

# Marists, Marian Devotion, and the Quest for Sovereignty in Bougainville

*Anna-Karina Hermkens\**

Macquarie University

*anna-karina.hermkens@mq.edu.au*

## Abstract

Christianity and politics seem to be intrinsically linked. In Central Bougainville, which is part of the autonomous region of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Catholic faith introduced by Marist missionaries has been instrumental in building a national Bougainville identity and sustaining the political struggle for sovereignty. Although the first missionaries were often cautious not to disrupt socio-political organisations, Marists have been advocating both local and Marist political interests and views in the continuously shifting religious, and socio-economical political context of colonial and “post”-colonial Bougainville. This article follows the early Catholic missionaries to Bougainville, elucidating dialectics, tensions and politics of conversion. Moreover, it shows how devotion to Mary became entangled with a particular representation of Bougainville land as Holy, and the engendering of an ethnic-religious nationalism in the context of a ten-year-long devastating conflict and struggle for sovereignty.

## Résumé

Christianisme et politique semblent indissociablement liés. Dans le district de Central Bougainville, qui fait partie de la région autonome de Bougainville (Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée), la foi catholique introduite par les missionnaires maristes a contribué de manière déterminante à la construction d’une identité nationale bougainvilaise et a nourri la lutte politique pour la souveraineté. Les premiers missionnaires

---

\* I thank retired Bishop Henk Kronenberg and the Marist Archives in Rome for their wonderful support and willingness to share their historical material with me. I also want to thank the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and suggestions and Yannick Fer for his patience and support in seeing this article coming to completion. All errors are my own.

catholiques ont certes souvent veillé à ne pas déstabiliser les organisations sociopolitiques locales. Mais ces missionnaires ont défendu des intérêts et des points de vue politiques, à la fois locaux et maristes, dans le contexte religieux, socioéconomique et politique très fluctuant des périodes coloniale et postcoloniale à Bougainville. Cet article s'intéresse aux débuts de la mission catholique à Bougainville pour préciser les dialectiques, les tensions et les politiques de la conversion. Il montre en outre comment la dévotion mariale a été intégrée au sein d'une représentation particulière de Bougainville comme terre sainte, en générant un nationalisme ethno-religieux dans le contexte des dix années du terrible conflit pour la souveraineté de l'île.

### Keywords

Catholicism – politics – nationalism – land – Marist missionaries

### Mots-clés

catholicisme – politique – nationalisme – terre – missionnaires maristes

### Introduction

“What difference does Christianity make?” asked Fenella Cannell in her edited volume *The Anthropology of Christianity*.<sup>1</sup> In Oceania, it has been argued that “the difference that Christianity makes is always and inevitably political”, both in terms of political relations between denominations and the way Christian churches partake in debates about the governing of society.<sup>2</sup> What has been less stressed is the ways that Christianity, and in particular Catholicism, seems to provide sustenance for movements that strive for sovereignty. What is also little discussed, is the role of particular divinities or Saints that come to function as what Eric Wolf coined “master symbols”, who “enshrine the major hopes and aspirations of an entire society”.<sup>3</sup> Examples of political theological movements that herald such symbols are perhaps most well known outside the Pacific. Most striking and relevant to the Bougainville (PNG) case discussed in this

1 Cannell (2006).

2 Tomlinson and McDougall (2013), pp. 2, 13.

3 Wolf (1959), pp. 34–39.

article, are examples where the Virgin Mary is heralded as a master symbol that produces nationalistic feelings and sentiments, and mobilizes people to engage in nation building, but also warfare to achieve freedom and justice. Eric Wolf discusses this phenomenon in relation to the Virgin of Guadalupe, who became regarded as the national symbol of Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Others have detailed the significance and impact of Our Lady of Czestochowa in Poland, where Mary as Polish master symbol mobilizes her followers simultaneously through “the sphere of private religious practices – Mary as mother of individual people – and one that is deeply embedded in the Polish national myth of origin – Mary as queen of the Polish nation”.<sup>5</sup>

In Central Bougainville, and in particular among the Nasioi people living in the Koromira area, Mary is equally considered as a master symbol. According to many of my interlocutors, the roots for this strong devotion to Mary are present in customary Bougainville culture. They argue that the matrilineal system and traditional gender relations are factors that facilitated the acceptance of Mary and conversion to Catholicism. But it was especially during the devastating ten year-civil war that Mary, or Mama Maria as she is locally called, became of immense significance. As a Bougainvillean priest stated: “It was mainly Marian devotion that kept people going”. Praying to Mary facilitated communication with Jesus and God, whose aid was desperately needed to deal with hardships brought about by an economic blockade and the violence that pitted various political and religious groups, as well as ethnicities against each other. The rosary was part of people’s daily lives, with mothers, fathers, elders, soldiers, and children carrying it on their bodies and reciting its prayers every day. In Central Bougainville, the establishment of Marian movements such as Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, the Marian Mercy Mission, and the Immaculate Conception all occurred during the crisis as people longed for new spiritual guidance in order to deal with the hardships they encountered. Among the Nasioi people, it can be argued that especially during the crisis, Mary gained the status of a superstar, with the rosary being prayed daily, her image displayed in people’s houses and printed on people’s clothes, and her statues carried around all over Bougainville.<sup>6</sup>

The seeds for this devotion to Mary were planted by mainly German and French missionaries of the Society of Mary (MSSM), referred to as Marists, in the beginning of the twentieth century. The society derives its name from the

---

4 Wolf (1959).

5 de Busser and Niedzwiedz (2009).

6 Hermkens (2009).

Virgin Mary whom the members attempt to imitate in their spirituality and daily work. Marists act from their love for Mary and with the compassion of Mary, aiming to bring others closer to God through their teachings of faith and practical skills. Positioned and mediating between (post-)colonial rule and local populations, they often advocated both local and Marist political interests and views in the continuously shifting religious, and socio-economical political context of colonial and 'post'-colonial Bougainville. This article follows the early Marist missionaries to Bougainville, elucidating how the seeds for Marian devotion were planted, but also the importance of Samoan catechists, and subsequently local laity, in the missionaries' endeavour to convert Bougainvilleans to the Catholic faith. Subsequently, focus will be on the dialectics of conversion and how Catholicism and, in particular devotion to Mary, became entangled with a particular representation of the land and a generic ethnic nationalism in the context of a ten-year-long struggle for sovereignty and autonomy.

### The Catholic Mission in Bougainville

Bougainville is a relatively small island group in the South Pacific, consisting of two main islands: Buka in the north and, separated by a small sea-channel, Bougainville Island in the south (Figure 1). In addition, there are many small islands and atolls, which together with Buka and Bougainville islands, make up the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (previously known as the North Solomons Province of PNG). Before becoming a province of Papua New Guinea, the Bougainville Region was under Australian government who became the ruling power of the German New Guinean colonies after the First World War. To the south, separated by a small stretch of sea, are the independent Solomon Islands, a former British colony.

Bougainville was part of the North Solomons missions, which were established by Bishop Pierre Broyer (1846–1918), vicar Apostolic of Samoa, in 1898.<sup>7</sup> Beginning in 1901, European, and subsequently American and Australian missionaries of the society of Mary introduced the Catholic faith, including devotion to Mary, the Mother of Christ.<sup>8</sup> In 2000, the majority (69 percent) of the circa 180,000 Bougainvilleans were Catholic, followed by United Church (15

7 By that time, the Society of Mary had been in Oceania for over 60 years. In January 1836, Pope Gregory XVI had entrusted Western Oceania to the Society, with Father Jean-Claude Colin accepting responsibility over this vast area a month later, subsequently expanding into Central Oceania from 1841 onwards. Snijders (2012).

8 Laracy (1976), pp. 54–55.

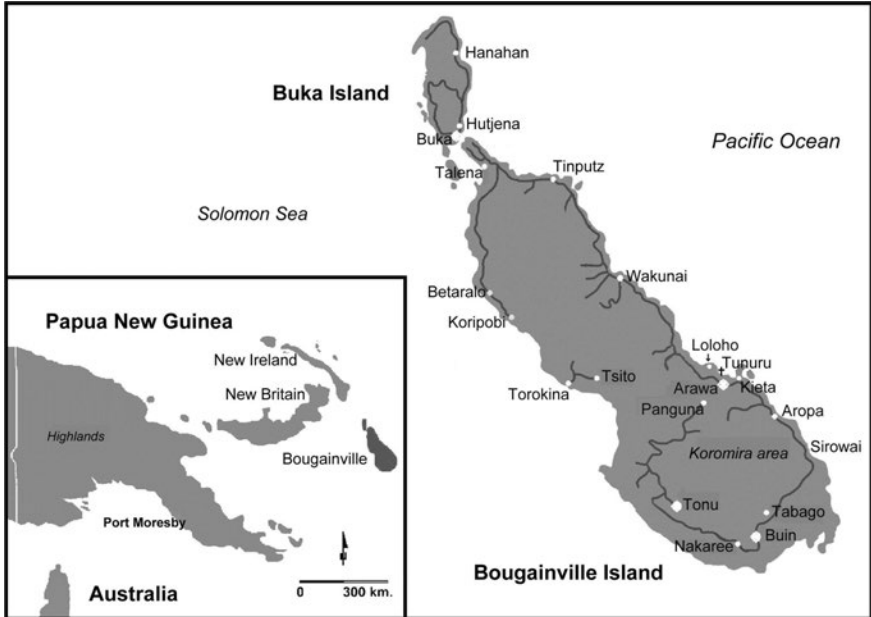


FIGURE 1 *Buka and Bougainville islands. Showing the Nasioi language area and the Koromira subdistrict of Bougainville.*

