
VISUAL MEDIA REVIEWS

Sacred Vessels: Navigating Tradition and Identity in Micronesia. 1997. Video, 28 min., color. Directed and written by Vicente M. Diaz; produced by Christine Taitano DeLisle and Vicente M. Diaz. Guam: Moving Islands, Inc.; also distributed by Pacific Islanders in Communications (Ste. 6A-4, 1221 Kapi‘olani Blvd., Honolulu, HI 96813; (808) 591-0059; e-mail: piccom@aloha.net; <http://planet-hawaii.com/~pacificislander/>). US\$30 (approx.)/individuals; higher for institutions.

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SACRED VESSELS EXAMINES a “shared tradition” of the canoe and navigation in Micronesia, focusing on two locations: Polowat in Chuuk State, Federated States of Micronesia, and Guam, in the northern Marianas. It looks at the disappearance of canoes and the recent efforts to revive a canoe-building tradition in Guam and the presence of canoes and canoe building in Polowat. This puts Guam and Polowat on opposite ends of the spectrum of both the presence of canoes and the experience of colonialism. Polowat was relatively spared from colonial presence and efforts to establish outside cultural influence. Guam, on the other hand, has had to “bear the yoke” of colonialism and unprecedented neocolonial activities. *Sacred Vessels* examines the problematic notions employed in explaining the presence of canoes and the lack thereof in the two societies and how those notions are misconstrued.

The filmmakers go through a series of interviews with contemporary practitioners and students of canoe building and navigation in both areas as they

struggle to “navigate” the challenges of their modern-day societies. The challenges are different for those in Guam and Polowat. The challenge to individuals like Rob Limtiaco and Gary Guerrero (as well as the Chamoru master canoe-builder Segundo Blas) becomes forcefully clear in their effort to build a canoe house in Guam. During the filming of *Sacred Vessels*, we learn from Limtiaco that the project is at a standstill. He and the rest have to “make changes and adapt” to navigate through a Western economy. The dilemma for modern practitioners of canoe building and navigation in Polowat like (the late) Sosthenis, Rabwi, and Celestino is to figure out how to navigate through a Christianized Polowatese society in their effort to initiate the Ppwo ceremony, which has not been performed in decades.

The visual use of underwater and scenic shots of both Polowat and Guam is very effective in enhancing the film’s overall narrative. We want to point out the most notable example: underwater shots with voice-over effects are used by the filmmakers to give voices to the canoes, the vessels that brought life to the islands. This enhances a point later made by Celestino Emwalu about the meaning of the canoe. Canoe is *wa* and *wa* is also (blood) vessels in the Chuukese languages. We want to add, in emphasis, to a point that Celestino also hints at: people (both mind and body) are also called *wa*. Another excellent use of visuals is the shot of a young man in Polowat approaching the church, wearing a *thuw*, lavalava, and carrying a pair of pants in his hands. As he is about to enter the church service, he pauses at the door, pulls on the pants over his *thuw*, and, finally, disappears into the church.

The disappearance of a canoe tradition in Guam is associated with the rigorous Spanish colonial reign formally established in 1668. In the film, Limtiaco asserts that the Spanish rulers saw the existence of canoes as a threat, so they made a “concerted effort to destroy them.” Confining the interisland mobility of the Chamorus not only ushered in the consolidation of the colonial power regime but also marginalized the existence and practicality of the canoe and canoe ownership. On the other hand, the obvious presence of the canoe on Polowat secures the tradition associated with it. Despite the assorted impacts of four successive colonial nations (Spain, Germany, Japan, and the United States), Polowat still appears pristine—except for a few field-trip ships from Weno, Chuuk’s center. It is as if the amenities of modernization have yet to find their way into the tradition-oriented Polowat.

From their physical appearance to the overall integrity of their indigenous traditions, Guam and Polowat clearly contrast with each other. However, according to the filmmakers, here lie and remain the misconstrued notions and discourse of history and culture when applied to Micronesia. The problematic perceptions of cultural survival and, more so, cultural loss

are often associated with the presence of such cultural items as canoes. Polowat is often seen as “having culture but [lacking] history,” as if the island community is suspended in time or forgotten. Guam, on the other hand, as the film points out, is often viewed as having history (only in terms of a legacy of colonial history) but no culture. This is pointedly clear with the fact that the one canoe that Rob Limtiaco and Segundo Blas built is now sitting in the Guam museum, “only a decade after it was built.” The filmmakers disagree with the notion that Guam’s culture is sitting dead in a museum; rather, the filmmakers like “to think that the same spirit that [enabled the prolific canoe culture in Guam in the past] now inhabits the museum waiting [to] possess . . . [individuals] to seize the adzes and build canoes.”

