
Photoessay

Melanesian mythical places with unreported conflicts: A portrait

ABSTRACT

As a photojournalist who has lived and journeyed through the ‘Black Islands’, Vanuatu resident Ben Bohane was drawn to them because they still seemed like mythical and remote places in an increasingly familiar world, while many of their conflicts went largely unreported. There were family connections too. So beginning in 1994, he ran a naval blockade to cover the war in Bougainville and soon found others too, wars the rest of the world had conveniently forgotten: in East Timor, West Papua as well as Bougainville. Then there were riots in New Caledonia, civil war in the Solomon Islands and coups in Fiji. The following is an introductory extract and a portfolio of images from Bohane's 2013 monograph, *Black Islands: Spirit and War in Melanesia*.

Keywords: conflict, culture, identity, independence, kastom, language, Melanesia, mercenaries, Oceania, spirit, wantok, war correspondence

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TO THE north of Australia lie *the black islands* in a region known as Melanesia. Coined by explorers in the 17th century, *Melas* means *black* and *nesos* is *islands* in ancient Greek. These islands are at the heart of Oceania and represent the largest landmass and populations of the Pacific, an archipelago of literally thousands of islands, languages and tribes, stretching from eastern Indonesia to Fiji and northern Australia.

In our collective imagination, these islands have represented all kinds of heady visions, from the very idea of tropical paradise itself, to the horror of cannibal and headhunting rituals. Kastom movements have inspired renegade

beachcombers and Christian mystics like Thomas Merton, while its art inspired Picasso and Matisse, along with storytellers Robert Louis Stevenson, Jack London and James Mitchener (Bohane, 2006). It remains a magnet for all manner of anthropologists, musicologists and linguists, since it is the most linguistically diverse region on earth.

The Pacific islands have long been a refuge for eccentric foreigners and castaways too, who often fell into one (or several) of these categories: mercenary, missionary or misfit.

As a photojournalist who has lived and journeyed through these shimmering islands, perhaps I am a crude mix of all of the above. I was drawn to them because they still seemed like mythical and remote places in an increasingly familiar world, while many of their conflicts were largely unreported. There were family connections too. So beginning in 1994 I ran a naval blockade to cover the war in Bougainville and soon found others too, wars the rest of the world had conveniently forgotten: in East Timor, West Papua as well as Bougainville. Then there were riots in New Caledonia, civil war in the Solomons and coups in Fiji.

The Pacific as a whole represents 30 percent of the world's geography, yet it remains the most under-reported region on earth. The Middle East continues to dominate the news agenda but that is changing. We are now in the so-called Pacific Century with the first US *Pacific* President in Hawai'i-born Barack Obama. The dominant strategic and economic issues of the 21st century will increasingly be played out in the Pacific Ocean. A new Cold War chess game is already well underway between the United States, the European Union, Indonesia and China for influence and control of the Pacific. Islands and atolls not heard of since the dark days of World War II may well resonate again: Guadalcanal, Hollandia (Jayapura), Santo.

Our notions of this region have changed in recent times, from one populated by happy frangipani-bedecked locals to one of trepidation and sometimes fear. It has been labelled the arc of instability as coups and conflict have taken hold in a number of these otherwise beautiful places. The Pacific is no longer pacific—if it ever was.

We are used to imagining these islands via seductive tropical sunsets and Club Med brochures, but there are many day-to-day challenges confronting people here: conflict over land and resources, environmental destruction and over-fishing, the spectre of AIDS and malaria, growing urban populations with

little access to good education or formal employment, rising seas and climate change and constant volcanic and seismic activity along the ‘ring of fire’. The inherent tribalism of Melanesia makes nation-building a fraught process, especially since all of its nations have been independent for less than 40 years.

Yet beyond the hardships and headlines, this remains a beautiful and largely tranquil region. Little wonder the very idea of paradise in the collective conscience is still a palm-fringed island in the Pacific—and yes, it can still be found here. Nothing brings a smile to islanders quicker than listening to visiting experts and economic advisors talk about the need for development.

To speak contentiously: very few live in abject poverty in Melanesia; which is to say that virtually everyone has shelter, food and community around them. However it is also true that urban poverty is increasing. For most islanders though, there is a healthy disregard for the consuming passions of money and work, which continue to entrance the rest of the modern world, either by necessity or desire.

