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HORIZONS IN VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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THE COVER IMAGE IS A STILL FROM THE FILM QUAND LA TERRE PARLES (WHEN THE EARTH SPEAKS, 2025) BY MHAMADOU IBRAHIM HAROUNA OSMANE, WHO WAS PART OF THE FIRST COHORT OF MASTER'S STUDENTS IN VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN NIAMEY, NIGER. THE IMAGE WAS TAKEN DURING THE PREPARATION PHASE FOR THE ARWA RITUAL IN MASSALATA, A VILLAGE IN NIGER'S TAHOVA REGION.

ARWA IS A RITUAL THAT BRINGS TOGETHER MEMBERS OF SEVERAL VILLAGES FOR A SERIES OF DIVINATORY CONSULTATIONS, THROUGH WHICH THE FUTURE CAN BE PREDICTED USING MYSTICAL CODES.

THIS WAS MHAMADOU'S GRADUATION FILM.



ZARE: HORIZONS IN VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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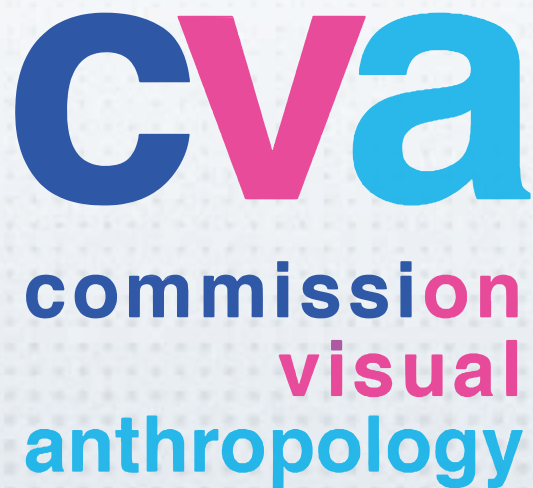


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Editors' note

by Editorial Team

In this second issue of ZARE: Horizons in Visual Anthropology, we chose to focus on various ways in which visual anthropology brings people together. Since its heyday, the international network involved the coming together of anthropologists, visual anthropologists, documentary filmmakers, editors, those involved in the films and enthusiasts to share and exchange ideas, methodologies and knowledge concerning anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking. This dynamic continues to bring people together to this day, despite increasing cuts to research funding and the global uncertainties affecting the new generation of aspiring visual anthropologists.

As a sequel to our previous issue's interview with Peter Ian Crawford, we begin with Mihai Leah's interview with Beate Engelbrecht, the co-founder and long-standing organiser of the German International Ethnographic Film Festival (GIEFF) who has recently stepped down as chair due to her retirement. Reflecting on her memories of what shaped ethnographic film from its early days until today, a further elaboration of this chapter's content is found in her recent, open-access, online publication, *Memories of the Origins of Ethnographic Film* (2025). Following this introduction to the foundations of visual anthropology through remembrance and collective engagement, subsequent chapters present various examples of how bringing people together is at the heart of all anthropological engagement, with particular attention to audiovisual methodologies and ethnographic film festivals.

Following the introductory piece, Trond Waage contributes two pieces reflecting on the collaborative efforts between the Arctic University of Norway and universities in the Sahel, as well as the state of visual anthropology in Niger today and its various challenges. Andrew Simon Tucker's reflection on co-creating indigenous VR in Colombia's Caribbean challenges the anthropological instinct to preserve stories on film, awakening dormant spirits and embracing ephemeral non-linearity. Taking a more classical anthropological approach, social anthropologist Michael Heneise writes on his audiovisual facilitatory engagements with recording, for the first time, the Karbi funerary epic in Assam, India. Returning to collective spaces for engagement, Rossella Ragazzi sums up and reflects on a symposium in Arctic Norway on indigenous Sámi cultural heritage as a living archive and contemporary research in acoustic ecology. Rounding off with a piece on the CameraWise ethnographic film festival 2026 at CREA, Student Cultural Center, in Amsterdam, Christine Moderbacher returns to the art of bringing people together through collective screenings and discussions.

We hope you enjoy the journeys our contributors shared with us, and, as always, we invite you to share your contributions through the website for our next issues. May this issue awaken the spirit of anthropological curiosity for ethnographic audiovisual engagements!



THE ALTAR FOR JESÚS NAZARENO IN PATAMBAN & A BOY FILMING THE PALM SUNDAY PROCESSION IN PATAMBAN, MEXICO, 2004 (PHOTO: BEATE ENGELBRECHT)





GIEFF 2026 AWARD CEREMONY - THANKS TO THE FESTIVAL MANAGERS: ROBERT SCHECK, ANNA SEEGER-KRÜCKEBERG, BEATE ENGELBRECHT (PHOTO: BASIL ISLAM)

The Art of Bringing People Together

Interview with Beate Engelbrecht on a Life in Visual Anthropology by Mihai Andrei Leaha

Beate Engelbrecht has been one of the quiet architects of visual anthropology in Europe and beyond. For three decades she shaped the Göttingen International Ethnographic Film Festival (GIEFF), which she co-founded in 1993 out of the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film (IWF). The storied Göttingen institution's Encyclopaedia Cinematographica once formed a worldwide network of scientific and ethnographic film. Trained first as an anthropologist rather than a filmmaker, Engelbrecht learned her craft

at the editing table and went on to a decades-long collaboration with cameraman Manfred Krüger, alongside long-term fieldwork in Mexico. In 2001 she convened the landmark conference "Origins of Visual Anthropology – Putting the Past Together", a gathering with many of the field's founding figures to record an oral history that had until then existed only in conversation. The filmed material of the conference, painstakingly preserved, digitized, and edited after the closure of the IWF, is now openly accessible

alongside her open-access book *Memories on Ethnographic Film*. We spoke at the 2026 edition of GIEFF that marked her retirement, and likely the festival's last in Göttingen, about beginnings, partnerships, and the future of a field she has done as much to connect as to document.

Mihai Andrei Leaha (ML): Göttingen has been such a special place for many people. I wanted to ask first how the story started.

Beate Engelbrecht (BE): The story started with economics. The bank here in Göttingen offered the Institute for Scientific Film 10,000 German Marks for an event. Rolf Husmann and I heard about it. Then there was a second thing: German anthropologists wanted new films in our distribution, important ones, but we needed to know which films were important. So, Rolf said, okay, then we make a festival.

We had an international selection committee. They selected the films, and from this selection we then chose films for distribution. That is why we still stick to the idea that it should be films from the last three years, so you can see what is going on and how things change. From the start we had a mixed selection committee. At the beginning, we had six people from six countries. Now it is eight people from five countries, four from Germany and four from other European countries. We try to have people from different backgrounds, and we change people every time, so that the committee always has new perspectives and new ideas, but also some traditional ones. There is always a mixture.

ML: For people who do not know what IWF is, can you tell me a little about it, why Göttingen, and when

the first edition of the festival happened?

BE: We have to go back to before the Second World War. At the Reichsanstalt für Film und Bild in Wissenschaft und Unterricht – The Reich Institute for Film and Images in Science and Education (RWU) – there had been separate departments for films for schools and universities. The head of the scientific department, when the end of the war was approaching, moved to a small village near Göttingen, and after the war he was able to transfer everything he had brought with him to Göttingen. The school materials went to Munich, and Munich was the centre at first. He started the *Encyclopaedia Cinematographica* in 1952. In 1956, the Institute in Göttingen, the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film, became independent.

They produced films for different subjects, and fortunately the director had an interest in anthropology, so from the start the Institute began working with anthropologists who went into the field with a small 16mm camera. Later, camera people went into the field with anthropologists, and we did production. I think they produced or distributed 1,900 ethnographic films, so it was an important institution, not just in Germany. The *Encyclopaedia Cinematographica* was a worldwide network.

