

ISLANDS OF RESILIENCE



Villagers dancing in Yakel, on the island of Tanna, Vanuatu.

BY DAVID
STRINGER

A new wave of filmmaking gives center stage to indigenous voices. They tell their own truths and allow images to confront the imagination directly.

INDIGENOUS

CINEMA

STORYTELLING AT

“I AM WATER, ONLY BECAUSE YOU ARE THE OCEAN”

(from *Kissing the Opelua* by Donovan Kūhiō Colleps)

Over the last decade or so, there has been an ocean swell of indigenous filmmaking highlighting the resilience of traditional societies and environments. The film and conversation series *Islands of Resilience*, currently screening as part of Themester at IU Cinema, presents us with beautiful visions of struggle, transformation, and revitalization. The island peoples at the heart of these films have their own unique languages and cultures but the same intimate connection to ancestral environments. In the context of current global threats to cultural and ecological diversity, there are many documentaries made by Western filmmakers about indigenous communities, which, while often valuable, nevertheless treat such people as “other,” as objects of study. However, this new wave of storytelling gives center stage to indigenous voices themselves. They tell their own truths and allow images to confront the imagination directly, without ushers to guide outsiders to assigned viewpoints. In many cultures, storytellers hold a story stick as a sign of their right to speak; it matters who is holding the stick.

The series consists of two films followed by a conversation with filmmakers. While the two movies share certain themes – the importance of personal and societal transformation, the flowering of individuals from a shared cultural root system, and the re-examination of gender roles – they also differ significantly in important respects.

Tanna (2015) immerses the viewer in the worldview of a single community in the village of Yakel, on the island of Tanna, in Vanuatu. While the setting is completely local, the themes of forbidden love and defiance of societal norms have universal resonance. The main cast members had never seen a movie of any kind before; their first experience of a film was making one. While the story originated from the villagers, the Australian directors served as allies enabling these voices to be heard. This raises the question of authorship; however, a film is always a product of group creativity. The villagers themselves articulated the plot, served as casting directors, forged the dialogue in their

Tanna (2015), directed by Martin Butler and Bentley Dean, was presented via virtual screening on Thursday, September 9th (see previous issue); *Vai* (2019), directed by Nicole Whippy, Sharon Whippy, 'Ofa-Ki-Levuka Guttenbeil-Likiliki, Matasila Freshwater, Amberley Jo Aumua, Miria George, Marina Alofagia McCartney, Dianna Fuemana, and Becs Arahanga, will be screened live and in-person at IU Cinema on Tuesday, October 19, 7–8:30 pm; *A Conversation on Islands of Resilience: Voices Making Waves*, with Matasila Freshwater, Marina Alofagia McCartney, and

Natasha Saelua, will take place as a webinar hosted by IU Cinema on Thursday, October 21, 7–8:00 pm. The series *Island of Resilience* is curated by David Stringer of the Department of Second Language Studies, with support from IU Cinema, Themester, and the Asian Culture Center.



native Nauvthal language, and played the roles in the film that they play in actual village life. Several actors even kept their own names: Marie Wawa plays Wawa, and Mungau Dain plays Dain.

Dain was cast because everyone considered him the most handsome man in the village. When the film gained international recognition, he traveled far from home, to Australia, to Venice, and to Los Angeles, where *Tanna* was nominated for best foreign film at the Academy Awards. Then he returned to Vanuatu and resumed much of his normal life, but within

Vai baiting a fishing hook in the Solomon Islands, aged sixteen.

Vai invites us to reconsider questions of gender and ethnicity, not only in the film but in the filmmaking process itself.

a few years, following a minor injury that turned septic, he was dead at the age of 24. This grim outcome adds an enigmatic, even heartbreaking, dimension to his poignant performance.

In certain respects, the collaboration between Australian filmmakers and the villagers of Yakel confused international critics, some of whom interpreted the film as indulging in exoticism, or of reworking a certain well-known Western love story. Such views are problematic, as they reveal an inability to see the world through the eyes of others, surely a basic function of cinema. The setting was not exotic to the people that live there every day, and they elaborated this drama based on actual events that happened in the village in 1987. None of them were familiar with the Western canon. Rather, thanks to archetypes lodged in our subconscious, we humans tend toward universals in our storytelling and mythmaking. Looking at the film with eyes wide open, we see neither a tourist postcard from a tropical island nor a retelling of a Western tale. Instead, we recognize universals of human intimacy, the quiet intensity of lovers on the run from a

society set against them, and a pristine environment holding fast against the forces of globalization.

