

THE CRISIS BEGAN IN 1886: A LONG VIEW OF BOUGAINVILLE'S DECOLONISATION STRUGGLE

AUTHOR: PROF KRISTIAN LASSLETT

Kristian Lasslett is Professor of Criminology at Ulster University. He has been conducting research into mining, conflict and decolonisation on Bougainville since 2004. He is the author of *State Crime on the Margins of Empire: Rio Tinto, the War on Bougainville and Resistance to Mining* published in 2014. He is joint Editor-in-Chief of *State Crime* journal and Editor of the *State Crime e-Testimony Project*. Kristian is on Jubilee Australia's Board.

Introduction

In policy and academic circles, when attempting to make sense of the Bougainville conflict and associated struggle for independence, one word is rarely uttered, especially in the present tense: colonialism. When it is used, 'colonialism' is employed to frame an historical period now long passed. But can a process as immense as colonisation, which prosecutes its objective of cleansing civilisations indigent to the subjugated territory through political, economic, cultural, linguistic, legal, pedagogic, spiritual, and psychological means, simply disappear when one flag is lowered, and another raised?

Colonialism has not disappeared.¹ Its presence on Bougainville looms large in government and market structures, social norms and religion, language and ideas, education and notions of 'common sense'. Its presence is hidden, because so many of the institutions, ideas and norms, that were forcefully introduced into Melanesian society initially by external powers, and then administered by local managers who took control with the

'granting' of independence (under the tutelage of foreign advisers and consultants), have been cloaked through sanitising language such as modernity, development, rule of law, democracy, government.

These different terms, in their own way, attempt to define the process of colonialism – forced acceptance of foreign institutions, cultural norms, economic systems, etc. – as neutral acts of progress, from a primitive past. They also assume there is one ultimate destination – copying the institutions, values, and systems of the coloniser. In so doing these terms disguise the fact that a *particular form* of modernity, development, rule of law, democracy and government has been introduced on Bougainville, which was formulated from outside by foreign powers, with their own self-interest in mind. They also disguise the fact that alternative ways exist for Melanesian societies to progress their

1. Grosfoguel, R., 'The Epistemic Decolonial Turn', *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), 2007, pp 211-223; and Maldonado-Torres, N., 'On the Coloniality of Being', *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), 2007, pp 240-270.

When a people are depicted as primitive and savage, this denotes an ideological framework which gifts to Western European society a rich history of discovery, innovation and social advancement, while denying the same to the communities of Bougainville.

own history, without emulating the coloniser, whose own society is exhibiting signs of decay and decline.

The above issues were absent from my first major research project, which sought to document and analyse how the Australian and Papua New Guinea Governments organised with Bougainville Copper Limited a brutal military incursion, designed to quell the 1988 uprising and reopen the Panguna mine. Following this research, I was fortunate to collaborate with a number of Bougainvillean intellectuals, who introduced me to bodies of thought that were circulating informally on the island, but not published in the journals and monographs, which academics conventionally trawl through when conducting research.

Gradually, I disconnected from the more accessible analyses of Bougainville's history coming out of Western higher education institutions and think-tanks and became much more interested in how intellectuals from Bougainville understood their complex history, and the lessons it holds for the future. These were not intellectuals with a PhD, or who could necessarily speak the language of the coloniser (i.e. English). Rather, they were the respected custodians of history and ideas emerging within the scientific laboratory of the village, where knowledge is produced through discussion, reflection, oration and art.

This led to a prolonged engagement with communities living in mine-impacted areas. Powerful pools of local knowledge at a

village level exist in the north and south, on the coasts and in the mountains, there is no denying that. But it was felt that beginning at the epicentre of the Bougainville conflict – which centred at least in the first instance around the Panguna mine – might be the most fertile place to find alternative histories and ideas for making sense of 'the crisis', in a way that is radically different to the dominant accounts published in the books and journals. To make these rich currents of Melanesian knowledge available beyond the immediate locale, a research team made up of local intellectuals and foreign collaborators, filmed over 130 hours with custodians from the mine impacted area.