On this basis we started the festival in 1993. When we got the message that there was money, Rolf and I immediately said at a meeting of the *Encyclopaedia*, "okay, let us start a festival and catch that money". Within three months, we held the first festival. At that time, we just asked people all over: what are your three

favourite films? Out of that question we made the first selection.

The next year we held the next festival, with the first proper call for films. But at that time, and this is perhaps important, everything was on paper. You had to send out letters on paper to submit a film, and that took a long time. We still have those submission forms, and we still have the submitted VHS tapes. There was much less around back then. The oldest festival was NAFA (Nordic Anthropological Film Association) festival, there was the Festival dei Popoli in Florence, which is not so ethnographic anymore, there was of course the Bilan du Film Ethnographique, and I think also the RAI Film Festival. That was more or less it.

Also, at that time we were very involved in being a bridge between East and West, so we always had someone from Eastern Europe on the selection committee. At the beginning it was János Tari, and then various other people.

ML: I wanted to ask about an important moment in 2001, when you managed to bring a lot of important figures in the field of visual anthropology here to Göttingen.

BE: When I started at IWF, I was not a visual anthropologist, I was just an anthropologist. I started going every year to the AAA (American Anthropological Association) meeting, and they had the Visual Research Conference just before it, the meeting of American visual anthropologists, with some foreigners too. I was there often, and I always listened to the stories of how everything started, how people were connected. But you could not read about it. Nothing was written down, nothing documented. You only knew it if you

listened to people. So, I had the idea to make a conference to bring them together. That is why I called it "Origins of Visual Anthropology – Putting the Past Together": what is the origin of visual anthropology? It was not meant as an academic research event but as a way to bring people together, to remember, because when you are talking and something suddenly comes up, you think, oh, I remember that.

I think I had about 80 percent of the important people there. The main person missing was Robert Gardner, who did not come, but we talked about him anyway. Thanks to the Wenner-Gren Foundation I managed quite a lot. We had a five-day conference, and being at the Institute for Scientific Film, of course it was clear we would film it. Manfred Krüger, our ethnographic camera person, took over the management of quite a lot of interns. We had four cameras in the lecture hall, two or three fixed and one moving around. We decided to document all the sessions in full. There were ten sessions, each about three hours long with breaks, and we did it.

Then, sadly, there was the decision to close the Institute for Scientific Film. The first thing I did was take out all the video cassettes, because they had not been archived yet, not listed, not documented. So, in a certain way I became their keeper. I had them at home for a long time. I do not remember exactly when I started digitizing everything, it was still early days for videotape, MiniDV and DVCAM, still 4:3. Then I digitized everything, and the two people who do the screenings here at the festival, Janek Totaro and Johannes Kohout, were willing to edit it. I wanted to bring the four cameras together, and they edited a great deal. They really made ten complete documents.

Then I asked the Technical Information Library in Hannover, where all the Institute's films are now stored, if they would publish it, and they agreed because it had been an IWF event. But I had to get consent forms from everyone, except public figures like Jean Rouch. I collected all these consent forms, and the year before last they all agreed, and it was uploaded. Out of this conference I also made a book, *Memories on Ethnographic Film*. I contacted the publisher, and they agreed to make it open access, with permission for me to extract the individual articles. So now we have a platform where all the films are sequenced as they were at the conference and attached to each film are the PDFs of the articles that came out of that session.

Website: <https://av.tib.eu/series/1923>

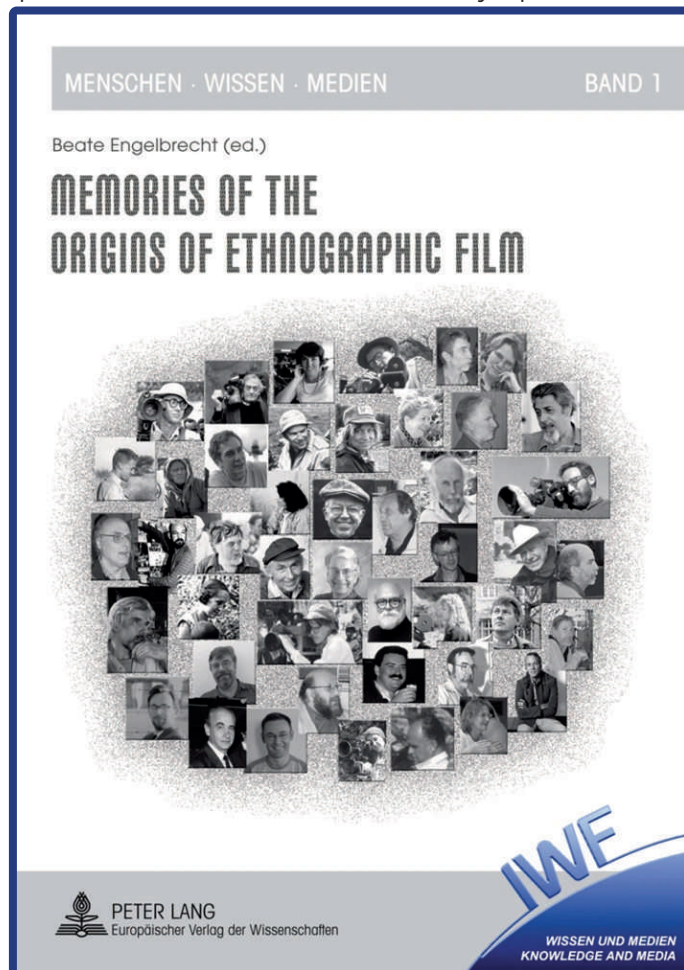
Book: <https://www.peterlang.com/document/1680559>

ML: This is an extremely important legacy for our field, and a wonderful resource for teaching and for anyone interested. It is fantastic that it is open access.

BE: I have noticed that more and more people are discovering the book. I am quite happy it really worked. I was not sure about it at first. There are two things, in a certain way. One is just to see the personalities, how they present, how they interact, their faces, their gestures. The other is that in the discussions many things came up that are not in the papers. There are parts where they read their paper, which you could go through quickly, but the discussions are sometimes very funny.

ML: You mentioned that organizing it brought some challenges, that you had invited some anthropologists who were not easy.

BE: I am grateful to NAFA, because by now I am an honorary member. NAFA has another honorary member, Jay Ruby. Jay Ruby was a really important person in the field, but he was not very diplomatic, and



MEMORIES OF THE ORIGINS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM, BY BEATE ENGELBRECHT (VOLUME EDITOR), 2025. [AVAILABLE ONLINE HERE](https://www.peterlang.com/document/1680559)



THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE CONFERENCE 'ORIGINS OF VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY', 2001 (PHOTO: MANFRED KRÜGER)

often quite aggressive. When I went to the US to organize everything, I talked a lot with him too, partly to get an idea of who I should invite. I invited him and said I would be happy to see him come, but asked him to behave himself, and he did. I do not know if this is the only filmed record of him, because he commented very often, on articles, on presentations, so you get a real sense of him and how he argues. At the end he presented a paper too. It was tricky, but I was really glad he behaved.

ML: I want to go back to you and Manfred Krüger as a filmmaking team. You made many films together. How did this passion for organizing the field and showing films come together with a passion for making them?

BE: First of all, everything started with making films. As I said, I was not a visual anthropologist or a filmmaker, and the work started at the editing table, together with an editor and an anthropologist. My task was to build some sort of bridge. Through that task I learned how to edit film, 16mm film. My editor always touched the screen to point, and I really learned it quite well.

Working in that environment, and having done my fieldwork in Mexico, I asked if I could develop a film project. At that time, I was only employed part-time. Thanks to a professor in Freiburg, I got money from the

German Research Foundation, and I did a film project in Mexico together with Manfred. At the beginning we had brought in a local person for sound, but after two films we decided I should do the sound, because the local person found what Manfred was filming so fascinating that he kept forgetting about the sound entirely. So, we started working together, and in a certain way we were a dream team.

