



## **Mekim Na Savvy: Bougainville - Small Nation, Big Message**

**January 2002**

These days we are swamped by information about the impact of corporate capitalism, structural adjustment, and the power and influence of transnational corporations. We are bludgeoned with propaganda about the inevitability of globalization, of there being no alternative to the global free market economy, of promises of globalization with a human face. The US-led "war against terrorism" has rained yet more death and destruction on the people of Afghanistan. The globalizers are on a counterattack against their critics as they try to claw back ground that they had lost. Opponents and supporters of the World Trade Organization alike are still pondering the meaning of the outcome of the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Qatar. And as usual, we are invited to drown our sorrows in a sea of consumer choices. Pepsi or Coca-Cola? BP or Shell?

But what if for some reason our ocean of consumer choices dries up? How would we live and what would we do? Would we, could we survive?

Right now it seems that we could all do with some good news.

It is rare that I wax lyrical about a film. But the independently produced documentary, *An Evergreen Island*, about Bougainville, a South Pacific island which survived nine years with little assistance from the outside world has left a big impression on me. Made by Australian filmmakers Fabio Cavadini and Mandy King, it should resonate with all who struggle against the power of global capital.

With all who are concerned about genuine alternatives to the global free market economy. With all who believe that it is impossible to exist without being beholden to products of the transnationals. And all of us who believe that we can.

An Evergreen Island has become a permanent fixture in my luggage as I have been on the road in North America and Asia since September. The people to whom I have shown it seem to have been as inspired by it as I was when I first saw it a few months ago.

Bougainville is part of the Solomon Islands archipelago, and lies about 700 kilometres east of Papua New Guinea. Like so many other lands and peoples, it is the victim of arbitrary boundary setting by former colonial rulers during their scrambles to control and exploit the Pacific. Bougainvilleans neither accepted Australian colonial rule nor incorporation into Papua New Guinea when it became independent in September 1975. In the early 1970s, demands for a referendum to give the people of Bougainville the right to genuinely determine their own future were denied. Meanwhile, the island was being ravaged by one of the world's most rapacious transnational corporations.

On their own, the people of Bougainville took on one of the world's biggest mining companies, and a Papua New Guinea Government, backed by Australia, which was desperate to get the mineral-rich island back in its grasp - and won. Conzinc Rio Tinto of Australia had located a huge copper-ore deposit in the Panguna valley in 1965. Prospecting had been strongly opposed by the local landowners whose customary title to the land was denied by the Australia and Papua New Guinea administrations in the name of "development". Women, the true custodians of the land on Bougainville, were at the forefront of early protests against the mining, and the backbone of the subsequent struggles and grassroots initiatives to rebuild their communities. In 1972 through its subsidiary, Bougainville Copper Party Limited, CRA began commercial production - a hugely successful and profitable operation from the standpoint of the company and for Papua New Guinea, but devastating for the peoples, lands and rivers of Bougainville. In 1987 Philip Hughes, Head of Environment Science at the University of Papua New Guinea described Panguna as "an economic godsend - and an environmental disaster."

Villagers were forced to relocate because of the mine tearing into the heart of their motherland. Over a billion tonnes of poisonous tailings were dumped in the Jaba and Kawerong rivers. River fish and animals, as well as marine life near the coast were poisoned, died, or disappeared, along with forests and food gardens. The mine created a huge crater, half a kilometre deep and two kilometres wide. Green mountains turned to barren rock. The Jaba river valley became a moonscape. Local communities were showered in dust containing toxic heavy metals and drank from polluted water. After 17 years of patient petitions and lobbying to seek better environmental controls, a fairer deal and compensation from CRA and the PNG government, the people of Bougainville closed the mine. The Bougainville Revolutionary Army blew up the power supply to the mine. From May 1989 until the present it has stayed shut.

An Evergreen Island is a bittersweet film. One cannot watch this documentary and forget the scale of the suffering in Bougainville, where between 15-20,000 people - out of a total population of around 200,000 - died during the years of war, many from preventable diseases like TB, whooping cough and malaria, or during childbirth.