percent), Seventh Day Adventists (7 percent), and Pentecostals (6 percent).<sup>9</sup> The Marists who are credited for starting the mission in the Northern Solomons are Fr. Karl Flaus (1865–1920), Fr. Eugene Englert (1872–1913), and Fr. Peter Meyer (1875–1903). Along with two Samoan catechists and their families, Fr. Flaus and Fr. Englert founded their first mission at Poperang in the Shortland Islands (which is now part of the Solomon Islands). Five weeks after their arrival (on the 3rd of May) the Samoan catechists Mr. Sakaio (Sataua) and Mr. Mikaele Taginoa (Safotu) opened the first school with students from Choiseul, the Shortlands and Bougainville. In 1899, Bishop Pierre Broyer SM came to Poporang for his first visit to the Prefecture. He brought along with him five more Samoan catechists and one Wallisian catechist.<sup>10</sup> These catechists and their families would be instrumental to the success of the Marist mission in Bougainville.

9 Slightly less than one percent reported themselves as non-Christians, and another two percent did not indicate a religion. (National Statistical Office, 2002), p. 19.

10 Kronenberg and Saris (2009), p. 91.

The missionaries responsible for establishing the early mission stations faced considerable hardships. Many of the early missionaries died due to malaria and they frequently travelled to other places to advance the mission. As a consequence, the mission stations and schools were often placed in the hands of the Samoan catechists.

In his work on Samoan catechists, Latai Latai shows the substantial and long-lasting impact these Pacific Islander missionaries had in PNG, with Samoan interpretations of Christianity, but also Samoan songs and language integrated into indigenous Christianity and culture.<sup>11</sup> Obviously, the nature of interactions between Pacific missionaries and Melanesians varied according to the persons involved as well as the conservatism, both in terms of gender<sup>12</sup> and race, of particular denominations.<sup>13</sup> In Bougainville, Samoan catechists were crucial in establishing, facilitating and maintaining mission stations, and one can only speculate about the impact they must have had on the transmission and communication of theological knowledge to the local population. While some denominations showed considerable disdain for both the Melanesian population and the Pacific Islander catechists who worked for the European missionaries,<sup>14</sup> with the colour of the skin being an index to a person's abilities,<sup>15</sup> Marists missionaries and their work depended hugely on their ability to collaborate with both Pacific Islander catechists and local people.

Although Catholic missionaries working among the Nasioi are credited for being quite tolerant regarding indigenous beliefs and cultural practices, often integrating local beliefs in their teachings in order to facilitate conversion, and "cautious not to disrupt social organisation",<sup>16</sup> they faced considerable hostility. In many parts of the Pacific, this hostility was often attributed to Protestant opposition.<sup>17</sup> However, also in areas where there had been no previous Chris-

11 Latai (2016). See also Sinclair (1982).

12 Latai (2016), p. 201, mentions for the London Missionary Society that although Pacific Islander women "[...] were often frowned upon and not recognised as equal to their husbands, [...] these women were not only dedicated missionary women who saw mission work as the fulfilment of their own calling but also women who indeed "bore fruits" for the mission aspirations of the LMS." For other case-studies on the role of gender in missions see Choi and Jolly (2014); Huber and Lutkehaus (1999).

13 For studies dealing with Pacific Islander missionaries in Melanesian contexts see, amongst others: Hermkens (2014); Herda, Reilly and Hilliard (2005); Munro and Thornley (1996); Crocombe and Crocombe (1982); Latai (2016).

14 Mackay (2005).

15 Reilly and Herda (2005), p. 11.

16 Ogan (1972), pp. 46–47.

17 Hamilton (2005), pp. 97–98.

tian proselytization, like in Bougainville, Marists frequently encountered local resistance to their arrival, their acquisition of land, settlement, and interference with local politics.

In 1901, when the first Marist fathers Eugene Englert and his curate Peter Meyer arrived in Kieta, Central Bougainville, they were met with apprehension and hostility. Fr. Englert, a harsh man, made no effort at reconciliation and through his actions, caused even more offence to the local population. The missionaries were quickly driven away, with a “defeated” Englert returning to Europe.<sup>18</sup> However, the missionaries did not give up and Fr. Meyer returned to Kieta soon after Fr. Englert’s departure, finding the mission house and its contents undisturbed. Unlike his former colleague, Fr. Meyer engaged with the local communities, managed to establish a Mission station by 1902,<sup>19</sup> and offered them protection against the colonial administration.

From 1905 onwards, the German administrators who introduced plantations, encouraged copra production and wage-labour among the Nasioi.<sup>20</sup> They also tried to enforce law and order and pacify local populations by sending warships, but most of all, by conducting punitive expeditions. In 1906, administration officer Doellinger “visited” the Nasioi at least seven times.<sup>21</sup> The severity of his ‘rule’ not only intimidated the Nasioi, but also other communities across Bougainville. The Marist missionaries, who had settled among the Nasioi near Kieta village and a few years later to the south of Kieta in Koromira, had been right in the middle of these tensions between local people and colonial rule.

Fr. Meyer spent most of his time travelling on the mission schooner “kolumbangara”, purchasing land for future mission stations and establishing the Church.<sup>22</sup> This implied that the mission depended to a large extent on three Samoan catechists: Kario, Lino and Kalepo and their wives who began teaching there. When Fr. Meyer passed away at the age of 28 due to malaria, these three catechists continued their work, until Sr. M. Ignace (†1959) and Sr. M. Boniface (†1933) arrived in Kieta in 1904. The school recruited students from as far as Pororan and Buka to the north of Bougainville.<sup>23</sup> Trained as catechists,

18 Laracy (1976), p. 55.

19 Ogan (2009), p. 46; Kronenberg, and Saris (2009), pp. 91–100; Laracy (1976), pp. 54–55. Ogan, and Kronenberg & Saris write that the Kieta mission was established in 1901, while Laracy argues that this happened in 1902.

20 Ogan (1999), p. 3.

21 Laracy (1976), p. 56.

22 Saris (2010), p. 50.

23 Kronenberg and Saris (2006), p. 91.

these students would aid the missionaries to establish new mission stations elsewhere on Bougainville and Buka.

In 1903, the Marists expanded to the South of Bougainville, to the Buin area. As in Kieta, the initial response of the local population to the mission was hostile. However, due to the administration's actions among the Nasioi, the Buin people were eager to avoid intervention by the administration and regularly allowed the two Marist missionaries in charge of Buin to mediate in inter-village disputes.<sup>24</sup> They also experienced that opposing and threatening the missionaries' actions led to administrative punitive action. When one of the missionaries, Fr. Allotte, turned local feeling against the Marists by protecting an alleged sorcerer, the administration in Kieta came to the Marists' aid, killing two men and burning several houses.<sup>25</sup> As noted by Hugh Laracy, "the expedition was only grudgingly undertaken; administrator Doellinger and later Hahl accused the Marists of bringing the trouble on themselves through needless interference with native custom".<sup>26</sup> The display of force the Marists had been able to summon obviously impressed the Buin people, who thought no longer of opposing the missionaries. Laracy suggests that the violence and subsequent "respect" beckoned by the missionaries increased their mobility in the area, despite continued feuding between villages.<sup>27</sup> The Marists could move freely throughout the Buin area and expand their mission with help of Marist Sisters, who had joined the mission in Bougainville from an early date, and local catechists.

The subsequent history of the Marists in Bougainville shows the extent to which the mission penetrated local communities, expanding the Catholic mission to Buka and elsewhere on Bougainville. Stories of converting and pacifying the "savage" "native population" and emancipating local women abound, illustrating both the perceived need and success of the mission. What I want to stress here, is the role of local catechists in these encounters. While initially the mission relied on Samoan catechists, soon the Marists trained local men as "church workers". Perhaps more so than their Samoan counterparts, this local laity became "essential in implanting the faith".<sup>28</sup>

---

24 The missionaries in charge of Buin were Fathers Jean Rausch (1872–1956), who would establish the Koromira mission station among the Nasioi in 1908, and Francois Allotte (1866–1948) (Kronenberg and Saris 2006, p. 92).

25 Laracy (1976), p. 56.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Kronenberg and Saris (2009), p. 97.



Prior to the foundation of catechist schools, each station used to train their own catechists, who would then assist the fathers in establishing new mission stations elsewhere. For example, the Buka mission station in South Bougainville was founded with help of ten local Kieta boys who had been trained as catechists. It was near Buka that the first general school for catechists was founded in 1910.<sup>29</sup> Here, over a period of three years, students learnt Catechism, Gregorian chant, reading, writing and arithmetic. Successful candidates departed to work as catechists in their own villages, or volunteered to be placed in the interior parts of the North Solomons, where the mission was not yet established.