Not for nothing was Vanuatu recently declared ‘the happiest nation on earth’ by a British think tank that looked beyond mere GDP as its gauge for a nation’s success. Vanuatu’s combination of idyllic geography, life expectancy, community values and low carbon footprint put it at the top of the Happy Planet Index measuring every country on earth. Many of the lifestyle elements that make Vanuatu ‘happy’ apply across Melanesia.

Traditionally the mark of a Big Man here was to be generous as a feast giver, to own many pigs and wives, to be a good orator, gardener and warrior and to respect the chiefs and ancestral spirits. Islanders believe it doesn’t matter how much you have, but how much you give away that is important. The *wantok* system of looking out for your community is at the heart of *kastom* life. Melanesia has little to learn from the West about democracy, since it is inherently so at the village level. Traditionally the chieftainship of most villages is not hereditary (contrasting with the Polynesian and Micronesian chiefly bloodline system), but goes to the most capable. Issues are discussed under great banyan trees where everyone gets a say and decisions are generally made by consensus—something often referred to as the ‘Melanesian Way’.

This is a region that inspired some of the great ocean voyages and navigations of human history. And contrary to the old cradle of civilisation theories, evidence continues to emerge that places New Guinea as one of three areas of the world where intensive agriculture began: Mesopotamia, China and New Guinea.

Recent archaeology points to cultivated agriculture in the highlands of New Guinea 6000 to 8000 years ago. The jungles and rainforest of New Guinea, the second largest island in the world, still hide a wealth of biodiversity and knowledge, flora and fauna, even tribes of people, yet to be discovered. Its wilderness area is second only in size to the Amazon and in a time of climate consciousness is recognised as one of the great lungs of the earth.

Yet it is also blessed/cursed by a wealth of resources, including the biggest gold mine in the world at Freeport in West Papua and major gold, copper, nickel, oil and gas operations in PNG.

New Guinea island as a whole will likely be a flashpoint in a new era of resource wars. At the same time we are seeing the *Asianisation* of Melanesia as many Pacific nations 'look north' to China, India and Malaysia to play the diplomatic game. Indonesia consolidates its hold over West Papua through a large transmigration programme that has made its indigenous Melanesians already a minority in their own land. Forget the border that runs down the middle in arbitrary colonial fashion. In the struggle for New Guinea ahead, it will ultimately be double or nothing: part of Asia or part of the Pacific.

These are ancient places. People have lived in New Guinea for at least 40,000 years. The Songlines and Dreamtime beliefs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples of Australia represent the longest continuous belief system in humanity, from at least 70,000 years ago to the present day. There is a mistaken, almost dangerous, belief in the idea that Australia and Melanesia are somehow new.

I remember talking to an Aboriginal elder during a protest once and asked him how long Aboriginal people have lived in Australia? He fixed me a wry grin and said: 'You remember the dinosaurs? Well we ate the bloody dinosaurs! That's how long we been 'ere'.

Only when we acknowledge how ancient these places and peoples are, can we become better custodians of the land and keepers of the lore. Similarly, to go deeper into the realm of spirit and war in Melanesia requires us to take off secular (and monotheistic) goggles and immerse into the 24/7 spirit world that islanders inhabit. This is a spiritually dynamic region full of *kastom*, cult, cargo-cult and new religious movements. Christianity spread like wild fire when it was introduced 100-200 years ago (and less than 30 years in some places), but has now reached its high tide mark.

Increasingly Islam, Buddhism, Bahai and other faiths are taking root.

Scratch the surface of most Melanesians and you'll find strong belief still in ancestral spirits and the power of sorcery. There persists a common belief that no death is ever natural in Melanesia.

During the colonial period, many *kastom* movements were dismissed as cargo cults by the Church and colonial authorities, but were in fact the embryo for the first nationalist political movements, such as the Maasina Rule movement in the Solomon Islands and the Nagriamel movement in Vanuatu.

Since independence in the established nations of Melanesia—Papua New Guinea (1975), East Timor (2002), Solomon Islands (1978), Vanuatu (1980) and Fiji (1970)—various *kastom* and cult movements continue to play a role in the evolution of their societies. They evolve, morph, transform and are renewed by charismatic leadership. Many of these movements are peaceful and in fact anti-cargo, that is, they are rejecting the 'cargo' materialism of the modern world and wish to live according to *kastom* and ancestral ways.

In the case of West Papua, Bougainville and (to a lesser extent) New Caledonia, still struggling for their independence, *kastom* movements have played a pivotal role in providing the spiritual legitimacy for the fight to reclaim *kastom* land or demand political independence, regardless of what international law or geopolitics decree.

