Resolving Hybrid Conflicts: The Bougainville Story

by Timothy G. Hammond

Introducing the Bougainville Crisis within its Global Context

The Autonomous Region of Bougainville, which includes the islands of Bougainville, Buka, and an array of smaller atolls, is located in Oceania just east of mainland Papua New Guinea, from which it is not yet fully independent. Geographically, Bougainville is a part of the Solomon Islands and Bougainvilleans share more cultural and linguistic traits with the Solomon Islanders than they do with the people of Papua New Guinea. Despite these facts, through colonization Papua New Guinea and Bougainville were administered together under the same colonial territory. So when Papua New Guinea gained its independence in 1975, Bougainville continued to remain politically connected to the country. Home to an estimated 200,000 inhabitants, the island’s population is far from being culturally homogenous. Similar to mainland Papua New Guinea, Bougainville is host to an impressive array of distinct languages (about 25, in fact), traditions, and cultural identities—all within the 9,438 square kilometers of the island. Amidst such high levels of diversity, some common traits among Bougainvilleans include their skin color, which is darker than that of most mainland Papua New Guineans, and a generally strong Christian faith, which has blended with indigenous spirituality as a result of interaction with Catholic missionaries. The igniting point that led many Bougainvilleans to come together to fight for independence from Papua New Guinea came from collective dissatisfaction with the management of the Panguna mine on the island (at one point the world’s largest open-cut mine), which created many significant costs for Bougainvilleans while providing very few benefits. The Bougainville crisis began in 1988.

The Bougainville crisis was the most severe and chronic case of violence that had occurred in the Pacific since World War II. A decade of guerilla warfare, political struggles over identity, famine, and insecurity plagued the people of Bougainville from 1988 until 1997. Beyond the hundreds of soldiers who lost their lives, an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 civilians died either by direct fighting, disease, or deprivation of basic needs. One false perception of the Bougainville crisis is that it was a case of warfare between the secessionists of Bougainville and the state of Papua New Guinea. This would lead observers to believe that the Bougainville crisis was a form of conventionally-understood civil war; however, the reality was that the violence was much more complex, as many intra-Bougainvillean conflicts commenced at the same time as the Bougainville-Papua New Guinea violence.

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1 (A. Regan, Bougainville/ Papua New Guinea 2008)
2 (Parliament of Australia 2010)
In terms of addressing violent conflict in the world today, the state and its formal judicial process (retributive forms of justice) is generally legitimized as the main provider of conflict prevention, management, and resolution (CPMR). That is because violent conflict and warfare have traditionally been understood by policymakers and state-leaders as an activity that takes place between two or more state entities, pitting their militaries against each other in order to achieve some form of political gain and/or increased power. Unlike the conventional model for understanding warfare, the actors involved in the Bougainville hybrid conflict were not limited to states’ militaries; non-state private military companies, indigenous groups, and multinational corporations were also involved. In these forms of warfare, the presence of violent non-state actors (VNSAs), including terrorist groups, traffickers, and warlords, complicates our understanding of conflict since they are borderless threats. In Bougainville, familial ties rather than political ideologies united groups together to compete for their own security. It is this form of violent conflict that is now considered to be the largest security concern in the agendas of the world’s leading countries. Some would consider these “new wars” as a sort of reversion in conflict—where violence breaks out over historically consistent issues such as access to resources, recognition of identity, and the assurance of basic needs. The reality is that violent conflict in the world today has taken a hybrid form: blending state and non-state issues and actors together and combining both old (the conventionally understood) and new characteristics of warfare.

Hybrid political orders are defined by Volker Boege of the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management as those states (often labeled as “weak”) in which diverse institutions (including non-governmental organizations, VNSAs, and multinational corporations) compete with state institutions, forming a country with a governing structure that does not match the conventional image of what a territorialized, Westphalian state looks like. Boege notes that today’s violent conflicts are often “hybrid socio-political exchanges in which modern state-centric as well as pre-modern traditional and post-modern factors mix and overlap. The state has lost its central position in violent conflicts of this kind…. Further addressing the prevalence of hybridity, the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that future threats were most likely to consist of a hybrid blend of conventional and irregular warfare, and the Department of Defense (DoD) uses hybridity as a term to describe the current complexity of violent conflicts and the requirement for an “adaptable and resilient response”. What should this adaptable response entail? After nearly a decade of warfare, the Bougainville peace-building process was largely

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3 (Williams 2008)
4 (Boege 2006)
5 (U.S. Department of State 2002)
6 New Wars Theory was developed by Mary Kaldor as a tool for differentiating the characteristics of violent conflict in the 21st century from the conventional understanding of interstate political warfare that formerly dominated the international relations field.
7 The modern state as it is known today is formally recognized as being created through the processes that evolved from the Peace of Westphalia, a series of treaties in Europe that ended the Thirty Years War and transitioned Europe from a medieval system of states into the modern territorialized system of sovereign states.
8 (Boege 2006)
successful due to the fact that indigenous customs and norms were integrated with conventional state procedures—a hybrid conflict resolution approach that was well suited for the complex array of state and non-state issues present in the crisis.

