

Like Moses Who Led His People to the Promised Land: Nation- and State-Building in Bougainville

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on indigenous religious beliefs and practices in relation to nationalism and state-building in conflict and post-conflict Bougainville. Since the early seventies, people of the island of Bougainville have sought to secede from Papua New Guinea and constitute a separate sovereign state. The almost ten year long secessionist struggle between the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) and the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF) that eventuated in 1988, destroyed nearly all infrastructure, socio-economic services, and the functions of the PNG state on the island. At the same time, the crisis also brought about the establishment of new local governments, such as 'The Bougainville Interim Government', as well as a new Nation: the Independent Republic, later called the Kingdom of Me'ekamui, ruled by BRA leader Francis Ona. This article explores the creation of the Me'ekamui Nation and analyses the religious underpinnings of nation- and state-building in Bougainville, focusing on the performances and normative frameworks used in the endeavor to become a sovereign state.

Keywords: Bougainville, Francis Ona, Me'ekamui, state-building, religion, Catholicism, nationalism.

INTRODUCTION

When late 1988, a group of Bougainville landowners protested against Australian owned Bougainville Copper Ltd, one of the world's largest copper mining projects, the Australian government was quick to intervene to safeguard its own interests and sovereignty.¹ Led by Francis Ona, then commander of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA), this insurrection blew up a power-line pylon and effectively stopped mining operations. The government of Papua New Guinea (PNG), under pressure from the Australian government and mine operators, sent a police riot squad and later its defense forces in order to try to protect the mine and suppress the insurrection (Lasslett 2009:154). This counter-insurgency ultimately failed and a civil war broke out in which various opposing groups, including *raskols* (criminal gangs), different language groups within the BRA, villagers, and released prisoners robbed, looted, destroyed, raped, killed, and tortured seemingly at will (Howley 2002:41,43–53; Regan 1996:10).² In addition, the conflict destroyed nearly all Bougainville's infrastructures and crippled the functions of the PNG state.

After almost ten years of violence, warfare and numerous ineffective truces, the crisis officially ended in 1998 with the signing of a ceasefire and the August 2001 peace agreement (Regan 2001:10–14). It was agreed that all government functions (except those of defense, foreign affairs, international shipping and aviation, and the supreme court) would be transferred to the Autonomous Region of Bougainville. Furthermore, the participating parties agreed that the Panguna mine would not be reopened and that, within the course of a few

years, elections for an Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) should be held.³ Francis Ona and his supporters, however, did not partake in these negotiations and agreements as Ona argued that Bougainville was already independent. Its sovereign was the Government of Me'ekamui with Ona as its president, and subsequently, King.

In the following sections I will detail the genesis of Ona's state: the Independent Republic, and later, Kingdom of Me'ekamui. Instead of debating and assessing the justness of Ona's fight for secession, as some other scholars have endeavored (see for example Matthew 2000), I focus on the ways Ona and others appropriated performances and normative frameworks of the state, not to create forms of power alternative to the PNG state and the autonomous status granted by PNG to Bougainville province, but to transform Bougainville to become a state (Figure 1). This state was independent from PNG and refuted Bougainville's autonomous status and its autonomous government, being essentially a deprived version of a sovereign state. Ona's endeavor to create an independent sovereign state (within the setting of Bougainville being an autonomous province of PNG), involved religious language and iconography, an appeal to Bougainvillean traditions, and efforts to establish a military and fiscal apparatus. These essential features of the state, though, were closely tied with his own charismatic authority. Since Ona passed away in 2005, his particular ideals and notions of a Catholic sacred state are fading. Ultimately Ona's visions and ambitions provide a powerful narrative that elucidates some of the key political instrumentalities central for any effort to 'become like the state.' At the center of these, is the imbrication of religious thought and sovereign aspiration, highlighting the Christian origins of nation- and state-building (Smith 2003).

While the Bougainville case could be interpreted as a reaction to external pressures brought about by colonialism and subsequent extensive and invasive resource extraction, a more in-depth analysis of Bougainville's nationalism and state-building efforts shows that it has been the thorough entanglement of religion, nationalism and sovereignty that led to various episodes of secessionist protest and, eventually, the Kingdom of Me'ekamui alongside Bougainville's political status as an autonomous province of PNG. Some scholars have attributed the emergence of religious nationalism in non-western countries to the imposition



Figure 1: Photo from Musingku's 'Royal Album': 'A soldier in civilian clothes in front of Sovereign Nation-Sovereign System Signboard' (<https://www.facebook.com/bougainville.reconstruction>).

of ‘western state secularism’ (Spohn 2003:267). However, in doing so they create a false dichotomy between the religious and the secular and between western and non-western countries, ignoring the fundamental religious nature of the western ‘secular’ state and its imbrication with state dynamics elsewhere.

The supposed incommensurability between the secular state and religion has long been under scrutiny with Robert Bellah’s work on ‘Civil Religion in America’ (1967, 1991) elucidating the religious dimension of US politics. More recently, Saba Mahmood (2009) critiqued the analytic opposition of religious and secular in the analysis of western democratic societies, claiming that the democratic state ‘has not simply cordoned off religion from its regulatory ambitions but sought to remake it through the agency of law’ (2009:858–859). By focusing on the growth of legal rights in modern Anglo-American law, Eve Darian-Smith (2010) extensively demonstrates this interconnection between religious faith (as well as racist practices) and state-building.

