

Through Each Other's Eyes.

How the Hungarian Naturalist Lajos Bíró saw German Missionaries in New Guinea, and Vice Versa

By Gábor Vargyas

The name Lajos Bíró (1856–1931) and the Bíró Collection in the Museum of Ethnography, Budapest will sound familiar to Oceanists and to collectors who appreciate the art of Oceania, although few will be able to match his name to a face, an object or a story. It is generally known that Bíró was a Hungarian naturalist (entomologist and ornithologist), who spent six years (1896–1901) in what was then German New Guinea, collecting items of natural historical and ethnological interest on behalf of the Hungarian National Museum.¹ There may be some people who know that the most famous part of Bíró's collection came from the area around Astrolabe Bay (Friedrich-Wilhelmshafen, now Madang),² although he also made longer or briefer sojourns in the Huon Gulf region (Tami Islands, Sattelberg, the Yabim territory), New Ireland, the French Islands (now Vitu Islands), Berlinhafen (now Aitape) and its environs, and the area around Potsdamhafen-Bogia. The small number of specialists who happen to read German—if such people still exist in today's predominantly Anglophone world!—may even be aware of the two monumental bilingual (Hungarian-German) “descriptive catalogues” Bíró published at either side of the turn of the century (Bíró 1899; 1901), which are now considered true bibliophilic rarities. But this is probably the furthest extent of knowledge that anybody has about Bíró.

It was precisely for this reason, among others, that I published, some thirty years ago, a volume entitled *Data on the Pictorial History of North-East Papua New Guinea*, in which I attempted to outline the circumstances surrounding Bíró's life in German New Guinea. The work featured 69 photos taken by Bíró and was organised into three thematic sections: the colonial “state apparatus” and the world of European (German) officials and their servants; relations between white colonialists and “black” women and their “marriages of convenience”; and misunderstandings and conflicts between the colonisers and the colonised, including punitive expeditions. In his popular writings and in his private letters that were published, Bíró shared an unparalleled wealth of interesting insider information with the Hungarian general public of his day: one example that still stands out today is his detailed description of his own marriages—he had three “wives”!

Changing the perspective somewhat, below I not only present Bíró's view of the situation at the time, but also—with the help of a singular document—the way Bíró (in his capacity as a “curious” naturalist) was seen by contemporary officials resident in German New Guinea.

¹ The Department of Ethnography at the Hungarian National Museum later broke away to become the independent Museum of Ethnography. Bíró regularly sent home consignments of the items he had collected, and the fee was calculated by the museum and sent back to him by post. Bíró thus lived for six years in New Guinea from the money he obtained in exchange for his objects.

² In Astrolabe Bay, Bíró continued the work of collecting that had been commenced by another Hungarian researcher, Samuel Fenichel (1868–1893), who had died in New Guinea a few years earlier.



Figure 1: “Home, sweet home in New Guinea”. Bíró with his servants in Friedrich-Wilhelmshafen, around 1896.

Scene one takes us to the Lutheran mission in Simbang, close to Finschhafen (Morobe Province),³ where Bíró spent roughly a year between 1898 and 1899 collecting ethnographic and natural historical objects. What little he wrote about the living conditions here was concerned mostly with the missionaries residing at the “*pietissima-orthodoxissima*” mission station that hosted him. The following excerpt from a letter he wrote in Simbang, dated 18 August 1898, speaks for itself: “Now I have come among a different people, the Yabim *namalas* (men). These are also no worse than the *tamols*.⁴ And it is not the cannibalistic brown savages who are frightful, but the non-cannibalistic white savages. Here I have just a few of them in my company, but I have already had my fill of them. There are only three missionaries here, and they have it in their mind to convert me. The other day, one of them warned me, ‘in my own interest,’ to take active part in their worshipping. These pious souls worship the Lord eleven times a day, six times before and after meals, then morning, noon and night, and twice more in the Yabim language. I expected them to praise me for religiously praying six times, or even seven, if they managed to catch hold of me after supper, but now I have to admit that my soul was close to danger! Back at home, I never had to thank God for my fine Hungarian food as much as I do here for the same old bland boiled beef and taro, day in, day out. I tried to convince them that, look, we have different callings, and different spiritual needs. A missionary's soul is in need of fatty victuals, but a naturalist like myself can make do with lean spiritual

³ The Neuendettelsau Mission began operating in Finschhafen in 1886.

