

Study Guide to *The Land Has Eyes*

This study guide is provided as an accompaniment to the DVD University and University Library Edition as a utility for promoting a thoughtful analysis of the film and stimulating class discussion. The guide includes some relevant background material and links to Internet resources, including the comprehensive [Rotuma Web site](http://www.rotuma.net) at <http://www.rotuma.net>. The Web site was constructed and is managed by anthropologist Alan Howard, who first did field work on the island of Rotuma in 1959-60 , shortly before the time frame depicted in the film.

Topics for analysis and discussion are roughly ordered into three sections: (1) those that might best be posed to students prior to viewing the film; (2) questions that can be presented to students in social science, humanities, and Pacific Islands studies courses for class discussion after they have seen the film; and (3) questions for students of film. However, instructors should feel free to select from each of the sections, and to reword questions, to best suit their purposes. Instructors might also wish to use some of the questions presented in this guide, perhaps in modified form, in essay exams.

Section I: Questions to present to student audiences prior to viewing *The Land Has Eyes*

1. In a small community like Rotuma, interpersonal relationships are of the utmost importance and generally take precedence over other concerns. This was well expressed by Rotuman screenwriter/director Vilsoni Hereniko in an interview about the making of *The Land Has Eyes*:

From Vilsoni's point of view, relationships within the community were paramount. He was at home, where he had obligations to kin and felt obliged to do things according to Rotuman custom. This meant spending time nurturing

relationships, which he perceived as vital to gaining the cooperation of people. In his own words, he "did all the cultural stuff." This required seeking consensus within the village as well as among the cast and crew, for group ventures rarely get done in Rotuma without consensus. Ultimately, Vilsoni said (in true Rotuman fashion), "For me relationships are most important. If it came to choosing between ruining relationships and making the film, I'd say to hell with the film." (Alan Howard, "Presenting Rotuma to the World: The Making of *The Land Has Eyes*," *Visual Anthropology Review* 21[1/2]:80 [2006])

However, the film involves a good deal of interpersonal conflict, partly for dramatic effect.

Q1a. Identify specific scenes that depict pressures toward conformity to social norms in the film, and differences in individuals' responses to these pressures.

Q1b. What are the main sources of conflict in the film? In what ways do you think they might reflect Rotuman culture at that time (1960s)? [Hint to instructor: The importance of land for both sustenance and personal identity is central to Rotuman society. A second source of conflict in the film concerns modernization and its effects on relationships (in this case between neighbors). A third source is simple greed, as expressed by Poto in his dealings with his fellow conspirator, Koroa. Drunkenness is a contributing factor.]

Q1c. In the climactic scene in the European magistrate's office, the tension between community harmony and individual agendas is dramatically expressed. How would you describe or explain this tension? In what other scenes is this tension expressed?

For further information concerning issues of conflict and conformity on Rotuma, see "[Restraint and Ritual Apology: The Rotumans of the South Pacific](#)" by Alan Howard (Published in *Keeping the Peace*, edited

by Graham Kemp and Douglas P. Fry, pp. 35-52. New York: Routledge, 2004). [<http://www.rotuma.net/os/howsel/34restraint.htm>]

2. Relationships between family members, relatives, and neighbors are vividly depicted in the film.

Q2a. Pay attention to one or more of the following relationships in terms of their main attributes:

- a. mother - daughter
- b. father - daughter
- c. brother - sister
- d. sister - sister
- e. husband - wife
- f. neighbors
- g. friends

Q2b. Which relationship did you find most appealing? Which did you find least appealing? Which did you find most difficult to understand or empathize with?

- a. Viki with her mother
- b. Viki with her father, Hapati
- c. Viki with her brother, Pili
- d. Viki with her sister, Hanisi
- e. Viki with Noa
- f. Viki with her teacher
- g. Viki with the warrior woman
- h. Viki with the European magistrate

3. One of the main forms of social control depicted in the film is shaming.

Q3a. Identify instances of shaming in the film and the different reactions of individuals to it. How might you account for these differential responses? [Hint to instructor: how much can be attributed to individual personalities, and how much to social contexts?]

Q3b. How effective is shaming in getting people to conform to social norms as depicted in the film?