I will build in particular upon Bellah’s thesis that the so-called secular state has a religious dimension and how behind the positive institutionalisation of religion within politics, which he terms ‘civil religion’, lie biblical archetypes such as ‘Chosen people,’ ‘promised land,’ and ‘sacrificial death and rebirth’ (Bellah 1967; Timmer 2008, this volume). In a similar way, I will analyse beliefs and performances that sanctify certain elements of the national Bougainville community and how this confers a transcendental intention to the act of becoming like the state (Bellah 1967; Santiago 2009:396). Alongside biblical rhetoric, like Bougainville secessionist leaders equating themselves with Moses, I will focus on indigenous principles, such as *Me’ekamui* (which translates as Holy Land and served as a name for Bougainville and its independence movement), that constitute Bougainville nationalism and the quest for sovereignty. This nationalism takes the shape in what Bruce Kapferer (1988) labels an ontology – a doctrine about the essence of reality that draws upon myth, custom, and Christian religion for its symbolism.

Before we can detail this ‘ontology’, which is to a large extent my own framing based on indigenous beliefs, I give an overview of the events that led to Bougainville’s aspiration for secessionism and the declaration of the independent Republic of Me’ekamui. This reveals the intimate relation between Catholicism and the quest for sovereignty, at the same time illustrating the historical persistence with which Bougainvilleans have challenged the authority of the colonial and post-colonial states that have tried to enforce their rule over the island and its populations.

THE QUEST FOR SOVEREIGNTY

Since colonial times, Bougainvilleans had been confronted with oppressive regimes including missionaries, plantation owners and colonial administration, which often led to feelings of resentment and resistance (Laracy 1976:37, Oliver 1991:21–56). When the colonial administration decided that Bougainville would become part of the Australian mandate area of Papua and New Guinea, protest became louder. In 1962, over 1,000 Bougainvillean leaders protested against Australian administration, demanding the US take the trusteeship of Bougainville in their hands and prepare them for independence (Havini 2000:5/27). The leaders of these protests did not trust Australia as they felt it had neglected, exploited and poorly treated Bougainville and its people (Havini 2000:5/27). Moreover, Bougainvilleans were not very eager to see their land become a province of what in 1975 became the independent state of Papua New Guinea.

The Bougainvillean secession movement grew stronger and more organized with the emergence of the secessionist Napidakoe Navitu movement in 1969 (Griffin 1982:113–38). It

was initiated in the Kieta District of Bougainville with the aim to unite all language groups in the island, hence the name Napidakoe Navitu, which is an acronym of various language groups and their unification (Nash and Ogan 1990:9; Griffin 1982). According to Nash and Ogan (1990:9), the movement can be seen as a form of burgeoning ethnic identity in response to having to deal with multinational mining interests. Other markers of identity that became of significance in Bougainville's secessionist aspirations were religion, in particular Catholicism, and skin-color.

The prominent role of religion in Bougainville secessionism comes as no surprise when one considers the dominant place of the Catholic Church in Bougainville. The majority of Bougainvilleans are Catholic, and many key-figures in Bougainville's struggle, such as Leo Hannett, John Momis and Francis Ona, enjoyed Catholic schooling and education. Moreover, for a long time the Catholic Church was the 'Government in action', as the colonial administration seems to have taken a greater interest in the region only after CRA found huge deposits of copper ore in Bougainville (Hannett 1970).

Leo Hannett advocated secession from PNG in the 1970s. He was one of the most prominent spokesmen of a group of educated Catholic seminarians and ex-seminarians of the Catholic Holy Spirit seminary in Madang (Garrett 1997:348). Hannett had left the seminary a year before his ordination and would become Bougainville premier (1981–1985) and is today the police minister within the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG). In the year of PNG's independence, 1975, he strongly protested against what he understood as the false 'unity' of PNG's government (Premdas 2004:233). His protest speeches combined 'Black power' indignation with a biblical theology of liberation, citing Martin Luther King and perorating 'to a vision of Moses leading his people to the promised land' (Garrett 1997:348–49).

The PNG state, however, could not afford to allow Bougainville to break away. The copper mine in central Bougainville was the national government's most important source of revenue. Losing the mine and its profits would be catastrophic for the newly independent state. In order to prevent Bougainville from breaking away, Michael Somare, the founding father of PNG, allowed for limited and gradual decentralization of the province (Devlin 2010:2–4). John Momis, a Catholic priest and leading Bougainvillean MP who was an advocate for an extreme degree of decentralization (and eventual secession) was appointed chairman of the Constitutional Planning Committee (CPC) (Devlin 2010:3). A year later, in 1973, Leo Hannett became chair of the extra-parliamentary Bougainville Special Committee (BSPC), which held consultative meetings throughout Bougainville in order to assess popular opinion on its political future (Devlin 2010:3).

Despite variation and divisions in Bougainville, the presence and operation of the mine united Bougainvilleans in opposition and around their concerns about compensation, about migration from PNG highlanders to Bougainville, crime and environmental destruction (Premdas 2004:235). Many Bougainvilleans shared a notion of being 'the neglected district' of PNG (Gesch 2005:95). They frequently complained about the fact that only 2 percent of the Panguna mine's revenues accrued back to Bougainville, with Papua New Guinea taking the largest share of the profits, yet denying Bougainville proper infrastructural development. In addition, most of the mine's employees were drawn from PNG instead of from Bougainville, even as unemployment among the local population remained steep. Bougainville's people and politicians started blaming the 'redskins' with the mine for destroying the environment and bringing violence, inequality and criminality to Bougainville (Howley 2002:33), the land of the 'blackskins' as Bougainvilleans started to call themselves (Nash and Ogan 1990).

