

## VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

From the Visual Anthropology Review Editors

### An Opportunity to Sample and Reflect

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*Visual Anthropology Review Editors*

Over the years, we have read many reviews in this section, have written a few, and have seen our own films reviewed. So it was an honor to be asked to follow Marc Moskowitz as the new editors for the visual anthropology section of *American Anthropologist*. Marc's tenure saw an increased number of reviews, an effort to underscore the synergy between written and visual accounts, and sensitivity to the paradigms that new technologies of acquisition and propagation make possible. We look forward to continuing these initiatives.

Our own involvement in visual anthropology spans the early days of Super-8 film for data collection and the Gardner–Rouch–Marshall era through to the present where our film on the Himalayan village where we have worked for many years turned up pirated on a website put up by a villager. He accompanied it with a statement claiming that it advanced “understanding by presenting with dignity and respect the accomplishments and evolving history of the Yolmo people of Nepal” (Yolmiculturehunter n.d.). What could we say—it was everything we had ever hoped for! That film cost us about \$50,000 in film, processing, and postproduction, and we had to carry a VHS player and tele-

vision set up to the village to show it. Our latest film there cost \$100 for tape and batteries, and it now vies for YouTube viewers with films of the same events taken by the subjects themselves.

This is an exciting time in visual anthropology. The proliferation of inexpensive imaging devices, editing software, and distribution avenues has opened purely visual discourse to an enormous number of people. Digital images and videos are electronically exchanged; people who once were the subjects of anthropological films make them; videos comment on other videos. This review section is part of a conversation, an opportunity to sample and reflect on the range of subjects, approaches, and concerns of the vast stream of anthropology in visual media. This includes not only films but also photography, museum displays, the Internet, and experimental work with visual imagery in the wider anthropological community. We welcome suggestions and hope that many of you will agree to provide reviews and content for this section.

#### REFERENCE CITED

Yolmiculturehunter

N.d. About Yolmiculturehunter. <http://www.youtube.com/user/Yolmiculture>, accessed December 12, 2008.

#### Film Reviews

### Singing Pictures: Women Painters of Naya

Lina Fruzzetti, Ákos Östör, and Aditi Nath Sarkar, dirs. 40 min. Color. Watertown: Documentary Educational Resources, 2005.

### Songs of a Sorrowful Man

Ákos Östör, Lina Fruzzetti, and Aditi Nath Sarkar, dirs. 35 min. Color. Watertown: Documentary Educational Resources, 2009.

Frank J. Korom

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The scroll-painting bards of West Bengal, India, known as Patuas (or Chittrakars), are well on their way to becoming the most celebrated subaltern community in India. In recent

years, two books and three other films have come out about them, all of which focus on the village of Naya, which has come to be known as “the village of painters.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, with the help of the European Union, the village became “museumified” in 2010 when a *pat mela* (scroll festival) was held there. Naya had previously been an unassuming place with a



**FIGURE 1.** Once principally about Hindu gods and goddesses, scrolls today include contemporary issues such as HIV/AIDS. (Courtesy of Documentary Educational Resources)

population of roughly 1,000, of which approximately 11–12 percent comprised the semi-itinerant Patuas, who lived in their own distinctly demarcated neighborhood named after them (*patuapara*).

The Patuas' caste occupation is painting narrative scrolls that they use to accompany the performance of short songs (see Figure 1). As they sing, they unravel the mostly vertical scrolls one frame at a time. The framed image loosely corresponds to the verse being sung by the bard. Traditionally, these talented performers sang songs about Hindu gods and goddesses (and a few about Muslim saints), but with the encroachment of modernity, their collective repertoire began expanding to incorporate contemporary events, ranging from British cruelty during the colonial period to, in more recent years, the *Titanic* film and the tragedy of 9/11. It is the Patuas' resilience and adaptability that has enabled them to continue their caste occupation continuously, despite numerous early 20th-century commentators adhering to romantic nationalism who opined that they would become extinct in just a matter of years.<sup>2</sup> This has not happened, and all indications, including those provided in the films reviewed here, suggest that the tradition remains vi-

brant, despite abject poverty and social marginalization due to the Patuas' low-caste status and lack of education.

