

BETELNUT BISNIS

- a story from Papua New Guinea



A film by Chris Owen



Introduction

Having lived in Papua New Guinea for thirty years, filmmaker Chris Owen worked among people he knew well. His easy familiarity with his neighbours is obvious in the relaxed way that the Papua New Guineans answer his questions. They seem unconscious of the camera. It is also clear that Owen is genuinely concerned about the lives of those that he interviews. Owen is not an intrusive cameraman, but he is not disinterested. When people are seen catching a bus, buying and selling in the market, or getting water for the house, again there is no sign that they are performing for the camera: they wander, chat, hesitate, and when they meet someone it looks as though the encounter is un-staged.

The contrast is with films made by visiting crews who start filming within hours of leaving an aeroplane at Port Moresby's Jackson's Airport. They are concerned with the strange and dangerous and what they think viewers expect: palm trees bending over white sand beaches and lagoons, bare-breasted women, outrigger canoes, exotic masks, bird of paradise plumed dancers, dense jungle, the hint of dangerous snakes and crocodiles, and a suggestion that the young men wearing dark glasses are members of criminal gangs. In the Highlands, the visiting camera crews capture peaks disappearing into clouds, roads clinging to cliff faces and fearsome tribal warriors armed with an assortment of bows and

arrows, home-made guns and assault rifles. These film crews are gone in a few days, they have no further contact with those they filmed, and do not remember their names.

Synopsis

In *Betelnut Bisnis*, the central character, Lukas Kaima, from Chimbu Province, is living in Goroka, the main town in the neighbouring Eastern Highlands. Like an increasing number of Papua New Guineans he is living away from his clan lands, but for those trying to make their way in the towns, finding cheap land and shelter is always hard. He and his wife Kopu have an agreement with local landowners who allow them to live on poor country on the edge of town. It is not suitable for gardening so they

Papua New Guinea

Once the separate Australian Territory of Papua and the Australian Territory of New Guinea held under trust from the United Nations, Papua New Guinea gained its independence in 1975 under the premiership of Michael Somare. In 2004, Somare, now Sir Michael, is again Prime Minister.

The population is over 5,000,000 and growing rapidly. Papua New Guinea has a higher population than New Zealand.

At independence, only half the children of school age were in primary schools, most of the adult population was illiterate, life expectancy was just over forty and infant mortality was high when compared with other low income countries. Most of these indicators have improved in thirty years of independence (adult literacy is probably now over 60%) but most people think that government efficiency has declined, corruption has increased and the country has become less safe as theft and violence has spread.

The main exports of Papua New Guinea are the crops (copra, palm oil, coffee, cocoa, rubber and vanilla), timber, gold, copper and oil and gas.

When Papua New Guinea changed to its own currency, the dollar became a kina and the cents toia. Both names were taken from traditional shell money. One kina is now worth about half an Australian dollar, making imported goods expensive. The high cost of rice and canned foods makes life harder for people in towns.

Australia has been providing about \$350 million in aid each year to Papua New Guinea and this is to be increased under the five-year enhanced cooperation agreement negotiated in 2003-4. Nearly 300 Australian police and public servants will work in Papua New Guinea to try and increase the government's capacity to provide services for its people.



cannot grow their own food and the only water is distant and dirty.

Kaima has known Chris Owen since 2002. As a willing and skilled bush carpenter he worked with Chris, but apart from other casual labouring and taking the night shift as a security guard for the compound where Chris lives, he has no regular income.

As he, his wife and members of his family are betelnut chewers, they need cash above the basic amount needed to pay for food. Also, they want money for school fees and emergencies. In Papua New Guinea there is no free education and almost no welfare system. Without pensions or unemployment benefits, people simply have to look after themselves. Many look to bisnis, a

Tok Pisin (Papua New Guinean pidgin) expression taken from the English word 'business', but having a wider meaning to include most money making ventures. Lukas long considers whether he might try his luck in the betelnut bisnis, and when he has some money he decides to risk it buying betelnut. He goes to Lae in the small buses on which the drivers yodel their destination to collect passengers, buys betelnut in the market, and returns, hopeful that he will make money.

But after his wife has sold it, there is no profit. Lukas tries again by going to Madang, but again there is no success. The betelnut bisnis requires a detailed knowledge of which sort of nuts people like to chew and the seasonal variations in prices. Also, Lukas is only

bringing back one bag of betelnut, and he has to cover the cost of his bus fare and loss of the betelnut that he eats, or gives away to friends, or sells on credit. Lukas remains dependent on his uncertain income from labouring and working as a security guard.