4. During the time in which the film is set, Rotuma was, along with Fiji, a British colony. In the film, the colonial presence is depicted by the magistrate, Mr. Clarke.

Q4a. What does the behavior of Mr. Clarke suggest to you about the colonial administration of Rotuma?

5. There are several scenes in the film that depict hilarity or subtler forms of humor.

Q5a. What are the kinds of things that seem to amuse Rotumans and make them laugh?

6. *The Land Has Eyes* dramatically illustrates some of the key values in Rotuman culture at the time in which it was set.

Q6a. If you were to use the film as your main source, how would you describe the key values of Rotuman culture in the 1960s? Provide specific instances to illustrate your views.

[Hint to instructor: Draw students' attention to the scene where Poto enters Viki's home in a drunken state and demands to be fed; what does the family's response to his actions suggest about cultural values? You also might ask them why Viki's father doesn't go back to tell the judge that the court interpreter had lied, as Viki had reported to him?]

7. The Rotuman language has proved a puzzle for linguists because it has some distinctive characteristics that make it difficult to assign to a subgroup within Oceania. There are several reasons for this. In part it is because Rotuman is an isolate, without any closely related languages that can shed light on its development. Complicating the issue is evidence of at least two layers of Polynesian loanwords, mainly from Samoan and Tongan, accounting for some 40 percent of the total vocabulary. In recent years Rotuman has also borrowed

heavily from Fijian and English, especially in areas associated with modern, global culture. Another source of confusion is the fact that the language uses metathesis (the inversion of word-final vowels with immediately preceding consonants), which produces an elaborated vowel system that includes diphthongs, umlauts, and shortened vowels. Also as a result of metathesis, most Rotuman words have two forms. For example, the word hosa (flower) becomes hoas in some contexts, the word pija (rat) sometimes appears as piaj. These alternative forms of words have grammatical functions and are not interchangeable.

The following questions might be posed to students with a special interest in linguistics.

When you are watching the film, listen to the spoken language.

Q7a. What characteristics of the Rotuman language do you find striking?

Q7b. Can you distinguish contexts in which English is used from those in which only Rotuman is spoken? How would you account for this?

Q7c. What can you say about the relationship between spoken language and body language in Rotuman culture (as depicted in the film)? Can you find instances in the film where nonverbal communication is more telling than anything that could have been said?

For additional information on the Rotuman language go to <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Language.html> This page includes links to an extensive bibliography of Rotuman language studies; an interactive Rotuman - English online dictionary; Rotuman language lessons by Marit Vamarasi, a linguist at Northeastern Illinois University; and an essay by linguist Hans Schmidt on the history of the Rotuman language. [<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Language.html>]

Section II: Questions to present to student audiences after viewing *The Land Has Eyes*

1. Vilsoni Hereniko was motivated to make *The Land Has Eyes* in part because he has been critical of the ways in which Pacific Islanders have been represented in film. In his words:

Pacific Islanders—particularly Polynesians—are portrayed as a simple people lacking in complexity, intellect, or ambition. Acting always as a group, Pacific characters can be seen running, fishing, eating, or playing with little of no differentiation between one individual and another. . . . there is a need for a wider range of settings, themes, lifestyles, and characters in feature film that will capture the complexity and diversity of experiences that characterize the contemporary Pacific. . . . The image of the Pacific Islander with multiple identities, straddling traditional and modern worlds successfully, is one that doesn't exist yet in film or video." (Vilsoni Hereniko 1999

[\[http://www.city.yamagata.yamagata.jp/yidff/docbox/14/box14-3-e.html\]](http://www.city.yamagata.yamagata.jp/yidff/docbox/14/box14-3-e.html)

Q1a. Do you agree with Hereniko's premise about the portrayal of Pacific Islanders in feature films? Provide examples from previous films you have seen to illustrate your contentions.

Q1b. In your opinion, how well does the film present Rotumans as characters with whom you can identify, despite cultural differences? Were you able to empathize with their reactions to situations? Were there instances in which you found it difficult to empathize with characters' actions or reactions? Discuss the reasons why you think this is the case [e.g., culturally too different from your own experience, film does not provide enough context]

Q1c. Some anti-colonialist viewers of the film have criticized it for being too generous in the portrayal of the European magistrate. To this accusation Hereniko has responded: "Why should I create a

cliché? It's important to take colonialism the way it actually happened in each specific island." He argues that Rotuma had a very benign relationship with Great Britain during the colonial period and even today celebrates as its primary holiday the date the island was formally ceded to Queen Victoria.

