins for the return of O'Bryan. The writers from Port Keats believed they had suffered greatly with the removal of O'Bryan. In 1964, they started writing to Kerrins in Sydney in small groups, probably families. They may have also written to the Bishop, who was directly responsible for O'Bryan's removal, but the diocesan archives are closed to researchers, so we cannot know for now.

Dear Fr Provincial

This is our first letter to you.

How are you getting on over there? We hope you are very well and happy.

We got no time to write you a long letter. But you might hear a lot from others. We couldn't know why Father Flynn close up We never seen a hard priest like this before. Old people and young people get sick tired and hungry because of Fr Flynn. We like Fr O'Bryan before he came. Do you think Fr O'Bryan had these things for himself? No he did not. He gave many good to all at Port Keats. He was grateful to us. We want him to be here as long as Fr. Docherty was here.⁷⁴

72 Leary to Kerrins, 10 April 1963, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart Archives (MSC) 0565.

73 Pye, 'The Port Keats Story', MSC 0567/B.

74 Docherty helped established the mission in 1935 and did not leave until 1958.

We asking you to let him stay long as that. Please Father, we are asking you to take old Father back to there. We will keep young priest at here, (Father O'Bryan). We got no time to write you long letter, because the plane is coming here at 2'o'clock. Good-bye and God-bless you.

From Albert and Mavis (Louis)⁷⁵

The petitioners at Port Keats were full of praise for Fr O'Bryan. According to the other letters, under O'Bryan, the people were 'very rich'. He gave them 'clean clothes and many good food' when he was 'a boss'.⁷⁶ The people were 'very healthier' and 'never got sick or thin'. They were 'only fat and strong'.⁷⁷ O'Bryan was kind and generous, a model of Christian love.⁷⁸ One even stated that O'Bryan 'gave his live to all at Port Keats'. Since he was so good to the people, they explained, they were happy to work with him and 'did what He asked', the implication being that they might not be so cooperative under other leadership.⁷⁹

Fr John Flynn, however, was everything O'Bryan was not. 'We never seen a hard priest like this before', they complained.⁸⁰ They were all 'poor and thin' because of this 'very hard priest'.⁸¹ The sickness associated with Fr Flynn may also have been an indicator that he was spiritually unsuited for the task. Flynn 'close everything what we need'. This had made everyone 'hunger and thin and poor on this Mission'.⁸² Under Flynn, people were sick and starving. 'Old people and young people get sick tired and hungry because of Fr Flynn'.⁸³ Flynn 'never give us a clean clothes or good food. We feel hungary all the time'.⁸⁴

The letters emphasised that their views were shared by the whole community. One mentioned that 'the whole camp' was 'talking about writing this letter'.⁸⁵ Another mentioned that Kerrins should expect to 'hear a lot from others'.⁸⁶ They explained that 'everyone in this Mission want Fr O'Bryan to be the boss'.⁸⁷

75 Albert and Mavis (Louis) to Kerrins, 5 June 1964, MSC 0565.

76 Francis, Dominic and Brian to Kerrins, 1 June 1964, MSC 0565.

77 Justin, Phillip, Marcellin, Andrew, Hilary, Jerome to Kerrins, 4 June 1964, MSC 0565.

78 Francis, Dominic and Brian to Kerrins, 1 June 1964, MSC 0565.

79 Vincent, Martha and children to Kerrins, n.d., MSC 0565.

80 Albert and Mavis (Louis) to Kerrins, 5 June 1964, MSC 0565.

81 Justin, Phillip, Marcellin, Andrew, Hilary, Jerome to Kerrins, 4 June 1964, MSC 0565.

82 Francis, Dominic and Brian to Kerrins, 1 June 1964, MSC 0565.

83 Albert and Mavis (Louis) to Kerrins, 5 June 1964, MSC 0565.

84 Dave, Wagon, Charlie and Matthew to Kerrins, n.d., MSC 0565.

85 Dave, Wagon, Charlie and Matthew to Kerrins, n.d., MSC 0565.

86 Albert and Mavis (Louis) to Kerrins, 5 June 1964, MSC 0565.

87 Justin, Phillip, Marcellin, Andrew, Hilary, Jerome to Kerrins, 4 June 1964, MSC 0565.

They also express goodwill, remarking that 'we hope you are very well and happy'⁸⁸ and mentioned the good work that they had been doing for the mission, 'this Mission is getting big, and young men a able to do good work'.⁸⁹

The letters sit in the archive without comment. There is no evidence of a response nor of any discussion around the letters' legitimacy as for the letters in the CMS and MOM archives. Perhaps they were simply ignored. The following month, however, the Bishop visited Port Keats. According to *The Canberra Times*, the Port Keats residents raised concerns about mining exploration on their land, but the paper made no mention of their concerns about their white 'boss'.⁹⁰

Common threads

The petitions are strikingly similar; Aboriginal people at three missions under different denominations and organisational structures raised very similar concerns and made similar demands within a period of only three years. Perhaps people from the communities had made contact in Darwin. Or perhaps the similarity of the petitions can be attributed to their similar experiences of Christianisation, bureaucratisation, education and modernisation under the one Northern Territory Administration and Welfare Branch.

