

Sukarno, Gandhi and Rizal: Asian role models for self-determination and decolonization aspirations of Pacific island countries

Hermann Mückler¹

¹ Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, Universitätsstr. 7, 1010 Vienna, Austria

DOI: 10.23791/461720

Abstract: This article highlights exponents of Asian nationalism, who followed a strategy of non-violent acting to achieve the political goal, in their capacity for being role models for Pacific Islands nations in their struggle for independence and/or autonomy from the 1960s onwards. Starting from the fact that precursory developments had taken place for preparing the way for local players in Oceania for their aspirations for decolonization, three examples – Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Guam – are mentioned. This is a first sketch, which shall invite for a more detailed future research about the impact of Asian political activists on Pacific Islanders political leaders.

Keywords: Sukarno, Gandhi, Rizal, decolonization, nationalism, independence, autonomy, non-violence

[Submitted as Research Note: 26 August 2016, Acceptance of the revised manuscript: 14 September 2016]



Figure 1: Monument of Achmed Sukarno und Mohammed Hatta in the Botanical Gardens of Port Moresby

Source: H. Mückler



Figure 2: Monument of José Rizal, the Philippine hero.

When taking a close look at the history and development of decolonization of Oceania, it is obvious that decolonization of the region after the 1960s did not happen out of the blue but that precursory developments had taken place, preparing the way for the local players in their aspirations for decolonization. When you visit the Botanic Gardens in Port Moresby, the capital city of Papua New Guinea, in these days, you will find two monuments next to each other

of the two Indonesian politicians and independence fighters Achmed Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta (Figure 1). Also in this park, very near these monuments, you will find those of the Philippine freedom fighter José Rizal and of the Indian politician and (inter-)national hero Mahatma Gandhi. This raises the question why all these four monuments are located together in Port Moresby. All these monuments were given to the people of Papua New Guinea by the respective governments – Indonesia, the Philippines and India – during official state visits to Port Moresby. Did the personalities portrayed in the monuments had an impact on the struggle for self-determination and/or independence of Papua New Guinea or some other Pacific Island countries? Gandhi for instance was and is well known in the Indo-Fijian communities of Fiji; Rizal on the other hand is famous on the island of Guam, which is controlled by the USA. An additional question might arise, why the monuments of the undisputed non-violent freedom fighters Rizal and Gandhi are located so close to the Indonesian politicians Sukarno and Hatta. After all, the latter two and especially Sukarno represent a state which annexed West Papua as a province and who attempted to marginalize the Melanesian Papua population by creating a Muslim majority by means of an aggressive immigration policy (“transmigrasi”) which is still going on today.

In spite of this argument, Sukarno, the founder of the Indonesian State, in some respects was a positive figurehead at least for some politicians of Papua New Guinea, during the era of a step by step achievement of independence from Australia. Michael Somare was the most influential indigenous politician when New Guinea achieved indepen-

dence from Australian colonial influence in 1975. He is therefore known as the “father of Papua New Guinea” because he was influential in the decades preceding independence and became the new nation’s first Prime Minister. Somare quite respectfully mentioned to me in a private conversation at a lunch, which we both attended during a state visit to Austria in 2008, that through Sukarno’s policies, this Indonesian politician had managed not only to achieve independence from Dutch colonial influence for Indonesia, but also to successfully hold together this extremely heterogeneous amalgamation of states. This situation is analogous to that of Papua New Guinea, which is characterized by many different ethnicities, languages and cultures and is made up of hundreds of social groups, autonomous and culturally independent. Sukarno’s model of ‘united in diversity’, which incorporated the five ‘Pancasila’-principles representing the interests of the state – the principles of divine rule, nationalism, humanism, democracy and social justice – could not be the perfect model for Somare, but there still were some common interests: What had been the Netherlands for Sukarno in the 1930s and 1940s, whose influence as a colonial power he strove to diminish by establishing a nationalist movement, was Australia for Somare, and he took up the cause of reducing and minimizing the Australian influence in Papua New Guinea since, which in fact was and is not always easy in view of the extensive Australian funding programmes. Being a staunch nationalist, Somare followed Sukarno’s example in this respect by attempting to generally reduce any foreign influence in the first years after Papua New Guinea had gained independence in 1975. The fact that Somare and members of his family in later years of his leadership were eminently involved in the sale of his native country’s resources, did not yet play an important role in the initial stages of the young Melanesian state. Also in the first years of Somare’s reign as well as in the years before 1975, Somare sympathized with communist ideas within the context of his anti-European and anti-Australian stance, as the Australian journalist Sean Dorney once explained in a radio interview, based on documents dating from the 1960s



Figure 3: Monument of Mahatma Gandhi in Port Moresby.