The story of the Bougainville crisis provides many lessons for understanding other violent conflicts that occur in the world today, especially those involving the struggles of indigenous populations. It's a story that demonstrates the inherent interconnection between three key forms of security: the security of the natural environment, the security of human beings, and the security of the structure of the state. Unfortunately the security of the state too often takes utmost priority in a manner that makes the other two key forms of security vulnerable—a clearly unsustainable condition as people will eventually revolt against the structures that create inequality within their governments. For sustainable peace and stability to be achieved, all three forms of security must be addressed. The Bougainville crisis was sparked because the needs of the indigenous Bougainvilleans, as well as those of the natural environment upon which they were dependent, were placed to the side in order for the government of Papua New Guinea to acquire highest profits from the Panguna mine in Bougainville. An ensuing period of warfare passed with human rights abuses occurring on all sides, as well as recurring failures to resolve the conflicts. Despite such virulent violence, the Bougainville story is ever more important due to the successes in peace-building that eventually emerged. These are successes that should shine as examples that demonstrate the potential for protracted conflicts to be resolved, as well as to demonstrate the potential for communities to become self-sufficient and ecologically sustainable. Maybe most importantly, the Bougainville story should be taken into consideration in order to preemptively avoid the outbreak of other violent conflicts, especially those involving minority populations, declining resources, and desires for autonomy. Where the Bougainville crisis began due to an unstable focus on national gain over human rights and environmental sustainability, the situation today is one in which the political governance of Bougainville is better designed to address the needs of the community and their environment.

**Short History of the Bougainville Conflict**

Social uprising began intensifying in Bougainville due to the negative social and environmental impacts caused by the Panguna mine. The Panguna copper mine was operated by Bougainville Copper Ltd (BCL), owned by Conzinc Riotinto of Australia (CRA), an Australian subsidiary of the British mining company Rio Tinto-Zinc. Drilling began at the Panguna site in 1972 in accordance with agreements made between the government of Papua New Guinea and BCL, despite opposition from indigenous Bougainvilleans. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Panguna copper mine remained one of the world’s largest open-pit mines, bringing profits to Britain and Australia, and making up 44 percent of Papua New Guinea’s exports, as well as 17 percent of the country’s state-generated revenue.¹⁰

Despite such profit generation, Bougainvilleans received very few benefits from BCL, and the costs to the society were readily apparent. PNG and the mining company failed to respect or understand

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¹⁰ (Parliament of Australia 2010)
Bougainvillean customs or methods of land ownership. Panguna was located on the Nasioi community’s land—the ownership of which is passed down through matrilineal family lines. Without taking the initiative to understand the norms of the matrilineal society, Bougainville Copper Ltd failed to sufficiently or correctly compensate the rightful land owners. Many Bougainvillean were forced to be relocated and they also faced immense environmental and social damages that were directly caused by the Panguna mine. Pollutant runoff, including poisonous copper, mercury, lead, and arsenic, destroyed entire river systems, leaving the water unlivable for plants and animals and unsuitable for human consumption. According to Australia Parliament records, 99.4 percent of the 1.215 billion tons of land that was removed by the mining company was effectively turned to waste. While communities on Bougainville had many differences and old conflicts between each other, continued resentment for the mine spurred collective desires which further strengthened a sense of a more unified Bougainvillean identity.

