

'THE LAND HAS EYES'

**OPENING ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY MAJOR-GENERAL
J.K. KONROTE (RET'D)
FIJI'S HIGH COMMISSIONER TO AUSTRALIA
DURING THE LAUNCH AND PREMIERE OF THE FILM IN CANBERRA
21 NOVEMBER 2005**

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentleman.

Good Evening

Ni Sa Bula Vinaka

Namaste

Noa'ia 'e mauri

First of all I believe it is appropriate that I acknowledge and thank the traditional indigenous owners of the Land, the elders and people of NGUNAWAAL (traditional owners of the land over which Canberra is situated) who are represented here tonight by? (TBC).

As Fiji's High Commissioner to the Commonwealth of Australia, I would also like to acknowledge and thank Mr Andrew Pike, The Managing Director, RONIN Films, Australia for according me the honour and privilege of addressing you very briefly during tonight's launch and premiere here in Canberra of the Film, 'THE LAND HAS EYES'.

2.

'THE LAND HAS EYES' which we are about to see is Fiji's first feature film which was written, directed and produced by Professor *Vilisoni Hereniko*, his lovely wife *Jeannette* and an entire film crew of about 14 x professionals who spent about 40 x days on the remote island of ROTUMA in the Fiji Islands.

Ladies and gentleman, at this juncture may I on your behalf acknowledge with pleasure the presence of Professor *Vilisoni, Jeannette Hereniko* together with *Ms Sapeta Taito* who played the lead role of *Viki* in the film, and welcome them to Canberra.

Vilisoni Hereniko is a Professor at the Centre for Pacific Islands Studies, University of Hawaii-Manoa; where he teaches Literature, Theatre and Film. In making the film he was ably assisted by his lovely wife *Jeannette Paulson Hereniko* who had been involved in Television and Film production for more than 30 x years and a team of very experienced and equally qualified film-makers like Corey Tong (an Independent Film Producer), Merata Mita (Executive Producer), Paul Atkins (Director of Photography), Rena Owen (Once Were Warriors fame) and American Actor James Davenport.

Before making the movie, Professor 'Vili' met an Indian movie-maker who gave him what he believed to be the best advice possible, "Look to your past, Retrace your life, then Share that Story".

3.

'THE LAND HAS EYES' portrays and highlights *Themes of Culture, Justice and Personal Freedom* from within the remote island of *Rotuma* in *Fiji*, deep in the South Pacific.

It is a positively uplifting story of a young girl, *Viki* who must somehow reconcile her devotion to the traditional ways of her people with her personal ambition of acquiring a modern education. It is a story of redemption as she endeavours to restore her family's status within the community after her father was wrongly accused, convicted and tried as a thief.

And it is also a story of *Viki's* ability to draw an inner strength from the island's mythical '*warrior woman*', the embodiment of the Rotuman proverb that states: "*The Land Has Teeth and Knows the Truth*".

Professor *Hereniko* is an accomplished author and playwright whose works have been produced and acclaimed internationally. '*The Land Has Eyes*' is his feature debut and the actors are mostly *Rotumans*, most of whom have not been inside a cinema to watch a feature movie before, let alone appeared in one. Indeed, a quantum leap for the small indigenous community of our home island of Rotuma.

4.

'The Land Has Eyes' premiered in the Sundance Film Selection last year at the Larsen Hall of the Harvard Graduate School of Education where it was an *Official Festival Selection* and continued to win praise and acclaim in film festivals in *Montreal, New York* and *Toronto* where it was named the *Best Dramatic Feature Film*.

At the *Waiora Maori Film Festival in New Zealand* on 2-6 June 2005, The Land Has Eyes won the *Premier Festival Prize* for the *Best Overall Entry*.

Following the Film's recent release in Fiji, the Fiji Audio Visual Commission through its Chairman, Mr Joe Mar announced that the country has endorsed and would like to recommend to the *Academy of Motion Picture, Arts and Science, Foreign Language Film Committee* that '*The Land Has Eyes*' be considered for an Oscar in its 78th Annual Academy Awards Competition. I believe that this is going to be held in the not too distant future?

In acknowledging Fiji's nomination for this prestigious Award, Professor Hereniko said;

5.

“Let this signal to the world that the indigenous people of the Pacific have stories that can be successfully told in movies that entertain and educate. May this nomination from Fiji encourage and empower other Pacific Islanders to tell their stories and persevere in getting their stories on the big screen.”

I also believe that this is the first time a Pacific Islander has had a feature film nominated for an Oscar by the Academy of Motion Picture, Arts and Science, Foreign Language Film Committee.

In making the film Professor Hereniko and the production team were faced with many problems and he was known to have remarked to a reporter that *it was perhaps the most difficult thing that he had ever done in his life?*

On that note may I once again congratulate Professor *Vili*, his lovely wife and Co-Producer of the Film, *Jeannette Paulson Hereniko*, the Production Team and the cast, particularly *Sapeta Taito* (Viki) for producing such a *masterpiece*.

6.

In conclusion I would like to echo a comment which was made by Professor Hereniko which is typical of the man, *modest and humble, yet very focussed, dedicated and has a strong will to persevere;*

“It is my hope that audiences everywhere will not only be entertained by this story, but will walk away with a precious sense about Rotuma, its culture and its people. More than ever before, may we all recognise that we need the wisdom of our ancestors as portrayed in the film. I want to express the ancient Rotuman belief that:

The Land Has Eyes

The Land Has Teeth

And Knows the Truth

May Justice Prevail, not just in the Film, but in real life as well”

Thank you

Vinaka saka vakalevu

Dhanyavat

Fai'aksia 'e garue lelei