

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

EPW-17  
Boana Junction?

P. O. Box 628,  
Port Moresby,  
Papua,  
Territory of Papua  
& New Guinea

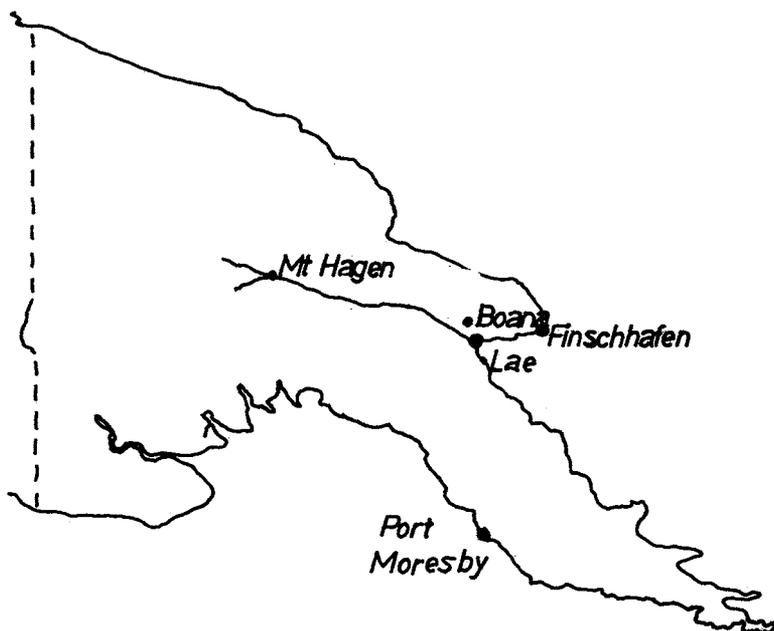
March 12, 1969

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,  
Executive Director,  
Institute of Current World Affairs,  
535 Fifth Avenue,  
New York, New York 10017,  
United States of America

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Communications are in many ways the most vital part of the infrastructure of the whole development process. Travel, letter-writing, listening to broadcasts from and about distant places, and trade, help to form that tangled skein of interdependence and awareness of outside relationships beyond the village from which a sense of membership in a wider community, perhaps of national identity, may grow. The same point was made in a rather more immediate way not long ago by a member of the House of Assembly from one of the most remote and inaccessible parts of the Southern Highlands, when he said :

"There are 200,000 people in this District, and yet it is like a gaol because there is no road access. To come to Port Moresby one has to travel by plane - one cannot travel by foot."



Nipa's problem, however, is but one, perhaps extreme, variant of a phenomenon that is familiar throughout many parts of the New Guinea mainland. The aim of this "Newsletter" is to describe how one small group of New Guineans is trying to overcome its sense of isolation from the rest of Papua and New Guinea.

Boana is a small government and mission station just off the edge of the Markham Valley and close to the fringe of the Saruwaged Range. Most of the villages in the area are set at between 1,500 and 4,000 feet above sea-level in what are often loosely called the "Lae



Boana from the air

Highlands". The Boana airstrip is on the top of a mountain, about 24 miles as the crow flies, or less than a quarter of an hour's flying-time by light aircraft from Lae.

The development process in Boana ~~was~~ quite typical of the process undergone by the majority of out-stations in Papua and New Guinea. As is so often the case, however, many of the details of Boana's early "contact" history are unclear. It is known that the German Lutheran missionary, Christian Keysser, passed through an area close to Boana in 1912, and that Singin Pasom, now a prominent leader among the Boana people, left his home at about the same time to work in Lae. There is some doubt as to whether German government patrols ever came there. Other missionaries and government patrols may subsequently have passed close by, but, if so, local records reveal nothing about them, and the people's memories cannot distinguish them from their successors during the 1920s and '30s. The first even moderately definite date in Boana's "contact" history, therefore, concerns the 1923-4 period when an Australian government patrol visited the area and appointed its official village spokesmen (luluais and tultuls) there.

