

# PRESENTING ROTUMA TO THE WORLD

## THE MAKING OF THE FILM

### *THE LAND HAS EYES*

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*The Land Has Eyes is a full-length feature film set on the Polynesian island of Rotuma in the South Pacific. The film was written and directed by Vilsoni Hereniko, who was born and raised on the island, and coproduced by his wife, Jeannette Paulson Hereniko. It is the first film to be nominated for an academy award by the Republic of Fiji. This paper documents the issues involved in making the film, including the logistic and cultural problems confronting the couple before, during, and after production. Responses to the film by Rotuman and nonRotuman audiences, and by critics, are presented. A number of issues associated with indigenous filmmaking are also discussed. [Key words: Rotuma, *The Land Has Eyes*, indigenous filmmaking, cultural mediation, Vilsoni Hereniko]*



Figure 1. Poster for the film.

In order to open a new “discursive space” for indigenous media that respects and understands them on their own terms, it is important to attend to the processes of production and reception. Analysis needs to focus less on the formal qualities of film and video as text and more on the cultural mediations that occur through film and video works. This requires examining how indigenous media are situated in relevant discursive fields in order to understand how this work gets positioned by those practising it and by those in the dominant culture with some interest in it. [Ginsburg 1995:259]

In early June 2004, my wife, Jan Rensel, and I accompanied Vilsoni and Jeannette Paulson Hereniko to Fiji and Rotuma, where they screened their full-length motion picture, *The Land Has Eyes*, for mainly Rotuman audiences. The movie, the first feature film by a director from Fiji, was shot entirely on Rotuma, mostly in Vilsoni’s home village of Mea, Hapmak. All but two of the actors appearing in the film are Rotuman, and most of the dialogue is in the Rotuman language, with English subtitles. The Herenikos were offering the screenings to thank everyone in Fiji and on Rotuma who had helped bring the film to fruition.

*The Land Has Eyes* is the story of Viki, a young woman who draws inspiration from a Rotuman legend



Figure 2. Film still of Viki being interviewed for scholarship by district officer.

about a warrior woman, the first person to live on the island. Viki's ambition is to go to Fiji to further her education, but her family is very poor and her only chance is to be selected for the one scholarship awarded by the Council of Chiefs. In an emotional classroom scene, her teacher shames Viki in front of the class for failing to bring her pen, which she has loaned to Noa, a young neighbor boy. The teacher drives home to Viki the message written on the blackboard, that "only the hard workers deserve success," and that without hard work she is likely doomed to poverty for the rest of her life. Viki is further shamed when her father is accused of stealing coconuts from a neighbor's land. He is unjustly convicted and fined by the European district officer because of an intentional mistranslation by Poto, the Rotuman court interpreter. Viki's emotional responses to a series of tragedies and triumphs following this event are at the heart of the story.

My purpose in writing this article is threefold: (1) to document the prodigious effort that was required to bring the film to fruition. The story of the making of *The Land Has Eyes* is both a tribute to the skill and perseverance of the Herenikos and a potential source of

inspiration for aspiring Pacific Islander filmmakers; (2) to consider issues of representation raised by the film; and (3) to reflect on the construction of meaning when a film like this, with all its culturally specific content, is presented to different audiences around the world.

#### EVOLUTION OF THE SCRIPT

Vilsoni began working on the script in 1997. His goal was to produce a movie that would reflect his own experience growing up in Rotuma. Initially he conceived of the protagonist as a young male, but found himself overly constrained by his own biography. In one of its early incarnations the script was entitled "Island Blossoms," followed by a short life as "Island Dreams." In a brief synopsis Vilsoni prepared at the time for our reactions he remarked that:

It's loosely based on yours truly's early years, from 10–14, though I've shaped it into a coherent story that has been embellished to make it meaningful. We see it as a small film intended for the family. Probably a good idea to do this as a first film, and would be lots of fun to shoot in Rotuma, I think. [personal communication with author, 1997]

The story described in this early synopsis is that of a young boy of artistic and literary sensibilities who is born to a large and poor family (Vilsoni is the youngest of eleven children) on Rotuma in the 1960s, a time when western standards of living were rapidly being adopted. Ridiculed by his peers for living in a thatched hut, the boy compensates by planting a beautiful flower garden and excelling in school. As the youngest in the family, he stays at home helping his mother while his brothers assist their father planting taro and fishing in the sea. Unfortunately, his father dies of pneumonia just after he begins initiating the lad into such manly pursuits. Devastated, the boy runs away and hides for two days at a friend's house, missing his father's fu-

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neral. But later, after the boy wins a coveted scholarship for further education in Fiji's capital city of Suva, his father appears in a dream and instructs the boy to look beyond flowers for true beauty. On the way to the wharf as he is about to leave the island, the young man takes a careful look at the people who are dear to him and realizes what his father meant.

When he decided to switch to a female protagonist, Vilsoni told us that he felt a sense of creative freedom that allowed him to develop a more compelling narrative. The new version still reflects some of the more profound experiences of his youth—his father's ordeal after being falsely accused of stealing coconuts and his subsequent death, the shame Vilsoni experienced at the hands of a teacher who admonished him to work hard if he wanted to avoid a life of poverty, and a love of reading that contributed to his being selected for a scholarship—although the story was now told from a female perspective.

During visits to Rotuma prior to filming, Vilsoni tested out his ideas for a script with locals. As he was quoted in an article in *Honolulu Magazine*:

I went around to the villages on Rotuma...and I would stand up in the kava circle and tell them the story, act by act. Then I'd ask the people for their reactions, and I'd incorporate some of their suggestions into the script. [Whitney 2002]

Vilsoni retitled the script "Fire in the Womb" to reflect the young heroine's passions for learning and justice, but following criticism that the title implied a more feminist perspective (in the activist sense) than was warranted, he changed it to *The Land Has Eyes*, in reference to the Rotuman proverb: "*Pear ta ma `on maf ka ma `on `al ma inea jema ne sei te nojo*" (The land has eyes and teeth and knows the truth).<sup>1</sup>

The prospect of making a quality film on such a remote Pacific island was daunting (Rotuma is over three hundred miles from the nearest inhabited high island), but encouraged by his wife, Jeannette, who had overcome great odds herself in various movie-related projects, Vilsoni persisted.

#### FINDING SUPPORT FOR THE PROJECT

This was not the Herenikos' first filmmaking project. Jeannette freelanced as a producer/writer for the State of Hawai'i Department of Education's educational televi-

sion program from 1975 to 1980, producing and writing more than a dozen 30-minute documentaries, two of which won national awards. In 1978 she wrote, directed, performed, edited, and produced a 15-minute documentary titled *The Art of Storytelling* for a national educational film company, Farmhouse Film, which distributed it nationwide, and in 1982, she cowrote and produced a documentary with Clarence Ching, a Hawaiian activist, called *The `Aina Remains*. She says it was largely through this experience that she became aware of the differences in making a film in a traditional western way and making a film keeping in mind indigenous Pacific values (personal communication, June 15, 2005).<sup>2</sup>

Vilsoni filmed *The Han Maneak Su in a Rotuman Wedding*, a 17-minute documentary that focused on female clowns who perform at Rotuman weddings, in 1989. At the time he was a lecturer at the University of the South Pacific, where he earned a reputation as a leading Pacific Islands playwright. After accepting a faculty position at the Center for Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai'i in 1991, Vilsoni continued to write and produce plays, including *The Last Virgin in Paradise* (1993, with Teresia Teaiwa); *Fine Dancing* (1997); and *Love 3 Times* (2001). He and Jeannette formed a company, Te Maka Productions Inc., in August 1997, and produced an 11-minute short based on *Fine Dancing* in 1998, using several professional actors. The film, titled *Just Dancing*, had its world premiere at the Pusan International Film Festival in Korea in 1998. Subsequently, it was an official selection at the Hawai'i International Film Festival, the Los Angeles Asia-Pacific Film Festival, and the Palm Springs International Film Festival. It was also part of a NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asia-Pacific Cinema) tour in 1999 and was screened at the Four Star Theater in San Francisco and at the Honolulu Academy of Art. *Just Dancing* was also shown at the SPACLALS (South Pacific Association of Commonwealth Literatures and Language Studies) International Conference held at the University of the South Pacific in Suva in 1999.

Producing a full-length feature movie confronted the Herenikos with far greater challenges than their previous productions, especially given their desire to film it on Rotuma. They were faced with the need to raise substantial amounts of money; to assemble a professional crew who would be willing to work for modest compensation; to organize transportation of people and equipment to and from Rotuma (with

highly unreliable air and shipping schedules); to arrange for a set to be built on the island and supervise it in absentia; and to devise a means of accommodating and feeding the film crew on Rotuma, among a host of other lesser challenges.