There is a word I think is not used enough: respect. The basis of our collaboration was respect. I respected him completely as a camera person, he respected me as an anthropologist. He really taught me how to interact with people in the field, because he was not an anthropologist, he spoke a little English, no French, no Spanish, nothing, but he was so easy with people, so communicative. I do not know how he did it. He helped me relax and just sit down instead of always overthinking things.

It was an unproblematic collaboration; we never really discussed anything. When I directed him, I would touch him somehow, or look at him, to signal "look there" or "do not look there." I would touch him on his right side, his blind side, and he would slowly turn that way, slowly enough that he could still keep cutting, and then move to the other shot. And I was doing the sound. At one

point David MacDougall told me I should start filming myself. In time, I could not always afford to bring Manfred to Mexico, so I filmed a feast there myself, and when I showed it to him, he said, oh, I know exactly what you are doing next. He could see I had learned how to film well from him. Janek is editing material now that we filmed in the Black Forest twenty years ago, and he says it is amazing, watching the footage is like watching someone edit while filming.

ML: I imagine it is easy to edit what he filmed.

BE: Because he thought about the construction, the way the images fit together. That is what I learned from him. Until the end, it was a friendship.

ML: Where does one find your films?

BE: At the Technical Information Library, they are online. If you follow the link in the book, you can search for Engelbrecht, and you will find all my films, including some I produced. Not all of them are online, because some of the anthropologists I worked with did not agree to put theirs online. [The films where I am the anthropologist are online.](#)

ML: How do you feel today, knowing this is your last edition of GIEFF, the one that marks your retirement?

BE: I would say I am involved 150 percent, so yes, it is very emotional, especially seeing all of you, and thinking about having so many friends around me. But I am convinced it is the right decision. I am not so young anymore, it was quite a lot of work, and I am not



MANFRED KRÜGER FILMING GENOVEVA RUIZ LOOKING AT THE FOOTAGE MATERIAL, 2001 (PHOTO: BEATE ENGELBRECHT)



BEATE TAKING NOTES DURING FILMING IN FLORIDA, 2001 (PHOTO: MANFRED KRÜGER)

in Göttingen anymore. I still have plans, I want to write a book together with the last film I made, and I have other things to do, so I want time for those activities. I think it is also the right time to hand it over to a younger generation. It will certainly change quite a lot. I will still be around, and I think my network is important to support the festival. I have to train people properly, there is a lot to do, but the decision is right.

So, there are two sides. One is emotional, but the emotional part is more about the people being here. I was truly honoured when NAFA offered me honorary membership, that meant something important to me, because I am perhaps a bit of an unusual person. I am not an academic, not a theorist, I am not known for academic work. I think I am mostly known as a kind of networker, someone who brings people together, and for that kind of activity, nobody can really say "that is something special." It is difficult to network; you have to put yourself in the background instead of wanting to be brilliant. Even if you think of someone like Asen Balikci, who founded the CVA. He made films, but in a certain way he was not someone who put himself in front either. He was someone who visited many places, many meetings, to build contacts. For me it is always like this: oh, here is somebody, here is somebody else, let us put them together, as I just did with you and the professor in Basel. I said, they have to get to know each other. And so, I will still be there, but to carry the burden of managing this festival, the last three months there was nothing else in my life. So, it is okay.

ML: One last question. How do you see the future of ethnographic film and our field? You have been active for so long, so many generations have come through

your hands. Where do you think we are heading, compared to the 90s when it all started?

BE: That is a complicated question, because it has a lot to do with anthropology itself, and with the current atmosphere around decolonial debates, where anthropologists now have difficulties knowing how to relate to other ethnic groups. What I think is, I did anthropology because I was curious about other people, I wanted to know different ways of living. In a certain way I have the feeling that this curiosity is being lost, and many young people are anxious even to go into the field, never mind filming or photographing. The entrance itself seems much more burdened than it was for me.

It has to do, perhaps, with what I learned from Manfred: just to sit there, talk, and relate. In a way it is the same thing I do at the festival, relating with people, talking with them, experiencing things with respect. I have some difficulty with the word "collaboration," because I sometimes feel that the filmmaker ends up making the decisions, and the anthropologist steps out of responsibility. We did collaborate, but in the end, when you make a film, you are not sitting down with everyone involved to discuss the edit. I like Jay Ruby's writing on this, he made a distinction between direction, cooperation, and collaboration. He said collaboration means the other person has the same knowledge of filmmaking as you do.

ML: So, they can be a true collaborator.

BE: Exactly, and then they can make a film themselves. It would actually be more interesting to have two films about the same event and compare the different perspectives, instead of always mixing them together. So, at the moment it is complex on several levels: authority, collaboration, entrance into a new field. When you do it the right way, I think filming is a kind of entrance. When you are filming together, in contact, you can show people what you have filmed and ask, is this okay? And they might say no, I do not want that, so you leave it out. In a way I found filming easier than just sitting and taking notes, because note-taking felt secretive, while filming is much more about sharing. But in the end, you are responsible for what you do with it.

In my own project in Mexico, where I worked with the same people for forty years, nobody was ever interested in collaborating in that formal sense. My main protagonist, a potter, used to say: I have my work, you have your work. I showed her the films, and by now

she knows them well and is happy with them. She still says we should make another film with all the material, because of course I filmed her whole family over the years. But filmmaking simply was not her métier.

Perhaps the last thing to say is that if you are an academic who wants to work with film, in Germany at least, the scientific foundations still do not really support film-based projects. That is also a matter of networking, people with professorships joining together to make sure projects with cameras are supported, not pushed aside. Of course there are not many positions, but I always told people, when the BA and MA programmes started here in Göttingen: do not make a separate master's in visual anthropology, make a master's in cultural anthropology with a specialization in visual anthropology. With a master's in anthropology, people have many more possibilities to find work. The visual specialization is an addition, something extra you can point to when there is a relevant job. If you think about how to live afterward, it is better, for example, to be able to go work in a museum, and for that it helps to have the master's in cultural anthropology, with the visual side as a strength. So, it is quite complex.

Mihai Andrei Leaha is Associate Professor in Visual and Multimodal Anthropology at UiT, The Arctic University of Norway, in Tromsø, where he is affiliated with the EA:RTH research group and the Visual and Multimodal Anthropology MA programme. He chairs the Commission on Visual Anthropology (CVA) of the IUAES and is part of the editorial board of ZARE: Horizons in Visual Anthropology. His research spans visual disinformation and AI, multimodal and sonic ethnographic methodology, and DIY music cultures, drawing on long-term fieldwork in Brazil and Romania.

Visual Anthropology at UiT

The Arctic University of Norway and its long-term collaboration with universities in the Sahel by Trond Waage



PHOTO DE FAMILLE. AFTER FORMAL OPENING OF THE "RENCONTRE INTERNATIONALE DE L'ANTHROPOLOGIE VISUELLE" NIAMEY, NIGER JANUARY 2026. WITH UNIV. PROFESSORS, PHD STUDENTS, MINISTERS AND AMBASSADORS

The visual anthropology programme at UiT, The Arctic University of Norway, was established in conjunction with the University of Ngaoundéré in Cameroon. Using film in research collaboration, Professor Emerita Lisbet Holtedahl showed in the 1990s how anthropological film can be a powerful method for cross-cultural communication. Through meetings between students and researchers from Cameroon and Norway, perspectives and understandings of reality were challenged, and new insights emerged through what we call the "crossing gaze" (regards croisés in French).

The recognition that people with different life experiences interpret

the world and social phenomena differently is fundamental to anthropology. It is when we test our experiences against one another in which values and cultural rules can be identified and made visible. Efforts to collaborate through research and filmmaking were the pedagogical foundation for what would become the first master's programme in visual anthropology in the Nordics which, for its first twenty years, was called Visual Culture Studies.