The relationship between PNG and Bougainville became more strained due to demands for further decentralization and secession, with Hannett and his supporters building a *de facto* provincial administration on Bougainville: the Bougainville Interim Provincial Government

(Devlin 2010:4). For Prime Minister Michael Somare the islanders were moving too fast. At the end of July 1975, Somare had all reference to provincial government removed from the draft constitution. This caused a furious reaction from Bougainvilleans. According to Hannett, secession was the only way out (Devlin 2010:4). And indeed, Bougainville's independence was declared by raising the flag of the Republic of North Solomons at the Arawa market on 1 September 1970. In turn, the central government suspended and dissolved the provincial government (Premdas 2004:237). Two weeks later, PNG declared its own independence from Australia.

Despite Bougainville's unilateral declaration of independence, PNG continued to oppose Bougainville's secession. This led to the Bougainville Agreement in August 1976 and the decentralization of financial, administrative and political powers to the provinces (Mukherjee 2010:2). Nevertheless, tensions between the PNG government and Bougainville remained.

In 1988, frictions surrounding the exploitation and distribution of BCL mining revenues resulted in a dispute within the Panguna Landowner's Association (PLA), causing a split between the older and younger landowners. BCL and the PNG government turned a deaf ear to demands by Francis Ona and the New PLA to provide infrastructure, education, water supplies (Serero and Ona 1988a, 1988b), and to pay K10 Billion,⁴ as a fee to the PLA for the Company's continued operation. That operation was also to be allowed only on condition the 'BCL pays 50% of all its profits gained each year to the land owners and the government of Bougainville' (PLA 1988). Getting nowhere with their demands, in November of 1988 Francis Ona and his group then sabotaged the power line pylon, cutting off power to the Panguna mine (Carl and Garasu 2002:96). This militant action was followed by other sabotages that effectively shut down mining operations.

The New PLA, chaired by Perpetua Serero with her brother Francis Ona as secretary, blamed BCL for having 'destroyed our living and of our ancestors throughout the life of the mine' (PLA 1988), and they accused the government of PNG being anti-nationalist. They argued that not only had the government of PNG exploited its own subjects, but that it had also sent its security and defense forces 'to fight its own people' (Ona 1989a:2).

In April 1989, PNG Prime Minister Rabbie Namaliu proposed a 'Bougainville Development Package' that would give Bougainvilleans a 10 per cent equity stake in BCL. Although Francis Ona cooperated and an agreement was reached, this package was not supported by the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF). The latter sabotaged the agreement by arresting Ona's supporters as they left a celebration party (Braithwaite et al. 2010:26; Premdas 2004:239). The cease-fire was subsequently spurned and in June 1989, Prime Minister Namaliu ordered a state-of-emergency and the imposition of curfews on the island, giving the army wide latitude to use violent means to impose PNG rule (O'Callaghan 2002:9). In response, Ona wrote a letter in which he accused the Prime Minister of being powerless against his own army, allowing them to kill and harass Bougainville people and destroy their properties. The language of this letter suggests the divine terms in which Ona cast Bougainville's independence:

By sending in [the] Defence Force to fight your own people, you have shown a sign of weak leadership. [. . .] We are fighting to save people, so God will help us win this war. You and your security forces will lose because you are fighting for power and money, which are only mortal men's needs (Ona 1989a:2).

In August 1989, Catholic priests in Bougainville issued a statement in favor of reconciliation. This was followed by a public meeting of fifteen hundred people in Arawa, including the Prime minister Namaliu, national government ministers, church leaders, and traditional leaders, in support of peace and reconciliation. However, Ona refused to attend the public peace ceremony and rejected the 'peace package' offered by the Prime Minister, which Ona

described as an attempt by the Namaliu government to lure Bougainville ‘with peanuts and carrots’ into an agreement (Braithwaite et al. 2010:26; cf. Ona 1989b:5; Regan 1996:71–72). As Ona suggested in a six-page pamphlet in November 1989, ‘there is no turning back [. . .], it is too late for that’ (Ona 1989b:5):

As far as we are concerned the political leaders of this country do not represent the interest of their people but instead for their own materialist interests. [. . .] In their quests for empire building and wealth accumulation, the politicians sell the resources and owners of these resources to foreign capitalists. [. . .]

Therefore, in as far as we are concerned, the sovereign state of Papua New Guinea has lost its legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the majority, including us. The state, being an alien construct does not represent the interest of society as a whole, but it is the instrument for the few rich to accumulate wealth. Furthermore, the state is the instrument for the rich to suppress the suffering masses. (Ona 1989b:2–3).

INDEPENDENCE: NATIONALISM AS RELIGION

Francis Ona declared independence for the Republic of Me’ekamu on 17 May 1990. The interim government of the new Republic included Francis Ona as president, with the former Premier Joseph Kabui as Minister of Justice and Sam Kauona as Minister for Defence (O’Callaghan 2002:10). The former BRA elements loyal to Ona were designated the Me’ekamu Defence Forces (MDF) (Regan 2010:48), thereby becoming the new Republic’s army. O’Callaghan writes that, amid a day of celebrations, marches and speeches, the self-proclaimed President Francis Ona announced that, ‘[. . .]the longstanding wish of the Bougainville people to become a separate nation had finally been granted. From today Bougainville shall be forever a sovereign, democratic and independent nation’ (O’Callaghan 2002:10).