The first Europeans to settle permanently at Boana were the Reverend and Mrs. Gustav Bergmann, who established a Lutheran mission station there in 1929. They brought a number of indigenous mission-helpers with them from the Finschhafen area where the Lutherans had established their first major bases in New Guinea. It was through the Bergmanns and their helpers that the Boana people first became conscious of a wider community beyond the surrounding villages.

Papuans and New Guineans were never as totally cut off from the rest of the world as many Europeans like to think. The people in the western parts of the mainland, even in what is now the Australian Territory, had had occasional contacts with Indonesian (specifically, Tidorese), and, more rarely, with Chinese and Malay, pirates, traders, slavers, and even Mohammedan missionaries, before Europeans came to the area. In the east, they were in more or less regular contact with the western Solomons, and some Polynesian outliers, while, to the south, the Kiwai of the Western District were not unknown among the Australian islands of Torres Strait. In a sense, this recitation probably only shows that Papua and New Guinea is not a "natural" political entity, but the same sorts of interconnections were to be found within the Territory as between its inhabitants and some outsiders.

The long trading voyages of the Motu along the Papuan Gulf from Port Moresby to Kerema lasted into the 1950s, while the Kula exchange cycle of the Trobriand Islanders and the Moka exchange of the Enga in the Western Highlands are still very much alive. Indeed, the Moka has expanded to include many more people since "contact". Quite apart from these more spectacular exchange cycles, many other trade-routes crossed the mainland. Unlike the long caravan routes of Africa's Arab traders, however, New Guinea's trade-routes were not roads or tracks along which individuals might travel vast distances, but long chains of many separate communities which exchanged valuables with one another. Gold-lipped shell and other ceremonial and symbolic valuables, pottery and some foods were passed along these routes, through hundreds of pairs of hands, far into the interior of the mainland. Stone axes, pigs and feathers went the other way. Steel axes, scraps of paper, discarded tins, and progressively more tattered clothing reached the Highlands along these routes well before the white man even knew that they were populated.

The pattern of traditional exchange reflected the structure of traditional society. Pre-contact Papua and New Guinea was no more than a congeries of probably 12,000 small communities, each in direct (and not always friendly) contact with no more than a few of its immediate neighbours. So unaware were they of people beyond their immediate ken, that many communities assumed that all of the surrounding land was theirs, and, if they lacked any immediate neighbours on one side, that was so for ever - a nice headache for today's land demarcation committees.

The Territory's fractured geography made travel overland extremely difficult. It is thought to have made communication so difficult after man first entered New Guinea that, whatever the first settlers' linguistic status, the various groups of indigenes became quite cut off from one another, eventually to the degree that about 700 separate languages and dialects emerged among them. An understanding of the "communications revolution" at Boana can only be obtained against this background.

Before "contact", Boana had no meaning at all in social terms. It was just one of many areas of indigenous settlement in Papua and New Guinea where small groups of relatives, wantoks and friends eked out their subsistence in a hostile physical environment, amid many

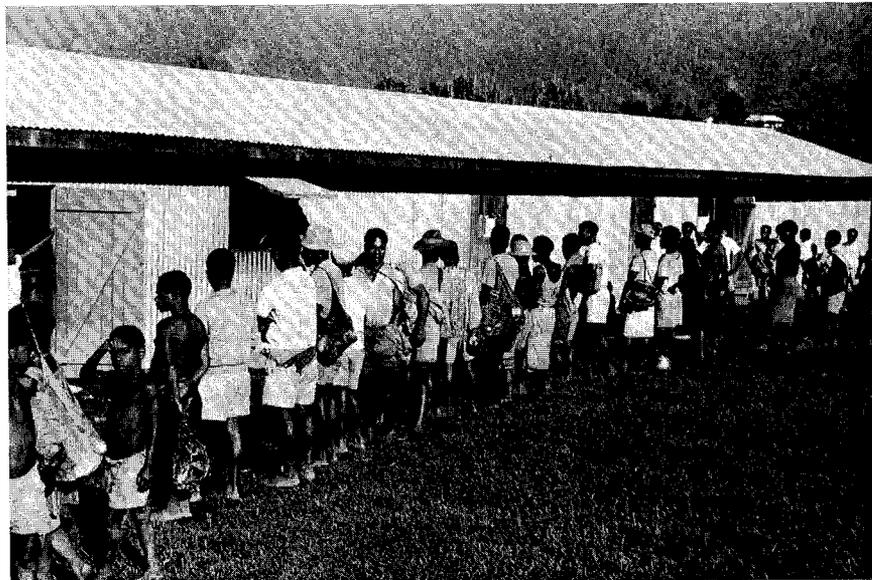
other similar groups, who were always "foreigners", and, from time to time, their enemies or allies, depending upon the particular groups with which they came into conflict. The immediate Boana area contained a multiplicity of language-groups of varying sizes. The entire Morobe District contained at least 150 languages, and 220,000 people. Some of these languages were spoken by several thousand people, others by fewer than 100. Close to Boana, for example, is a village, Banzain, whose people are unable to communicate in their natal language with any of their Wain neighbours. Bilingualism, therefore, was common; indeed, it was a necessity if neighbours were to marry, trade or settle disputes with one another.