How would you characterize the representation of the magistrate in the film? Do you think the criticisms are valid — that Hereniko should have focused more on the unequal power relationship involved? or do you think it more important for films to reflect an indigenous filmmaker's perception of how things actually were (or are)?

2. Choose a scene from the movie that you found particularly interesting or moving. [Some candidates might be: the trial of Hapati, Poto's drunken scene, Viki's pig stampede, the classroom scene in which Viki's teacher shamed her, the marriage scene, the church scene, the climactic scene in the magistrate's office, Viki's various encounters with Noa.]

Q2a. What did you find most interesting or emotionally provocative about the scene?

Q2b. In what ways did the scene contribute to the story's narrative?

Q2c. What did this scene convey to you about the characters involved, or about Rotuman culture in general?

3. Choose a character in the movie that you found particularly interesting in some way, or that you found easiest to empathize with.

Q3a. What was it you found interesting about the character?

Q3b. If you were in the same situation as this character, how do you think you would have responded to the challenges he or she faced in the film?

Q3c. What more would you want to know about this character to get a fuller understanding of the kind of person she or he is?

4. In his *Visual Anthropology Review* article on the making of *The Land Has Eyes*, Howard states, "A film like *The Land Has Eyes* raises questions about the distinction that has been made between a work of fiction and an anthropological documentary" (2006: 92).

Q4a. Discuss the contrast between anthropological documentaries and feature films like *The Land Has Eyes* that provide a good deal of ethnographic detail. Assess the relative merits of each approach to conveying an understanding of a culture.

Q4b. A few American film critics have criticized *The Land Has Eyes* as being "too ethnographic" to be good cinema. Do you think this is the case, or would you take issue with this criticism? Why?

Q4c. In order to be true to Rotuman culture, Hereniko opted to have the characters speak mostly in the Rotuman language and rely on English subtitles for general audiences. As a result, many of the nuances of social interaction are lost in translation. Discuss the pros and cons of his choice versus having the characters speak in English or relying on dubbing speech.

5. *The Land Has Eyes* has been touted as an "indigenous" film on the grounds that Vilsoni Hereniko, who wrote and directed it, was born and raised on Rotuma, and the fact that it is largely based on his own experiences growing up there. In addition, all but two of the actors in the film are Rotuman, playing roles that are familiar to them, and speaking in their mother tongue. However, Hereniko has spent most of his life away from Rotuma, has earned a Ph.D., and is a full professor at the University of Hawai'i. Also, many of the crew, including the cinematographer, sound technicians, editor, and producer, were not Rotuman and had no previous experience with Rotuman culture.

Q5a. Do you think it is warranted to consider *The Land Has Eyes* to be an "indigenous film?" What do you consider to be the most important criteria for labeling a film "indigenous"? [Hint to instructor: The

definition of "indigenous" is controversial; for an overview of usages go to http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Indigenous_peoples]

6. The myth of the warrior woman is central to the plot of *The Land Has Eyes*. According to Howard:

Like *Whale Rider* and *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, *The Land Has Eyes* incorporates a myth that underlies and makes sense of the story. There seems to be something about myth that attracts indigenous filmmakers (as well as writers, poets, and artists). Perhaps it is the opportunity to re-enchant a world that has been systematically stripped of enchantment by a dominant culture devoid of it. This distinction between an entrancing indigenous world and a mundane, urban, cosmopolitan world presents indigenous filmmakers with an important means of validating, and being faithful to, their cultural roots.

While the myth of the warrior woman, told to Viki by her father at the beginning of the movie, is presented as just that—a myth—in the climatic scene in *The Land Has Eyes*, mystical potency drives the action in a way that appears visually surreal. Nevertheless, the sequence completes a cultural logic that makes the film distinctively Rotuman. (Alan Howard, "Presenting Rotuma to the World: The Making of *The Land Has Eyes*," *Visual Anthropology Review* 21[1/2]:89 [2006])

Q6a. How does the myth of the warrior woman influence the development of the film's narrative and outcome?

