



Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

State Society and Governance in Melanesia

THE BOUGAINVILLE CONFLICT: PERSPECTIVES FROM NASIOI

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In reading journalistic and some academic accounts of the Bougainville conflict, I have been struck by two weaknesses. First is a tendency to emphasise only those events immediately leading up to the outbreak of violence in 1988, to the neglect of significant issues originating decades earlier. Second is a picture of a monolithic, homogenous 'Bougainville', ignoring both past and present divisions among the population. Both weaknesses can be addressed by focusing on speakers of a language labelled Nasioi, who claim the land on which the Bougainville copper mine was developed; who have consistently provided a strong voice for secession from what is now the nation-state of Papua New Guinea; and who furnished the core personnel and most prominent leadership of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army. Their history in the twentieth century has been distinctive, and is worth comparing and contrasting with those of the other language groups on Bougainville and Buka islands. My comments are based primarily on my experiences living intermittently with Nasioi speakers from 1962 to 1978, with the opportunity to see at close range the lives they led before and after the development of the giant copper mine.

Nasioi is the term given to this language by a German Marist missionary at the beginning of the century. The language is related to three others spoken in the southern part of the island but to no other. Matthew Spriggs (1997) has made a convincing argument that ancestors of Nasioi speakers arrived millennia before settlers ancestral to speakers of quite unrelated languages to the north. Thus one might argue that some of the present cultural divisions among Bougainville's population have long roots indeed.

But there is no evidence that Nasioi-speakers saw themselves as any sort of united group at the beginning of this century. They lived in environments stretching from the coast inland to mountains 900 metres above sea level. These different environments called for different adaptations, therefore variations in social life. Coastal Nasioi had access to salt, the products of the sea and sago palms; those living in valleys easily grew coconuts and taro; mountain dwellers used forest products for bows, arrows, and carrying utensils. Villagers exchanged what they produced for what their own environments did not provide.

Furthermore, people in the varied parts of this territory had different kinds of contact with

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other groups: coastal Nasioi faced raids from the Solomon Islands to the south; mountain dwellers in the Kongara region dealt, and sometimes intermarried, with neighbouring Nagovisi-speakers; those in the Koromira area were subject to influence from the rather different political organisation of Buin-speakers to the south.

Despite these variations, it is possible without too much simplification to draw a picture of Nasioi social life at the time when outsiders settled on their land. Their settlements were small—not more than a few households—and scattered over the landscape. The household of a married couple was the unit producing basic subsistence needs, but each Nasioi also belonged to a larger kinship group, a clan. One belonged to the clan of one's mother, and one should choose a spouse from a different clan. Certain kin were favoured as marriage partners, and the practice tended to produce a continuing relationship between two clans exchanging spouses over generations. However, members of any single clan lived in settlements scattered over the territory, and the entire membership never joined together for political or social action.

Rights to garden land were primarily inherited through the female line. Because of the importance of women in the kinship and inheritance system, and in providing basic subsistence needs, relations between the sexes tended to be complementary, rather than hierarchical. In contrast to many other parts of Papua New Guinea, Nasioi women had status and rights comparable to those of men.

This absence of strict social ranking was general in Nasioi society when outsiders first arrived. There were no chiefs like those found in some other parts of the Pacific. Rather, villagers recognised what anthropologists often call 'big men'. These individuals established their influence by hard work, generosity (especially in giving feasts), and knowledge of local affairs. They did not have widespread authority to command others. If a big man became too overbearing, other villagers might simply move

away from him, since land for gardens was relatively plentiful. Because no individual or group could wield much authority over others, one of the sanctions that enforced social harmony was fear that an offended person might work sorcery on someone guilty of anti-social behaviour.

A guiding principle of all social life was that interactions between individuals or between groups should balance. The marriage pattern in which two clans exchanged brides and grooms over time is an example of this principle of balanced exchange.

