

Strong Connections

A film by Martin Maden

On a beautiful, Pacific-post card beach, a wailing swallow sounds the stern warning of an impending tragedy. And true to that warning, a tragic drowning occurs in the sea. Mekdui Konga dies and his death changes the lives and destiny of his friends and his family. From the coasts of Papua New Guinea and right up to the highlands the news of the tragedy spreads and along with it, the shock and the sadness.

This is the opening sequence of a new film, "Strong Connections", which will screen on EMTV on Sunday, the 8th of October 2000. "Strong Connections" is an original screenplay written by Martin Maden and funded by GTZ under the "Promotion of Vocational Training" programme. The film first follows the adventures of Benedict, a young Tolai man (played by Francis Maden) whose Mt. Hagen friend Mekdui dies in the sea. The grieving Benedict then takes his dead friend's body back to Mt. Hagen where he meets Mekdui's father, Apa Konga (played by Hitch Loape). After mourning the loss of his son and after the performance of very elaborate rituals, the old man goes on a pilgrimage in an attempt to understand the aspirations of Mekdui. He decides to enter and become an active participant in the world of Vocational Centres. This was the world into which Mekdui had invested all his dreams. In his journey, Apa Konga finds an ally in a young lady Yalda, (played by Olivia Wilson) and in Benedict, who becomes a surrogate son to the old man.

In writing the screenplay, Martin Maden placed a lot of emphasis in the values that we as Melanesians still have with regard to human life. The main characters of the film are Apa Konga, an old man from the Highlands, Benedict, a young Tolai man and Yalda, a young lady of mixed parentage. Within this group, there are already the contradictions and contrasts of age and the generation gap. Then there is the issue of gender and the right of equal participation both of men and women of different ages and cultural backgrounds.

Papua New Guinea has resources that are supposed to ensure all citizens a comfortable livelihood. But where do we fail ourselves? A greater part of the answer lies in our own attitudes, which then govern

our positive or negative aspirations. While we may blame a system that fails to deliver fairly and consistently, our children in the meantime, are dying from preventable illnesses and suffering the indignity of illiteracy and lack of proper and appropriate education. We are forced everyday to make very critical decisions even regarding our basic rights. Gone are the days when our elders were in control of our social harmony and political destiny. We live in a new system where our traditional elders are alienated from our processes and progress.

What then, are the appropriate options and choices? If the system should totally fail, the load as we know, will always fall back onto the shoulders of ordinary people. And we the ordinary people had better have the basic education and appropriate skills that will help to sustain our micro economic systems. We also cannot ignore the traditional skills and systems that served Papua New Guinea during our stone age cultures nor the skills and systems that have kept many PNG communities prospering without any basic government support. The real resource of Papua New Guinea is our people. It is people we treasure and that is why we Melanesians always take care of each other in times of hardship.

Far from being controversial, "Strong Connections" is a film that promotes the work and role of Vocational Centres in Papua New Guinea. It is from these institutions that we often draw the crucial modern skills that can supplement our own systems of survival, self help and community development. Vocational Centres are national treasures that we do take for granted. "Strong Connections" is 75 minutes long and features original music by Denis Crowdy and Tony Subam. We are also treated to the wonderful singing voice of rising star and female vocalist, Georgianna Toro, who sings the title song, "Strong Connections".