

Media Review

Tanna. Directed by Bentley Dean and Martin Butler. Australia, Screen Australia and Contact Films in association with Film Victoria, 2015. 104 mins.

When I told my wife that I had received an invitation to review the film *Tanna*, she replied, ‘That’s wonderful’. I asked why. ‘Because it’s the most delicate, fragile, intimate look at life. That’s what I think’. Now, as a reviewer, I have to say what I think. I am not a film critic. I rarely go to films, but I spend a lot of time reading, researching and writing about Tanna – and I visit the island nearly every year. And, of course, I saw the television series *Meet the Natives*, which featured some of the same people from Yakel, the village at the centre of the film. Some of the villagers – perhaps most – would claim that Yakel is not only at the centre of *Tanna* the film but also of Tanna the island.

Other Tannese make similar claims. Ni-Vanuatu throughout the group proudly proclaim the strength and continuity of *kastom*, but the Tannese are famous for competing so extravagantly to demonstrate how *their* place, *their* village and *their* line are the staunchest guardians and protectors of *kastom*. For many it is a means – for some the only means – of accessing tourist dollars. For the daily fly-in fly-out tourists, visiting a *kastom* village such as Yakel comes a close second to ascending the island’s volcano, and my apprehension about the film was that it would be a cinematographic commoditisation of an exotic culture for tourist consumption.

The film is exotic, sumptuously so. Not just because it takes us to the edges of our familiar physical world but also because it takes us to the edges of our emotional world. The camera work – capturing all those lingering looks and silences and gestures of the people against the backdrop of the verdant extravagance of the forest and the moonlike terrain of the volcano – is, well, captivating. In the screening I went to at Melbourne’s Nova cinema, one could have heard a pin drop during the entire screening. It is understandable that it won best cinematography and audience awards at the 30th Venice International Film Critics’ Week. The sensory appeal is established in the opening scene – an aerial shot of Yakel at dawn, smoke rising, cocks crowing, the camera closing in on a man sweeping the *yimwayim* (kava-drinking ground) with a branch, singing: ‘Since the beginning of time the chiefs have arranged marriage along the *Kastom* Roads, but two lovers chose to walk a different path’.

By the time the film closes, the audience understands what it means to arrange marriage along *kastom* roads – a collective responsibility – and the implications of the two

lovers choosing to walk a different path – a personal choice. We also understand why the *kastom* chiefs had no choice but to accommodate personal love into arranged marriages – not to have done so would have put at risk the very *kastom* roads arranged marriages are designed to protect. This part of the plot is loosely based on real events. A couple did in fact take their lives on the edge of the volcano back in the 1980s. And the chiefs did change their *kastom* rules about marriage. And it is true that every scene was shot on location and that the film's characters use their real names. But for all of that, they remain inventions – the filmmakers' inventions and the Tannese inventions of what it means to be Tannese. As a frequent visitor to Tanna, I am audience to similar inventions every time I sit down in the *yimwayim* to drink kava with the men and listen to their *kastom* stories. Sometimes the details are not entirely accurate. But in terms of the deeper insights into what holds their society together – what it is to be Tannese – these rehearsals on the *yimwayim* express fundamental truths, more authentic than any outsider representations of Tanna and the Tannese.

Viewing the film, I had a deep sense of Tannese agency – of the Tannese using the cinematographic medium to tell their story. Doubtless compromises were made as they negotiated with the filmmakers what would work on film, look good on the screen, have the right dramatic impact. But the Tannese are old hands at negotiating, between themselves and with outsiders, to get their point of view across.

After the opening aerial shot of Yakel at dawn and the man sweeping the *yimwayim* with a branch, we are taken to bare-topped women and girls in grass skirts, men and boys in penis sheaths. We meet Dain, grandson of the chief, playing panpipes and casting a long meaningful look to his beloved Wawa. We also meet Wawa's sister Selim, witness to the lovers' tryst. We see women making grass skirts on the rocks in the water, to be used in Wawa's initiation – her menstruation celebration. We overhear her grandmother's comment: 'Not a girl anymore'. The camera takes us into the domain of the women, the slightly risqué jokes denoting their shared intimacy. Later we see the women and girls making *laplap* for Wawa's celebratory feast. We see them smearing Wawa with coconut oil. More risqué jokes between the older women about how fetching Wawa looks. Then we are witness to the customary mock battle between two groups of women representing Wawa's adoptive and biological families, hitting each other with stinging swatches in an extravagant display of high spirits and good humour. Finally a close-up of face paint being carefully applied to Wawa – to show her off as a woman, the prelude to the chiefs choosing a husband for her.

I visited Yakel in March 2016 and asked about the depiction of the initiation. From earlier visits to Tanna, I knew about strong opposition to allowing males to witness the

ceremony. It would be like women and girls attending the boys' circumcision ceremony, I was told. When I asked a Yakel spokesman about showing the menstruation ceremony knowing that men as well as women would see the film, he acknowledged that feelings had run high in the village that it was 'spoiling' *kastom*. But, he added, the film was attracting more tourists to Tanna and Yakel – after which he offered me a special rate of 2,000 vatu (A\$25) a day to stay in a tourist hut at Yakel with all food supplied. The offer confirmed my misgivings about the commoditisation of culture for tourist consumption.

At the same time, one cannot deny that the film does give what my wife described as a delicate, fragile, intimate look at life – especially towards the end of the film, when Wawa and Dain's bodies are being carried back from the volcano to the village, when Wawa's father is heralding the return of his dead daughter and her lover, when the collective grief expresses itself through crying and wailing. It is impossible not to be moved by the close-up of Wawa's dumbstruck mother; of Yakel's *jif*, Dain's grandfather Charlie, contemplating the heavy burden of leadership and the awfulness of what has transpired; of Wawa's little sister Selim sobbing her heart out; and of Wawa's father standing alone surveying a bleak landscape – the collective again juxtaposed against the personal. The sound of a conch shell echoes through the bush, calling the people together, and people file their way to the *yimwayim* and the two graves, topped with Wawa's grass skirt and Dain's bow and arrows. At this point I was holding my breath, and while one might quibble over the accuracy of this or that scene, one cannot deny the universal authenticity of what it portrays.

In the very last scene, we are back on the *yimwayim* whence the film opened. There is a *toka*-type dance, with Wawa's mother looking on – the collective again juxtaposed against the personal. The two tribes – Wawa and Dain's and the opposing group, who had killed Dain's parents and to which Wawa had been promised – are sitting in a circle around a fire. A peacemaking chief stands and speaks: 'Honoured *Kastom* Roads, I called you here to tell you I received a song from the Spirit Mother. It touched me deeply. Now hear their words' – at which point he picks up the opening lines of the song that introduced the film, reminding us, the viewers, of the timelessness of *kastom*.

Yakel's *jif* Charlie rises and walks slowly to the centre of the *yimwayim*, where he expresses the need for – and the capacity of – *kastom* to change. 'We've always fought to keep *kastom* strong', he declares: resisting the colonial powers, the Christians, the lure of money. But the young people are the future, and to keep *kastom* strong, they must now be listened to. Then the opposing *jif* rises and slowly takes his place at the centre. Pointing to the fire, he declares that *kastom* burns like the fire, and with every death the fire becomes

weaker. 'We must embrace any idea that keeps *kastom* burning strong. Let's add this new log and unite in peace'. He throws a log on the fire. The camera pans the crowd, the faces expressing a mixture of sadness (for the couple) and smiles (for *kastom*) – the juxtaposing, again, of the personal against the collective.

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