The petitions were forthright. The Port Keats letters often mentioned that it was the 'first time' they wrote, yet this was not apologetic, as if the authors were unsure whether they should approach the Father Provincial. Rather, it pointed to the importance of their claims. The act of writing a petition presumes the right to make such demands. They did not seem to expect their letters to be ignored, rather, they wrote as if they provided the mission authorities with useful information about how to improve the situation.

The letters each express a preference for certain superintendents. Again, these reveal Aboriginal people's expectations that they had a right to choose or at least veto their superintendent. A good superintendent brought substantial benefits. There were the material benefits of food and clothing. There were also spiritual benefits; the Christian gospel could be a new source of spiritual power and knowledge. There was also the benefit of keeping order, brokering peace among rival clans and negotiating with white authorities. The letters also express a preference for superintendents who, in the eyes of the missionary

88 Albert and Mavis (Louis) to Kerrins, 5 June 1964, MSC 0565.

89 Dave, Wagon, Charlie and Matthew to Kerrins, n.d., MSC 0565.

90 'Tribal Concern in N.T.', *The Canberra Times*, 12 August 1964.

organisations, were compliant to local people's demands. The petitioners expected superintendents who would not interfere too much in their affairs and, instead, support them.

Turning to oral histories from old people today, old people continue to praise a number of their 'bosses'. Jabani Lalara spoke highly of the first Angurugu superintendent, because 'he used to handle community right way'.⁹¹ He praised the subsequent superintendent, Kevin Hoffman, but made clear to me that it was Aboriginal people, in partnership with missionary superintendents, who made their community flourish.

Kevin Hoffman's been a really good man that's really established shops that's got the money from every stage he used to sell and bring money in. And that's why we've got first shop on the island, the store ... And no government didn't help us, only missions made money, Indigenous made money, very hard. Bring a lot of them arts and crafts to sell to Brisbane, Adelaide, Melbourne ... We had no problem with missionary.⁹²

This high regard, however, did not mean they were uncritical of missionary leadership. Nancy Lalara criticised the way the mission operated: 'it was just rule-bound, strict things'.⁹³ 'Missionary were the bossy ones ... they used to tell them what to do and they used to punish them', Judy Lalara told me in her oral history about Angurugu. 'Some missionaries were good, some missionary were bad. They didn't like Aborigine people.'⁹⁴ But, as Pirrawaygni Puruntatameri assured me, although missionaries did both good and bad, 'good outweighed bad'.⁹⁵

Many old people at former missions also feel that they had ownership over them and are proud of their work in their development. Tiwi Island women proudly told me of their fathers who built the mission church.⁹⁶ At Angurugu, Jabani Lalara expressed disappointment that Anindilyakwa labour and hospitality on their island were never acknowledged by the CMS.

Even though this old people came here to do this job, great job ... even though in those days people used to work, missionary and the government people, you know, and for our people what they've done, they never think of give them reward. They should have reward for that, for finding this place to give 'em to the missionary.⁹⁷

91 Jabani Lalara, oral history interview with author, 15 June 2012.

92 Jabani Lalara, oral history interview with author, 10 December 2012.

93 Nancy Lalara, oral history interview with author, 29 April 2012.

94 Judy Lalara, oral history interview with author, 12 December 2012.

95 Pirrawaygni Puruntatameri, personal communication, 17 June 2016.

96 Oral history interview with author, 23 September 2015.

97 Jabani Lalara, oral history interview with author, 10 December 2012.

According to the old people, it was the missionaries who should be thanking Aboriginal people. This expectation is consistent with the demands of petitioners at Port Keats who wrote that priests should be 'grateful' to the community who hosted them.⁹⁸ In fact, missionaries themselves fostered the impression that Aboriginal people were their hosts and would continue to have authority at missions. Gsell, for example, believed that Aboriginal people should be made to think they had ceded no authority to the missionaries:

When a new mission station starts there is a lot of work to be done & this can only be done if the natives give a willing helping hand. To attract their help one must be cheerful. They are big children, they like to play and to laugh & if you can manage to turn the work into a joyful game, you are sure to get this cooperation. God loves a cheerful giver & so does the blackfellow. He considers you the giver & such you are; you are their servant, not their boss. If you make them feel you are here to serve their needs, they will give in, they become friendly & trust you. Never play the boss; they ignore & resist any authority. They will tell you: This is my land, this is our fashion, me do what me like.⁹⁹

Gsell worked hard to give the impression that missions would only benefit Aboriginal people and not require much from them. This is not to say that Aboriginal people did not resent controls when missionaries did impose these, nor that Aboriginal people did not see through Gsell's scheme, but it does help explain why Aboriginal people might expect their complaints to be heard.

The petitions also reflect an expectation of, and concern for, material prosperity. Over the decades preceding the petitions, people in these communities witnessed a huge increase in educational and medical facilities available to them and gained new skills and knowledge. The government payment of the Child Endowment and subsidies for missionaries (and some Aboriginal workers) through the 1950s allowed for a massive expansion in mission activities. The generation who wrote these petitions was the first to see their children educated in government-funded schools with qualified teachers and a recognised syllabus. It was reasonable, therefore, for Aboriginal people's ambitions for themselves and their communities to continue to expand over this period and that they might protest where they deemed the services they received to be inadequate.