Of the five films on this subject, *Singing Pictures* and *Songs of a Sorrowful Man* are by far the best. The Bhattacharyya film (2004) is amateurish, thrown together rather haphazardly, while both *Gone to Pat* (Bhaumik 2005) and *Mulaqat* (Parente and Pinheiro 2010) display an overly romanticized view of the Patuas and their lifestyle. In contrast, the two films reviewed here are starkly real in their portrayal of the Patuas' plight. They present the Patua tradition in its contemporary context, with a focus on the role of women in the first film and a stress on the senior male scroll painter, known as *guru* (teacher), in the second. *Singing Pictures* opens with a series of quick establishing shots, then shifts to a young male singer singing his version of the 9/11 tragedy. Some lead-in text emphasizes the recent and visible rise of women in the tradition. We then view an elderly matron mixing paints made from organic raw materials, after which the woman's son and daughter are introduced, both of whom live and work together side-by-side. Swarna Chitrakar, who is illiterate, stresses the symbiotic relationship she has with her brother, who writes down her compositions and critiques her work for her. She also sings his new songs, helping him to fit the verses into preestablished rhythms and meters. By the end of the scene, the viewer gets a good sense of the importance that the extended family plays in nurturing the tradition. There is then another shift to the recently established Naya Women's Self Help Group; this portion of the film is comprised of individual and group interviews. Interspersed with the interviews are scenes of complete songs being sung by the entire assembly of women, which is rare (it is a solo art, for the most part), but such scenes exemplify both Hindu and Muslim themes.

Although the first film does not address men (beyond their negative penchant for beating their women) or religion to any great extent, the second one, *Songs of a Sorrowful Man*, does. Here the focus is on Dukhushyam Chitrakar, who is the senior painter in the village. He is the one responsible for teaching the women to paint in the first place in the 1970s. The film follows this quirky individual through his daily routines, from painting and singing to praying to drinking tea and philosophizing. The impression we get is that Dukhushyam is a cosmopolitan individual who easily blends in wherever he goes. The film begins, for example, with him singing an autobiographical song that highlights some of the more extreme events in his life, such as the composition of his first song and his first arrest for composing politically controversial lyrics about India's dominant Congress Party.

Dukhushyam's religious views are equally idiosyncratic. He states that the Patuas are "like Sufis" but not quite. In essence, they are perennialists, believing that all religions are one. It does not matter, therefore, if one goes by the designation Hindu (as they previously did) or Muslim (as they do now). In fact, the *guru* is fond of saying that they are "na Hindu, na Musulman" [neither Hindu nor Muslim]. This poignant phrase aptly sums up the community as a whole. They live in perpetual liminality. As one male Patua elder

states in conversation with Dukhushyam in this film, Hindus “despise” us, as do Muslims (the term in Bengali is *ghrina* [hate], which is much more intense emotionally). This is the dilemma that the Patuas face. Despite the fact that they have achieved international fame, they still live on the margins of Indian society, as the films under review here make quite clear.

## NOTES

1. See Bhattacharyya 2004; Bhaumik 2005; Hauser 1998; Korom 2006; Parente and Pinheiro 2010.
2. See, for example, Korom 2010.

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2010 *Mulaqat*. 70 min. São Paulo, Brazil: Interior Produções.

# Owners of the Water: Conflicts and Collaboration over Rivers (Ö Tede'wa)

Laura Graham, David Hernández Palmar, and Caimi Waiassé, dirs. 34 min. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2009.

## Brian Brazeal

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In *Owners of the Water*, Laura Graham collaborates with filmmakers from the Wayú and Xavante tribes to produce a documentary video chronicling a nascent protest movement. Members of the Xavante tribe find themselves threatened by toxic effluents from soybean farms in the central Brazilian state of Mato Grosso. These fertilizers and pesticides pollute their sacred Rio das Mortes (The River of the Dead). Xavante tribesmen block a bridge over the Rio das Mortes and, thus, bring the traffic in agroindustrial products to a temporary halt (see Figure 1). Just as interesting and important as their

daylong protest was their use of media technologies to draw attention to their plight.

Graham and her indigenous collaborators chronicle every aspect of this protest, and they interview important participants. We see the meetings where demonstrations were planned. We meet the principal organizer as he seeks the permission of village elders to put those plans into action. We see tribe members' confrontations with the police, angry motorists, and representatives of FUNAI (Fundação Nacional do Índio [National Indian Foundation]), the Brazilian federal agency charged with administering indigenous territories. We also see scenes from the editing bays where the international, multicultural crew brought this film to life.