These two discourses on Guam and Polowat sum up the overarching perceptions of Micronesia’s history in scholarly attention to Micronesia and the whole Pacific. This perception often implies that the vitality of the history of Micronesia is contingent upon the extent to which such history reflects colonial and postcolonial activities. In that essence, then, Micronesia’s history is actually about other forces residing in and inhabiting the cultural and historical topography of the place. Suffice to say, this perception negates the fact that we Micronesians, Chuukese, Chamorus, Polowatese, and the rest of the Pacific Islanders have always been around, long before Western contact.

The attitude above facilitates the shortsighted idea that the disappearance of canoes in Guam proves Chamorus today are “cultureless.” Within such a notion, culture has been unjustly reduced to material existence. If we cling to such a notion, then the effort to revive the canoe in Guam by master carver Segundo Blas, Gary Guerrero, and Rob Limtiaco would be pointless and futile because the demise of the canoe culture is an irreparable loss. On the other hand, the “historyless” Polowat is seen as such because of its contemporary reality—pristine topography, traditional-looking huts, canoe-oriented kids, and so forth. Polowat, in that problematic notion, must have been bypassed by history and forgotten by time.

Sacred Vessels argues to the contrary. It shows that Guam and Polowat have navigated and are still navigating through some turbulent oceans of colonial and postcolonial change in their own peculiar ways. Instead of seeing the native culture and history as passive, Guam and Polowat Islanders indeed perpetuate prolific traditions that endured transformations and alterations and fostered continuity. In *Sacred Vessels* we see the juxtaposition of transformation and continuity personified in the experiences of brothers Sosthenis and Celestino Emwalu, whose differing formative training in life serves to facilitate the preservation of canoe tradition amid economic imperative in a world often favoring changes. Likewise, the revival of canoe tradition on Guam by contemporary Chamorus could be seen as an

act of gauging the possibility of cultural continuity in their world of vast modernization.

We also want to look at some issues that are raised in *Sacred Vessels*. These are issues we consider of major importance to educators and those of us struggling with the effort to incorporate cultural knowledge into our modern education system. In *Sacred Vessels* Celestino and his late brother, Sosthenis, address one issue that often becomes a point of contention: Who gets to learn? In other words, who will have access to the knowledge of navigation? We bring this up because it is interesting and at the same time problematic, and it relates to the very effort of these modern-day efforts to revive the tradition of canoe building and navigation. Sosthenis Emwalu, along with the filmmaker, Vince Diaz, taught a course on navigation at the University of Guam. Both Sosthenis and Celestino Emwalu made the point that in order to ensure the survival of navigation, they and other navigators would share it with others. Where do navigation, canoe building, and other traditional skills and knowledge fit in our “modern” (identifiably) Western-style education system? If there is a growing concern that traditional knowledge and skills are disappearing, then does our education system have any answers for sustaining this cultural knowledge? A related concern, articulated by Celestino Emwalu, is the issue of loss of instruction time in cultural and traditional skills for students and young people who move away to school elsewhere. (In the film we do see younger students on Polowat learning navigation.) Is the education system then a threat in that it alienates young people from opportunities to learn this cultural and traditional knowledge?

Some answers may have been raised in *Sacred Vessels*. Filmmaker Diaz talks with Rob Limtiaco about going away to school and finding their way back to this source of knowledge in their own backyard. In the introduction portion, Diaz talks about his efforts to understand Islander travel and its “boundaries.” Celestino Emwalu talks about going away to school in Hawai‘i as an extension of his Islander navigation culture.

Sacred Vessels is about more than just navigation as a lore and its complexity or the canoe as vessel. It is about tradition and identity in two contemporary Micronesian societies: Guam, in the Mariana Islands, and Polowat, in Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia. The film features the practitioners of navigation and students of master navigators and canoe builders. *Sacred Vessels* also makes some important points through what we may refer to as “pondering.” For example, in the discussion of the domains of men and women in Polowat, the filmmakers ponder, “What does it mean when the Ppwo bounders” are women? This inquiry is made after telling the audience that the domain of the women is the land; the men belong to

the sea. To enhance this point the interview with Celestino is added. Celestino tells us that in Polowat one only has a father through his mother, so to speak. The traditional chiefly titles and clan lineages are defined through the mother's side of one's family. Even the knowledge one receives from the father is also viewed in this way, as coming through the mother's connection. (The term for that paternal connection in Chuukese languages is *afakur*.)

Sacred Vessels is an important work in the field of cultural studies and history in general in Micronesia. It challenges some prevailing notions within the realm of Micronesian historiography and asserts some important indigenous views about history and culture—and the real challenges that they have to face today.