Former employee of Bougainville Copper Ltd and Bougainville native, Francis Ona, came to lead a strong resistance against the Panguna mine and to further fight for independence from Papua New Guinea. Ona stated that his people fight for their land, their culture, and their independence. After his demands to the Panguna administration were not met, Ona stole 50 kilos of explosives and sabotaged the mine, destroying a power-supplying transmission tower with the help of a few others in 1988. Papua New Guinea, out of defense for their main source of exports, sent in riot police who overzealously burned natives’ homes to the ground. This created an intensified backlash and under Ona’s command, the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) was formed. The BRA would face the Papua New Guinea Defense Force (PNGDF), Australian assisting forces, and opposing Bougainvillean forces as well. Due to the island’s geographical challenges as well as the complex array of actors involved, a militaristic stalemate eventually occurred. A ceasefire agreement was signed in 1990, one year after the mine stopped operating because of the conflicts, and PNG’s forces withdrew from the island. However, in this same year the government of Papua New Guinea formed an air and sea blockade around Bougainville and Buka, prohibiting the flow of goods. Bougainvillean initially faced starvation and disease without the imported goods that are essential for life on an island, which includes food and medicine for infections like malaria. Bougainvillean also lacked fuel and other items that would be necessary during wartime. At this point they had no choice, Bougainvillean had to adapt or die, and so many turned their attention inward.

An acclaimed 2001 documentary by Dom Rotheroe titled, “The Coconut Revolution” helped spread awareness of the “world’s first eco-revolution” as it shed light on the self-sustaining efforts of the Bougainvillean at this time in the conflicts. The coconut revolution was an example of innovation

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11 Ibid
12 (Rotheroe 2001)
13 (Parliament of Australia 2010)
14 (A. Regan 2008)
15 (Rotheroe 2001)
16 (Parliament of Australia 2010)
17 (Rotheroe 2001)
birthed out of necessity. With the blockade in place there was no supply of diesel, so the Bougainvilleans learned how to extract oil from coconuts to fuel their vehicles. Herbal remedies for diseases and infections were discovered from plants on the island. The soil of the land was rich and fertile, so when Bougainvilleans enhanced their cultivation techniques they were rewarded with bountiful amounts of food. Hydroelectricity even lighted their towns once rivers and streams were utilized for sustainable energy. The shut-down site of the Panguna mine even became a large resource, as Bougainvilleans used anything and everything they could to create something useful. By focusing back on a subsistence-based livelihood that had nearly been lost, and by utilizing and reinvigorating indigenous knowledge of the environment, Bougainvilleans were surviving. They largely owed their capability to survive off the natural environment to a higher power. Even through devastating times of war, a positive outlook was acquired through the act of thanking God for what blessings they were able to receive. Unlike countries in which the church and state are more clearly divided, spirituality in Bougainville is much more inseparable from the values and norms that provide the framework for the organization of their society. A lot was being proved about indigenous identity to the entire world.

It is important to be aware that the method of storytelling in the popular 2001 documentary may unintentionally paint an inaccurate and oversimplified picture in viewers’ minds that indigenous Bougainvilleans, through Ona’s command of the BRA, stood as unified secessionists against the mainland forces of Papua New Guinea. In reality, conflicts between communities on Bougainville also erupted and some Bougainvillean groups, including those on Buka, even received support from the PNGDF. While localized groups were organized in ways that the documentary demonstrates, no organized form of centralized Bougainville government was able to get off the ground due to the amount of intra-Bougainvillean conflicts that were occurring. Inspiring ecological revolutions were underway, yet conflict between the many actors at play in the crisis continued to remain unresolved at the time.

Francis Ona put forth a unilateral declaration of independence after Papua New Guinea’s forces left the island in 1990. The UDI received no international recognition at the time. While Ona was named president of the Bougainville Interim Government (BIG), support for the BRA and for the BIG declined among Bougainvilleans. Anthony Regan reports that with the threat of the PNGDF absent, and without any form of effective self-governance, many intra-Bougainvillean conflicts arose over issues such as land ownership. While the south of the island remained in support of the BRA, Bougainville Resistance Forces (BRF) formed in opposition to the BRA groups and some were even supported by the PNGDF.

Australia, home to BCL who had supplemented PNG’s forces, came to condemn the PNGDF due to many human rights violations that occurred. Yet the tipping point seemed to be after Julius Chan, the Prime Minister of PNG at the time, made agreements in 1997 with Sandline, an international

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18 (A. Regan 2008)
19 Ibid
20 Ibid
military contractor, to enhance PNG’s military strength. After this, divisions grew in Papua New Guinea as General Singirok of the PNGDF led a rebellion that evicted the controversial contracted private military forces. Afterward, Bill Skate was elected as the new Prime Minister and opportunities for peace talks were seized.  

