

*Advertising Missionaries.* 1996. Video, 52 min., color. Directed by Chris Hilton and Gauthier Flauder. New York: First Run/Icarus Films (32 Court Street, 21st Fl., Brooklyn, NY 11201; fax 718-488-8642; <info@frif.com>; <http://www.frif.com/>). US\$390; \$75 rental.

*Pacific Passages.* 1998. Video, 30 min., color. Produced and directed by Caroline Yacoe, Wendy Arbeit, and G. B. Hajim. San Diego: Media Guild (11722 Sorrento Valley Rd., Ste. E, San Diego, CA 92121; fax 858-755-4931; <http://www.mediaguild.com/>). US\$99.95.

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Although aimed at quite different audiences, both of these films address the relation between the “traditional past” and the “modern present” of Pacific peoples. They both locate the traditional past in the village and the present in urban centers. The bridging of the dichotomy becomes not just a question of geographical and historical relationship, but a moral one as well. In the opening sequence of *Pacific Passages*, set in a museum displaying Papua New Guinean artifacts, the young female narrator claims a maternal link with Papua New Guinea and declares with conviction that the artifacts surrounding her are not exotic but are “part of me, part of my past, they’re alive.” Toward the end of *Advertising Missionaries*, Aluago, the Huli villager who carries the burden of representing village life, worries about the effect that the coming road, linking his village with the larger centers of Papua New Guinea, will have on the lives of his children. In confronting differences on these many planes, both videos acknowledge the existence of more broadly based identities that have to do with national and regional commonalities. *Advertising Missionaries* points out the detrimental effects of an idealized national culture of consumption on the environment and on cohesive community life while *Pacific Passages* presents to young people a way of looking at themselves as members of a larger Pacific community.

*Pacific Passages* is aimed at intermediate grades in junior high and high schools. Its goal seems to be to present to students a way of looking at themselves and at their “traditional” past that will inspire an acceptance of a regional identity within the context of a hegemonic Western discourse. Material is presented in four sections: “Origins,” “Childhood,” “Adult Life,” and “Elders.” Each section contains a mini-lesson on the history, geography, or anthropology of Pacific peoples as warranted by the topic and makes extensive use of archival film clips from across the Pacific. The narrative lauds the uniqueness of “traditional” aspects of community life and, at times, oversimplifies the contrast between that life and “modern” urban life. We are told in the sequence on “Adult Life” that those living in the village are faced with a clear path: “In the village you don’t find an apartment, you build a house.” The narrator goes on to say that there is little need for money in the village as everything can be made or grown, and a later sequence points out the difficulties that some Pacific Islanders experience in the move to town. The cautionary tone becomes even more pronounced as high rates of diabetes, obesity, and high blood pressure are attributed to the change from the traditional staple diet to one high in sugar and processed foods. This section ends with a shot of the Bougainville open pit mine while the narrator concludes by saying, “Western culture has changed our relationship with nature. . . . We exchange nature for money.”

Aside from what I see as an overstatement of the contrast between the modern and the traditional, village life and town life, exchange economies and commodity economies, the overall message of this film speaks to young people who will have to negotiate major decisions in their lives concerning the quality of their environment, the pitfalls of engaging in the dominant capitalist ethic, and the frustrations of a consumer ideology. It presents these issues in a manner sensitive to viewers immersed in a hegemonic popular culture that rudely devalues noncompliance and brings many to ruin in frustrated desire.

These themes play a major role in *Advertising Missionaries* as well. The style in which they are presented is evocative, however, and they are embedded in the convention of a road film or journey. The film follows a troupe of Papua New Guinean performers whose task is to introduce the relatively unsophisticated inhabitants of the interior of Papua New Guinea to new consumer products. The troupe, composed of Elijah, Tina, Peter, and Robert, assembles in Lae. Traveling in their truck labeled "Walkabout Marketing" they drive into the Highlands, stopping at town markets, encountering rascals on the road as well as tribal fights, and staying overnight in a mission guest-house. Their journey and experiences are counterposed to those of Aluago, a Huli tribesman who lives a "traditional" life in the "remote" Yoluba Valley. I call attention to these terms because obviously there is a relative remoteness and traditionalism at issue here. The Yoluba Valley does have a road of sorts leading into it; it does have members of a local government council who are fluent in English. Nonetheless, the relative isolation of the valley and Aluago's concern with traditional Huli wig making are used to underscore the very real contrast between his way of life and that of the urban sophisticates who make up the acting troupe.