FIGURE 1. Xavante tribesmen block a bridge over the Rio das Mortes and bring traffic to a temporary halt. (Courtesy of Documentary Educational Resources)

In the past few years, Brazil has become the world's leading producer of soybeans. But their success has come at a price. As more and more lands are opened up to soy cultivation, ecosystems such as tropical forests and the arid *sertão* (desert backlands) and *cerrado* (tropical savannah) are lost. Rivers are diverted and depleted for irrigation. Those that remain are deluged by agrottoxins from the runoff of the soybean farms. These same rivers are an integral part of the way of life of South America's indigenous peoples. They provide water and fish that sustain tribe members' bodies. They also provide sacred, ceremonial spaces that maintain traditional ways of life. Threats to the rivers are thus threats to native peoples. However, these threats go unnoticed in Brazil, where economic policy focuses on the production of commodities for export.

And so the native peoples of Brazil take matters into their own hands. Their protest is peaceful and seems to be greeted with sympathy by many of the motorists whose paths they obstruct. Even officers of Brazil's military police seem to treat the indigenous people with calm respect and some deference (although one wonders if the presence of so many cameras may have assisted in this regard). Tensions escalate briefly when a crew of angry motorists demands that the police "kill these Indians." Graham's camera gets ripped from its tripod and flung to the ground by an individual demanding to know whether "only Indians have rights." But even this situation is defused, and Graham's footage is saved. In the late afternoon, the indigenous people furled their banners, and traffic was again allowed to flow unimpeded.

Graham is to be congratulated for bringing this collaboration to a successful conclusion. This film will bring knowledge of the struggles of the Xavante and other indigenous peoples to a wider audience than could ever be reached by protests alone. This film is in English, Spanish, and Portuguese as well as several indigenous languages. Subtitles are available in English, Spanish, and Portuguese to facilitate its diffusion to the widest possible audience. The indigenous members of the production team clearly had creative control over the cinematography and editing process. This occasionally seems to be a mixed blessing. The film might have profited from closer attention to the techniques of continuity editing, field audio recording, and documentary cinematography. But attentive audience members will not see the impact of this film diminished by its occasional technical imperfections.

*Owners of the Water* will be of interest to professors teaching courses on the indigenous peoples of Latin America as well as on the anthropology of protest movements, applied anthropology, and ecological anthropology. Visual anthropologists will find that it is a useful model for incorporating the voices and the aesthetics of the people with whom we work, both in front of and behind the camera. The struggles of indigenous people like the Xavante will only continue as Brazil ratchets up its soybean production. This film could serve as an inspiration to indigenous communities across Brazil and the wider world to use digital technologies in the struggle to maintain the ecosystems on which they depend.

## Sifinja—The Iron Bride

Valerie Hänsch, dir. 70 min. Bayreuth, Germany: Institute of African Studies, University of Bayreuth, 2009.

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Travel on the vast unpaved tracks between Sudan's small towns has for decades involved an unusual vehicle that can softly churn over the rutted tracks, through mud or sand or over hard, dry cracking-clay soils, rocking along with a soft rolling gait that looks like it might tip the vehicle over. The overloaded Bedford lorries, piled high with sacks of charcoal or produce for market and crowded with humans and small animals on the top layer, serve as the ships of the desert—replacing the camel caravans of earlier generations. As a foreigner and a woman, I was expected to ride in the oversize (and overcrowded) cab with the first-class passengers—for a higher fee—but with the understanding that we all might need to pile out and help if the vehicle got stuck.

I had always admired the Sudanese trucks' paint jobs, decorative designs, and custom extensions to haul higher loads. But until I saw Valerie Hänsch's film, I had never re-

alized the degree to which these vehicles were not merely a slightly altered imported vehicle from England but, rather, the product of a long tradition of major technical modifications wrought by creative Sudanese craftspeople in the dusty market workshops of the industrial neighborhoods of northern Sudanese towns. Having myself been the beneficiary of the mechanical genius of local Sudanese engineers who kept our aging VW Beetle running even when spare parts were lacking, I should not have been surprised by the inside look this film offers of adaptation, invention, fabrication, and apprenticeship to masters, all in service of making these vehicles fit for Sudan's geographical and economic conditions.