Jane Tamas is another significant person in the film and like Chris, she is a participant in both the events and the filming of them. A researcher and production assistant on the film, Jane is a young woman from the coast. She appears neatly dressed and competent, but we learn that she has had only five years of primary schooling and knows that she has to improve her education if she is to get on in life. But to do that she needs extra money. She teams up with Lukas' wife to go

The Highlands

In the centre of Papua New Guinea there are five highland provinces: Eastern Highlands, Chimbu, Western Highlands, Enga and Southern Highlands. The highest peak, Mt Wilhelm, is 4500 metres (Mt Kosciuszko is 2230). When Europeans first tried to travel inland they were confronted by dense vegetation and harsh terrain. Ahead they could see more towering peaks and they thought that the centre of the island of New Guinea was extremely mountainous and few people lived there. It was not until the 1920s and 1930s that European missionaries, gold prospectors and missionaries learnt that between the ranges were high, fertile valleys and dense populations. Nearly half the population of Papua New Guinea live in the Highlands.

In the 1930s Australian government officers began bringing the Highlanders under central government administration. No battles of the Second World War reached the Highlands and many Highlanders scarcely knew that a world war was being fought in New Guinea. It was not until the

1950s that government authority reached thousands of Highlanders. Many had only twenty years of Australian administration.

An enterprising people, the Highlanders were soon leaving their villages (or scattered hamlets as many Highlanders did not live in concentrated villages) and trying to find work in the towns and the plantations on the coast. This movement was assisted by the government sponsored Highlands Labour Scheme under which men contracted to work on plantations on the coast and in the islands. Lukas' father was one who left home to work on a coastal plantation.

The longest and most important roads in Papua New Guinea connect the Highlands with Lae and Madang. While 85% of Papua New Guineans live in rural communities, many people, including thousands of Highlanders, live in the towns.



into the betelnut bisnis. Through her relatives on the coast she buys betelnut and brings it back for Kopu to sell in the market. There is just a chance that with their complementary skills the two women will succeed. While there are many successful male businessmen in Papua New Guinea, it is often said that women are the best traders in the market and the ones most likely to look after any small profits. This is a film of hardship and poverty, but not one without hope. Most of all, it is a revelation of the lives of ordinary people in Papua New Guinea—the people who do not appear on Australian television screens or in newspapers.

Curriculum Links

The film was made for SBS television, conforms to the fifty-two minutes of the television hour, and is appropriate

for an adult audience. With its gentle and absorbing revelations of basic human ambitions it is also appropriate for tertiary students and the final three years of secondary school. Its primary relevance is to the social sciences and any courses where the aim is to extend understanding of the region. Given the increasing involvement of Australia in peacemaking on Bougainville, the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands and Enhanced Cooperation in Papua New Guinea, this is of growing importance.

Betelnut Bisnis could also be used in English classes where the main themes—relationships between people and their prospects in a difficult environment—can be discussed. For English (or language) students there is also the issue of the common language, Tok Pisin, used by Papua New Guineans

when they wish to speak to those from another language group. (See 'Language' overleaf.)

Both Chris Owen and Andrew Pike have distinguished careers in film and their work should always be of interest to students of media.

The filmmakers

Andrew Pike and his wife Marilyn Fitzpatrick have managed theatres in Canberra and run the company Ronin Films. They have assisted in the production and distribution of major feature films such as *Strictly Ballroom* and *Shine*, and they have been involved in many award-winning Australian documentaries.

From 1976, Chris Owen was involved in the training of Papua New Guinean

Betelnut

The tall betelnut palm (*Areca catechu*) grows on the coast and is commonly seen close to many villages. Most betelnut palms do not flourish in the Highlands although a few varieties are cultivated there.

Betelnut chewers skin the nuts, chew the fruit, and to get the maximum impact add lime and the leaves or catkins of the vine, betel pepper. The chewers' quid produces scarlet saliva, and when the chewers spit a red stain is left. Those who use it claim it has a nicotine-like effect, giving them a feeling of well-being and a greater capacity for work. In Tok Pisin betelnut is buai and the pepper is daka. The term spak (from the English 'spark') means to be drunk, influenced by a drug.

Chewing betelnut is a wide-spread habit among peoples from east Africa to India, Southeast Asia and Melanesia. As the film notes, it is the most

commonly consumed drug after nicotine, alcohol and caffeine.

