

Bougainville: A True Eco-Revolution?

Bougainville, the northernmost island of the Solomon Island chain and an autonomous province of Papua New Guinea, was the site of one of the most significant Indigenous revolts of the late 20th century, a civil war that has been described as 'what may be the world's first true eco-revolution'.¹ For those who take seriously the prospect of building a post-capitalist future, the experiences of the people of Bougainville are instructive. Theirs is a story of not just survival, but remarkable creativity and innovation. Alongside this, however, they have faced significant challenges, both internal and external. This discussion will examine the history of the Bougainville conflict and post-war reconstruction, exploring the achievements and trials faced by a people who took on the nation-state and one of the world's largest multinational mining companies, and won.

Geographically, ethnically and culturally, Bougainville is part of the Solomon Islands. However due to the arbitrary nature of colonial territorial acquisition, the island ended up being incorporated as part of the Australian mandated territories of Papua and New Guinea following the Second World War. The discovery of vast reserves of copper ore on Bougainville in 1969 was central to plans to include Bougainville in the newly formed nation-state of Papua New Guinea in 1975. It was evident to both the Australian and the new PNG governments that the enormous copper mine built at Panguna on Bougainville would become a primary source of internal revenue for the new nation, which had initially been dependent on Australian grants.² The establishment of the mine was seen by most Bougainvilleans at the time to benefit the rest of PNG at Bougainville's cost, environmentally, socially and economically.³ With most of the mine's profits being extracted by the mining company and the PNG government, and little sense of cultural and ethnic unity with the rest of PNG, many Bougainvilleans expressed dissatisfaction with the arrangements to incorporate them into the new state.

The building of the Panguna mine served as the catalyst that focused the disillusionment felt by Bougainvilleans over colonial rule into separatist ambition.⁴ The Australian colonial authorities had asserted the right of the crown to the mineral wealth lying beneath the soil on the island, disregarding opposition from landowners. Whole villages had been obliterated to construct the mine, one of the largest open-cut pits on the planet, with petty compensation payouts made to displaced landowners.⁵ The widespread alienation of the people from their land manifested itself in a popular secessionist movement. Three

weeks before PNG was granted independence, this movement declared independence for the 'North Solomons Republic' on 1 September 1975.⁶ However, the secessionists received no international support. Furthermore, Australia, Indonesia and the United States were openly opposed to an independent Bougainville.⁷ Under this pressure, the secessionists were driven to negotiate terms with PNG in 1976 which resulted in the island's inclusion in the new nation. These terms granted Bougainvilleans limited rights to fly their own flag and name their province the North Solomons, offered as concessions to secessionist sentiment.⁸

The dissatisfaction felt by Bougainvilleans over the operation of the Panguna mine and the perception of exploitation by PNG did not dissipate with the small concessions granted to the province in 1976, but lay dormant until 1988. At this time, a new generation of educated and articulate landowners had emerged who pressed the company running the mine, Bougainville Copper Limited, a subsidiary of Rio Tinto, for compensation for the environmental damage and social disruption caused during its operation.⁹ The environmental damage caused by the mine had been considerable. After 20 years the mine had become an enormous crater half a kilometre deep and nearly seven kilometres in circumference, generating in excess of a billion tonnes of waste. BCL had solved the issue of where to deposit mine tailings, toxic by-products of mineral extraction, by dumping these pollutants into rivers.¹⁰ In the words of the former Chief Executive of this company, the environmental impact of this practice was 'monumental'.¹¹ Bougainvillean Marcelline Tunin articulated her sense of loss and frustration:

Our fish in the river - sometimes we would find them dead, floating. Sometimes even fish in the sea. Each time we reported this to the health officers. Nothing was ever done about it. Every time we complained they would say it'll be alright. It'll be alright; you will get the money, but money compared to what we lost is nothing.¹²

In addition to environmental destruction, landowners accused BCL of having caused social disruption and economic exploitation. Relocated landowners had received very small payments in compensation for the loss of their land, and the jobs created by the mine which were made available to Bougainvilleans were typically for low-paid unskilled labour.¹³ The loss of land was of central importance to a people whose cultural identity was based on an intimate

relationship with their land. Francis Ona, the spokesperson of the New Panguna Landowners Association, later stated:

BCL forced their company on our people... We were exploited, we were deprived, we were a lost people on our own land... Land is our lifeline. There was no fair distribution of money to landowners and the government of Bougainville.¹⁴

However, landowners' demands for K10 billion in compensation were dismissed by BCL and the PNG government. Disregard for Bougainvillean concerns resulted in an escalation of the situation into a renewed push for independence.