The exception to this notion of balance and relative equality came in the area of traditional religion. Nasioi believed in the superiority of ancestral spirits who could aid them in everyday activities. Though they recognised the need for energy and skill in producing the necessities of life, they did not think real success was possible without supernatural help from these spirits. Special qualities of individuals, like the ability to heal or perform sorcery, were also believed to derive from such help. Villagers entreated spirits for their assistance by making gifts of valuable food like pork, which they set out in small household shrines.

These practices and attitudes were still shaping Nasioi behavior in 1962, despite all the changes that began when outsiders contacted them. This continuity can be seen—for example, in rhetoric employed by the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA)—down to the present time.

When Imperial Germany and Great Britain carved up the Southwest Pacific in the late nineteenth century, Bougainville was included in what was called German New Guinea, drawing an artificial political boundary which constitutes one root of modern secessionist unrest. One factor making Nasioi particularly subject to coloniser invasion was a good natural harbour at Kieta, where the first European settlers entered Bougainville. These were Roman Catholic missionaries arriving in 1902. In 1905,



Germans set up an administrative headquarters in Kieta, and other Europeans began to establish coconut plantations on Nasioi land from 1905.

Although Australia became the colonial power ruling Nasioi and the rest of what had been German New Guinea after the First World War, the colonial situation which Germans had created remained much the same for more than thirty years. This took the form of a particular kind of political economy, based on plantations producing copra (see Ogan 1996). Bougainville's rich volcanic soil, together with Kieta's harbour, made the Nasioi area particularly attractive for plantations. It was not difficult for prospective planters to 'buy' Nasioi land cheaply, because villagers had no concept of a sale that permanently alienated such a basic resource. Nor could they foresee that the future might bring a shortage, since land had apparently always been abundant for their needs.

Indeed, planters acquired more land than they could easily develop because conditions like endemic malaria precluded the possibility of a large European settlement on Bougainville. What was a persistent problem for planters was obtaining an adequate labour supply. The understaffed colonial administration could not force Nasioi to work, and there were few incentives for villagers to enter a money economy, so long as they could meet their basic needs through traditional subsistence activities. Only the desire for imported goods could persuade Nasioi to undertake employment.

The best solution that planters could find was adopting copra as the basic plantation crop. In contrast to sugar, for example, copra production does not need a highly trained or well-organised labour force in order to be profitable. The tasks required are simple and can be performed in a relatively casual manner. From a Nasioi point of view, the presence of plantations on their land was as much a source of confusion as of anything that might be called 'economic development'. Plantation work did not educate, but rather raised questions. Who were

these strangers with such unfamiliar wealth as metal tools, kerosene lanterns and tinned food, and what was the source of their power?

Unlike planters, missionaries saw their goal as bringing salvation, but inevitably they changed traditional life, often with unintended consequences. For the first twenty years of colonialism, missionary efforts were in the hands of Roman Catholics. Later, Methodists and Seventh-Day Adventists entered the area, creating new divisions among the Nasioi. These were not so severe as the mission rivalries to the south, because most Nasioi were nominally converted to Catholicism. It is clear that Nasioi tended to interpret missionary teachings in terms of their original world view. God, Jesus and the Virgin Mary were seen as a kind of super-ancestral spirit, and could be asked for practical benefits as villagers had done in the past. Yet missionaries, like planters and administrative officers, enjoyed a material life style which remained tantalisingly out of Nasioi reach. Nor were missionaries always free of the race prejudice that was more commonly expressed by other colonisers. All colonisers brought with them European ideas of male dominance as well, and the status of Nasioi women suffered accordingly.

Nothing could have been less like traditional social life that the kinds of inequalities created by plantation colonialism, but this did not mean that all earlier patterns of behaviour and belief were simply extinguished.

Plantation colonialism thus disturbed Nasioi life without bringing the improvements that villagers sought, especially in their material standard of living. This situation lasted more than thirty years, until the Second World War brought new invaders. As soon as Japanese forces bombed New Britain, the small coloniser community around Kieta began to flee the island. This abrupt departure had a demoralising effect on Nasioi, who had been led to believe that these Europeans were so much more knowledgeable and powerful than they.

