

## Editorial

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The five films presented in this issue of the *Journal of Anthropological Films* were shot in India, Nepal, the Solomon Islands, the USA and the border region between Peru and Brazil. Set in different cultural contexts and using a range of approaches, the films offer diverse anthropological perspectives on the relations between humans, non-humans and the environment. Some cross-cutting themes in this issue include mythology, spirits, human-animal relations, and environmental politics and activism.

## The Films

*Curupira*, a film by Pedro Figueiredo Neto, 12 minutes (2016)

This film follows Arturo as he paddles his canoe through the watery darkness of the Peruvian/Brazilian border region in pursuit of the Curupira – a mythological elf-like creature prominent in local folklore. The entire film is shot at night, from the back of the canoe, which creates a rather unusual and visually disorienting effect. The images are difficult to discern, but this is the whole point as it allows the viewer to enter into Arturo's world - the world of watery darkness in the Javari valley. The shadowy atmosphere of the film also has the effect of inviting the viewer into the mysterious reality of the mythological Curupira itself. As we paddle along with Arturo in the canoe, surrounded by the lapping water and the sounds of the forest, it is hard not to consider the possibility that the Curupira might actually be real. In this sense, the film challenges our own ontological assumptions about reality and induces a stimulating embodied experience.

As the viewer is taken along this boat ride, the film touches upon several important anthropological issues. Arturo provides a detailed narrative about the mythological creature and its interactions with humans, connecting the film to mythologies from other parts of the world, as well as questions of human-nonhuman relations. The film also links the search for the Curupira to Arturo's childhood and the environmental changes he has experienced in the region. The viewer is left with a sense that there much left unexplained, in terms of the film's wider economic and political contexts. But this is not the film's primary intention, which is to explore the nocturnal landscape and its hidden narratives from Arturo's perspective.

***Chidra: Piercing Karma in the Himalaya***, a film by Arik Moran and Nadav Harel, 41 minutes (2018)

*Chidra* describes the complex and dense meanings of a human sacrificial ritual (*kabika*) held in the valley of Kullu in the Indian Himalayas. The film's main character, Ram Nath, who plays a central role in the ritual as master of ceremonies, has the special ability to create a portal to the spiritual world as well as purify bad karma.

As the narrator of the film notes, *Chidra* means “pierced” or “cut”, and it is through these rounds of ritual *chidra* that “Ram Nath cuts the bond between cause and effect, creating a space of reconciliation”. We observe Ram Nath uttering sins aloud, with the village men responding “*chidra*”, thus effectively piercing the bad karma. As Ram Nath's wife, Khekhi Devi, explains, “When we speak of it, sin is removed.” Towards the end of the ritual, Ram Nath is symbolically sacrificed to Shiva – “the divine ruler of the village” – only to be revived and return to the world of the living. The sacrifice is performed by the community leader to “deliver the sins of society to the gods”. “Only our family can do this work”, Ram Nath explains, highlighting the special caste knowledge necessary to complete the ritual.

The narrator guides viewers through the ritual process and focuses on Ram Nath as a purifier. Viewers also get a glimpse of everyday life through small talk and gossip, in addition to observing the spectacle of the two-day ritual. The drums and horns, the choreographed dancing, the presence of sacred effigies, and the village mediums possessed by Shiva, contribute to a sense of excitement and are testaments to the liminal quality of the ritual leading up to the ultimate gift to the gods – the human sacrifice.

***The Brick Mule***, a film by Michael Brown, 66 min (2019)

At a market in Northern India, mules are bought and herded for three days and then packed on trucks and transported to the brick-making factories in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley. This film follows a group of these mules on their journey from the brick factories to their subsequent work as pack animals transporting goods to faraway villages in the high mountains of the Himalayas.

It is the mules as a group who are the main protagonists of this film, with their owners and drivers playing only supporting roles. The mules are hardworking animals susceptible to physical injury and disease, patiently accepting their drivers' loads. The opening scene shows mules as they are loaded onto a truck, whipped by the transporters to force them to move closer together, beaten even more when they resist. This treatment stands in contradiction to what develops after they arrive in Nepal, where more sympathetic relationships are cultivated between the animals and their new owners and drivers.

