

Media Reviews

Cracks in the Mask, 57 minutes, VHS, color, 1997. Written and narrated by Ephraim Bani; written and directed by Frances Calvert; produced by Lindsey Merrison and Frances Calvert; distributed by First Run/Icarus Films. US\$390.

This film is really two films. The visual images document the journey of two Torres Strait Islanders from their home in the Torres Strait to several museums in Europe that hold collections of objects taken from the islands at the end of the nineteenth century. The dialogue reveals a story about museums and about objects—about what museums do and about their rationale for continuing to hold such objects, and about the meaning of these objects for Torres Strait Islanders today. The effect is a moving, often poignant, representation of the issues surrounding the return of such collections to the descendants of their original owners.

The Torres Strait Islands are part of Australia and lie between Australia and Papua New Guinea. From the mid-nineteenth century the lives of Islanders were changed by an influx of pearl fishers, missionaries, and then government administrators. Missionaries suppressed traditional religion, many of the objects associated with ritual were destroyed, and their production and use ceased. Some objects found their way to Europe via European visitors to the islands, but by far the biggest collection was that

removed by the scientists of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition of 1898. More than twelve hundred objects were removed and preserved.

The narrator of the film is Ephraim Bani, a Torres Strait Islander who is a well-respected linguist and expert on Torres Strait culture. With his wife Petharie he visits each collection. For the viewer of the film there is enough to hold both interest and emotion as the first Torres Strait Islanders to view these objects since they were taken behold, exclaim, and discuss their significance. But a century after their removal, Ephraim Bani is also on a mission to investigate the curators' attitudes to the return of these objects, even if that means only an exhibition in Australia.

The real substance of the film lies in the questions that arise from the conversations between the curators and Bani, and Bani's reflections. For Torres Strait Islanders there is a certain irony in the fact that by the taking of these objects, the objects were preserved. Preserved though they are, they are still lost to the Torres Strait Islanders. Lost also is an important material link in history, for these objects embodied meaning, and both the skills and practices associated with their production no longer exist in the Torres Strait. Curators may acknowledge that objects embody memories, that they see the museums' role as the storage of culture for the future. They may acknowledge that they display material culture as art. They may talk

of more effective or honest ways of displaying objects and argue that future collections will be virtual and able to be stored and viewed on disc and available to all. But the Islander Bani has other considerations.

The central question is why are museums keeping these things? For whose future are they stored? What and how do they represent and interpret Torres Strait Islanders? For Bani, these objects are an important link for Torres Strait Islanders in reclaiming both their history and their knowledge of precontact times. They are no longer made or used in the islands but they are kept in memory and they represent the discontinuity with their own history and cultural practices wrought by the intrusions of colonization. In European museums a dead exotic culture is portrayed, but Torres Strait culture is living, and material objects from times gone by are not just “traditional art” but history whose traces of meaning remain in contemporary cultural forms and practice. Bani says “I thought to myself that this is where our ancient wisdom is buried so when I saw these objects I thought I need to take these images back. . . . Not to do anything about [returning these objects] is like a great silence in our history, no one will ever know.”

While the science for thinking about “primitive” societies has greatly changed, the legacy of this thinking survives in the museums of Europe. Ephraim and Petharie Bani are welcomed as visitors but they can only look; they cannot take, for curators “cannot part with these things.” With diminishing hope for the return of any

of the objects it “became clear to [Ephraim] that museums regard this stuff as treasures in competition with others.”

Perhaps only a Torres Strait Islander can appreciate the style and direction of the film. The footage shot in museums is very dark, in contrast with the footage shot in the Torres Strait Islands, which is light and bright. In the Torres Strait the Christian Gospel is viewed as having taken Islanders from darkness to light. To cast museums as places of darkness is a clever visual irony. The narration of the film is minimalist. Ephraim Bani asks questions, explains objects; the curators insert their thoughts and rationales. In this there is more for Islanders than for others. The conversations are familiar—the Islanders visit their own history, a history firmly in the hands of others. Bani’s reflections and diary entries represent the conversations that Islanders have among themselves. These are the conversations necessary to sustain hope.

Torres Strait Islanders are used to long and patient negotiations with others, and this film is part of a process that will go on until these objects are returned to the home of those who made them. The collective dignity of Torres Strait Islanders is expressed by Bani in the closing scene of the film. When at the British Museum of Mankind he touches an object of his ancestors and is reminded “please don’t touch,” he raises his hand and says “Sorry, sorry.” But this politeness belies the tenacity and patience of Islanders when they feel and know what is just and fair.

In this film, the emotions of

Ephraim and Petharie Bani as the first Torres Strait Islanders to view these objects since their removal from the islands, the resistance of museums to relinquishing any part of their collections other than skeletal remains, the discussions about the relationship between objects, culture, memory, history, identity, and cultural reclamation, all converge to provoke reflection and thought about these issues. The dialogue will go on—in the Torres Strait and in other parts of the world.

MARTIN NAKATA

University of South Australia

* * *

Since the Company Came. 52 minutes, VHS, color, 2000. Produced, directed, and filmed by Russell Hawkins; edited by Gary Kildea; distributed by Ronin Films and First Run/Icarus Films. English and English subtitles. us\$390.

Set in a remote village in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands, *Since the Company Came* is the story of a community coming to terms with social, cultural, economic, and ecological disruptions brought on by the logging of their land. Some village leaders had previously invited a Malaysian timber company to log their tribal forests, and now the Rendova Island people find themselves at a difficult crossroads. Many village men embrace the chance to earn some easy money, to become part of the modern economy. Village women, however, are more concerned with preserving the source of their daily existence, the forest, and the traditions that sustain their way of life.

The film presents a village meeting

where Chief Mark Lamberi calls into question the tribes' finances, only to find himself the target of furious accusations from the local chairman of the logging project, Timothy Zama. The village group is embroiled in conflict over land ownership, logging royalties, and money deals, conflicts that threaten the very core of their traditional social values.

But the more important issue, what is happening to the people's way of life, their very existence as a unified people, is questioned by the women of the village. Mary Bea and Katy Soapi are two village women who are desperate to stop commercial logging before it destroys not only their land but with it their very way of life.

Although women are the custodians of land according to the matrilineal tradition, their power has been severely eroded over the past few years. Forests are assumed to be the latest money spinner, and money is men's domain. A people's tradition, custom, and history are given short shrift in the headlong dash to gain money. Mary tells us, "Men don't want to hear anything from women, but we women are actually the center of life in our village."

As Rendova's forest rapidly disappears, the loggers set their sights on a nearby deserted island, Tetepare, held sacred by the villagers.

Archival footage from the 1920s provides an insight into the Solomon Islands' colonial experience and raises questions about the ongoing legacy of colonial attitudes to land and especially people's understanding of their way of life, so intimately based on their major resource base, the forest. We witness the ongoing disruption of