AN INTRODUCTION TO BOUGAINVILLE CULTURES[1]

by Eugene Ogan

Although there has been much written about Bougainville during the past three decades, most especially since 'the Conflict', drawing together all the strands of prehistory, history and ethnology to present a composite picture of the people who live in Bougainville (including Buka but not all the outlying islands) remains a daunting task. What follows cannot pretend to be definitive, but rather is offered to provide a suitable background for the more detailed papers included in this volume.

Some general, preliminary comments should be made. 'Cultures' — broadly defined as the life ways of people — are dynamic, not static. People are both the active agents of their culture, and the subjects of the cultural framework in which they live. Cultures change constantly, albeit at different rates. In the case of Bougainville, where people settled about 29,000 years ago, culture change has taken place at an ever-increasing pace, especially since sustained contact with the west began in the late 19th century.

Matthew Spriggs [1997, and this volume], who has carried out first-hand archaeological research on Bougainville, Buka and Nissan, makes clear how complex is the prehistory of the area. He notes that Bougainville and other Melanesian islands represent 'something of a hybrid population', resulting in 'a creolized set of cultures' [1997: 11–12]. In other words, for centuries the area has been characterised by population movements, language shifts, and transmission of cultural traits across what are now political boundaries. Thus the notion that Bougainville cultures are either homogeneous or fixed in time forever cannot be sustained from historical or anthropological perspectives.

Within this complexity, however, current scholarship agrees on certain points. The south-west Pacific, including Island Melanesia, was settled thousands of years ago by people originally moving westward out of South-East Asia.

Though dates can never be precise and are always subject to revision, a site on Buka dates back to the Pleistocene (or Ice Age), at about 29,000 years ago [Wickler 1990; Wickler and Spriggs 1988]. There is evidence here that *Colocasia* taro was already available to these early inhabitants. Language will be discussed in greater detail elsewhere [Tryon, this volume], but it should be noted here that these settlers are believed to have spoken non-Austronesian (NAN, or Papuan) languages. Thus they may well have been the ancestors of people who today speak the related south Bougainville languages Nasioi, Nagovisi (or Sibbe), Buin (or Terei, or Rugara), and Siwai (or Motuna), and the other Papuan languages farther north, Kunua, Keriaka, Rotokas, and Eivo [see Allen and Hurd 1963].

Some 3,000 years ago a new population entered Buka and Bougainville. These people brought a new kind of pottery (called by modern scholars Lapita — see Spriggs, this volume) and a rather different way of life. This lifestyle included a better developed agriculture, the domestication of pig, dog and chicken, and larger villages. The newer settlers almost certainly spoke completely different languages — those classed as Austronesian — from the earlier inhabitants. As Spriggs [1997: 71] puts it, 'That the most widespread archaeological phenomenon in the South-East Asia–Pacific region and the most widespread language group in the same area are intimately linked seems hard to deny.' These people were presumably the ancestors of present-day Teop, Hahon, Tinputz, Halia, Solos, Petats, Saposa, Nissan, Nahoa and Banoni. Speakers of another Austronesian language, Torau, arrived in a later migration from the south [Terrell and Irwin 1972].

Though there were now two different groups of settlers in Bougainville–Buka, there was plenty of opportunity during the next millennia for both groups to influence each other culturally, so that certain common patterns had emerged by the time of European contact. Furthermore, these influences went beyond the Bougainville area to include islands to the north and, especially, south. Canoe voyages for such purposes as exchange or raiding across the Bougainville Strait began at least one thousand years ago. A trade in pottery linked Buka to other groups [Specht 1974]. In short, one should not underestimate the complexity of a cultural history that, though not recorded in writing, took place across modern political boundaries for centuries.

A cautionary note is required before commenting further on Bougainville cultures. Anthropologists have often erred when writing their descriptions by portraying peoples' lives as if in a timeless 'ethnographic present'. Misunderstandings thus produced are often resented by younger generations who justifiably say 'My people don't live like that'. In the case of Bougainville, some of the earliest scientific observers were well aware that significant change, sometimes viewed as

'the loss of tradition', had already taken place [Parkinson 1999: xxxiii; Thurnwald, H., 1934: 151; Blackwood 1935: xxiii: and Thurnwald, R., [1934b: 119]. Thurnwald, in particular, noted changes that he observed between a first visit in 1908–09 and a second in1934. Any cultural description must be anchored in history, though surveys like the present one have the disadvantage of drawing upon individual accounts that may have been written at different times. What follows is anchored in the first half of the 20th century, whether based on first-hand observation or material carefully collected from elders who lived during the pre-World War II era.