The past 20 years has seen much armed conflict in Melanesia. What is at the root of it? From coups in Fiji and civil war in the Solomons, to wars of independence in West Papua and Bougainville, it is too simplistic to say these are due to ancient enmities, or because of corruption, poor governance, unemployment and other diagnoses, viewed through the lens of the modern State. The reach of government is limited and means little to most islanders living in their remote villages and we need to be wary of diagnosing the problems of Melanesia only via the State.

A significant role has always been played by *kastom* and cult movements, which have acted as lightning rods for dissent, often the very spark igniting conflict. Yet equally these movements are instrumental in ending conflict and initiating reconciliation. They can start conflict but usually help end them too: this is part of the cycle of life here, where payback revenge drives a lot of conflict, but is tempered by traditions of limited warfare and strong reconciliation *kastom*. It is a place where the Old Testament resonates stronger than the New.

In West Papua, it is the Mansren prophecy that drives many OPM guerrillas (Free Papua Movement) to fight for independence from Indonesia. Their

Morning Star flag is emblematic of the Mansren mythology; that one day this prophet will return in a canoe from under the sea, after a drunken consort with Venus, to liberate his people. It is estimated at least 100,000 Papuans have perished under Indonesian rule since its controversial UN-sanctioned takeover in 1969. East Timor is thought to have lost 200,000 under Indonesian rule from 1975 until its bloody liberation in 1999.

In Bougainville, Damien Damen's 50 Teoa Gavman movement was instrumental in sparking the rebellion and provided sanctuary for the first BRA (Bougainville Revolutionary Army) guerrillas in their operations against the giant Panguna gold and copper mine. He preached against Church and State and influenced BRA leader Francis Ona to close the mine and declare independence. In turn, the BRA were opposed by King Tore and his 666 Movement, which backed the PNG Defence Force and a local militia, known as the BRF (Bougainville Resistance Front). The fear of potent sorcery by the BRA was a contributing factor to the trauma and ultimate failure of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force to retake Bougainville by force. At least 10,000 people died in this war between 1989-1999.

During the Solomon Islands civil war (1998-2003), it was Chief Moro and his Moro Movement who provided Guadalcanal guerrillas of the IFM (Isatabu Freedom Movement) with the spiritual legitimacy to clear out Malaitan settlers on Guadalcanal island. The leader of their rivals in the MEF (Malaitan Eagle Force) was Andrew Nori, the son of the main leader of the old Maasina Rule movement, which had opposed British rule, later recognised as the first nationalists of the Solomons.

In Vanuatu, France backed the rebellion of the Nagriamel Movement on Santo island during its failed rebellion for independence from newly independent Vanuatu (formerly New Hebrides). Nagriamel was led by the charismatic Jimmy Stevens, whose movement combined kastom and communal values to win back alienated land. He is now recognised as the prophet of independence, having led the first delegation of ni-Vanuatu to the UN to seek nationhood in the mid 1960s.

In Fiji, three of the four coups of the past 20 years were backed by the Taukei Movement; a quasi-kastom movement demanding indigenous supremacy over land and political power. It was led by a former trade union leader and convert to Islam, Apisai Tora. There was much speculation around US support for the Taukiei Movement leading up to the 1987 coup, given that Fiji's ousted

government had supported an anti-nuclear and non-aligned foreign policy (like neighbouring Vanuatu) and a multi-ethnic political platform, which included Indo-Fijians.

This is not to suggest that all conflict in Melanesia has been inspired by kastom and cult movements, but there is no doubt they have played a significant, often hidden and unreported role in recent conflict. At first I had been hesitant to focus too much on these kastom and cult movements lest they be reduced to exotica or be seen in lurid tabloid terms. I did not wish to muddy the waters of what were already complex political conflicts. But over time I came to realise that their spiritual and political dimension were not be underestimated in trying to understand Melanesian philosophy and conflict.

Often suppressed by governments both white and black, these movements can actually be the ‘canary in the coalmine’, they can alert us to the spiritual and sometimes militant ideas that can spread from a minority to majority of the population, especially during times of crisis. In many cases they can be the very building blocks of peaceful, progressive societies in the region instead of being viewed as necessarily a threat to Church and State. At least there is no such thing as unemployment or hunger in a kastom village.

