

‘We have our own ways too’ – the Dilemma of Reconstruction on Bougainville

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Abstract

With the emergence of peace out of the Bougainville Crisis, aid agencies and NGOs formed programs to assist in reconstruction and reconciliation with their funding and expertise. Although such help was generally welcomed, it presented the beneficiaries with the dilemma of being under the direction of outsiders. This was seen to be the dominant character of the resentment leading up to the revolutionary outburst of the Crisis. The receipt of aid presented the islanders with continual dilemmas about who was making the decisions in any aid situation. Differing opinions on aid were settled by outsiders. This ties in too closely with the strong resentment about outside influence which can be traced up to the troubles.

For a fortnight in September-October 2000, James Noke and I, together with Bishop Douglas Young, were commissioned to do an evaluation of the aid agency Caritas on the island of Bougainville. It was a good time for trying to understand lessons from the Crisis, and trying to see what the Crisis might mean for the rest of Papua New Guinea (PNG) as its 820 language nations work to form a single nation.

There had been a statement to the National Parliament by Sir Mekere Morauta, the Prime Minister of PNG, on 1 September 2000 on ‘The Bougainville Peace Process, Autonomy and Referendum’ (*Post Courier* 4/9/00, p. 34). This seemed to be something of a turning point in the relations of the rest of PNG to Bougainville. However, we were billeted on our arrival in Buka three weeks later with the leaders of the Bougainville People’s Congress (BPC) who rejected the statement out of hand.

The time of our visit was almost incident free for us and for Bougainville, but we returned to ‘peaceful, beautiful Madang’ to find a growing sense of disorder, criminality and murder. It was hard to resist the feeling that the resolving of the Bougainville Crisis had implications for the rest of PNG. The meaning of aid agencies in the rehabilitation process was our point of access to Bougainville. This seemed a particularly acute problem for Bougainville.

Leave us alone and we’ll do it ourselves

I believe that all three of us visitors gained the dominant impression that the people we met wanted as a top priority to wrest control of their own lives back

from the agencies that were giving them a sense of alienation in their own land. As one of our most articulate interviewees said,

The crisis has made us critical of being dumped with others' ideas. We have asked the volunteers helping us to make adjustments for Arawa—we cannot use Buin ideas in Arawa. I tell the BRA, there is the Siwai Crisis, they find it so hard to forgive. Others' ways do not work for them. We have our own ways too. NGOs cannot have a uniform approach for all. The ways to approach Asia won't help us. That is their agenda. (Lawrence Mattau, 30/9/00)

A Bougainvillian Bachelor thesis reconstructed the progress of the Panguna mine from the side of the landowners in the following form:

When the surveyors came to our land, we said we did not want them there. The next time they came, they were agents of the government and we said all the more strongly that we wanted nothing to do with this drilling and digging of the earth. Then when they started mining, we said we were against it, and refused permission for them to do this with our land. There were police to insist on helping the mine. The government seemed to be against us, and intent on helping these white foreigners. They came in ever greater numbers, and we said, we are losing control of our own place. We watched the mine getting bigger and bigger, and we saw our places disappear, and we started to hate the mine bitterly. The Government still insisted on putting us aside, and we said we would not go. They brought in the riot squad and the army against us. Now finally there is this enormous hole in the ground. Our places have disappeared, and we don't like it. We have never consented to this, and we have resisted all the way. Now with the violence people are at last forced to listen to the fact that we are objecting and we have never agreed to any of this¹.

I also find very poignant the account of three Bougainvillian students given in 1974 and reproduced in Connell and Howitt (1993:60).

Land is our life. Land is our physical life—food and sustenance. Land is our social life; it is marriage; it is status; it is security; it is politics; in fact, it is our only world. When you [the Administration] take our land, you cut away the very heart of our existence. We have little or no experience of social survival detached from the land. For us to be completely landless is a nightmare which no dollar in the pocket or dollar in the bank will allay; we are a threatened people².