As both academics [for example, Oliver 1989: 255] and older Bougainvilleans [Mauro-Miraku n.d. 2, 18, 62] point out, World War II brought radical social and cultural change to the south-west Pacific. For Bougainvilleans, that included Japanese invasion, and subsequent bombing and reconquest by Allied forces. In less than five years, outsiders moved into Bougainville on a heretofore unprecedented scale [see Nelson, this volume] and villagers were forced to develop strategies adapting to each new incursion. Thus any discussion of islanders' lives must treat the war and its effects as distinguishing sharply different historical periods.

COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS

Because Bougainvillean cultures are characterised by both common patterns and noteworthy variation, what follows is organised around these two dimensions. (It should be underscored that a description of pre-war cultural variation does not reflect negatively on the remarkable political unity that Bougainvilleans have forged over the past decade.) More general comparisons and contrasts are followed by two specific examples to add depth to the survey.

Similarities

During the first half of the 20th century, most people on Bougainville and Buka:

— lived in settlements small in size, at least in comparison with such other New Guinea societies as those found in the East Sepik. As noted by Spriggs [1997], when Austronesian speakers arrived, they brought a pattern of living in larger villages than those of their Papuan predecessors.

— were typical Melanesian swidden horticulturalists, raising root crops (particularly taro before the plant blight of the 1940s) and pigs. Depending on environmental conditions, this subsistence pattern was supplemented by fishing, hunting and foraging.

— recognised descent through females as an important principle of social organisation. Based on this principle, people formed groups of different sizes and with different functions, variously called by anthropologists clans,

lineages, or sibs. The importance of matrilineal descent sets Bougainvilleans apart from many other New Guinea populations and is reflected in many symbolic forms. In recent years, matrilineality has become a potent political symbol, reflecting women's participation in peacemaking.

— believed in a variety of spirit beings, especially spirits of the dead. Spirits of the dead were believed to take an active role in the lives of the living, with the ability to reward the dutiful or punish transgressors. Other supernatural creatures might be described in Western terms as goblins or nature spirits.

— assigned rights to land and other resources on the basis of a variety of social principles. These included descent, personal or ego-oriented kinship, residence or locality, and exchange. The last especially involved exchanges of both people and property at marriage. Despite the importance of descent, actual cases of land disputes might be settled on the basis of one of the other factors.

Differences

There were, in addition to these common features, some important dimensions along which cultures varied. These included:

— ecology. Those living on large Melanesian islands have always distinguished between 'bush' and 'saltwater' people, and Bougainvilleans were no exception. However, the island also encompassed several different ecological niches, each permitting slightly different adaptations. Nasioi speakers probably enjoyed a more varied environment than many other groups, stretching from the coast to the mountains and allowing for the exchange of produce with other Nasioi, without going beyond the borders of their own language. Some environments provided greater return for the labour involved. These more productive areas permitted more elaborate exchanges within the community and thus allowed for more differentiation of status among individuals. Still larger surplus production created the opportunity for wider exchanges with more distant communities, as noted below.

— contact with other language groups. People residing in the interior of Bougainville (generally Papuan speakers) had little opportunity for direct contact with anyone but their immediate neighbors [see Allen and Hurd n.d.: 39]. On the other hand, residents of Buka, Nissan and north Bougainville formed what some anthropologists call an 'areal culture' in which marriage and trade crossed language boundaries and permitted the formation of larger political units. Through Nissan, Buka was even linked with New Ireland [Specht 1974]. In the south, Austronesian-speaking Alu Islanders first raided, then traded and exchanged marriage partners with the Papuan-speaking Buin [Keil 1975].

— kinship. Cross-cousin marriage, in which two kin groups regularly intermarry, seems particularly associated with southern Papuan speakers [Oliver 1949: 13], especially Nagovisi and Nasioi. As these people regularly emphasise [for example, Mauro-Miraku n.d.: 15–16], this arrangement tends to reduce the likelihood of land disputes, since opponents are likely to share close kin. This was especially true in pre-World War II days, when marriages were likely to be contracted within a limited locality.