This paper will give a brief insight into the rich vein of knowledge this project tapped into. Drawing on insights provided by local theorists, it will explore the fault-lines of contention which the processes of colonisation triggered, and how these fault-lines can be traced to the construction of the Panguna mine, and the subsequent conflict its operation triggered. Attention will also be given to the anti-colonial roots of the uprising against the Panguna mine, and the process of cultural healing painfully brought into being by the subsequent period of military violence. This paper will conclude by looking at the enduring colonial legacies impacting on Bougainville and the opportunities which the independence referendum offers for putting these legacies under a critical spotlight.

Land, culture and colonisation

When Bougainville was invaded and then occupied by external powers (invasion and occupation are not commonly used terms but are more factually accurate than euphemisms such as 'administered', 'settled', or 'pacified'), their officials maintained intricate records. The detailed files emerging from the Australian period of colonial administration (1914-1975) are kept in Canberra, a significant

Arawa, in central Bougainville, was largely destroyed during the war.



Photo credit: Christina Hill

journey from Bougainville, the region to which they relate. Close examination of these records provides a revealing insight into the ideology and thought processes of those serving the colonial administration.

The human target of the colonial regime – those to whom it must administer and ‘civilise’ – are described in these records through a range of derogatory labels, such as ‘primitive’, ‘savage’, and more sedately through the catch all noun, ‘the natives’.² The regime officials using these phrases were not specifically malicious people; this was the common parlance within administrative circles, and they were simply men of their times. This should not excuse us, however, from understanding their times, and how it informs the here and now.

When a people are depicted as primitive and savage, this denotes an ideological framework which gifts to Western European society a rich history of discovery, innovation and social

advancement, while denying the same to the communities of Bougainville. It eviscerates and flattens the latter’s own long period of social advance, which is rich with discovery, innovation, and change. These labels also frame history as a set of linear sequences, where human beings evolve from a state of ‘primitiveness’ to the heights of civility, epitomised by Western style government and global capitalism. Those who are heir to the latter are thus humans of a higher order, whereas the heirs to the alternative social system are a throw-back to a primitive period in human history. A mandate is thus created for

2. Barnes, C., *Papua and New Guinea - Development of Copper Resources at Bougainville*, Confidential for Cabinet, Submission No.36, Copy No. 39, 13 January 1967; Cleland, D. M., Draft Correspondence from D. M. Cleland, Administrator, Papua New Guinea, to Rt. Rev. Bishop L. Lemay, S.M., Catholic Commission, Post Office, Sohano, Bougainville, 31 August 1966; and Hay, D.O., Correspondence from D. O. Hay, Administrator, Papua New Guinea, to G. Warwick-Smith Esq. O.B.E, Secretary for Territories, Department of Territories, Canberra. A.C.T., 30 August 1968.

the rule of the one by the other, in the name of tutoring the primitive to a sufficient state of civilisation.

A formidable critic of this racist standpoint is Blaise Iruinu, one of Bougainville's foremost, yet little known, theoreticians. Iruinu is custodian of a highly organised oral tradition of historiography. This tradition retraces pre-colonial civilisations on Bougainville, to better understand the rich lineages of social institutions, cultural assets, science, and methods of education to which its communities are heir. All of these civilisations, he argues, contain features that must be retained if Bougainville is to create a resilient and sustainable political-economy.

At the core of these civilisations – as varied as they are – is a deep-seated sense of communal obligation, a strong fiduciary duty to future generations, and complex relationship with land that is woven with respect and balance. In Iruinu's view³ (and this is a point also emphasised by Pokpok island Chief Peter Garuai⁴ and Tinputz academic Dr Ruth Saovana⁵), land is the nerve centre of Melanesian society; it connects people, regulates relationships, binds the present day to the past and the future. It is the source of social security, and the base for identity, memory, culture, and spirituality. Iruinu and others, such as Bruno Idioai,⁶ contend that these relationships that centre upon land, are a model for sustaining future generations. This understanding of land stands in notable contrast to the relationships and associated cultural practices introduced by the colonial regime.