Bougainville’s secessionist struggle and Ona’s declaration of independence exhibit the tensions between the modernist project of freedom and nationalist recuperation in the name of original traditions (Jolly 1997:133–134). Francis Ona and his supporters claimed that Bougainville independence rested on a foundation of shared cultural traditions, ethnicity, land and the belief in God, and that secession aimed to reclaim Bougainville’s spiritual, economic, and political independence from the control of foreigners (Hermkens 2009). Importantly, as the above historical narrative begins to suggest, Ona’s nationalism is intrinsically religious, not in the sense that religion is the origin of Bougainville’s nationalism, but rather nationalism and religion are mutually imbricated in his conceptualization of Bougainville’s independence and self-determining logos. Ona’s pronouncements shape a distinctively religious form of nationalism in which religion, and in particular both ancestral beliefs and Catholicism, provide cohesion and constitute ‘the overall mechanism for integrating signifier and motivation in systems of action’ (Brubaker cited in Santiago 2009:399).

In the six-page pamphlet he wrote in 1989, Ona portrays himself as a ‘true nationalist’ (Ona 1989b:3), who defends his motherland with God’s support against the PNG State, which was founded by its ‘fathers’ such as Sir Michael Somare, but is driven by greed.

If God is with us, who shall be against us? Like Moses who led his people from slavery to freedom, we are also fighting for liberation. We are fighting to liberate ourselves from the exploiters and the neo-colonial forces (Ona 1989b:5).

The parliament house in Port Moresby is nothing more than a central market place where indigenous capitalists exchange large sums of money and make bargains for large foreign loans and investments for personal benefits in the name of national development. Hence, the national parliament too, has lost its sacredness (Ona 1989b:2–3).

For Ona, the PNG state had lost its sovereign power over Bougainville as it no longer acted in the name and service of the Bougainville people. Instead of being united, and supporting its people in their struggle for justice ‘under the guiding hand of God’ (Constitution of PNG), the PNG government sided with the multinational company BCL and Australia, exploiting and attacking its own people. According to Ona, this shows the capitalist, instead of nationalistic drive of PNG politicians such as Somare and Namaliu, they being mere ‘puppets for foreign capitalists’ (Ona 1989b:4). For him, the PNG parliament therefore had lost its sacredness. In declaring Bougainville an independent nation with himself as president, Ona takes control over Bougainville, removing it from PNG’s sphere by appropriating the lost sacrality of the PNG Christian Nation and its government.

Importantly, Ona’s claims that sustain Bougainville as an independent nation are not secular, but rooted in a specific local ontology that is inherently shaped by religious beliefs. This ontology, whose ‘constitutive principles of being locate and orient human beings within their existential realities’ (Kapferer 1988:220), sanctifies particular elements of Bougainville community life, such as people and land, thereby intimately connecting religion, secessionist politics and the attempt to become like a state.

According to ex-BRA combatant and former president of the Autonomous Government of Bougainville James Tanis, three main principles guided the BRA’s efforts during the war (as well as during the process of reconciliation). These are *osikaiang* (indigeneity), *sipungeta* (roots) and *Me’ekamui* (Holy Island) (Tanis 2002:60). While *osikaiang* and *sipungeta* relate to (dark) skin colour and ancestral heritage, *me’ekamui* encompasses the belief that Bougainville is holy land, given by God to Bougainvilleans.

The principle of *Me’ekamui* refers first of all to Bougainville’s landscape, which is marked with sacred sites where ancestors and spirits reside. These sites can be located in villages or in the bush, and are considered *mèpo* (‘holy place’) or *me’ekamui*.⁵ In the past, each community had a special person who would pray and make offerings to the spirits at these places for the fortune of the community. Some prayers were aimed at a good harvest or to give thanks, or to pray for a return of health, while others were focused on cursing people and making them sick and die. For many, the ancestral spirits are still present at these sites, and, as such, they are respected and not disturbed. Secondly, *Me’ekamui* refers to Bougainville being given by God to Bougainvilleans, illustrating the close relationship between God and Bougainvilleans and the latter’s responsibility to respect Bougainville land and their covenant with God (Hermkens 2007).

By seeing Bougainville as a Holy Land, Ona effectively claimed it as the land of the ancestors and, as such, a land that spiritually and physically belongs to indigenous Bougainvilleans (Tanis 2002:60). Importantly, both the mining company (BCL) and PNG are blamed for violating this holy land and thus undermining the ecological underpinning of people’s covenant, their alliance, with God. Critically, the mining project site at Panguna featured a sacred stone and was connected to important local myths (Kenema 2010:paragraph 3). Consequently, BCL was not just blamed for insufficient compensation, as is often argued in analyses of the Bougainville conflict (for example: Regan 1996, 2010; Filer 1990), but rather for ‘destroying the sacred life of the people; their relationship with the land and the spirits’ (Father Koran, interview with the author, Buka 26/10/2005).

Although environmental activists such as Ona often accused the mining company of degrading the natural environment, the mining activities were in fact violating reciprocal relations between humans, spirits and place, and thereby desecrating the land. These relations go beyond what is imagined in Western ecological thought, and point us to what Simon Kenema (2010:paragraph 3) in his analysis of the major post-conflict analyses aptly phrased ‘the analytical problem associated with the Western conceptual separation between nature and culture and between materiality and spirituality’. For Bougainvilleans land, culture, materiality, and spirituality are inseparable. Or as Perpetua Serero, Ona’s sister and prominent member of the Panguna landowner association said: ‘Land is marriage – land is history – land is everything. If our land is ruined our life is finished’ (Serero, quoted in the *Post-Courier* May 1989).