Where it has long been used on the coast of Papua New Guinea betelnut is important in ritual and etiquette, and it has left its mark on artefacts such as the delicately carved lime spatulas and gourds. Some communities do not allow children to chew betelnut. But betelnut is new to most Highlanders who acquired the habit in postwar meetings with coastal people and with the opening up of airways and roads that enabled the growth in the betelnut trade.

Growing, transporting and selling betelnut is a major industry and as most of it is outside the formal cash economy its full extent is difficult to measure. In spite of attempts by some missions and governments to ban or limit the habit, the number of betelnut chewers has been growing.



filmmakers, a role he often carried out by working with them on projects in which they had considerable initiative. Owen's own films have varied from carefully observed ethnographic films and contemporary documentaries to the feature film *Tukana*, made on Bougainville with a cast which was speaking Tok Pisin and was new to film. Over the last twenty years most serious filmmakers who have gone to Papua New Guinea have called on Owen for advice and they have used his expertise and local knowledge, giving him work as an additional cameraman, sound recordist or editor. Apart from *Tukana*, another award-winning film by Chris Owen is *Man without Pigs* (1990), and again Andrew Pike worked with him on that film.

In contrast to *Betelnut Bisnis*, *Man without Pigs* is about a Papua New Guinean, John Waiko, who has a doctorate from the Australian National University and went on to become Minister for Education in the Papua New Guinea parliament. But *Man without Pigs* places John in his home village, where other skills, knowledge and wealth are significant.

Chris Owen said in a recent interview

for the press statement that accompanied the release of *Betelnut Bisnis*:

I'm sure ... that my presence with a camera influenced some events, but I was embedded in the process, and I just show what we did on a day-to-day basis—which included the making of this film. So essentially the camera is there and I'm there. I'm in the film, a participant observer, to use a phrase that I like.

Chris Owen does not confront those he films, either with his camera or his questions. The camera is rarely hard up on the face of those interviewed; more often Chris takes a longer shot so that we see people in what to them are familiar surroundings. While he avoids tough questions, Owen's technique encourages his informants to reveal more about themselves and their hopes and values than they would under tough interrogation. He makes no overt comments on the behaviour or values of Lukas and others, but the information is there in words and images for the viewers to draw their own conclusions. Because of Owen's technique and because we have been led to an understanding of the material conditions and

culture in which his interviewees live, any critical judgments are likely to be sympathetic rather than hostile.

At the end of *Betelnut Bisnis*, Chris Owen reconsiders where he should work as a filmmaker; this film marks a significant moment in his life and in the history of film in Papua New Guinea.

Language

There are many varieties of Pidgin English throughout the world, and those spoken in Papua New Guinea, the Solomons, Vanuatu and parts of Australia have significant differences. In Papua New Guinea there are over 700 different languages; no one Indigenous language is spoken by ten per cent of the population; and many are spoken by less than one per cent. There is a further complication: some languages are completely unrelated or only distantly related. Once Papua New Guineans from different places began meeting they were in need of a lingua franca.

Papua New Guinea Pidgin or Tok Pisin (from 'Talk Pidgin') developed along the north coast of the mainland and in





the New Guinea islands. It may have been used by white English speakers attempting to trade, gain information or instruct house servants and plantation workers, but it rapidly became the language of New Guineans speaking to each other, especially where New Guineans from different languages were living close together and had to communicate with each other. Among New Guineans, Tok Pisin was soon the language of the plantation labourers, the police, the prisons and the towns. Even during the German administration of New Guinea from 1884 to 1914 Tok Pisin was a common language, and when the Australians arrived in 1914 they proclaimed their control to the New Guineans of Rabaul in what they thought was Tok Pisin.

Although much of the vocabulary of Tok Pisin has been derived from English, many words from other languages (including, of course, from Papua New Guinea) have been included. The rules of grammar differ from English and have been influenced by Papua New Guinean languages, and pronunciation has largely been determined by Papua New Guineans. English speakers, when they first hear Tok Pisin, cannot

recognize most words derived from English and take some time to grasp the grammar.

There are now thousands of Papua New Guineans growing up away from their home areas and for many of them Tok Pisin is their first language. Tok Pisin is an official language of Papua New Guinea, is often heard on radio, and many politicians use it to reach the maximum number of listeners. Used by fluent speakers, Tok Pisin can be rich in metaphors and colloquial expressions, and is often preferred for jokes and anecdotes.

National Issues

Although *Betelnut Bisnis* is centred on the daily lives of individuals, viewers are reminded of national issues that may at any time impinge on those lives.

