

7.4.5.10. MISSIONARY LINGUE FRANCHE: BOIKEN

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The Boiken¹ language with its 30,528 speakers in the East Sepik Province is the second largest language of North-East New Guinea. D.C. Laycock (1973) classifies Boiken as a member of the Ndu Language Family, the Middle Sepik Super-Stock, the Sepik Sub-Phylum and the Sepik-Ramu Phylum.

Bishop Franz Wolf, SVD, who was in charge of the Catholic Mission of New Guinea mainland from 1922 to 1931 and from 1931 to 1944 of its eastern part, decided in the first half of the 1920s to make Boiken the lingua franca of the area under the influence of the Catholic Mission. The Catholic Mission had begun its work in New Guinea in 1896 on Tumleo Island, in the Aitape Sub-District, and in the course of time extended its influence in an easterly direction along the coast and the adjacent hinterland to the vicinity of the Madang town area.

Following a decision of the superior of the Mission, the already available grammar and dictionary were duplicated. Textbooks for religious instruction, translations of parts of the Bible and a hymnal were printed at Alexishafen press. Some staff of the Mission, fluent in Boiken, were transferred from Boiken to Alexishafen, the centre of the Catholic Mission located about 13 miles west of Madang town, to implement the decision.

The attempt, however, failed in a short time and left only a few traces that old-timers remember.² Fr Blaes, SVD, who is now retired and lives in Western Germany, saved much of the old Boiken dictionary and grammar and hopes to publish this material soon. Copies of the printed and duplicated books in Boiken have yet to be found on the shelves in the archives.

In the colonial period prior to World War I German was used and taught in schools of higher education. At a later stage, the German government began to express interest in introducing the German language into New Guinea by supplying the missions with textbooks. The use of German is still very well remembered by old people in coastal villages where the Catholic Mission established itself in that period. But for religious purposes numerous vernaculars were used. To my knowledge, there is no comprehensive study in existence on the use of German in New Guinea by either the Administration or the Catholic Mission. Nothing is known of an attempt to establish an indigenous lingua franca during this period, but this may be because the archives of the Catholic Mission have not yet been well studied.³

After World War I, German was replaced by English. In the 1930s the Administration began to support the use of English actively in mission schools through supplying textbooks. In the transition period after World War I, the Catholic Mission used vernaculars almost exclusively in church and to some extent also in schools. This was done because there was no definite policy regarding the use of English, and Pidgin English spread rapidly, but its potential was yet uncertain and much debated.

In this situation it was decided to make Boiken the lingua franca for the Catholic Mission. The linguistic situation was known to be highly complex, a fact everyone had experienced. There was no adequate linguistic survey study available yet. W. Schmidt's (1900) summary of the linguistic situation of German New Guinea was at that time outdated⁴ and in addition he had made no recommendation regarding a possible lingua franca. No trade language with enough prestige to become a lingua franca was available.

In spite of all these difficulties, the need was felt to have an indigenous language as the lingua franca of the entire Mission to bridge over the language barrier. Boiken was the largest language known at that time. Extensive studies of its grammar had been made and a dictionary compiled, though nothing was published. It seems also that Fr Limbrock, SVD, one of the first Catholic missionaries to arrive in New Guinea, was much in favour of the use of Boiken.

The attempt failed because of the complexity of the linguistic situation and the approach in the missionary work. Indigenes east of the Sepik River very much resented having to learn another New Guinea language, whereas they regarded their own language as equally good or even better for the purpose of becoming a lingua franca. Missionaries outside

the Boiken area found it bothersome to learn another language foreign to the area of their activities. In addition, preference was always given to more immediate practical work. The Catholic Mission had little time to spend on thorough theoretical studies. Fr Kirschbaum, SVD, the linguistic expert at that time, who had an extensive knowledge of the languages east and west of the Sepik River, favoured the use of Pidgin English instead of Boiken.

At a conference held at Alexishafen towards the end of 1930, it was decided to make Pidgin English the lingua franca of the Mission, instead of Boiken.

N O T E S

1. Information for this chapter was obtained by correspondence from Fr Ross, SVD, who had been in New Guinea from 1926 until his death in Mt Hagen on 20 May 1973; Fr Blaes, SVD, in New Guinea from 1929-70; and by oral communication from Fr Boehm, SVD, in New Guinea from 1931 onwards; Br Gerhoch Eder, SVD, in New Guinea from 1928 onwards; and Br Venantius Michelkens, SVD, in New Guinea from 1934 onwards. To all of them my thanks are due for their valuable information. For other sources of information the reader is referred to the bibliography.

2. Fr Höltker, SVD (1945), discusses in some detail the lingua franca situation of the Catholic Mission in the time between the two wars. But he fails to mention the choice of Boiken as lingua franca. The Catholic Mission selected in Boiken a lingua franca, but failed to introduce it successfully because of the complex situation. This is clear from Fr Höltker's statement:

Die konkreten Verhältnisse und die aus diesen erwachsenden unüberwindlichen Schwierigkeiten haben der katholischen Mission in Neuguinea die Auswahl und Einführung einer einheimischen Sprache als Missions- und Verkehrssidiom verunmöglichlicht. (Höltker 1945:50)

3. Perhaps the Monumbo language (Z'graggen 1971, Laycock 1973), a member of the Torricelli Phylum isolated from the other members of the phylum and located in the Bogia area, was at one stage considered for use as a lingua franca. Höltker (1945:50, note 24) refers to this possibility. The extensive grammatical and lexical studies by Vormann-Scharfenberger (1914) also point towards this interpretation. But further inquiries have to be made regarding this matter.

4. Recent surveys of the area concerned were conducted by Z'graggen (1971) and Laycock (1973).

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