The principle of Me’ekamui is also part of the secessionist ideology of Damien Dameng with whom Francis Ona united when taking refuge during the Panguna mine crisis. Dameng had initiated the Me’ekamui Pontoko Onoring movement,⁶ which roughly translates as ‘government of the guardians of the sacred [or holy] land’, around 1959. This movement championed customary Bougainvillean culture, while strongly opposing the presence and influence of the outside world (Regan 2002:paragraph 22). For Francis Ona, this ideology became very important in legitimating his resistance against Papua New Guinea and BCL. However, unlike Dameng who rejected outside influences including Christianity, Ona’s political thinking was strongly influenced by his Catholic schooling and his devotion to Mary in particular.

FRANCIS ONA’S RELIGIOUS POLITICS

According to the former Dutch Catholic bishop of Bougainville, Henk Kronenberg,⁷ Ona was particularly devoted to Mary. During the crisis, he addressed a statue of Mary on a daily basis, seeking her advice. Moreover, as token of his devotion, Ona established the Marian Mercy Mission (MMM) with himself as the superior in 1993. Current Bishop Bernard Unabali described this movement as very strong and as having a strong emphasis on morality and the importance of conversion of all Bougainvilleans.⁸ The movement had disciples in Koromira, Buin and Nagovisi, but the centre of activities was in Guava village with Francis Ona.⁹ One of the main aims of the movement was to help others and pray for the welfare of the community and the sovereignty of Me’ekamui. Indeed many understood Ona’s strength to derive from such prayer.¹⁰ As narrated by Maria from Guava village, who became a MMM member in 1993:

Ona had visions of Mary talking to him. She was telling him to inform people that they have to change. Everyone had to become holy. He foresaw through Mary what would happen in the future. Ona was a man of prayer. He committed himself to prayer so the result would be independence. The whole Marian Mercy Mission committed themselves to these ideals. Ona’s dream was for the whole of Bougainville to come inside this Lotu [Church/ religion] and become independent. Santu Maria helped us in our struggle for independence. She protected us. The Marian Mercy Mission prayed to Maria for help. For cargo and money from America or other countries. [. . .] Santu Maria has been giving many things to Francis Ona. It was Santu Maria and God who chased out all this big mining companies. It was with her help that this was made possible. Santu Maria was very close to Francis Ona.¹¹

The interplay between Ona’s nationalism and his devotion to Mary came to the fore quite markedly through the warm welcome he extended to the pilgrimage of the international

Pilgrim Virgin Statue of Our Lady of Fatima to Panguna in 1997. Those who witnessed the pilgrimage claim that Ona was convinced by Mary to end the fighting.¹² Catholic missionaries captured the proceedings on film at the time. On these never-released recordings Ona can be seen and heard praying in front of the statue, making a vow to Our Lady to work towards peace. More significantly, he consecrates the island of Bougainville to Mary. Thus, in addition to devoting his own life to Mama Maria, he appropriated the whole of Bougainville in Her name (Hermkens 2009; Hermkens 2011).

Ona's strategy to obtain political influence through religion became most apparent in his attempts to enhance his leadership of the Holy Island of Bougainville with a personal sense of divinity. Although many Bougainvilleans viewed Ona's crowning in May 2004 with dismay and irony, his followers – especially those calling themselves Me'ekamui – perceived Ona as their King (Figure 2). As the President and subsequent King of Me'ekamui, Ona sought political legitimacy through an adherence to religious doctrines and an appropriation of biblical powers.

Ona was convinced that a monarchy would open up the isolated and largely ignored kingdom of Me'ekamui and its King to the outer world. As he stated: 'I've got people all over the world supporting me as a monarch. We've got a monarchical system in which different

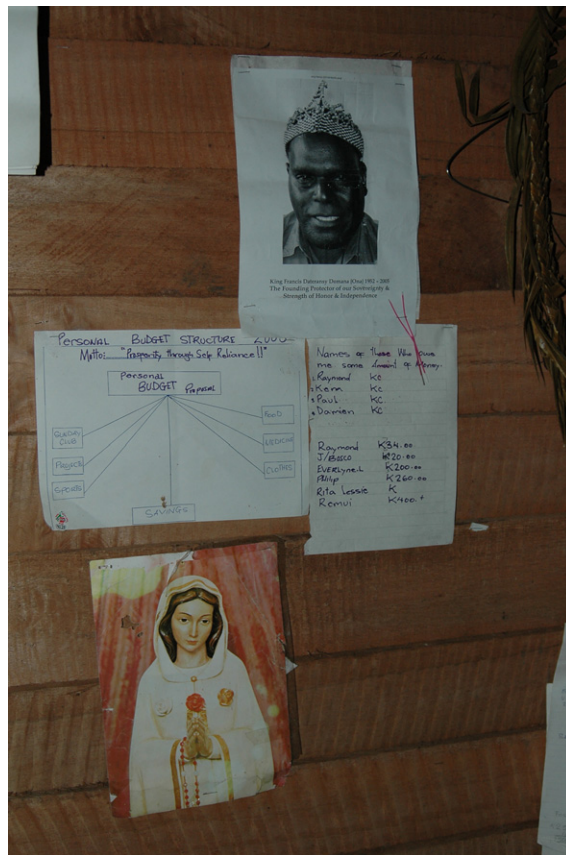


Figure 2: On the wall of a female Me'ekamui supporter in Buka, alongside personal notes and an image of Mary, Rosa Mystica, a picture of Ona with the text: 'King Francis Dateransy Domana (Ona) 1952–2005. The founding Protector of our Sovereignty & Strength of Honor & Independence'. Photograph by the author, Buka 2005.