¹ Dominic Kiaku, *The Gift of Reconciliation for the island of Bougainville*. A thesis presented to Holy Spirit Seminary, Bomana towards a B. Theol. (Hons). My presentation is a reconstruction of a longer, vivid (now hard to access) passage.

² J. Dove, T. Miriung and M. Togolo as given in Connell and Howitt (1993, p. 60).

These are three examples, which should probably be read in reverse order to what I have presented here. To be chased off one's land gives the feeling of being under serious threat. To see one's world physically inverted from ranging mountain to unfathomable chasm can clearly be doom. Never again will such people acquiesce in someone's telling them what is good for them.

This is the radical dilemma of the aid agencies presently at work in Bougainville. Because of the demands of accountability back to sponsoring organisations overseas, non-government organizations (NGOs) can hardly avoid telling people what is good for them, yet this digs into the whole feeling of dis-empowerment which went on at the hands of many hostile agencies during the Crisis years. The aid agencies so frequently say they want people to take a share in the work of reconstruction so that they do not succumb to a hand-out mentality. We met a number of occasions where this yielded the result that tasks were half-completed because materials given were inadequate for the job; where low quality material was given and soon became damaged; and the resulting feeling was once again dis-empowerment—that 'we are not able to succeed in anything we do.'

Joseph Kabui, leader of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) political wing and President of the BPC, told us, 'Now we are talking about the substantive matters, autonomy and referenda. The people see this, and now the unrest is dying down.' From the top to the bottom, the North Solomons' people believe that autonomy is vital to life itself, now more than ever.

What became clear to us in the course of our interviews was that no person had a single answer to present to what the Crisis was all about. Everyone had multiple answers to give, and perhaps there was even a sense of frustration at trying to explain in verbal discourse something which had so many roots and heads. The naïve question, 'Why was there civil war on Buka, so far from Panguna?' brought signs of exasperation from commentators. There was an attack, there were deaths and divisions. It was an experience that is left begging for a unified explanation. To be content with a plurality of causes, remembered experiences and resentments seems tantamount to holding little hope for the project of uniting 820 languages into a single nation.

The neglected district

We were told by Joseph Kabui that, since their childhood, he and his companions were told stories of resentment about being 'the neglected district' of PNG. It seemed that Bougainville was only good for the extraction of copra and cocoa. Even the white planters, and American, Australian and French missionary priests joined in the chorus drawing attention to the exploitation. In return for the agricultural exports, there was little development in terms of roads and infrastructure. Education and health were largely in the hands of the missions, and this was seen to be a two-edged sword. The missions could never alone sustain a full complement of adequately paid employees in these fields, nor keep the systems up to date and integrated with best practice in PNG.

However, since the missions were taking care of the job, the government could neglect the needs of health and education in the North Solomons.

This situation is oddly the forerunner of the present arrangement. Joseph Kabui and the leaders of the BPC are perversely proud of getting no income. They work for free, although negotiations are done with the help of the Bougainville Provincial Government (BPG), who supply helicopter transport and pay the guest house bills. The BPC say that, in this way, they are able to ask the young people to work for free all over the province. Kabui explains the situation: the BPC has the legitimacy, because they were voted into office in the popular elections of 1999, but the BPG has the money because they are connected to the PNG Constitution and Parliament. He is quick to say that the two groups communicate closely so that nobody can exploit their divisions. It remains a fact however, that Governor John Momis does not accept the legitimacy of the BPC elections, nor does he view it as so 'popular'—in the sense that in a number of electorates only a specified BRA member was allowed to stand unopposed. The net effect of this is that Central and South Bougainville can still see themselves as 'the neglected districts' as far as the Government is concerned.

