

TANNA gets tanned...

The movie takes us to the serene and peaceful life of the Yakel tribe on the remote island of Tanna on the Pacific Ocean. Beautifully woven around their customs and rituals it pleases our eyes and minds in a seamless way. The absence of time and material as we otherwise know in our world makes us wonder about the foolishness and vacuum that surrounds our lives. Our madness for material possession and emptiness of relations pop up often as we move through the nature-rich frames of the rainforests and events during the first part of the movie. Though they all have just a sheath to cover the genitals or the women barely have clothing made of plant fibers, we hardly feel any nudity as this gels without any sexual connotation into the movie's theme.

The spectacular shots of an active volcano spray illuminating spark of nature's beauty. The active volcano is considered to be the house of Yahul, a Spirit Mother who teaches wisdom, respect and knowledge. However, the apparent peace does not last forever as the Imedin tribe again threatens the Yakel tribe, accusing them for the bad crops. The clubbing of a senior member of the Yakel tribe forces its chief to go to the supreme leader of the various tribes to seek peace, ensuing in the exchange of the sacred Kava plant and pigs as signs of a peaceful co-existence. Further, the Yakel chief promises to gift the *just-initiated young woman* Wawa to a young man in the Imedin tribe, shocking Wawa and her lover Dain, who is the grandson of the Yakel chief and whose parents had been brutally killed by the Imedin members some time ago. Banished by their own members and having no way to get their love accepted by the chief or fellow-members, they elope in a futile attempt to seek refuge elsewhere. Chased by the furious and vengeful members of the Imedin tribe to restore their wounded pride at the potential loss of the promised bride; and those of the Yakel tribe who wants to ensure the return of peace by bringing back Wawa, the lovers find themselves forced to take the ultimate step of committing suicide by consuming a poisonous mushroom.

This true incident of 1987 forced the Yakel tribe to accept love marriage in order to prevent further thinning of the already endangered community that had refused to accept the modern developments and attempts of religious institutions and government bodies to move away from their traditional life in the vast expanse of the forest. Nobody leaves the movie hall without a heavy heart, feeling an immense amount of sorrow for the lovers who chose the lap of Yahul as the place for eternal union. This sorrow slowly transforms into a deep appreciation and respect for the directors Martin Butler and Bentley Dean who had to stay for seven long months inside the tribal communities to make this movie that has been winning awards at almost every international film festival, with a premiere in Venice. The admiration grows further as we understand that all performers in the movie were real tribal people without any previous association with acting or the world of movies.

This appreciation and respect quickly degenerate into an abysmal despicement for the same filmmakers when we see a “making of Tanna” video on the Internet. The protagonists – including a small girl who plays the pivotal role of the loving and loyal sister Selin – arrive at a modern airport in Australia, all dressed in a visibly uncomfortable shirts and jeans. The directors are seen excited to take them through the city, the shopping malls with overabundance, leaving the Yakel guests completely out of waters. What shocks more is the so-called red carpet event at the Venice festival where we see these innocent tribals showcased in their tribal clothing before hundreds of guests in lounge suits and the best of fashion products. Thankfully the directors seemed to have allowed the young Wawa to cover the upper part of her body with more than what she normally has in her real habitat. What a disgusting sight and how pitiful for the innocent Yakel members to be thrown out to such a show.

The thoughts moved from Venice to Attappady in Kerala where senseless efforts by government agencies to *uplift* the tribals have terribly failed to even sustain the natural way of life they were used to. Pulling them out of their huts and agricultural fields and pushing them into the concrete, row houses and weekly rations, forcing them to a life of freebies and doing nothing while resorting to excessive usage of illicit liquor and country hashish. That way the modern society has succeeded in uprooting the basic fabric of their life, without foreseeing the consequences and leaving us wonder whether we would ever be able to bring them back to their original emotional and material settings. From a life of simplicity and inner peace, they are today undoubtedly in an unsettled group of humans in their new settlements.

Going by this example, I wonder whether the same has already happened to the Yakel or Imedin tribe in a world, which was completely unknown to the majority of us until this movie was released. It is left to apprehend, whether they are subjected to endless number of tourists flocking to their habitats as curious Homo sapiens, as we always have been.

Tanna, the movie has indeed made its success what the makers had intended to reach. But the island and its people are probably never going to be the same Tanna.