Jeannette had to draw on all her previous experiences as a fund-raiser and motion picture entrepreneur to get the ball rolling. After graduating from Chaminda University in Honolulu, she had taken a job as community relations officer at the East-West Center, where she developed the idea of starting a film festival that would focus on movies with Asia-Pacific themes. She had to start from scratch to raise money for the project with a volunteer staff, but succeeded in launching the first Hawai'i International Film Festival on November 1, 1981. Over the next 15 years, during which she served as its director, the festival developed into one of the most prestigious venues for launching films by Asian and Pacific filmmakers. During this period Jeannette developed a reputation as a superb organizer and she established a wide network of friends and supporters within the film industries of several countries. This expertise served her well in producing *The Land Has Eyes*.

The Herenikos went heavily into debt during the preproduction and production phases, using up all their savings, taking out loans, and maxing out their credit cards. They got a boost in 1997 when Vilsoni received a grant for script and project development from the Hubert Bals Fund in Rotterdam, and after production was completed they were fortunate to be granted a licensing fee from Pacific Islanders in Communications, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting Pacific Island media content and talent, that allowed them to proceed with editing the film. They have also expressed gratitude to Merata Mita and Geoff Murphy for allowing them to use their editing suite in New Zealand free of charge. Additional support was provided by grants from the Cooke Foundation and the Movie Museum in Hawai'i; and from the Fiji Visitors Bureau and Suva Rotary Club in Fiji. The Center for Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai'i (Vilsoni's home department) was also generous in providing assistance for the project. In addition, a significant number of individuals donated money backing the project, but it is unlikely that it could have succeeded without a great deal of in-kind support from agencies and individuals in Hawai'i, Fiji, and Rotuma.

In July of 2000 the Herenikos visited Rotuma to announce their plans for shooting the film, and to arrange for a set to be built on unused land in Vilsoni's home village of Mea. This meant getting permissions from chiefs and landowners, as well as recruiting labor for clearing the land, planting and nurturing a garden, building traditional-style structures, and training pigs! The willingness of the Rotumans to cooperate in the venture was heartening.

Recruiting professional and support personnel with little more to offer than a trip to an "exotic" Pacific Island and minimal pay (\$20 per day plus room and board) was made possible by the Herenikos' infectious enthusiasm, Vilsoni's compelling vision, and Jeannette's persuasive personality. They convinced Paul Atkins and his wife Grace Niska Atkins to take the positions of director of photography and sound recordist, respectively. Both are highly regarded professionals and have been nominated for Academy Awards for previous work on successful motion pictures. They wanted to have a crew that would be made up of people from all over the Pacific Rim, and so the final crew came from Hawai'i, New Zealand, Australia, California, and Rotuma. They also wanted to involve Pacific Islanders, and were able to recruit three Hawaiians, two Maori, and several Rotumans to serve as crew.

While most of the characters in the film were to be Rotuman, the Herenikos recruited Rena Owen, the renowned Maori actress who had starred in the 1994 film *Once Were Warriors*, to play the role of the warrior woman, a mythical heroine who is abandoned on Rotuma by her seven brothers after being raped by one of them. Owen had also starred in Vilsoni's play, *Fine Dancing*, when it was first performed in Honolulu in 1997. The only other nonRotuman to appear in the film is James Davenport, an experienced actor from Hawai'i who played the role of a district officer/magistrate assigned to Rotuma by the then colonial government (Rotuma, as part of Fiji, was under British colonial rule until 1970).

Rotuman actors and actresses for the film were selected after a series of auditions on the island. Sapeta Taito, who plays the role of Viki, was 15 years old when the film was shot and had never even been inside a movie theater. We were told by the principal of Rotuma High School during our 2004 visit that Sapeta,



Figure 3. Film still of Rena Owen as the mythical warrior woman.

an honor student, had subsequently received the highest scores ever for a Rotuman student on the national exam. She is now attending the University of the South Pacific and in interviews has expressed a desire to become a surgeon or a botanist.

The role of Viki's father, Hapati, is played by Voi Fesaitu, a neighbor and cousin of Vilsoni's who was born and raised on Rotuma and had sailed for a few years on a tanker that worked Pacific Rim ports. After returning to Rotuma and marrying, he worked for a cooperative society before starting his own chicken farm. Viki's mother, Maurea, is played by Ritie Titofaga, a housewife with several children who is a relative and a former classmate of the director. Viki's brother, Pili, and sister, Hanisi, are played by Moriki Tigarea and Emily Erasitio, two youngsters who, like Sapeta, were attending Rotuma High School. The actors with the most impressive backgrounds of achievement are Elisapeti Inia (as the grandmother Mata, who plays the clown in a wedding scene), John Fatiaki (as Poto, the court interpreter), and Maniue Vilsoni (as Koroo, the neighbor who falsely accuses Viki's father of stealing coconuts).

Mrs. Inia was the first Rotuman woman to be educated as a teacher. Vilsoni was her student when he was growing up on Rotuma; a defining incident in her class inspired the schoolroom scene in *The Land Has Eyes*. Now retired, Mrs. Inia is an esteemed elder and an accomplished author, deeply concerned with preserving her island's culture. Among her publications are *Fäeag`es Fuaga: Rotuman Proverbs* (1998) and *Kato`aga:*

*Rotuman Ceremonies* (2001); she is also coauthor of *A New Rotuman Dictionary* (1998). That such a dignified woman played the role of a clown both surprised and delighted Rotuman audiences. Mrs. Inia was also the cultural consultant on this project.

John Fatiaki is a distinguished physician with a private practice in Suva. In the film, he plays the villain, an unscrupulous individual who lies and cheats for personal gain. In one memorable scene, he acts drunk in a particularly compelling manner. Like Mrs. Inia's performance, his screen persona is a distinct contrast with his reputation as a thoroughly responsible, reputable individual. Dr. Fatiaki's son, John, was 11 years old when the movie was shot and played the role of Noa, Koroo's son and Viki's friend.

Maniue Vilsoni is a teacher, author, and a frequent emcee at Rotuman events on the island, in Fiji, and abroad. He taught for many years on Rotuma before transferring to Marist High School in Suva. More recently he has taken a teaching position at Fiji College of Advanced Education. In the film as Koroo, an ambitious man married to a white Australian woman, he is engaged in building the first two-story house in Rotuma. He connives with Poto against Viki's family, his immediate neighbors, in an attempt to make them move away. A generous man who has contributed much to the broader Rotuman community, Maniue, too, is out of character as a villain. All the actors and actresses in supporting roles were residing on Rotuma at the time the film was shot. Like the main Rotuman actors, none of them had any previous film experience.

For some of the key roles, such as that of Viki and Noa, Vilsoni auditioned as many as forty candidates. For other roles he auditioned only a few individuals (four for the role of Mata), and for some he simply asked someone to audition he thought would be suitable, or who was recommended by others (Voi Fesaitu for the role of Hapati, Ritie Titofaga for the role of Maurea). Interestingly, during interviews that I videotaped, both Voi and Elisapeti expressed some initial reluctance about taking their roles. Both said they were apprehensive about not making a good job of it, a reflection, in part, of the value Rotumans place on humility. But there was also a risk involved for the Rotuman actors, because to stand out in Rotuma is to invite teasing at a minimum, and possibly ridicule if one makes mistakes or does something foolish in public. Voi's response to a question about trying out for the



Figure 4. Vilsoni Hereniko on set with Paul Atkin.

role of Hapati is telling: “Vili came and asked me to try out for the part of Hapati, but I rejected it, I refused it. Then we started to discuss it and I found out it’s something I had to handle because it’s between me and him, so I took the part” (Voi Fesaitu, interview with author, June 5, 2004). Elisapeti also indicated that she auditioned and took the role of Mata in order to help Vilsoni out. It is clear that his personal relationships with people were as vital for the recruitment of actors as they were for getting much needed cooperation from members of the community at large.

#### PROBLEMS ON THE SET

Language problems, culture differences, a lack of resources, conflicting agendas, and role conflicts challenged the film crew’s patience and ability to cope. Housing and feeding the crew, transporting them and their equipment, and dealing with misunderstandings arising from language and cultural differences at times threatened the viability of the project.

The first major crisis arose after the 13 crew members arrived in Fiji from California, Hawai`i, Australia, and New Zealand. They convened in Nadi, ready to board a Sunflower Air plane to Rotuma as per arrangements made well in advance by Jeannette. However, when confronted with the fifty boxes of equipment the assembled crew had with them, the Sunflower Air personnel balked. The equipment weighed far too much and was too bulky for the small planes Sunflower flew to Rotuma. In part this represented a miscalculation by the Herenikos. They had decided to shoot the film in mini-DV because they thought it would significantly

reduce the bulk of equipment needed. But the crew was largely made up of professionals who wanted to have the equipment they felt necessary to do a proper job. The only option was to charter a bigger plane, and to do it quickly, to avoid mounting hotel and food expenses in Nadi. Precious shooting time was also being lost. One American member of the crew, the set designer, lost patience with the delay and abruptly quit the project.