Throughout the programme, we have always recruited students from the universities in Cameroon and Mali in a continuous effort to enable exchange. For us, as teachers in Tromsø, this has been enriching. In pairs, first-year

master's students set out to make films in a city they are new to. This leads to many examples of how students film the same social situation but reaching entirely different interpretations. Footage of a nursery teacher's handling of wet, muddy children returning indoors after playing in puddles was seen by one student as an act of abuse of power, while another saw it as an expression of care. A scene of a Chilean man on an internship walking along the harbour was read both as an expression of homesickness and as a scene of harmony.

There are many more examples. When interpretations diverge, we confront and invite students to the classic challenge of cross-cultural communication. A central quality of ethnographic research is that we, as researchers, acknowledge that our representations claim to represent reality. Whether a situation is depicted as one of coercion or of care, these opposing representations demand further ethnographic work for verification. Ethnography is not just about rich description. Equally important is ensuring that audiences can interpret those descriptions in a way that does justice to the portrayed reality.

The "Sahel on Sahel: Collaborative Visual Anthropology" project (2021-2027) is a collaborative institutional-building project in

visual anthropology between UiT and the universities in Ngaoundéré and Maroua in Cameroon, Bamako in Mali and Niamey in Niger. And also here, we build on the principle of interpretation in ethnographic research to succeed in cross-cultural communication. At the institutions in Mali and Cameroon there are former UiT students now working in their respective anthropology departments, teaching at visual anthropology programmes.



AUDIENCE AT THE OPENING OF THE ANNUAL MEETING IN THE SAHEL ON SAHEL PROJECT "RENCONTRE INTERNATIONALE DE L'ANTHROPOLOGIE VISUELLE", NIAMEY, NIGER, 2026 (PHOTO: AICHA MACKEY)

Student exchanges remain just as important, with master's students from Bamako coming to Tromsø, while students from Niamey, Niger, have been on exchanges at the University of Maroua in Northern Cameroon. The project has 10 PhD students, who are following courses at all 5 universities.

Negotiating understandings of reality and conflicts in the Sahel – a task for anthropological film workshops

As in the nursery example above, in

the "Sahel on Sahel" project we use the process of filmmaking as a space for dialogue and reflection. By working concretely with research partners on audiovisual storytelling, we aim to both produce films that represent pressing realities in the region and to engage local communities facing various challenges. The reflection that film enables – both in production and distribution – becomes an opportunity to discuss the issues addressed in the films.

One example of this is the work our team in Maroua, Cameroon, has realised with women associated with the jihadist group Boko Haram, active since 2014 in the border regions between Nigeria and Cameroon. When the governor, political elites and representatives of international organisations saw the resulting films, they commented that their political treatment of these women had been based on entirely false assumptions.

Another case in point is exemplified by the films from a workshop organised in Mokolo. Since Boko Haram began its violent incursions from the mountains into Nigeria, the town of Mokolo in northern Cameroon has seen a steady influx of displaced people settling in and around the town. At the same time, rainfall during the rainy season has become more erratic. Access to water and land has therefore turned into a source of conflict. Organising film workshops that bring together different actors who use the land and the water creates a forum for discussion and reflection towards possible solutions.

Film thus evolves into more than a medium for conveying tradition and culture. The act of making film becomes a space for reflection and dialogue, revealing possible solutions along the way. On a more general level, we can say that nations long colonised by France, with hierarchical political grammars, have had their local arenas for discussion and decision-making weakened. Village chiefs no longer hold the same authority. Film workshops in communities and neighbourhoods with visual anthropologists knowing the field, have the potential to reclaim such a local arena for reflection. The films are also intimate testimonies from a rapidly changing region striving to free itself from the yoke of the colonial era, but which remains unseen by the wider world. An overarching aim of these film projects is to create spaces for interpretation and reflection, thereby supporting efforts to find new solutions in a region under pressure.



FROM LEFT, DR ALHASSANE NADJOUR ABDOURAHMANE, PROF TROND WAAGE (UIT), THE CANDIDATE FATOUMA INTAHAMA HOUSSEINI, DR RACHEL ISSA DJESA (UIT), PROF MOHAMED MOCTAR ABDOURAHMANE, L'UNIVERSITÉ ABDOU MOUMOUNI DE NIAMEY, NIGER, 2026 (PHOTO: MOUSSA SEIDOU SOUMEY)

Visual Anthropology in Today's Niger

Where Jean Rouch made his films, and stricter Islam is gaining ground by Trond Waage

Fatima was the first person ever to defend a master's degree in visual Anthropology in Niger. We were at the university in the capital, Niamey. She stood before us, the examination committee, ready to present the film she had made, which we would discuss alongside the thesis she had written. I found myself a little anxious about how it would go. The faculty boardroom was packed with classmates, neighbours, family and friends. The atmosphere was electric. Fatima, a weaver by trade, always fully veiled and wearing what in the Middle East is called an abaya, was restless. Her

face was hidden beneath the plain, brown cloth. Her eyes betrayed her nerves, her head bowed.

Fatima brought a gift for my wife when I was in Niamey to teach the introductory course in visual anthropology to this first cohort of students in spring 2024. When she handed me the small box she had made, she quickly withdrew her hand, afraid I would touch her.

I have thought a lot about how the female students in this very first master's cohort in visual anthropology in

Niamey would be able to conduct fieldwork. They seemed so cautious and seldom spoke up, and all followed the same dress code. To me, they appeared raised to be invisible, hiding in their loose clothes and hijabs. Not long ago, women's dress in the Sahel was very different: explosions of colour and joy, with combinations of hues, cuts and breathtaking headpieces. Now times have changed. One consequence of the rise of Islamism since 2015 is that a stricter version of Islam has spread across the Sahel. An Islam with many conventions. My worries have been about how these "invisible" women in abayas can conduct active fieldwork among both women and men. Can they engage in participant observation aimed at getting close to people's experiences? Could they do so with a video camera? And what is the point of universities exchanging with a country that is becoming strictly Muslim and is governed by a military regime that staged a coup in 2023?

It had been two years since we launched the master's programme in visual anthropology in Niger as one of the objectives of the "Sahel on Sahel" project. The students have returned from their fieldwork. In recent months, the editing suite has been busy with film projects from different parts of this large and diverse country, known to many through Jean Rouch's films. Now it was time for exams and Fatima was visibly nervous, but she delivered a fine presentation. Her film about young male students who run small shops on campus was lively and well-crafted. We had a good discussion, and Fatima received a good grade.

After the session, the committee and the candidate left the room to take the obligatory "photo de famille." I, as "le président" (or the external examiner), standing closest to the candidate, focused on keeping a respectful physical distance. Then it happened. After the photos were taken, she turned to me, looked me straight in the eye, took my hand in a firm grip and said, "Professeur, je suis tellement heureuse, je suis tellement fière, merci, merci, merci..." — "Professor, I am so happy, I am so proud, thank you, thank you, thank you..." She would not let go.

At the subsequent conference organised by our project, she walked around with her head held high, smiling and chatting with PhD students and researchers from Cameroon, Mali and elsewhere.

Fatima's story is about much more than

a pleased teacher seeing students flourish; it is about newly acquired confidence meeting the world. These students' emergence as socially engaged storytellers, telling stories rooted in people's everyday lives, is hugely important in this country and in the troubled Sahel region.

University collaboration in a country under a military regime

Niger, often counted by UN being among the world's weakest and poorest states, is ruled by a military regime. In 2023, the elected president, Bazoum, was toppled in a coup — the fifth coup since independence in 1960. After the coup, most European countries followed France's example and withdrew from the country, suspending aid projects, stopping transfers, and halting cooperation. This has, in turn, opened space for increased activity from China and Russia.