— the importance of matrilineal descent varied considerably. As Nash [1974 and 1981] demonstrates, Nagovisi probably represent one end of a continuum — certainly for the south Bougainville Papuan group. Nagovisi clearly stress the power of the matrilineage in all aspects of life. The senior female member of that group controlled land and shell valuables, and represented her lineage in the village community. Among Buin speakers, on the other hand, matrilineal descent only regulated marriage, by specifying that one should marry outside the matrisib. It was patrilineal descent that carried weight in governing rank and access to land [Keil 1975, and this volume].

— rank and leadership. This is a particularly thorny issue, especially in recent times when, as White [1992] points out, a 'discourse of chiefs' prevails in much of the south-west Pacific [for Bougainville, see Regan 2000]. Oliver's [1955] detailed analysis of 'big man' leadership among the Siwai of the 1930s was over-generalised by later anthropologists to draw an artificial polarity separating 'big men' from Chiefs. Terrell [1978a], in discussing a debate between Oliver and Thurnwald over chieftainship in Buin, can be said to have begun a line of argument to which today most anthropologists would subscribe: that a rigid dichotomy between such categories as 'Chief versus Big Man' or 'ascribed versus achieved status' obscures as much as it illuminates [see Douglas 1998: 31].

The general remarks above need to be supplemented by more ethnographic substance. Longer descriptions of Nasioi and Tinputz follow, as examples of a Papuan speaking southern group and an Austronesian speaking northern group. Nasioi material is based primarily on my own fieldwork, carried out intermittently over a period of 41 years. The description of Tinputz culture is based primarily on Blackwood [1935].

NASIOI

The Nasioi language is most closely related to Nagovisi (Sibbe) and forms, with Siwai (Motuna) and Buin (Telei), the south Bougainville Papuan stock. According to Allen and Hurd's [1963] survey, there were more speakers of Nasioi (with its

dialects) than any other language in the Bougainville District. These people occupied a variety of ecological niches. They spanned the coastal areas through fertile valleys and up into the high hills. This meant that there was some variation in subsistence patterns. Those living in the valleys had access to more and different products, and could act as middlemen in exchanges between coast and hills. Hill dwellers in what is now called Kongara could not raise coconuts or sago, and so were dependent on their fellows residing at lower altitudes for these items. Villagers on the coast not only had more contact with Austronesian speakers, who reportedly taught them pottery making, but also had access to all the products of the sea. Some Nasioi had more contact with Buin speakers, others with Nagovisi, still others with Austronesian speakers both coastal and inland, specifically Banoni. Exchanges and occasional intermarriage thus took place across both ecological and linguistic boundaries.

Despite these environmentally conditioned differences, Nasioi possessed a relatively uniform culture which can be seen as one variant of a south Bougainville Papuan pattern. Their settlements, whether coastal or inland, were small, with often no more than a few households. People lived in houses raised on posts, usually occupied by husband, wife and children. There seems never to have been any real shortage of land for subsistence. People moved freely, whether to develop new gardens, to avoid disputes with others, or to flee an area that had developed a reputation for sorcery or other supernatural malaise.

One aspect of social organisation was most stable: every Nasioi belonged to a named matrilineal descent group, usually glossed by anthropologists as a clan. Not all members of a clan lived together but were dispersed throughout the entire Nasioi territory. Only those clan members who lived together cooperated on everyday tasks. Ideally, one should marry outside one's clan. Clan membership was one principle through which important land rights were inherited. Bilateral cross-cousin marriage (marrying one's father's sister's child who was also one's mother's brother's child) produced long-lasting affinal relationships between two clans. Kongara informants in 1966–67 were emphatic in connecting that practice to other forms of balanced exchange, thereby keeping land and shell valuables within a limited span of kin and geography. Residence rules specified that a newlywed couple should set up housekeeping in the bride's village.

All of these factors helped to create a society that was characterised more by equality than hierarchy. Women had status complementary, rather than subordinate, to that of men. Their role as gardeners, producing the bulk of village subsistence, was highly valued, as was their place in maintaining continuity of the clan. Maternal symbolism characterised Nasioi discourse; the epitome of any quality (like industry) was phrased as 'the mother of (work)'. Social interaction

was built around an ideal of balance. Thus, Nasioi contrasted their balanced exchange of food and valuables at marriage with the institution of bride price, of which they had heard from other groups. (One Nasioi even said 'What we really did was exchange people', a neat description of what anthropologists call bilateral cross-cousin marriage.)