Chartering a plane was an expensive proposition not covered in the Herenikos’ budget. Fortunately they were able to draw on Jeannette’s fundraising skills. As she put it:

I knew the only way out of this mess was for me to raise an additional \$10,000 as soon as possible. This was a tremendous challenge. In Hawai`i, I knew various fundraising techniques and people I could call on in a pinch. But I was in Fiji, a country whose customs and people I really didn’t know that well. It was only my third visit there. But I was pleasantly surprised when the Fiji Visitors Bureau responded quickly and positively to my urgent plea, and arranged an Air Fiji charter for us—even though tourism cannot be promoted on Rotuma because it has no hotels, restaurants, or frequent air service. In addition, the Rotuma Council had been discouraging tourism.

Vilsoni was on the island working with the actors when the big Air Fiji chartered plane carrying the crew arrived on Rotuma’s small runway. When I walked out, one of the Rotumans was overheard saying, “Oh, look who Vili married. A millionaire white producer from Hollywood!” [Vilsoni and Jeannette Hereniko, interview with author, June 4, 2005]

Organizing transportation on the island was equally challenging. Because Rotuma has no hotels or restaurants, the 12 crew members had to be accommodated in private homes. This required not only patience and understanding on the part of host families, but also homes that were large enough and had sufficient resources to care for their guests in a culturally appropriate manner. There weren’t many homesteads on the island that fit the description, and they were scattered. Although the furthest was only four miles away at the most, the logistics of getting to and from the film set proved time consuming and frustrating. With no rental vehicles

available, the Herenikos had to recruit Rotumans with trucks to transport the crew and to run innumerable daily errands. Picking up the crew and delivering them to the production center and back home took about 45 minutes each way, involving a huge commitment from the truck owners. They not only had to forfeit the use of their trucks for their own purposes, but also had to adjust to the crew's necessarily flexible schedule. It was a difficult recruitment challenge.

Language was also a problem at times. Although today Rotumans learn English in school, many of the older people did not have that opportunity. This proved a challenge for Jeannette as she struggled with logistic arrangements while Vilsoni focused his attention on adjustments to the script, setting up scenes, and doing all the things a director has to do.

To help solve the language problem Jeannette asked for help from Vilsoni's sister Vamarasi, whose house was adjacent to the set and served as the main production (and feeding) center for the crew. This added to Vamarasi's prodigious burdens; Vilsoni was already counting on her to take responsibility for feeding the crew and looking after their needs. She had been preparing for the occasion for more than a year, even taking an advance trip to Fiji to buy two cows to bring back to Rotuma. As the crew settled in, her living space was full of strange equipment and her kitchen full of others taking over as cooks. This took a heavy toll on her, resulting in tensions between her and Jeannette. Vamarasi coped by reverting to speaking only in Rotuman, which made communication with Jeannette virtually impossible. Logistics became even more difficult, often requiring Vilsoni's intervention as translator and peacemaker.

Managing occasionally frayed nerves and strained relationships among the crew and supporting personnel was only part of the interpersonal problems the Herenikos had to cope with. More threatening was the demand of one of the local landowners for an exorbitant amount of money (F\$100,000) for use of the land on which part of the set was built. He, along with other landowners in the village, had agreed in advance to allow use of the land in exchange for having the land cleared (it was overgrown and not in use) and being able to use the buildings constructed for the set after filming was completed. However, this landowner, like some others on the island, assumed that the Herenikos were "millionaires" and would make a fortune with the film. He stopped production for a brief time by posting threatening state-

ments on trees around the set. The issue came to a head at a community meeting attended by the Fijian district officer, Luke Moroivalu, and the chairman of the Rotuma Council, Visanti Makrava. Both were openly supportive of the Herenikos' project and admonished the landowner for obstructing the filming and for his outrageous demands. Exchanges between Makrava and the landowner became increasingly heated, culminating in the landowner blurting out, "The land has eyes; you will see!" to which Makrava replied, "No, you will see!" (Vilsoni and Jeannette Hereniko, interview with author, June 4, 2005). Ironically, and as testimony to the power of the curse, both have since died at a relatively young age. In any case, following the meeting, the landowner dropped his open opposition to the filming, although he continued to ask for compensation.

Greed is universal, so the demands of the landowner could have happened anywhere. A more culturally specific problem arose when Gagaj Osias, the district chief of Itu'muta (on the western end of Rotuma), confronted Vilsoni about the myth of the warrior woman. He told Vilsoni that the myth "belonged" to Itu'muta and that people in his district had reservations because of an earlier instance when a white man had come from outside and said he was going to do one thing and did another, much to their consternation. He said his people were very concerned that Vilsoni might be bringing in white people who would steal the mana of the warrior woman. A short while later Vilsoni visited Osias at his home with Harieta Bennett, a Rotuman woman from Itu'muta who is married to an American, to ask the chief's permission to tell the story and to do some filming at one of Itu'muta's isolated beaches. According to Vilsoni, Gagaj Osias was very agreeable, and they even went to inspect the beach, leaving Vilsoni with the impression that there was no problem. However, Osias subsequently scheduled a district meeting to discuss the issue. Although he was informed of the meeting, Vilsoni was not specifically asked to attend by the chief, so felt uninvited and did not go. As a result the matter remained somewhat in limbo, and although a few people from Itu'muta grumbled about the use of the myth, no one made a move to interfere with the shoot.<sup>3</sup> Vilsoni speculates that the issue arose only after rumors circulated that he and Jeannette were wealthy, based on the chartered plane that brought supplies. Gossip about how much the Herenikos paid to have a canoe made and the set constructed, may also have contributed to the issue being raised.

In her role as producer, Jeannette developed a meticulous plan for shooting the scenes prior to going to the island. The crew was committed to staying on the island for only 40 days, so all the scenes would have to be shot within that limited time frame. She broke the script down to segments and carefully allocated a certain amount of time for each. In her role as producer, she described herself as “goal oriented,” her job being to see to it things were done on schedule. She arrived on Rotuma several weeks after Vilsoni, expecting to find him ready to begin filming. Instead, she found that he had not even completed auditioning potential actors, and even worse, from her point of view, had been changing the script as a result of consultations with local people. This meant the careful plan she had developed for shooting scenes was out the window, requiring her to start all over again.

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” (Vilsoni and Jeannette Hereniko, interview with author, June 4, 2005).

Vilsoni wanted the film to accurately reflect Rotuman culture, which meant leaving a good deal of room for improvisation rather than close direction. He wanted the actors to behave as naturally as possible, as long as they were following the general lines of the revised script. Mrs. Inia, for example, said that Vilsoni did not direct her and Dr. Fatiaki in the wedding scene, where she chases him on her motorbike. “I told him to stand still and I would come and knock him down,” she told me, “but he decided to run so I had to chase him” (Elizabeth Inia, interview with author, June 5, 2004).

As Vilsoni described his approach to directing:

There was quite a bit of improvisation in which the actors contributed to the scene their own words, as long as the meaning didn’t change. I would give them the scene and the characters that go in the scene, and when I said “action” they basically interacted with one another along the lines of the script I had set, but they didn’t have to be wedded to the script. They said things a little differently because it was more natural, so I went along with it.

Part of the reason is to honor the actor, so they can bring to the project their own talent. Sometimes they do things you didn’t think about, and it adds to the scene...some of the little surprises makes it more natural. If you’ve really surprised someone then they react rather than anticipate and “act.” I told them they didn’t have to act, that they do these things all the time—they feed the chickens, they go to church—and this is happening, this is real, in now time. Once they understood that they didn’t have to act, just be, and inhabit this character because they do these things all the time, they broke into a naturalness that I didn’t have earlier when they were pretending to be somebody. They forgot about trying to say their lines and just did things the way they might have in ordinary life. [Vilsoni and Jeannette Hereniko, interview with author, June 4, 2005]

Indeed, one of the great strengths of the film is the accuracy with which it depicts normal Rotuman behavior patterns.

For Jeannette, some Rotuman cultural practices were disconcerting, to say the least. While she now concedes that revisions to the script arising from consultations resulted in a leaner, better screenplay, the time taken up by attending to relationships meant additional delays and tighter constraints on the filming schedule. “The price we had to pay was getting up at five in the morning and working until ten at night,” she said (Vilsoni and Jeannette Hereniko, interview with author, June 4, 2005). As time compressed, the penchant for Rotumans to do their own thing became increasingly stressful to Jeannette. One source of problems was that Rotuman actors and crew members had other obligations within the community, from feeding pigs to helping relatives and attending functions of various kinds.



