

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.

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*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

society's understanding of itself, how its resources of land, reef, and sea are currently viewed as simply different ways of gaining money. We glimpse how the modern world, with its emphasis on money, development, progress, works on the people themselves.

This microcosm of a small village in one part of the Solomon Islands wrestling with forces greater than themselves presents disturbing insights into what has recently occurred in another part of the country. The near civil war waged on Guadalcanal during 1999 and 2000 between its people and those of Malaita focused as well on the people's resource base, the distribution of benefits, and equity in development.

The film allows a brief insight into the whys and the wherefores of the Solomons' recent slide to economic and social collapse. It becomes obvious that the Malaysian logging company is but one of the modern forces at work changing the Solomons society from a fundamentally subsistence-focused people to one more and more centering on the world of cash. Solomon Islands is a nation of villages, islands, and cultural identities that are sited close to their resource base, which sustains life and makes daily living possible.

The modern life of the cash economy, on the other hand, presents a completely different view of how life can be lived. In this view resources are but commodities to be sold to the highest bidder and the proceeds used to live a better kind of life. Many peoples overseas view this kind of life as normal, natural, almost inevitable. Solomon Islanders have been at the

crossroads of this debate for most of the twentieth century and are finding it tough to decide which way to go. Although the good life brought by cash has great attractions, it has become evident as well that the cash needed for permanent houses, better education, easier life, and so forth can only be paid for by selling off their most precious resources.

Village women know from bitter experience that the cash promised by society rarely becomes reality for the many. It is they who must feed, clothe, and care for the family. The local resource base, they know from years of working with it, brings a level of security that sustains their families. Men, on the other hand, often focus on the bright side of the cash economy and are keen on getting more fully into it.

*Since the Company Came* graphically illustrates the Solomon Islanders' continuing dilemma, which the country is currently living and fighting over. Conclusions for a national future are far from clear, and the film's final scene of public social solidarity does not mask how far the nation must travel in the twenty-first century to regain a modicum of its former peacefulness.

JOHN ROUGHAN

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