With the lack of progress achieved through the fight for compensation, landowners led by Ona turned to a program of anti-BCL sabotage. The PNG government responded by sending in the national army to quell the dissent, supplied by Australia with helicopters which were allegedly used as gunships, a claim denied by the Australian government.¹⁵ The situation quickly deteriorated. The landowners' campaign became one of secession. Ona formed the Bougainville Revolutionary Army and issued a Declaration of Independence for the newly proclaimed Republic of Bougainville on 17 May 1990.¹⁶ The independence declaration made direct reference to the UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, citing the 'inalienable right' of a people to freedom and independence.¹⁷ It justified these rights by explicitly highlighting the historical circumstances that had severed Bougainville politically from the rest of the Solomons, and the geographical and cultural dissimilarity between Bougainville and the rest of PNG. However, this declaration was completely ignored by the international community, just as it had the first declaration of independence in 1975. Rabbe Namaliu, the Prime Minister of PNG, described the declaration as 'unlawful and invalid'.¹⁸

What followed was a protracted war of secession. Initially only armed with bows and arrows, the BRA soon acquired high powered weapons from the PNG Defence Force, and the tide of the conflict gradually turned in their favour.¹⁹ Concerned with the escalating violence, the government sought to subdue the growing rebellion by withdrawing its forces and imposing a blockade around the island, choking off food, fuel and medical supplies.²⁰ The conflict and the government blockade of the island left between 15,000-20,000 people dead, one tenth of Bougainville's population, in what has been described as the 'most long-running and bloody instance of violent political conflict in the South Pacific region after 1945.'²¹

In the face of secessionist movements, the international system reacts to protect the state against those that threaten it, labelling them 'rebels' or 'terrorists'.²² At the genesis of the crisis, this is precisely how the push for independence on Bougainville was portrayed. Don Carruthers, the BCL chairman, labelled the demands of the landowners as 'unrealistic', and condemned the sabotage undertaken against the mine as 'acts of terrorism'.²³ These sentiments were echoed by the PNG government and the Australian media at the time. As a result, the fight for independence on Bougainville was long held to be illegitimate. Evidence that corporate pressure was applied on the PNG government to institute the blockade on the island emerged in 2001. John Momis, current President of the Autonomous Bougainville Government, stated in a signed declaration submitted as part of a class action against Rio Tinto:

BCL requested that PNG reopen the mine by whatever means necessary, and later assisted in planning and the imposition of the blockage. I was aware of one meeting where BCL management instructed PNG to "starve the bastards out." The military actions and the blockage were undertaken for the purpose of reopening the mine so that BCL and PNG could continue to benefit from their commercial enterprise.²⁴

Cut off from the outside world and denied basic medical supplies, food and fuel, Bougainvilleans were forced to rely on themselves and their land. What took place was something of a renaissance in the cultivation of indigenous foods and the practice of traditional medicine. The volcanic soils of Bougainville are highly fertile. Taking advantage of this, villages moved to establish self-sufficiency. Diets improved considerably.²⁵ Speaking of the blockade, landowner Josephine Haripa described this newfound independence:

They blocked everything, but they were not able to block the sun, the moon and the rain. We had the land, we survived on our land. We have proved to Papua New Guinea that we can live without them. We have proved to them for six years that we did not need their help.²⁶

The blockade also resulted in notable innovation. Bougainvilleans generated electricity for villages by constructing makeshift hydro power generators out of disused mining equipment.²⁷ Possibly the most remarkable development was the

perfection of a simple method for refining coconut oil into a fuel which was used as a substitute for diesel, enabling Bougainvilleans to continue to run their vehicles after conventional fuel supplies ran dry.²⁸

By mid-1997, a peace process began to unfold which aimed at ending the fighting between the PNG government and the Bougainville secessionists. The secessionists were split into three factions: those that advocated negotiating for secession, those who supported autonomy within PNG and those who spurned the peace process, claiming Bougainville had already achieved independence.²⁹ By mid-1999, a compromise had been reached which saw the secessionists agree to defer pressing for immediate independence in favour of a later referendum on the issue, in exchange for autonomy within PNG.³⁰ On 30 August 2001, the Bougainville Peace Agreement was signed with the PNG government. The agreement established the conditions for granting autonomy and detailed the principles on holding a referendum on independence. The agreement stated that the first objective of autonomy would be to 'facilitate the expression and development of Bougainville identity'.³¹ Another central objective of the agreement was the promotion of the 'unity of Papua New Guinea'.³² Furthermore, the agreement specified that the referendum would be conditional on the 'good governance' of the Autonomous Bougainville Government, which had to meet 'internationally accepted standards'.³³ By setting standards of governance to which the ABG had to comply, the prospect of reintroducing mining to the island began to be discussed by some Bougainvilleans as a means of funding effective government, an irony not lost on many. Despite recognition of the negative environmental and social impact of mining on Bougainville, Michael Pariu, the head of the Panguna Landowners Association, has stated that a return to mining would be the only 'economically viable' way the island could hope to move to full independence from Papua New Guinea.³⁴ It was an opinion shared by Joseph Kabui, the late President of the ABG, who believed that reintroducing mining to the island would transform it into 'a Kuwait of the Pacific', funding autonomy and paving the way for independence in 2015.³⁵