(Dorney 2012). There definitely existed parallels to Sukarno's positions, who, before his downfall in 1965 in the last years of his rule, was accused by his opponents of displaying sympathy with the communists (especially regarding all topics related to the economy). This hastened his fall from power in the coup of 1965 led by Suharto. Somare was also sympathetic to Sukarno's support of the Non-Aligned Movement, which at that time was to be established as an alternative to the two blocks – the East and the West. Sukarno had been the host of the famous Bandung-Conference in 1955, where the protagonists Jawaharlal Nehru und Josip Broz Tito, together with Sukarno, set the course for founding the Non-Aligned Movement, which became established in 1961 and continued to grow steadily. While Indonesia became one of the founding states of the Non-Aligned Movement, Papua New Guinea was able to join only after when it became an independent nation in 1975 and has remained a member of this association ever since. The monument of Sukarno in the Botanic Gardens in Port Moresby was a gift by Indonesia to the government of Papua New Guinea, presented and erected in 2000 on the occasion of a state visit by Megawati Sukarnoputri to Papua New Guinea; she was then still Vice President and was soon to become President of Indonesia.

It is no coincidence that a monument of Mahatma Gandhi, installed in 1997 under PNG Prime Minister bill Skate, is there in the immediate vicinity. This outstanding person too was a figurehead in Asia but also in the Pacific Region because of his political achievements especially in the 1920s and 1930s. The Fiji Islands play a significant role in this context, since in the 1930s a vast number of Fijians of Indian descent – the so-called Indo-Fijians or Fiji Indians – used to live in that country, and might eventually have outnumbered the native Fijians of Melanesian-Polynesian origin. The majority of the Indo-Fijians had been brought to Fiji by the British as contract labourers for the booming sugar cane industry from 1879 onwards. Thus they were a population, which had to suffer massive repression and their interests had been insufficiently protected by the British colonial power. Usually the



Figure 4: Indentured Indian labourers (girmityas) in Fiji.

contracts of the indentured labourers, which they called *gimit* (agreements), required them to work in Fiji for a period of five years, but many of them extended the contracts and remained in the islands after the expiration of the contract. The living and working conditions for the *girmityas* (indentured labourers; Figure 4) on the sugar cane plantations were harsh and brutal, also because of the indigenous Fijians opposing their presence. Thus the Indians in Fiji observed Gandhi's statements with the keenest interest, especially the Gujaratis were strongly nationalistic and avid followers of Mahatma Gandhi (Lal 1992: 77). Gandhi (Figure 3) had already agitated against the British colonial power in South Africa and since the time of the First World War had increasingly called for India to become independent from Great Britain. Gandhi preferred a non-violent solution as opposed to some of his companions in the cause, especially Subhash Chandra Bose. When Great Britain entered World War II and the British Governor in India had enforced Indian commitment to the conflict, those forces in the Indian sub-continent, which were in favour of gaining independence from Great Britain as soon as possible, won the upper hand. Fiji too was supposed to support Great Britain in the great dispute and the Fiji politician Lala Sukuna played a key role in those days, organizing the recruitment of Fijians for

the Allied troops in World War II. He toured around the villages holding incendiary speeches for the British and Allied cause and was the symbolic figure calling for both Fijian tradition and unconditional loyalty to and respect of the English. The Fiji-Indians, however, received this call with great reservation. On the one hand they did not really share Fijian unconditional loyalty to the British, on the other hand they closely observed the developments in India, which they considered relevant to the Indians in Fiji. On the political front they followed Gandhi's call for non-violent opposition and most of them refused to be recruited as soldiers. As early as 1934 a small Indian unit of 40 soldiers had been established in Fiji, but this was dissolved by the Indians in 1941. Nevertheless the Indians too contributed to the Allied forces by appealing for donations. With the money thus raised a bomber for the Royal Air Force was purchased and named "Fiji Indian" (Lal 1991: 20).