Wherever these boys were placed they conducted the village schools. They called the people to the small chapel to be found in each village, and led morning and evening prayers. They summoned the priest to dying people, baptized infants and the aged who were in danger of death. They were in fact, the Missionaries' greatest asset.<sup>30</sup>

### *Post War Mission*

For some twenty years, the Marists were the sole missionaries on the island. But this changed due to World War I with the Germans losing control over German New Guinea and the Australians taking over and becoming the new administrators after the War. The Australians opened Bougainville to the (English speaking) Methodists, who arrived shortly afterwards. Unlike the Marists, who insisted teaching in local vernacular, often to the disagreement of colonial administrative rule,<sup>31</sup> the Methodists "taught in English only and looked down on the Catholic schools as their teachers (catechists and priests) were not fluent in English".<sup>32</sup> This propelled the Marist missionaries to request for English speaking Marists, which eventuated with the arrival of the US born Fr. Thomas Wade (1893–1969), who taught English at Burenoutui (Buka) Catechist School before he was ordained as the first Bishop of Bougainville.<sup>33</sup> The Catholic Church thus actively sought to re-establish its position within the rapidly changing Bougainville colonial political landscape. However, with its European background and increasingly strong American influence, the Marist mission hardly identified with the Australian administration. Moreover, it retained its dominant position in Bougainville society with welfare services and education

29 Kronenberg and Saris (2009), p. 95.

30 Kronenberg and Saris (2009), p. 94.

31 Laracy (1976), p. 92.

32 Kronenberg and Saris (2009), p. 93.

33 Ibid.

being largely in mission hands up until the 1970s.<sup>34</sup> By that time, practically all Catholic Schools' head teacher positions had been localized.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to the Methodists, the Catholic Church also had to deal with Seventh-Day Adventists (SDA), who, like the Methodists, had come via the Solomon Islands to Bougainville after WWI. This dissemination of other forms of Christianity created "new religious divisions among the Nasioi" of whom most had been converted to Catholicism.<sup>36</sup> In some parts of Bougainville, these second and third waves of conversion<sup>37</sup> caused intense rivalry, with Catholic and Methodist factions fighting and destroying each other's chapels in Siwai.<sup>38</sup>

Over the years, 30 missions were established on Bougainville, Buka, Nissan and the Caterets, all with help of catechists. According to Laracy, "the emphasis placed by Marists on the construction and maintenance of stations was not merely for convenience but reflected Catholic doctrine".<sup>39</sup> He argues that "the rigid European-based standards of their discipline and education prevented ready delegation of priestly office to people as culturally different from the Marists as the Solomon Islanders".<sup>40</sup> Successful and effective evangelisation and initiation of converts depended upon and required numerous stations that would keep large numbers of people under Marists' influence.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, by building mission stations and their manifold buildings, including the church, presbytery, classrooms, sisters' convent etc., the mission "materialized" its goals and aims, transforming spiritual conversion in material assets and proof of success.<sup>42</sup> However, with the European priests frequently travelling, being transferred, as well as repeatedly ill, the mission stations were often left under control of Pacific Islander missionaries and indigenous Catechists. In fact, the Marist history in Bougainville shows that, albeit not readily being ordained as priests, who are crucial to the sacramental system on which Catholic life is based, these "church workers" had considerable influence on

---

34 Only in 1961, the first government school was established, which was set up mainly for children of administrative personnel. Three years later, a government high school was founded. Source: Griffin (1995), p. 10.

35 Momis (2005), p. 321.

36 Ogan (1999), p. 3.

37 Ogan (1972), p. 50, estimates that in the early 1960s, Catholics were the majority among the Nasioi, outnumbering adherents to other religions by about four or five to one.

38 Laracy (1976), p. 64.

39 Laracy (1976), pp. 38–39.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 See also Hermkens (2014).

how Marist teachings were circulated and mediated. They facilitated the inculturation of the Catholic Church in Bougainville communities and life. As stated by Kronenberg and Saris about the importance of catechists for the Marist mission and Catholic Church on Bougainville:

They [catechists] worked in the villages as well as on the mission stations. They taught catechism, prepared children for first confession and first communion, made sure young people got married, started the singing in church, were leaders of morning and evening prayers, of rosary and other devotions. The catechist accompanied the priest wherever the priest went for a pastoral visit. The catechist informed the priest of what was happening in the village and in the parish.<sup>43</sup>

World War II disrupted mission efforts with the Japanese invading and occupying the Region, and several Marists lost their lives.<sup>44</sup> After the war, the missions undertook the work of reconstruction of churches, schools, health clinics and convents.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the Bougainville Church became increasingly nationalised and entangled with Bougainville communities and daily life. By the mid-1960s the overwhelming majority of Catholic priests, sisters and brothers on Bougainville were nationals, with only seven missionaries left.<sup>46</sup> This was partly due to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which had a great influence on the Church in Bougainville. In addition to “liturgical changes and attempts of inculturation, the role of laity in the administration of the ‘mission stations’ was addressed”, which resulted in the establishment of Parish Councils.<sup>47</sup> A major goal of the Bougainville Church became the establishment and support of local Christian communities, termed “*Liklik Kristen Komuniti*”. This implied getting people involved in the Church by training local leaders, setting up local ministries, and training Bougainvillean priests. The importance of local laity and local priests in the Bougainville Church is reflected in Bougainville’s ordination of Gregory Singkai in 1974.

Bishop Gregory Singkai (1935–1996), who was born in Koromira, was a respected Nasioi man and very much loved by the people of Bougainville. He

---

43 Kronenberg and Saris (2009), p. 97.

44 Five Marists (three priests and two brothers), were killed during WWII, others were interned. Source: <http://www.maristocceania.org/en/Pages/6-links.htm>.

45 <http://www.maristocceania.org/en/Pages/6-links.htm>.

46 Pinda (2006), p. 33.

47 Kronenberg and Saris (2009), p. 96.

was a great advocate of “Yumi yet i Sios” (We are Church).<sup>48</sup> As former Bishop Kronenberg recalls Gregory Singkai’s effort of indigenizing the Church:

He supported the involvement of the laity very much. In Papua New Guinea the Diocese of Bougainville became known as the Diocese of the laity. He also propagated the idea that the catechist is serving the community, so in the first place the community has to look after the catechist and not the bishop. As catechists are only part time involved in their church work, Bishop Gregory decided that no payment would be given, but he encouraged the communities to assist their catechists in whatever way they could. He also stressed that the service catechists gave was voluntary. And certainly now as people are involved in only one ministry, it is very much part time and voluntary, a service to the community. All this is part of the principle “We are Church”.<sup>49</sup>

The pervasive presence and impact of the Catholic Church in Bougainville and its entanglement with local communities, or rather, Bougainville people and communities *being* the Church, came markedly to the fore during the Bougainville crisis (1988–1998). During the almost ten-year crisis, “when priests were scarce and hindered in their movements”, it were the catechists, or church workers, who kept the faith (and Catholic Church) alive.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, Marists and other Catholics were actively involved in the Bougainvillean struggle to gain political independence from PNG. However, before detailing the entanglement between Marists’ teachings and the desire for political autonomy, let me take a step back and address local spiritual beliefs and how these collided with and, or supported conversion to Catholicism. The results of these and ongoing encounters between “custom” and Christianity resulted in particular Bougainvillean ontologies that place Mary in the centre of devotional practices while framing Bougainville land as Holy. Importantly, these practices and beliefs supported and advocated a “Holy War” against Australia, Papua New Guinea and the mining company that was violating local customs, women, and draining resources and wealth from Bougainville Island.

48 See also Barker (1993). In this work, Barker details similar processes of indigenizing the church within the Anglican Mission among the Maisin in Collingwood Bay, PNG.

49 Kronenberg and Saris (2009), p. 98; Momis (2005), p. 325.

50 Kronenberg and Saris (2009), p. 99.

### Politics of Conversion<sup>51</sup>

As described in the beginning of this article, Nasioi's encounter with both Marists and colonial administration had not been without repercussions. Since 1906, the Nasioi had suffered from the systematic enforcement of "law and order", with administration officer Doelinger conducting several (punitive) expeditions to keep the Nasioi under control.<sup>52</sup> The presence of the administrative post and hence government in Kieta since 1905, increased the likelihood of punishment for violence, but also meant that local people looked for the missions to offer protection.<sup>53</sup> Hence, although the Marists missionaries did perhaps not see themselves as the "religious arm" of German colonialism, Nasioi conversion to Catholicism must be seen in this context of both colonial administration and mission wielding their influences and powers over Bougainville and its peoples.