The Bedford lorry has been used in Sudan since the 1950s, but as one Sudanese in the film remarked, "the English built it too weak." So the Sudanese mechanics and blacksmiths got to work. Workshop inventors found ways to disassemble and widen the chassis and reinforce the springs to carry bigger loads and withstand the jolting of local driving conditions, and they widened the cabs to accommodate

more passengers and added decorative features to enhance the vehicles' beauty.

This documentary film by African studies anthropologist Häsnsch tells its tale without narration, unraveling its story exclusively through interview responses and commentaries (in Arabic, with English subtitles) from the people involved in this trade as well as through rich visual images and sound. The rhythmic clanking of tools, the hiss of welding, and the voices of workers cooperatively hoisting parts as they disassemble and reconstruct these trucks is profoundly evocative of the sounds of Sudanese industrial areas. The techniques portrayed—measuring, cutting, fashioning springs and fixtures, designing woodwork and decoration—leave one with new admiration for human ingenuity.

Häsnsch's film also goes deeper into the professional traditions and social lives of the artisans and their apprentices. The filmmaker allows the interviewees to laud their mentors and those who added new techniques and ideas as this industry evolved. Interviewees describe the apprenticeship system and explain the way they keep techniques "in the family"—by marrying each other's sisters, for example. A few of the specific towns are mentioned, but the film does not try to catalogue the industry as much as to evoke appreciation of these artisans and their love for their creations.

The title of the film—*The Iron Bride*—reflects the affection artisans feel for these lorries. The soft ride created by these modifications earned the altered trucks the nickname *Sifinja*, a term for the spongy-soled flip-flop slippers: the ride is as comfortable as a pair of old slippers. And the elaborate decorations of woodwork, paint, and interiors show the pride in their creation: the truck is "something beautiful," you hear people say, like a shiny, decorated, iron "bride."

The ride through the film, too, is soft and shiny, and it is easy to see why Häsnsch's film took first prize in the Material Culture and Archaeology category at the Royal Anthropological Institute's International Festival of Ethnographic Film in London in June of 2011. Although perhaps a bit too long for some undergraduate anthropology or African studies classes, it is a treasure for its detailed view of craftspeople at work and its take on material culture. For those whose images of Africa are dominated by wildlife safaris or "traditional tribal peoples," this film's gritty workshops and witty workmen in blue coveralls offer viewers a globalized Sudan where something new is created out of imports and tuned to local aesthetic preferences and practical purposes. The film also shows artisans facing new competition from Chinese spare parts that are cheaper than their own hand-crafted parts as well as competition from new giant trucks for the asphalt road trade routes to the smaller towns.

## Secrets of the Tribe

Jose Padilha, dir. 98 min. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2010.

John Homiak  
Smithsonian Institution

Eleven years ago the publication of Patrick Tierney's *Darkness in El Dorado* (2000) precipitated a scandalous indictment of anthropological practice in the Venezuelan Amazon. Stated briefly, Tierney argued that warfare and violence among the Yanomami was largely contact induced by anthropologists and other scientists who introduced large quantities of steel trade goods (e.g., machetes, axes, fishhooks, and pots) into Yanomami villages as a means of procuring data relevant to their biomedical investigations. Tierney's more far-reaching claim, however, focused on the implications of the Atomic Energy Commission's long-term funding of the Yanomami project, including a now-infamous expedition to Yanomami territory in 1968. As an isolated group that had never experienced an incidence of epidemic disease, the Yanomami were prized as an indispensable control group for the study of genetic mutations caused by exposure to radiation and chemical or biological agents. Led by James V. Neel, the celebrated geneticist who headed the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission in Hiroshima, and Napoleon Chagnon, the anthropologist who brokered access to various remote Yanomami villages, the expedition members (some of whom may themselves have been sick) collected blood and tissue

samples and vaccinated several groups of Yanomami in advance of a measles outbreak among the southern Yanomami. The fact that some 200 Yanomami subsequently died and that standards of informed consent then in place were ignored in these backwaters of the Amazon has raised a host of ethical issues about the nature of cultural contact with indigenous people. The Yanomami who survived this episode have not forgotten the impacts on them nor have members of the anthropological "tribe" who were involved or who witnessed the initial barrage of incriminations and recriminations associated with the matter. The AAA's El Dorado Task Force that was charged to investigate the matter ultimately dismissed Tierney's accusations concerning Neel and Chagnon's culpability in causing the measles epidemic. The 160 pages of this report, which parsed a range of ethical and practical issues related to Chagnon's work, only served to generate further controversy about his methods and presence among the Yanomami. The matter was further complicated when the Task Force Report was rescinded by the AAA by a vote that some felt was timed to ensure that the full membership would not have (or take) the opportunity to vote on the matter.

