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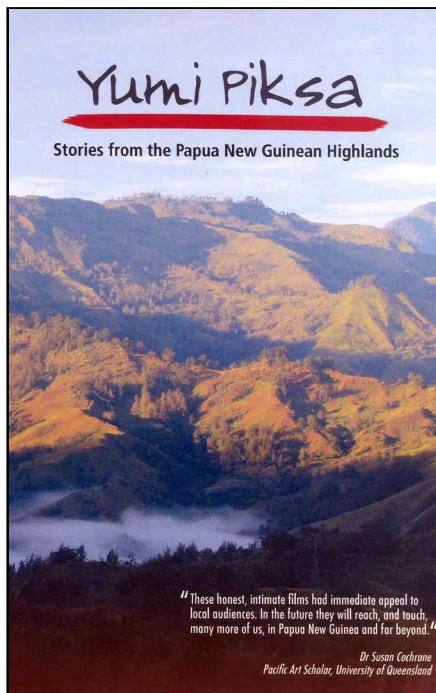
DR PHILIP CASS is a senior lecturer in the Department of Communication Studies at UNITEC, Auckland.

Highlanders hold on to culture and survival

Yumi Piksa: Stories from the Papua New Guinean Highlands, directed by Verena Thomas. Yumi Piksa. 2009, 35 min.
www.yumipiksa.org

THE TRILOGY of short films on this DVD records the lives of three Highlanders and their struggle to survive, support their families and keep a hold on their culture. Produced by a group of students from the University of Goroka who worked with German filmmaker Verena Thomas, these films are, on the surface, about the fear of losing culture and a future in which their descendants become *kulturlos*, that is, people who have lost their culture and become culturally lost.

However, that is merely the surface gloss, for while the films



certainly depict people struggling to cope with changes on a personal, cultural and artistic level, they are more deeply about adaptation, change for survival and, in the first film of the trilogy, about immense courage.

In *Mama Bilong Down Under*, Mama Lucindo looks after her children and grandchildren in a camp outside the fence surrounding the university. Hers is a typical story of the *grassroots* who live on the fringes of PNG's towns and cities. In many ways her story is universal; she could be living in a Brazilian *favela* and her problems would be the same.

She is eager to establish her right to live where she is, and whether she really has any traditional right to the land is immaterial. Time and usage have made it her own.

Like strong women the world over she worries about her children. She tries to send her grandchildren to school whenever she has enough money to pay some of their fees, sells home cooked food to passers-by and washes her clothes in the water from a broken outlet pipe. Hers is a struggle common to many: An education system that seems permanently closed off by the demand for fees she can rarely pay, no electricity or clean water and a life circumscribed by poverty.

Hers is also the story of strong women everywhere, women who cope and keep coping without husbands, woman who cope for the sake of their children and who cope because they have to give the next generation a chance. If this is a story about poverty and struggle it is also a story about courage.

Nokondi's Morning Call and *Levekuka Clay* can also be seen as stories about change, but not perhaps in a way the protagonists would recognise. In *Nokondi's Morning Call* local artist George Sari paints pictures of the mythical Nokondi. Sari is concerned about the problems of climate change and about the fact that people

no longer honour the ancient gods and mythical figures.

However, it is fair to ask which version of Nokondi he is talking about. Sari, who has co-authored one book, *Land of Nokondi*, emphasises Nokondi's role as an environmental guardian. In Simbu myth, however, Nokondi is not exactly a green role model. He keeps his wife and child locked up in a rock and fights battles on behalf of his clan. In the film Sari worries that young people ignore Nokondi and blames the problems caused by global warming on this rejection of the old ways. A young man interviewed for the film says his church (we are never told which one) has told him not to believe in Nokondi. The question which is not answered is which version of Nokondi is being rejected. Is it the oppressive, patriarchal big man or is it Sari's environmental demi-God, the transfigured Nokondi? *Nokondi's Morning Call* offers fragments of a larger story and poses more questions than its nine minutes can answer.