Missionaries were also aware that Aboriginal people might develop high expectations. Gsell warned the hypothetical future missionary not to 'spoil' his flock lest they come to resent it.

To give to the blacks anything without reason & without measure is to spoil them. They come to look upon your liberality as something due to them & if you try to curtail your gifts they take it as an injustice & become nasty & threatening.¹⁰⁰

98 From Albert and Mavis (Louis) to Kerrins; and Vincent Martha and children to Kerrins.

99 Gsell Manuscript 'My fifty years of mission life in North Australia 1900–1950' [195?], MSC 0700.

100 Gsell Manuscript 'My fifty years of mission life', MSC 0700.

Whereas Gsell used the paternalistic language of 'spoiled children', Aboriginal people had reason to consider themselves entitled to benefits the missionaries brought. Aboriginal people had granted missionaries safe access to their land.¹⁰¹ They guided missionaries to the appropriate place to establish missions, making sure these locations would be politically suitable for a range of clan interests. Many worked as interpreters, positioning themselves in strategic and powerful roles between missionaries and their kin.¹⁰² They had also made an effort to learn to understand the missionary religion, language and culture. Given the importance of reciprocity in Aboriginal cultures, it was reasonable to presume that missionaries should be 'grateful' and give something in return.¹⁰³

The conundrum of nostalgia in oral history and Aboriginal people's mixed, but largely positive memories, then, becomes easier to understand when considering these factors. The mixed memories of mission frustration and fondness are in fact consistent with the petitions that express assertiveness and confidence as well as concern. These petitions align with a complex story of both oppression and accomplishment. They reveal Aboriginal people's sense of ownership of the missions and their work to manage the missionary presence at the same time as disappointment at the direction authorities were taking.

A rude awakening

At each mission, the authorities failed to act as the petitioners demanded. It was easy for the mission organisations to ignore the petitions. Aboriginal people appeared childlike through their use of English rather than their own languages. The spelling errors and large script buttressed paternalistic missionary thinking. The mission authorities also presumed the letters were inauthentic, prompted by non-Indigenous interests. The accusation of ventriloquism based on assumptions that Indigenous peoples, as passive victims or recipients of aid, could not possibly make their own demands – has long been used to silence Indigenous claims.¹⁰⁴

The mismatch between Aboriginal people's expectations and the mission authorities' response (or lack thereof) must have been a rude shock. At Angurugu, the missionary dismissal of the petitions preceded a new 'eruption of violence', prompting the Welfare Branch to send an investigator to the mission in 1961.¹⁰⁵ Through the 1960s, there is evidence that Anindilyakwa

101 Baker 2005: 17.

102 Brock 2005: 133.

103 O'Donnell 2007: 199.

104 Belmessous 2011: 7.

105 Long 1963: 2–11.

people became disillusioned with the missionaries; there was a revival of interest in ceremony and dancing, and decreased engagement with the church.¹⁰⁶ At Yirrkala, the missionary dismissal of the petitions preceded the more famous Bark Petition whereby Yolngu people directly challenged missionary policy. The failure of the petitions, among other things, made it clear to Yolngu people that missionaries did not view themselves as partners but as authorities over them.

The boldness of the petitions reveals also a mismatch between some historians' perceptions of missions and an older generation of Aboriginal people's own understanding of their experiences. Whereas the missionaries saw Aboriginal people as recipients of aid and evangelism and themselves as dominant decision-makers, historians should be careful not to take the missionary rhetoric at face value. These petitions and oral histories together reveal that, in some places, Aboriginal people felt considerable ownership and agency in that context. They also reveal that Aboriginal people did not always see the missionaries as a homogeneous group; they preferred to work with some over others as they formed productive partnerships. In the case of the three missions I examined above, living on country, no doubt, played an important part in this experience of agency, but so did the nature of Aboriginal people's relationship with missionaries and the benefits they could extract from their presence. Of course, the missions were sites of inequality and colonisation; it was the missionaries who claimed authority on Aboriginal land, attempting to change Aboriginal people, not the other way around. Yet the old people who experienced the missions also worked hard to ensure that their missions were run 'proper way', to benefit their communities in ways missionaries might not have perceived or acknowledged. This work included writing petitions to mission authorities, making their expectations known. Despite the challenges they faced in the mission days, even now, many continue to insist that those days were indeed the good old days, thanks to their hard work.

These findings also have wider implications for the question of nostalgia and memory. Personal and collective memory can recall different aspects of past – both true – such that the collective past of structural inequality can be remembered concurrently with a nostalgic past of personal meaning and agency. Nostalgic memory, I suggest, can be closely connected to lived experiences past and so can assist historians seeking to interpret the archive. Historians do not need to fear nostalgia contaminating oral histories. Rather, nostalgia sheds light on people's most valued experiences, for which evidence can also be found in documentary sources.

106 Taylor to Leske, 1 June 1970, NTAS NTRS 1098, Box 2.

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