Niger and the other states have consciously sought new partners. They are angry at the West for its negative role in the Sahel over the past 15 years. NATO's bombing of Libya in 2011 destroyed a regime that ran many development projects across the region. Libya had built infrastructure, run petrol stations and hotels, and had countless construction projects underway. Taxi drivers in Mali and Niger used to have photographs of Libya's President Gaddafi in their cars. After 2011, Libya withdrew from everything. NATO's war left arms depots exposed, which armed a range of groups — separatists, Islamists and bandits — and destabilised an entire region. In Niger, violent Islamism has taken root in the east along the borders



SCREENSHOT FROM THE FILM "COÛT DU SAVOIR" BY FATOUMA INTAHAMA HOUSSEINI



SCREENSHOT FROM THE FILM "QUAND LA TERRE PARLE" BY MAHAMADOU IBRAHIM HAROUNA OUSMANE

with Chad and Nigeria, and in the west along Mali and Burkina Faso, with recurring attacks.

Since Libya, the resentment toward France and the West has grown across the region. There are many reasons for this. Franco-African relations are complex. The fact that French forces sent to Mali from 2013 did not manage to halt the violence has made the population suspicious of Western influence. How can one of the world's best-equipped armies fail to stop bandits on motorcycles? And who is really arming the insurgents? Western aid organisations delivering food to villages where Al-Qaida-affiliated groups operate has caused outrage. Niger's authorities have discovered that many aid organisations do not report what they actually do in-country. Lately, there have even been assertions on social media that France might be arming the Islamists to weaken the military regime — a claim now repeated in comment threads after recent attacks in Niger and Mali.

Amid all this noise, it is nevertheless the recurring corruption allegations against projects and people linked to French interests that truly infuriate people. In Niger, one may ask how it can be that France pays far less for uranium from their mines than it pays for uranium from Kazakhstan or Canada. It is such political undercurrents that made it possible for militaries to carry out coups in Mali (2020 and 2021) and Niger in 2023 without mass popular protest.

University cooperation and continuity

Abdou Moumouni University of Niamey has lost many international partnerships as a result of the sanctions. This is not experienced purely as a loss. Among the university staff in Niamey, there has long been a strong feeling of not being recognised as truly equal

participants in projects with international partners. They are tired of the constant condemnations and of the endless narrative that Niger is the world's poorest country with weak governance. France's and the West's reprimands after the 2023 coup have been harsh. French and Western media focus only on what goes wrong in the country: violence, Islamism and poverty. My colleagues insist that the situation was not better when the president was democratically elected — yet then there were never such reports. And was the president really elected

democratically in 2023, they ask with irony? Bazoum, the president now accused of high treason and held under house arrest, likely received no more than 20% of the vote. Nevertheless, France approved the election, so did the EU, and people are well-aware of this.

Staff at Abdou Moumouni University of Niamey see institutional cooperation, of the kind offered by Norway, Switzerland and a few other countries, as an opportunity to develop academic environments in Niger. The model Norway has used for institutional cooperation since the 1990s is based on university teachers from Norway — and in our case from Niger, Cameroon and Mali — working together over time to develop courses, teach and supervise master's and doctoral students. This means we jointly train new candidates. Through this process, theories, experiences and mindsets from North and South are tested against each other and produce new perspectives in a genuine partnership. It is the practical operationalisation of the "crossed gaze" as a method. We become dependent on one another to learn and to do our work. This model is very different from the approach used by earlier colonial powers. For example, France and the US pull PhD candidates out to their own metropolises, where many remain. For example, France and the US have a tendency to pull PhD candidates from their own environments and bring them to Western university cities, where they frequently remain after completing their studies.

In times of political turmoil, jihadist uprising and coups, there is nevertheless continuity in academic communities: environments that will train the bureaucrats, academics and filmmakers of the future. In this unstable situation, where countries like Niger

and Mali have a war economy and education is not prioritised, international cooperation is crucial for keeping these communities alive. Norway must not repeat the French model, as my colleagues in Niger warn.

Film as a space for reflection and dialogue

What about Fatima and her film? Why do visual anthropology in turbulent times?

In Fatima's character-driven story, two young men carry the narrative. One starts a small shop selling school bags and other supplies. The other runs a tiny stall selling baguettes with omelette and tea. They are two enterprising young men whom we follow through their everyday lives. The omelette seller brought his sister to the big market in central Niamey. They hunt for ingredients to mix their very own perfume. Omelettes and perfume are their new business idea. The school-bag seller shines in front of the camera when he introduces his best friend and explains how they help each other run the shop and finish their studies in economics. It is striking how Fatima, with her camera, gave these young students a chance to reflect on what they were doing. "Yes, Niger is poor," one says, "but we must try; we cannot wait for others to help us, so we must connect what we learn to developing our own enterprises." Through these enterprises, we see them embedded in larger networks of fellow students in similar situations who support each other in both business and studies. They are proud of what they accomplish.

The next student up for examination made a film whose English title translates as "Writing in the Sand." Shot in three neighbouring villages further east, the film captures life on the cusp of the rainy season as communities wait to resume planting. The film was beautifully shot — the colours, the quaint houses, the landscape, and the people. Children, women and men of all ages take part in the village festivities with various rituals. In a colourful procession accompanied by drums and string instruments, they walk out of the village together. In an open area under baobab trees, men draw symbols in the sand which are then interpreted. Chickens and beer are offered and Muslim prayers performed. The prefect, the state's local representative, blesses the whole. The solidarity, the joy and the warm mood portrayed in the narrative impacted us. I think Jean Rouch would have loved this film, because in "Writing in the Sand" we see the kind of religious practice that characterised the Sahel and much of West Africa for centuries: local adaptations

and traditions seamlessly integrated with Islamic practice. Such stories stand in contrast to the doctrinaire Islamists in the region who try to impose a strict uniformity — where women must wear the abaya, men must have long beards, and anything not deemed an Islamic tradition is forbidden.

Three months after the exams, these films are circulating at several film festivals in West Africa. "Writing in the Sand" has been shown at some of West Africa's largest documentary festivals, and I continue to receive updates on the new awards it has won.

Fatima and the other students shone with their engaging films. They were the first in their families, in their communities, to take a master's degree, proving they have important messages to share. They dressed and behaved so that the Islamists could not easily criticise them, while at the same time proving to have important messages to share. They made films based on sharing with their protagonists and committing to their stories to be told using film. The films are marked by closeness to the everyday lives they portray, and they are in local languages people understand. These are stories that spark new conversations and reflections about what Niger's future could be. They offer hopeful narratives rooted in Nigerien perspectives that stand in stark contrast to the regime's televised reports about recent activities and actions of ministers, and, not least, to Islamist propaganda.

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ANIMATED SCENE FROM LA KANDURUMA (2011). CREDIT: IMAGE COURTESY OF ANDREW SIMON TUCKER & KANKUAMATV.

The Father of Shiny Things

by Andrew Simon Tucker

Since 2009 I have been working with Indigenous, farming and fishing communities in northern Colombia. Trained at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester, I have always been close to observational filmmaking, marked by a high ethical component and an attempt at a non-extractivist approach in the field. Yet, during my many fieldwork trips around Colombia's Caribbean, I soon realised that linear two-dimensional media does not always fit the concepts and content the communities wished to share. A question that frequently arose was how I could accommodate non-linear cosmological principles in a linearly structured film. A traditional visual ethnography records past events, past places, and people who may no longer exist, whereas the cosmovisions of the Indigenous communities of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (SNSM) and the Guajira peninsula conflate past, present and future, entangling human and more-than-human beings into a mesh of interwoven relationships.

When we make a film, we press record, we leave the filming site, we sit down to edit, sometimes with the communities we filmed, unfortunately more often without them. We aim to represent our fieldwork situation as closely as we can, yet the footage remains a vestige of the past, or, borrowing from Laura Mulvey, death 24 times a second, itself an inversion of Godard's claim that cinema is truth 24 times a second. Audiences 'read' an ethnographic or documentary film as something that occurred before, with the narrative following a beginning, a middle and an end, though not necessarily in that order, as my former mentor Paul Henley, again borrowing from Godard, liked to remind us. So, what if we could flip this? What would it take to develop a form of mediatic representation constructed in the present, one that shifts the viewer's position from "I am witnessing the past that no longer exists" towards "I am experiencing something now"?