One of the Vice-Presidents of the BPC, James Talis, who alternately radiates a dazzling smile and ominous threats, and who often performs an effective spokesman's role on national PNG television, also reinforces the message of separateness which motivates the BRA. He was called a Commander for the BRA in earlier times. The writers had a conversation with a group of six leaders of the BPC, which ranged from the continuing presence of the PNG Defence Force in Buka township to the dependency on Port Moresby that the BPC experience in fellow-feeling with the BPG. During this conversation the writers recalled what had been said to us by Governor John Momis the night before, that he had K70,000.00 to run the public service, and that the national government had shown its blatant insincerity by not forwarding the K4.2 million that had been promised. Talis proclaimed, 'If they can't give us the money, then let us go. We will find it for ourselves'. This was greeted with enthusiasm by all at the table.

If one were inclined to be argumentative, it would be at this stage that the point of independence would be at its sharpest. The province is largely being reconstructed with donor agency funding at present, and the amount of this assistance is many times the K4.2 million looked for from Waigani. Will there be agencies that will continue to fund Bougainville if it is intent on secession? Can the public service be kept going on a purely volunteer basis, like another set of NGOs? Can Bougainville's own economy be reconstructed quickly? I am sure the BPC members would be impatient at my putting such questions. It is just this kind of outsider evaluation which caused the Crisis in the first place.

However, on our visit to the renowned Paruparu Education Development Centre, we found members of the BRA who were not at all willing to keep working much longer without payment, which is of course a reasonable position. This Centre lies within the range of the present BRA no-go zones, and

is only a few kilometres over the mountain from Panguna. It is a central station for five or so villages ranged on the hillsides, and was started in 1964 with a community school and a large health centre. We were told that the present centre developed mostly through a form of trauma counselling offered to villagers by members of the church community. This was an effort at extra-legal dispute resolution, cutting out the middle man of the magistracy, who felt they had to charge Government fines on top of interpersonal settlements.

Paruparu remained largely unscathed during the fighting, apart from one ill-conceived venture of the PNG Defence Force with a helicopter. Throughout the nine years of the crisis, the school has expanded to offer adult education opportunities, in the trades, in domestic and office skills, and particularly in teacher training. Although the staff of the centre are rightly proud of what they have built up and sustained, the education offered did appear to be largely informal. Now they have done enough short courses; they want to be inscribed on a regular payroll.

In the south of Bougainville there were other efforts observed of one-to-one coaching of grade six level students to provide some sort of teachers for the schools. This slow re-construction of the education system that was destroyed is one indication that James Talis might be overly optimistic to think that money to run the province can readily be found.

There were other indications of what going back to depending on ourselves might mean. Some people were idyllic about the virtues of village living during the crisis— 'My children came back from the bush, plump and healthy and sustained by bush medicine. I do not agree with BRA propaganda which says that we were almost crushed by the blockade of medicine from overseas' (Lawrence Mattau).

The most vivid of indications of greater autonomy came from the so-called 'cargo-cultists'. It is hard to beat the radicalism of the Naked Cults that have been generated in Solomons and Bougainville. Years ago, accompanying a Bougainville priest, I approached a young woman at Kabaleo Teachers College. The priest told the girl that her father had taken off all his clothes, left his spoon and plate behind and gone to the Naked Cult in the mountains. She replied, 'Yes, I know'. This is a radical renunciation of all outside influence and control. It was a practice that is reported to have gone together with exhuming bodies and making intercessions with the dead and local spirits. Here is independence being taken seriously.

The BRA took the necessary step of declaring Bougainville a separate nation, and calling it 'Mekamui'. Some people try to respect this step until today by referring to the province as Mekamui. However, in a conversation with Cornelius Besia, another Commander of the BRA, he said not to use this name, 'That name is *antap tumas* (too lofty).' He said it means 'holy land' and we should not use that name while there is still fighting. Then he ventured into a rather vehement but enigmatic instruction to the two writers. He said to us:

Dispela em i wanpela longpela stori. (This is one of the long stories.) First, we were driven out of Ogoni in Nigeria; then we were driven out of Tasmania; then we were driven out of Hagen—and some of them were driven out of Manus and New Ireland. Now they want to drive us out of here to Western Australia, but they won't drive us out a fourth time.