3. Iruinu, B., *Interview – The Panguna Seminars*, Arsam International, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 25 August 2015.

4. Garuai, P., *Interview – The Panguna Seminars*, Arsam International, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 12 November 2014.

5. Saovana, R., *Gender and Peace: Bougainvillean Women, Matriliney and the Peace Process*, PhD Thesis (Australian National University: Canberra, 2007).

6. Idioai, B., *Interview – The Panguna Seminars*, Arsam International, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 27-28 November 2014.

Accordingly, land was a predictable fault line of contention. For the colonial administration, who were convinced of the superiority of their own system, land was a resource that could be sacrificed to the point of exhaustion if the anticipated profits were sizable enough. Linked to this posture were a set of cultural values which encouraged citizens to build an identity around individualism, consumerism and urbanisation. At the same time, the communal obligations that lie at the centre of Melanesian society were replaced by social connections mediated through markets and an abstract allegiance to nationality.⁷

For those communities on Bougainville confronting these values and relations extolled by the colonial regime, it was not simple arithmetic that these processes exported from Europe should replace the social systems bequeathed by Melanesian foremothers and forefathers. Peter Garuai notes it was a particularly ambiguous situation.⁸ Newfound access to items like steel axes, which could cut down labour time in the garden, was certainly welcomed. However, once this access was married to accepting a much wider range of political and economic institutions, the cost-benefit ratio became increasingly more problematic.

Nevertheless, local communities were not contending with an outside force that was inclined to leave, or indeed to abandon its mission. Colonisation was a calling that could not be denied, such was the belief of the colonial powers in the superiority of their civilisation and the necessity of occupying countries viewed as 'less-developed'. As a result, local misgivings were not an insurmountable barrier. Indeed, while consent is an essential rule

7. see Denoon, D., *Getting Under the Skin: The Bougainville Copper Agreement and the Creation of the Panguna Mine* (Melbourne University Press: Melbourne, 2000) and Hawksley, C., 'Constructing Hegemony: Colonial Rule and Colonial Legitimacy in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea', *Rethinking Marxism*, 19(2), 2007, pp 195–207.

8. Garuai, P., *Interview – The Panguna Seminars*, Arsam International, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 12 November 2014.

governing our interpersonal relationships, at the level of colonial geopolitics consent is irrelevant. Refusal or opposition is not a reason to leave, but a barrier to be torn down. On Bougainville, the administration pursued its colonial mission – especially after WWII – with zeal. The choice offered to Bougainville was to drift off in a state of primitive stasis, or become active participants in the colonial project, so communities could be inducted into a new civilisation, which was modern and developed.⁹

For communities confronted with this choice, they faced the unedifying prospect of all the cultural assets and relationships dear to their heart being stigmatised as primitive; while the values and systems they were being told to accept, they had no connection with, or passion for. Elders such as Chief Antony Taruito, recall a feeling of violent dislocation.¹⁰ The rules and norms communities were intuitively accustomed to were being eroded, and replaced with a foreign system. In the transition people felt trapped in a void. Nevertheless, this did not precipitate a moment of eruption; this would come later, in 1988.

Colonialism's power, in its more austere form – which typified the Australian administration – is that its mission to gradually unpick the roots of local civilisations, and impose on them new forms, occurs in a gradual and piecemeal fashion. There is never a clear moment of dispossession or cultural genocide. It is more of a gradual fading than a sudden bang.

Soon, however, the Australian regime began to anticipate the colonial project it introduced would need to be handed over to local management first through self-government and

9. Cleland, D. M., Draft Correspondence from D. M. Cleland, Administrator, Papua New Guinea, to Rt. Rev. Bishop L. Lemay, S.M., Catholic Commission, Post Office, Sohano, Bougainville, 31 August 1966 and *South Pacific Post* 17/2/1967, pp.7-8.

10. Taruito, A., *Interview – The Panguna Seminars*, Arsam International, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 22 July 2015.