For them, the film was only one of many activities involving them. More disconcerting to Jeannette was the Rotuman proclivity for not communicating about scheduling problems; they would simply not show up if they had a conflicting obligation they considered more important. This involved a constant struggle to get people where they had to be to shoot scenes.

Partly as a result of their conflicting agendas, tensions mounted between Jeannette and Vilsoni. In Jeannette's words:

As producer, I felt my job was to find a balance between the mostly traditional western practices the crew subscribed to and the cultural considerations that Vili needed to respect and practice in order to maintain the integrity of the film being truly a "Rotuman" film. Every day was like a tug-of-war, and the most difficult part was that there was no time and no privacy for Vili and me to talk about what was happening so that we could make adjustments together. All our waking hours were spent with people working on the film, and so we could almost never discuss the complexity of the situation. Being married made it more difficult, as it added yet another role into our expectations from each other, from the cast and crew, from Vili's family, and from the Rotuman community.

To illustrate the lack of privacy, one evening we were in our bedroom, which also served as one of the production offices, and I asked Vili in a regular conversational voice, what a Rotuman crew member's phone number was, and a voice from a neighbor outside our window somewhere, yelled it out! There is a line in the film, "Quiet, Koroa might hear you." I certainly learned the reality is that the neighbors do seem to hear everything. [personal communication with author, June 15, 2005]

Jeannette was not the only person caught in a cultural bind. Some nonRotuman members of the crew did not appreciate the degree to which the filming had to be integrated into the life of the community. They did not understand, for example, why participants in the wedding scene had to be given a real feast when it was not in the script. Fortunately, Vilsoni well understood that for the participants there was no clear separation between acting and being at a wedding, and at a wedding you are fed, and fed well. Another problem stemming from

this lack of separation between life and filming was a tendency of people on the set to talk to one another, or act (inadvertently) disruptively on the set. On the other hand, the villagers found the generator used to run equipment disturbing at times, necessitating shutting it down. As a result, Jeannette related, over \$1,000 worth of food spoiled for lack of refrigeration.

In one instance, failure to accept an outside opportunity for community engagement led to a minor setback. The annual Methodist Conference was being held in the village of Losa at a time when several pages of the script were scheduled for filming. Vilsoni leaned toward going to the conference anyway, but was persuaded not to. This meant a lost opportunity to record some fine Rotuman singing, which Vilsoni later regretted when putting together the sound track for the film. The sound crew had hoped to organize a group especially for recording purposes, but failed to appreciate just how difficult it is to get enough people together at the same time.

Despite the time compression and all the problems, the crew managed to shoot more than forty hours of material in the allotted time, although on reflection, Jeannette expressed the view that an additional 30 days would have been needed to avoid the stresses, and to have time to communicate and better understand what was happening, as well as to plan better for shooting details.

## POST-PRODUCTION

The main post-production tasks were selecting shots from the footage they had obtained (editing), creating a sound track that would enhance the visuals, and producing English subtitles for scenes in which Rotuman was spoken. However, money was running out, so the Herenikos were confronted once again with the necessity to raise funds. They put together a ten-minute sequence of shots to show to potential donors, which met with considerable success, thanks in large measure to the Hawai'i International Film Festival, which provided screening opportunities at the Movie Museum in Honolulu in order to raise money and get reactions.

Given the extremely limited resources available to them, the Herenikos had to rely at first on a volunteer to do the editing. This proved less than satisfactory because the man they engaged was otherwise employed and could only work on it in his spare time. After a year

of frustration, they managed to raise enough money to hire a full-time editor to put together a full-length (87-minute) version of the story. Unfortunately, he was enamored with MTV-style jump cutting, which resulted in a disjointed sequence of scenes, each lasting only a few seconds. Test audiences who viewed this version (including my wife and I) were dismayed. The continuity of the story was lost in a welter of confusing images; the characters emerged as underdeveloped; and—perhaps most problematic—any appreciation of Rotuman culture, which by nature is slow paced, was rendered impossible. Though distressed by a wasted effort, the Herenikos recognized these flaws and, through the generosity of filmmakers Merata Mita and Geoff Murphy of New Zealand, who were living at Hawai'i at the time, engaged Jonathan Woodford-Robinson, an editor in New Zealand with considerably more experience and a better appreciation of what they were trying to achieve. Vilsoni went to New Zealand for three weeks and remained holed up with Woodford-Robinson doing the final edit. "He's very sensitive, not just a cutter," Vilsoni told me, "and was very respectful to the rhythm of the island" (Vilsoni and Jeannette Hereniko, interview with author, June 4, 2005).

This left Vilsoni with the final say with regard to which scenes should be left in and which should be taken out, a situation Jeannette pointed out usually rests with the producer: "But when working with an indigenous director who's so close to the culture, it's extremely important that the director have the final creative say. He should be free from worrying about pleasing a financial partner" (Vilsoni and Jeannette Hereniko, interview with author, June 4, 2005).

Dramatically illustrating the power of editing, the end product is a compelling narrative of well-developed characters who engage an audience and convey a profound rendering of Rotuman culture. Indeed, the film as finally edited has many virtues, not least that it provides a vivid portrayal of Rotuman interpersonal interactions in their subtlest manifestations—"culture" at its deepest level.

In conjunction with the editing, the film needed a sound track that would support and enhance the visuals. The fact that the dialogue is in Rotuman adds immeasurably to the sense of authenticity it conveys, and musical riffs and island sounds were needed to complement rather than detract from this. First efforts were somewhat less than successful, with incongruous

western musical strains overlaying visuals of Rotuman social life in places, but it was time to show it to critical audiences.

#### INTRODUCING THE FILM TO THE WORLD

*The Land Has Eyes* was fortunate to be selected by the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, for its world premiere. The launching, on January 16, 2004, was propitious; it raised the movie's visibility and led to a flood of invitations from other film festivals, many of which the Herenikos turned down in order not to overexpose the film, which would diminish the possibility of it being picked up by a distributor.

The film was screened three times in Park City to sold-out audiences. On the premiere night, following the film, a reception was held that included Sapeta Taito (Viki), who was flown in courtesy of the Fiji Visitors Bureau and Air Pacific; a group of Fijian musicians who had been performing in New York; and a contingent of Rotumans and other Pacific Islanders living in Utah who arranged to dance Rotuman-style for the guests. Seeing the movie on a big screen was an awesome experience, not only for me (I had seen a number of previous versions on a TV screen), but for those Rotumans who were able to attend as well. As Hiagi Wesley, a Rotuman educator living in Orem, Utah, put it:

*The Land Has Eyes* is a Rotuman cultural masterpiece. It not only has captured the subtleties of the Rotuman ways, it is also a very moving story of many Rotumans who have left the island for the outside world. It is a representation of an odyssey. The movie evoked memories of one's childhood, village life, relationships, and special functions. It brought tears to my eyes and made me yearn to see Rotuma again. The inclusion of the Rotuman language is historic; it will definitely contribute to the preservation of such an unusual language. I consider Vilsoni Hereniko's movie a tribute to Rotuma and its people; it will help put Rotuma on the map. The actors in the movie are wonderful... I am so proud of the movie... The cinematography is just outstanding... what a beautiful place! [Wesley 2004]

From Sundance, Vilsoni took the film to The Netherlands, where it screened only a few days later

at the Rotterdam International Film Festival (January 28–31, 2004), again to appreciative audiences. It was also shown at the Hawai'i International Film Festival in April 2004, cosponsored by the Center for Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai'i and Pacific Islanders in Communications.

Despite the film's warm reception by audiences and critics alike, the Herenikos were dissatisfied with the music and hired the services of Audy Kimura, a well-known musician living in Honolulu. In May 2004, Vilsoni and Jeannette went to work with Dick Reade, a sound designer in Auckland where they substituted more appropriate music and background sounds, and re-recorded dialogue where it was unclear. Finally satisfied with the end product, the Herenikos were ready to take *The Land Has Eyes* back to Fiji and Rotuma to show to the people who had done the most to make it possible.

#### TAKING THE MOVIE HOME

It was a privilege for my wife, Jan, and me to accompany the Herenikos on this journey of repatriation. The first screening was at Village Six Cinema in Suva on June 1, 2004. The showing had been organized as a fund-raiser for the Fiji contingent that was to attend the Pacific Arts Festival held in Palau July 22–31, 2004. Tickets were sold out at F\$20, a substantial sum by any standard. Prior to the screening a reception was held in the theater's lobby. Many prominent members of the Rotuman community in Suva attended, along with a number of the individuals who had played roles in the film. The audience's reaction to the film was an interesting, and expected, contrast to the reactions of mainly nonRotuman audiences. There was much more laughter, in addition to frequent squeals of recognition. The laughter in part was a response to the Rotuman dialogue, which incorporated subtleties of humor that could never be adequately translated into the necessarily abbreviated English subtitles. Scenes in which individuals widely known to the audience, such as Dr. Fatiaki and Mrs. Inia, acted counter to their reputations (drunk, clowning) brought howls of laughter. Other scenes epitomizing certain types of Rotuman behavior (for instance, borrowing money or equipment) also drew vocal responses. Afterwards, Vilsoni introduced the actors who were present, thanked all in attendance who had contributed to the making of the film, and answered questions.

