

8. Layers of identity involved in the conflict

The identities invoked in conflicts are consistently coded for the Peacebuilding Compared project. In this chapter, we consider the role of the following layers of identity in this war and this peace: gendered and family identities, big-man and chiefly identities, clan, Bougainville and PNG identities. Of course, there were international identities as well—of the United Nations, Australians, New Zealanders and ni-Vanuatu, who could position themselves as Melanesian *wantoks* of Bougainvilleans because they spoke a similar lingua franca. Both the top-down and bottom-up peacebuilding we have described in the previous chapters can be comprehended as a process of identity work, of pushing forward conciliatory aspects of extant identities and suppressing warlike aspects of those identities. Where many identities are in play in a particular context, there is much scope for local creativity in the identity work of peacebuilding. Such creativity characterised the Bougainville peace.

Gendered and family identities

The most basic layer of meaning for Bougainvilleans is the family identity. For the matrilineal majority—but also in patrilineal areas to a considerable degree¹—the script ‘mother’ is unusually wide and profound. It certainly means mother to particular children who issue from a particular mother’s womb. Second, it means mother to all the children born in the land over which a set of multigenerational mothers and grandmothers are custodians. Third, it means being mother to all those younger than a particular mother once those children grow into adults. All adults are children of their mothers’ land. With modernity, the conception of what is that land of the mothers has widened. So the conception of the women of Bougainville (including those who have not given birth to children) as mothers of the land of Bougainville (Sirivi and Havini 2004; Saovana-Spriggs 2007) is a conception that began to be enlivened only by struggles against colonial conceptions of national boundaries and against the government owning the minerals under the surface of the land that made no sense to Bougainvilleans. The identity mother of the land of Bougainville became stronger in struggles against the conception of nation of fathers of the

1 This was clear from our interviews in Buin, Siwai and Nissan. It could be the broad conception of motherhood rooted in custodianship of the land spread as a cultural script (as opposed to one directly connected to custodianship of the land) from the matrilineal to the patrilineal and mixed areas of Bougainville.

new nation of Papua New Guinea (such as Sir Michael Somare from 1975). At the same time, Catholicism, particularly the worship of Mary as the mother of Jesus,² has further widened the mother identity to the mother of all humankind. We were told many stories (see also examples in Saovana-Spriggs 2007; Howley 2000) of mothers saying to combatants who were not from their land, including combatants from the PNGDF, 'I am your mother'. Howley (2002:165) provides poetic documentation, for example, of an encounter in which Lucy, President of the Catholic Women's Association in Siwai, calms a shouting PNGDF officer:

I tell you, when you fight with the young men here, with the BRA and some of you die, maybe you think, we the mothers are happy when we hear about the deaths of your fellow soldiers. I tell you, quite frankly, I am speaking on behalf of the women, when you die or some of you die, we feel very sad too. And if a BRA member dies, I also feel very sad. Because, I do not support the war. I believe in peace. I stand up for peace. And you, even though you are a different coloured skin, you are my son. I am talking to you because I have the heart of a mother. You see, when one of you gets killed, you think, we, the black-skinned people do not care, but that is not true. We care, we, the black-skinned mothers care for you, I am still your mother.

These encounters often effectively regulated the violence of young men or teenagers with guns in the context of that encounter. While soldiers would often argue with Bougainvillean mothers that no, they were not their mother, they had not given birth to them,³ still there was sufficient of the pan-PNG recognition of this wider cultural script of motherhood for its invocation to at least cause the young man pause, even if he continued with the violence. Just as there were men who promoted peace and men who promoted violence, so there were among the women. While women never in fact fought with guns in Bougainville as far as we can tell, there were many contexts where women supported violence and advocated revenge (see Charlesworth 2008).

2 Hermkens (2007) argues that Mary was appealed to by both some in the BRA, who saw the war as a holy war, and peacemakers. Indeed, she argues that Francis Ona did both—daily addressing a statue of Mary during the war to seek her advice and convinced by Mary to seek peace in 1997 on the occasion of the welcoming of the international Pilgrim Virgin Statue of Our Lady of Fatima. The promise to Mary to end the fighting was captured on film (Hermkens 2007:280) and confirmed in our interviews by an Ona aide who was present. Its effect, however, did not make Ona an active supporter of the peace, though he did cease being an active spoiler of the peace in the sense of Ted Wolfers' comment in Footnote 2 in Chapter 6.

3 Helen Ikilai, Siwai schoolteacher, demanding the attention of soldiers:

'Young men, listen to me. We are your Siwai mothers, we are your mothers.' The boys did not accept the claim that these women were their mothers because the women were not their biological mothers. One of the young fighters responded: 'You are not my mother. You did not give birth to me.' Helen replied: 'Regardless of that, myself and all the other women are still your Siwai mothers. You have to believe me' (Saovana-Spriggs 2007:32).