The film is well shot and edited, skillfully capturing the daily activities and the surrounding landscapes. The mules are closely and empathically portrayed as we follow them through the different stages of their life cycles. Detailed observational sequences are interrupted by intertitles and short interviews that provide the viewer with contextual information. The men and animals alike live rough lives, and we learn that the life expectancy of the working mules is less than half of what it could be under more favorable conditions.

***Fish On!***, a film by Liivo Niglas, Diane Perlov and Frode Storaas, 60 minutes (2008)

This film provides a glimpse into three Native American communities – the Yurok, the Hoopa and the Karuk – whose members live along stretches of the Klamath River that extends through Oregon and California in America’s Pacific Northwest. Containing the largest salmon runs in the United States, the Klamath has been plagued by pollution and droughts brought on by hydroelectric dams constructed along the river since the 1960s. The dams block the path of the salmon’s migration, through physical barriers that prevent them from spawning, and through thermal barriers that heat up the water and force the fish to seek refuge in nearby cooler creeks. As noted by several of the film’s protagonists, over the past decades the river has become shallower and wider, with the appearance of toxic algae blooms, increasing numbers of predatory sea lions and seals, and massive fish-kills resulting from disruptions to the local habitat.

The filmmakers convey the gravity of these issues with sensitivity and nuance, highlighting the struggles that the local indigenous communities face regarding the mounting environmental hazards, but also the ways in which they continue to fight back against them. Through the deliberate and attentive cultivation of social and cross-generational ties, the maintenance of ancient “world-renewal” ceremonies involving traditional medicine dances, and the development of holistic wildlife management approaches, the inhabitants of these landscapes reveal the depth of their determination and resistance.

The most compelling scenes in the film are those of multiple generations spending time together by the river, at home, sitting around the campfire. Parents and grandparents explain how to wield and care for the objects that are part of the ceremonial dances; they recount to a wide-eyed group of children the dangers and temptations of river mermaids; they demonstrate how to string a net onto a wooden fishing tool, how to securely hold a salmon by hooking your finger underneath its gullet, how to properly slice and gut the fish. Such sequences vividly convey how the rivers, as one of the members of the Tribal Council remarks, contain the grains that hold people together. A threat to the river is a threat to the entire community, bringing into sharp relief the enormous challenges these members face in trying to counter the deep imbalances in their cultural and natural environment.

***Vincent and the Rainforest: Global Conversations in Rural Melanesia***, a film by Edvard Hviding and Rolf Scott, 80 minutes (1996)

“When we enter the forest, everything is there for us,” Vincent Vaguni tells anthropologist Edvard Hviding at the start of their long and thoughtful conversation about life in the remote rainforest village of Tamaneke in the Solomon Islands. Vincent is a long-time community leader and resource activist in Tamaneke. In essence, this is a conversation between old friends. Topics shift from the challenges of preserving local culture to protecting the resources of the coast and rainforests that support life in the Solomon Islands, to dealing with the global mining and logging companies that threaten to take it all away. “When you first began to visit me,” Vincent tells Edvard, “I had a sincere interest in the environment, not because people came and instructed me, but because I felt it.”

At the heart of this film is Vincent’s deep cultural knowledge and his skills as a steward of a rich subsistence environment. The film conveys local experience gained from years of collaboration with and resistance to foreign logging and mining companies, as well as environmental NGOs. We learn how his critical understanding of the complex factors at play have given him both the skills and motivation to successfully navigate these tangled

relationships. Vincent and his wife Amina share their insights into issues of rural development in a now globally connected, resource-rich "out of the way" place. "There are many logging and environmental NGOs involved here now," Vincent explains. "I don't know if either do us any good. Once companies come in, NGOs are just another opposition group. Maybe their intentions are not really to assist us. They just come here to fight each other."