It is explained by the European director of the advertising agency in downtown Port Moresby that his firm has fielded such a troupe for ten years and that this, itself, testifies to the effectiveness of the technique. Its function is to "follow development" and to be the first to introduce Western commercial goods to remote rural populations. His tone is matter of fact, concerned with increases in product sales. It is Elijah, the leader of the acting troupe, who provides the rhetorical embellishment and makes his quest heroic. In reflecting on his work he claims, "We are missionaries of lifestyle, we are pioneers." Further drawing on the metaphor of missionization into a consumer lifestyle, the narrator declares that the troupe spreads the "gospel of a new way of life."

The tension in the production depends on the counterpoint of Elijah and his troupe, on the road, and Aluago, going about subsistence concerns in his peaceful valley. The opening sequence sets up this opposition by showing the troupe on their makeshift stage before an appreciative market audience,

maniacally brushing their teeth while singing a silly ditty about Colgate toothpaste. There is a cut to Aluago carefully cleaning his perfect, white teeth with only water. The regular cutting back and forth between the two protagonists and their settings sets up a tension of expectation: What will happen when they meet? How will the issues deployed in the subtext be resolved?

The viewer can appreciate the irony in the presentation of Elijah's home and family in Lae as the troupe gathers to start their journey into the Highlands. Elijah is sitting in an easy chair on the veranda of a standard-looking town home. Several small children and other family members are sitting on the floor watching television while eating fast food consisting of french fries, fried chicken, and soft drinks. The camera focuses on the screen, which is showing an advertisement for Tru Kai Rice with the figure of a powerful male flexing his overmuscular arms. One of the small boys mimics the movement with his arms. Later, while explaining the purpose of his work, Elijah posits that his task is to acquaint his less-fortunate fellow citizens with the contents of the "luxury life," referring to the amenities he enjoys in town. As Elijah and his troupe enact ecstasy at the drinking of Coca Cola, as Tina shows village women how to use the detergent OMO in a clear mountain stream, the moral weight of the impending encounter looms.

The strength of this production lies in its ability to raise in the minds of viewers critical issues having to do with the encounter of subsistence village life with the complexities of a hegemonic consumer ethos. It does so subtly and with good humor, pointing out along its picaresque way the present social consequences of that encounter and concerns for the future. It presents no resolution save personal responsibility.

Once Aluago finds his way into the audience of one of the troupe's performances and good humoredly eats a cracker with peanut butter from Tina's hands, he reflects on how both the mission and the theater troupe give instruction on correct lifestyle. He recognizes the challenge to the authority of the elders in that message of the "luxury life." He comments, "When the road comes through, one of the things that will happen is that those kids that don't listen will be killed like frogs. So I will have to shout instructions into their ears, as if I am teaching some wild pigs." A further layer of responsibility is addressed by Elijah in a poignant concluding scene, showing members of the troupe and Aluago's villagers crossing a cane bridge in the primeval mountain forest. Elijah's voice is heard over the background of an indigenous lament, almost in debate with himself, asking who is responsible when the message of the good life results in the frustration of unattainability. He concludes that he can't be assigned the blame, it belongs to those he represents.

Nominated for several awards and shown at international film festivals in recent years, *Advertising Missionaries* will take its place as a classic among

ethnographic films that attempt to portray the encounter between “some of us” and “some of them” distinguished differently on a number of available axes. In such efforts categories become blurred, blame is not easily fixed, and questions of personal moral choice are naggingly exposed. It is a film that has much to say to a wide audience of scholars, students, and the general public.