**The Path to Peace in Bougainville**

The first rounds of peaceful negotiations were hosted in New Zealand beginning in 1997. Notably, peace between PNG and Bougainville would not be possible until the intra-Bougainvillean conflicts were resolved. In 1997, opposing Bougainvillean groups successfully signed the Burnham Declaration, which committed them to pursuing peaceful negotiations. Later in the same year, the government of Papua New Guinea joined the Bougainville factions to sign the Burnham Truce, agreeing to be monitored by an unarmed New Zealand peace monitoring group. A continued “roadmap” to peace was signed with the Lincoln Agreement in 1998, which provided a ceasefire, continued external monitoring under Australian military leadership, and further agreed for reconciliation to take place between Bougainvilleans and between PNG and Bougainville.  

Interesting to note is that Francis Ona, original leader of the BRA, stood as a roadblock for negotiations towards independence at this time due to the fact that he believed that his 1990 UDI was enough to solidify Bougainville’s independence. Finally, in 2001, the Bougainville Peace Agreement was ratified, providing autonomy for Bougainville, a position just short of full independence. PNG military forces were withdrawn, combatant Bougainvillean groups were disarmed, and a referendum was created so that the future political status of Bougainville may yet be decided. There were several key factors that led to the successful implementation of these agreements in Bougainville. These include the role that women played for resolving conflicts on Bougainville, the inclusion and integration of indigenous forms of governance with formal Westphalian state procedures, collective perceptions responsibility, an emphasis on restorative justice, strong external monitoring and mediation, and the fact that the process of healing was emphasized without rushing or pushing for immediate outcomes.

An inherent danger exists with the agreements made that a lack of enforcing or implementing mechanisms may mean that the sources of the conflict could go unaddressed and conflict may reemerge. The United Nations was aware of these complications and therefore aimed to design incentives for cooperation for all parties involved. Boege writes that the New Zealand negotiations were effective because the New Zealand hosts were focused on the process rather than on the outcome. With long years of intense conflict, ample time is needed for any kind of healing to occur. The 2001 peace agreement had built in mechanisms for ensuring that a long-term outlook was made, so that the final political status of Bougainville could be addressed down the road after a level of peace was restored. Emphasizing the process rather than immediate outcome ensured that

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21 (Dinnen, Porter and Sage 2010)
22 (Hegarty 2003)
23 (Boege 2006)
political decisions were given the time they needed to best suit the community’s needs, which in turn prevents the reemergence of conflict.

Another significant reason that the negotiations in New Zealand were successful was because the parties present were constructing peace from an already established foundation. As early as seven years before the first rounds of mediated negotiations took place in New Zealand, Bougainvillean women, church leaders, and chiefs began taking advantage of indigenous customs designed for conflict prevention, management, and resolution. The fact that warring factions in Bougainville chose to begin building peace on their islands by utilizing traditional indigenous means of CPMR demonstrates the significance of keeping indigenous knowledge alive in the world today. Women, church leaders, and traditional chiefs aimed to restore damaged relationships between warring communities on the island.

Restorative forms of justice aim at restoring relationships to promote peace between entire communities, while retributive justice (conventional legal forms) aims to punish or reward the parties present. Restorative justice has been used to prevent conflict by indigenous populations throughout the world. In most cases the social foundations constructed by collective responsibility, restorative justice, and reciprocity were destroyed during colonization. It is here that the term “ethnic conflict” is often misleading. Conflict did not erupt because of the presence of different ethnic groups; conflict erupted in Bougainville due to the presence of political structures that perpetuated inequality. Many of the world’s ethnic conflicts have ignited after colonizing forces disrupted the indigenous social fabric that had once maintained order. One Bougainvillean chief emphasized the importance of restorative justice for the people on the island, stating that it is what “our ancestors used for thousands of years to resolve minor and major disputes, up until colonial times.” The BRA strongly supported the strengthening of indigenous customs in their fight for independence; however, the councils of chiefs still faced many roadblocks to peaceful relations. Adapting traditional indigenous customs to better suit the realities and challenges that Bougainville faced in the modern day, a system of councils of elders (COE) opened the door for elected church leaders and women to join the clan chiefs in their efforts to manage conflict.

Due to the matrilineal organization of society on Bougainville, there was strong potential for women, in particular, to influence the peace process. In terms of land ownership, Bougainvillean women reserve the right to designate land for personal or commercial uses. As they do not typically fight in battles, women are viewed as more neutral parties who fulfill the roles of negotiating and peacemaking. By the end of the Bougainville crisis, hundreds of women put aside their diverse clan allegiances in order to come together as a more unified Bougainvillean force. Saovana-Spriggs

24 (Saovana-Spriggs 2003)
25 (Tombot 2003)
26 (A. J. Regan 1999)
27 (Saovana-Spriggs 2003)
emphasizes the importance of the role that women played, stating that “women were the initial brokers” in the process of peace-building process.28

Towards a Transformed Future?