The following day (June 2nd) we were to take the weekly flight on Air Fiji to Rotuma with the Herenikos. For some time we had been trying, without success, to rent a video projector to bring to Rotuma, and as flight time neared we were getting desperate. Departure for Rotuma was scheduled for noon and it looked like the only option would be to show the movie on TV screens, which wouldn't do it justice at all. Fortunately, that morning Vilsoni went to the University of the South Pacific media center and talked its director into providing a projector and screen for the week at a reasonable rate. The fourteen-seater airplane was too small to accommodate the screen and its stand, so once we arrived on Rotuma, we were still faced with the challenge of finding other surfaces on which to project the movie.

The Herenikos chose to screen the film first in the subdistrict of Hapmak, where most of the footage had been shot, so on the evening of our arrival we convened at the community hall in the village of Salvaka to set things up. The island's doctor, Sumasafu Manueli, provided a thick white sheet from the hospital, which we hung on a ping-pong table set on its side; a woman from the village loaned us an amplifier and two speakers for the week. The setup worked remarkably well.

During that first screening, people laughed uproariously whenever they saw someone they knew, sometimes drowning out the dialogue. When the film ended they applauded profusely. Vilsoni gave a speech thanking the people for all their support during the making of the film, and a subchief followed with a speech thanking the Herenikos.

The screening schedule for the rest of the week had been set by the chairman of the Rotuma Council, Visanti Makrava. On Thursday evening (June 3rd) the film was to be shown in Motusa, the largest village in the largest district, Itu'ti'u. However, the man who had promised to provide a generator and fuel hadn't come through, so we arrived to find a large audience assembled in the district hall—but no electricity. Fortunately, Motusa Primary School is adjacent to the hall, and the headmistress, Sarote Fonmanu (who plays a teacher in the film), asked some men to fetch the school generator and a long extension cord, so we were able to get things set up in time.

Mrs. Inia had attended the previous night's screening in Hapmak and been disappointed that people did not stay around after the film to thank the Herenikos,



*Figure 5. Vilsoni Hereniko answering questions after screening in Malhaha, Rotuma.*

so she decided to speak to the audience about it before the film started. When she stood up to talk, some of the young people in the back of the darkened hall kept talking until the district chief, Gagaj Markav, told them in a loud, commanding voice to pipe down. Mrs. Inia then explained that the film would be shown all over the world at prestigious film festivals where people would pay money to see it, and that they were very fortunate to have it brought to them and to see it for free.

The audience was still quite raucous and their laughter drowned out a lot of the lines of dialogue in the film. However, they seemed to react to the English subtitles, even if they could not hear the dialogue. Despite Mrs. Inia's exhortation, most of the people left immediately afterwards, while the credits were still rolling.

The following afternoon, in response to a request by the principal of the high school, Vilsoni showed the film to the combined classes of the primary and high schools at Malhaha. In comparison to the boisterous reception the film had received the previous evening, the students were rather subdued, perhaps because their teachers and principals were watching it with them. After the screening Vilsoni spoke about the making of the film, pointing out that several of the actors were from the school, that the classroom scene was filmed

there, and that he, himself, had attended school there. He then took questions, which led to his elaborating on how his own experiences were reflected in the plot and in the making of the film. The high school principal then responded, telling how his face had been awash with tears throughout the movie, and he thanked Vilsoni profoundly. The assistant principal also said that she had tried to hide her tears from the students so that they wouldn't tease her. I observed that the students had indeed noticed (with mild amusement) the emotional responses of their elders. This reflected a generational difference in the reactions of Rotuman viewers generally. Vilsoni's take on the difference is that older Rotumans were more attuned to the nuances in the film, while the youngsters gave it a more superficial reading. It's not that they enjoyed it less, but their emotional responses appeared to be of a different order.

That night we showed the film at the Noa`tau district hall, which had only recently been opened and was not quite finished. The hall had its own generator, so there was no problem setting up. The youngsters were very excited when we first arrived (they had decorated the pillars with leaves and flowers, and applauded our entry) and were chattering loudly until Rotuma Council Chairman Visanti Makrava admonished them to behave. In contrast to the Motusa crowd, the Noa`tau

audience was somewhat subdued in their reactions, and as a result seemed to follow the story better. The fact that many of the students had seen the film that afternoon may have contributed to a quieter reaction; the students were very attentive and some of them quietly spoke lines before they were heard in the film. Before and after the screening Vilsoni thanked the audience for all the support he had received from the Rotuman people, singling out those who were present.

The next evening (Saturday) it was Pepjei district's turn to host the film. Unfortunately the district hall could not accommodate all the people who wanted to attend, which included a large contingent from the neighboring district of Juju. As a result people were lined up five deep outside the hall, watching through open windows. Although the immediate response was somewhat subdued it was still gratifying. Compared with audiences during the previous evenings, the people on the south side of the island (where Pepjei and Juju are located) were less familiar with the actors, and interrupted the film less often with exclamations of recognition. They were nevertheless attentive and expressed effusive appreciation afterwards.

In deference to Methodist Sabbath restrictions, we did not show the film on Sunday. On Monday a screening was scheduled for Malhaha district, but the hall presented a problem; there was no suitable place to hang or pin up the sheet. Some young men brought in two smallish blackboards and tried unsuccessfully to join them. Then one of the older men present suggested that we nail up some of the 1" x 8" by about 15-foot boards that were lying on the floor to provide a place to tack up the sheet. It worked just fine. Vilsoni gave his usual introduction, for which he was amply applauded. The audience was very intent; only a few of the young boys were a little rowdy and laughed loudly when people from Malhaha came on screen.

Tuesday evening was supposed to be our last on Rotuma, and the Herenikos wanted to have the final showing in Hapmak, where we began. The hall was full again, even though most people had seen it before, and the audience seemed as intent as they had been during the initial screening. In fact, my impression was that the first time most Rotumans saw the film they were so excited seeing people and places they knew intimately on the screen, and hearing the Rotuman language spoken, that they did not always follow the story being told; the second time they saw it they seemed to

be more engrossed in the story and appreciative of the film as a whole.

As it turned out, the plane that was scheduled for Wednesday, June 9th, was delayed for a day, giving us one more opportunity to show *The Land Has Eyes*. The Herenikos responded to a request that the film be shown at the government station at Ahau. The idea was to screen it at the pavilion facing the sports field, but when we arrived we discovered that nothing had been done to set up a backdrop for the screen. In addition, it was raining heavily, and the pavilion was open at the sides and unprotected. Prospects looked bleak, but we went across the road to the hospital and checked out the possibility of showing the film on the hospital verandah, which provided more shelter. The doctor was very accommodating and helped us tack up a sheet between two poles at one end of the verandah; he and the nurses then brought out a number of benches and chairs for people to sit on. It turned out to be an excellent solution, and although it did not accommodate everyone (several people watched it from the ground adjacent to the hospital under umbrellas, while a few others viewed it from the reverse side of the sheet), it allowed most people present to see the film in relative



Figure 6. Screening of the film on the hospital verandah at the government station on Rotuma.

comfort. They were a well-behaved audience, in part because a respected subchief sat with the children up front and told them to keep quiet. Mrs. Inia also came to sit with the children and gave them a brief lecture on proper decorum. Once again, members of the audience expressed great appreciation to the Herenikos for making the film and for bringing it back to Rotuma.

We flew back to Suva the following day. While still on Rotuma the Herenikos had arranged to show *The Land Has Eyes* at Davuilevu, near Nausori. After some negotiation the venue was changed to Churchward Chapel in Suva, but the postponement of our flight made that impossible. However, shortly after arriving in the late afternoon on Thursday, a free screening was arranged for that evening at the University of the South Pacific. Word must have spread very rapidly, because approximately three hundred people, mostly Rotumans, showed up. The following evening Vilsoni and Jeannette showed the film at the Mocambo Hotel in Nadi, just a few hours before our plane departed for Hawai'i. They were lavishly feted by an appreciative audience of about two hundred people. It was a fitting conclusion to an extended homecoming for a film that celebrates the people and culture of Rotuma.