Gender is a significant theme in this film and conversation series. *Tanna* documents and poeticizes a tragedy that led to a social transformation for women. Previously, tribal disputes could be resolved by arranged intermarriage, irrespective of the personal feelings of the women concerned. The desires of the individual were utterly subsumed by the perceived priority of the well-being of the community. Following the events depicted in the film, the rules were broken and reimagined. A communal decision was reached to respect the right of a woman to refuse subjugation to an unloved groom, and her right to choose her own partner. One underlying thread of the narrative is that resilience of traditional culture can be served by compromise and change from within.

In contrast to *Tanna's* close-up of self-contained indigenous village culture, *Vai* (2019) zooms out to capture a wider panorama of Pacific identity. This ambitious portmanteau project involved nine female filmmakers, was shot in seven different Pacific countries, and relates the story of one woman named Vai, played by eight actors, at eight pivotal moments in her life.

The dialogue changes language with each location, and is in English, Fijian, Māori, Samoan, and Tongan. On the surface, it may seem like a fool's errand to hope for film continuity, but amazingly this all works, thanks in part to the marvelous acting, the same gorgeous cinematography in all locations, and the ease with which we can lose ourselves in the drama of the moment.

The distinct narratives of *Vai* share emotional strands of displacement and diaspora but are woven together in a way which reaffirms indigenous resilience, the agentive force of women, and diverse storytelling.



Vai, now in her forties, preparing to lead a traditional ceremony in Samoa.


In many cultures, storytellers hold a story stick as a sign of their right to speak; it matters who is holding the stick.

We don't need to see *Vai* as a single person; rather she emerges as an amalgam of female experience in cultures where colonialism has disrupted intergenerational transmission of knowledge, families are regularly separated as children leave for education or employment, and individuals seek to reconnect with ancestral cultures as they reclaim their heritage.

Vai also invites us to reconsider questions of gender and ethnicity, not only in the film but in the filmmaking process itself. It served as a platform for female empowerment at every stage of production, and the writers and directors are all New Zealanders with indigenous ancestral links to each of the Pacific Islands where they set their stories. The film intelligently eschews simplistic notions of racial or ethnic purity. Several vignettes implicitly acknowledge the intricacy of contemporary identity in communities that have been transformed by colonialism, and this sense of complexity is enhanced by the frequent shifts in location and language.

The distinct narratives of the film share emotional strands of displacement and diaspora but are woven together in a way which reaffirms indigenous resilience, the agentive force of women, and diverse storytelling. Each part of the film dramatically conveys how an individual can rise to meet the challenge of maintaining identity, cultural heritage, and connection to the land in the face of global capitalism and socio-economic injustice. This ultimately uplifting film offers not only stories of struggle but visions of emancipation.

Both films are notable for their superb cinematography. In *Tanna*, the viewer is plunged into a world of sun-dappled forest glades, volcanic purple mist, and liminal rocks where land meets sea and sky. Perhaps this is what the Ancient Greeks had in mind when they spoke of Elysium, the land of immortal heroes on the shores of Oceanus at the ends of the earth. *Vai* is characterized by similarly transporting images, although it is often the camerawork with characters that dazzles; we feel the joy of childhood as 7-year-old *Vai* runs through her garden with friends she may never see again; we gently sway with the canoe as the 16-year-old talks to her mother, either in reality or in her mind, and we feel the shock of the water as she suddenly dives into the blue. The camera lingers on the emotions played out on the expressive face of the middle-aged *Vai* (a wonderful performance by Fiona Collins), as she struggles to remember her prescribed motions in a traditional ceremony after many years away from home, but overcomes her fears to find joy in her community again.

The final event in the series involves a conversation with filmmakers Matasila Freshwater and Marina Alofagia McCartney, two of the directors of *Vai*, and IU doctoral candidate Natasha Saelua, an experienced advocate for Pacific Islander communities. Matasila Freshwater was voted 2019 New Filmmaker of the Year (Screen Production and Development Association, New Zealand), and is well-known for her original work in animation. Marina Alofagia McCartney has had a wide-ranging career in fashion, film, and academia, and is currently exploring Moana Pasifika identity and filmmaking through her doctoral studies at Auckland University of Technology. Natasha Saelua is a doctoral candidate in Higher Education and Student Affairs at IU and a founding board member of the national organization Empowering Pacific Islander Communities; she will share perspectives from both campus and the Samoan diaspora. The audience will be invited to consider not only what is unique about these films, but how they relate to the current wave of indigenous reclamation of voice, image, and the story stick. 



CARRIE NEWCOMER & OVER THE RHINE
AN ACCOUSTIC
Holiday Show
DEC 11
BUSKIRK-CHUMLEY THEATER BCTBOXOFFICE.ORG



EST 1973
GOODS *for* COOKS
KITCHENWARE • GIFTS • FINE FOOD
For those who love to cook,
and those who don't.
115 N College Ave. | www.GoodsForCooks.com | 812.339.2200