After the initial establishment of the mission in Kieta in 1901, another mission station among the Nasioi was opened in 1908, when Fr. Jean Raush (1872–1956) established the Koromira mission station, where he worked for approximately five years.<sup>54</sup> Fr. Raush and his colleagues, such as Fr. Charles Seiller (1876–1951) and Fr. Nicolas Goedert (1881–1940), tried to convert the Nasioi to Christianity by circulating their beliefs and imageries about God, Christ and the Virgin Mary. According to Eugene Ogan, the Nasioi interpreted the Marist teachings and their religious regalia in terms of their own world-view.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, Douglas Oliver reasons "conversion to the Catholic mission creed and membership in the church did not require a major change in indigenes' thinking and living". However, "it did represent a conscious acceptance ... of something partly new".<sup>56</sup>

Early twentieth century accounts of Nasioi religion state that Nasioi believed in a Creator, called *Komponing* or *Kumponi*.<sup>57</sup> This Creator inhabits the mountains, forests and rivers and is often referred to as "God" by present-day Nasioi. The affinity between local and Christian notions of God is a recurrent theme

51 Parts of this section have been previously published in Hermkens (2007) and Hermkens (2010).

52 Laracy (1976), p. 56.

53 Ibid.

54 After five years, Fr. Raush became ill and left for treatment in Sydney. "Raush J.501" archival card Missionary Archives Rome.

55 Ogan (1972), pp. 30–31.

56 Oliver (1991), p. 61.

57 Ogan (1972), p. 30; Laracy (1976), pp. 7–8.

in the history of Christian missions, and a common feature of missionary discourse. However, it appears that the Nasioi had a rather ambiguous relationship with this Creator, preferring to mediate their affairs via spirits or ghosts of the dead (*ma'naari*). The reason for this apprehension was that according to Laracy's interlocutors, *Komponing* had been reluctant to withdraw from the human world. During the day when the adults were working in their gardens away from the village, *Komponing* would leave his abode on the mountain-peak behind Koromira and visit the village, giving food to the children so they would not eat the evening meal prepared by their parents. The narrative continues with the parents trying to prevent *Komponing's* continuous involvement and interference and driving him away into a sago grove in a coastal swamp some miles to the south. *Komponing* punished the Koromira people by planting only a few small fishes in their waters and creating an abundance in the waters south of his new abode. Since then, the Koromira people are said to have had nothing to do with him, instead preferring to conduct their affairs in association with spirits.<sup>58</sup> These spirits are believed to be crucial for material well-being.

According to Ogan, it is these spirits or ghosts of the dead (*ma'naari*) that dominated Nasioi belief. The *manari* encompassed the *kasiai*, who live on the horizon; the *parori*, bush spirits; the *tanuang*, ancestral spirits; and the *masalai*, who live in or near inland water.<sup>59</sup> Ogan stresses the absolute dependence on *ma'naari*, and in order to ensure ones' well-being and success, offerings of pork and prayers had to be made to get their favourable attention.<sup>60</sup> During my work among the Nasioi in 2005, I was told that in the past, each village had a special man, a ritual leader, who was the caretaker of the sacred places where offerings were to be made, and who prayed to the spirits to ensure that his place and people would stay prosperous and healthy. Women, although regarded as "mothers of the land", due to the mainly matrilineal nature of Bougainville societies, were not allowed to be caretakers, make offerings, or eat the remains of the animal offerings.

Ogan argues that the Nasioi people perceived the Catholic pantheon as more powerful, or more efficient than the local spirits, and hence easily converted to Catholicism.<sup>61</sup> However, my interlocutors often stress that the process of conversion is both ongoing and contested. When reflecting upon the relationship between indigenous and Christian beliefs, Koromira elder John Bovora,

---

58 Laracy (1976), p. 8.

59 *ibid.*

60 Ogan (1972), pp. 30–31; Ogan (1999), p. 2.

61 Ogan (1972), p. 46.

a religious minister and founder of an elementary and vocational school in Koromira Parish, narrates the following:

The idea of a creator existed with our *tumbuna* [ancestors] before the missionaries came. Those who lived near the sea believed God is living there. Those staying in the bush believed he stayed there. Those who stayed near the river believed God resided in there. Within Catholic faith, God stays in Heaven. For us, he stays with us ... Our *tumbuna* knew God exists. They knew how to pray to *Kumponi*, to God. If the missionaries had known this, they could have built churches on these places. Now there is confusion: we have our churches and we have our sacred places. If they had built churches on these places, it would have been clear.<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, not all Bougainvilleans agree with the new spiritual powers that were introduced, perceiving the Catholic pantheon, and the Marists who served them, as being responsible for the disruption of the traditional spiritual power balance and order. As James Tanis, a former member of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA), secretary of the Bougainville Interim Government (BIG) and previous president of the Autonomous Province of Bougainville, describes:

I am the eldest son of the second son of the medicine man. I grew up listening to my grandfather's stories about the good days when his power was strong. Now the church has chased away the spirits that gave him power. He would tell me that it was the rosaries that were given by the priest that have taken away the power of growing taro.<sup>63</sup>

In this quote, Tanis blames in particular the rosary for having destroyed the ancestors' magical powers. The rosary, or garland of roses, is both a material object and devotion in honour of the Virgin Mary. While handling the rosary beads, devotees will recite a set of specific prayers, with the Hail Mary – a prayer to Mary – being the centre of the devotion. It is remarkable that Tanis does not blame the Christian God for chasing away the traditional spirits, but instead, devotion to Mary. Perhaps, this is due to the fact that the Christian God is frequently equated with the Nasioi God *Kumponi*, while the Christian figure Mary was unknown to the Nasioi people.

62 Interview with John Bovora, Berasinau village, Koromira, Bougainville 28/11/2005.

63 Tanis (2002), pp. 58–61.

*“Mary as Our Mother”*

According to Bougainvillean Marist Brother John Mauro and elder John Bovora, Bougainville people did not know Mary before the missionaries arrived. Both dedicated to Mary, they argue that Mary was easily accepted due to her role as a mother, an important status in the matrilineal societies of Bougainville. In fact, as Brother John Mauro argues, Mary was often more easily accepted than her Son. In his opinion, it is the matrilineal system, which is practiced in the North and Central areas of Bougainville, which made it easier for people to accept her. When the Marist missionaries came, they combined their preaching and praying with local understandings and *kastom*, traditions. So, he tells, “Christ came with his mother. This helped people’s understanding and their acceptance of the Gospel. Without Her, it would have been hard.” This particular inculturation of Mary as a mother is also stressed by Ogan, who writes that among the Naisioi, Mary was venerated as “*Maria niuko*, Mary our mother”.<sup>64</sup> In a similar vein, elder John Bovora argues that it was Mary’s identity and role as a mother that facilitated her acceptance:

There was no customary idea of Mary, or of Jesus. But when the Marists introduced Mary, she was accepted as the mother of God. This is because we have a matrilineal system here.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, the acceptance of Mary seems to have concurred with local ideas about women as mothers. Traditionally, mothers have an important role in Bougainville societies. They are the caretakers of the land, which is inherited via the female line, have leadership responsibilities (together with men). Although women have lost much of the respect they received in the past, women are still regarded as the custodians of the land in the matrilineal societies of Bougainville. Moreover, several interlocutors explained that Mary is so popular because praying to her and asking her to help you is like asking your mother for help. In Bougainvillean family life it is not the custom to ask your father for help. The mother provides, takes care of her children, and she is the one to which her children turn if they are in need of help. This resonates with the virtues that are attributed to “Mama Maria”, as just like Mary, the mother has a mediating role in Bougainville culture.<sup>66</sup>

64 Ogan (1972), p. 46.

65 Interview with John Bovora, Berasinau village, Koromira, Bougainville 28/11/2005.

66 See further: Hermkens (2011b).



Ogan argues that the ideological orientation of Catholicism on dependence on Mary, God and Saints tapped into traditional beliefs and practices, enhancing this theme in Nasioi minds, while the other denominations did not make that connection with custom.<sup>67</sup> It thus seems that in particular Catholic Nasioi held on to traditional beliefs concerning dependency upon spirits and ancestral powers. However, according to Ogan, while Christianity “may be regarded as a functional substitute for ancestral spirits”, [...] “the Christian pantheon must be viewed as a distinctively religious system, removed from the worshippers in a way that ancestral spirits were not”.<sup>68</sup> Yet, John Bovora’s narrative shows that instead of replacing traditional elements of belief with Catholic ones, Christianity for Nasioi people today is rather a kind of ontological “remix”<sup>69</sup> in which traditional and Catholic elements of belief retain their ‘original’ form while constituting something new. Moreover, my interlocutors stress that Mary is very close to them, like a mother, mediating on their behalf in order to ensure the goodwill and support of her Son. This defies Ogan’s thesis that the Christian pantheon is more removed from its worshippers than the ancestral spirits, at least with regards to Mary.

John Barker disputes the conventional opposition that is often posed between Melanesian religion and Christianity, an opposition, which he states, “finds its basis in essentialist distinctions between Them and Us rather than in empirical observation”.<sup>70</sup> Instead, he argues that Melanesian religion is “heterogeneous, made up of distinct practices, ideologies, and organizations”.<sup>71</sup> Barker urges us to look more closely at this religious pluralism, and at the dynamics through which different people have accepted, created, and combined Christian and indigenous forms; “the ways they interact with encompassing systems connecting them to the rest of the world; and the ways they maintain their cultural distinctiveness”.<sup>72</sup> The specific history of Marist proselytization by European missionaries, Samoan, and indigenous catechists and its continued appropriation and translation by Nasioi people suggests that indigenous and introduced forms of religiosity have retained aspects of their distinctiveness,

---

67 According to Ogan, this ideological orientation, as well as other Catholic practices and rules (or rather the absence of prohibitions on consuming alcohol, tobacco, and betelnut) had a negative impact on Nasioi (and Bougainvillean) economic development. Ogan (1972), pp. 50, 52–56.