The threesome is complete with José Rizal, the Philippine non-violent acting freedom fighter and author of the first draft of a Philippine constitution. He was court-martialled and shot by the Spanish in 1896 following a charge of inciting a rebellion, which had never been proven. He was considered to be one of the key founders of Philippine national identity. Rizal also plays a vital symbolic role for the former Spanish colony, now

Source: Ministry of External Affairs/Government of India.



Figure 5: Angel Leo Guerrero Santos.

the US-colony Guam, whose population largely has Philippine roots. But there it is the indigenous population of the Chamorro, who sees Rizal to be the father of their call for regaining control of their island. Large areas of the island, which came under US-rule after the Spanish lost the island during the American-Spanish War in 1998, are used by the US army and are therefore off limits. The most important Chamorro activist of recent days was Angel Santos until his early and mysterious death (Figure 5). Angel Anthony “Anghet” Leon Guerrero Santos III., as is his full name, was born in 1959, a United States Air Force veteran, a former Senator in the Guam Legislature and a (finally unsuccessful) candidate for Governor of Guam. In the past decades he had promoted the vision of a “Nasion Chamoru”, an independent Chamorro state, for which he campaigned incessantly. Among others he had fought for the implementa-

tion of the Chamorro Land Trust Act and the return of excess federal lands, and acted as an advocate of social justice for the indigenous Chamorros of Guam. His unexpected death in 2003 was associated with rumours about him having been poisoned in prison, after he had been convicted for vehemently campaigning for his views. It is not absolutely clear in how far Angel had been inspired by Rizal's ideas, but he had repeatedly mentioned and praised him in his public speeches. As the Philippine Community in Guam is quite influential with more than a quarter of the total population, only surpassed by the indigenous

Chamorro who count for 37% of the total population, Rizal has a meaning for many Guamanians. In Guam the Rizal Park north of Agat is reminiscent of this Philippine freedom fighter. Rizal, who was a contemporary of Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Sun Yat-sen, died already in the 19th century and thus was one of the first exponents of Asian nationalism following a strategy of non-violent acting to achieve the political goal.

Conclusion

Summing up it may be said that three events in Asia had an influence on at least three developments in Oceania. These events were the following: 1) The resistance by the Indians against the British in the Indian subcontinent, symbolized by Mahatma Gandhi; 2) The Philippine struggle for freedom first against the Spanish and subsequently against the US-Americans, symbolized by José

Rizal, and 3) The Indonesian fight for independence after World War II, led by Achmed Sukarno. These three conflicts each in their own specific way had an influence in Oceania 1) on the Indians or Indo-Fijians in the fight for more rights and cultural autonomy on the Fiji Islands; 2) on the campaigning by Chamorro activists against the US-administration for more rights on Guam, and 3) on the struggle for independence and on the political situation in Papua New Guinea. This paper only provides a very rough outline of these connections and mutual influences. No detailed bibliographical references are given, because usually only one sentence or phrase can be found on the activists from Asia in the many books and articles on Self-determination and independence of small Pacific Island states. This topic as a whole has so far not been paid the attention it deserves and is urgently required to be dealt with thoroughly in future. Detailed future research is fairly sure to reveal a number of interesting aspects and connections and these would help add a new facet to the ups and downs of the history of Pacific Islands societies.

Bibliography

Dorney, Sean (2012): *Communist leaning in early Somare - Australian official*. Radio Australia, 24 May 2012. retrieved July 28, 2016; <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/radioprogram/pacific-beat/communist-leaning-in-early-somare-australian-official/949166>.

Field, Michael J. (1984): *Mau, Samoa's struggle against New Zealand oppression*. Wellington: Reed Publications.

Lal, Brij V. (1991): *For King and Country: A Talk on the Pacific War in Fiji*. In: White, Geoffrey: *Remembering the Pacific War*. Occasional Paper 36, Center for Pacific Studies, Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii.

Lal, Brij V. (1992): *Broken Waves. A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century*. Pacific Island Monograph Series, No. 11, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Corresponding author: Hermann Mückler [hermann.mueckler@univie.ac.at] is Professor of Cultural Anthropology and Ethno-History at University of Vienna. His regional focuses are the Pacific Islands as well as Australia. He specialises in peace and conflict studies, colonialism and post-colonialism, geopolitics, history, visual anthropology and material culture. More info: www.hermann-mueckler.com.