More recently, controversy has sparked over talks for the infamous Panguna mine to be reopened. This time around, there are several key changes that suggest that the vehicle to peace and security remains on the correct tracks. John Momis, current President of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, believes that reopening the Panguna mine will enable Bougainville to take a further step towards full independence, as well as strengthen health and education systems across the island. Rose Pihei, Minister for Culture and Tourism for the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG), also voiced her support of the motion to reopen the mine. She explained that “Panguna landowners are ready to work with the Autonomous Bougainville Government as the legitimate government for Bougainville and other factions are already working with them to join the team so that Bougainville can voice their grievances as one Bougainville. The Panguna mine will be opened as soon as all the negotiations are completed. Panguna gave independence to PNG and should now be opened to give the necessary funds for Bougainville to move forward.”29 Papua New Guinea’s leading newspaper reported that the right to choose their own future was what “every Bougainvillean has been waiting for”. Important measures were made in the motion that ensured that the landowners will maintain ownership of resources, and that mining policies are installed for wealth to trickle throughout the island, a clear difference from Panguna’s past.

No population on Earth today is left isolated from globalizing forces, from the flows of the global market economy, and neither are they excluded from the global challenges that the human community faces. Having such valuable resources located on their island, Bougainvillean must move forward carefully to avoid economic symptoms like the “resource curse”, where the gift of holding such valuable resources within one’s borders increases the likelihood of conflict. The possibility also exists that if Bougainville’s economy does not diversify, future mining exports will out-compete all other sectors on the island. At the same time, Bougainvillean are given an opportunity here to become further independent and to gain the funds required for their communities to prosper. This is possible as long as rightful landowners are given due compensation and the Bougainville community as a whole, rather than the government of Papua New Guinea, takes responsibility for the Panguna mine—ensuring that the environment is much better protected from dangerous chemicals and that the wealth created is used to enhance society rather than to form a new class of elite. In this year, 2012, developments are still ensuing.

Conclusion: Balanced Security, Better Bougainville

The hybrid form of warfare that occurred in Bougainville is the most common form of warfare that has waged through the 21st century. As resources continue to be depleted with a growing population

28 Ibid
29 (The European Shareholders of Bougainville Copper 2012)
and cultures of over-consumption, the risk is high that intra-state conflicts will continue to emerge across the globe, igniting over distributions of wealth and the assurance to basic needs, and involving governments, indigenous groups, multinational corporations, private military forces and more. Amidst such complexity, the Bougainville story demonstrates that resolution of hybrid conflicts is possible and that situations of conflict can be transformed into times of peace as long as we remain innovative and dedicated.

The peace-building mechanisms that have proved to be the most effective and longest-lasting are those that are valued internally by the community members themselves. This means that the community’s voice is heard throughout the process, creating autonomy and solidarity, building collective responsibility, and legitimizing social identity. Third-party mediators must consider the specific cultural and historical contexts of the conflict at hand if they are to help those caught in violence come up with solutions that suit their own needs. As Clements, Brown, Boege, and Nolan clearly depict, the success behind the achieved peace in Bougainville is due to the political order that has been developed that “combines elements of the western model of statehood (a president and parliament, a constitution, free and fair elections, a public service) and elements of customary governance (councils of elders and councils of chiefs, customary law and conflict resolution. This hybrid model is functioning well and enjoys a high degree of legitimacy….”

If conflict, and the states in which conflict occurs, are often hybrid in form, it would seem a logical necessity that conflict resolution efforts also take a hybrid form.

The victories within the Bougainville story legitimate grassroots movements as well as non-western or indigenous forms of governance and conflict resolution. The Bougainvillians’ solution was not to revert to the past, but rather to reinvigorate traditional customs and incorporate their own cultural norms and values into the conventional westernized methods of peace-and-state-building. This ensures that the identities, needs, and livelihoods of minority communities are legitimized and respected while also making progress to ensure that they have equal access to the goods and services of the modern era. It is through such innovative and integrative methods that populations who have suffered protracted conflicts may strengthen their own capability of breaking cycles of violence to ensure peace for the long haul.

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30 (Boege, Brown, et al. 2008)


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