#### A MATTER OF REPRESENTATION

A concern for the misrepresentation of Pacific Islanders in western media dating back to the 18th century was a motivating force driving Vilsoni in this endeavor. In a 1994 article on "Representations of Cultural Identities," he deplored the ethnocentric and racist representations of Polynesia and Melanesia and registered an eloquent protest:

These representations of islanders are important because they shape attitudes of foreigners about the Pacific and its inhabitants. Negative or positive stereotypes reduce islanders to two-dimensional figures, not fully human, resulting in the erosion of the self-esteem and dignity of the colonized. They must then contend with identities that are not of their own making but nonetheless become regarded over time as their distinctive characteristic, that which makes them different from others. A stereotypical cultural identity, once struck, is almost impossible to shake off completely. [Hereniko 1994:413]



Figure 7. Jeannette and Vilsoni Hereniko at Rotuma airport after a week of screening *The Land Has Eyes*.

In a later article he specifically addressed the issue vis-à-vis filmic representations where, he asserted,

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 or no differentiation between one individual and another. [Hereniko 1999:1]

The main source of indigenously produced feature films about Polynesians has been New Zealand. Most of these films, including *Once Were Warriors* (1994), *Te Rua* (1991), *Utu* (1983), and *Ngati* (1987), are dark, albeit realistic, portrayals of dispossessed Maori living on the fringes of a society dominated by Pakeha (white people). Although important, Vilsoni pointed out,

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." [Hereniko 1999:1–2]

Rotumans have not been immune from prior representations of the kind Vilsoni has criticized. During the Christmas holidays in 1996, the Australian documen-

tary filmmaker, David Gardiner, shot footage for a film entitled *Rotuma, Our Identity*. The film was aired on Australian television in January 1998 and was seen by many of the Rotumans living there. Their reaction was immediate and extremely critical. At the time, I was operating a message board on my Rotuma Web site, on which were posted a flood of protests. A Rotuman identifying herself only as “Sani” posted the following message after seeing Gardiner’s documentary:

I watched the documentary “Rotuma Our Identity” by David Gardiner and it was very disappointing. Then again, I guess I should not have been surprised at all. For whom was the documentary intended? It served no purpose to Rotuman peoples anywhere. The documentary is ill informed. I have seen home videos of Rotuma (the people and places) taken by Rotumans who have been to our island to visit family, and they do the Rotuman people more justice. In my opinion the documentary shows nothing about the Rotuman people and our identity. For a documentary that attempts to show what its title claims, it misses by a long, horrid and painful mile. There is no substance in the documentary. A big show about nothing. All talk about a great many issues affecting Rotumans and naught to show about it. I presume that the theme was as the title suggests, but the producers seemed to have forgotten what they set out to achieve. They got carried away with the importance of their documentary, saturating it with as many issues as they could within the given time limit, and confusing the issue of identity along the way. All the Rotumans that I have spoken to who have seen the documentary share the same opinion about the documentary’s beginning. We were all anxious and excited to see it—Rotuma on TV and to the world! I for one was ready to give the documentary “a fair go.” Well, we were all in for a shock—big time! What a way to introduce OUR island Home—with a song praising Samoa!!! (What the song actually means I have no idea, only that it is supposed to be a Samoan song. I know nothing about the Samoan language but I won’t be surprised if they find offence to the way their language is sung.) We were put off and disgusted and had to endure this outrage for what seemed a real long time...It showed volumes about the people who produced it—David Gardiner, etc. People talking

about OUR identity; they know NOTHING about it and produced a documentary that is nothing short of embarrassing. [Sani 1998]

The response of Rotumans to *The Land Has Eyes* has been in marked contrast. Everywhere they have viewed the film—on the United States mainland, in Hawai‘i, Europe, Fiji, and Rotuma—the responses have been overwhelmingly positive. Rotumans often respond to the film with deep emotions, moved by scenes that resonate with their own experiences growing up or living on the island.

When I asked Vilsoni if he thought the film represented Rotuma accurately, given the dramatic need to emphasize conflict (when Rotuma is in my view a quite gentle culture; see Howard 2004), he responded that he tried to portray the characters as much as possible to be fully human, and that a number of events in the movie are based on real-life incidents and real persons, like the dishonest court interpreter.

In the film they are not a homogeneous group who all behave the same way, but they are portrayed as people who are good, and evil, and complex, and varied. That is what I was aiming for. I was very aware that because I had these two guys who were not very nice [Poto and Koroa], I needed to balance them with Hapati, who is a major force to reckon with in the story and is portrayed as very different from them. I also had in mind Pili, who is a really kind brother to his sisters. Even in the myth I had one of the brothers be sympathetic although the story wasn’t told to me that way, because I wanted to give it more nuance, because I was very aware that I needed to portray them in as varied a way as possible. I think [the film is] a fairly, to the best of my ability, accurate representation of the different kinds of people that do and have existed on the island. [Vilsoni and Jeannette Hereniko, interview with author, June 4, 2005]

The film has a resonance beyond that of Rotuman culture; Polynesian moviegoers from Samoa, Hawai‘i, and New Zealand have responded with equal enthusiasm, often thanking Vilsoni for representing “us” in such a splendid manner. A review by Kaleikipio`ema Brown of the Ka`iwakiloumoku Hawaiian Cultural Center at the University of Hawai‘i is indicative:

First things first. You will not, in years to come, be able to carry on an intelligent conversation about indigenous film-making in the Pacific if you haven't seen *The Land Has Eyes*. Vilsoni Hereniko's "film for Rotuma" is every bit as important as *Once Were Warriors* and *Whale Rider*. Maybe more so...

Reviewers of *The Land Has Eyes* tend to characterize Viki's success as the result of her ability to unify her native heart and nonnative brain, of her ability to balance her traditional values and western ambitions. She restores her family's good name and goes to Fiji to satisfy her intellectual curiosity; she defends her heritage and holds true to personal aspiration; she speaks for the land and wins a ticket to leave; she gets her cake and eats it too. Interpretations of this sort are subtly demeaning of native intelligence and motivation. They imply that intellectual interests are somehow at odds with indigenous culture, and they imply that the pursuit of western academic success represents a selfish abandoning of native culture. Not so. Not so at all. One need look no further than Hereniko himself to understand that genius is fostered in native homes and that many of us have left these homes for the specific purpose of acquiring the weapons necessary to defend, define, and celebrate our people. That is what I see when Viki, at story's end, gets on her boat for Fiji. Her pen is left behind in the hands of the boy who loves her. They wait for her return, both boy and pen. When she returns, they will make warriors and she will write truth.

Noenoe Silva, in her recently published *Aloha Betrayed* (2004), defines native pen-wielding as the "war of discourse." She notes that Hawaiians have been waging this war since "No ka Pono Kahiko a Me ka Pono Hou" (Concerning the Ancient Pono [righteousness and well-being] and the New Pono) appeared in 1834 in the first edition of *Ka Lama Hawai'i*, our first Hawaiian language newspaper. We are, then, less than 30 years away from two full centuries of battle by essay, letter, "mele" [song], and "mo'olelo" [story]. Hereniko's "momi" (pearl) of a movie calls attention to a genre of discourse in which we are sadly underrepresented; *The Land Has Eyes* reminds us of the need for more pens and voices. It won't be long before Sony and the Rock tell us the story of Kamehameha in much the same way that Disney told us the story of Lilo's 'ohana

[family]. Someone else will again have control of the silver-screen narrative; we won't. "The time has come for Pacific Islanders to be not just consumers of other people's images of themselves," Hereniko says [Takeuchi 2004]. We have our own Woman Warriors, our Hi'iakas, Keaomelemeles, Manonos, Lili'us, Pi'ilani Ko'olau, and the Vikis who emulate them. We have many movies to make of stories that only we can tell. [Brown 2005, italics added]

The fact that the film won the Premiere Festival Prize for best overall entry in the inaugural Waiora Maori Film Festival in New Zealand is testimony to positive reception by fellow Polynesians.<sup>4</sup> The June 2005 festival screened over one hundred feature films, short films, and documentaries, including *Whale Rider*, with which *The Land Has Eyes* is often compared. After the award ceremony, Vilsoni said, "This award is recognition from the Maori community of how important and empowering it is that indigenous people tell their own stories and do so in their own language—no matter what the risk" (Jeannette Hereniko, personal communication to author, June 6, 2005).

#### RESPONSES OF NONPOLYNESIAN AUDIENCES

*The Land Has Eyes* has played at numerous film festival around the world, including Rotterdam (January 2004); Honolulu (April 2004); Moscow (June 2004); Brisbane (August 2004); Montreal (September 2004); Toronto (October 2004); Ashland, Oregon (March 2005); Singapore (April 2005); Manchester, England (April 2005); Wairoa, New Zealand (June 2005); Maui (June 2005); and Shanghai (June 2005); in addition to special showings at the British Museum; the Freiburger Film Forum in Heidelberg, Germany; the Museum of Modern Art in New York City; and the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC. It was also been screened at the Pacific Arts Festival in Palau (July 2004) and to anthropological audiences at conferences. In addition, *The Land Has Eyes* enjoyed a two-month run at a commercial theater in Honolulu, where it was the highest grossing film for the first two weeks in a large complex showing twenty films, most of which were Hollywood movies. More public screenings are scheduled, and a contract to show the film in Oceania (including Australia and New Zealand)



has been signed with Ronin Films based in Canberra. As a result, Rotuma, once a virtually unknown island omitted from most maps of the Pacific, is being presented to the world in a vivid manner by a native son whose appreciation of, and affection for, his homeland is fully apparent.