1. Politics and Corruption

The scenes of the political rally reveal something of Papua New Guinea's turbulent democracy. Rare among similarly ex-colonial states, Papua New Guinea has held regular elections and governments have changed as a result

of these elections. People are keen to participate in the democratic process and many aspire to be candidates, but the comments of the bystanders reveal that they expect little from their elected leaders. They know they will be promised roads, bridges, schools and hospitals, but seem to accept that government services will continue to decline. They see their politicians as corrupt or ineffective, and over half of them will be rejected at the next election.

2. HIV/AIDS

On the bus to Lae, Lukas travels with a theatre troupe. Later they are seen performing at the market: they entertain but have an explicit aim to encourage the use of condoms. It is the film's reminder that in Papua New Guinea HIV/AIDS is already a serious problem, and there are fears of it becoming the scourge that it is in parts of Africa. Much transmission is among heterosexuals; parents of young children are casualties, and the health system is ill equipped to provide the necessary long term care or those drugs that require careful monitoring. In a country where many are illiterate, few newspapers circulate and there is little television





outside Port Moresby, street theatre has been one way of communicating important public welfare notices.

3. Law and Order

While no violence and no raskols (members of criminal gangs) are seen on screen, there are visual and spoken references to law and order problems: the high fence around the houses where Chris Owen lives, the employment of guards, the talk of break-ins attempted, and Lukas' praise of Madang's safety compared with Lae and Goroka. Ordinary Papua New Guineans are often under threat of violence or robbery. The frequency of crime and fear of crime stops them doing what would be done elsewhere without a thought for personal security.

4. The Australian Legacy

At the market in Goroka, a man says that conditions were better when Australia was in control. As Papua New Guinea had full internal self-government from 1973, it seems unlikely that he is speaking from firsthand experience. Perhaps he is expressing what has become a romanticized version of

the past. In any case, his point of view evades two important issues: could Australia have continued to control a more populous and increasingly turbulent Papua New Guinea, contain the civil war on Bougainville and suppress the revival of tribal fighting—something already underway before the Australians left? And to what extent are the present problems in Papua New Guinea a result of Australia's failure to entrench those institutions needed for the efficient functioning of a modern state?

This film is an engaging, often gentle exposition of ordinary lives—but the tough issues that come with any recreational drug (such as child users) and the broader national issues are not evaded.

Music

When groups meet in Papua New Guinea's suburbs and villages there is usually music. It ranges from traditional drums, flutes and conch shells through makeshift string bands using aged and repaired guitars and ukuleles, to dependence on the most sophisticated sound technology. Both songs in *Betelnut Bisnis*—'Sekim Pocket' by the

LBX2 band and 'Buai Buai' by Georgianna Toro—were written for the film. Chris Owen and the film team cooperated with LBX2, a band from Bilbil, Madang, in the production and lyrics of 'Sekim Pocket'. Note the use of the melodious, simple percussion instrument—the bamboo pipes belted by a rubber thong. Like those going into the betelnut trade, the young men and women who form bands hope that one day they might have financial success. Georgianna Toro is a Bougainvillean woman now living in the Highlands. She is not a betelnut chewer. The LBX2 men are all enthusiastic chewers and have their own palms. Chris Owen has tried betelnut, will give it to his Papua New Guinean guests, but has not himself acquired the habit.

Before Viewing

Before seeing *Betelnut Bisnis* students should be familiar with some of Papua New Guinea's basic geography (the location of the Highlands, Goroka, Lae and Madang), its history (the late extension of Australian administration to the Highlands, the granting of independence in 1975), and something of contemporary social and economic





conditions. Much information about betelnut is revealed during the film.

Further Study

Sean Dorney, *Papua New Guinea: People, Politics and History since 1975*, ABC Books, Sydney, 2000, is one of the best of recent general surveys.

Hank Nelson, *Taim Bilong Masta: The Australian Involvement with Papua New Guinea*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1982 (reprinted and available in sound) gives the earlier history.

Sinclair Dinnen, *Law and Order in a Weak State: Crime and Politics in Papua New Guinea*, Crawford House, Adelaide, 2001.

Meanjin, Vol. 62 No. 3, 2003 devoted all articles to Papua New Guinea.

First Contact (1982) *Joe Leahy's Neighbours* (1989) and *Black Harvest* (1992), made by Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson make a remarkable trilogy of Highlands films. See also the book: Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson, *First Contact: New Guinea Highlanders Encounter the Outside World*, Viking,

New York, 1987.

Students who access the web sites of Port Moresby's two national daily newspapers, the *Post-Courier* and *The National*, can quickly grasp something of the main issues confronting people: <http://www.postcourier.com.pg> and <http://www.thenational.com.pg>

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