

The 2005 South Kasai stamp issues and the activities of their colourful creator

In August 2005 I was looking at advertisements placed on e-bay, using “stamps” as the *category* with a search for “South Kasai”. To my surprise, I found “South Kasai 2005 Pictorials, mint”. It is common knowledge that the Autonomous State of South Kasai existed briefly (from September 1960 until December 1961) and in this time it issued stamps that are listed in the COB. The starting price was low, \$US12, and there had been no bids. I was fully aware that this was most likely not to be a genuine issue, but thought it would be a good conversational piece in a display! At \$3 per stamp, I considered that I was not being foolish. I entered a bid of \$US 12 and won. Here are those stamps:



Figure 1. The 2005 Pictorial Issue

When I received e-mail notification that my bid had been successful, I contacted the seller (The Imperial Stamp Co. Ltd. of Auckland, New Zealand) through e-bay to enquire if there were other issues available. There was one, on sale at just \$US 3,50 and which is shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. The 2005 Leopard Issue

In the same e-mail, I asked about used examples on cover. A reply came back, telling me “I’ve also asked SK Post to send you a cover”. It came two weeks later in the envelope with the mint set of the Leopards issue.



Figure 3 Stamps of the 2005 South Kasai issues “used” on cover

When put together, all the elements on this envelope point to fakery. The envelope is from surplus unrelated old stock. The printed language is English. The postmark has no resemblance to any

used in the Congo. Addressed to “Monsieur Charles Lloyd” implies a francophone origin, but why (if genuine) did it not come directly to me?

We have every reason to suspect that these stamps were not issued by a genuine postal authority. The Pictorial Issue (Figure 1) was included in Dufrene’s articles on South Kasai stamps (1). He lists it as the 10th issue and last postal issue, and states that it is totally fictitious (*tout à fait fictive*). Mistakes in accents and genders led him to conclude that this “reflects a profound ignorance of French and a fault which would certainly not be committed in a francophone country or a printer of French language.” However, the *accent tréma*, which is not present in Kasai (ie *Kasai*) and cited by Dufrene as evidence, is not present on the stamps (COB20 -28 & COB BL1) printed by Courvoisier SA in Switzerland. Errors in accents are not proof of origin though gender errors provide stronger evidence.

Dufrene points an accusing finger at Bruce Henderson of the Imperial Stamp Company, New Zealand as the creator on the basis that the invoicing address is the same as that for other “Cinderella” issues. It is circumstantial evidence to which further evidence should be added to change a suspicion to a certainty.

I find the legends on the 5F (*Leopard, Mbuji-Maya*) and 8,50F (*Rhinoceros blancs, Mbuji-Maya*) strange, suggesting the issue was not approved by any indigenous authority. For the 25F it is *Mbuji-Maya, Sud-Kasai* and for the 90F it is *Elephants africaines, Sud-Kasai*. Leaving aside grammatical mistakes, why should the capital city used and not the state on the 5F and 8,50F? It is not logical.

Dufrene does not have the Leopard issue in his compilation. Following his classification, it would be the 11th issue.

The envelope in which the stamps were sent provides evidence of a link to Bruce Henderson.

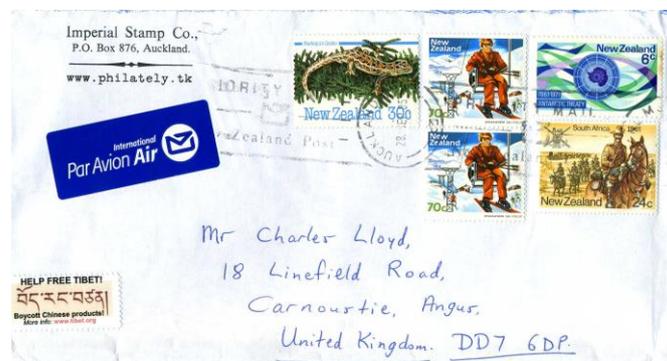


Figure 4. The envelope in which the stamps and cover were sent

It carries a label “HELP FREE TIBET! Boycott Chinese products! More info: www.tibet.org”. Letters sent by Bruce Henderson always have this propaganda label.

The Tibetan saga is fascinating. In New Zealand, a Customised Advertising Label (CAL) allows any non-political organisation to publicise itself or objectives by using its CAL in the place of a stamp. To obtain a CAL a design is submitted to NZ Post which prints it in stamp format for the organisation. Of course there are Terms and Conditions”, one of which is important in this instance. NZ Post will refuse to print a design if it “...contains any political message or could be associated with a current or former political cause or leader...” New Zealand Post made a mistake when Bruce Henderson, a member of The Friends of Tibet (NZ), requested a CAL. His CAL would mark the 50th anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising, though this was not disclosed. Two denominations

were ordered and delivered. The political implication, which had been overlooked, became apparent when these CALs began to appear on envelopes with the message spelt out clearly. Fearing Chinese Government objections and reprisals, NZ Post demanded Bruce Henderson return the CALS. He refused, claiming they were sold out and won the highly publicised legal tussle that followed.