The arrival of the first permanently settled outsiders in the area wrought a subtle change to the linguistic picture, for the Lutherans brought two new languages with them that soon altered the whole social structure of the area. Firstly, there was Pidgin, the emerging lingua franca of New Guinea, and the first new skill required of those who worked on European-owned plantations or were in regular contact with government officers. Secondly, the Lutherans brought the Kâte language of the Finschhafen area with them, a language which the Lutherans sought to foster as the official mission lingua franca throughout New Guinea.

Today, many people around Boana are multilingual. In addition to their own natal languages, which are often in process of displacement, or at least supplementation, by one of the larger local languages such as Wain, Naba or Erap, most of the people speak Pidgin, to communicate with the kiap and with other New Guineans, and Kâte for the mission. Many young people are also learning English at the government primary school, while New Guineans tend not to find it unusual that those among them who travel should pick up smatterings of the language in the area where they live and work.

Before Kâte or Pidgin could have been widely known, however, another change in the communications structure of the area was taking place. Access to the area had always been difficult. There were only two routes from the coast - both foot-tracks only, one up the Busu River from Lae, the other along the relatively even Markham Valley followed by an 8 to 10 hour walk across the mountains to Boana. In 1935, therefore, under the Bergmanns' guidance, and in return for modest pay (£500 in all), the people of the immediate Boana area constructed an airstrip suitable for small aircraft. Like many other Papuans and New Guineans, the Boana people saw an aeroplane before they saw a horse or a car. A modest vegetable export industry to Lae quickly grew up around the airstrip.

The Second World War cut right across the history of places like Boana. The Australians fled before the advancing Japanese, as did the German missionaries in New Guinea, many of whom were subsequently interned in Australia. The indigenous people were caught up in a war for and by countries of which they knew at best little.



Lining up outside the communally-owned store to be counted before the day's road-work begins

The Japanese passed through the area, as did Australian soldiers engaged in civil administration (usually kiaps in uniform) and military tasks. After the war, some of the people were held on suspicion of "collaborating" with the Japanese, while others received medals for their heroic support of the Allied cause. Both types of action were probably similarly motivated: in areas of heavy fighting (and the

missionary's house at Boana still bears marks of the conflict), the indigenous people who were caught up in the war probably tended to support whoever seemed to have control of their part of the country.

After the war, the normal business of the Territory's peacetime administration recommenced, and European private citizens were allowed to return. Increasing numbers of men left home for a few years to work in town or on plantations. They returned with stories and goods that those who had stayed at home had neither heard nor seen before. Development at Boana proceeded



