

DUEL WITH THE TIMBER GIANTS

RESUMEN

Los periódicos “Times of Papua New Guinea” (en inglés) y “Wantok” (en lengua vernácula) se han convertido en la “conciencia periodística” de Papua Nueva Guinea tocando temas de vital importancia para el país como la corrupción, la mala administración o la explotación de los bosques por parte de empresas madereras extranjeras. Fundadas por los Misionarios del Verbo Divino (SVD) y mantenidos en un verdadero esfuerzo ecuménico por varias iglesias cristianas, estas publicaciones abren su espacio al punto de vista de la población, y así cumplen un eminente rol de correctivo ante los medios de comunicación comerciales. Una empresa maderera de Malaysia y el poderoso empresario Murdoch de Australia últimamente lanzaron sus propios periódicos, y su fuerza financiera pone en peligro el periodismo independiente de la “Times of Papua New Guinea”.

by *Bertram Otto*

The ecumenical publishing house “Word Publishing Company” is in trouble. Their two weekly papers “Times of Papua New Guinea” (English language) and “Wantok” (local Pidgin language) are experiencing mighty competition on the media market: A million-dollar-strong Malaysian timber company has started publishing a daily paper. The press freedom is now endangered. On top of this, Australian papers and TV networks are becoming the main forces as opinion-leaders of the people. The financial limitations of the Church-backed papers makes the continuation of their independent critical reporting difficult. A ruthless, competitive fight for advertising and readers is raging on the national media market. In particular the “Times of Papua New Guinea” has developed into the “conscience” of the country, treating “hot” topics such as corruption, financial and political mismanagement, or pointing their finger at other questionable things such as the ongoing overexploitation of the forests of PNG through foreign wood companies, with the support of government responsables. The newspaper has a balancing function in the overall foreigner-owned media scene in the country, because it tries to promote the people’s views and interests. In an article recently published by the German Steyler Missionaries, the founders of the Word Publishing project, the alarming situation has been strongly outlined. We have translated this article for our IB readers so as to draw their attention to the developments due to the ongoing media-concentration endangering the freedom of the press in Papua New Guinea.

For more than 100 years, the Steyler missionaries have been active in Papua New Guinea. Originally as pioneer missionaries, but today as an important element of the living Christian Church, to which the majority of the four million Papuas belong.

In the spirit of an unusually early ecumenism, the Roman Catholic Church (25% of the population), Lutherans (17%), the United Church (Methodists, Presbyterians 10%), and the Anglican Church (7%), work closely together, also in tackling special national themes. In 1975, at the time of independence and the searching for State identity, the Steyler missionary Fr. Frank Mihalic, founded the media alliance "Word Publishing", to whose structuring he also invited the other Christian Churches to take part.

Fr. Mihalic, who had already written/composed the first Pidgin dictionary in the world, was of the opinion that the rural population of Papua New Guinea had not really been included in the independence process of the country. In this respect, with the newspaper "Wantok" he launched the world's very first Pidgin newspaper - a great feat for a country in which 812 different languages are spoken. Little by little, from the House of Word Publishing, with premises in the capital Port Moresby, followed other publications: the four-colour printed magazine "New Nation", the weekly "The Times of Papua New Guinea" which revolutionised the media landscape of the country with their criticism not only of the one-time Colonial masters, but also of the indigenous decision-makers. Right from the very beginning the philosophy of "Word Publishing" was to intellectually and spiritually fight injustice, inequality, violence and environmental destruction with each and every one of its publications. Very soon however, opposition raised its head.

With the "new" age - as everywhere in the "free" world, the chasms of a misunderstood "capitalism" opened up: crime, drug abuse, environmental destruction. Powerful foreign companies lusted after the natural resources of the island, above all for the - apparently - unlimited forest land. To quench the criticism of their offence against the laws of the forest, large investments were brought in draw the attention of the media scene. Within a very short time these companies established and built up new media structures, which should squeeze "Word Publishing" - up till now the sole media organization in Papua New Guinea, run by local people and at the same time independent of government - out of the media market.

From that time forward, the greatest and wealthiest media structures in the Asian-Pacific area became bitter competitors of "Word Publishing": the media magnate from Australia, Murdoch, with his daily "Post Courier", the daily "The National" dominated by the Malaysian timber magnates "Rimbunan Hijau", not forgetting the first and only television station, the TV network "Channel Nine" owned by the wealthy Australian TV-magnate Kerry Packer. With professional pressure they introduced their influence, attracting subscribers, readers and listeners to their media, and so determining the climate of public opinion: All leading editors are foreigners, Malays and Filipinos, and the overexploitation of the forests is no longer mentioned.

"Word Publishing" with its - still - 10,000 copies of "Wantok" and "The Times", find themselves in an ever increasingly difficult position inasmuch as the "Forest Giants" continuously attempt to lure away their employees with tempting offers. The publishing house, which is debt-free and in the 90s even enjoyed some profit, is fighting for its life with the help of Catholic and Lutheran funding agencies in Germany and Europe.

To explain to the village dwellers of Papua New Guinea - in reality the actual owners of the forests - that the overexploitation of the riches of the country can only have catastrophic results for the future, needs a great deal of courage and tremendous action from the side of the Christians of "Word Publishing". They are counting on the reasoning - at least of intellectuals. But to reason is difficult in the face of the sensational press which continuously deflects from the main problems. In the meantime the precious-timber forests are being irreplaceably felled, and the country's treasures are being turned into furniture and plywood.

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