

FROM CRISIS TO OPTIMISM: BUILDING BOUGAINVILLE'S FUTURE

AUTHORS: THEONILA ROKA-MATBOB AND CHRISTINA HILL

Theonila Roka-Matbob grew up around Panguna in central Bougainville. She is a qualified teacher, having completed studies at Divine Word University and the University of Goroka in Papua New Guinea, and is an experienced researcher and activist.

Christina Hill's work focuses on human rights, gender and corporate accountability. She is Jubilee Australia's Bougainville 2020 Project coordinator and editor of this publication. Christina travelled to Bougainville in January 2018 where she met and interviewed Theonila.

Christina Hill: You were born during the crisis on Bougainville. What do you remember about that time?

Theonila Roka-Matbob: I remember a lot of things. We are talking about the year 1991 coming up 1992 because I cannot remember anything in the year I was born which was 1990. The volumes of memories I have and that I consider quite significant and distributing at the some time are those like the memory of seeing harms. Being born at that time and growing up I thought that was a normal life every human being lives. Some of the things I remember are gun shots, next neighbours dying, and then hearing stories like that person in that village has been dragged away from his family in the night and he has been murdered or is missing or these other kinds of memories that I have in my mind. Also, I should say there are other very horrific kind of memories I have in my mind is those like seeing slaughtered people and people whose bodies are like crushed in whatever way that is very violent, and seeing the corpse lying on front of me. These are all the kind of memories that I have even today having grown up and already being a mother and married women these are like memories that I have seen yesterday.

CH: Do you remember any good times or happy moments?

TR: I would hardly think of a happy moment I have of my family because having grown up in that period of time when there was just fear. Having being born amid that fear and then growing up all the way until the early 2000s I really don't remember a time where there was some kind of happiness shared in the family, apart from just laughing amongst ourselves, because during that period of time when we were growing up there was always fear in the society. Even if it is in the family we have got to be very careful of what we have say to each other.



Photo credit: Christina Hill

CH: Do you often wonder how your life might now be different if you were born during a time of peace rather than conflict?

TR: The biggest part of my life that I wonder if it had have been different is the fact that I grew up being fatherless as a result of the crisis. This is something that today that as a mature person, as a grown-up person, I wonder what it feels like to have a father and having growing up saying papa. Recalling my memories back I used to wonder how life . . . life would have probably better than the life that I lived if it was in a time of peace but then there is no point to regret because there are also other positive things I see like if I was born at a time of peace then I wouldn't have this experience to be a voice for the voiceless.

CH: You now have a young son. With some talk of reopening the Panguna mine and the independence referendum scheduled for next year are you worried that history might repeat itself? Or are you more optimistic about the immediate future for Bougainville?

TR: I should say this is the biggest worry being a young mother to a young life because the last thing that I would want to see is the repeat of our history, to see my own son suffering the way I suffered. If there is a possibility that history repeats itself then I would be no different from the life I lived because I am fully aware of the fact that I am married to a Papua New Guinean and due to this kind of misunderstanding people have, especially on the front of racism, I think that my son would be the victim of that if history is to be repeated. But otherwise within myself I am quite optimistic about the future because at that time [of the crisis] I see that a lot of people were not aware of the kind of lies corporations play on indigenous people and today we have a good number of population who are aware of the tricks they play on the lives of people,

The Kawerong River downstream of the Panguna Mine, and next to Theonila's village, showing a blue coloured deposit on the riverbed caused by elevated copper levels in water discharged from the mine site



Photo credit: Christina Hill

like keeping us divided to fight against each other. I think today the level of awareness has gone up compared to back then in the 80s.

CH: What is like to be a young person in Bougainville now?

TR: Being a young Bougainvillian at this point in time, especially the period where we in the transitional period from the conflict era, post-conflict and now we are going into another chapter in the political process of Bougainville, I really feel that within myself and as a person contributing into the nation building in small ways, I should say it is a blessing, it really is a blessing for me. But then on the other hand as I look at my own generation there is the biggest worry. I think that if our generation can have the sense of ownership, can have the sense of service I think Bougainville will at least move some steps further than this. But instead people live a life of selfishness. I should say because at this point in time when if we are to talk about Bougainville's independence, we are talking about a generation who has to be of service because if we can be able to give then we will build the nation. But at the moment I see my own generation, we are so fond of money, building ourselves and not building others and we do not want to render our service for free, we want to render it for money and that is a problem we have. This is the biggest worry that if Bougainville is already developing this culture from my generation then this generation will be controlling the bureaucracy of Bougainville, the administration of Bougainville, and the business sector of Bougainville, then we will become profit oriented and this will be the fall of our nation. Our elders, the generation this is ahead of us, they've lost a sense of patriotism as Bougainvillians and there's a lot of imitations and our generation seem to copy, we tend to imitate and that is the biggest problem I see.

CH: Are young people given the opportunity to participate in public life? Or are they encouraged to participate in public life?

TR: The community leaders they encourage us to stand up but they do not give us space, this is the problem. To really create that avenue where young people can walk in and exercise whatever potential they have I think this is the biggest part missing in Bougainville. When we come out and then whatever views that we have and when we are trying to come out with it we are suppressed and for that reason most of our young people are going back, they are laying back, they become laid back. The few of us who keep coming out are the ones who force ourselves because we believe that nothing can beat the truth that if we believe that our perspective is for the justice and for social inclusion for every single Bougainvillean. These are the things that keep pushing us.

CH: What needs to happen to change the situation you've just described?

TR: I have the biggest confidence that the only way we will change this attitude, or change this mentality, or change this trend is to go down and tap the shoulders of these very young children coming up. This is the whole reason why I with the support of my family were able to come up with this little school for kids because we believe that real change will come from that generation. My generation is a bit of a confused generation because we have these people who fought for independence, those who fought for liberation, but then we see that they are not living the spirit, they are rather making themselves look as though they lifted the guns to fight against the corporation, to build themselves materially. There is nothing really for my

Inside the school established by Theonila



Photo credit: Christina Hill

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generation to look at because the warlords are actually becoming rich and they are suppressing everyone else so really there is no example left for us to see. So, I really believe for young children, like those aged 3 coming up to age 7, these are the people who we really need to look into and then start influencing them, so that is the way we can really change for the good of Bougainville. I am very much positive that if we can influence a good number of children and then by the time that they become youths they are at the stage to question, they will be able to question, and then they will see the difference. Then if a number of our generation come up as leaders later on then we will at least have some people to bank onto because we already tried our best to create, to impart, different perspectives on Bougainville.

CH: What are your hopes for the future and how are you going to get there?

TR: My biggest hope for Bougainville is to change the education system. We'd rather talk about a curriculum that we will develop in the context of Bougainville. This is the whole reason why when I look back into my own life I am thankful for whatever has happened, all the challenges, because then these are the things that we can always use as building blocks to be able to create a new beginning for the young people. If only we can change the education system. The reason why I will keep pressing on changing the education system is because I believe that a lot of influences also comes in with the system of education. Having gone through the formal system and having reached university I've realised that a lot of things, a lot of concepts, a lot of theories, that are taught in the classroom are actually challenged by the practices that creates harmony in Bougainville. Having practiced it for the past 5 years with the school that I developed, I've seen that if we can be able to teach our children the values of the community and then just putting in whatever we believe is necessary from outside then that is the way forward for Bougainville. And the only way that we will be able to achieve this is to teach from the heart, and not to teach simply because we are professional teachers, we have to become teachers who want to change the path that Bougainville is going into which is I believe, that if our leaders are not careful, we are going into a very disastrous period of time.