In my filming practice, I already encountered moments that do not follow a strict linear temporal ordering. From 2011 onward, I've been supporting and

collaborating with an Indigenous film collective, KankuamaTV, based in the village of Atanquez in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (SNSM), Colombia, in the production of a short documentary series on the community's myths and legends. We produced *La Kanduruma*, a part-animated short about a female spiritual being who appears at night, taking away unsuspecting husbands in a huge bag. At the time, she was considered a spirit who, due to electrification, mobile phones and cable TV, had mostly disappeared from village life. Yet after screening the film for the community, stories of sightings of *Kanduruma* began to increase. The given explanation was that we had inadvertently woken her from her slumber. The power of an image of the past, of a story, directly affected the partially dormant spirit world of the present.

Audiovisual media in the SNSM, as all instruments, devices and apparatuses imported from the outside necessarily need to be incorporated within the communities' cosmological ordering. The Indigenous film collective *Zhigoneshi*, of the Kogi, Ikú and Wiwa communities, has documented how their spiritual leaders, the *mamos*, assigned a spiritual adoptive ancestor to audiovisual media, *nuñgá* in Kogi or, the Father of Shiny Things in English. If images carry spiritual agency in the context of the SNSM, the question partly shifts away from our old ethical conundrums of who holds the camera, to what kind of entity we are making or engaging with when we press record, and on whose authority might it enter the world? I have, over fifteen years of fieldwork, come across this idea repeatedly. The power of an image of the past to influence the present and connect with subjacent spirit beings in an atemporal framework became something I grew increasingly uncomfortable with. Documenting the past seemed more like a locking in of what I was trying to convey.

Discussions with Indigenous students in my Visual Anthropology classes at the Universidad del Magdalena in Santa Marta, Colombia, among them



SCENE FROM LA VERDAD DUERME EN SILENCIO. CREDIT: IMAGE COURTESY OF TATIANA MAHECHA.

Dúnjuse Mojica of the Wiwa community and Aty Zapata of the Ikú community, helped me sharpen those questions and think through the limitations of linear film as a vehicle for non-linear temporalities. That process led me to develop, together with Germán Villalobos with whom I have built several expanded reality experiences, and guided throughout by the Ikú leader Moisés Villafañe, a virtual reality experience addressing the question of whether a different representational medium could better express non-linear and atemporal principles. *La verdad duerme en silencio VR* (The Truth Rests in Silence) grew out of our homonymous sensory documentary.

The Truth Rests in Silence

The sensory ethnographic film of the same name, released in July of 2026 on Colombian national TV, and just beginning its festival run, explores the colonial trauma suffered by the Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities of the SNSM through landscape, voice and texture, past and present, with an approach to sensing how the sacred mountain range senses us. The virtual reality (VR, work-in-progress) version is based on this research and material but deconstructs its linearity while opening up to spatiality and user agency. While the documentary unfolds the same way every time, the VR assembles itself differently around each visitor, with their actions and movements through three-dimensional space acting directly on the outcome.

The experience opens with Ikú cosmogony, the



FILMING A SCENE FROM LA VERDAD DUERME EN SILENCIO WITH SAGA MARÍA LUISA MOJICA AND MOISÉS VILLAFañE.
CREDIT: IMAGE COURTESY OF JENNY MACHADO VIDES.

beginning of everything. The visitor stands in darkness, and the world slowly takes shape around them, accompanied by the voice of Ikú mamo Camilo. There is no menu, no tutorial, no narrator telling them where to go or what to do. From this opening scene, four worlds become available, each addressing an episode of bio-cultural principles, colonial violence, current extractivist activities, or territorial displacement suffered by the communities. They can be entered in any order, and the visitors' actions within each world become a personal and unrepeatable interaction with the presented content. No two visitors will explore the experience the same way, and none will repeat the same actions.

In each world, the visitor encounters current voices from the communities contrasting with voices from the past. The Ikú mamo Camilo, the Wiwa saga María Luisa, and Moisés Villafañe speak from within the environments, contrasting with historical accounts of colonisation, as disembodied presences inhabiting the same space as the visitor. The audios are played randomly based on visitor's actions, thereby creating a fragmented narrative, trying to avoid a curated sense-making of the messiness of human encounters and experience with other worlds. The environments themselves are photogrammetric reconstructions of

real places in Indigenous territory, allowing visitors to freely explore these spaces.

Visitors interact with each world through their bodies; they can move, reach, gesture, place things within each virtualized environment. Each world reacts to gesture and movement, whether a seed reaches the ground, whether water moves, whether objects are moved. Within the pre-determined six scenes we consciously avoided a pre-determined path; there is no correct or incorrect way through. The interface does not measure the visitor against a template of right behaviour as in a video game. It means the experience does not know what it expects from you, only what it offers. Thus, the experience is ephemeral, unique to each

visitor, its meaning is derived from the interactions with the virtualized worlds.

The final scene is assembled from each visitor's actions, tracing their unique choices and displaying them as an abstracted organism of light, sound and texture, which then dissolves again into darkness. The experience keeps no record of who came through it or their actions, it only lingers in the memories of those who passed through it. With Miklós Kiss, I have previously adapted Maturana and Varela's concept of autopoiesis, originally used to describe self-maintaining living systems, to immersive media (Tucker and Kiss, 2023). We argue that an autopoietic VR experience exists only through the interactions between the visitor's agency, the presented content, and the underlying reactive programming. In La verdad duerme en silencio VR we attempted to consciously apply this theory into practice, as the experience only exists as an entangled set of meaning-making processes, arising through action and reaction, limited to its duration.

In VR the perceived boundary separating the audience from the subject matter, the screen, dissolves. This illusion is facilitated by the stereoscopic rendering combined with an array of movement sensors of a VR headset. In a conventional film, however ethically

produced, the viewer sits on one side of a flat rectangle, and the content stays on the other. The flat screen acts rather like a window into other worlds, a barrier that cannot be crossed. In post-screen media, such as expanded reality, the visitor's perception comes closer to being emplaced in a digitally re-created space, or indeed closer to a fieldwork situation, where their corporeity is a part of and influences the surroundings, both human and non-human alike, thereby altering the outcome of the experience. They become, in effect, co-creators in their own right. I see this as a structural shift that brings the medium closer to the ontological principles the mamos describe, where 'observer' and 'observed' enter a type of double-bind, which, of course, brings on a new set of questions surrounding the ethics of post-screen media. This is where, I think, a term like post-screen media anthropology, could help describe more precisely what we are experimenting with, departing from footage contained within a frame to embodied encounters channelled through an immersive digital system.

Designing Opacity

The design decisions in the experience emerged from the relationships and conversations I have sustained over many years of fieldwork in the SNSM, attempting to address some of the ethical, aesthetical and narrative questions of working with representational media.

The non-linear structure approximates the cosmological principles the mamos describe, where past, present and future occur simultaneously on different planes and not on a linear continuum. As the experience assembles itself differently on each run, reacting to the visitor's agency within different worlds, it lies closer to cosmological atemporal principles common in the SNSM than a fixed linear edit of a traditional film ever could.

The fragmentation and withholding of some information, the fact that the experience deletes all session data after each use, and the control of the communities to be able to retract the VR experience from circulation at any time is a direct nod to what Édouard Glissant called the right to opacity, the importance of keeping secrets, not to be fully legible to outsiders.

Our discipline has a deep-rooted archival history, assuming that what is registered should be preserved

and made available. In La verdad duerme en silencio VR we deliberately push against that instinct. The experience offers itself and then withdraws, paralleling my own experiences in the SNSM; sometimes I'm welcomed in, others I'm kept at bay, a principle I have learnt to accept and uphold.

