

Vila, the difficulty of planting gardens over and over again on the same ground, the search for firewood. It illustrates the inadequacies of plumbing and other services. It alludes to the problems at the hospital caused by inadequate staffing and facilities and by indifference. It shows young men drinking homebrew, and watching pornographic videos screened in the settlements. And it shows how escalating frustration is leading to escalating violence. At times it feels a little as if every major issue of poor urban life in Vila is being raised, and yet in general the plotting is tight and the narration good-humored, so that overall the film absorbs the viewer in its story.

It is not clear what audience the filmmakers expect. The film is in English, and some concessions are made to non-ni-Vanuatu (currency is expressed in dollars, not in vatu), suggesting that the film is designed for distribution overseas. At other points explanations are lacking. Netti is helped in the house by a young girl, Jane (Janet David), whose relationship to family members is never made explicit. Only a local audience could interpret her as a "housegirl," a member of the extended family brought in to help with the domestic work. Some of the humor is aimed squarely at a ni-Vanuatu audience, being in the style that Wan Smolbag Theatre has used so successfully in the plays it takes around Vanuatu. More particularly, there are also some sections aimed specifically to provide information—a talk about contraceptives given by a nurse is clearly designed to educate a ni-Vanuatu audience.

As yet, there is very little published information on what has been happening in Vanuatu in the last

decade. Urban growth, the population explosion, pressures on land and other resources, and the human costs involved in these developments have hardly been discussed in publications, at least in part because of the research moratorium that was imposed by the Vanuatu government from 1985 to 1994. For those interested in what is happening in Vanuatu, the film is well worth watching, especially in combination with the sobering documentary *Kilim Taem*, made in 1998 at the initiative of the Vanuatu Young People's Project, which discusses problems facing youth in Port Vila. *Kasis Road* would make a very illuminating and entertaining contribution to the teaching of any course about the contemporary Pacific. It is also a film worth seeing for itself.

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Mabo: Life of an Island Man. Filmmakers: Trevor Graham, Denise Haslem, and Sharon Connolly. 87 minutes, VHS, color, 1997. Distributors: Film Australia and First Run/Icarus Films. Sale video US\$440; rental video US\$100. Awards: Australian Film Institute, Best Documentary, 1998; Sydney Film Festival, Best Documentary, 1998; New South Wales Premier (Literary) Script Writing Award, 1997; Brisbane Film Festival, Most Popular Film, 1997.

In June 1992, the High Court of Australia handed down its decision in what is commonly known as the Mabo case, ending a ten-year battle for Eddie Koiki Mabo and four other Mer elders. They claimed that the

Mer people had lived on Mer and the surrounding islands since time immemorial and that they are the owners by custom of the islands and surrounding seas and seabeds. This case overturned the doctrine of *terra nullius* (meaning land belonging to no one), which justified the British invasion and dispossession of Australia's indigenous population. The High Court decision recognized that the Mer people held property rights in the islands prior to their annexation by the Queensland government in 1879, and that these rights constituted a form of customary ownership or native title that had not been extinguished after annexation. The principles of this case could also establish claims for Aboriginal people in mainland Australia.

The film *Mabo: Life of an Island Man* is the story of an extraordinary man from a small island in the Torres Strait. This island is called Mer by the Islanders, while most Australians would know it as Murray Island. The man is Eddie Koiki Mabo. The Islanders call him Koiki. The filmmaker, Trevor Graham, founder of Yarra Bank Films, Melbourne, and writer-director of *Land Biling Islanders*, a 1989 film on the Mabo case, spent a number of years with Eddie Koiki Mabo until his death in January 1992. He developed a close relationship with family members, including Benita Mabo, Koiki's wife. In *Mabo: Life of an Island Man*, Graham has produced a moving and personal story of a family who have become a public name in Australia. The film includes a number of interviews with Torres Strait Islanders, politicians, lawyers, and academics who have been associated with the

Mabo family. Old film footages and interviews with Koiki have also been captured by Graham. However, the strength of the film lies in the portrayal of Eddie Koiki Mabo as seen through the eyes of Benita Mabo and the adult Mabo children.

The film highlights Koiki's political activism in Townsville, north Queensland, with the victory of the 1967 referendum, which allowed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be counted in the national census and directed the federal government to take responsibility for Aboriginal affairs after years of neglect by state governments. Koiki's political battles were numerous, one being the opposition to the first Black Community School, which he and others established so that black culture could be part of the learning experience for black children. Opposition to the Black Community School came from many groups and organizations, such as the Queensland Education Department, that could not accept that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children could learn in an environment where their culture was part of the school curriculum. There was also opposition from Aboriginal people who had lived in missions and reserves where they had been taught in "special" black schools where the education was inferior to that available in schools in the wider Australian society. Koiki was not afraid to challenge the authorities. Not surprisingly, Koiki, like many indigenous activists at the time, came to the attention of the Special Branch of the Queensland government, a section of law enforcement that specialized in surveillance of people who opposed the government.

Koiki lived most of his life in exile,

where he remained emotional and homesick for his homeland of Mer. His outlet was in his paintings of the seas and islands and in his writing, which filled numerous journals and diaries. In 1973, he sought permission to return home to Mer to see his dying father. He was refused by the Island Council, which was subordinate to, and acting on the orders of, the paternalistic Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, because he was known as a political agitator. However, Koiki was determined to return to Mer to secure his land, and in 1977 he sailed his boat home. He expected to be arrested when he landed on the beach, but in general his people were happy to see him. Koiki's return to Mer marked the start of his great battle.

The Mabo family tell their stories with pain and honesty. One of the most striking stories tells how Koiki was totally consumed with court cases where he sought to secure what rightfully belonged to the Mer people. This required enormous sacrifices from the family, as Koiki could no longer hold down a job, and the family was forced to survive on unemployment benefits. The family's finances were stretched even further to fund Koiki's frequent journeys to Brisbane and Canberra to attend court, while the lawyers and barristers enjoyed the luxury of plane trips. The court cases were also divisive, as the Mer people became witnesses for both the Crown

(the Queensland government) and the Mer claimants. Unfortunately, this is one of the sad realities of land claims in Australia.

The film demonstrates how passionate Koiki was about equality and justice. He challenged the myths of invasion and colonization through Australia's own legal system and won. However, his victory was not without suffering and sadness. In 1991 Koiki was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and he died on 21 January 1992, five months before the handing down of the High Court decision. He was laid to rest in Townsville, but sadly not for long. In 1995, following the tombstone opening, a ceremony ending the mourning period, events turned nasty. What was supposed to be a celebration to commemorate the life of Eddie Koiki Mabo became a chilling reminder that Australian society remains divided. Koiki's grave site was desecrated.

In the closing part of the film Eddie Koiki Mabo is returned to his beloved island of Mer, where he is finally laid to rest in peace. Due to internal conflicts caused by the High Court case, it was not until after his death that the Islanders could welcome him home. By then, the Mer people and Koiki had changed the political and legal landscape of Australia.

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