Nor does Melanesia have a monopoly on cargo cult behaviour—this is universal and historically seen as a response by indigenes everywhere when they came into contact with powerful foreign invaders. In the West, has not decades of casino capitalism, accumulation of huge debt, financial abstracts and property speculation constituted in itself a massive cargo cult far bigger than anything dreamed of in Melanesia? To a rational mind anywhere, the global financial system seems as illogical as any islander talking into coconut headphones to direct planes sent by ancestors to deliver unending supplies of goods.

The central issue of Melanesia and black Australia remains land and its ownership. It overrides all other issues and is literally a life and death issue for many, today. Custodianship of land is beyond foreign notions of property and is intimately connected to the spirit world and community responsibilities. Melanesia is also unique in that it has perhaps the last matrilineal systems left in the world—it is women who own the land in many islands and pass it onto their descendants, not men. This has been the undoing of several mining companies operating in the region, which failed to get their anthropology done or decided to ignore it.

There have been parts of Melanesia, in remote highland villages and jungles teeming with every form of life, where I had the sensation of stepping into Genesis, of being at the origin of all our humanity. It has been said that no other people on earth have made the leap from stone-age to space-age so quickly. We have much to learn from this region, not least the abiding tolerance, generosity and knowledge that dwells here.

How these island societies fuse their spirit world with modern politics will determine much of the Pacific's *pacific* nature for generations to come.

The Black Islands is the fruit of 18 years of wandering through the spirit worlds of Melanesia and black Australia, like a photo-beachcomber, in times of peace and war and witnessing great ceremony and cruel injustice. Mere photographs can never truly capture the spirit of this great oral storytelling region, but perhaps they can provide an alternative record to the postcard version of the Pacific that predominates, and take us a little deeper into a region that was once called 'The Last Unknown'.

I have always been a saltwater man, constantly in and out of boats, looking for surf, looking for stories. That is partly why I have always felt welcome here—I learnt long ago that the best gift you can bring to islanders are your stories at night, over a shell of kava or fireplace in the Men's House. Not trinkets or promises. There is a notion here of *wan solwara* (one ocean)—that it is the sea that links us all even if we come from different Pacific islands, including Australia: whitefella or blackfella, we are all Pacific islanders.

Some have suggested the sea is to Pacific islanders what forests are to Europeans and deserts are to the Arabs. So often our religions and *kastoms* have been moulded by the nature around us. When I am in the warm embrace of the Pacific ocean, it certainly feels as sacred to me as the Ganges must be to Indian pilgrims, or the way springs and rivers are considered the threshold place of ancestral spirits in Ireland. I am reminded too of the old Danish proverb: no sailor at sea is an atheist.

These lush islands, scattered like a constellation over a vast cobalt sea, will always feel like home: a liquid continent where great spirits dwell.

Ben Bohane is an independent Australian photojournalist living in Port Vila, Vanuatu. This extract is the introduction to his book Black Islands: Spirit and War in Melanesia (Waka Press). An earlier (2006) academic work for a Masters of Arts (Journalism) thesis at the University of Wollongong synthesised kastom and conflict in contemporary Melanesia and his own photojournalism in the region. He is currently the communications director for the Pacific Institute of Public Policy (pacificpolicy.org) and director for wakaphotos.com, the first photo agency for the Pacific islands.
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1. Traditional welcome in the Moro Movement area of the Weathercoast. Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, 1999.



2. Papuan boy with pearl-lugger headdress used in kastom dances remembering the pearling days of the early 20th century. Papuan Gulf, PNG 2006.



3. Woman and child on their way home from the garden. She carries sweet potatoes in a bilum bag tied around her head. Nduga Highlands, West Papua/Indonesia 1995.



4. A girl in kastom dress during the Hiri Moale festival. Port Moresby, PNG 2003.



5. A man in traditional costume prepares himself for ritual during a custom dance. Sepik River, PNG 2005.



6. 'Luklik man', a FALANTIL guerrilla wounded many times but considered holy due to his survival and wisdom. Uimori HQ, East Timor 1999.



7. Radio Free Bougainville on the air with 'Philip' at the microphone. Central Bougainville, PNG 1994.



8. 'Baby' Stevens, a notorious raskol gang leader. Chimbu, Highlands, PNG 1994.



9. An IFM militant (and chief Moro's son) rests near a waterfall while patrolling the Weathercoast, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands 1999.



10. An Australian former mechanic at the Panguna mine with his Bougainvillean wife. They stayed during the war despite the hardships of the blockade. Bougainville, PNG 1994.



11. Skull of a slain victim during the massacres following the Timorese vote for independence. East Timor 1999.