The communities also retain the right to withdraw public showings entirely, at any point and for any reason, so that when the need to share this material has run its course, the work can be taken back, a feature of the piece agreed upon with the communities from the beginning and based on my experience while working on a previous VR prototype, Masks of the Sierra VR that I developed with the Kogi. As this experience re-constructed a three-dimensional version of sacred temple and a Kogi mask that, at the time, was held in the archives of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, the political Kogi leader Arregocés Conchacala asked me not to share the piece with anyone outside of the community or anyone who had not gone through the required initiation rites to access this content (see Tucker, 2025). If a screening of a film can wake Kanduruma from her slumber, if images can carry spiritual agency, then a non-linear ephemeral autopoietic VR experience operates on a different level of risk. With La verdad duerme en silencio VR, we avoided including sensitive artefacts and spaces. We may avoid the risk of binding spirits to a linear narrative, yet we might inadvertently wake previously dormant spirits or change the meaning of these virtualized environments.

Where this leaves us

I do not know whether what we are building resolves the questions I started with. A VR experience is still an artefact, consisting of noughts and zeros, encoded in software by people who are not – in this case at least – the communities it concerns. There remains an asymmetry in who holds the means of production and the infrastructure to reproduce the experience. However, this work changes the terms on how it exists in the world. I consider it a tool, a point of departure for understanding how this new medium works within Indigenous cosmology in the SNSM. Instead of strictly adhering to recording the past, it assembles temporal fragments in the present, reacting to the visitor's body instead of following a fixed script. This means that we should stop regarding post-screen media as a logical extension of traditional 2D media. And yet, for immersive media, The Father of Shiny Things may not be its spiritual ancestor after all. Nuñgá was assigned



A FULLY THREE-DIMENSIONAL, EXPLORABLE WORLD IN VR, THE PHOTOGRAMMETRIC MODEL ALLOWS FOR THREE-DIMENSIONAL MOVEMENT. CREDIT: IMAGE COURTESY OF ANDREW SIMON TUCKER.

to devices that record the past, keeping a memory for posterity. Our VR experience comes closer to an embodied experience of space, ephemeral and autopoietic in its design, building itself from the viewer's agency in the present. What this means for how it is entangled with the spirit world, neither my Indigenous collaborators nor I can quite fathom yet. In the context of the SNSM, this novel medium will likely require a new spiritual ordering, a new adoptive ancestor. And still, we may be left with pressing questions of authorship, on the nature of digital artefacts and of governance. These may well be questions better posed to the spirits of the Sierra.

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JOSÉ, MY 360° CAMERA ASSISTANT AT WORK IN TEYKÚ, SNSM. CREDIT: IMAGE COURTESY OF ANDREW SIMON TUCKER.

Singing the Road to the Ancestors

Voice, Image, and the Karbi Kecharhe Alun

by Michael T. Heneise



KASANG TERONPI AND DR DHARAMSING TERON DURING THE DOCUMENTATION OF THE KECHARHE ALUN, KARBI ANGLONG, ASSAM, 2017 (PHOTO: MICHAEL T. HENEISE)

In Karbi Anglong, Assam, Kasang Teronpi sat down in a clearing beyond the village boundary and began to sing.

There was nothing especially dramatic about the scene at first glance. A mat had been laid out beneath the trees. A few microphones were placed in front of her. Cameras stood awkwardly on tripods. Around her sat a small group of Karbi researchers, translators, and cultural workers, along with Dr Dharamsing Teron and myself, each of us trying to appear more prepared than we

probably were. There were notebooks, memory cards, batteries, bottles of water, the usual small anxieties of field documentation. Someone checked the sound. Someone checked the frame. Then Kasang began.

I had known, of course, that we had come to record the Kecharhe Alun, the great Karbi funerary epic. I also knew that Kasang was a charhepi, a female ritual specialist often described in English as a dirge singer, and that she was known locally not only for funerary lament but also as a rainmaker. Still, I

suspect I had not quite understood what this meant. I had imagined, perhaps too neatly, that we were there to document a long ritual song. It was only after the first hours passed, and then the first day, and then another, that the scale of what she held in memory began to register.

The old shorthand is to call the charhepi a dirge singer. This is not wrong; it is simply too small. A charhepi laments the dead, but she also guides the soul of the deceased toward the village of the ancestors. Her voice maps a



KASANG TERONPI DURING THE DOCUMENTATION OF THE KECHARHE ALUN, KARBI ANGLONG, ASSAM, 2017 (PHOTO: MICHAEL T. HENEISE)

difficult route across rivers, mountains, resting places, and remembered landscapes. It names ritual objects and kin relations. It recalls an ancestral geography. It instructs, mourns, remembers, and accompanies.

Depending on the singer, the Kecharhe Alun can extend to as much as thirty-five hours. In Kasang's case, the performance lasted just under thirty-three. She sang from memory over several days, stopping only when the practical limits of the recording process demanded it. After four days, we paused to recharge batteries, empty memory cards, and check files, only to realise that we were still somewhere near the middle of the performance.

What seemed at first to be a project of preservation became something stranger and more demanding: an encounter with a living archive carried in the body, breath, memory, and ritual authority of one extraordinary woman.

A Sung Geography of Death

The Karbis are an Indigenous people of Assam and adjoining hill regions of Northeast India. Older colonial and administrative sources often referred to them as "Mikir," a term that still appears in early ethnographic

and governmental writing. Today, Karbi Anglong remains the principal homeland of Karbi communities, though Karbi language, ritual, and oral tradition exist across a wider and internally diverse cultural geography.

The Kecharhe Alun occupies a particular place within Karbi death ritual. In Karbi thought, death may be described through the phrase along kachevoi, a return, or going back, to one's village. The soul does not simply disappear. It must be guided toward ephi-ephuarong, the land of the ancestors. In this sense, the epic is a sung geography of death: a verbal map, a ritual itinerary, and a poetic means of passage.

One section, known as Tovar Kethan, gives instruction about the route the soul must follow to reach the ancestors' village. Teron describes this landscape as full of hills, mountains, and rivers, with named ranges and crossings that vary across versions of the lament (Teron 2014). The journey is a difficult route, remembered in words, through a landscape at once earthly, ancestral, and otherworldly.

In Ronglin, Bonglong Terang's extensive Karbi "book of the dead," the ancestral village is described as a strong settlement, "thousand-household" in scale.



RECORDING THE KECHARHE ALUN: CAMERA, AUDIO EQUIPMENT, AND THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF DOCUMENTATION, KARBI ANGLONG, ASSAM, 2017 (PHOTO: MICHAEL T. HENEISE)

Teron gives the following short demonstrative stanza:

... Iruachepong
Chephong rongsengklong
Donsuri plengchong
Somekar ke'ong
Sora mutengbong
Pirdia serbong ...

"Our ancestors' village, it's a strong one, which is a thousand-household strong, with such a huge population..."

(Terang 1986, cited in Teron 2014: 106)

The epic also narrates the wider sequence of death ritual: preparing the body, dressing the deceased, cooking the final meal, offering betel nut and water, constructing the pyre, carrying the body on the dola, saying the final farewell, and returning to the cremation ground with food on the third day. These details matter because the epic is

embedded in household space, kinship obligations, gendered ritual labour, food, mourning, landscape, and the moral work of accompanying the dead.

At the centre of this tradition stands the charhepi. Her lament is one of the conditions through which the ritual journey can take place. In some accounts, her role overlaps with that of the uchepi, the woman who prepares the final meal for the deceased. Women's ritual labour, so easily treated as domestic or auxiliary in external accounts, here occupies the centre of the passage between the living and the dead.

The Camera in the Meadow

The documentation of Kasang Teronpi's performance began in 2017 as part of a collaborative effort involving Dr Dharamsing Teron, the Centre for Karbi Studies,

the Highland Institute, and a team of Karbi researchers, translators, poets, teachers, and cultural workers. The project was supported by the Firebird Foundation and grew out of a shared concern that the Kecharhe Alun, though widely recognised as one of the most significant works in the Karbi oral repertoire, had never been fully documented, transcribed, translated, or archived in a systematic way.