This charged terrain is now revisited by Brazilian filmmaker José Padilha in *Secrets of the Tribe*, a film that provokes ethical and methodological questions about encounters with

indigenous peoples and about the uneasy positioning of anthropology between science and the humanities. In a 21st-century account of “anthropology on trial,” Padilha tackles Chagnon’s representation of the Yanomami as “the fierce people”; contentious debate over the varied materialist, cultural, and biological determinants of Yanomami warfare; anthropological ethics and human rights abuses; and the negative impact that all of this has had on the Yanomami themselves. These issues and debates may be public secrets within the relatively parochial sphere of the discipline, but here they are served up as grist for a broader film-going audience. If ever there existed the notion that anthropologists are a group of innocuous and dispassionate individuals interested largely in detached analysis about non-Western cultures, Padilha demolishes it. In so doing, he provides viewers with a glimpse into how professional egos, jealousies, and politics have shaped the reproduction of knowledge about what was, until recently, one of the last isolated and pristine indigenous tribes on the planet. Conflict sells, and Padilha understands the significance of this particular story.

Padilha has successfully turned the tables on anthropologists—making them the subjects of his story and giving the Yanomami the opportunity to “talk back” to their erstwhile interrogators. One senses that he has spent considerable time in acquiring familiarity with the issues at hand. He has certainly had an abundance of documentary materials with which to work. This includes recently shot interview materials with the protagonists to this debate and with the Yanomami themselves as well as archival footage from the Asch–Chagnon film corpus.

His cast of characters provides more pathos and drama than any filmmaker could hope for. There is Chagnon, famously self-celebrating, whose controversial field methods involved exploiting existing animosities within and between Yanomami groups and violating their most significant cultural taboo—uttering the names of deceased kinsmen—to acquire data for “science.” There is Kenneth Good, Chagnon’s one-time student who acrimoniously broke with him at the end of his Yanomami fieldwork in the mid-seventies, only to ally himself with Marvin Harris, one of Chagnon’s major critics. Himself not free of controversy, Good married an adolescent Yanomami girl and made this crossing of cultural boundaries a major part of a trade publication about his fieldwork, a publication that was transformed into several screenplays. And there is Jacques Lizot, an anthropologist personally selected by Claude Lévi-Strauss to research the Yanomami, who became infamous for assembling a “harem” of adolescent Yanomami boys for his sexual gratification during fieldwork that extended from 1968 through the 1970s. Both Chagnon and Lizot were part of the 1968 expedition, and both have become persona non grata in Yanomami territory. Lizot is taken on by the Yanomami for the humiliation and pain inflicted on them, and at least one Yanomami interviewed by Padilha has vowed to kill Chagnon if he returns. In all of this drama, one senses the double entendre in the film’s title. If the firestorm of accusa-

tions that lies behind the Yanomami having been used in the name of a global project (i.e., genetic population testing) is a scandalous secret, it is one inextricably tied to a breaching of cultural secrets of the Yanomami themselves. These are the unspoken and tabooed names of their dead—the “secrets” of kinship and genealogy that were essential to analyzing the blood samples taken by Neel and Chagnon. Using this turmoil caused by this case, Padilha casts the discipline as an unstable field of alliance and hostility—mimicking the tribal sociology of what has been studied—with professional insults and innuendo replacing the poison arrows of the Yanomami.