Nasioi leaders, called *oboring* (pl. *obontu*), can thus be fairly described as 'big men', though compared to Siwai described by Oliver [1955] they were rather small fry. Villagers described the important qualities of an oboring as those of generosity, industry, and knowledge. He was certainly supposed to give large feasts to establish and reinforce his status, but these were smaller in scale than elsewhere in the south, and the road to his status was open to others, not simply determined by heredity. He had to rally followers to amass the food for these feasts and, if his demands became too onerous, the followers would simply move away. (Though modern-day Nasioi may have overemphasised their peaceful nature, large-scale conflicts of the kind reported as having occurred in the New Guinea Highlands do seem to have been rare, as one might expect from the existence of adequate supply of garden land.) Another check on an *oboring*'s power lay in the fear that sorcery could be carried out as a leveling mechanism against an overweening individual. Fear of sorcery was generally a form of social control against all forms of transgression.

As noted below, by the time of my fieldwork missionisation had overlain earlier religious practices, but basic attitudes forming a world view showed continuity with the past. Most notable was a belief that all good things came from the spirits of the dead. It was these spirits who had to be propitiated with offerings of special food like pork, opossum or *canarium* almonds if children and pigs were to thrive, gardens to flourish and success to be achieved in hunting. As older Nasioi said 'If you didn't give them food, you would be the one to starve'. Ancestral spirits provided special abilities like healing to the living. Other beings with whom the living had to contend might be described as nature spirits or bush ogres, such as a fearsome water creature described as part eel, part crocodile, or hairy goblins with a taste for human flesh. Before missionisation, the dead were cremated on a funeral pyre.

Parkinson [1999: 212] said that a line could be drawn that separated head-hunting in the south from cannibalism in the north. Although Nasioi in the 1960s would happily agree that this distinction held true for their northern neighbours, they did not discuss head-hunting as one of their own practices. However, they certainly spoke of a time when the dead were cremated and lower jawbones displayed in houses. It is not hard to imagine that such displays were sometimes of enemies slain in battle.

Although the foregoing sketch has of necessity been brief, it does provide the opportunity for the comparison with a different group, which follows.

TINPUTZ

Tinputz is an Austronesian language most closely related to Teop and Hahon, with which it forms a family. At the time of Allen and Hurd's survey, there were fewer than 1,500 speakers of Tinputz (including dialects). However, this figure may be misleading in view of the close physical proximity of Tinputz speakers to the other members of their language family, forming a greater concentration of related languages.

The Tinputz are fairly classed as a 'saltwater' people, oriented toward the sea. Taro and other root crops area are cultivated in the lowland and foothills, but villagers exploit maritime resources as well. Fishing for bonito on the open sea and in the lagoon is an important activity for men, while women operate near the shore, fishing with nets and gathering shellfish. This part of Buka is relatively densely populated. Kurtatchi, the village in which Blackwood lived, contained 27 dwellings plus a special house for adolescent boys, with a total of 107 individuals. These houses were built directly on the ground. Before pacification under Western government, villages might move because of warfare, or if sites were seen to be threatened by sorcery.

Matrilineal descent prevailed in Tinputz, forming lineages which were localised. Villagers also recognised a larger matrilineal unit, the clan that spread over all Tinputz territory, though clan ties are less strong than those of the lineage, especially since pacification has eliminated the need to rally members of the larger clan for warfare. Throughout the area, two clans are recognised as most important. They are called Naboin and Nakarib. However, Blackwood is at pains to say these are not moieties, or halves of a two-section social structure, since other, smaller clans exist and may vie for status in particular localities.

Within lineage and clan, strict matrilineality prevails; every child belongs to the lineage and clan of the mother. People are supposed to marry outside their clan, though this rule is not always strictly observed. In each village there is one lineage that takes precedence over all others. The clan to which the lineage belongs is considered the most important, and is generally the most numerous in the village. The head of this lineage is called *tsunaun* which Blackwood glosses as 'person of rank' or 'person of importance'. The title is strictly hereditary in the female line.