When Papua New Guinea sent its soldiers in to shoot to kill, and to try to reopen the mine, the pro-independence Bougainville Revolutionary Army formed to defend the land and the people. In April 1990 the Papua New Guinea government imposed a land, sea and military blockade around Bougainville. It aimed to make life even harder for Bougainvilleans so that they would turn against the pro-independence BRA and the Panguna mine could reopen. All government and social services were suspended, schools closed and medical staff left Bougainville. For nine years, the blockade kept journalists out, along with food, medical supplies, fuel and humanitarian assistance. The film documents how the people of Bougainville survived, rebuilt and maintained their communities.

Without modern weapons, the BRA built guns from water pipes which could fire more quickly than the automatic weapons of the PNG Defence Force. As the noose of the blockade closed in around the island, Australian-supplied Iroquois helicopter gunships strafed villages, and the Australian-supported and armed PNGDF troops attacked, tortured and killed people and torched villages on Bougainville. But in the

BRA-controlled areas (over 80% of the Bougainville mainland) communities showed incredible resourcefulness, determination and ingenuity in fashioning solutions to complex problems from local materials and nature itself. They built and maintained indigenous health and education services without outside assistance. While the seriously ill could take the chance of being ferried at dusk across the blockade in small boats to hospital in the Solomon Islands, bush medicine - the traditional knowledge and practice of indigenous healing underwent a revival in the absence of medical supplies and health professionals. A system of schools and training colleges were set up. Houses, schools and clinics were built from local timbers, vines and foliage. Nails were made from cutting up cyclone fencing. In Pidgin, local chiefs dubbed this indigenous inventiveness "mekim na savvy", or learning by doing.

Without diesel, Bougainvilleans discovered a new, truly revolutionary use for coconuts. Coconut oil was fermented in upturned fridges discarded at the beginning of the crisis, boiled and used as fuel to run generators and the specially-adapted four wheel drives needed to cross the rugged terrain. Young people driven from their studies by the crisis combined basic technical knowhow, indigenous knowledge and sheer genius to cannibalize available bits of machinery like the gearbox of a truck to create electric power from small homemade hydro installations on the fast-flowing rivers of their lands. The abandoned mine became a hardware supermarket for spare parts which were salvaged, carried across the island, and put to new uses. Solar power was harnessed to charge batteries for two-way radios and satellite phones - an important link with the outside world. As one Bougainvillean woman comments at the beginning of the film: "The war was like a university - it made us creative. We thought for ourselves and we discovered alternative ways to survive".

This film is more than just a tale of survival on a troubled tropical island paradise. It is a story about community - and self-determination. After many years, there is finally some light at the end of a long tunnel for the Bougainville people in their struggle. Communities across Bougainville are confronting the painful task of reconciling with communities and individuals whom they treated as enemies during the war. In late August, after three years of an often fragile ceasefire between the BRA and the PNGDF, an agreement was signed which will deliver a greater amount of autonomy to Bougainville. This includes a disarmament agreement, the

drawing up of a new Bougainville constitution, and an eventual referendum on full independence. In December legislation is due to go before Papua New Guinea's Parliament to make the constitutional amendments necessary to implement the peace and autonomy agreement.

Maybe there is light at the end of the tunnel for the rest of us, too.

For many years now we have been lied to. The TINA myth. There Is No Alternative. Embrace the free market - or perish. Buy our products or miss out. Let us destroy your lands and rivers for profit - or else. Watch this film. There are alternatives. There are no blueprints. But if we can harness just some of the same courage, resourcefulness and vision as the people of Bougainville we would be well on the way to a brighter future. Perhaps we need a global dose of mekim na savvy.

(To order a copy of An Evergreen Island, contact Frontyard Films at [cavadini@tpgi.com.au](mailto:cavadini@tpgi.com.au))

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