The mine itself was an explicit attack not simply on an asset, but the nerve centre of local societies: the land, without which they cannot exist in any form they would be welcomed or recognised.

then political independence. It thus rapidly increased its investment in local managers who could run the newly introduced political, market and cultural machinery, and further entrench it in the country.¹¹ This process, to be sustainable in the long term, required a significant injection of funds. The copper and gold ore-body in Bougainville's Crown Prince Ranges offered a welcome revenue boost.¹²

But in pursuing the mine the colonisation process lost its primary weapon, its gradual and piecemeal nature, which diluted its more contentious effects. The mine itself was an explicit attack not simply on an asset, but the nerve centre of local societies: the land, without which they cannot exist in any form they would be welcomed or recognised. The tensions colonisation was pregnant with were laid bare by the Panguna mine, in their most explicit form.

Mining and resistance to the colonial project

When the colonial administration initiated an industrial scale open cut mine in the Panguna region of Bougainville, in partnership with Rio Tinto, it created an existential threat to the life of those who stood in its shadow. Its construction and operation would produce hundreds of thousands of tons of effluent daily that would go on to destroy surrounding land, waterways, and ecosystems.¹³ The mine's operation would also precipitate new economic practices, migration patterns, cultural changes, and a shift in the urban environment, all of which corroded the relationships and processes essential to the reproduction of local social structures.¹⁴ For the Australian administration, executing

this process in a controlled and organised matter was their right as a colonial power. The Administration understood that however carefully orchestrated this transition was, it would precipitate resistance. This resistance was regarded by colonial officials as the emotional over-reaction of a primitive people, which Australia, as the father nation, needed to cautiously chide, with some sensitivity to what was being lost.¹⁵

To chaperone Bougainville through this turbulent period, the colonial administration opted for a mixture of persuasion (via kiap patrols and propaganda campaigns), alongside the strategic application of armed force.¹⁶ What administration officials failed to appreciate by and large, was that resistance to the mine was not the unthinking reflex of a primitive people facing an anxious journey into modernity. Rather, resistance was the considered strategy of a people who were not prepared to surrender their cultural sovereignty, set against a well-known backdrop of decimation in the colonial south. Indeed, communities anticipated in very precise terms - which were loudly articulated at the time - that the mine would, on the one hand, export local wealth abroad, and on the other, outside problems, such as environmental damage and social

conflict, would be imported into Bougainville.¹⁷ While these critiques were dismissed by colonial officials, history would reveal that, in the long run, local knowledge and analysis proved superior to that of the Australian regimes.

Despite a prolonged campaign of resistance that featured road blocks, industrial sabotage and protest, operations at the mine began in 1972. The fragmented nature of the resistance, spread as it was across rugged rural stretches, as well as the superior arms and resources commanded by the colonial regime and mining company, meant the operation could be shepherded into being without a clear mandate.

Its effects, as communities warned, were wide-ranging and life-changing. Some took advantage of the opportunities opened up by entering into business, or gaining employment at the mine. Others endured profound social dislocation. With land and environment inevitably eviscerated, the loss was more than economic. It was denial of access to cultural, customary, economic, and spiritual practices essential to community traditions, individual senses of personhood and social security.¹⁸ The result was a sense of collective and individual displacement.

No person was a bystander. Those who did not directly suffer the trauma of this loss, empathized with compatriots who did.¹⁹ And it ought to be underlined, this was trauma. People in the mine impacted area recall suffering severe mental distress as they were swept into conflicting paradigms;²⁰ on the one hand there were introduced sets of

11. Griffin, J., Nelson, H. and Firth, S., *Papua New Guinea: A Political History* (Heinemann Educational Australia: Richmond, 1979).

12. Downs, I. (1980). *The Australian Trusteeship: Papua New Guinea 1945-75* (Australian Government Publishing Service: Canberra, 1980).

13. Vernon, D. 'The Panguna Mine', in Regan, A. J. and Griffin, H. M. (eds.) *Bougainville: Before the Conflict* (Pandanus Books: Canberra, 2005).