Once again Kieta's harbour made the Nasioi area a natural point for invasion and occupation. Villages and individuals tried different strategies for dealing with these invaders, although all choices had the same goal, survival. Some Nasioi cooperated with the Japanese as fully as they could. Others secretly assisted the few Europeans, like coastwatchers, who remained behind. These wartime divisions were not forgotten in the immediate postwar era.

Because Bougainville was a major Japanese base, the island was subject to heavy bombing by American planes, and the island as a whole, along with East New Britain and the Sepik, was deemed to have suffered more than any other part of what is now Papua New Guinea. Bombing not only harmed villagers directly but drove them from their gardens to seek shelter wherever they could find it. As people said in the 1960s, 'We lived in the bush like wild pigs'. Children and pregnant women suffered the most, and the postwar population distribution was skewed as a result. In late 1943, American forces landed on the west coast of Bougainville. Once an Allied base had been established, Nasioi joined other Bougainvilleans visiting the camps, attracted by the stories of food and supplies they heard could be obtained from the generous troops.

Australian administration was restored in 1946. When the Mandated Territory became a United Nations Trust Territory, it continued to include Bougainville, though islanders had never seen themselves as truly connected with the rest of that political unit.

Nasioi had already become disillusioned with decades of a colonial experience that seemed to disrupt their lives without improving them. Their abandonment by their former colonial 'masters', followed by wartime suffering, added to their dissatisfaction. As village men were fond of saying in the 1960s

When my grandfather was alive and my father just a little boy, the Germans came. They gave us steel axes and laplaps. Then

the Australians came and drove away the Germans. Then the Japanese came and drove away the Australians. Then the Americans drove away the Japanese so the Australians could come back. Now my grandfather is dead, my father is an old man, and I am a grown man. And what do we have? Nothing more than steel axes and laplaps.

I cannot emphasise too strongly that the disillusion and disaffection with the colonial experience, together with sentiments that recognised connections with the Solomon Islands rather than New Guinea, were widespread among Nasioi before 1964.

Nasioi began to express their disenchantment with colonialism in a variety of ways soon after Australian administration was re-established, as planters and missionaries also returned to the Kieta area. They were no longer willing to work on plantations in return for the kind of treatment they had received in the past, increasing mutual resentment between planter and villager. Plantations that had existed on Nasioi land using Nasioi labour for decades had to import workers from other parts of New Guinea. As Jill Nash and I have written elsewhere (1990), this first-hand contact with people they came to call 'redskins' was important in creating a new sense of Nasioi and ultimately Bougainvillean identity.

Administration policy changed considerably in the war. Great emphasis was placed on 'development'. Though this particularly meant economic development, it included more government expenditures on education, which had in the past been left in the hands of missions. At the same time United Nations pressure to move the Territory toward independence increased. To Nasioi it seemed that the administration was more intrusive than ever, just when villagers were less willing to believe that such interference was to their benefit. However, the removal of District Headquarters from Kieta north to the island of Sohano, and policies that concentrated on the recently opened



New Guinea Highlands, actually meant something more like benign neglect.

A majority of Nasioi simply refused to participate in administration-sponsored projects. These included local government councils and cash-crop producers' cooperative societies. They also resented (though they could not resist without open rebellion) new public health efforts like spraying villages to get rid of malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

In the early 1960s, Nasioi had not yet organised themselves to carry out effective political or economic action. Rather, many villagers were seeking more supernatural solutions to their problems. Small groups would try to combine economic efforts like cash cropping and trade store management with religious practices, that joined traditional with missionary ideals and rituals. These groups were attacked by administration as 'cargo cults', and leaders were sometimes jailed. Though ineffective from an outsider's viewpoint, this response—which Nasioi themselves called in Tok Pisin '*longlong lotu*' or 'crazy church'—did focus diffuse resentment, and helped link villages in a way that traditional political organisation had not.