kingdoms support each other, so all the monarchies are willing to give me our much-needed aid' (McLeod 2005). But his crowning can also be regarded as an act to restore his diminishing popularity, and reaffirm power and influence against outside influences and the new Bougainville government. In the beginning of 2005, Ona held a series of rallies in Arawa to support his leadership and oppose provincial elections for the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) to be held in June 2005.¹³ He also staged a protest march to present a petition to the United Nations Observer Mission on Bougainville (Harepa 2005). In the 3-page petition, Ona refers to himself as King Francis D. D. Domanaa, Head of the Monarchy and Nation of Me'ekamui Islands, urging the UN to respect [. . .] 'our right of immediate verified self rule and governance'. As Ona declared: 'We are Sovereign as always, we say we are independent in pursuit of peace under GOD'S natural laws and title and to him alone we give the glory' (Ona 2005:2–3). While contesting the ABG elections in Buin, South Bougainville, one man asked him: 'Shouldn't you step down now we have the ABG?' To this Ona answered:

I am not a King of the government; I am the King of all grasshoppers, trees, oil, and minerals, of everything that is on this island. When I step down, our island will go down [it would be destroyed by the mining activities of Papua New Guinea and the whites].

Here Ona portrays himself not as a bureaucratic ruler, but as a King whose rule is intertwined with the welfare of both nature and men. This resonates with the powers attributed to the Kings of the Old Testament. Biblical Kings had unlimited control over their followers, with their God-given title denoting independence, unrestricted power and extensive dominion (Hermkens 2007). This link between divinity and political leadership was effectively secured when Ona's followers and sympathizers with the secessionist struggle commenced to refer to him in terms of divine leadership. Indeed, on the occasion of the first anniversary of his death, Father Bernard Unabali described Ona as 'a Savior of Bougainville' who, just like Moses in the Bible, led the Bougainvilleans to freedom.¹⁴

MAGICAL ROYAL STATE BANKING

Access to financial funds and a banking system were a further, essential aspect of Ona's capacity to gain legitimacy for a sovereign Me'ekamui Nation and for Bougainville to become a real independent state, instead of the autonomous province it was and is. This enabled Ona to fund restoration and development in Bougainville and provide compensation to those who had suffered from the conflict. Between 2003 and 2004, Francis Ona established an alliance with Noah Musingku, a charismatic and devout Siwai (South Bougainville) Pentecostal Christian, and the operator of a fraudulent investment scheme (see Cox this issue). In 2003, Musingku had fled to Bougainville and the no go zone of the Panguna area to evade prosecution in Papua New Guinea, after having been persecuted in Fiji and Australia (Braithwaite et al. 2010:91; Regan 2010:112, 118). In Bougainville, Musingku persuaded Ona to invest in his investment scheme by promising him enough wealth to 'restore his [Ona's] preeminence in Bougainville' (Regan 2010:118). According to Musingku, he had met with general Sam Kauona, Joseph Kabui and Francis Ona at the end of 1997, agreeing that without financial sovereignty it would not be possible to achieve political independence (Papala Chronicles 2005/ 7:10):

Bougainville needed to create its own independent and sovereign system in order to be free from the control of the other international financial and governing structure.

Also, it was very clear that the funds we needed to work with in uprooting, pulling down, destroying and overthrowing the existing foreign control system could not be earned through the conventional system. A new international system needed to be established whose control and coordination would not be based overseas but right here on our own soil (Papala Chronicles 2005/ 7:10).

Noah Musingku started operations of 'U-Vistract Financial Systems' in Bougainville in 1997 (Regan 2010:117) and in Port Moresby in 1998 (Bainton and Cox 2009:2; Regan 2010:117). At this point of time, the Bougainville crisis was finally coming to an end, and people were looking for opportunities to financially rebuild their lives. U-Vistract initially promoted itself as the 'Bank for Bougainvilleans', 'drawing on Bougainville's sense of having been exploited by international capital' (Bainton and Cox 2009:2). Musingku claimed he wanted to aid Bougainvilleans and Pentecostal Christians all over PNG by offering them 100 percent interest per month on investments. He could deliver these revenues because of secret investment methods associated with the development of his new world financial system, combining Bougainville custom and Christian principles with modern technology (Cox this volume; Regan 2010:117). By giving payouts to several high level Bougainvilleans as well as others including students (Bainton and Cox 2009:2), Musingku managed to obtain trust and attract a huge amount of investors in PNG as well.

Musingku also seems to have influenced Ona to transform the former Republik of Me'ekamui into the Royal Kingdom of Me'ekamui (Regan 2010:113). In May 2004, Francis Ona proclaimed himself 'His Royal Highness King Francis Dominic Dateransy Domanaa', King of the Royal Kingdom of Me'ekamui. At the same time, Noah Musingku was crowned as prince of a separate but related Kingdom of Papala in Tonu, South Bougainville (Regan 2010:113). Thus, an alliance was created between two kingdoms on Bougainville, referred to as the 'Royal Twin Kingdoms of PAPALA and MEEKAMUI' (see further Cox this issue). According to Musingku, this alliance was necessary in order to establish a new international system of governance, monetary and banking:

We had to set up our own home-grown international government, monetary and banking system with the capability of resolving the crisis once and for all. At Bougainville national level we had Meekamui government as our hardware whilst Papala government provided the software. Internationally we established RAONK (Royal Assembly of Nations & Kingdoms) as our hardware whilst U-Vistract System provided the software. We then invited other nations, governments and kingdoms to seek affiliations with us (Papala Chronicles 2005, issue 3:9).

