

## Media Reviews

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*Spirits of the Voyage*, 88 minutes, VHS, color, 1996. Director: Eric Metzgar; producers: Eric Metzgar, Jesus Urupiy, and Ali Haleyalur; distributor: Triton Films. VHS NTSC: Home use US\$39.95, other US\$99.95. VHS-PAL: Home use US\$89.95, other US\$149.95.

*Sacred Vessels: Navigating Tradition and Identity in Micronesia*, 28 minutes, VHS, NTSC, and PAL, color, 1997. Writer and director: Vicente Diaz; producers: Vicente Diaz and Christina Taitano DeLisle; distributor: Pacific Islanders in Communications, Honolulu. Individuals US\$29.95; institutions US\$99.00.

Perhaps no other images of Micronesia have entered the popular imagination of people outside the region more consistently in the past several decades than the outrigger canoe and the navigator. Two recently released films continue the media tradition of focusing on navigation in Micronesia. *Spirits of the Voyage* documents a ritual in which Islanders are initiated into the role of navigators. Eric Metzgar, a filmmaker and anthropologist who has engaged in research for twenty years on Lamotrek atoll in the state of Yap, Federated States of Micronesia, directed and produced the film in collaboration with Jesus Urupiy, Ali Haleyalur, and the people of Lamotrek. *Sacred Vessels: Navigating Tradition and Identity in Micronesia*, written and directed by University of Guam professor Vicente Diaz and coproduced with Christine Taitano

DeLisle, explores the maintenance of “canoe culture” on Polowat and Guam and the links that continue to connect these two seemingly disparate islands. Diaz and DeLisle are affiliated with Moving Islands Inc, a Guam organization whose mission is to promote Micronesian cultural programs by indigenous Micronesians.

*Spirits of the Voyage* tells the story of the revival in the early 1990s of an ancient Caroline Islands navigator initiation ritual called *pwo*, a ritual that had not been performed in forty years. Structured in two main parts, the film introduces Lamotrek and its people in part 1. Ali Haleyalur asks his father, eighty-year-old sailing master Jesus Urupiy, to conduct the ritual so that he and several others can begin the process of becoming navigators. Haleyalur had worked as a police officer on the main island of Yap for many years before deciding to return to Lamotrek, his home island.

The first part also contextualizes the filmmaker’s role. Metzgar, the first-person narrator, traces his connection with Lamotrek, explaining that he had become friends with Haleyalur years earlier when spending time on the island collecting information for his doctoral dissertation. Two films resulted from these earlier periods of ethnographic investigation: *Lamotrek Atoll: Research Film Footage of a Traditional Carolinian Society* (1983) and *Lamotrek: Heritage of an Island* (1988). Metzgar blends footage from his previous work into the new film, and these somewhat grainier images work well in defining visually for the viewer a

chronology of events leading up to the revival of *pwo*.

"The Rites of *Pwo*," the title of the second part, documents the preparation for and the eventual holding of the ritual. Following the ceremony from beginning to end, Metzgar's product—in conventional documentary fashion—focuses on the ritualistic aspects of *pwo*. Viewers see the types of food associated with *pwo*, and their significance, as well as the bodily adornments worn by the initiates; they hear the chants Urupiy uses (and see a subtitled English translation); and they learn about the sequence of events spanning the four-day ritual. It is not clear how much of the ceremony has been edited out of the film, but Metzgar's product seems to capture most of its significant features.

What the film does not convey, however, is a richer understanding of the people involved in the ceremony. Urupiy and his initiates perform and participate on screen, but their presence lacks depth; for the most part, they appear as flat, empty figures, distant and disconnected from the viewer. Though one scene shows the men joking with each other during a more relaxed period of the ritual, and another scene shows several young women making fun of a "ghost"—a scene that captures the often convivial nature of everyday life on an outer island of Yap—Metzgar's singular objective of documenting *pwo* sacrifices an exploration of the complexities of the participants' motivations, understandings, and personalities.

How did Haleyalur—after spending years away from his island—come to value the perpetuation of naviga-

tion, for example? What motivated the other men to also desire to become navigators? Why did Urupiy agree to allow Metzgar to preserve the *pwo* ceremony on film? What was Urupiy's experience of conducting the ritual for the first time in decades? How did the island community perceive the event? And how might the interest and filmmaking presence of Metzgar—whose role changes from self-conscious central character to omnipresent objective observer in part two of the film—have influenced the revival of *pwo*, as well as the participation and conduct of the individuals in the ceremony?