⁴ “*Tamol*”: the local name for “people” in Astrolabe Bay, where Bíró had been stationed earlier for a substantial period of time.

nourishment. They should just leave me to my own modest vocation, for I would never try to persuade them to go birdwatching or insect-collecting ten times a day. Their sensitivities were deeply offended by my comparing the suffocation of snakes and frogs with their own lofty calling. Eventually I found some refuge in telling them that I was a Calvinist. I prefer that religion. But I am still afraid that in the end, for the sake of peace, I will have to become a Lutheran! [...] The fact that our little country has so many faiths is perhaps good for learning religious tolerance and how not to molest each other because of it. In all my travels in the great wide world, though I admire the power of the English, the Dutch and the Germans, which has spread to distant oceans, wherever I go I can see that I have but one reason to give thanks to the Lord God every day: for creating me and keeping me Hungarian!” (Bíró, n.d. [1923], 118–119)

And now for the view from the other side! How was Bíró viewed by German missionaries (albeit not exactly the same ones)? Scene two is in Astrolabe Bay, and the author is a certain Albert Hoffmann, missionary with the Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft,⁵ who recalls “Professor Birolajus” in his “Memoirs.”⁶ The background to this story comes from a letter Bíró wrote on 10 April 1897: “In my current consignment I am sending only zoological objects in 12 cases [...] In the package of birds’ nests there are also two cassowary eggs, which are no good as zoological items, only as ornaments. I had to saw one of them in two, because it contained a complete embryo, and I had already damaged it so badly that I did not expect it to survive. *I warmed its companion in my bed, and on the third day the little cassowary hatched; it now rushes about at my feet like a little puppy. Such a delightful little creature. We shall see if it remains as loyal as a dog.*” [Bíró, n.d. [1923], 98–99. Italics by the present author.]

The same episode was described by Albert Hoffmann in a slightly different light: “A curious figure, rather comical than one to be taken seriously, was the Hungarian Professor Birolajus. The man had come to New Guinea in order to study, as he put it, the smallest of animals. By this he meant the vermin with which the natives are utterly infested: lice, fleas and bugs. He claimed to have discovered several new types of these otherwise worthless creatures. Professor Birolajos,⁷ meanwhile, was so enamoured of them that he was rumoured to have nurtured cultures of them on his own head. Whenever he was in company, he was often mockingly asked, ‘Professor, surely you haven’t ... ?’ to which he customarily replied, ‘In God’s name I never bring lice and fleas into such company!’

“The professor was particularly intent on my vocabulary, and was an almost daily guest in my house, asking me about all manner of things, which he naturally utilised for his own ends. One day a native brought me a cassowary egg, offering it to me for sale. I thought I would do the professor a kindness, so I went with the native to his little house and told him he could buy the egg. At first he refused: ‘I not interested in dead egg. The Negro can bring me a live cassowary. Then I give to him much money.’ I told this to the native. He scratched behind his ear and said that would be deadly. The cassowary is dangerous with its young around, and can do a man serious injury. Then suddenly the native grabbed the cassowary egg, held it to his ear and cried with joy, ‘Inside there is a young cassowary. The White should make the bird come out.’

⁵ The Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft established its first mission station in Friedrich-Wilhelmshafen (Madang) in 1887 and remained active in Astrolabe Bay throughout its history. The Catholic Steyler Mission also began operating here in 1895.

⁶ The “Memoirs” of Albert Hoffmann, with the section on Lajos Bíró, were brought to my attention by the late Pastor Rufus Pech, then a member of the Martin Luther Seminary in Lae, Papua New Guinea, in a letter he wrote to me on 13 November 1986, as a generous and spirited response to the details given in my book, *Data on the Pictorial History of North-East Papua New Guinea*, a copy of which I had sent to him.

⁷ Albert Hoffmann knew no Hungarian, which explains the inconsistency of his spelling.

