Using Historical Sources for Ethnographic Research

History has become a major part of virtually every ethnographic research project. For example, in order to develop an understanding of how a contemporary educational system came to take its present form, it is necessary to begin with a history of that system and its relationship to other important social institutions within the country. Similarly, if I wanted to understand why a particular area was receiving special funding today for the development of tourism, I believe it is also necessary to learn about the history of economic change in that area and how tourism fits into that overall social and economic history.

In an ideal world, researchers would be able to follow an initial study of secondary (i.e., published) historical sources with research into primary (archival) historical sources before beginning the actual fieldwork stage of a project. In the case of educational research in Papua New Guinea, for example, primary historical work would require spending time in research archives contained in both Australia and Papua New Guinea itself (and possibly Great Britain as well). For most of us, whether first-time researchers (and therefore likely graduate or perhaps even undergraduate students) or professional researchers (and therefore likely professors or employees of government or nongovernment agencies) the time constraints imposed by financial and professional limitations generally render an extensive use of primary sources in the initial research project impossible. I therefore begin this chapter by concentrating on the use of secondary historical sources and suggest that a careful consideration of these materials can create an adequate, if not ideal, platform upon which to generate an understanding of the most important historical trends affecting the special area of research interest.

Secondary Sources for Historical Research

In my own initial Ph.D. study, I was forced to rely extensively upon secondary sources, saving primary historical research for a later period of postdoctoral work. Luckily, Papua New Guinea had a relatively rich secondary literature on the history of education available to me prior to field research. Obviously, there will be
considerable differences in relation to the amount of secondary historical material available to researchers depending upon the project topic, the site at which the author is doing the preparatory work, and the developing or industrialized country that contains the project site. Going to graduate school in Canada, for example, did not make it easy to find material concerning the topic of education in Papua New Guinea within local libraries. It might require some “digging” to ferret out the resources that are available in your home country (a task that should be somewhat easier for those who also live in the country in which they are doing their research, unless of course they live in a more remote part of that country). Even though I was located at a large university in Canada (McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario) with a good general library, I was still forced to travel to another even larger Canadian city (Toronto, Ontario) in order to make use of its specialized education libraries (attached to various educational institutions there). Many countries have interlibrary loan systems, but this may not prove to be sufficient if scholars do not yet know what sources they need to ask to borrow (a common enough situation at the beginning of a project). Anyone having difficulty obtaining at least six to twelve good secondary historical publications about the topic they are interested in should consider whether they can afford the time and expense of a trip to an urban center with a larger library system. Alternatively, if that is not feasible, I would suggest that you build three or four weeks into your field research that will initially be devoted to using the research country’s university library system in order to gather basic information about the history of your topic in that country. This is a feasible option for most researchers, even those working in developing countries, as it is normally necessary to fly into either the national capital or one of the major city of a developing country in order to gain eventual access to one’s (possibly) more remote field research site. Local academics are ordinarily extremely helpful, especially to neophyte researchers, and can generally be counted upon to point out the classic historical and contemporary works available in their libraries and bookstores. Don’t be shy about asking for their help—they want you to understand what you are doing so that you can properly contribute to the knowledge base of their country.

To use my own study as an example, the secondary literature on the history of education in Papua New Guinea alerted me to the notion that there had been three main phases of educational policy in that country (corresponding roughly to three political phases): (1) 1873–1945: an era of almost total missionary control over rudimentary education for the purpose of Christian “salvation,” (2) 1945–1960: a period of rapidly expanding the primary school system for the purposes of a “basic education” for the masses, during which time the colonial government and missionaries began to work in a closer partnership, and (3) 1960 until the present: a phase in which first the colonial government of Australia and then the independent government of Papua New Guinea (post-1975) took over primary responsibility for the total educational system (see Fife 1995b, 1996). It was during this last period that large amounts of money were invested in the rapid expansion of the secondary and tertiary levels of education in order to prepare an educated “elite” for independence in 1975. An important impact of this overall trend was the creation of an educational system that fueled regional, urban/rural,