

DR DAVID ROBIE is author of *Blood on their Banner: Nationalist struggles of the South Pacific*.

## Gossanna cave siege tragic tale of betrayal

**Rebellion [l'Ordre at la morale]**, directed by Mathieu Kassovitz. Nord-Ouest Films, 2012 [English version]. 136min. [www.lordreetlamorale-lefilm.com](http://www.lordreetlamorale-lefilm.com)

WHEN the headlines hit France in April 1988 about the critical turning point in 'les événements' down under in New Caledonia, maverick filmmaker Mathieu Kassovitz was just 18. He remembers the gritty images of the Gossanna cave siege on television. Indigenous Kanaks were reported to have massacred a quartet of gendarmes with machetes and shotguns and taken 27 others hostage (three others were captured later). There were also false reports of alleged decapitations and rape on Ouvéa in the remote Loyalty Islands.

But 13 years ago, Kassovitz's father handed him the League of Human Rights report on the cave siege and he read the chilling real story for the first time. A French military force



of some 300 had been deployed in a retaliatory 'invasion' of the island (pop. about 2700 at the time) and the report detailed atrocities and summary executions that had left 19 Kanak hostage-takers dead in a dawn assault on 5 May 1988.

Kassovitz (*La Haïne* and *Café au Lait*) noted then how a dedicated and reflective negotiator, Captain Philippe Legorjus of the elite police counter-terrorism unit CIGN was a central character in the disturbing report. 'I knew then there was the material for a wonderful movie and the script was virtually written,' Kassovitz recalled in a *Femail* interview. The dramatic structure was in the report of those 10 days.'

On his first trip to Ouvéa to explore the possibility of making the movie, it seemed many obstacles could block getting such a project off the ground. ‘Ten years had passed but people were still withdrawn into their grief. The subject was *tabu*. There had been no closure,’ he says. ‘There was a lot of religious and political in-fighting within the Kanak community.’

A decade on and 25 film scripts later, against all the odds and being forced to make the film on the French Polynesian island of Anaa (pop. 300) in the Tuamotus instead of Ouvéa, a courageous 136min testimony to the Kanak struggle and search for justice has been finally achieved.

The film was released in France in November 2011 with the title *L’Ordre et la Moralea*—play on words from the title of the Legorjus autobiography, *La Morale et l’Action*, and on a statement by the hated Minister of Overseas Territories Bernard Pons who said rather cynically: ‘Sometimes some deaths are necessary to uphold order and morality.’

In July 2012, the gripping docu-drama was screened for the first time at the New Zealand International Film Festival (and also the Melbourne Film Festival)—under the English-language title *Rebellion*, which loses the nuances of the French name. But

the film was never shown in New Caledonia on general release in the largest cinema chain. The Pacific territory’s French operator refused to screen it. Smaller cinemas played the film to packed audiences, both Kanak and French.

The film succeeds with the inspirational and credible performances of both director Kassovitz as the frustrated but professional lead character Legorjus—who tried hard to seek a peaceful solution to the hostage crisis—and the Kanak pro-independence militant leader Alphonse Dianou, played superbly by his cousin Iabe Lapacas, aged only six at the time of the tragedy.

Negotiator Legorjus—who is ultimately also taken captive—and Dianou ironically form a trusting bond of fraternity and understanding and the French officer is released in a bid to broker a deal. But tension builds as the film covers the 10 days of negotiations until the expediency of the power struggle between right-wing Prime Minister Jacques Chirac and socialist President François Mitterrand in Paris over the imminent outcome of the presidential elections takes over. Mitterrand calls for negotiations—but in reality orders the full catastrophe assault on the cave to free the hostages just three days before the crucial runoff ballot.

He wins the election.

Legorjus feels betrayed by the military (who cynically use a helicopter carrying ‘journalists’ as a ruse to approach the cave) and politicians and subsequently resigns from the elite force after the assault. Dianou feels betrayed and is horrendously allowed to die from his wounds from the cave firefight. Other Kanak prisoners were simply killed in cold blood.

And the Kanak community feel betrayed by both Legorjus and the pro-independence FLNKS (*Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste*). This sense of betrayal ultimately led to the assassination of charismatic FLNKS leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou and his deputy Yéiwène Yéiwène a year later in a ceremony marking the anniversary of the martyrs.