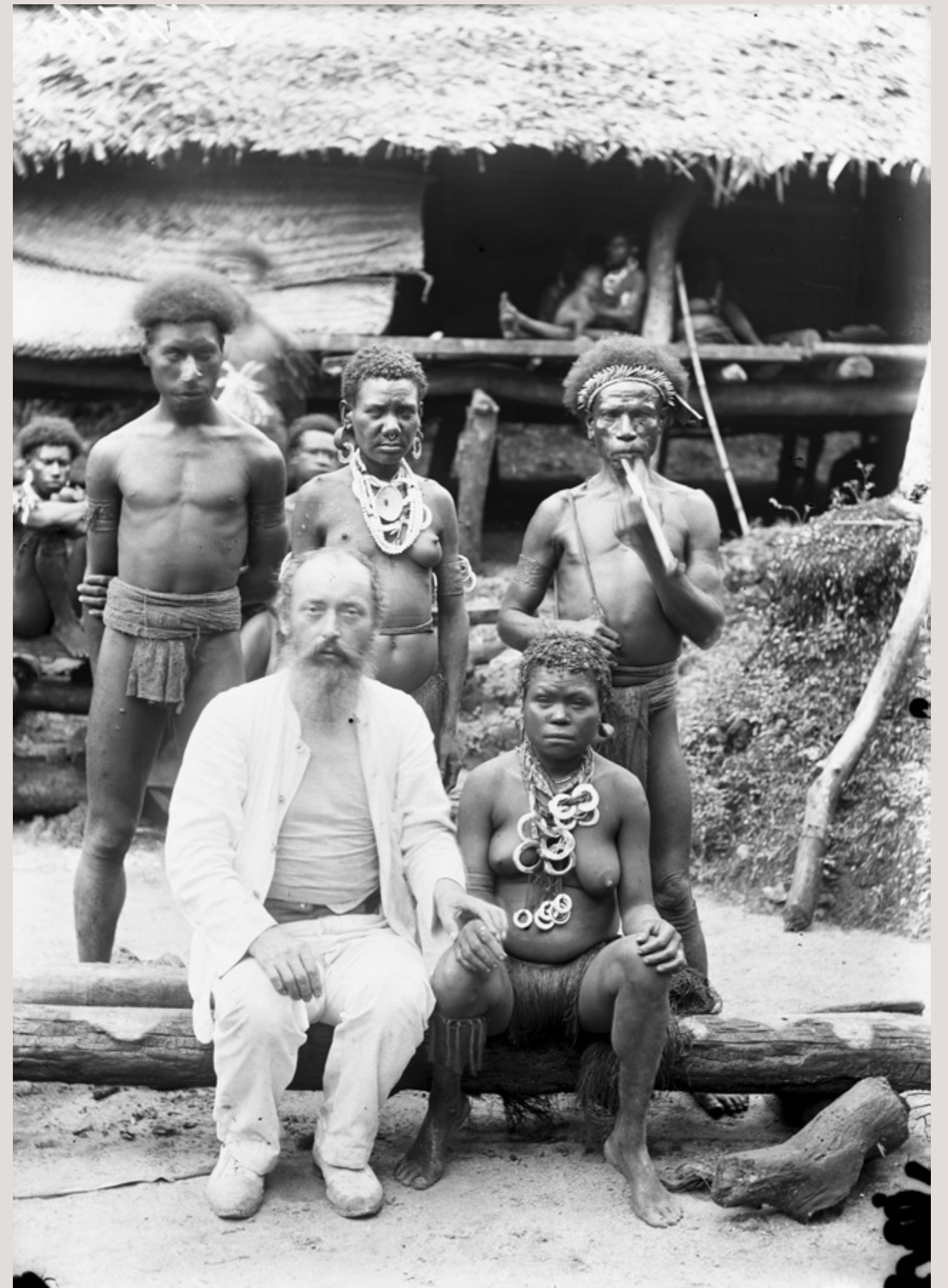


Figure 2: “My prospective relatives on Bilbil Island”. Bíró with his third wife. Astrolabe-Bay, unknown date, between 1896-1901.

“I told this to the professor, and he bought the egg. For four days I did not see his face. On the fifth day, at the break of dawn, he knocked on my bedroom, and when I opened it at last he shouted, beaming with joy, “Herr Missionar, the native give to me good advice. I lie four days in bed with egg, and honestly today morning the egg said crack and out come a young cassowary.’ That was not the worst egg a professor of science has ever incubated!” (Hoffmann, 1948: 157–158)⁸

Such was the researcher and the man—Lajos Bíró was thoroughly committed to science. As a closing word, although the ethological concept of “imprinting” cannot be attributed to him, the case of the cassowary chick hatched from his own bed took place approximately contemporaneously with the similar phenomenon and experiments discovered, in the wake of nineteenth-century precedents (Douglas Alexander Spalding), by Oskar Heinroth, and given scientific proof and popularity half a century later by the Nobel laureate Konrad Lorenz. Bíró’s ethnographic notebooks and photographs, together with the objects he collected in German New Guinea (in particular those from the Huon Gulf, which are as yet mostly unpublished), constitute an ensemble of inestimable value, which has still been only partly properly investigated.⁹

⁸ Pastor Rufus Pech added the following comment in his letter: “Hoffmann was a former miner, who was trained as a missionary pastor, and worked in the Bogadjim (Stephansort) area from 1892–1904. In his autobiography he appears as a man with broader sympathies than many of his co-religionists, such as those caricatured by Lajos [Bíró], among the Neuendettelsau missionaries at Finschhafen. From the above account it is clear that Hoffmann could hold his own with the colonial gentlemen of the day. He obviously liked Bíró, even while he looked down on him and did not always treat him seriously.”

⁹ For the Huon-Gulf objects, see: Bodrogi 1949; 1955; 1956; 1961; Bíró Anna 2013; Vargyas 2008.

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Figure 3: The catholic mission “Ad spiritum sanctum” in Bogia village, near Potsdamhafen.

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