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Ben Bohane
University of Wollongong

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BLACKFELLA ARMIES
- KASTOM AND CONFLICT IN CONTEMPORARY MELANESIA
1994 - 2007.

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements
for the award of the degree

Master of Arts (Journalism)

from

The University of Wollongong

by

Ben Bohane

Faculty of Creative Arts
School of Journalism and Creative Writing

2007

CERTIFICATION

I, Ben Bohane, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts (Journalism), in the School of Journalism and Creative Writing, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document and associated photographs have not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Ben Bohane

May 2007

Abstract

This dissertation accompanies photographs taken in my role as a photojournalist in the region under study. The photographs on CD are a visual narrative in their own right while serving as part of the overall text and they are referred to regularly throughout the dissertation.

The past decade has seen a significant rise in armed conflict throughout the established nations of Melanesia, as well as in those still fighting for their independence. Thus some are wars of independence, others are civil wars, while others are about reclaiming traditional lands within an acknowledged nation state.

These coups and conflicts have resulted in humanitarian crises', the weakening of government authority and in several instances such as Bougainville and the Solomon Islands, the intervention of armed regional peacekeeping forces led by Australia.

What is at the root of these conflicts? In conducting photojournalism, how can we better understand the conflicting forces prevalent within Melanesian societies? This thesis will argue that beyond the usual diagnosis of corruption, unemployment and poor governance, there is a powerful spiritual component at work - ie the role played by *kastom* and cult movements throughout the region.

These movements were often the embryo for nationalism during colonial times and today they continue to play a significant role in their societies and can be seen as something of a weather-bell for the hopes and frustrations of island communities. They have been responsible for instigating conflict and equally have been instrumental in ending conflict and facilitating reconciliation. Traditionally, *kastom* and cult movements have either been ignored or actively suppressed by government authorities (white and black) and by the established churches. However these movements can also play a positive role in the development and stability of island communities.

A better understanding and appreciation of these movements will add a critical analytical tool to journalists working within the region, who are often accused of superficial, "parachute" journalism. The use of sorcery is rarely reported within the mainstream press, yet it continues to have daily relevance for Pacific islanders regardless of whether they are at war or peace. A basic understanding of the role of *kastom* and cult movements will help reduce the chance of journalistic misrepresentation of big issues such as coupes in Fiji and civil war in the Solomon Islands.

To better understand the socio-political landscape of Melanesia, and so to write more accurately on issues affecting the region,

it is essential to come to terms with the spiritual world its peoples inhabit. To do this I am using a methodology incorporating large amounts of journalistic fieldwork (witnessing and documenting rituals and first hand interviews with spiritual leaders), with a study of previous academic work on the subject.

This overall research process is best described as Participatory Action Research - a broad collection of scholarly activities involving community, solidarity, consultation and commitment. These were necessary to both my journalism in the first instance and in conducting research for this thesis. Participatory Action Research was able to identify any advantage and power between the researcher and the studied - a central issue to the notion of working with indigenous people, whether it be in journalism, ethnography, film-making, diplomacy or defense.

The main case study for this thesis rests on Bougainville, charting the history of Christian, kastom and cult activity there over 100 years leading up to its war of independence from 1988-1998, as well as following the evolution of these movements throughout the war, the role they played in ending the war and in facilitating a successful reconciliation process that has (so far) brought peace to the embattled island.

One hundred and twenty images relating to various Christian, *kastom*, cult and militant groups throughout Melanesia and

Australia are incorporated in the thesis in a CD sleeve, including a section entitled *Big Men* with portraits of various leaders.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my family for allowing the time and space needed to complete the thesis. In print, Editors such as Peter Kerr at the Sydney Morning Herald, Peter Holder at Men's Style magazine and those representing my work through Wildlight Photo Agency in Sydney and Contact Press in Paris and New York - all have helped keep me alive over the years. In the world of TV news and current affairs, Executive Producers Mark Corcoran at ABC Foreign Correspondent and Mike Carey at SBS Dateline have similarly supported my Pacific ideas over the years. Ian Affleck and Shaune Lakin at the Australian War Memorial have done me the honour of purchasing a significant number of my photos for their archives.

I wish also to thank Dr. David Blackall, my Supervisor at Wollongong University for stimulating ideas and methodology around my thesis, plus my best friend and fellow photojournalist Steve Dupont for his great friendship and support. I also remember two great friends who died in the field: Richard Walker-Powell and Mark Worth.

Finally, this thesis is also dedicated to the many Pacific islanders and indigenous Australians who have shared their lives, stories and thoughts with me, with such generosity of spirit, over the years.

BLACKFELLA ARMIES

KASTOM AND CONFLICT IN CONTEMPORARY MELANESIA

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