Part of the road

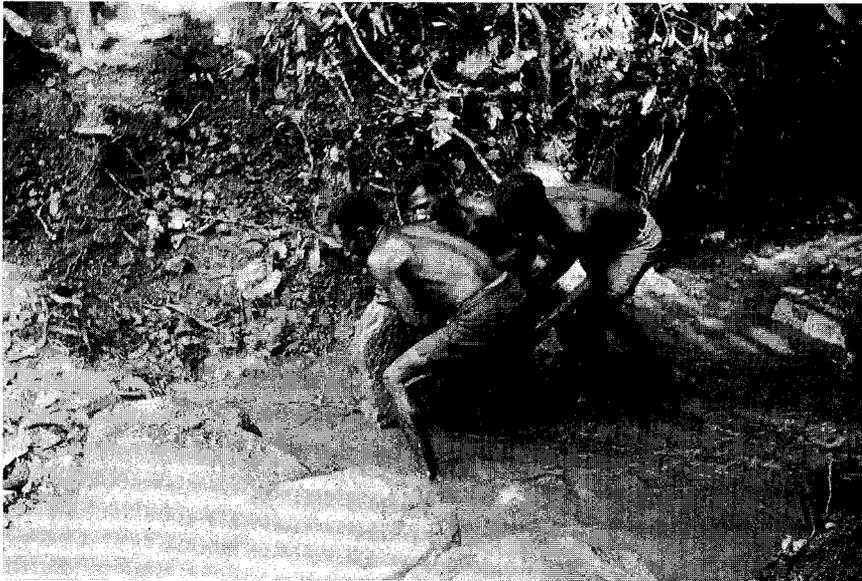
gradually, receiving a great stimulus after the Bergmanns' return, when they introduced coffee and then cattle (which had been tried before the war) into the area in 1947, to help the people gain a cash income. The mission and Singin Pasom, by then a prominent local leader, together with some assistance from the Department of Agriculture, were largely responsible for what development took place at this time. The area's economic development was, however, still restricted by the absence of an effective infrastructure for external communications; in short, a road.

Everything passed in and out through the Boana airstrip. Relatively little could be carried overland. In 1961, the mission handed ownership of the airstrip to the local people - the trade store and a herd of cattle also established by the mission had already been transferred to the congregation. The local people were, in a sense, virtually self-governing again, but too insecure about their tenuous connections with the rest of the Territory to face the prospect of Territory-wide self-government with anything other than apprehension.

The frontier between the present and the past was the Boana base-camp - a patrol post with a school, an indigenous agricultural officer, some simply trained aid post orderlies, a kiap and a cadet patrol officer, but without many of the trappings of a full patrol post (e.g. a hospital, a Commonwealth Savings Bank agency, a large police detachment, and a gaol). Many of the more specialised services of the central government were located in, and administered from, Lae Sub-District headquarters. The hope that separated the past from the future was the airstrip, and the developing industry that supplied Lae with European vegetables.

By the time of the first House of Assembly elections in 1964, the area's principal need for the future was a road link with Lae. The revolution wrought in Territory society by the few roads that have been built so far has, in fact, been so recent and so dramatic that the juxtaposition of the road and the elections should cause no surprise. Roads still remain probably the single most important source of both questions and speeches in the House of Assembly. The need for a road, as well as its political importance, were both quite clear in Boana's case.





Only a few miles from Soana, as the crow flies, is the long Highlands Highway (see map), which stretches from Lae on the coast to 100 miles both west and south of Mt Hagen in the Western Highlands. Apart from the main arterial road, many subsidiary roads have been built throughout the four Highlands Districts, all of them ultimately dependant upon, and linked to,

the main highway.

The Highlands Highway is the Territory's best example of a kiap-led "self-help" scheme. Almost as pacification proceeded, the Highlands' kiaps had conscripted thousands of volunteers, with the help of their traditional leaders, to build a road for vehicles they could not imagine. They used shovels and traditional digging-sticks, under the leadership of men who knew nothing of their followers' legal civil rights, and who did not yet know enough about the modern world to resent working for the government without pay.

In some areas, roads were built before pacification had been completed. Indeed, for some years the Highlands Highway became a special sort of neutral zone on which men might travel for previously unimagined distances, and still be safe, by general agreement, from both enemy attack and sorcery. There is even a rather moving description in J.P. Sinclair's book, Behind the Ranges, of a "first contact" patrol in the area between Koroba and Mendi, in the Southern Highlands, on which the kiap met two men who had attached themselves to one of the legendary Jim Taylor's exploratory patrols that had passed close by some years before, had accompanied him to the coast, and then returned home through hundreds of miles of hostile territory, to pacify much of the Wage area, build a house for the kiap and organise the building of several miles of moderately well-constructed road as a sign of their hope for the future.