Fourth, the mother script is about custodianship of land, as opposed to simply being people who occupy it today, and all that is spiritually embodied in that land. This includes animals, particularly animals that are totemic of the origin myths of the clan, and the spirits of all one's human ancestors who once physically occupied that land. Catholicism has become increasingly intertwined with a shared spirituality of totemic animals and humans. So in Catholic churches you see animal totems of the clans artistically represented—for example, at the entrance to the church.

Ruth Saovana-Spriggs has provided various quotes from her interviews that capture the potency of women's backstage veto:

Alright in our case here [Rotokas community], the mothers are the owners [of the land and traditional wealth]. And so, here, men are just like rubberstamps. We, the men cannot say much about land matters. We are just rubberstamps. In my case, if you wish to discuss land with me [with the intention to purchase a piece of land from my lineage], you go and talk to my sisters, not me. They are the ones who say 'yes' or 'no'. But once they say, 'no', then a 'no' is a 'no'. There is no other option. (Interview with Jacob Rerevate, Wakunai, in Saovana-Spriggs 2007:27)

Since land can be seen as everything—as embodying everything—to Bougainvilleans, its custodianship by mothers is a powerful thing for women. Traditionally, it is not a front-stage thing (Kenneth 2005:374), so, at a reconciliation planning meeting about the killing of a number of people that Peter Reddy and John Braithwaite attended on Buka, women on both sides sat on the fringes of the meeting and let their men do most of the speaking for them. 'We let the men do all the talking but if we do not agree with what the men say then women stand up from the back of the meeting and say this is not what the women want' (2006 interview with female leader). They would, however, lean forward and give instructions to their men on what they wanted them to say on their behalf as the landowners. Sirivi and Havini (2004) have documented the most influential interpretation of this articulation of male to female identities:

The land is sacred and protected by men on behalf of the women. The men as guardians share leadership with women, taking the responsibility in open debate to protect women from potential conflict; however, women have the power to veto decisions, and therefore are involved in the final consultative process. (Sirivi and Havini 2004:149)

One traditional justification for keeping women away from face-to-face political confrontation was that this could sometimes escalate to physical attacks with weapons or death by sorcery. And if mothers who were custodians of the land were killed before their daughters could succeed them, this could cause

internal inheritance crises and disputes over distributions of land to different purposes such as digging a new garden (Kenneth 2005:379, 381). Contemporary Bougainvillean feminists see colonialism as having disrupted women's backstage power when *kiaps* designated *luluais* and other male leadership roles (such as 'doctor-boys', who received some first-aid training, and 'bossboys') as the only leadership roles male colonial authority recognised. At the same time, pacification of intertribal warfare dampened the risks associated with taking the front stage in politics. This justifies advocacy in feminist terms of women taking a front-stage role in contemporary politics to counter the way colonialism crushed women's traditional backstage power to instruct and veto. The passive resistance of Rorovana's 'brave matriarchs' in 1969 is often presented as an inspiration for taking that front-stage step:

Women have put their own safety 'on the line' in Bougainville's stand for their land rights, human rights, justice and freedom and environmental protection. Ever since PNG and Australian police in Loloho beach clubbed the Rorovana mothers to drive them from their Loloho Village property in 1969 there has been an unspoken and unbroken line of resistance. (Havini 1999:40–1)

A theme emerging from some of these quotes is the way war breaks down traditional regulatory relationships of older women and older men—especially of chiefs, male and female—over young men.⁴ Peacebuilding in Bougainville has been in part a struggle to reassert something of traditional age-graded identities, which once were highly structured and important, even symbolised on the Bougainville flag through the *upe*—the headgear worn by young men until their transition to adulthood, as pictured on the cover of this book. What are seen as mostly new problems of domestic violence and sexual assault by post-conflict young men are attributed to this breakdown of respect for the guidance of elders (Tonissen 2000). To a degree, community-level peacebuilding has restored this respect for elders.

Big-man and chiefly identities

Older big-men who promoted conflict, such as Francis Ona and Noah Musingku, in a sense started out as young men who put themselves beyond, or partially beyond, the peaceful control of their women. Repeatedly during our fieldwork, we were told that the women of Ona's and Musingku's villages of Guava and Tonu, respectively, were against the war and in favour of peace talks that Ona

⁴ Anthony Regan comments here: 'But I am not convinced on the breakdown argument. It's more that violent conflict destroys or damages balance, and it takes time for a consensus to develop on the need to restore balance rather than fight—and it takes brave leaders, male and female, to move toward that.'

and his hold-outs did not attend. We can only speculate, but it is hard to believe that many women in Guava would not have been opposed to the murder of Ona's uncle, even if there were other women who supported the murder. The younger Ona seemed able to cut himself off from censure by male and female elders. Indeed, once he had demonstrated his willingness to have his way through violence, doubtless elders who wanted peace were afraid to speak up.