After Ona passed away in mid-2005, Musingku declared that: 'Here on Bougainville, we have just crossed over to the "time of Joshua & Caleb". The "time of Moses" has just lapsed with the passing away of late King Francis O.D.D.Domanaa' (Papala Chronicles 2005/ 15:9). As King David Peii of the Kingdom of Papala, Musingku named himself as the successor monarch over Ona's kingdom (Braithwaite et al. 2010:91; Regan 2010:114). While Ona is equated with Moses who led its people to the Promised Land, it is Musingku as Joshua (who took Moses' position as the leader of the Israelites) who will lead his people into the Promised Land. With his strong faith and belief in God, Musingku proliferates himself as being able to 'replace the conventional/corrupt system with a godly system' and defeat his fundamental enemies, PNG and Australia, who are trying to block the expansion of Musingku's Godly financial and governmental system across the world (Cox this issue; Papala Chronicles 2005/ 15:9).

BECOMING LIKE THE STATE

In 2000, Bernard Narokobi fixed a large cross on top of the PNG parliament building. He had put up the cross as a reminder that PNG is a Christian nation, stating that the 'Parliament makes decisions that are sacred, and for the common good of the people' (Gibbs 2005:7). Yet for Francis Ona, the PNG parliament had long lost its sacredness: it did not represent the interest of society and the common good of the people. To the contrary, it sided with western imperialism and exploitation to the extent of waging war against its own people. As a result, God no longer supported the PNG State (Ona 1989a:2). Ona was not the only one who questioned the PNG government. During the course of the Bougainville crisis many PNG citizens themselves lost their confidence in the PNG State. The efforts of the Skate government (1997–1999) in brokering peace between PNG and Bougainville by using Protestant pastors 'did not go unnoticed by many Bougainvilleans [who are predominantly Catholic] and did little to win their confidence' (Gibbs 2005:4). In response, Ona set out to create a state – the Holy (Catholic) Nation of Bougainville that was based on Bougainville's special alliance and covenant with God.

Ona's identity as a political leader oscillated between that of a freedom fighter during the Bougainvillean uprising and a divine leader (Hermkens 2007, 2010). From beginnings as a 'simple' landowner and rebel, Ona was ultimately hailed as a patriot-hero, and inspiring figure able to mobilize Bougainville people to fight against PNG 'occupying' forces. Subsequently he became a crowned King and embarked on a quest to save the Holy Island and Kingdom of Bougainville. Ona and the people close to him actively sought to build a Kingdom of Me'ekamui, the theocratic power base of which was largely founded on Ona's capacity to convince his followers of his divine leadership. By claiming to be able to hear Mary's voice, Ona assumes the gift of prophecy, which is, as argued by Csordas, a vital component of charismatic leadership (Csordas 1997:205). Having access to Mary and experiencing the immediacy of her divine presence and voice is, obviously, a key element in having social and religious authority. However, Csordas sees charisma not as an individual quality, but as rhetoric that is part of 'a collective, performative, intersubjective self process' (1997:140). Obviously, Ona depended upon the appraisal of his congregation and followers, and they, in turn, depended very much on Ona, who 'Like Moses' was to show them the way to an independent and Holy Bougainville.

Another essential element in trying to regain legitimacy as political ruler of a sovereign Me'ekamui Nation was access to financial funds and a banking system that would enable him to fund restoration and development in Bougainville and compensation payments to those who had suffered from the conflict (Regan 2010:112). With Noah Musingku's U-Vistract banking system, Ona tried to outmaneuver the Autonomous Bougainville Government, which lacks such funds and is still struggling to rebuild Bougainville. Following and superseding Ona's attempts of nation-building, U-Vistract recast itself as a sovereign Christian nation-state, The Royal Kingdom of Papala with its own currency, the Bougainville Kina (Cox 2011:173).

Both Ona and Musingku relied heavily on Christian symbols and rhetoric to not only create forms of power alternative to the PNG State and the ABG, but also to become like a nation-state. While Ona's State ideology was infused with Catholicism and belief in Mary in particular, Musingku relies heavily on Pentecostal Christian beliefs in enforcing legitimacy through the divine. Musingku repeatedly compares his life and mission to that of Biblical figures, like Joshua and Jesus Christ. The U-Vistract Loan agreement forms end with a biblical quote: 'It is Finished' (John 19:30), which refers to the last words spoken by Christ before he gave up his spirit to God and died on the cross. The new gold-based currency, referred to as 'Jesus Money', that Musingku intends to use, pictures Jesus Christ (Gridneff in The Sydney Morning Herald, July 8, 2009), himself, and people like late King of Me'ekamui Francis Ona

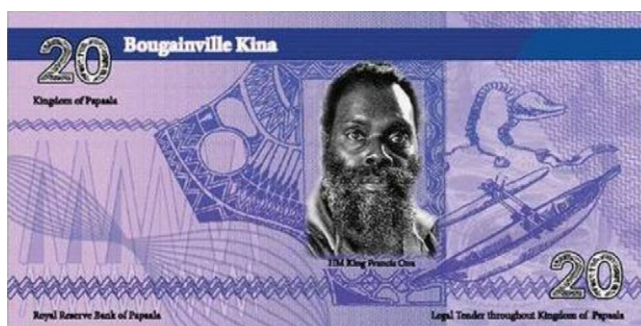


Figure 3: \$20 Bougainville Kina note issued by the 'Royal Reserve Bank of Papaala' with Francis Ona's image (<http://www.bougainville-copper.eu/bougainville-kina-en-1.html>).

(Figure 3) and late Bougainville president Joseph Kabui. In fact, by aiming to create a new godly (financial) system that will benefit the world's poor (Cox 2011:173), Musingku goes beyond the local nation-state, incorporating the whole world in his religious/ monetary 'scheme'.