Critics have been lavish in their praise of the film. For example, Aleksandra Stankovic wrote in the *Harvard Crimson*:

Filmed with great patience and skill, and accompanied beautifully by a rich, haunting soundtrack, Hereniko's picture brilliantly captures the tension slowly consuming an island torn between its loyalty to deeply abiding tradition and submission to an ever-encroaching modernism...The movie plays like a kind of cultural window, presenting to the world a vision of life in the distant Pacific from the very imaginations of those who live it.

The movie presents the possibility of a reconciliation between divisive Western and indigenous cultures. As an existential offering, the film asserts the power of choice, advocating fierce dedication and courage which can overcome shame and adversity. And that, ultimately, is a very powerful message to send from this distant island into a world already so crowded by globalization and mass modernization, making *Eyes* at once gently affecting and quietly uplifting. [Stankovic 2005]

And on March 29, 2005, Kay Lorraine posted the following on [www.reviewedmovies.com](http://www.reviewedmovies.com):

The motion picture is worthwhile on so many levels: First of all, award-winning National Geographic cinematographer Paul Atkins has captured the vivid beauty of this hidden world that few of us will ever get the chance to see. The footage of the mythical Warrior Woman of Rotuma has a mysterious soft-focus quality, making the ancient tale seem enigmatic and slightly out-of-reach. It is a lovely contrast with the modern scenes that are crisp with saturated color and beauty. Even without the story, Atkins' photography works as a travelogue capturing your visual senses.

Then, of course, there is the story...The final reason to see this picture is the opportunity to learn about the day-to-day culture and traditions of this

remote place located within the Fiji Islands chain. We are privileged to see the spiritual rhythm of Rotuman life through the eyes of writer/director Vilsoni Hereniko. [Lorraine 2005]

#### MYTHICAL STRUCTURES AND POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Like *Whale Rider* (2002) and *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), *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.<sup>5</sup>

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. In that dramatic scene, the ancestral spirits of the land, represented visually by the warrior woman, act to overpower the villain who has acted maliciously, contrary to custom (he has not only knocked the sacred clown to the ground at the wedding, but also publicly insulted the chiefs).

Failure to appreciate the cultural logic of the underlying myth has led a few viewers to express discomfort with the climatic scene. One complaint is from some western urbanites who cannot relate to the mythical structure and regard the scene as “unrealistic,” and therefore unfathomable. Vilsoni's response is to point out that westerners make a sharp distinction between myth and “reality,” whereas Rotumans do not. He says:

For the Rotuman characters in the film these worlds are integrated, not separate. I don't think most people understand this scene, because it happens very fast. What I had in mind is that for the Rotumans the world of the past and present are fused, but not for the district officer; he's not from that world. And so the wind comes in and takes over

the whole room, the symbols that Viki uses, the red feathers and the ceremonial staff. She throws the red feathers, which in my mind are almost like arrows that pierce the skin, and she twirls the ceremonial staff, and then Poto grabs it and starts shaking, almost like the staff electrocutes him. But I also see the battle in the scene as kind of a spiritual battle; it's not so much a physical battle between Viki and Poto, but more a battle between good and evil forces. Therefore to nullify the evil, she uses the symbols of Rotuman culture (the red feathers from sacred mats and the staff used by the ritual clown at weddings).

For me, it's an interesting way to resolve the whole conflict. After the wind dies down and the district officer surveys the scene, we cut to Poto being taken away, and there are no feathers visible at all. The reason is, from his point of view, in my mind he doesn't see this. For him it's like this storm came in and knocked Poto over, and he probably had something like an epileptic fit. So I was trying to distinguish between these two worlds, and that the world that is fused is the one experienced by the Rotuman characters as distinct from the world of the district officer. So he says to Viki, "What happened there? The chiefs understand, but I don't." [Vilsoni and Jeannette Hereniko, interview with author, June 4, 2005]

More disconcerting have been a few anti-colonialists who find the portrayal of the European district officer objectionable. The first inkling that this was an issue came in the form of a rejection letter from the Auckland Film Festival, which read in part:

I'm sorry...to say that we have decided not to select the film, though we share your conviction that there is an audience in New Zealand who would be interested in seeing it. Our programmers were surprised by the film's ultimate assertion of faith in the authority of the colonial arbiter, and feel that this stance would generate a degree of hostility in the comparatively academic environment of our festival which would not be at all helpful to the filmmaker or the debates which [the] film raises. [E-mail correspondence from Bill Gosden to Jeannette Paulson Hereniko, March 1, 2005]

At a screening in Heidelberg, Germany, a professor who saw the film complained that the white man was "too good," to which Vilsoni replied, "Why should I create a cliché?" He has since altered his introduction to the film at screenings where he is in attendance in an attempt to clarify the historical circumstances, letting the audience know that Rotuma enjoyed a very benevolent relationship with England during the colonial period, and that even today, the most important Rotuman holiday is an annual commemoration of the Rotuman chiefs' cession of the island to Great Britain. "It's important to take colonialism the way it actually happened in each specific island," he tells them. Ironically, Vilsoni points out, no Pacific Islanders have registered such a complaint, only white academics (Vilsoni and Jeannette Hereniko, interview with author, June 4, 2005).

A woman at the same screening in Germany accused Vilsoni of using stereotypes, "because you gave the film a happy ending," with the white man as the good guy. Vilsoni responded that for him it was a bittersweet ending, because Viki was leaving the community with conflicting emotions, and she did not get to say goodbye to Noa because he arrived at the beach too late. He said he had filmed Viki showing a range of emotions when leaving, but that showing them all would have resulted in audiences being confused, there being no resolution, so he decided on a single shot suggesting mixed emotions. Besides, he remarked, "Indigenous people do have happy ending sometimes; why should only Hollywood movies have happy endings? Why can't we have a happy ending?"<sup>6</sup>

Leaving aside the issues of historical accuracy—there really was a European district officer appointed by the British colonial government to serve as magistrate (among other duties) on Rotuma during Vilsoni's childhood—these critics fail to recognize that the political power of the district officer is subordinated in the film to ancestral spirits, who are the ultimate dispensers of justice. Such complaints are the result of a form of misplaced concreteness; they cannot grasp that for Rotumans invisible ancestral spirits are social actors just as much as in-the-flesh colonial officers. But even at the concrete level they apparently miss the point that the district officer can only recommend to the chiefs that Viki be given a scholarship. The final decision is made by the chiefs.



Figure 8. Viki's family responding to Hapati's illness. They are trying to keep him warm as he suffers from severe chills.

There is considerable irony in this form of knee-jerk political correctness insofar as these are white westerners, manifesting a transformed version of the colonial mentality, telling indigenous people how things should be done, what is right and what is wrong—the very attitude they abhor in their colonial predecessors.

#### DISCUSSION

*The Land Has Eyes* is a major landmark in the quest of Pacific Islanders to gain control of the way they are represented in the media. In my opinion, it portrays life on a remote Pacific island better than any feature film ever made. This is not to imply that *The Land Has Eyes* is without flaws. In places the lack of acting experience on the part of some of the minor actors is apparent, and the significance of some of the scenes is not always as clear as it might be, particularly to nonRotuman audiences. But as a depiction of culture in its subtlest manifestations, *The Land Has Eyes* is quite magnificent. The interactions between family members—parents and children, husband and wife, siblings—is particularly worthy of note. Their body language, facial expressions, timing, and dialogue are authentic representations in the fullest sense. The tensions that plague life in small communities stemming from the pettiness that can disrupt harmony between neighbors, the mean-spirited pursuit of self-interest by some, and the apprehensions concerning health and welfare that instill anxiety are not glossed over in the film. These are not simple, one-dimensional “natives”

being depicted, but fully complex human beings with their own distinctive ways of thinking, feeling, and coping with life's problems.