Bougainvilleans face significant challenges. The need to build health and education services is frequently voiced. There are few schools and hospitals on the island. Larger infrastructural projects, such as the construction of bridges or the maintenance of roads, remain reliant on the intervention of international aid. Most troublingly, there is a whole generation of ex-combatants who have been psychologically traumatised by a decade of war. Beyond these concerns, the issue of environmental pollution remains an ongoing one. Aside from the pollution

caused by the mine, decaying infrastructure is causing new problems. At the former port of Loloho, a large oil leak in storage tanks near the coast threatens to spill into the sea. Arguably, real independence on Bougainville actually occurred during the blockade of the island in the 1990s. Forced into a situation of self-reliance, Bougainvilleans responded with courage, creativity and innovation. The re-engagement with traditional modes of land cultivation coupled with grass-roots solutions to their energy needs offer us a model of self-sufficiency that strengthens local communities. Their example is a glimpse of the possibilities beyond the destructiveness wrought and dependency fostered by contemporary capitalism. I'd like to finish with the words of Francis Ona:

My fighting on Bougainville is based on these factors: One, we are fighting for man and his culture; two, land and environment; and the third one is independence.³⁶

¹ *The Coconut Revolution*, dir. Dom Rotheroe, Luton, Stampede Limited, 2000.

² Mark Turner, *Papua New Guinea: The Challenge of Independence*, Penguin Books, Australia, 1990, p. 152.

³ Yash Ghai, and Anthony J. Regan, 'Unitary State, Devolution, Autonomy, Secession: State Building and Nation Building in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea', in *The Round Table*, Vol. 95, No. 386, Routledge, 2006, p. 592.

⁴ Turner, p. 124.

⁵ Ralph R. Premdas, 'Secessionist Politics in Papua New Guinea', in *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 50, No. 1, University of British Columbia, 1977, p. 76.

⁶ Leo Hannett, 'Down Kieta Way: Independence for Bougainville?' *New Guinea Quarterly*, March-April 1969, p. 11, quoted in Premdas, pp. 64-65.

⁷ Hannett, p. 84.

⁸ Hannett, p. 78.

⁹ Michael C. Howard, *Mining, Politics, and Development in the South Pacific*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1991, p. 86.

¹⁰ Howard, p. 64.

¹¹ Paul Quodling, *Bougainville: The Mine and the People*, Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney, 1991, p. 29.

¹² Marcelline Tunin, quoted in Martin R. Miriori, 'Bougainville – A Sad and Silent Tragedy in the South Pacific', *Do or Die*, No. 5, 1996, pp. 59-62.

¹³ Howard, pp. 55-56.

¹⁴ Francis Ona, quoted in Mark Corcoran, 'Bougainville – Revolution South Pacific Style', [transcript], *Dateline*, [broadcast: 23 February 1991].

¹⁵ Quodling, p. 59.

¹⁶ 'Declaration of Independence', [17 May 1990], extracted in <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/png-bougainville/key-texts4.php>, accessed 3 June 2009.

¹⁷ 'Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples', adopted by United Nations General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) [14 December 1960], extracted in <http://www.un.org/en/decolonization/declaration.shtml>, accessed 23 May 2009.

¹⁸ Turner, p. 134.

¹⁹ *The Coconut Revolution*, dir. Dom Rotheroe, Luton, Stampede Limited, 2000.

²⁰ Howard, pp. 100-101.

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- ²¹ Karl Claxton, *Bougainville 1988-98: Five Searches for Security in the North Solomons Province of Papua New Guinea*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1998, p. xvii.
- ²² Marc Weller, 'Settling Self-determination Conflicts: Recent Developments', in *The European Journal of International Law*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2009, p. 113.
- ²³ Howard, p. 87.
- ²⁴ John Momis, signed statement, 2001, <http://ramu.mine.wordpress.com/2013/07/17/when-momis-spoke-the-truth-to-power/>, accessed 5 November 2013.
- ²⁵ Elizabeth Thompson, 'Bougainville', [transcript], *Radio National: Earthbeat*, [broadcast: 13/11/99], extracted in <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/science/earth/stories/s65998.htm>, accessed 23 May 2009.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ *The Coconut Revolution*, dir. Dom Rotheroe, Luton, Stampede Limited, 2000.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ghai and Regan, p. 597.
- ³⁰ Ghai and Regan, p. 597.
- ³¹ 'Bougainville Peace Agreement', [30 August 2001], extracted in <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/png-bougainville/key-texts37.php>, accessed 3 June 2009.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ilya Gridneff, 'Bougainville landowners call for mining', [12 December 2008], *Australian Associated Press*, extracted in <http://news.theage.com.au/world/bougainville-landowners-call-for-mining-20081212-6x61.html>, accessed 23 May 2009.
- ³⁵ Steve Marshall, 'Bougainville – The Killer Deal', [transcript], *Foreign Correspondent*, [broadcast: 17 June 2008], extracted in <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2008/s2280236.htm>, accessed 7 May 2009.
- ³⁶ *The Coconut Revolution*, dir. Dom Rotheroe, Luton, Stampede Limited, 2000.