Some will question why this film is appearing now, but it is reasonable to think that Padilha’s project would have been impossible sooner. The AAA El Dorado Task Force roiled anthropology. Camps of opinion have formed, positions have become caricatured, and the contending parties—those on the biological wing of the discipline and those centered in cultural–interpretive practice—are now comfortably talking past one another. Statements such as “they have no standards of proof” or “they can’t even agree if reality exists” parry with “how can you go back and check the data—things have changed.” One hopes that the popular audiences at which this film is directed will see more than merely argumentative egos debating arcane points about remote ex-primitives. Here Padilha’s inclusion of Yanomami voices is critical, including subjects of differing ages who had direct contact with Chagnon and Lizot over many years. Their perspectives are coupled with information about the political economy of region, including things like the encroachment and deadly impact of gold miners in Yanomami territory. This enables viewers to assess local impacts on the Yanomami as well as to appreciate that the representations of a people have real political implications for even the most remote groups against the inescapable power and policies of nation states.

Padilha’s film does not—nor can it be expected to—provide viewers with sufficient information to appreciate the interpretive complexities that inform debate over Chagnon’s claims about the relationship between Yanomami aggression and reproductive success, which is the basis for his characterization of them as “the fierce people.” More often than not, sound bites stand in for complex argumentation and personalities for reasoned scholarly content. As such we are afforded only the broad intimations of Chagnon’s debates with Harris, Good, and Brian Ferguson regarding the materialist (i.e., protein scarcity, capacity of hunting territories, steel trade goods), cultural (revenge killing, reciprocity), or biological (selection for aggression, reproductive success) determinants of Yanomami warfare (see Chagnon 1992; Ferguson 1995, 2001). Neither can the film give uninitiated viewers the wherewithal to grasp the complexities associated with ethnographic knowledge (e.g., the contested interpretations that have been applied to the Yanomami term *unokai*, their term for “killers” [see Ferguson 2010]) nor to understand the ambiguity often associated with the interpretation

of anthropological data. But Padilha's skillful engagement with the broad sweep of this controversy and with the personalities involved commands the viewer's attention with a sense of unfolding expectation. The debate he reveals makes us want to understand more about the actual details and substance of the arguments engaged. This, in my view, is what is most significant about his film.

It is happily the case that Documentary Educational Resources is distributing this work. As noted, it won't explain to students all they should know, but I can't think of a more engaging way to introduce them to issues about methods and ethics in fieldwork, the relative scientific and humanistic aspects of anthropological investigation, and debates about the cultural versus biological determinants of behavior.

*Full disclosure: Homiak is the Director of the Anthropology Collections and Archives Program at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. This program is the repository for the Asch-Chagnon Yanomami*

*films and associated archival materials. These records were used by Padilha and were also accessed during the AAA El Dorado Task Force investigation. Homiak played no role in either project.*

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## Can't Go Native?

David Plath and Chet Kincaid, dirs. 56 min. <http://cantgonative.com>, 2010.

**Amy Borovoy**

*Princeton University*

"Wheels" is the title of the first segment of David Plath's recent video about the relationship of anthropologist Keith Brown to his long-term field site in Japan, Mizusawa, a village in the mountainous Iwate Prefecture (near the center of the recent earthquake), which, in the early days of Brown's research, was a ten-hour train ride from Tokyo. We see Brown on one of his recent visits tooling through the merchant sector on his low-riding bicycle, surveying recent changes and gathering local knowledge; on each visit, he stops at the barber to learn about recent marriages, illnesses, births, and deaths. Through such insights, Brown became one of the foremost scholars of the Japanese kinship system known as the *dozoku*, networks of lineal families that shaped prewar social life and that arguably shaped the complexion of post-war Japanese capitalism. And Mizusawa became part of a broader conversation on Japan anthropology. But Mizusawa also touched Brown. After his initial dissertation research in Mizusawa from 1961 to 1963 as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, he has returned to the village for subsequent sustained visits, maintaining a relationship with his friends and informants over the course of 50 years (see Figure 1).

Brown's intellectual motivation was to understand the process of "modernization"—a process that preoccupied social scientists of the 1960s in the context of the newly decolonizing third world. Japan was a particularly important case study in this effort. As a non-Western culture with rapidly growing industrial might, Japan's modernity was viewed by many as a test case that would reveal the universality of "American"-style capitalism and liberal democracy.