14. Lasslett, K, *State Crime on the Margins of Empire* (Pluto Books: London, 2014).

15. Daw, T.E., Correspondence from T.E. Daw, District Officer, to the Director, Department of District Administration, Konedobu, 15 June 1967 and Hay, D.O., Correspondence from D. O. Hay, Administrator, Papua New Guinea, to G. Warwick-Smith Esq. O.B.E, Secretary for Territories, Department of Territories, Canberra. A.C.T., 30 August 1968.

16. Warwick-Smith, G., Correspondence from George Warwick-Smith Esq., Secretary, Department of Territories, Canberra, to Douglas Hay, Administrator, Territory of Papua and New Guinea, 2 February 1967.

17. see for example Daw, T.E., Correspondence from T.E. Daw, District Officer, to the Director, Department of District Administration, Konedobu, 15 June 1967.

18. Pokamari, T., *Interview – The Panguna Seminars, Arsam International*, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 6 August 2015 and Totobu, M., *Interview – The Panguna Seminars*, Arsam International, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 7 August 2015.

19. Onavui, P., *Interview – The Panguna Seminars*, Arsam International, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 23 July 2015.

practices which ‘civilized’ people were meant to embrace. On the other there were the norms of indigenous societies, to which people were meant to only pay tokenistic homage to.

By the 1980s, these intersecting forces found expression in a growing social movement that aimed to close the Panguna mine.²¹ Despite its outward form, this was not an anti-mining movement – or at the very least this label fails to capture the larger historical schisms informing the movement. The mine was arguably the most physical and visceral symbol of a deeper social crisis, initiated a century before.²² It concentrated and condensed this crisis. The opposition that emerged in response to the mine was not simply questioning then the rights and wrongs of extracting ore from the ground. Rather, a spotlight was being placed on the existential crisis indigenous communities were facing, as the colonial project entrenched itself on Bougainville no longer under Australian management, but the management of localised provincial and national governments.

This anti-colonial resistance fused with other forces that began to entwine themselves in the crisis.²³ Nationalist elements on Bougainville saw in the emerging crisis an opportunity to leverage growing public anger, to seize a greater share of the mine revenues for Bougainville.

This faction of economic nationalists appear to have accepted the general direction set for Bougainville by the colonial powers as the right one. The principal concern was increasingly local control over the profits this system was generating. Evidence later revealed that key economic nationalists were involved in opaque business ventures which aimed to leverage the

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discontent to gain control of the mining sector on Bougainville.²⁴ This suggests had they led the initial revolution in 1988 it would have exacerbated the inequalities and colonial processes the social movement was challenging.

Arguably the strongest social faction underpinning the movement to close down the Panguna mine found its figurative articulation in two young leaders, Francis Ona and Perpetua Serero, who assumed control of the Panguna Landowners Association, following their election in 1987 to its governing board. Using this pressure body, they aimed to stimulate a movement which would stem all the corrosive impacts pointed to above, allowing the mine impacted region to undergo a process of renewal where local social systems could be revived, initiating a period of cultural and social healing.²⁵ Their objective, which was widely shared, found expression initially in protests, road-blocks and sit ins; it progressed to industrial sabotage in November 1988.

When the Papua New Guinea and Australian governments responded to the unrest using military force - with logistic support from the Rio Tinto subsidiary, Bougainville Copper Limited – a decade long period of armed violence was initiated.²⁶ A former combatant, Jonah Matvai,²⁷ argues that the colonial project was always progressed with a gun in the background. The Bougainville Revolutionary Army in his opinion, seized this gun and used

20. Taruito, A., *Interview – The Panguna Seminars*, Arsam International, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 22 July 2015.

21. see Lasslett, K, *State Crime on the Margins of Empire* (Pluto Books: London, 2014).

22. Iruinu, B., *Interview – The Panguna Seminars*, Arsam International, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 25 August 2015.

23. see Lasslett, K, *State Crime on the Margins of Empire* (Pluto Books: London, 2014).

24. ‘President John Momis implicated in Chinese-Australian plot to lift Bougainville mining moratorium’ in *PNG Exposed*, 12 May 2016.