Some of the big-men of the war we interviewed were contemptuous of the 'mothers of the land' peacebuilding script. Their line was that it was the BRA leaders who saved Bougainville by leading the war and it was also they, and not the women, who led the peacemaking. Even before the war, it can be argued that the big-man role breaks out of the constraints of matrilineal vetoes and other kinship checks and balances by building constituencies that incorporate many lineages and encompass much wider expanses of land than any kinship group controls. The political practices and identities of modernity allowed a Francis Ona to assert big-manship over all Bougainville. Even Ona, as a chief of Guava, could not totally escape the constraints of the women of Guava—at least in land matters. That was one reason why he did not move on his own to take over the Panguna Landowners' Association, but did it together with the presidency of Perpetua Serero. But as Ona was the pan-Bougainville big-man of the BRA, there were few constraints from BRA women who held sway over him. Hence, the hypothesis that big-manship that is territorially expansive unfetters big-men from the constraints of mothers and of traditional checks and balances more generally.

So we might see big-manship as a Bougainvillean institution (that also exists widely across Melanesia) that structurally enables male subordination of traditional Bougainvillean structures of female empowerment.⁵ And we might see warfare in Bougainville society both traditionally and in the 1980s and 1990s as providing an opportunity for new strongmen to break out from female checks and balances and take over. For many very young men, such as Chris Uma, who was a twenty-two year old controlling a large territory during the war, and for Thomas Tari, who was also a twenty-two-year-old commander during the war, the crisis provided a much quicker path to becoming a big-man than, for example, by acquiring the wealth to put on large feasts for a wide circle of people. In Uma's case, maintaining armed roadblocks into a no-go zone that persisted much longer than the war helped sustain that unconstrained power.

5 We do not want to be read here as taking a position on the longstanding debates within anthropology about whether matriliney does or does not enhance female power. Yet we do want to argue that big-manship that is territorially expansive cuts big-men off from influence by local sources of female influence, which exist under both matriliney and patriliney, and which can include influence over matters of land, which happen to be particularly important in this conflict. Of course, this would not be such a structurally important matter of gender politics were it the case that there were equal numbers of 'big-women' with geographically expansive influence cut off from local male influence.

The collapse of checks and balances in the West as much as in Melanesia allows big-men to spin fantastic stories about what is responsible for their woes and about prospects for the big-man to deliver the society to some kind of millennial transcendence. Germany was the society with the most sophisticated education system in the world when Hitler spun to its alienated people a fanciful story of how Jews were responsible for the loss of World War I, the Great Depression, inflation, the rise of communism and much more. And he sold the German people a fantastic populist story about how Germany could conquer the Soviet Union, Western Europe, the United States and everyone else to establish a Third Reich that would rule the world. The Japanese militarists managed to sell their people something similar after their early victories in China and Pearl Harbor.

So, we do not need to resort to distinctively Bougainvillean culturalist explanations about cargo-cultism—to visions of a mining policy that will make Bougainville wealthier than Brunei,⁶ to visions of the Queen and the President of the United States arriving to pay homage to Bougainville as the future financial capital of the world⁷—as a cargo-cult frame for understanding why Bougainvilleans would follow leaders with ambitions as implausible as Francis Ona's or Noah Musingku's. Ona's vision was not an ambit claim from which he could negotiate a realistic future for international support for greater economic justice, environmental clean-up and political independence for Bougainville. He was a millennial folk hero unhinged from the realities of politics by the excesses a big-man script could allow. The demand for compensation several times larger than the annual national GDP and the lack of interest in compromise—or what Filer (1992:134) somewhat unfairly calls 'the virtual admission of his own insanity'—were about Ona as folk hero. Being above reality checks, it did not matter that there was 'not much method in the madness' (Filer 1992:135). Ona was more prophet who lucked out than politician who made his luck.

Pragmatism did come from people around Ona who did have a politics of greater vulnerability to checks and balances (including from women) and a less murderous politics—men such as Miriung, Kabui, Tanis, Kauona and many others who opted for a revisionist democratic alternative to Ona's kingdom. Yes, there is a history of cargo cults in Bougainville led by big-men who promise fantastically unrealistic things. The most extensively documented one is the Hahalis Welfare Society from the 1960s (Rimoldi and Rimoldi 1992; Oliver 1973). We can opt for cultural explanations of it that scholars more knowledgeable than the present authors might judge to be right. Our purpose is not to challenge the Peter Lawrence (1964) interpretation in *Road Belong Cargo* that cargoism is grounded in distinctively Melanesian epistemologies. It is just to say that we might equally understand cargo cults as consequences of big-men stepping

6 President Kabui often made this prediction in his speeches.

7 This is a reference to one of Noah Musingku's predictions for the year 2005.

beyond the checks and balances of traditional Bougainville politics and of the emerging democratic politics and rule of law of PNG/Bougainville society and the important checks and balances in Bougainville society from the regulation of the Church.