Another disappointing aspect of *Spirits of the Voyage* is Metzgar's use of a discourse that romanticizes navigation and Micronesia. He frames the discussion—as well as many of his images—around the popular romantic notion that an outer island such as Lamotrek is an ahistorical place. Reflecting on a visit to Lamotrek, Metzgar states that "it was like looking through a window into the past." He refers to the chants used as part of the *pwo* ceremony as "sacred chants that have empowered navigators since time immemorial to voyage upon the open seas." The film's narrative structure and theme reinforce these notions: outsider (Westerner) journeys to remote, isolated place in search of the primitive (people living in touch with nature) and discovers enigmatic ritual. Metzgar says, "[N]ow only in Micronesia do the last traces of ancient navigation schools survive and it was here that I came in hopes of witnessing a mysterious rite of passage." Sound familiar?

While the conventional narrative

and documentary style of *Spirits of the Voyage* lack innovative qualities, the film features some well-crafted and interesting stylistic devices that enhance its aesthetic appeal. For instance, the montage of close-ups of faces early in the film elegantly introduces the viewer to the people of Lamotrek. Slow motion and long shots throughout the film are thoughtfully and adeptly employed. Finally, the use of special effects to evoke the mystical nature of the spirit world is imaginative and effective. For example, Metzgar's bold device of giving voice to spirits may help viewers to better appreciate the vitality of the spirit world central to *pwo* (though one wonders how Lamotrek Islanders might respond to this device).

Whereas *Spirits of the Voyage* stops short of engaging in an exploration of the significance of *pwo* in changing people's notions of cultural identity, *Sacred Vessels* examines Carolinian traditional navigation as a metaphor for the ways notions of tradition and identity can be formulated and expressed in contemporary Micronesia. The film centers on two places in Micronesia—the high island of Guam, and Polowat, an atoll in the state of Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia—and on the paths that several individuals from these places have taken. Rob Limtiaco is a young Chamorro who develops an interest in traditional Chamorro canoe building and sailing. Soste and Tino Emwalu are brothers from Polowat whose routes are not uncommon in outer-island Micronesian families: Tino is educated in American colleges, while Soste remains on the island to become

a greater master of things Polowatese.

The islands of Guam and Polowat are contrasted, depicted “at opposite ends of Micronesia's experience of colonization.” Long shots of high-rise buildings on Guam are juxtaposed with the flat, low-lying green topography of Polowat. Whereas other films about Micronesia use this method of contrasting images of “modern” environments of more urbanized Micronesian areas with the “traditional” (ie, natural) landscape as a way to convey visually a sense of deterioration and corruption of Micronesia (and, by extension, its people), *Sacred Vessels* sails a different route: Diaz sets out to explore the connections that are being renewed and revitalized between and among the islands despite colonial histories that have fractured to varying extents the maintenance of island connections and interactions. Rather than delving into a discussion of Micronesia's colonial past and a “what went wrong” approach (characteristic of American-made productions about the region), the film explores efforts to reconnect links within contemporary Micronesia: “In modern times,” Diaz suggests, “ancient traditions continue to explore new horizons.”

In *Sacred Vessels*, the canoe is vital and contemporary—the central character. It is a metaphor for a history of island and Islander travel and connections, as well as a symbol of cultural resilience and vitality. The men on Guam and Polowat featured in the film work hard to learn the craft of canoe building, of experimenting with different materials, of studying under master canoe builders,

of sailing the vessels. Diaz sees the canoe as a vessel that enables individuals to travel to the past to affirm their cultural identities in the present, and to open up routes and possibilities to new and renewed identities in the future. As Limtiaco says in the film, "There is knowledge waiting to be discovered. You just have to take different paths to discover it."

The contrasting images and the central role of the canoe also set the stage for Diaz to elegantly critique the ways in which discussions of contemporary Micronesia (and, by extension, the entire Pacific Islands region) are conceptualized and framed. "The disappearance of the canoe on Guam is identified with the death of native culture due to foreign domination," Diaz points out, "while the presence of the canoe on Polowat signifies the survival of native culture." This results in a conceptualization in which "Chamorros get to have history but no culture, while the Polowatese get to have culture but no history."