Ona's and Musingku's interpretations of state and nation are clearly based on covenanted forms of government, but they are also mundane techno-bureaucratic in nature. This is particularly so for Musingku's Kingdom of Papaala, which encompasses Tonu city that has various governmental and royal buildings, banks and its own financial system, including currency. Moreover, it has its own army, or security forces, which have been trained by Fijian mercenaries from 2005 onwards. Unlike the former BRA militants, who were asked to hand in their arms as part of the peace-process, and the ABG police,¹⁵ this 'Royal Guard' is armed, thereby having a monopoly on weapons. They use this monopoly to enforce the no-go zone surrounding Tonu, preventing people from freely traveling in-and-out of the Kingdom of Papaala.

Unlike Ona, Musingku acknowledges the presence and validity of the ABG government, stating that at the moment, Bougainville has a tripartite governing system, consisting of the Autonomous Bougainville Government, the Me'ekamui National Government, and the Papaala/U-Vistract International Government. While the ABG provides for the Presidency, Me'ekamui supplies the Prime Minister, and Papaala /U-Vistract furnishes the Head of State, Musingku himself.¹⁶ In addition to 'reforming global financial systems to create a new godly system that will benefit the world's poor' (Cox 2011:173), Musingku aims for Bougainville to become a truly sovereign Nation, just like his Kingdom (Figure 1). As he states on his face-book page: 'a sovereign nation is one that does not owe money to another nation or system. A sovereign nation is supposed to be the head and not the tail, a lender nation and not a borrower nation'.¹⁷

For Francis Ona, the Republic and Kingdom of Me'ekamui was very much shaped by emphasizing Bougainville's regional and national destiny in terms of justice, and exposing the failing of the PNG State, and later onwards the ABG, in these terms. For him, sovereignty was about self-determination, self-rule and self-governance, and the acknowledgment of international bodies like the UN and the PNG and Australian government, of Bougainville's right to self-rule, governance and independence (Ona 2005:1-3). Unlike Musingku, he was not willing to acknowledge the ABG, which he saw as an extension of Australian and PNG intervention and the implementation of alien law by a (neo)-colonial trustee-administration.

It must have been hard for Ona to realize that the ongoing peace process, which culminated in general elections for the ABG in May 2005, were undermining his legitimacy and credibility as a key leader in Bougainville (Regan 2010:113). Just a few weeks after the

elections, Ona died unexpectedly in his home village of Guava. According to Regan (2010:114), close advisors to Ona blame his death in large part on stress derived from the fall-out he had been having with his former advisors in late 2004. Another factor was the realization that Musingku had misled him, and that the money he and his supporters had invested, and the promised magical returns on the investments would never be paid (Regan 2010:114). And so, with Ona's death, the idea of the Me'ekamui state also faded, leaving Musingku and Me'ekamui factions to claim ownership over its shadows.

NOTES

1. Bougainville Copper LTD is an Australian copper, gold and silver mining company that operates the Panguna open-pit mine in the central range of Bougainville. The mine was opened in 1969 by Conzinc Riotinto of Australia (CRA Ltd.), under armed Australian police protection.
2. But see Rimoldi (2009:55) who argues that the portrayal of the Bougainville conflict as an internal civil war, is 'a misreading of history', as Bougainvilleans were united by their common blame of the PNG government for causing social and economic problems and their common aspiration for a Bougainville identity.
3. Although it was agreed that the Panguna mine will not reopen and the PNG national government, which maintains control of mining operations in the autonomous province, has placed a moratorium on all further mining at Panguna, recent leaders of the ABG have suggested that the mine should be reopened to finance the costly rebuilding of Bougainville.
4. K10 billion is almost the equivalent of US\$10 billion (Premdas 2004:238).
5. *Me'eka* means holy and *mui* refers to island or place.
6. It is also called the 'Fifty Toea Movement', referring to the monetary contributions required of its members.
7. Fr. Kronenberg retired as Bishop of Bougainville in December 2009 and was succeeded by Bougainvillean Fr. Bernard Unabali.
8. Father Bernard Unabali, interview with the author, Arawa, October 2005.
9. Father Koran, interview with the author, Buka, October 26, 2005.
10. Father Luis Lovosi, interview with the author, Buka, October 26, 2005.
11. Maria, interview with the author, Arawa, November 7, 2005.
12. One year later, on the 30th of April 1998, a ceasefire agreement was signed by all parties, which officially ended the crisis. Although a treaty was signed, Ona himself was not present as he stayed out of the peace process. The BRA was represented by BRA leaders Sam Kauona and the former ABG president Joseph Kabui. Moreover, hostilities between various Bougainville groups continued. Nevertheless, for many Catholics the pilgrimage of the statue of Fatima marked a turning point in the crisis.
13. Joseph Kabui was elected president of the ABG in June 2005. He died in 2008.
14. 'Ona's legacy still lives', *Post Courier* 4, August 2006. <http://www.postcourier.com.pg/20060804/frhome.htm> (last visited 13/10/2006)
15. The Bougainville police have been unarmed up until recently. The first time they wore guns was in 2011, when they had to deal with acts of violence committed by a Me'ekamui faction near Buin (*Radio New Zealand International* 3 July 2011: <http://www.rnzi.com/pages/news.php?op=read&id=61564>). In 2012, the debate about arming the Bougainville police forces gained momentum due to a series of armed robberies.
16. In reality, Bougainville's political landscape is much more complex. There are various Me'ekamui factions in various places with different alliances. While Ona's group opposed the Australian/ New Zealand led peace process and the ABG, others became participants in the peace process (Regan 2010:114–117).
17. <https://www.facebook.com/bougainville-reconstruction>

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