Pastor Djubelly Wea, whose character features in the film giving Legorjus a Kanak history lesson while manacled to a coconut tree, was the assassin. He never forgave the FLNKS leadership for failing to negotiate on their behalf. (Although the FLNKS villain portrayed in the film is Franck Wahuzue). Wea (played by relative Macki Wea) in turn was gunned down by Tjibaou’s bodyguard.

Having reported on the Kanak independence struggle for several years, watching *Rebellion* was an emotional rollercoaster for me. (In fact, I shared

a hotel room in Manila at a ‘peace brigade’ conference with Wea just five months before the assassination).

Gossanna cave was *tabu*—and the film portrays traditional ‘custom’ and beliefs very evocatively. In Kanak tradition, a promise made face-to-face is never broken. I don’t believe the militants ever intended to harm their captives—they were simply negotiating leverage after things went wrong in the Fayaoué hostage-taking. In fact, as portrayed in the film, the hostages were about to be freed anyway. At the time, I wrote a lengthy narrative about the tragedy in my book *Blood on their Banner*—the ‘blood’ being that symbolised by the Kanak flag as being shed by the martyrs of more than a century of French rule:

As almost 300 gendarmes flown to Ouvéa searched for them, the militants demanded that the regional elections be abandoned and that a mediator be flown from France to negotiate for a real referendum on self-determination under United Nations supervision. They threatened to kill their hostages if their demands were not met.

Declaring on Radio Djiido that he was dismayed by the attack, Tjibaou blamed it on the ‘politics of violence’ adopted by the Chirac government against the Kanak people: ‘The [colonial] plunderers refuse to recognise their subversive lead,’ he said. ‘From

the moment they stole our country, they have tried to eliminate everybody who denounces their evil deeds. It has been like that since colonialism began.’ (Robie, p. 275)

Many of the 40 Kanaks in the film had no prior acting experience, but they are convincing in their roles because they speak from the heart. (Many are actually extended family members). On the other side, many of the French officers and soldiers also had limited acting experience. They were chosen for their military experience.

Kassovitz found it extremely difficult to cast a suitable actor for the role of Dianou: ‘I think there are only five Kanak actors listed in mainland France, and four of those were the wrong age.’ In the end the filmmaker opted for a 28-year-old Kanak law student and community broadcaster living at Clermont-Ferrand in metropolitan France. Iabe Lapacas recalls being impressed with the script when he first read it. But taking on an acting role like this is a tough and complicated assignment, especially culturally and politically for a younger man like him.

‘We don’t take an individual approach,’ he explained in an interview with *Femail*. ‘We have a place in the family that must be respected, and my place—as I’m not married—is as

a child. So I had to ask my parent’s permission. I wouldn’t have made the movie without it.’

One of the pleasing aspects about the film from a Kanak perspective is that this period of Kanak history through the mid and late 1980s—known as ‘*les évènements*’—has finally been told. And it is also acknowledged the assassination by the military of an earlier FLNKS leader Éloi Machoro in January 1985. ‘One of the conditions of the 1988 Matignon Accord was the amnesty that everybody on both sides wanted, including both the loyalists and *indépendantistes* back home,’ Lapacas recalls. (A decade later, the Nouméa Accord was signed, scheduling the transfer of sovereignty by 2018).

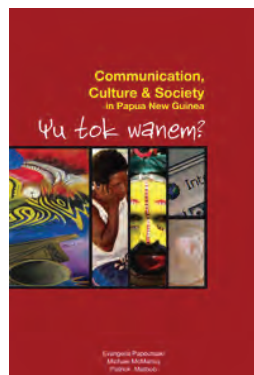
Trouble is, ‘amnesty’ is derived from the same Greek word as ‘amnesia’. Choosing an amnesty to avoid legal proceedings also resulted in memory loss. This film isn’t about taking sides. It simply tells the storybook events that happened but don’t feature in textbooks and aren’t taught in schools. Talking about this story means also talking about our history. (*Femail*, 2012)

This film will contribute to the healing of old wounds and raise awareness of the Kanak struggle like *Balibo* (Eisenhuth, 2010) has done in many respects for Timor-Leste.

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## COMMUNICATION, CULTURE AND SOCIETY IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: YU TOK WANEM?



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