Figure 5. The Friends of Tibet, NZ CAL. Design: The Tibetan flag with 1959 – 2009. On the right is a rare example on cover without NZ Post mutilation. (Whenever the Tibet CAL was detected on overseas mail, NZ Post covered it with an airmail label!)

Note that the handwriting that is on the cover shown in Figure 5 belongs to Bruce Henderson and identical to that on the envelopes in Figures 3 & 4.

What status should we give to the 2005 South Kasai stamps? Although we cannot call them fakes or forgeries, we could describe their sale as fraudulent because they were advertised as South Kasai stamps and sold as such, although the price was trivial. Serious fraud is associated with the high value classic stamps, which is why we have an expertisation committee. Are they Cinderella issues? The British Postal Museum Philatelic Glossary (2) defines a Cinderella stamp as “*labels, vignettes, etc. that look like stamps but were not normally used to pay for sending mail*”. They are, if anything, Cinderella issues.

Can we elevate these Cinderellas to the standing of *artistamps*? The term *artistamp* was first coined in 1982, although this art-form dates back to the late 19th century. It is art in the form of a postage stamp. “*Artistamps are a form of Cinderella stamps in that they are not valid for postage but differ from bogus or illegal stamps in that typically, the creator has no intent to defraud the postal authorities or stamp collectors. Irony, humour, satire and the subversion of government authority are frequent characteristics.*” (3) An example of this is shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6. “Queen and Country”. The artwork of Steve McQueen (on the right). Sheets of stamps are mounted in display frames. Here it is on show at the (UK) National Portrait Gallery, London in 2010.



Figure 7. Bruce Henderson on his artistamp produced in 2009 to commemorate his illegal 1968 local postal and created for *Tarapex*, the NZ national stamp exhibition, held at Timaru in 2009

Steve McQueen is an internationally acclaimed visual artist and film director, who has won both the Turner Prize (the UK’s highest award for visual art) and a Hollywood Oscar! In 2005 he went to

Iraq as an official war artist. In the following year he created the artwork "Queen and Country", 155 sheets of stamps mounted in retractable oak display frames. Each sheet features the image of a British serviceman killed in Iraq. It was conceived as a tribute to the fallen and a public demonstration of the true cost of war and its futility. McQueen says the use of the *artistamp* format came to him when he was sticking a stamp on an envelope. As an artist examining the stamp, he saw that "a stamp has a beautiful scale, the proportions are right, the image, it is recognisable, and then it goes out into the world, who knows where. Perfect. Wonderful" [sic]. Isn't this one of the attractions of philately for us?

What of the alleged creator of the South Kasai stamps, Bruce Henderson? When researching Cinderellas that originate in New Zealand another individual, Bruce Grenville is to be found as well. Bruce Henderson appears to adopt the *nom d'artiste* Bruce Grenville for his stamp activities. [I shall use the name that is found in each particular article (etc), though I might easily have used just one name throughout.] Grenville admits producing Cinderella stamps, which he describes as *mail-art* (a less common alternative name for artistamp). He states "Why am I involved in mail-art? Because I enjoy stamps and enjoy making them." (4). On Grenville's page on the International Union of Mail-Artists (IUOMA) website, he gives his postal address as Box 876, Auckland 1140 NZ which is the same as The Imperial Stamp Company (see Figure 5) and his own website as <http://okusi1.tripod.com> which is the website of "The Sultanate of Okusi-Ambeno" (4). (nb Okusi is one of several alternative spellings of Occussi.) In response to story in a NZ newspaper, Henderson has been described on the web as "An unemployable hairless hippie who is a great anarchist and a jolly good human". (The latter refers to his campaigning for a free Tibet.)

Back in 1968, Henderson and two friends set up a local letter delivery service, "Post Moulins", in the town of Timaru, South Island, New Zealand. It was efficient (same day delivery by bicycle) and undercut NZ Post (5). In those days, postal authorities had a zero tolerance to anyone who infringed their monopoly and Post Moulins was closed down almost immediately. This was Henderson's first foray into stamp production and the affair brought him to public notice. By 2009 he had become a local hero for giving international recognition to this small town, and now with the blessing of the Mayor, he commemorated Post Moulins by cycling from the town hall to the philatelic exhibition (Figure 7).

There are a dozen or more counties for which Henderson/Grenville has created Cinderella stamps. Each was not invented but had existed briefly or was an obscure island or a region to which no attention was paid. I will give two examples because the *modus operandi* is relevant to the choice of South Kasai and the invented histories are entertaining. For his more prominent Cinderella states, in terms of his scale of production, a fantastic history was invented, a satire on the notion of statehood. For South Kasai no invented history is presented; only stamps were produced. As a short lived state, obscure to most philatelists, it has the attributes Grenville seeks.

The Republic of Raoul:

The Reality: Raoul Island exists (29° 16' 0" S, 177° 55' 10" W). It is the northernmost of the major islands in the Kermadec chain that runs NNE from New Zealand. It is just 29 km² in size and, at 1100 km from North Island, the furthestmost extremity of the country. When Europeans discovered it in 1788, the Polynesians had been and gone. A tiny English settlement was present until 1937. Since then, the only inhabitants have been staff manning the Raoul Island Station, a meteorological outpost and Department of Conservation officers working to remove damage to the indigenous island species caused by the settlement. Landing on the island is restricted to scientists. It is not a place to put on your list of "must visit" places! It sits on a tectonic junction and has two active volcanoes that erupt periodically. There are significant earthquakes and tsunamis are an ever present threat.