Throughout the Highlands, whole villages moved closer to the roads through their areas, or built feeder roads to their homes without outside assistance. The familiar pattern of "spot development"

around an airstrip was quickly replaced by one of "strip development" along the road. Roads were built from one outpost to another, in a sense, from nowhere to nowhere else, until, eventually, many of these roads linked up, to become what is today the main spinal artery of New Guinea. Many of these strips of road in both the Southern and Western Highlands still do<sup>not</sup> provide a route out of their originating areas, yet their construction continues as local volunteers hear of the economic benefits that roads have brought to other areas, and in the hope that they will, in fact, go somewhere before the **people** become disillusioned with the attempt.

In a sense, Boana's road needs are relatively modest - just a short feeder road to the Highlands Highway. Singin Pasom, the member for Lae in the House of Assembly from 1964 to 1968, saw the importance of a road for his area. The Administration, however, did not deem it to be an economically viable proposition. It was not only accorded a very low priority on the Territory Works Programme, but a survey of the road's possible route resulted in Boana's designation as a "non-self-help area" in official eyes. The area is geologically much too young, and unstable, for the sort of road that volunteers might build, and economically not worth a more expensive style of construction at this **stage**. In other words, the central government refused to supply even shovels for the road's construction, and would do no more to assist the declining vegetables industry in the area, which the kiap estimated to be worth \$750,000 per annum at its height.

One of the more brutal ironies of economic development planning is that economic criteria are often applied in situations where rational calculation is impossible. Roads open up possibilities rather than solve problems. They allow people to move around, to set up internal service industries that outsiders cannot plan for. Throughout the Highlands, for example, simple restaurants have been established in many villages to sell **basic** meals of rice or sweet potato and meat to passing travellers. Many New Guineans now own and operate trucks to carry passengers throughout the Highlands. They have, in short, seized and created many opportunities to keep money moving in the area that most Europeans, and all Highlanders, would have thought impossible just 15 years ago.

The failure to build a road between Boana and Lae **did not just close** off possibilities for the future, but led to a decline in local incentive. The people lost much of their will to develop the area, for the prices they received remained low because of the cost of air-freight, while the goods they bought from outside were relatively expensive, especially in relation to what passed along the Highlands Highway. In a sense, the absence of a road served to decrease the importance of money in their lives. Once they had paid their council tax, and bought a few clothes and some imported food to supplement their diet, the Boana people lacked the possibilities the Highlanders had to employ money in furthering local development, through investment in trucks especially, or other goods that could not easily be brought in by air.



Singin Pason

Singin's failure to procure a road for the area cost him the 1968 election. He is still highly respected in the area, but known to be unable to get much from the government. Since the election, however, Singin and the kiap have expended a great deal of energy in a rather more direct, if somewhat desperate, attempt to build a road through encouraging the local people to help themselves in a designated "non-self-help area". Together, they have persuaded the Nawae Local Government Council, which embraces the Boana area, to allocate \$5,000 for the road in 1968-9, which has been supplemented by a matching grant from the rural development funds at the District Commissioner's disposal, plus a further \$1,000 given by the council to pay for rock-blasting on the proposed road route. In all, the road will absorb two-thirds of the council's capital works funds, or 42% of its total income, for the year. With this money, the kiap buys shovels and crow-bars, as well as food for the men and women who assemble each day to work on the road. In return for a full day's labour, each person who works on the road receives fish and rice to the value of about \$2 per man/week on the road - a change in diet rather than a wage.

Every adult in the Boana area is obliged to spend one day each month working on the road by order of the council. Between 100 and 700 people appear every day. Relatively few people, however, seem to know precisely what the legal requirement is, and the kiap is content to keep it that way. Because they are uncertain just how often they must work, the kiap and the councillors manage to extract a few extra man-days more than is legally necessary from the people. The penalty for not performing the legal minimum is erratically, and then heavily, applied, but still within the law, so that the maximum benefit, both as example and as warning, may be derived from those who go to gaol.

