

Jim Marbrook is a television lecturer in AUT's School of Communication Studies.

Significant social documentary examines PNG missionary

Papa Bilong Chimbu, directed and produced by Verena Thomas. Documentary, 2008, 54min. Distributor: Ronin.

*P***A***P*A *Bilong Chimbu* is Verena Thomas' affectionate examination of the life of her great uncle John Nilles. Father Nilles was a German missionary who worked in the highlands of Papua New Guinea for more than 50 years. Thomas steers us through Father Nilles' career and life as we return with her to the Chimbu region to meet his friends, parishioners, those who he converted, educated and supported. To many of the Chimbu people Father Nilles was a 'kanaka—one of us'. To others he became the successor to Kawagle, the clan leader who first welcomed him to the region.



As we hear more about the mission work in the Chimbu area, we understand more clearly the social and spiritual contract that developed between Nilles and the clans and villagers of this area.

This documentary is strongest when it shows rather than explains. Thomas' reconnections with those who knew Father Nilles form a vital part. There is a warmth and honesty to the interviews and there is an obvious rapport between crew and subjects. Thomas' access to family letters also provides a remarkable view of the man himself. Fragments of these letters are skilfully placed. We build up a picture of a complex man who

not only had to become the new Kawagle but who also struggled to clearly understand the subtleties of those he was leading.

The archive material, which ranges from footage shot by Bob Connolly through to family films and photographs, gives the viewer a key historical context. But at times some of the formal elements of this documentary, such as animated Papuan stamps that bookend various sections, divert us from fully engaging in Father Nilles' story. They also take us away from Thomas' own journey to reconnect, discover and decipher Father Nilles, the missionary.

Thomas, currently doing a doctorate at the University of Technology, Sydney, does take a partisan approach to the analysis of Father Nilles and his work. We do learn about Vatican opposition to his plans to accept traditional marriage alongside Catholic marriage rites but we don't fully understand the impact of Catholicism on Chimbu customary life. However, what Thomas does do admirably is track the social and spiritual contract that Nilles agreed to when he was accepted as Kawagle's successor. There seems to be a force and charisma about Father Nilles. He flies planes over the Highlands to drop pamphlets that get him elected to Parliament. He is a speech-maker and fundraiser. But there are also ambiguities.

Thomas thought him 'brave' but when she got older she became critical. She 'loved her uncle, the man, but wasn't sure about her uncle, the missionary'.

There are hints of deeper cultural truths that, even for Nilles, remained unknown. He confesses in a letter that despite his long life among the Chimbu there were still levels to their culture, 'gut beliefs' and 'motives for action', that he did not understand. It is the inclusion of these types of insights from Father Nilles's letters that add a particular resonance to the core of this documentary.

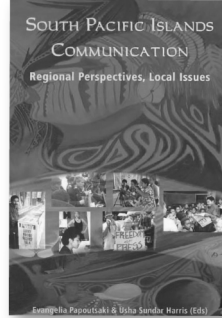
Papa Bilong Chimbu is not an advocacy piece and neither is it a purely journalistic examination of issues and beliefs. It must speak to Thomas' own family, and then to a wider viewing public but also to those who knew Nilles in Chimbu. The supplementary material that comes with this DVD—footage showing the moving community screenings in the Highlands—clearly demonstrates the importance of this documentary to local communities. Nilles's decision to return to Germany due to severe health problems made it impossible for him to fulfil the role that Kawagle's clan had expected.

In many ways, this documentary allows Nilles to return. Thomas's skill is in presenting us with a view

of her great uncle that can transcend linguistic and cultural divides. Thomas has made a significant social document that, in its own way, moves to heal a rupture between Nilles and the community he ultimately had to leave.

NEW

SOUTH PACIFIC COMMUNICATION



South Pacific Islands Communication: Regional Perspectives, Local Issues

Edited by Evangelia Papoutsaki and Usha
Sundar Harris

Significant new scholarly contributions on
communication issues by journalists and
researchers working around the region.

Published by the Asian Media, Information and Communication
Centre (Singapore), University of the South Pacific (Fiji) and the
Pacific Media Centre.

PACIFIC MEDIA CENTRE
AUT UNIVERSITY

Order from South Pacific Books Ltd

www.sthpac.netstep.co.nz

sales@southpacificbooks.co.nz

Content details @:

www.pmc.aut.ac.nz/publications.html

Price: NZ\$50