68 Ogan (1972), p. 56.

69 Teaiwa (2015).

70 Barker (1992), pp. 148, p. 153.

71 Barker (1992), p. 158.

72 Barker (1992), p. 167.

at the same time impacting on each other,<sup>73</sup> thereby creating a distinctively Nasioi Catholic theology in which Mary, the mother of Jesus, figures prominently.

Currently, after decades of emulation of Christian teachings and political struggles for sovereignty, many of my Catholic Bougainvillean interlocutors believe that the landscape of Bougainville prior to the arrival of missionaries and whites was a Holy Land (*Me'ekamui*). This landscape is perceived as a geography of sacred places. The ancestors, referred to as *tumbuna*, exercised their powers at these sacred places, which include stones, trees, mountaintops, and rivers. Bougainville is considered to be *Me'ekamui* not only because of the presence of these sacred places, which confer offerings and blessing because the divine manifests itself there, but also because it is believed that God (*Kompuni*) stands close to the Bougainvilleans.

The concept of *Me'ekamui*, meaning Sacred or Holy Island, refers to the sacred places of the ancestors that are located all over Bougainville, and is central to the secessionist movement *Me'ekamui* Pontoku Onoring. The movement started to develop from around 1959, when its leader Damien Dameng gained support from several thousand people with regards to his ideas of rebuilding customary Bougainville social structures. The movement's advocates and followers believed that their social structure "was built mainly upon custom, and saw it as superior to the colonial administration and the Christian missions, both of which Dameng opposed".<sup>74</sup> However, according to Regan, they did incorporate some of the "'good' aspects of the changes brought by the missions and the colonial administration".<sup>75</sup>

By calling Bougainville a Holy Island, it is claimed as the land of the ancestors, and as such, as the land of indigenous Bougainvilleans. Dameng's ideology thus places emphasis on customary culture along with a strong opposition to the outside world and its presence and influence in Bougainville.<sup>76</sup> Importantly, Catholic Nasioi also appropriated this emphasis on custom, indigeneity and nationalism in their struggle for justice and independence. They combined *Me'ekamui* ideology and nationalism with belief in God and Mary to legitimate what they termed a "Holy War" against the Australian owned copper mine on

73 See also Whitehouse (2006), p. 304.

74 Regan (2002), pp. 21–22. Today, Dameng's ideas are mainly upheld around the Panguna mine in central Bougainville and the Buin area in the South. But also in the Kieta and Koromira districts, people adhere to (parts of) Dameng's ideology.

75 Regan (2002), pp. 21–22.

76 For a detailed analysis of *Me'ekamui* ideology in the context of secessionist warfare, see further Hermkens (2007), pp. 271–289.

Nasioi land, and the Papua New Guinea Defence Forces (PNGDF) that tried to protect the mine against Nasioi people's interests and activities.

### Marian Devotion and Secessionist Warfare

The crisis, which lasted from 1988 until 1998, revolved around the exploitation of one of the world's largest copper mines located in the island's central mountain range near the Nasioi village of Panguna in the Koromira area. BCL operated the Panguna mining project of Conzinc Riotinto of Australia (CRA) from 1972 onwards. The project increasingly began to face local resistance and demonstrations by landowners. As argued by Mary-Louise O'Callaghan, the giant copper mine struck at the heart of Bougainville's, and especially Nasioi's, matrilineal structure. Not only were "villages relocated and their lands despoiled by the wastes from the mine [...], many women in Central Bougainville felt completely disempowered in their role as land-owners".<sup>77</sup>

As argued by many scholars, the Panguna mine triggered prevailing desires for freedom and self-governance. Colonial experiences with oppressive regimes had led to feelings of resentment and resistance.<sup>78</sup> As a result, the rally against the Panguna mining became linked to the Bougainvillean secession from PNG. Francis Ona, a previous BCL employee, led the protest against the mine in the 1980s and 90s. Angry at BCL's lack of response, Francis Ona and his group, who would become known as the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA), sabotaged a power line pylon, cutting off power to the Panguna mine.<sup>79</sup> This militant action, which took place in November 1988, was followed by other sabotages that shut down mining operations. The Papua New Guinea Government responded with force, and, after first having sent a police riot squad, mobilized its defense forces (PNGDF) to protect the mine and bring the BRA under control.

Hiding in the mountains from the PNGDF, Francis Ona united with Damien Dameng's *Me'ekamui Pontoko Onoring* secessionist movement, which provided spiritual backing to the opposition against BCL.<sup>80</sup> This union altered Ona's militancy from mainly anti-BCL sabotage into support for secession from Papua

77 O'Callaghan (2002).

78 The colonial and recent history of Bougainville shows the impact and oppression of white missionaries, plantation owners and colonial administration: Oliver (1991), pp. 21–56; Laracy (1976), p. 37. For a more detailed analysis, see further Hermkens (2007).

79 Carl and Garasu (1995), p. 96.

80 Swain and Trompf (1995), p. 182. *Me'ekamui Pontoku Onoring* roughly translated means

New Guinea.<sup>81</sup> Significantly, Ona's rebellion and his secessionist movement was highly influenced by his devotion to Mary. As explained to me by several of his followers, Ona's idea was that through devotion to Mary, Bougainville would get faithful leaders who are connected with the land and lore of the Island. Since Bougainville was perceived as Me'ekamui (Holy Land), the people, and especially the leaders, would have to become holy as well. Not only did Ona use his daily prayers to Mary as a guide for his actions, and had he himself crowned as a holy leader, as King of Me'ekamui, he also established the Marian Mercy Mission (MMM). This new religious movement with a focus on devotion to Mary opposed the PNG state and the autonomous status PNG had granted to Bougainville, and labelled the fight against PNG as a holy war while seeking to transform Bougainville into One Holy Catholic Nation. In short, in Ona's vision of Me'ekamui, the Catholic faith, and in particular the veneration of Mary, played a crucial role.<sup>82</sup>

### *Marion Devotion, Holiness and the Politics of Nationalism*

According to the former Dutch bishop of Bougainville, Henk Kronenberg,<sup>83</sup> Ona had been particularly devoted to Mary. At the time of the prospecting activities, Francis Ona (born in 1953) – a young Nasioi man from Guava village next to the Pangunu mine – was attending the Catholic Mission Tunuru school near Arawa, which is close to the traditional capital town of Bougainville, Kieta. In 1968, he continued his education at St. Joseph Rigu High School, the Marist school at Rigu Lagoon near Kieta.<sup>84</sup> During the crisis, Ona's Catholic upbringing and devotion to Mary seem to have taken a new dimension. Apparently, Ona would only proceed with his daily agenda after he received a confirming message from Mary, whose statue he addressed daily. Moreover, his devotion to Mary transpires from the Marian Mercy Mission (MMM), which Ona commenced in the Nasioi village of Guava, close to the Panguna mine. The movement's devotees recited the rosary for hours and regularly engaged in fasting and prayer sessions. Current Bishop Bernard Unabali described it as a very

---

“government of the guardians of the sacred [or holy] land”. It is also called the “Fifty Toea Movement”, a reference to the monetary contributions members made, in Regan (2002), pp. 20–24.

81 Carl and Garasu (1995), p. 96.

82 For an elaborate analysis of Ona's religious beliefs and influence on the crisis see Hermkens (2013).

83 Fr. Kronenberg, who succeeded Bishop Gregory Singkai, retired as Bishop of Bougainville in December 2009.

84 McCane (2004), p. 339; Daveona (2006).

strong movement, with a strong emphasis on morality, striving for the conversion of all Bougainvilleans.<sup>85</sup> Through several visits from official members of the Bougainville Catholic Church, such as the Bishop and several Catholic priests, Francis Ona was convinced he had the Church behind him. At the same time, Ona is credited with keeping the Catholic faith alive, especially in Guava village,<sup>86</sup> which was completely sealed off from the rest of Bougainville during and some years after the crisis.

Importantly, Ona's devotion to Mary and strong emphasis on holiness also directed his fight against PNG and the Australian owned mining company, which was framed into a Holy War to save and restore Bougainville to the holy Island it used to be. The struggle to restore Bougainville was the task of the BRA who, especially in the Koromira area, acted as a Holy Army that was guided by Francis Ona and supported by Mary and God. As Ex-BRA combatant and BRA prayer leader Albert Natee of Koromira parish, explained:

Francis Ona said this land must become holy again, Me'ekamui. We prayed to God and he gave us the strength. This directed us to make a clean fight. We were fighting for our rights, to get rid of all these bad companies and their effects. All BRA and all Bougainvilleans, everybody practiced this holiness. Our spirits must be holy so God would get rid of Satan [the mining companies]. And God helped us. How? His power worked through the rosary. Before we would go on patrol or go into fighting, we would pray the three most powerful decades: Our father and three Hail Mary's. This we did in a group. The mysteries we would pray in private. We would pray for protection and for guidance. I would get them [BRA combatants] all together and read or share the bible and explain how to stay holy in the fighting. We stayed holy by: not gossiping, not swearing, and not getting angry. When somebody made trouble within the camp, we would send him away. As a group we must stay holy, one man may not destroy this. He would have to make some kind of sacrifice and return after some weeks. He must apologise to God, to us, to those to whom he had done wrong. If he doesn't he will jeopardise our safety. God and Mary will not protect us when we have done wrong. Also, when I die, I must go to heaven. So during the fighting and before, I must stay holy so when they shoot me I go straight to heaven.<sup>87</sup>

85 Father Bernard Unabali, interview with the author, Arawa 2005. After Bishop Kronenberg's retirement in 2009, Bernard Unabali became the new Bishop of Bougainville.