Brown and others sensed the story was more complex, and one of the major contributions of Japan anthropology during the decades of Japan's rapid economic growth was to document the very different foundations that undergirded Japan's capitalism, social exchange, and notions of gender, family, and the self. Although the film does not explore these epistemological questions in great depth, it does provide a sense of Brown's commitment to exploring Japanese belief systems on their own terms and to hearing the voices of his informants. (The film is punctuated by some segments of Brown and his two brothers today, remembering their childhood growing up on a research farm in Ames, Iowa, where car culture was important and land plots were large. One gets a sense of the distance that Brown has travelled from the farms of Iowa to the farms of Iwate.)



**FIGURE 1.** Keith Brown with farmers Nasukawa and Watanabe. (Photo taken by Chet Kincaid)

Rather, the film is preoccupied with the inevitable ways in which human lives and mutual obligations become intertwined with the intellectual investigation that is the project of long-term fieldwork. The anthropologist cannot tidily separate academic investigation from the social commitments that come with daily village life. We see Brown attending the yearly festival of the village shrine (to which the Brown family also makes a donation); black-and-white photographs of the young Brown transplanting rice in a straw hat; Brown lighting incense in honor of the ancestors at the family altar at a friend's home; and images of Brown presenting lectures to numerous institutions and constituents of the village on his findings, including one unexpected invitation as "honorary city postmaster." When a community group publishes a local village history, Brown writes the introduction and shares the volume with his students.

Plath takes an old friend's pleasure in Brown's intimacy with his informants—particularly the ribbings Brown receives for his habitual haircuts (despite his receding hairline), his abstemiousness when it comes to alcohol, and his occasional faux pas (including the time that he mistook a villager's mistress for his daughter).

Although the film explores Brown's relationship to his field site, it also demonstrates changes in Mizusawa itself and shows Brown growing old with his field site. As Brown returns to Mizusawa to study its urbanization and new pro-

fessional classes, he visits old friends, sometimes paying homage to them at the local cemetery. Mizusawa changes: a bypass road starves out the small downtown merchant area and changes commercial relations; urban migration empties out the old villages, and the remaining population is disproportionately aged; shops are boarded up; and new irrigation technologies change the pace of farm life. In one of the segments in which colleagues and students of Brown's comment on the significance of his work, Yale anthropologist William Kelly points to Mizusawa's relevance for the exploration of the major social changes affecting Japanese society more broadly: the reorganization of work, the renegotiation of kin-based relationships, and the demand for elder care.

Although the film resists the conceit that one can "go native" (Brown, with characteristic humility, dismisses the proposition, saying, "My language is not good enough"), it does show how an anthropologist's long-standing entwinement and sense of obligation to a local community simultaneously opens new vistas for academic exploration.

Beyond being a tribute to a beloved colleague and friend as well as a paean to a generation of Japan anthropology that engaged intensely with its field site, the film shows, in a myriad of ways and without being pedantic, how the project of anthropological fieldwork unfolds, not merely as an intellectual exercise but as a process, always mixed with real life, human sentiment, and social change—a process in which the object of knowledge, too, changes.

## Keep the Dance Alive

Rina Sherman, dir. 75 min. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2007.

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In an opening voiceover to *Keep the Dance Alive*, director Rina Sherman alludes to her extensive experience among Ojibhero-speaking groups on both sides of the Kunene river border between Namibia and Angola, stating: "Over the years I observed how they integrate music and dance into their everyday lives. This includes the initiation of infants, the transmission of customs to their children, the permanent dialogue with the ancestral spirits, and the final homage paid to the deceased." The film then supports these observations with a series of vignettes loosely structured along this general narrative path from infancy to death. The first half of the film situated in Etanga, where Sherman was based, is cohesive and insightful. Toward the second half of the film, however, Sherman provides more of a tour of neighboring groups' singing, dancing, and ritual with less context and critical analysis.

Sherman's filming is unobtrusive, even in the most intimate of spaces. Some of the strongest moments are those when Sherman both shows and tells us how youth learn these rhythms and movements in and out of various con-

texts. Scenes of younger women playfully imitating their elders, in both their dance movements and possession techniques, are apt illustrations of the processes of surrogation. An early sequence with a child barely able to stand but beginning to dance while watching her aunt enter possession is a particularly poignant example, especially as we then see the girl demonstrating more of what she has learned a year later.