25. Lasslett, K, *State Crime on the Margins of Empire* (Pluto Books: London, 2014).

26. Lasslett, K, *State Crime on the Margins of Empire* (Pluto Books: London, 2014).

27. Matvai, J., *Interview – The Panguna Seminars*, Arsam International, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 23 November 2014.



Photo credit: Alexandre Berman and Olivier Pollet

Families still remember those they lost, while mothers to this day search for children whose remains are missing.

it to protect local resources from further deprivation. It is hard to imagine the depth of feeling and the seismic stakes that would cajole a large number of young people, living in a peaceful region, to take up arms against a far superior military force. Outside commentators have often resorted to racist tropes, describing rebels as cargo cultists and terrorists, labels that whitewash a much more complex history. Such labels do a deep injustice to the suffering being resisted and the critique of colonialism underpinning this struggle.²⁸

The violence endured during the war period cannot be adequately captured here. It tore apart families, dislocated successive

28. discussed in Lasslett, K, *State Crime on the Margins of Empire* (Pluto Books: London, 2014).

generations, destroyed considerable infrastructure, and has left legacies of trauma that are being left badly under-treated today. Families still remember those they lost, while mothers to this day search for children whose remains are missing. No side to the conflict can escape blame for these atrocities, although the evidence strongly suggests a significant share of responsibility for gross human rights violations goes to the Australian and Papua New Guinean states, alongside Rio Tinto. These legacy issues deserve serious policy attention, and a considerable volume of funding, especially for addressing post-conflict trauma. However, there are other remaining legacies of the war also worth examining.

Social renewal and decolonisation

In their accounts and histories of the conflict period, survivors recall a mixture of feelings. On the one hand, many can cite traumatic

experiences at the hands of combatants, or the fear associated with raising a family during a prolonged period of displacement. However, amidst this violence and ambiguity, survivors also point with pride to the resilience local cultures demonstrated in providing the glue for social life, when the colonial political and economic infrastructure communities had become partially dependent on was abruptly removed, and a military blockade was placed around Bougainville. Local forms of customary leadership, the strengthened role of women as custodians, growth in indigenous forms of savvy, and traditional productive practices, are all pointed to as integral support structures that got communities through a dark period. But it was not merely a matter of survival; these enhanced social trajectories signaled a period of cultural renewal.

This precipitated some extraordinary restorative actions. Emblematic of this phenomenon is Bruno Idioai who made efforts to repair the harm generated by the extractive industries by planting over one million trees and starting a local agricultural college specialising in Melanesian agronomy.²⁹ Others who had been displaced by the mine returned to their ancestral home and rebuilt their communities on top of millions of tons of waste rock, enduring all the hardship this implies.³⁰

That said, the cessation of the blockade, and the onset of the peace process was widely welcomed. But not uncritically so. There was strong grass-roots support for mending rifts between communities and providing new generations with stability and security. However, it is not as clear whether people desire that this process should be accompanied by a restoration of the institutions and systems introduced during the colonial period. For example, in the Panguna region, there remains a deep skepticism of industrial-scale mining,

29. Idioai, B., *Interview – The Panguna Seminars*, Arsam International, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 27-28 November 2014.

30. Onavui, S., *Interview – The Panguna Seminars*, Arsam International, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 7 December 2014.

and the economic model this type of project is married to, a model that was implemented first by the Australian regime acting on the advice of the World Bank (both of the which remain active voices, supporting the return to large-scale mining on Bougainville).³¹ While the call for a ‘small is beautiful’ approach to economics has been dismissed by politicians as idealistic,³² it represents an enduring desire at the grass-roots level to find a uniquely Bougainvillean path that integrates with the world economy and international political system, but in a way that is sympathetic to local sovereignty and the maintenance of those cultural systems which proved so essential to community life during the conflict.³³