By the time of Blackwood's fieldwork, the authority of tsunaun had been affected by both pacification and government-appointed leaders. However, there was no question about the privileged status afforded the position and the deference shown by commoners. Every event in a *tsunaun*'s life, however minor, was marked by elaborate ceremonies. Both men and women could be *tsunaun* though

males exercised more authority over lineage and village matters. Normally a *tsunaun*'s spouse would be of the same status.

On the other hand, *tsunaun* were not necessarily possessed of more property nor did they enjoy a lifestyle that was, in material terms, much different from that of commoners. Though male *tsunaun* usually had more than one wife, commoners might also have as many as they could provide for. When special group ceremonies occurred that called for large feasts, he contributed as much as he could but others were expected to provide food as well. Therefore, while a *tsunaun* definitely possessed higher status and prestige than an *oboring*, there were nonetheless limits on his power and authority.

Since parallel cousins (mother's sister's children and father's brother's children) were called by the same terms as siblings, marriage between them was forbidden. In addition, marriage between cross-cousins (mother's brother's or father's sister's children) was regarded unfavourably. A couple was typically betrothed as children, the boy's father making initial arrangements with the girl's mother. Exchanges of food took place between the couple's mothers, but more important was the payment of bride-price. This was in the form of strings of currency made of porpoise or flying-fox teeth. The currency was amassed by the boy's mother and her lineage, though the boy's father might be called on to help. A much larger amount of currency was required for a girl who was *tsunaun*. Initially, the couple lived in the groom's village, even in his mother's house until one was built for the newlyweds. After that, there was a certain freedom of choice of residence, though the couple would always spend a certain amount of time in the village which was the home of the other partner.

A distinctive feature of Tinputz ritual life (shared by related Austronesian groups in North Bougainville) was the wearing of the *upi*. This conical headgear was prescribed for boys from about the age of nine into early manhood. Following a period of seclusion while the boys' hair grew there were several further stages, each involving feasting and exchanges. During this entire time boys lived in a special house. Avoidance of women while the boys are wearing the *upi* was strictly observed; a boy was not even allowed to enter his own mother's house. *Upi* wearers also underwent severe dietary restriction. The removal of the hats was marked with a major ceremony.

Spirits of the dead (*urar*) were thought to live in Mt Balbi. Although they could bring benefits, the living generally feared them. The same term was applied to spirits who had never been alive. Before western contact the dead were buried at sea, and this is still prescribed for *tsunaun*, though burial of commoners may take place on land today. Distinct from *urar* were bush goblins who were typically described as small in stature and usually seen as mischievous but not fearsome.

However much modern-day Tinputz might like to deny the practice, it seems clear that cannibalism was part of earlier life. The practice was generally performed in response to an insult or as punishment, or as a necessary part of certain ceremonies, rather than out of a desire for human flesh. The victims were typically enemies taken in war and, as a result, pacification meant the end of cannibalism.

CONCLUSION

This survey, albeit brief, nonetheless makes some significant points. Bougainvilleans have a legitimate case for claiming that they are unique in the south-west Pacific, though not merely on the oft-cited basis of physical appearance (see Friedlaender, this volume). The diversity of their languages and traditional cultures within the space of two large and some small islands is uncommon. The difference between Austronesian and Papuan languages, which as noted by Spriggs in this volume goes back millennia, remains. However, this is but part of a complex story of population movement and cultural transmission that extends over thousands of years.

What is still more distinctive is their 20th century history. They have seen plantation agriculture dominating a colonial economy, followed by a war not of their making that was fought on their own soil, next the largest mining operation in Papua New Guinea at the time, and most recently an armed conflict of international significance that has on occasion divided Bougainvilleans themselves. The resilience they have shown in adapting to these rapidly changing circumstances can be fairly described as heroic. At the dawn of the 21st century, this characteristic offers the possibility of an even brighter future.

Endnotes

1. More than a half-century ago, Douglas Oliver [1949] published a survey of Bougainville cultures, based upon first-hand observation and reviews of published literature. Since that date, ethnographic and historical material have notably increased, and I tried to take advantage of both Oliver's still insightful work and more recent scholarship in writing a similar article more than 40 years later [Ogan 1992]. The present offering grows out of these.