Q6b. Comment on Howard's assertion that indigenous myths provide indigenous filmmakers with an opportunity to validate their cultural roots.

Q6c. What is your interpretation of the title of the film, *The Land Has Eyes*? In what ways does it relate to the myth of the warrior woman?

Q6d. Could the ritual clown at the wedding as well as the protagonist Viki be interpreted as manifestations of the warrior woman motif? Explain your answer.

7. From the time of initial European intrusion in 1791, Rotuma has been a society in transition, with western products and patterns of thinking and behaving making constant inroads.

Q7a. Identify in the film areas of tension between the old and the new. What does the film have to say about these tensions and their effects on social life in Rotuma at the time?

Section III: Questions for film students

1. A number of films from around the world have been referred to as "indigenous films." These include *Smoke Signals*, *Atanajuart/The Fast Runner*, *Whale Rider*, and *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

Q1a. What do the films above have in common? How are they different from each other? How might you explain the reasons for these differences? [Hint to instructor: What might be reasons why *Smoke Signals* and *Whale Rider* are in the English language?]

Q1b. How would you define the word "indigenous"? [Hint to instructor: The definition of "indigenous" is controversial; for an overview of usages go to

http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Indigenous_peoples]

2. Describe in a page or two the characters of Viki (the protagonist) and Poto (one of the antagonists). Why do you think the events in the story are portrayed through the eyes of a young girl rather than a powerful man?

3. What do you consider to be the main theme or themes in the film?

4. What role does the garden play in the film? How effective is it in relation to what the film is about?

5. What do you think is the main purpose of the wedding scene in the film? Would the film be more effective without this scene? Explain your answer.
6. Authenticity is very important in an indigenous film. What are the tools employed by the writer/director in order to achieve authenticity in *The Land Has Eyes*? [Hint to instructor: Consider his decisions to use Rotumans living on the island as actors rather than professionals, to have them speak in the Rotuman language rather than English, and to shoot on location.]
7. Commercial films are considered successful if they make money at the box office. Art films are serious works that are driven primarily by the director's perspective and view of the human condition. What about indigenous films? What might be the main reasons they are made? [Hint to instructor: The film begins with "A film for Rotuma" instead of "A film by Vilsoni Hereniko"; the latter phrasing is the norm in contemporary filmmaking.]
8. What are the challenges faced by filmmakers who want to make indigenous films for a global audience? [Hint to instructor: Consider matters to do with audience, language competency, actors, distribution, theatrical releases, and so on.]
9. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the screenplay of *The Land Has Eyes*? How might you improve the screenplay?
10. Analyze the screenplay and identify the following: inciting incident, major turning points, climax, and resolution.
11. Select a myth from *Tales of a Lonely Island* by Titifanua and Churchward (see references below) and analyze the structure of the myth. Does it follow the classical design that is typical of mainstream films from Hollywood or is it different? Justify or explain your answer. [Hint to instructor: The classical design usually has a single protagonist, a clear goal, and a closed ending.]

12. The fantasy elements in the film (myth, garden scenes) were shot in super 16mm film, whereas the mundane realities of life on the island were shot in DV cam (PAL format). Why do you think the director chose these two different formats? What do you think of his choices?

13. It is common practice in contemporary films to depict the ancient past in black and white to differentiate it from the present world of the story, usually in color. *The Land Has Eyes* could have made this distinction but doesn't. Why do you think the director chose not to differentiate between the past and present?

14. Some viewers find it odd or unbelievable that Hapati does not return to complain to Mr. Clarke after Viki tells him that the translator had lied. Do you agree with this view? Explain and justify your view.

15. According to some, the film has a "happy ending" that reminds them of Hollywood films. The director thinks of the ending as "bittersweet." How might you describe the ending? Is the ending organic to the story or does it come across as contrived? Explain your answer.

