

Makarai

language and exchange in early encounters in New Guinea, 1871-83

Chris Ballard

Abstract

Communication in the process of early cross-cultural encounters has commonly involved the use in combination of language, gesture and the exchange of material items. A particularly useful illustration of the complex interactions amongst these communicative elements is the extended encounter between 1871 and 1883 involving the Russian anthropologist Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay and the people of Bongu, Gorendu and Gumbu villages, in what is now Madang Province in Papua New Guinea. The strong likelihood that Maclay was the earliest direct extra-local contact in this area, the extensive documentation by Maclay and others of the nature and consequences of his interactions with local communities, and his use of a distinctive Russian vocabulary allow us to reconstruct with some precision the extent of adoption and diffusion of terms and material items introduced through this encounter. This paper describes the results of research conducted in collaboration with linguist Carol Priestley and Russian scholar Elena Govor.