

The Black Islands

SPIRIT AND WAR IN MELANESIA



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN BOHANE

The semi-naked man stands anchored, his intense stare fixed ahead, palm upturned and outstretched. Holding his ground on the edge of his clan's land yet welcoming the viewer to cross the threshold.

To the north of New Zealand lie “the black islands”¹ – the archipelago of Melanesian nations from Fiji to Timor. In recent decades this area of the Pacific has come to be known as the “arc of instability” as warring factions have taken hold. Their conflicts have heightened our apprehensions of these seemingly remote islands and their people; the legacy of hostile early cross-cultural encounters initiated these fears while the foreign-ness of *kastom*² spirituality and rituals reinforce our perceptions. In turn sensationalist coverage of political unrest alongside limited media freedom and strictly enforced military-backed censorship in Melanesia often fuel these fears.

Over the past 20 years photojournalist Ben Bohane has journeyed through these islands to find and document conflict, *kastom*, and cultism in an area that remains one of the most under-reported regions in the world. While New Zealand claims to be a Pacific country (but not a Pacific Island country) our minimal in-depth engagement with Melanesia is notable in comparison with other parts of the world – both in our media and general knowledge. Australia also draws this criticism claiming itself as a ‘continent’, actively dislocated from its northern island neighbours. Bohane ardently rejects this



‘grandiose’ notion. As an Australian (resident in Vanuatu), he is concerned by his own country’s lack of awareness, and this compels him to continue his work in this area. Bohane sees himself as a Pacific Islander and reinforces this connection by saying, “The reality is that we remain forever linked to other Pacific islands through the blood and song-lines of our indigenous peoples – and our historical and military legacy in the region”⁴. He believes that to help us gain a basic understanding of this region, its people, and our relationship within it, we need to remove our “secular goggles and immerse ourselves in the spirit world of our near neighbours...”³ This strategy is particularly poignant as tension continues to grow between the United States and China over control of the Pacific Rim and its resources, as Australian and New Zealand aid and military services are increasingly drawn in.

The Black Islands exhibition provides an entry point into the complex realities of our Melanesian neighbours. Through these photographs we are given a window into worlds otherwise unseen or censored revealing the turbulent and layered relationships between *kastom* belief and Christianity embroiled in the socio-political movements of the area.

Bohane's photographic method combines photojournalism and portraiture in which we are presented with a range of human emotions and contexts – familiar and alien. The necessary trust and right to document these portrayals is through Bohane's research methodology known as participatory action research (PAR) that aspires

to empower the subjects through a negotiated process and informed consent rather than "point and shoot". In the field, Bohane lives and travels with a wide range of *kastom*, tribal and rebel groups for months, at times risking his life. Usually spontaneously photographed, Bohane's collaborators entrust him to document their beliefs and struggles, often disturbing, strange and confrontational to our eyes. In one photograph a *raskol* in his Port Moresby hideout gazes intensely up at us his pistol raised heavenward framing a Christian psalm on the wall behind; in another a thin exhausted white man stands next to his Papuan wife compelling us to question their life stories and hardships endured. In another photograph a circle of men pray along a shoreline, their weapons momentarily at rest, challenging the contradictions of war and Christianity. Rather than intruders we are privileged to these moments of living pathos, prayer and struggle.

Bohane's ongoing commitment to documenting Melanesia and its people is evident in these sensitively considered and pragmatic photographs. Not only do they bring us closer to the harsh realities endured, they ask us to cross our cultural, geographical and psychic boundaries.

NOTES:

- 1 The term 'black islands' is derived from the word 'Melanesia' (Greek for 'black islands') and was first used by Jules Dumont d'Urville in 1832 to refer to ethnicities and islands distinct from Polynesia and Micronesia.
- 2 *Kastom* is a broad term derived from *Tok Pisin* (Melanesian pidgin) for 'custom'. It describes religious movements based in traditional spirituality that are hybridizing with western religions, culture and warfare.
- 3 <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts/unravelling-the-pacifics-fraying-tapestry/2006/09/04/1157222072088.html?page=fullpage>
- 4 Cited in Bec Dean, "Black Islands" catalogue essay, produced by the Australian Centre for Photography, NSW, 2006.





IMAGES:

Left: An Australian mechanic and his Papuan wife living through the hardships of the blockade, Bougainville, 1994.

Far left: A *raskol* from Kips Kaboni gang in his Port Moresby hideout, Papua New Guinea, 2005.

Cover: A *sanguma* man (a shaman or sorcerer) welcomes Ben Bohane onto his clan's land, Nduga Highlands, West Papua (Indonesia), 1995.

Above: Women welcome Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM) guerillas during a war dance and independence flag raising ceremony in the Nduga Highlands, Papua New Guinea, 1995.

*"Enter into the ruling principle of your
neighbour's mind, and suffer him,
to enter yours."* MARCUS AURELIUS



Ben Bohane has been covering the Pacific – particularly Melanesia – since 1994, when he went to Papua New Guinea to report on the Bougainville War. Since then he has focused on “kastom and conflict” throughout Melanesia and black Australia, documenting conflict, cults, cargo cults and new religious movements.

Ben's photographs are collected by the New York Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), the Australian War Memorial (AWM) and private collectors. His photographs and articles have appeared in Vanity Fair, Times, Newsweek, The Guardian (UK), Geo (France), Aera (Japan), Pacific Magazine (Hawaii) as well as numerous Australian publications. He also shoots, reports and produces news, current affairs and documentaries that have been shown on ABC and SBS Australia, BBC, ARD (Germany) and NHK (Japan). He is a regular producer for the ABC's Foreign Correspondent program on Pacific issues. He is also on the Advisory Council for the Pacific's main think tank, the Pacific Institute of Public Policy.

This modest selection of photographs are part of a larger and continually growing collection Ben gifted to the Vanuatu Cultural Centre in 2008.

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Ben Bohane with Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM) guerillas from Central Command, Nduga highlands, West Papua (Indonesia), 1995.

Ana Terry and Don Hunter (Number 8 Collective) are working with Ben Bohane and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre to manage the storage of The Black Islands Collection and tour a selection of the works to New Zealand. This project began during their two year VSA (Volunteer Service Abroad) assignment based in Vanuatu (2008-09).

The purpose of Number 8 Collective is to initiate and facilitate arts-led projects that address contemporary issues by providing platforms for discussion between artists and the wider community. Number 8 Collective aims to develop these relationships through exhibitions, workshops, and seminars. Their motivation is to broaden understandings whilst finding ways to practically enhance our relationships between ourselves and the environment.

number8collective.weebly.com

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