86 Father Luis Lovosi, interview with the author, Buka, October 26, 2005.

87 Interview with Albert Natee, Kororo village, Koromira, Bougainville, 22/11/2005.

Deeply informed by both Me'ekamui ideology and a strong localised Catholic discourse, Ona's ideology constituted a form of ethno-nationalism with a fierce anti-foreigner sentiment, and strong validation of a traditional customary society. Appropriating elements of Catholicism as an ideology of resistance to PNG and Australian hegemony, the crisis was at the same time conceptualised and legitimised as a Holy War to restore Bougainville as the Holy Island it once was. However, while Dameng's Me'ekamui movement envisioned the restoration of a Holy "customary" Bougainville society, Ona envisioned a Holy Catholic Bougainville Nation led by Mary.

The interplay between Ona's nationalism and his devotion to Mary came to the fore markedly in the warm welcome he extended to the pilgrimage of the international Pilgrim Virgin Statue of Our Lady of Fatima to Guava village in 1997.<sup>88</sup> As I detail extensively elsewhere, the organizers of this pilgrimage, as well as the villagers who experienced the statue entering their village, believed that Ona was convinced by Mary to stop the fighting.<sup>89</sup> Catholic missionaries captured the proceedings on film at the time, and on these recordings, Ona can be seen and heard praying in front of the statue, making a vow to Our Lady of Fatima to work toward peace. More significantly, he also consecrates the island of Bougainville in the name of Mary. Hence, in addition to devoting his own life to Mama Maria, and directing the BRA to do the same, Ona appropriated the whole of Bougainville in Mary's name, thereby converting the whole of Bougainville into one holy Catholic Nation.

Importantly, Francis Ona's emphasis on Mary was not unique. Especially in Central Bougainville, Mary became increasingly popular during the crisis, resulting in special devotional groups and nationalist religious movements like Ona's Marian Mercy Mission.<sup>90</sup> While not officially acknowledged by the Bougainville Catholic Church, these movements credit themselves of having worked with support of the Bougainvillean Bishop Gregory Singkai, as well as other local Catholic priests. Whether real or perceived, this aura of institu-

88 See further Hermkens (2009), pp. 69–85.

89 One year later, on April 30, 1998, the crisis was officially ended when all parties involved signed a ceasefire agreement. Obviously, the crisis did not end this simply. Although a treaty was signed, Ona was not present, as he stayed out of the peace process. The BRA was represented by BRA leaders Sam Kauona and the former president of the ABG, Joseph Kabui. Moreover, hostilities between various Bougainville groups continued. Nevertheless, among Catholics there is a general conviction that the pilgrimage of the statue of Fatima marked a turning point in the crisis.

90 For an analysis of the establishment of new religious (Marian) movements during the crisis see Hermkens (2015).

tional Church approval and support for their ideology made these secessionist religious movements highly influential and popular. One of these movements, and which seems to have been particularly influential and strongly supportive of Francis Ona's political goal, was the Our Lady of Mercy (OLM) movement.<sup>91</sup>

The OLM was established two years after the crisis had started, at a point when Bougainville was immersed in a political and economic vacuum, with almost no civil government, a total blockade, and casualties caused by the PNGDF and the BRA on all, including civilian, sides. The OLM was founded by the then 50 year-old Peter Kira from the Nasioi village of Kokoka in Koromira Parish. He had initiated the movement to do "the work of Mama Maria".<sup>92</sup> Aided by a small statue of the Immaculate Conception that he had bought on Buka Island before the crisis began, and the rosaries given to him by Bishop Gregory Singkai, Kira informed people about Mary, healed them, and with help of Mary, tried to convert Seventh-day Adventists and Methodists. Peter Kira and his Marian movement were supported by the BRA, Bishop Gregory Singkai, and the Interim Government of Bougainville, which enabled Kira to do his work and travel around Koromira and neighbouring areas.

Importantly, both Ona's and Kira's Marian movements aimed towards building one Holy Catholic Bougainville Nation. Francis Ona's MMM envisioned the conversion of the whole of Bougainville, while the OLM envisioned the Bougainville community as "One, Holi, Katolik, na Apostalik".<sup>93</sup> Both movements thus placed themselves and Bougainville within the main doctrine of Catholic Church, which is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Importantly, both movements had strong nationalist and separatist drives, linking faith and holiness with the Bougainville Island's well-being. The OLM encouraged members to follow the laws and conduct of God, thereby strengthening the Bougainville Catholic Church as well as the nation. One OLM circular<sup>94</sup> blamed Papua New Guinea for causing Bougainvilleans to misbehave, stating "the politics of the Papua New Guinean government have been brainwashing people's minds," and that "economic development works (such as the mining) have led people astray and corrupted them." The PNG government also was accused of having brought "all kinds of false (religious) beliefs into Bougainville". The OLM's mission was to enlighten people and lead them to

91 See further Hermkens (2011a).

92 Kira, interview with the author, Siriwai village, 12 December 2005.

93 Circular, OLM archives, Siriwai village, Bougainville.

94 Circular, n.d., OLM archives, Siriwai village, Bougainville. Translation from Tok Pidgin into English by the author.

the “Society bilong Santu Maria”, ensuring that Bougainvilleans became good Catholics in service to the nation.<sup>95</sup> The same circular pointed people towards their obligation to help others, hence strengthening the work of the Catholic Church in each parish in the diocese, the whole of Bougainville, and the world.

### Marists and Secessionist Warfare

In Central Bougainville, the Catholic faith introduced by Marist missionaries and laity has been instrumental in building both national and subnational Bougainville identities. Marists integrated local languages, beliefs and political interests in their teachings and activities. Despite early interventions in local disputes that were aimed towards pacification, Marists were also cautious not to disrupt socio-political organisations. At the same time, they trained local leaders, build a self-sustaining system of Basic Christian communities under Bishop Singkai<sup>96</sup> and advocated both local and Marists’ political interests and views in the continuously shifting contexts of colonial and “post”-colonial Oceania.

In fact, Marists have inspired many influential Bougainvilleans to oppose successive acts of oppression that have faced Bougainville.<sup>97</sup> They taught their students not to accept colonial or postcolonial oppression, but instead, strive for self-determination and (political) leadership positions. For example, when Panguna villagers opposed Australian mining prospecting activities on their lands “from the early 1960s onwards, some of the Marist priests became involved in the enduring dispute and encouraged the people to be firm in standing up for their rights”.<sup>98</sup> They were encouraged and joined by other Catholic political agents, like Fr. John Momis who, at the time, was a young Bougainvillean priest (from 1970 until 1993). Momis’ political ambitions to stand for the regional seat were backed up by the Catholic Church and the American Marist Bishop of Bougainville Leo Lemay (from 1959 until 1974).<sup>99</sup> While Momis favoured nationalisation of the Panguna mine, Bishop Lemay strongly advocated the social justice related issues that caused controversy in Bougainville in

95 Hermkens (2011a), p. 172.

96 Pinda (2006), p. 25.

97 O’Callaghan (1999), p. 17; Momis (2005), p. 325; Laracy (2005), p. 132.

98 McCane (2004), p. 126.

99 Griffin (1995), p. 13. After an active career in both PNG and Bougainville politics, John Momis was elected as president of Bougainville in 2010, and re-elected in 2015.



the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>100</sup> One of the European Marists who had been involved in the protests against the mine was Fr. Robert Wiley (1932–2005). In the 1980s, he promoted the rights of the local people against Bougainville Copper Ltd (BCL). “His life was publicly threatened several times, but he managed to leave the troubled area in 1990 on the last plane out of Bougainville”,<sup>101</sup> just before the dispute escalated in a brutal warfare that caused great suffering and ruined nearly all infrastructures and socio-economic services. However, one of the most prominent supporters of Bougainville people, and Nasioi in particular, was undoubtedly Bishop Gregory Singkai.