In making the film Vilsoni was in an ambiguous role—part insider, part outsider. As an insider he drew on his own experiences growing up on the island; as an outsider he came to the task with years of academic conditioning. He had written about Rotuma before, but was unable to engage in a dialogue with the people he was writing about because, with very few exceptions, they had not read what he had written. Taking the film to Rotuma presented a welcome opportunity for him to get feedback from the people he was representing. In Vilsoni's own words:

This film reaches a much wider audience. Rotumans may not read *Woven Gods* [a study of ceremonial clowning in Rotuma, written by Vilsoni (1995)], but now the vast majority on the island have seen some of the same traditions and customs portrayed in the film. [Vilsoni and Jeannette Hereniko, interview with author, June 4, 2005]<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, one of the most significant messages the film conveys to Rotuman viewers, while implicit, parallels the argument that Vilsoni makes in *Woven Gods*—that the female clown at Rotuman weddings inverts the social order by comically humiliating chiefs, which both reminds the chiefs that their authority is constrained by cultural rules (and supernatural sanctions), and conveys to the audience the disconcerting prospects of a chaotic universe. In the film, Mrs. Inia and Dr. Fatiaki, by presenting personas so contrary to their roles in real life, communicate a very similar message, and have evoked reactions from Rotuman audiences quite comparable to responses to ritual clowning at real weddings.

By bringing *The Land Has Eyes* to Rotuma, Vilsoni feels he has fulfilled an important obligation:

I think it is important for scholars to not just take from their host cultures, but to give back. Taking this film back to Rotuma allowed me, as a researcher/filmmaker, to have a dialogue with members of the host culture. After all, the film is about them; it's important for them to be able to critique their own representation. [Vilsoni and Jeannette Hereniko, interview with author, June 4, 2005]

As far as I can tell from the reactions of Rotuman audiences, responses have been uniformly positive, but the dialogue will be ongoing, for this is a film that they will see over and over again (especially after it comes out on videotape and DVD), and their opinions can be expected to evolve.

Having the opportunity to see the film in a variety of contexts, played to different audiences, has reminded me of the well-known argument, proposed by literary critics, that the meaning attributed to texts (or in this case films) is an interactive process in which readers or audiences play an active role. NonRotuman film festival audiences have tended to react in subdued ways as they focus on the narrative of the story. Having to rely on abbreviated English subtitles to gloss longer spoken passages in the Rotuman language, such audiences are deprived of the nuances of dialogue that have animated Rotumans' reactions. Audiences that have had previous exposure to Pacific cultures, as in Hawai'i, New Zealand, and Palau, have responded more demonstratively to scenes and actions that are familiar to them, though still constrained by their reliance on subtitles. For Rotuman audiences, however, the texture of meaning attribution is much richer, and goes well beyond the narrative and the dialogue.

Over the years, I have identified three rather distinct modalities for Rotuman audiences watching videos or movies: (1) a rather subdued response while following narratives of stories with limited dramatic action sequences; (2) a series of spontaneous outbursts of laughter and shouts expressing encouragement, anticipation, anxiety, etc., while watching videos or films with action sequences involving fights, car chases, and the like; and (3) a highly interactive mode with other audience members while watching homemade videos depicting Rotumans engaged in various events.

*The Land Has Eyes* is not an action film, so the second type of response was not much in evidence by audiences on Rotuma. The initial response to the film by most Rotuman audiences was of the third type, although the volume of talking and commentary was generally less than one finds at small gatherings where people feel freer to express themselves. The admonitions of chiefs and elders to keep quiet added to the inhibition at some of the screenings, but people could not restrain themselves when seeing friends and relatives on the screen for the first time. My impression is that many first-time viewers on Rotuma did not pay



Figure 9. Mrs Elisapeti Inia in the role of a clown during the wedding scene.

as much attention to the story's overall narrative as to the details of each scene. They noticed, for example, when a school bus that had apparently driven for some time had not moved far enough from its locale. It was during subsequent viewings, I believe, that they paid closer attention to the story being told.

There is a sense in which the film not only reflects Rotuman culture, but will likely act to define it. For example, there are multiple versions of the warrior-woman myth, but the vivid portrayal in the film will no doubt lead young Rotumans, especially, to visualize it in accordance with the film's version. It is difficult to assess at this time the full implications a film like *The Land Has Eyes* will have in the long run, but at present it appears to be invigorating the Rotuman people's sense of their unique identity, and reinforcing their sense of pride in their island (which appears spectacularly beautiful in the film), their language, and

their culture. Rotumans in the past often commented on how unknown the island was outside of Fiji; it did not even appear on most maps of the Pacific. Now they know that their island and they themselves are being introduced to people all over the world by *The Land Has Eyes*, and they have expressed their gratitude.

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. Even though the film conforms to almost none of the criteria established for “scientifically acceptable” ethnographic documentaries (see, for example, Heider 1976), it shows so many aspects of Rotuman culture in such a vivid way that it does the work of a documentary (to record selected aspects of a culture), and does so in a way few documentaries have been able to equal. By allowing the actors to act spontaneously instead of sticking to the script, and by blurring the distinction between the set and the community, Vilsoni has achieved the best of both worlds—a compelling work of imagination and a sensitive ethnographic portrayal of life on a Pacific island. Indeed, if we invoke Malinowski’s dictum that the goal of ethnography is “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” (1922:25), then *The Land Has Eyes* is a more credible ethnographic document than a good many highly regarded anthropological films. Furthermore, because the story is so compelling and universal in form, it engages audiences in a way few academically inspired films can. As Eliot Weinberger has put it:

There are vast areas of human life to which scientific methodology is inapt; to which ethnographic description must give way to the ethnopoetic; a series of concrete and luminous images, arranged by intuition rather than prescription, and whose shifting configurations—like the points of and between constellations—map out a piece of the world. [1994:22]

In years to come, as one perceptive viewer noted, this film will be treated as a documentary, as a historical record of what life was like on the island. I hope it will also be shown in anthropology classes, both as a vivid account of what life is like on a remote Pacific island and as an example of what can be achieved ethnographically through the medium of feature films.

How much of the film’s success was because Vilsoni Hereniko is an indigenous Rotuman who was able to tell a story from an insider’s point of view? Obviously quite a lot—after all, it is largely autobiographical in nature—but in important respects it also represents a multicultural effort. *The Land Has Eyes* is, in the words of David MacDougall, “intertextual cinema” (1992:97) and is all the better for it. If it were not for Paul Atkins’ sensitivity as cinematographer, Audi Kimura and Clive Cockburn’s ability to produce a soundtrack that fit so well, Rena Owens’ performance as the warrior woman, Jeannette Paulson Hereniko’s skill as a producer (and her willingness to yield so much of a producer’s prerogatives to Vilsoni), and Vilsoni’s willingness to seek the (mostly nonRotuman) crew’s input into the script, this might have been a much weaker film.

Vilsoni and Jeannette Hereniko undertook this project knowing full well that it was a long shot from a commercial point of view, but they were driven by a broader vision. Regarding the significance of *The Land Has Eyes* for Pacific peoples, Vilsoni had this to say:

We hope that the film will encourage Pacific Islanders not to be daunted by the challenge, money or otherwise, in making a feature film about island life. They’re used to being the consumers of images of themselves, so it’s important to turn that around and produce their own images. They need not be scared. [Chun 2002]

Note: For more information concerning *The Land Has Eyes* and Rotuma, consult <http://www.thelandhaseyes.com> and <http://www.hawaii.edu/oceanic/rotuma/os/hanua.html>; both web sites were constructed and are maintained by the author.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Inia 1998, 24, for a version of the saying with an explanation of its cultural significance.
- <sup>2</sup> Jeannette is also well connected within the film industry, particularly with regard to Asian films, which she has done much to promote in the United States. She is currently Director of the Asia Pacific Media Center, the Annenberg Center for Communication at the University of Southern California and President of NETPAC/USA (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema). In addition to starting the Hawai`i

International Film Festival, she served as Director of the Palm Springs International Film Festival from 1989–91.

- <sup>3</sup> As it turned out, none of the filming was done in Itu`muta after all. The reference to a white outsider may have been a reference to David Gardiner, the Australian filmmaker, who shot a documentary on Rotuma in 1997 entitled, *Rotuma, Our Identity* that was screened on Australian television in January 1998. See section on representation below.
- <sup>4</sup> In addition, *The Land Has Eyes* was selected as best dramatic feature film at the ImagineNATIVE Film & Media Arts Festival in Toronto in October 2004.
- <sup>5</sup> Myth has also been a frequent element in anthropological documentaries such as *Dead Birds* (1963), *Magical Death* (1973), and the films of Robert Ascher, among many others. Myths in films can serve many functions, from exoticizing the “other,” to providing a template for understanding behavior.
- <sup>6</sup> At another screening a film producer with a Hollywood background asked why Vilsoni had chosen not to have a happy ending, referring to Noa’s late arrival at the beach. This suggests that Vilsoni achieved the emotional ambiguity he was aiming for.
- <sup>7</sup> In this regard, Vilsoni was in accord with Jean Rouch, who has stated that his prime audience is the one he has filmed (Rouch 1995:95).

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