

# Reconciliation:

## my side of the island

### James Tanis

A former member of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA), James Tanis served as Secretary to BIG President Francis Ona and BIG Vice President Joseph Kabui. He is Co-Vice President of the Bougainville People's Congress since 1999.

*It was about 3:00 in the morning, yet I could not sleep. This in itself was not unusual – there had been many nights in the past nine years that I had lain awake, waiting for the enemy to strike. But this time it was different. The next day we would reconcile with the Rabaram Villagers from the Moitaka care centre. They were my kinsmen and I had not seen them for many years. Thoughts raced through my mind. Who would be missing? Who would bear the scars of war? How would we all react?*

*At the set time we met. We had been enemies until a few days ago. We said a short prayer and then the signal was given to shake the hands of the long line of brothers, cousins and uncles. I scanned the line and saw my aunt. Next to her was her son, my cousin. I continued my gaze – where was my uncle? Suddenly I felt dizzy. I fought back the tears. The custom told me that I could not run to her. Instead she held out a stick for me to shake and croaked weakly. 'Nephew I have come home alone'. Then she looked away to hide her anguish from me. My heart ached.*

*There was no money, no feasting, no lengthy speeches, no media, and no neutral observers. Just us. It was a day of sorrow and forgiveness, of happiness and hope. Yes, it was the day of reconciliation and unity.*

*In our haste we put aside the traditional rituals of chewing betel nut. What mattered was what was in our hearts. No compensation was discussed. There were no big men with special chairs. We were all the same. The day was Saturday 14 June 1997 – the first large public reconciliation in the district. Soon the whole district was standing in line for reconciliation.*

### Traditional conflicts and reconciliation

Reconciliation between opposing groups in the Bougainville conflict has been accomplished by a mix of modern and traditional processes. Understanding of how this was achieved requires a brief consideration of the nature of traditional conflicts and conflict resolution in our society. With this purpose I will focus firstly on aspects



of reconciliation in my own Nagovisi community on the southwest of Bougainville island.

Conflicts could be inherited and passed down from one generation to the next. A conflict would usually start when one of the main parties felt that the actions of the other side – murder, trespass, adultery, theft or swearing – represented a threat or injury to them. This injury would be communicated to the other side, often by a neutral party. But it was common for others to become involved and this would elevate the matter into a full-blown conflict. These other parties could be relatives or dependents, or other groups with vested interests in the outcome of the conflict. In many cases the conflict would be fanned by ‘talebearers’ who fed false stories to either side. Because traditional conflicts involved so many groups, traditional reconciliation was thus achieved by involving the entire community.

The manner of the dispute settlement varied according to the seriousness of the offence. Let us take one example of reconciliation that involved a death. Firstly the parties would identify a neutral and respected person. Then, before the parties could talk, the offending party would give a cooling-down payment that was passed through the neutral person. This served as a token of trust and a demonstration of the willingness of the offending party to admit guilt and pay compensation. In most cases the parties would agree to meet at a neutral location. Women did not participate at this stage. It was feared that their

grief would arouse the men’s emotions and lead to fighting on the spot. Furthermore, as customary landowners in a largely matrilineal society, women were protected from involvement in major disputes. Instead a woman’s feelings and ideas of solutions would be conveyed through other family members.

The next stage was the payment of the compensation. This took the form of either traditional currency or a combination of money and pigs, which was then distributed amongst the clan members. This was followed by a ritual feast. The exact nature of the practices varied from place to place but in Nagovisi, it entailed chewing betel nut, mustard and lime from the same gourd and eating from the same bowl.

This was also the day that the parties would first step on each other’s territory. As part of the ceremony in some areas, the parties would plant tangget plants on stone. This symbolised their promise to forget the past and remain as silent as a stone. Anyone who violated this agreement would be cursed by the stone and any tale-bearer would be punished by its strength. To ensure the consolidation of peace, a vow was taken by both parties that confirmed their commitment to long-term peace. The parties would agree that the conflict would not continue into the next generation.

An important aspect of traditional reconciliation was the lack of attention to the identification of the guilty party.

Rather, it started with the admission of guilt and the willingness to pay compensation by one side and openness of the other side to forgive and accept compensation. The underlying incentive to confess or forgive was the understanding that you could be in the very same situation as your opponent in a future conflict.

## Reconciliation in modern Bougainville

The nature of modern conflict on Bougainville has been shaped by the political, economic, cultural, environmental and ethnic dimensions of a society that had experienced colonialism. This is a complex system of overlapping problems. Therefore to end the war in Bougainville, we were obliged to use more complex methods than those of our forefathers. The rituals are the same but the mechanisms needed to sustain the peace are multi-faceted. At the same time, Christian principles of reconciliation have conveniently found their place in the culture and have, indeed, added a great deal to the process, through the incorporation of prayers and public acknowledgments by priests and church ministers.

There were many dimensions to the ending of the conflict between Bougainvillean leaders. The traditional spiritual beliefs of our people provided the underlying principles of *Osikaiang*, *Sipungeta* and *Me'ekamui*. These principles guided the efforts of the war and later became the basis of reconciliation. The first step was for every Bougainvillean to recognise him or herself as 'Osikaiang' or 'indigenous', and to understand that the only way to live together is to reconcile and reunite. The process itself was 'Sipungeta'. It demanded that holiness, peace and reconciliation must start 'from the roots'. The process moves from one's inner self to the families, then to clans and later to the nation. The spirits of the dead must also be put to rest. If this can be done our homeland can truly be 'Me'ekamui' – a holy place where the creator dwells amongst His people.