Being a Nasioi man, Bishop Singkai was very much concerned about what was happening in his region. Initially, he supported the BRA and the OLM and was a great advocate for autonomy for Bougainville. The BRA actively tried to encapsulate the Bishop in their new, independent government and appointed Bishop Singkai as minister of Education in the Bougainville Interim Government (BIG).<sup>102</sup> Consequently, not only the people of PNG and the PNG government, but also the PNG Catholic Church and the Bishops’ Conference in Port Moresby were suspicious of Bishop Singkai’s involvement with the BRA.<sup>103</sup> PNG historian John Waiko blamed Bougainville clergy like Bishop Singkai for advocating national unity in public, while in practice supporting the BRA and its secessionist aspirations.<sup>104</sup> While two priests did openly supported the violent action of the landowners, Singkai never actively participated in the BIG, nor did he connect the Bougainville Catholic Church with the BRA.<sup>105</sup> In response to the accusations against Bishop Singkai and the involvement of the Bougainville Catholic Church with the BRA, former Bishop Kronenberg writes:

---

100 Momis (2005), p. 323; Laracy (2005), p. 132.

101 Saris (2010), p. 89; Laracy (2005), p. 132.

102 In 1990, the Bougainville Interim Government (BIG) was established as the legitimate authority on Bougainville. Francis Ona was appointed President with Joseph Kabui as Chairman of the Interim Government. The churches of Bougainville were given different roles within BIG. Bishop Singkai ‘accepted’ the portfolio of Education, while Health was given to the Uniting Church, and Youth Affairs to the Seventh Day Adventists. Source: Griffin (2005), p. 19. On May 17, 1990, BIG announced the declaration of Bougainville independence from PNG.

103 Interview with Archbishop of Honiara, Adrian Thomas Smith, Honiara, Solomon Islands, 2011.

104 Waiko (1993), p. 252; See also Griffin (1995), p. 23, who blames the Bougainville Church, and Bishop Singkai in particular, for failing to provide moral guidance.

105 Personal communication with Bishop Kronenberg, 2017; Kronenberg (2006), p. 114.

The Church favoured a better deal for the landowners, tried to make the older generation understand that the compensation payments should be shared with the younger generation. The Church tried to intervene when the hatred towards the squatters from other provinces grew out of proportion. The Church did its best to make the BRA as well as the police and army understand that violence breeds more violence. Nobody took note of the trip Bishop Gregory made to the inland mountain hideout of Francis Ona to speak of peace. It was an arduous trip for the Bishop and on the way he was treated by armed schoolboys as if he was a “nobody”.<sup>106</sup>

Bishop Singkai and several other priests stayed in the mountains for several years, being allowed to do limited ministry. However, they always faced suspicion on the side of the army and police, or on the side of the BRA.<sup>107</sup> After some time, Singkai had to leave Bougainville as his position was no longer tenable. Too afraid to go to Port Moresby (PNG), as the PNG government equated him with the BRA, Singkai went to Honiara where he received support from the local Catholic Church. In 1996, he travelled to Port Moresby and subsequently back home to Bougainville in August that year.<sup>108</sup> However, after a week he was hospitalized in Vunapope hospital in Rabaul where he passed away on 12 September 1996. While his death was caused by a heart attack, the BRA claimed the PNG government had poisoned ‘their’ relative and beloved Bishop.<sup>109</sup> Bishop Singkai’s unfortunate death did not only cause a lot of rumours and suspicion, but also the establishment of cults surrounding his physical remains and his conceptual legacies. He is still very popular among Bougainvilleans, especially among the Nasioi, and his ideas persevere in local teaching curricula and religious movements.

It leaves no doubt that Bishop Singkai’s Nasioi identity, religious status, as well as his initial approval of Kira’s OLM and support against BCL strengthened the local Marian movements and their devotion. Although not always approved of by the main Church, these movements looked towards the Bougainville Church for inclusion and acknowledgement, considering or aiming to be part of the national and universal Catholic community. This shows the enduring tension between universalism and localism, or between the institutional Church and lived religion.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, the Bougainville Church itself has faced oppo-

106 Kronenberg (2006), p. 115.

107 Ibid.

108 Personal communication with Bishop Kronenberg, 2017.

109 Ibid.

110 However, not all Bougainville religious or social movements sought approval of the main

sition from the State, the wider Catholic Church community, as well as outside media. Both the Papua New Guinea government and the PNG Church condemned the Bougainville Church over its role in Bougainville and its decision to side with the “people” in a major political conflict and struggle for sovereignty.<sup>111</sup> As duly noted by John Barker, throughout the region “the history of Christianity is inextricably entangled with stories of political contest, convergence, and transformation”,<sup>112</sup> and Bougainville is no exception.

What makes the Bougainville case intriguing is the force with which Catholicism, and especially devotion to Mary, became a political presence during the crisis. Not only did the Marian movements claim spiritual and moral authority, they were willing to fight for their sovereignty and protect their land and culture against capitalist expansion and exploitation. This shows how Marian devotion, as a globally institutionalised practice and part of a transnational discourse, can be appropriated into local secessionist protests and practices of resistance, as well as in local peace efforts.

### Conclusion

Despite the importance of Catholic ideology and faith during the crisis, the Bougainville crisis destroyed much of the work the Catholic Church had been doing since WWII and the 1970s in particular. However, both during and after the conflict, Marists have been involved in reconciliation processes and the re-establishment of political, social and economic structures still continues.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, the Catholic Church, with its emphasis on “We are Church”, has penetrated deeply into local communities, not just with regards to spiritual matters, but also in terms of civil and political life. According to retired Bougainville Bishop Henk Kronenberg, the early dependence of the Marists missionaries on both Pacific Islander and indigenous catechists and their training, prepared the Bougainville Church of today for the involvement of many lay people in the mission. As he states: “the laity takes its rightful place in the Bougainville Church”.<sup>114</sup> He believes the Church has an important role in Bougainville’s civil

---

Church. Some, like the ‘Hahalis Welfare Society’ in Buka, actively contested both colonial State and Church, much to the shock of Bougainville Marists (Rimoldi and Rimoldi 1992).

111 Pinda (2006), p. 27.

112 Barker (2016), p. 23.

113 <http://www.maristoceania.org/en/regions/bougainville>.

114 Kronenberg and Saris (2009), p. 91.

and political world. Significantly, the Bougainville Church has a history of training local leaders and supporting Bougainville political candidates, perhaps not surprising considering that many were educated by the Marists. In fact, the Church continues to be on good terms with members of the Bougainville Government,<sup>115</sup> including with current President John Momis, a former Catholic priest himself. This illustrates the political function of religion in Bougainville, as elsewhere in PNG. As Philip Gibbs' long-term research on the interplay between Christianity and politics in PNG shows:

In Papua New Guinea, attempts to keep religion and politics separate often meet with incomprehension and resistance on the part of the general populace, for in traditional Melanesian terms, religion has a political function: seen in the power to avert misfortune and ways to ensure prosperity and well being.<sup>116</sup>

The next step for Bougainville is to decide whether to remain an autonomous province within PNG or become independent. This will be decided upon in a referendum, planned for 2019. Crucial in this process is the Panguna mine, which triggered so much conflict and violence. Current President John Momis of the Autonomous Bougainville Government wants to restart the mine in order to provide revenue for an independent state. This intention has already caused much controversy, especially among Nasioi landowners and Me'ekamui adherents near the mine, but also among those groups living downstream of the mine and who have been most affected by the detrimental environmental impacts of the copper mine.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, many Bougainvilleans blame the mine for "exacerbating economic and social differences and fomenting political instability".<sup>118</sup> Hence, reopening the mine might be detrimental to the fragile national unity and peace Bougainville people have fought so hard for to obtain.

It leaves no doubt, however, that Bougainville will remain "a challenge for the Churches" in the years to come.<sup>119</sup> One can only hope that this time, the influences of the churches will be sufficient "to stop Bougainvilleans from killing not just intruders but each other",<sup>120</sup> and that instead, the peace, reconstruc-

---

115 Personal communication with Bishop Kronenberg, 2017.

116 Gibbs (2005).

117 Boege and Franks (2012), pp. 100–101.

118 May (2005), pp. 464–465.

119 Griffin (1995).

120 Griffin (1995), p. 24.

tion and reconciliation established through years of indigenous peacemaking in combination with Christianity will endure the socio-economic and political dilemmas Bougainville is facing today.

### Bibliography

- Barker, John. (1992). Christianity in western Melanesia Ethnography. In: James Carrier, ed., *History and Tradition in Melanesian Anthropology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 144–173.
- Barker, John. (1993). We Are Eklesia: Conversion in Uiaku, Papua New Guinea. In: R.W. Hefner, ed., *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 199–230.
- Barker, John. (2016). Comments to Part 1: Christian Transcendence and the Politics of Renewal. In: Fiona Magowan and Carolyn Schwarz, eds., *Christianity, Conflict, and Renewal in Australia and the Pacific*. Leiden & Boston: Brill, pp. 21–33.
- Boege, Volker, and Daniel M. Franks. (2012). Reopening and developing mines in post-conflict settings: The challenge of company-community relations. In: P. Lujala and S.A. Rustad, eds., *High-Value Natural Resources and Peacebuilding*. London: Earthscan, pp. 87–119.
- (de) Busser and Niedźwiedz. (2009). Mary in Poland: A Polish Master Symbol. In: A. Hermkens, W. Jansen and C. Notermans, eds., *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*. Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate, pp. 87–100.
- Cannell, Fenella. (2006). *The Anthropology of Christianity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Carl, Andy and Sr. Lorraine Garasu. (2002). Chronology. In: A. Carl and Sr. L. Garasu, eds., *Weaving consensus. The Papua New Guinea-Bougainville Peace Process, Accord 12*. London: Viking Associates, pp. 94–102.
- Choi, Hyaewol and Jolly, Margaret, eds. (2014). *Divine Domesticities: Christian Paradoxes in Asia and the Pacific*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Crocombe, Ron and Crocombe, Marjorie, eds. (1982). *Polynesian Missions in Melanesia: from Samoa, Cook Islands and Tonga to Papua and New Caledonia*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1982.
- Daveona, L.J. (2006). Francis (Dateransi) Ona. A Rebel with a Cause. Obituary Port Moresby.
- Gibbs, Philip. (2005). Political Discourse and Religious Narratives of Church and State in Papua New Guinea. *SSGM Working Paper 2005/1*, pp. 1–30.
- Griffin, James. (1995). Bougainville: A Challenge for the Churches. *Catholic Social Justice Series no. 26*.