The Hahalis Welfare Society put the big-man who led it above the Church, above the state and above the traditional regulatory power of the mothers of the land. Hahalis issued from a credible enough critique of colonial exploitation and domination and an aspiration for cooperative economic development grounded in indigenous values. The society effectively socialised land and other property under the control of the leadership of the society and put girls and young women into a 'baby garden' where they were to be available for sex with sundry men of the society. They were also encouraged to make their sexual services available for sale to outsiders to create wealth for the society. It is hard to imagine a more oppressive deal for women, especially young Catholic women who were told by the ex-communicated leadership of the society that they would have to get used to the idea that this would mean they would end up in Hell (but perhaps God would take pity on them if they kept believing). The hypothesis we advance is that Hahalis was an unrealistic utopian vision of how to transcend colonialism to accumulate cargo and a joyous, wealthy life on Earth because its leaders succeeded in shutting down checks and balances. This included domination of the mothers of the land in their role of asserting the interests of vulnerable girls.

So this is an alternative interpretation to a cultural disposition to believe that there is an easy path to the cargo that white men have traditionally brought and the wealth they have controlled locally. It is one of big-manship as an institution that enables a dismantling of reality checks—from the custodianship of mothers, from the law, from the Church, from education, from investigative journalism and from a robust, contestatory (Pettit 1997) republican politics.

Clan, Bougainville nation, PNG nation

While family, big-man and chiefly identities that transcended female constraints were important in understanding the dynamics of the war, so were other more encompassing identities. Clan was an important one in the sense that certain clan identities could be found right across Bougainville. Leaders of both the war and the peace could invoke clan allegiances across far-flung corners of the province to advance their projects.

Before colonialism, the regional identities—Buin, Siwai, Bana, Nagovis, Nasioi, Tinputz, and so on—were not very important (Kemelfield 1992:156; Oliver 1973; Regan 2005c). They were not units for raising armies or decision-making

units in times of peace. They became more important in the plantation economy when workers from different districts were distinguished from one another in this way in order to orient managers and workers to language and cultural differences that had to be navigated to make the workforce click. Naturally, however, in this process of being called a Bana man and revealing important cultural and language differences of Bana from other peoples, men came to think of themselves as Bana men. Similarly, we have already explained how colonial and postcolonial struggles over seemingly unnatural international borders forged the Bougainville identity as increasingly important and ultimately decisive in mobilisation for civil war.

Once the German, British and Australian colonialists had laid down those international boundaries, they of course created an institutional reality on the ground that also sculpted identities. It might be that as a student at the University of Papua New Guinea you joined the Mungkas to assert your Bougainvillean identity, but this resistance was called out because your more encompassing identity there was as a student of the national university of Papua New Guinea. As a member of the Bougainville provincial civil service, you were still a member of the PNG civil service. As a member of a church, you were led by bishops in Port Moresby and listened to sermons from graduates of seminaries and theological colleges on the mainland. And if you became prominent in the church, you shared many moments of communion with mainlanders. In these circumstances, only the most unusual people would not be at all affected by a layer of PNG national identity. Just as Pidgin as a lingua franca and the importance of church identity built bridges between local allegiances that helped constitute pan-Bougainville pacification and a pan-Bougainvillean identity, so Pidgin and the church also contributed to the limited progress towards a PNG national identity.

Conclusion

A complex of identities has therefore been a resource for those who chose to be war-makers and those who chose to be peacemakers, for those who favour integration with Papua New Guinea and for the majority who oppose it at the time of writing. The multiplexity of identities connects the conclusion of this chapter to that of Chapter 6. It is hard to understand how the complex dynamics of the conflict in a particular place demand a particularistic dynamics of reconciliation in that place (as opposed to pursuit of pan-Bougainvillean reconciliation grand narratives). One reason is that the multiplexity of disparate identities—and the history of how they have been mobilised for war and peace—is different in different places.

This is why the Truce and Peace Monitoring Groups—peopled as they were by peacekeepers on six-month rotations—would have been unwise to think of themselves as capable of comprehending the fabric of contextual identities. What they could do was supply a local ‘bubble of security’ (Shearing 1997) under which parties in conflict could come together in safety and take other risks for the peace. Peacekeepers need to do enough local identity work to understand who the key players are without deluding themselves into believing that they are capable of drawing out the peaceable facets of those identities. They can challenge stereotypes of the other as inherently violent, without presuming they know how to get them to put their non-violent self forward. To their credit, this is pretty much what the mostly humble international peacekeepers did in Bougainville.