Unlike most of those in *Spirits of the Voyage*, the voices of the navigators are heard in *Sacred Vessels*. Diaz includes segments of interviews with Limtiaco and the Emwalu brothers, interviews that invite the viewer to understand some of the complex motivations and circumstances that lead people to travel on different paths. Diaz even gives voice to the canoe. While not intended to be those of spirits as in *Spirits of the Voyage*, the voices serve to position the canoe as the central character in the film. However, the filmmakers' choice to modify the male and female voices giving them a sort of distorted, fluid,

underwater quality distracts from the aesthetic appeal of the shots of the canoe's visual beauty and movement, and from the sounds of the lapping of the ocean against its hull and the creaking of its wooden parts. Ultimately, the device fails: it just sounds like there's something wrong with the tape.

One might argue that the film overstates the case for a revival of "canoe culture" on Guam. Such an argument, however, takes the film too literally. Diaz's approach is to ponder, to question, to raise possibilities in the future rather than focus on the destructive realities of the past. In *Sacred Vessels*, the canoe is a vehicle for considering not just the "staying afloat" of a shared cultural heritage, but routes that may be traveled in the future. In that sense, then, the revival and perpetuation of links, and of a cultural identity based on ancient traditions, are not limited to the traditions of the canoe culture. Other traditions that may inspire the same possibilities for a renewed sense of cultural identity surely are practiced—and read about, discussed, observed, imagined—on Guam.

Unfortunately, *Sacred Vessels* does not include a discussion of the ways in which Micronesian navigation has been a significant yet often overlooked force in reviving traditional navigation and in strengthening cultural identity based on a tradition of seafaring and wayfinding elsewhere in the Pacific, especially in Polynesia. Such a discussion would have certainly affirmed the film's central themes, yet would have taken the film beyond its 28-minute format. Diaz originally

envisioned the film as a much longer work and, in earlier versions, had expanded on the notion of contemporary Islander travel to include modern vehicles that connect Islanders, such as computers. Because funding sources dictated a 28-minute length, so the film would fit the format required by the Public Broadcasting System, *Sacred Vessels* had to be reconceptualized and edited a great deal. In an article discussing the “post” postproduction phase of the film, Diaz wrote, “I am amazed at the remarkable number of revisions that are required in the industry, and the even greater circuits of travel that a film project must travel. The process of revision is constant. And the script kept transforming as it sailed the virtual seas of e-mail . . . or by air and boat . . . or by hand, telephone, word of mouth, and pickup truck” (*Storyboard: The Quarterly Film and Video Journal of Pacific Islanders in Communications*, Sept 1997).

The long process of making and remaking *Sacred Vessels* underscores the highly collaborative nature of filmmaking, a process that draws on the artistry and technical skills of writers, directors, film editors, and production assistants. It also involves the desires and motivations of individuals and organizations providing funding. As Donald Rubinstein has suggested, when evaluating a film it may be as valuable to critically consider issues of imposed form and medium upon content and representation as to focus solely on the fixed, final product. After all, the remarkable and fascinating aspect of Micronesian navigation is not only the reaching of a certain destination,

but the complex journeying and routes that people take along the way.

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*Flight of the Albatross*, 90 minutes, 35 mm, color, 1996. Director, Werner Meyer; producer, Vincent Burke; screenplay by Riwia Brown, from a novel by Deborah Savage. Awarded Best Film 1997 at Berlin Kinderfest. Distributor: Portman Entertainment, London.

*Flight of the Albatross* is ostensibly about growing up and falling in love for the first time; it is also about dysfunctional families and the coming together of two cultures, Maori and European. The film's opening shot follows the graceful flight of an albatross over a wild blue ocean. A keening *karakia* (incantation) leads into the next shot of an old Maori woman, complete with *moko* (facial tattoo) walking along a wild and deserted beach, clutching a *patu pounamu* (greenstone weapon). The opening sequence locates the film firmly in beautiful and remote (from Germany, that is) Aotearoa and introduces significant objects, places, and themes: the albatross, the sacred island of Pukeroimata, the *patu pounamu*, and the *tohunga* (priest) Hatai.

The plot follows Sarah (Julia Brendler), an aspiring young German flautist, from Berlin to New Zealand's Great Barrier Island—about as far from civilization as a German can imagine. “Welcome to the other side of the world” says Sarah's mother