Reflecting Sherman's considerable access, the film provides numerous examples of how categories of "play" and "ritual" can frequently blur, how dance can be a game as well as do serious, spiritual work; in fact, such examples could be used to ask just what one means by the word *dance*. Scenes of open-air dancing games, where one dancer playfully exposes herself to the camera, transition to enclosed, intense spaces in which women attempt to induce a patient into trance to find the forces responsible for her miscarriage. In this case, the patient is uninitiated and cannot host the spirit. We linger through to the next morning with the attempts to induce her possession, but eventually the elders have to rest and move onto another case. Sherman treats this situation sensitively, and the sequence reminds viewers that possession is not some innately African ability and that sustained efforts are





**FIGURE 1.** *Young Ovahimba girl dances.* (Photo taken by Rina Sherman, courtesy of Documentary Educational Resources)

often required. The film, then, could be useful for classroom discussions, particularly if students have already read about similar practices. In these regards, the supplementary materials and the broader context of the Ovahimba Years project are important to note ([www.ovahimba.rinasherman.com](http://www.ovahimba.rinasherman.com)), as the film is probably best situated among the larger project's many hard-earned materials.<sup>1</sup>

The long-term ethnographic engagement Sherman has achieved cannot be feigned and should be lauded. And, yet, the film's subjects' voices are not foregrounded even as we hear their singing and see their movements. Cinematically, Sherman maintains her distance with a disembodied voiceover, and hers is the dominant (explanatory) voice in the film. One should not take it for granted that films that allow people to "speak for themselves" are therefore more transparent or authentic. Perhaps such "sharing" of authorship and representational authority is simply the technique of a subtler filmmaker crafting his or her own invisibility. Voiceover like Sherman's can often be the most honest of techniques, saying in effect: "I was an outsider who was let in to significant degrees, but maintaining critical distance with which to appropriately analyze, I now explain these insights to other outsiders and for the groups' posterity." Any negotiations regarding representation are not made explicit in the film, as Sherman remains behind the camera and provokes few in-frame responses. The film remains primarily about the Ovahimba themselves rather than the ethnographic encounter with them. Yet the vision and voice of the film is surely Sherman's.

For all of her explanatory voiceover, there is little commentary, concurrent or subsequent, on the film's events

from those in front of the camera and on display. Perhaps the best exception is when, as Sherman films a group singing while mining ochre, a woman works in a verse reminding the filmmaker that she promised to take her on a trip to another town. Especially for all of the film's attention to ritual and possession, if the film's subjects' interpretations and reflections were given more screen time, there could be greater potential for broader audience appreciation of the verbal play, poetry, and moral imaginations of those in the film. Much of what is said—sung is not subtitled; in fact, the subtitle use is inconsistent at best. For example, a couple of older ladies sing a thank you song to Sherman for a ride she gave them. We are given this basic context via voiceover but are left to imagine what exactly they are singing. In the following scene, as a group builds Sherman's house, the women's singing is translated, and we get a glimpse into their wit. With just consistent subtitling of the dialogue and songs during the ceremonies, and without needing to default to talking-head interview techniques, the film could provide more diverse perspectives.

So for all the access and the ability to deftly maneuver the camera in intimate spaces that this film provides, some alienation remains. Perhaps this speaks more to the state of the discipline than to Sherman's filmmaking, which certainly demonstrates considerable skill in terms of cinematography and sound work. Can films like *Keep the Dance Alive* continue being made, existing unscathed by critics of the anthropological gaze who are likely to focus on the trappings of classic ethnographic film (i.e., bare-breasted Africans singing, dancing, and crawling in the dust possessed in a rural savannah

while only the invisible anthropologist narrates the events [see Figure 1])? In a kind of coda to the film, after the (largely unexplained and unsubtitled) funeral ceremonies, Sherman includes a reminder that dance is not always involved in deep ritual or rites of passage—sometimes it is used just for enjoyment. Perhaps she is telling us that ethnographic film can also just be enjoyed, and the songs and dances therein just appreciated, without an incessant need for critical analysis.

**NOTE**

1. From the filmmaker's DER profile: "*The Ovahimba Years* [is] a multi-disciplinary long-term research programme (drawings, oral tradition, video, film, photography) aimed at creating a living trace of Ovahimba cultural heritage. For a period of seven years, she filmed and photographed aspects of the daily and ritual lives of the Ovahimba" (<http://www.der.org/films/filmmakers/rina-sherman.html>, accessed January 21, 2012).