- Hamilton, Andrew. (2005). God in Samoa and the Introduction of Catholicism. In: P. Herda, M. Reilly and D. Hilliard, eds., *Vision and Reality in Pacific Religion*. Canterbury and Canberra: Pandanus Books, pp. 87–105.
- Herda, Phyllis, Michael Reilly and David Hilliard, eds. (2005). *Vision and Reality in Pacific Religion*. Canterbury and Canberra: Pandanus Books.
- Hermkens, Anna-Karina. (2007). Religion in war and peace: Unravelling Mary's intervention in the Bougainville crisis. *Culture and Religion* 8(3), pp. 271–289.
- Hermkens, Anna-Karina. (2009). Mary's Journeys through the warscape of Bougainville. In: A. Hermkens, W. Jansen and C. Notermans, eds., *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World*. Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate, pp. 69–85.
- Hermkens, Anna-Karina. (2010). The power of Mary in secessionist warfare. Catholicism and political crisis in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. In: M.B. ter Borg and J.W. van Henten, eds., *Powers. Religion as Social and Spiritual Force*. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 116–134.
- Hermkens, Anna-Karina. (2011a). Circulating Matters of Belief: Engendering Marian Movements during the Bougainville crisis. In: L. Manderson, W. Smith, and M. Tomlinson, eds., *Flows of Faith: Religious reach and community in Asia and the Pacific*. Dordrecht and New York: Springer Publishing Company, pp. 161–181.
- Hermkens, Anna-Karina. (2011b). Mary, Motherhood and Nation: Religion and gender ideology in Bougainville's Secessionist Warfare. *Intersections. Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, issue 25. <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue25/hermkens.htm>.
- Hermkens, Anna-Karina. (2013). Like Moses who led his people to the Promised Land: Nation and State building in Bougainville. In: D. Fischer and J. Timmer, eds., *Becoming like the State*. *Oceania* 38(3), pp. 192–207.
- Hermkens, Anna-Karina. (2014). The Materiality of Missionization in Collingwood Bay, Papua New Guinea. In: H. Choi and M. Jolly, eds., *Divine Domesticities: Christian Paradoxes in Asia and the Pacific*. Canberra: ANU Press, pp. 349–380.
- Hermkens, Anna-Karina. (2015). Marian Movements and Secessionist Warfare in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. In: In Garry Trompf, ed., *New Religious movements in the Pacific*. *Nova Religio* 18(4), pp. 35–54.
- Huber, Mary T. and Nancy C. Lutkehaus, eds. (1999). *Gendered Missions: Women and Men in Missionary Discourse and Practice*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Kronenberg, Henk. (2006). Bougainville. In: in P. Gibbs, ed., *Alive In Christ. The Synod For Oceania and The Catholic Church In Papua New Guinea, 1998–2005*. Point No. 30. Goroka: Melanesian Institute, pp. 114–116.
- Kronenberg, Henk and Hendry Saris. (2009). Catechists and Church Workers in the Church of Bougainville. *Novum Forum* 11, pp. 91–100.
- Laracy, Hugh. (1976). *Marists and Melanesians. A History of the Catholic Missions in the Solomon Islands*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii.

- Laracy, Hugh. (2005). 'Imperium In Imperio?': The Catholic Church In Bougainville. In: A.J. Regan and H.M. Griffin, eds., *Bougainville: Before the Conflict*. Canberra: Pandanus Books, pp. 125–135.
- Latai, Latu. (2016). *Covenant Keepers: A History of Samoan (LMS) Missionary Wives in the Western Pacific from 1839 to 1979*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Canberra: ANU.
- Mackay, Ross. (2005). A Church in Papua or a Papuan Church?: Conservatism and Resistance to indigenous Leadership in a Melanesian Mission. In: P. Herda, M. Reilly and D. Hilliard, eds., *Vision and Reality in Pacific Religion*. Canterbury and Canberra: Pandanus Books, pp. 154–174.
- May, Ron. (2005). The Bougainville Conflict and its Resolution. In: J. Henderson, and G. Watson, eds., *Securing a Peaceful Pacific*. Christchurch: Canterbury University Press.
- McCane, Lawrence fms. (2004). *Melanesian Stories: Marist Brothers in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, 1845–2003*. Madang: Divine Word University.
- Momis, Elizabeth Iba. (2005). The Bougainville Catholic Church and 'Indigenisation'. In: A.J. Regan and H.M. Griffin, eds., *Bougainville: Before the Conflict*. Canberra: Pandanus Books, pp. 317–329.
- Munro, Doug and Andrew Thornley, eds. (1996). *The Covenant Makers: Islander Missionaries in the Pacific*. Fiji: Pacific Theological College and the Institute of Pacific Studies at the University of the South Pacific.
- National Statistical Office, 2002. *Papua New Guinea Census 2000 North Solomons Provincial Report*, Port Moresby: National Statistical Office.
- O'Callaghan, Mary-Louise. (1999). *Enemies Within: Papua New Guinea, Australia and the Sandline Crisis, The Inside Story*. Sydney: Doubleday.
- O'Callaghan, Mary-Louise. (2002). The origins of the conflict. At: <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/png-bougainville/origins-conflict.php>
- Ogan, Eugene. (1972). Business and Cargo: Socio-Economic change among the Nasioi of Bougainville. *New Guinea Research Bulletin No. 4*. Port Moresby and Canberra: The Australian National University.
- Ogan, Eugene. (1999). The Bougainville Conflict: Perspectives from Nasioi. *Society and Governance Discussion paper no. 3*. Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies.
- Oliver, Douglas. (1991). *Black Islanders. A Personal Perspective of Bougainville 1937–1991*. Melbourne: Hyland House.
- Pinda, Gabriel. (2006). The Catholic Church in PNG: A Historical Perspective. In: P. Gibbs, ed., *Alive in Christ. The Synod for Oceania and the Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea, 1998–2005. Point No. 30*, pp. 14–33.
- Regan, Anthony. (1996). *The Bougainville Conflict: Origins and Development, Main 'Actors,' and Strategies for Its Resolution*. Port Moresby: Faculty of Law, University of Papua New Guinea.

- Regan, Anthony. (2002). Bougainville: Beyond Survival. *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 26(3), pp. 20–24.
- Reilly, Michael and Phyllis Herda. (2005). An Introduction. In: P. Herda, M. Reilly and D. Hilliard, eds., *Vision and Reality in Pacific Religion*. Canterbury and Canberra: Pandanus Books, pp. 1–18.
- Rimoldi, M. and E. Rimoldi. (1992). *Hahalis and the labour of Love. A social Movement on Buka Island*. Providence, Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Saris, Hendry. (2010). Bougainville and its Missionaries. 1899–2010. Unpublished manuscript.
- Sinclair, Ruta. (1982). Samoans in Papua. In: R. Crocombe and M. Crocombe, eds., *Polynesian Missions in Melanesia: from Samoa, Cook Islands and Tonga to Papua and New Caledonia*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, pp. 17–36.
- Snijders, Jan. (2012). *A Mission too Far ... Pacific Commitment*, The Marists Series. Adelaide: ATF Press.
- Swain, Tony and Garry Trompf. (1995). *The Religions of Oceania*. London: Routledge.
- Tanis, James. (2002). Reconciliation: My Side of the Island. In: A. Carl and Sr. L. Garasu, eds., *Weaving Consensus: The Papua New Guinea–Bougainville Peace Process, Accord 12*. London: Viking Associates, pp. 58–61.
- Teaiwa, Teresia (2015). Indigenous remix in Oceania. Public Lecture as part of ‘Worlding Oceania: Christianities, Commodities and Gendered Persons in the Pacific’ symposium of ARC Laureate Project Engendering Persons, Transforming Things. Canberra, ANU, April 2015.
- Tomlinson, Matt and Debra McDougall. (2013). Introduction. In: M. Tomlinson and D. McDougall, eds., *Christian Politics in Oceania*, New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 1–21.
- Tomlinson, Matt and Debra McDougall, eds. (2013). *Christian Politics in Oceania*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Waiko, John Dademo. (1993). *A Short History of Papua New Guinea*. Oxford University Press, South Melbourne.
- Whitehouse, Harvey. (2006). Appropriated and Monolithic Christianity in Melanesia. In: Fennella Cannell, ed., *The Anthropology of Christianity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 295–307.
- Wolf, Eric R. (1959). The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol. *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 71(279), pp. 34–39.