The people who live away from the proposed road, however, are becoming tired of the huge expenditures and physical labour required for one small part of the council area. Ultimately, probably 15-20,000 people could possibly be connected by feeder roads to the main Boana road, which will benefit perhaps only 5-8,000 people directly. The people outside the immediate Boana area do not like sleeping away from home, in the fragile, bush materials lean-tos provided for the labour-line, while the food they are offered is not unduly attractive to people who already have their own cash incomes. The road issue, then, is a very real source of friction throughout the Nawae area, and already some of the Naba people, who live several days walk from Boana, have tried to leave the council, or at least to make the point that they want something to happen in their area too.

The Boana road will not be finished this financial year. The money for the 1968-9 financial year was almost exhausted by January, and the remaining engineering problems are immense. In addition, the ethnic underlay to much of the discussion about expenditure on the road is rendering its completion increasingly difficult to market **politically** within the Nawae area, and, in consequence, even more so in Port Moresby.

Late in January, Singin and I walked the 4-5 miles that embrace all of the current, discontinuous road-making efforts in the area. On the way, he keened softly to himself, feeling "sori" for his people in a way that only the Pidgin expression can convey (perhaps "feeling for and with them" would be the closest English equivalent). Whole mountain-sides had caved in during the rain of the previous few days, and deep creeks had been gutted in the roadway. In a few places, the road had almost disappeared. Even where the road remained, the mud was deep. In the middle of the roadway were many mighty boulders, too large to lift, and too porous to heat repeatedly, then gradually crack with cold water, as had been done in the Highlands. There is presently not enough available from local funds for dynamite, and no one in the area who is capable of using it anyway. Finally, at the end of the present road is the Busu River - perhaps 60 yards from bank to bank across a raging torrent. The kiap estimates that the bridge required here would cost about \$700,000. And then? No decision has yet been made as to the direction the road should follow once the river has been crossed : follow the surveyors' pegs for seventeen and a half miles along the route for a "non-self-help" road, or go through a seemingly easier saddle in the range, without expert guidance, a total distance of between twenty and twenty-three miles to the highway through the Markham Valley?



No one who can use dynamite,  
and no other way...

The Boana road project is not unique in Papua and New Guinea. In many different parts of the Territory, "development" has as tough and immediate a meaning as at Boana. However, the Boana people are, in a sense, readier for self-government than almost any other people in Papua and New Guinea. The mission has taught them local self-government again, in a way the local government council is not allowed to do, and the Boana congregation now operates its own church, a herd of cattle, a profitable vegetable business, a trade-store, and the airstrip. The Boana people have, however, not yet re-learned self-reliance, for, when the Bergmanns left (about 18 months ago), the mission was handed back to the local people to run themselves. Unfortunately, due to local pressure, the Lutheran Church was subsequently forced to give in, against its better judgment, and post a European married couple to the area, to administer the church for a congregation that did not trust itself.

In some way or other, then, the people of the Boana administrative area manage to run most of their own affairs, often in their own ways. The kiap is suspicious, however, for he has had only three court cases to hear in the last four years (all in the last year). He has, therefore, threatened to "court" any local government councillor he finds hearing courts - the Westminster system allows self-government only in accord with certain narrow rules.

Yet, despite their neat European-style houses around the station and their lush vegetable gardens, as well as such modern appurtenances of village life as a commercial bakery, the people of Boana seem insecure about their future, as if they had but a slender lifeline to the outside world. Their present lifeline is the aeroplane that brings their mail and manufactured goods, and exports their coffee and vegetables, and takes the local people on their travels. Boana lacks the permanent link that only a road can provide.

The Pidgin expression "no gat rot" ("there is no road") has a rather special meaning. In general terms, it signifies that one's way is not clear, one lacks an avenue to do what one wants; it is an expression that refers generally to situations in which a person cannot solve a particular problem, or perform a certain deed. The ambiguity of the expression fits the Boana situation nicely : without a road, there is no way.

Yours Sincerely,

*Edward Wolfers.*

Received in New York March 18, 1969.