For those trained to administer the political and market institutions bequeathed by the colonial powers, questioning the merit of Bougainville’s colonial heritage is an existential threat; much as the mine was an existential threat to impacted communities. That is, questioning in a serious way the merit of a national economy grounded in the auctioning of natural resources to foreign investors, in order to generate revenues that can support an introduced Westminster system of government, affronts the salaries, profits and political interests of powerful actors on Bougainville who have become wedded to this structure, which now includes notable ex-combatant leaders. As a result, we have seen politicians and senior policy makers try to deny the political opportunity opened up by the crisis to dismantle dimensions of Bougainville’s colonial heritage, by framing it as no choice at all; life, so the assumption goes, would be impossible without such structures, so we cannot question them. Yet living memory on Bougainville recalls life

31. Jubilee Australia, *Voices of Bougainville*, (Jubilee Australia: Sydney, 2014).

32. Momis, J., ‘To Meet Fiscal Self-Reliance we Must Open the Panguna Mine’, *Bougainville News*, 6 January 2015, <https://bit.ly/2OxZxCl>.

33. Jubilee Australia, *Voices of Bougainville*, (Jubilee Australia: Sydney, 2014).

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existing without these structures, under the most inhospitable conditions imaginable.

Despite efforts to deny the opportunities now open to Bougainville, as the autonomous region approaches the referendum over independence, there is ample scope for a wide-scale process of critical reflection. Would raising the Bougainville flag, figuratively speaking, over the institutions bequeathed to it by Australia and then Papua New Guinea enable the form of sovereignty desired by rural communities throughout Bougainville? Is it possible to imagine an independent Bougainville dismantling certain colonial legacies while retaining others? And what

space might be opened up in this emerging political landscape to experiment with new Melanesian models of governance and economic organisation that sit sympathetically alongside local cultures, social systems, and value frameworks?

These questions beget others. Is economic life on Bougainville best pursued through luring foreign investment into natural resource projects, supplemented by a local economy rooted in forms of private ownership based on introduced models of competitive individualism? Is there an argument for focusing policy attention on those industries that can be locally controlled, with the revenues retained on Bougainville? Are there alternative models of social ownership that could support household economic activity, such as cooperative societies, which are more sympathetic to Melanesian social systems? Is the current form of representative democracy delivering accountable results for people? Are there alternative models of participatory democracy

Youths from Sipuru Village Assembly come together to build a road and steps in the Evo mountains to link up their communities and villages



Photo credit: Alexandre Berman and Olivier Pollet

that could be drawn on to facilitate greater communal control of policy and budget expenditure? Can small island democracies support the type of bureaucratic system that echoes a model used in Australia and the UK? Are there alternative economic structures, that are more accountable, less corrupt and thus reduce demands placed on taxation receipts? What are the assets and institutions that have been developed in Melanesian society that could be scaled up to replace some of the ineffective institutions imposed during the colonial period? Are there also principles and cultural values that could be scaled up as a constitutional focal-point which can ensure future governments on Bougainville remain loyal to local conceptions of the good life, rather than conceptions imported from abroad on what a responsible country should do with its time and resources? How have belief systems, gender relationships and social interactions been shaped by colonial institutions? To what extent are these changes compatible with cultural expectations that should be upheld as a resource for the future? Is the formal education system fit for purpose? Does it capture the capacities, skills, knowledge, and teachers, essential to a holistic education that equip future generations to transmit their cultural heritage and enliven national sovereignty?

These are big questions that interrogate over a century of history. They presuppose that there is no single destiny for Bougainville, and no one right way of doing things. Indeed, these questions frame the future as an open process with many possible avenues, with consequences for communities on Bougainville that can be anticipated; just as the construction of the Panguna mine was one potential path of history with consequences that could be predicted. There are rich veins of thought that stretch across Bougainville which could provide answers to the above questions, out of which a political strategy for the future could be engineered. However, elites on Bougainville – local and foreign – will not easily relinquish control over this strategy to a wider populous. As Blaise Iruinu rightly

observes the struggle against colonialism on Bougainville is not yet over.³⁴

34. Iruinu, B., *Interview – The Panguna Seminars*, Arsam International, Bougainville Peoples Research Centre and Fourth World Films, 25 August 2015.