A more recognisably political response came in 1962, when a United Nations fact-finding team visited Kieta. At a public meeting, some Nasioi braved coloniser anger by asking the United Nations to remove Australia as administering authority, and to substitute the United States. This proposal reflected memories of American troops' wartime generosity with food and supplies. It also showed that many Nasioi still believed outside help, rather than their own efforts, was necessary to achieve their goals. Typically, Nasioi were not united on the issue; others were equally outspoken in favour of continuing Australian control.

In 1964 Australian geologists began searching for minerals on Nasioi land, where small-scale gold mining had existed before the Second World War. I want only to highlight here

what seem to me key points. First, the Australian laws on mining, which had been introduced into the Mandated Territory in the 1920s and gave subsurface mineral rights to the state, were unknown to Nasioi and not in accordance with their own ideas of land rights (for example, clay for pottery was understood to belong to whoever had ultimate gardening rights).

Second, the agreement to develop the mine was negotiated between Australian civil servants, acting as trustees for the Territory, and high-priced lawyers employed by the multinational firm Rio Tinto Zinc. No Nasioi was ever consulted in these negotiations.

This agreement had to be ratified by the first democratically elected House of Assembly in Papua New Guinea. When debate began, it appeared that only those landowners directly affected by construction of the mine and associated facilities would receive any payment at all. This would be compensation for loss of land at the rate of one Australian pound per acre per year, plus compensation for loss of crops and other property at rates to be decided in a Mining Warden Court. At that time, there was only one Bougainville Member in the House, not a Nasioi, Paul (later Sir Paul) Lapun. Over the opposition of the official members but with the support of those who were willing to compromise to get this incredible project up and running, he succeeded in obtaining a royalty for the landowners. There was considerable confusion about this royalty of 5 per cent, and at least one member who voted for it later admitted he was surprised to learn the actual maths involved. Landowner royalty was established at 5 per cent—not of the value of minerals produced, but of the government's royalty of 1.25 per cent of that value. In other words, Nasioi were to receive a little more than 6 cents per A\$100 of the value of minerals taken from their land. The amended mining agreement was unanimously approved by the House in August 1967.

Construction of the mine and associated facilities from 1968 to 1972 was a remarkable

technological achievement, but I want here to emphasise some of the social consequences. When the total population of Bougainville may have been less than 80,000 (Nasioi making up perhaps 14,000 of that total), some 10,000 construction workers from all over the world, including the main island of New Guinea, flooded into the Kieta area and inland to the mine site. This invasion transformed a peaceful part of the island to a place where public drunkenness, violence, and attempts to obtain sexual favours from Nasioi women were all too common.

Land leased for the mine by Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL) amounted to more than 32,000 acres. Small villages had to be relocated. Additional land was taken over by the administration for new towns and other facilities. Loss of Nasioi land was felt even more keenly in the face of a rapidly growing population. After wartime losses, improved medical care and other factors had boosted natural population growth to an estimated 4 per cent per year, one of the highest rates in the world. Nasioi themselves had also reduced the amount of available garden land by planting cash crops of coconut and cacao. By the early 1970s even unsophisticated village folk at some distance from the mine began to appreciate the increased pressure of so many young people. At the mine site itself, women said 'We weep for what is being done to our land'.

Perhaps it is worth underscoring here that, while almost all Nasioi resented the mine, the degree of that resentment varied with geographic distance. Those in the valleys farther south saw the mine as just one more example of outsider oppression; those in the mountains were truly outraged.

Two new significant points can be stated briefly: first, despite all the early statements from BCL about the consideration being given to preserve the environment, such brute facts as the massive pollution of the entire Jaba/Kawerong river system forced admission by the 1980s that irreversible damage had been done and that the

Panguna area could never be restored to agriculture.

Second, the much trumpeted—and indeed laudable from a national point of view—renegotiation of the original mining agreement in 1974 greatly increased revenues for soon-to-be-independent Papua New Guinea but added nothing to income received by Nasioi who bore the brunt of all the environmental and social damage.