Unfortunately, we were not able to get a clear explanation of this story, but it sounded like the 'Long Story of God' told in Paliau's cult and in such movements as the Mt Rurun Movement in East Sepik. This is a purpose driven account of origins, recasting events in the light of the cultists' needs. I asked Cornelius whether this story referred to the 'black man' in general, but got no reply. I then observed to him that it sounded like something I was familiar with from the Sepik cargo cult. Cornelius insisted, 'We never had anything to do with the cargo cult. We never went naked, except for work. We were not the ones who were opening the graves to take out the *laplap* (cloth)'. I take this suggestion to mean that even the dead were being purified of their unfortunate contact with the world of dependence, the world of the invading civilisations.

The aid agencies remain aware of this ringing term, 'cargo cult', taking it simply to mean 'greed', which is of course to be condemned everywhere. One young leader told us that he was having a planning session with an older New Zealand man, when he said that, given the poor state of communications in Arawa and the whole area, it would be good to have a bicycle to help with the supervision of projects. The New Zealander replied, 'That's cargo'. The young fellow said, '*Mi les long kros wantaim em olgeta taim. Mi laik pinisim olgeta save bilong em*'. (I did not want to be cross with him all the time. I wanted to learn all I could from him.) Then he said to us, 'I did not think a bicycle comes out of the sea!'

It is freely admitted though, that the origins of Francis Ona's stand are to be traced back to millennial expectations and campaigning on the part of Damien Damen and his Fifty Cent Men. Damen started his campaign before 1969 by pointing out that the ancestors had lived healthy lives, and had lived long. Then there was such disturbance that short life spans were the result. The solution was to get rid of all outsiders and missions. When Francis Ona asked people if they would join in the task of ejecting the mine, they agreed on the basis of what they accepted from Damen.

We were told that it was the general thinking while the BRA were living in the bush that they had to find inventive ways of living today. Coconut oil was used for engines; home-made guns were manufactured; the boys made water-driven machines to scrape out coconut meat; everybody became healthier than before; and finally the micro-hydro systems emerged everywhere. When we expressed the opinion that this seemed to be combining imported thinking with local genius, the sense of compromise seemed to come as a surprise.

There is no doubt that the demand for independence runs deep in Bougainville. The demand for a referendum on the topic is traced to the early 1950s. It was formally proposed when the University of Papua New Guinea was starting up with a high proportion of Bougainvilleans³. There was a public meeting to demand a referendum on independence in Kieta in May 1969, and a strategic insistence on such a referendum just before the Independence of PNG was declared in 1975 (Kiaku 1999, pp. 9-12, 23). How much of a sense of compromise is allowed under the term 'greater autonomy' is simply not known and perhaps needs to be tested before it can be known.

The question for this paper now becomes, how much of an echo does this thinking of the 'neglected province' find in the other provinces of PNG? Should the world have listened to calls during the writing of the PNG Constitution to insert a chapter on 'secession without tears'? (May and Spriggs, 1990, p. 1).

Greater autonomy for the provinces and districts

To answer the question of the meaning of greater autonomy for the other provinces of PNG is simply too political an issue for me to tackle. It is to be settled by protracted negotiation. We can take note of the other island provinces of PNG under the leadership of Polonhu Pokawin who are demanding greater autonomy for their region. The notion of parts of provinces breaking away from their established provinces is proclaimed loudly enough in East New Britain and presently in the Southern Highlands.

The Sepiks, those great person-exporters, generally have no difficulty admitting that 'here in Madang we use the big name of Sepik, but at home we are Yangoru, mountain Sepik, island Sepik, nambis Sepik, kunai Sepik or dirty water Sepik'. Once recently, when we were crowding through a small door to get on the Lutheran Shipping vessel from Madang to Wewak, a man called out, 'Don't push. It's just us. We are all Sepiks'. This brought a good humoured laugh from the crowd. Although there was some feeling shared amongst all the Sepiks, the remark begged the question of why Sepiks had anything less to fear from their own province wantoks. The notion of '*wantok*' can be used as aggressively as the Australian term 'mate'. Some rude names are used quite casually for people from other provinces who are met in town, and it seems a foolish ambition to take on oneself downtown the worries of someone who is obviously from a different province.