Figure 8. A letter sent through the New Zealand postal service. Although there was no settled population after 1937, mail was sent by staff of the Raoul Island Station for whom stamps and postal equipment were supplied. Genuine mail.



Figure 9. Stamps issued by The Republic of Raoul. Left. 1998 “Sports of Raoul – Slave Hunting” Right. 2005 “Marine Life”

The invention: Raoul Island, in the South Pacific, is volcanic with constant seismic activity. At this point a fantasy world emerges! It was settled in 1930 immigrants from Aotearoa (The Maori name for New Zealand) who established a hereditary monarchy in 1937. In 1998 Queen Aveline dissolved the monarchy and proclaimed Raoul “a slave republic”. She assumed the new title “Mistress Aveline, Absolute Ruler, President for Life and Supreme Commander”. In this republic only females can hold citizenship and all males are slaves (or tourists). The economy depends on the sale of postage stamps and the export of fruit and nuts.

Postal notices are amusing, if bizarre: New Postal regulation, September 1998: From now stamps will be placed on the bottom left corner of envelopes; “This will show the world that we are no longer happy to follow their standards just to keep in with tradition.” Postal Notice September 1998: “Raoul Post Office also wants it to be known that to commemorate slave hunting as a new national sport of The Slave Republic of Raoul, the post office has issued a new stamp. It is 60c, blood red in colour...”

The Sultanate of Occussi-Ambeno:

The reality: Oecusse (formerly Ambeno and Oecussi-Ambeno) exists and is an enclave of East Timor separated by Indonesian Timor (see Figure 10). It has an area of 814 km² and a population of around 68 000. Portuguese Dominicans established a settlement in 1556 and set about converting the inhabitants. By 1702 a Portuguese governor ruled Timor from the port town of Vila Ambeno (Oecussi Town). However, unrest led to the Portuguese abandoning most of west Timor and in 1859 a treaty divided the island between the Netherlands and Portugal. Portuguese rule continued in the enclave until 1975 when Indonesia invaded and annexed the entire colony as Portugal withdrew from empire. General resistance to Indonesian rule and foreign reactions to repression led to the re-establishment of an independent state of East Timor (including Oecusse) in 2002.

The invention: An equally fantastic tale is spun for this microstate! After overthrowing and expelling the colonial power, Portugal, in 1968 a utopian sultanate was created. It is a nuclear-free and genetic engineering-free zone. Transportation is green. The national shipping line is wind-powered and the national airline flies a fleet of helium filled Zeppelins. The main exports are postage stamps, poetry and hallucinogenic mushrooms. (The country does not have any laws for recreational drugs.) The flying Naga-Ungu, a close relative of the (flightless) Komodo Dragon lives on the heavily wooded inland mountains.



Figure 10. The location of Oecusse (Occussi-Ambeno)



Figure 11. A postage stamps of “The Sultanate of Occusi-Ambeno”

The stamps mirror those issued by other minor states (birds, British royalty, ships etc). Such stamps are aimed at children, thematic collectors and collectors of Cinderella issues. Two issues for Tibet betray who is behind their production, Bruce Henderson (Friends of Tibet, NZ). Fearing possible consequences, it is almost unknown for genuine minor states to issue stamps that would so offend a major state.

It is clear from the fictitious histories that Henderson and his collaborators are satirising the concept of statehood with outrageous and humorous invention for both Raoul and Occusi-Ambeno. Yet, there are aspects in their tales that are recognisable for new countries, if exaggerated. In this context they are *artistamps*. But this classification must be restricted to these two “states”. For the 2005 South Kasai issues all you see is all you get, Cinderella stamps. They do not have the substance to raise them to the level of *artistamps*. The argument about the worth of Cinderella stamps is polarised. “Why should any sensible collector or philatelist want to waste his hard-earned money on these private productions? They are rubbish!” (6) “Some people call them rubbish, but I say: if you know what it is and wish to collect it, then do! You won’t win a gold at international level, but you will enjoy your collection.” (7) There lies the problem. As specialists and members of the Belgian Congo Study Circle we can readily recognise that these stamps purporting to be issued by South Kasai are at best Cinderellas. While they may be sold at a low price from their source, they might be passed off as genuine rarities at inflated prices on resale. There is a case to be made for mentioning their existence in catalogues, being identified as Cinderellas that have no philatelic collecting value. At present they are ignored which creates an opportunity for rogue traders.

References

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- (2) British Postal Museum www.postalheritage.org.uk
- (3) Wikipedia entry
- (4) iuoma-network.ning.com/profile/BruceGrenville
- (5) Blair A. Post Moulins (Postal Service Timaru) *Stanley Gibbons Monthly*, May 1985, p74
- (6) www.stampboards.com posted 3rd March 2012
- (7) *ibid.* posted 11th February 2012

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