However, BCL had learned that they had to deal more directly with Nasioi individuals and groups, as well as—or instead of—with central government, since the firm was guided by 'bottom line' considerations of profitability, rather than ideology. They attempted to lower their wage bill by localising the mine's workforce as much as possible, though Nasioi were less willing to accept BCL employment than were other Papua New Guineans. BCL provided finance and assistance to Nasioi who wanted to set up small businesses like trucking, and Nasioi together with other islanders might take advantage of education and training schemes financed by the company. Many new forms of compensation to Nasioi were directly negotiated by BCL.

Ironically, these new sources of income increased the dissatisfaction many Nasioi felt, because the financial rewards were distributed according to Western legal practice, in sharp contrast to the traditional values of a social life based on balanced exchanges that spread benefits more or less equally. New social divisions developed among the Nasioi themselves, particularly between the generations which had been affected in different ways by the mine, as well as by other social changes like cash cropping and new educational opportunities.

Let's step back a moment and trace the changes Nasioi have made toward more recognisably political responses to new conditions. Many resisted the idea of the first House of Assembly election in 1964, because they associated it with local government councils.



Eventually, a majority voted for Paul Lapun, from another language group, rejecting the Nasioi candidates. At that time, villagers often emphasised their choice's experience as a former Catholic seminarian, suggesting that he had supernatural knowledge that could help them.

Nasioi learned more about modern politics from Lapun, but also now from younger islanders who took advantage of new educational opportunities. In the 1968 election, they overwhelmingly voted for the incumbent Lapun, although they did not necessarily understand or approve his role in obtaining a landowner royalty. The increase in Bougainville representation from one to three—none Nasioi—provided greater visibility in Port Moresby, but the Members soon began to take different positions on important issues.

Lapun was a key figure in the formation of the organisation called Napidakoe Navitu, centered in Kieta (see Griffin 1982). This was the most modern political body in which Nasioi had participated as a majority up to that time. New electoral boundaries in the 1972 election meant that Nasioi could not vote for Lapun, but his endorsement of Father John Momis and his association with Navitu led most Nasioi to vote for the former in the Regional contest, and for one or the other of the two candidates claiming Navitu affiliation in the Central Bougainville Open race. Note that none of the candidates receiving major Nasioi support were of that language group.

When Papua New Guinea became independent in 1975, a new cry for Bougainville secession arose, with angry demonstrations in Kieta. According to everything I have learned, Nasioi were the strongest supporters of this movement, though they did not provide its leadership. The consequent establishment of a North Solomons Province has been well analysed in *Political Decentralisation in a New State* (May and Regan 1997) and I only wish to underline one point: the mining royalty originally given to the central government was transferred to the

Provincial Government, but this did not directly affect Nasioi landowners.

Few of Bougainville's political spokesmen who emerged in the 1970s were Nasioi. I believe this reflects the inhibiting effect of the long dominant colonial presence in and around Kieta. However, this did not mean Nasioi were quiescent, as resentment of the mine's social and environmental effects continued to grow. Review of the mining agreement, scheduled for 1981, did not take place, partly because of general landowner resistance to any further projects. Divisions between central and Provincial governments, and between the different ideologies represented by Father Momis and Leo Hannett were also involved (see Wesley-Smith 1992).

In what now can be seen as a highly significant development, Nasioi around the mine site created the Panguna Landowners Association (PLA) to represent landowner interests in negotiating with BCL (see Okole 1990). This suggests that both parties found it advisable to work around, rather than through, Port Moresby whenever possible. (However, it should be noted that by 1980, BCL was paying less attention to community relations than in the early years of operation.) PLA succeeded in obtaining a new compensation agreement which provided increased benefits, as well as a new structure including a trust fund to diversify investments with funds which might otherwise have gone to individuals. Despite these initial successes, disagreements arose within the Association, particularly between younger and older members, over issues like distribution of benefits.