## Preparations to end the fighting

By 1995 the conflict had lasted eight years. The leaders knew that if the war continued beyond the year 2000 it would involve the next generation. Our tradition compelled us to make peace or run the risk of permanent warfare. Therefore a small band of elite was trained to carry out political education and reconciliation in the territories under BRA control. The small movement grew and soon it gained recognition. On 15 November 1996, BIG President, Francis Ona, decreed that a Ministry of Political Education and Reconciliation and Internal Affairs be formed and that I, James Tanis, would lead that Ministry. This marked our preparations for the end of war and my own efforts to prepare for this were now formally recognised. We quickly trained a small band of officers.

We conducted a course with all the company commanders of the BRA at Doreinang on 17-18 December 1996.

Having no formal training in conflict resolution, we developed our own home-grown methods. We began by studying the situation, identifying the interest groups and the different cases within the conflict. We then formed a reconciliation committee that was divided into two or more groups depending on the number of the major cases. The other interest groups were isolated and worked on separately. We then re-established dialogue by becoming the neutral second channel of communication and facilitated one-to-one negotiations between the parties. Finally we would secure an agreement and have the reconciliation ceremonies.

We learned a great deal. We found that in some conflicts one big ceremony would cover all the cases, whereas others required several different ceremonies. The agreement to reconcile could come at any stage of the procedure. The best reconciliation processes were the ones initiated by the main parties. When this happened, the application of the procedure was not necessary. There were also cases when other interest groups made the first move to reconcile, leaving the primary parties exposed and with no choice but to reconcile. Through our handling of many cases, we saw these simple techniques work. Soon reconciliations were beginning to roll without the assistance of the working committees.

## The year of reconciliations

At provincial level our priority was to reconcile the division within our leadership. The major breakthrough occurred on 8 January 1997, when Francis Ona and Joseph Kabui reconciled with James Sinko, Francis Ona's former deputy at Paruparu.

By now the people were weary of the economic blockade and there was considerable pressure to end the war. In April, at a meeting of the Supreme National Council, we conveyed this information to President Ona. At the meeting we divided ourselves into three main groups. The first, led by President Ona, would continue to manage the military operations and the second, led by Vice President Kabui, would lead a delegation across the border to the Solomon Islands to seek international support. I was tasked to lead the third group, to mobilise and rally the people for Bougainvillean unity.

Perhaps the turning point for all of Bougainville came when the BRA captured the Regional Member for Bougainville, Honourable John Momis during the 1997 PNG National Elections and handed him over to President Ona. On 15 June, Ona and Momis had a short and

emotional reconciliation. They made a radio broadcast, appealing to all Bougainvilleans to reconcile and reunite as they had done. After this, Momis was released and was free to run for elections for the PNG National Parliament.

In June we also negotiated reconciliation between Francis Ona and a group that was branded as a cult movement. Then it was a matter of reconciling the military groups. A small BRA patrol established contact with a small resistance patrol from the same village. They opened dialogue and agreed to meet again underground. The following week we reconciled with the paramount chief at the PNG Army Care Centre.

What seemed impossible had become possible. We had succeeded in punching a hole in the wall that divided our district. Now we had to smash it down. Open reconciliation between our people took place at Pisina on 23 July 1997. The pride and dignity of the leaders and the people of my district was restored. We all decided to name 1997 'The Year of Reconciliations'.

## Reconciliation of political visions for the future

The reconciliation process had to be extended across Bougainville at the political level and required extensive negotiations between different Bougainvillean groups and then between the Bougainvillean leadership and the government of Papua New Guinea. The achievements marked by the *Burnham Declaration* needed consolidating. In the first meeting of the newly elected Bougainville People's Congress in Arawa, leaders worked to reconcile their differing views on the future of Bougainville. But further reconciliation was needed with those outside the process. A new coalition of former enemies finally agreed a common negotiating position that ultimately led to the Bougainville Peace Agreement of August 2001. Since then, there has been a renewed focus on the ground, ensuring continued reconciliation between individuals and groups so as to enable the restoration of peace and harmony on Bougainville.

However, the benefits of peace must reach the widows and orphans, not just the elite. The institutions that we establish under the Bougainville Autonomous Government must be designed to consolidate the reconciliation that has been achieved. Those institutions must address the different aspects of reconciliation that are outlined in the Agreement.

*It was September 2001. Once again I found myself walking across hills and valleys to attend a reconciliation ceremony.*

*The enemy clans entered the church from opposite ends. The choir sang and the procession slowly advanced. The ceremony started as a simple Catholic service. The poster on the right side read 'the victims'; and on the opposite side read 'the offenders'. In between them was a Crucifix with the words 'the Prince of Peace'.*

*They stood there for a while. Simon, a young ex-combatant, addressed the elderly chief on the other side. He said, 'Father I killed your son, I was defending the government of PNG and your son was defending his government too. I am sorry for what I did to you and I beg your forgiveness.' The elderly chief, looking calm and dignified, replied, 'I have forgiven you. Please son, I also beg your forgiveness because when I picked up my dead son, I saw not only bullets, but also a rock stuck in his mouth and I was struck dumb by my hatred of you. You see he was the first born son of my inexperienced days. Please release me from my hatred.' Then Simon replied again, 'Father, I thank you'. The two sides chewed betel together, then ate together from the same dish. When the time came for shaking hands, the two sides held each other and wept openly. These sides were descended from the same great grandmother. The singers hummed slowly 'Jesus, have pity on me'. They concluded the ceremony by planting a tangget tree on a stone.*

*When the time came for me to speak, tears were clouding my eyes. I joined them and said. 'Father I too beg forgiveness because during the conflict, we leaders gave you the vision and the confidence to walk the path we walked. And in doing so you lost your first born son.'*

*I turned to Simon and his family and continued, 'When you killed the BRA member, I cursed you and prayed that you must be killed. For that I beg your forgiveness too.' I walked down from the stage and stood amongst the people and shook their hands. I remembered my uncle, who never made it home.*