The suspension of provincial governments, the trickling distribution of school monies and health service subsidies, as well as probably many other points of relationship between the central government and the provincial governments must inevitably raise the question of what advantage the centralised State

³ It is to be observed that the mission education in Bougainville was not without its effect. Although I have no statistics for the UPNG in 1968, at the same time there were 23 Bougainvilleans out of a total of 35 PNG seminarians in the first Catholic seminary in Kap in Madang in the same year (ref. Fr Kees van der Geest, oral testimony).

brings to the provinces. If the provinces have fundamental rights, then every check on their activities by the central government must raise the question of greater autonomy for the provinces. The centralisation of these matters is a statement that greater autonomy would be a disaster for the people's moneys. Yet at the time of writing, the world is watching the all-powerful American President being elected by a system where every small district of the nation is responsible for its own voting methods and operations. Is that a system that could be made to work in PNG? I find it very hard to guess whether the other provinces of PNG are deeply concerned that Bougainville should not secede from the nation or not. I do not know whether the notion of secession or greater autonomy is a widely popular hope in the other provinces.

By way of conclusion, I would like to present some of our findings about the ambivalent nature of giving aid in the Bougainville province.

The dilemma for aid agencies

Almost every aspect of aid work is controverted.

- There were definite statements that working with groups has proven a failure, and that work must be done with the principle of individual ownership in mind. On the other hand, people objected to the fact that group projects were made the personal property of individuals.
- Some declared that aid must be given to those in the bush who had so little help during the crisis. Others said the people in the bush had the best of it and became better people for their self-reliance and traditional foods. Still others said the townfolk were innocent people who suffered most in the cross-fire and need most help.
- Some people warned against helping the BRA as a kind of peace bribe. Others say the BRA benefited most when they took a strong stand on community independence. Others say BRA areas are simply the most in need of help to reintegrate them back to normalcy.
- There will always be jealousy when one person gets something, and there is not enough to give the same to every one else in the same position.
- There has been much talk of co-ordinating the work of NGOs in Bougainville, but it seems obvious that early efforts at concerted planning have been allowed to lapse.
- Some say the crisis taught people self-reliance, and now the BPC and its agencies are working without pay. But it is clear these people do not want to work without pay any longer, and wish to be integrated into the government services, and paid for providing services.
- People ask for aid to bring into reality their choices. But aid projects in Bougainville appear to have the usual short term life-span as for all of PNG, and the end feeling is that the people cannot succeed in up-skilling themselves, gathering instead a sense of failure.
- One local development program, BOCBHIP, tells the aid agencies, 'We have the initiatives, you just give us the money to make them happen'. On the other hand, other organisations say that there must be planning, training and coaching of all kinds surrounding the gift of aid.

- While the idea of handing out ‘cargo’ is everywhere deplored, people see no sense in an aid agency baulking at giving a saucepan to someone who does not have one, doing a few quick photocopies for free, or giving a bicycle to establish communications.

Given this wide variety of opinions on the matter of aid, it becomes impossible to please everyone and avoid criticism. The aid agencies usually operate with people who have strong opinions, and who daily face situations that people at a distance find frightening. We were frequently told that the people want to know from each agency, what their policy was and what the guidelines might be. They want a quick and clear refusal if that is going to be the decision. As we have seen above, the agencies (including the Red Cross and AusAID) presently are much better endowed than the Provincial Government, even as far as what has been promised and not yet delivered. Under these circumstances the aid agencies must live in fear and trembling that they are intruding on the sense of autonomy gained as people emerge from the Crisis. Everything that they set in place is in danger of becoming a way of continuing the Panguna mine invasion and of making the province dependent on outsiders. That is the dilemma for aid agencies intent on the work of reconstruction in Bougainville.

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