A new group of younger, educated Nasioi appeared to contest the leadership and policies of PLA. One of these was a young woman, Perpetua Serero, which suggests that the importance of women in traditional life—at least at a symbolic level—never completely disappeared under colonial pressures. Representatives of this 'new PLA' presented their grievances to consultants

employed by BCL in 1988, but rejected the consultants' responses. From this point, increasing violence spread from Nasioi territory throughout Bougainville, violence that would last almost a decade.

It is important to pinpoint where the violence began. The first targets were mining installations and equipment, blown up by explosives stolen from BCL. This interrupted operations, which were then resumed when additional police were sent in to improve security. Their attempts to arrest the alleged ringleader, Francis Ona, a leader of the new PLA and former BCL employee were unsuccessful. Ona was also believed to have kidnapped and murdered his uncle, Matthew Kove, active in the older PLA group.

Continued attacks on BCL installations caused the mine to close in May 1989. It should be clear that the real escalation of the Bougainville conflict—though the roots go back for decades—came when the central government, unable to tolerate the loss of mining revenues, sent in the police mobile squad with the Papua New Guinea Defence Force. No matter how diffuse a political organisation people operate with, nothing can unify them more effectively than a common enemy. Of course, when the enemy is so easily seen as physically different as are 'redskin' troops, and behaves in such an undisciplined and brutal manner as has been reliably reported for both the police and the Defence Force, the reaction will be even more dramatic. Nor could anything bring forth more quickly the secessionist sentiments that had been present in varying degrees throughout the island for years.

It is hard for me not to believe that the entry of the PNG security forces and their variably brutal and grotesquely ineffectual activities created a qualitative change in a conflict that might otherwise have taken a less catastrophic course.

To conclude: I think ironies, contradictions and complications are inherent in any colonial and postcolonial situation. Here are some that lie in the background and present manifestations of the Bougainville Conflict.

- Linguistic divisions within the island's population go back to prehistoric settlement. These were compounded by differences of geography and physical environment, and complicated by different interactions among Bougainvilleans and with other islanders.
- Nasioi, who must be seen as key players in events since mineral exploration in 1964, possessed at the time of colonial settlement a political organisation that was extraordinarily atomistic and non-hierarchical, even in comparison with other Bougainvilleans.
- At the same time, in part because of the natural harbour at Kieta, Nasioi were most subject to all the forces of colonialism before World War II and, in particular, the effects of a political economy based on copra production.
- On one hand, plantation colonialism made Nasioi and—to a lesser extent—other Bougainvilleans aware of themselves as a group in contrast to the coloniser. On the other, competition between missions, and varying strategies for dealing with colonisers set up new divisions within Nasioi. Wartime responses to Japanese invasion also separated Nasioi, although all were most concerned with simple survival.
- The long history of plantation colonialism made Nasioi particularly disaffected, disillusioned and ready for new solutions including secession and/or joining with Solomon Islands, years before mining exploration.
- Although it can be argued that BCL represents a much more ruthless kind of exploitation than copra plantations, what BCL did to increase its own profitability—

localising the workforce, providing education and training, muting racism in favour of recognising Nasioi potential—had the unintended consequence of creating social and cultural resources for more concerted political action than was conceivable in a plantation economy. In this sense, BCL could be said to have ensured the degree of success that the BRA has enjoyed.

- Perception of a common enemy during the last ten years has produced an unprecedented sense of Bougainvillean identity. But older divisions—whether linguistic, mission affiliated, clan and locality-related—have not simply disappeared. To these have now been added the allegiances created by the armed struggle itself, as separate groups have chosen different strategies for survival. Added to this are the real and inevitable conflicts of economic interest produced by increasing disparities of wealth, whether related to the mine, cash cropping or other new economic opportunities. This division into haves and have-nots is in turn related to a generational conflict, separating younger from older, educated from unschooled, and most frightening of all, a cohort of youngsters who have grown up knowing only violence as a way of life. The lasting peace that so many of us hope for must deal with the threat posed by old and new divisions among Bougainvilleans, while at the same time reaching an accord with the rest of Papua New Guinea.

AUTHOR NOTE

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