Resources

Web sites

Two Web sites of particular relevance to an appreciation of *The Land Has Eyes* are <http://www.thelandhaseyes.org/> and <http://www.rotuma.net/>. The former is the official Web site for the film and contains information about its production and the cast, press and media reviews, as well as an interview with Vilsoni Hereniko. The latter Web site is a general resource for information about Rotuma. It includes sections on Rotuman culture, language, history, myths, and population as well as the complete texts of Alan Howard and Jan

Rensel's articles and book chapters (33 so far). (Jan Rensel is also an anthropologist who has done research on Rotuma and in Rotuman communities abroad since 1988.) The Web site also contains an archives of important early sources concerning Rotuma, maps, an extensive array of photographs and many other features, including contemporary and recently archived news and a bulletin board used by Rotumans around the world. Other features include an interactive Rotuman-English dictionary, sound clips of Rotuman music, and a forum where issues of concern to the Rotuman community are posted and commented on.

Publications

The following is a selected list of publications that students might find helpful in researching specific topics concerning Rotuma. Links to items on the Rotuma Web site are provided if they are posted there.

J. Stanley Gardiner's "[The Natives of Rotuma](#)." Gardiner, a naturalist, visited Rotuma for 3-1/2 months in 1896. He was a keen observer and conducted extensive interviews on a range of topics. His account, published in 1898 in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (27:396-435, 457-524), is the most comprehensive ethnography of Rotuma published in the nineteenth century. It is an indispensable source for studies of Rotuman culture and history. [<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Gardiner/GdrContents.html>]

Gordon MacGregor's "[Field Notes on Rotuma](#)" are housed at Bishop Museum in Honolulu. MacGregor did ethnographic field work on Rotuma in 1932 but did not publish any extensive accounts, although he organized his notes systematically. The notes are presented here, edited and with marginal notations by Hans Schmidt and Alan Howard. [<http://www.rotuma.net/os/MacGregor/MacGregor.html>]

Vilsoni Hereniko's *Woven Gods: Female Clowns and Power in Rotuma*, published jointly by the University of Hawai'i Press and The Institute of Pacific Studies (IPS), University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji

(1995). In this unconventional ethnography, Hereniko uses early scattered reports on Rotuman society and culture and his own knowledge of female ritual clowns to unravel the sacred origins of the Rotuman hān mane'ak su (literally, "woman who plays the wedding") and her central role in women's production of fine mats and in the celebration of marriage.

Elizabeth K. Inia's [Kato'aga: Rotuman Ceremonies](#), Suva, Fiji: Institute for Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific (2001). The book describes in detail the performance of rituals associated with birth, marriage, death, chieftainship, and much more. Mrs. Inia plays the role of Mata, the clown at the wedding, in *The Land Has Eyes*. [<http://www.rotuma.net/os/ceremonies/toc.htm>]

Alan Howard's *Learning to Be Rotuman*, New York: Columbia Teachers College Press (1970). An account of formal and informal education on the island in the context of Rotuman culture in 1960, when Howard was doing his doctoral research on the island. Contrasts between western and Rotuman cultural patterns are explicitly considered.

Mesulama Titifanua's and C.M. Churchward's *Tales of a Lonely Island*, Suva, Fiji: Institute for Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific (1995; first published in 1938-39). A collection of Rotuman legends dictated by elders to Mesulama Titifanua, who wrote them down. C.M. Churchward, a missionary/linguist who spent several years on Rotuma, translated them into English and commented on their historical and social significance. Both the Rotuman and English versions are presented.

Seksek 'e Hatana: Strolling on Hatana: Traditions of Rotuma and its Dependencies, edited by Aubrey Parke. Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific (2002). A collection of myths, legends and stories as well as some ceremonial speeches songs gathered by Parke in 1964 while he was serving as district officer (and magistrate) on Rotuma.

[Speak of the Devils: Discourse and Belief in Spirits on Rotuma](#), by Alan Howard. In *Spirits in Culture, History, and Mind*, edited by Jeannette Mageo and Alan Howard. New York: Routledge (1996).
[<http://www.rotuma.net/os/howsel/24spirits.html>]

[Youth in Rotuma, Then and Now](#), by Alan Howard. In *Adolescence in Pacific Island Societies*, edited by Gilbert Herdt and Stephen Leavitt. University of Pittsburgh Press (1998).
[<http://www.rotuma.net/os/howsel/30youth.htm>].