This was not a case of an anthropologist arriving to "discover" an oral tradition. The request to record came from within Karbi intellectual and ritual worlds. Kasang herself wanted the performance documented. Dr Teron had already been working for many years to support Karbi cultural scholarship through the Centre for Karbi Studies. The recording was therefore part of a broader effort to pass on a body of

knowledge whose conditions of transmission had become precarious, as Karbi scholars and ritual specialists themselves understood.

The visual scene mattered. The rules surrounding the performance meant that the epic was not to be sung casually inside village space, a point later noted in Tora Agarwala's report for The Indian Express (Agarwala 2019). So, we filmed in a clearing, with the devices arranged around Kasang in a way that was both practical and, in retrospect, revealing. The camera fixed attention on a seated woman. The microphone received her voice. The rest of us entered the frame only intermittently, as listeners, assistants, technicians, and witnesses.

For visual anthropology, this raises a central question: what does the camera capture when a ritual specialist sings the road of the dead? It captures posture, gesture, duration, fatigue, pauses, the changing light, the bodily discipline of singing, and the social atmosphere of listening. It also captures the rather prosaic labour of documentation: tripods adjusted, files checked, batteries replaced, the team hovering between reverence and technical anxiety.

Yet the camera cannot carry the whole burden of interpretation. The meaning of place names, the distinction between ritual formula and poetic variation, the question of what may circulate and what requires care — these belong to a field of

relations around the recording. In that sense, the visual record is not the end of documentation. It is the beginning of another form of responsibility.

Collaboration and the Labour of Translation

After the performance came another kind of labour: transcription, transliteration, translation, checking, interpretation, and preparation for publication. These processes are slower than recording and far less visible. A camera can dramatise the moment of performance; it is much less capable of showing the months and years of collaborative listening that follow.

The Kecharhe Alun is an immense sung composition dense with ritual language, place names, poetic formulae, and Karbi concepts of personhood, death, ancestry, and landscape. A literal translation risks flattening its poetic and ritual force. A polished literary translation risks detaching it from

the Karbi terms that give it life. The challenge is not simply to move from Karbi into English, but to ask what kind of translation can remain faithful to the epic as ritual speech.

This is why collaboration is not decorative but constitutive. The work depends on Karbi speakers, poets, historians, linguists, ritual specialists, and community scholars. It also depends on the interpretive authority of Dr Teron, whose earlier essay "Charhepi's Song: Karbi Women's Funeral Lament" situated the Kecharhe Alun within Karbi death ritual and within wider comparative discussions of funeral laments and journeys of the soul (Teron 2014; see also Blackburn 2005).

The epic's world cannot be reduced to "content." It is a performed relation between the living, the dead, and the ancestors. It is also a gendered form of knowledge. In a context where women's ceremonial labour is often essential yet under-recognised, the Kecharhe Alun reveals the authority of



MEMBERS OF THE KARBI RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION TEAM AT WORK TRANSCRIBING, KARBI ANGLONG, ASSAM, 2017 (PHOTO: MICHAEL T. HENEISE)



THE KARBI RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION TEAM, KARBI ANGLONG, ASSAM, 2017 (PHOTO: MICHAEL T. HENEISE)

women as keepers, performers, and transmitters of oral tradition. Ruth Finnegan's broader observation that women often take the lead in ceremonial songs at crucial life-cycle moments is helpful here, though the Karbi case demands attention to its own ritual particularity (Finnegan 1977).

After the Newspaper Story

In 2019, Tora Agarwala reported on the project for The Indian Express under a headline that compared the scale of the Kecharhe Alun to Homer's Iliad. The comparison made sense journalistically: it gave readers unfamiliar with Karbi oral literature a measure of scale. The article also did something locally important. It made Kasang better known beyond the circles in which she had long been called upon in moments of death. Agarwala described her as an eighty-year-old resident of Taralangso near Diphu who had wanted to become a charhepi since childhood and who regarded mastery of the epic as an honour for women, almost like an educational degree (Agarwala 2019).

One line in the article remains especially difficult to improve upon. "If we don't do it, who will?" Kasang asked (Agarwala 2019). That question carries the urgency of the project more precisely than any comparison with Homer. The Kecharhe Alun is important because it is Karbi. Its power lies in the relations it sustains: between a deceased person and their kin, between the living household and the ancestral village, between named landscapes and remembered migration, between women's ritual voices and the fragile future of oral transmission.

The problem, then, is not simply how to make the epic visible, but what kind of visibility is appropriate. Some forms of knowledge become vulnerable when removed from the relations that sustain them. Some ritual practices can be documented without being fully disclosed. Some recordings may need to remain in community archives rather than circulate freely. Some images require captions that explain not only who or what is shown, but also the conditions under which the image was made.

To document the Kecharhe Alun is to stand within these tensions. There is urgency, because the number

of fully trained charhepi singers is declining. There is also caution, because preservation can too easily become extraction. Between urgency and caution lies the difficult but necessary work of relationship.

Passing Things on

The phrase "passing things on" has particular resonance here. Oral traditions are passed on through apprenticeship, repetition, performance, correction, and participation. In the present moment they are also passed on through recordings, transcriptions, archives, books, translations, films, and digital files. Each medium carries something; each medium also changes what it carries.

When Kasang sang, she was enacting a form of knowledge that lives in performance. The recording devices preserved her voice, but they did not replace the conditions that made the performance meaningful. The project's future depends not only on the existence of files, but on the continued work of Karbi scholars, communities, and ritual specialists who can interpret and sustain them.

This may be the clearest lesson of the Kecharhe Alun project for visual anthropology. Documentation is never only technical. It involves microphones, tripods, lenses, and storage drives, but also trust, consent, obligation, interpretation, and care. One has to follow the local narrative as closely as possible, while also recognising that no recording can exhaust the social world from which the narrative draws its force.

In the meadow, Kasang Teronpi's voice moved across a landscape that was remembered, sung, and ritually present. The camera held the image of her seated there. The microphone received her voice. Around her, the team listened. Beyond the frame, the road to the ancestors continued to unfold.

Acknowledgement

This article draws on and substantially revises an earlier Tromsø Anthropology Blog post by Carolina Némethy, based on a seminar presentation by Michael T. Heneise at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. I am grateful to Carolina for the original invitation to revisit the project for ZARE. The Kecharhe Alun documentation project has been developed in collaboration with Dr Dharamsing Teron, Kasang Teronpi, the Centre for Karbi Studies, the Highland Institute, and Karbi researchers, translators, poets, teachers, and cultural workers.

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LOGO OF THE SYMPOSIUM OFFERED BY JAKOP JANSSØNN. COPYRIGHT INGA-WIKTORIA PÅVE.

Sámi Rhythm, Sounds of Nature, Yoik, Contemporary Research in Acoustic Ecology

by Rossella Ragazzi

This symposium collectively explores the convergence of Sámi cultural heritage, soundscapes, and artistic research, emphasizing the role of sound, rhythm, and storytelling as living, relational archives. Central themes include the politics of listening, biocultural sustainability, and the ethical dimensions of preserving, translating and circulating research or artefacts rooted in Sámi cultural praxis. Through innovative methodologies — ranging from sound installations and audiovisual collages to rhythm-based performances and digital dissemination — these works highlight the resilience of Sámi knowledge systems in the face of a risk of historical erasure or manipulation, environmental challenges, and cultural shifts wanted by consumerism, appropriation and cultural

commodification. By integrating Indigenous methodologies with contemporary artistic and academic practices, the presentations advocate for a deeper understanding of the dynamic interconnections between people, place, and sound, fostering directions of engaging with Sámi heritage and its relevance in addressing global ecological and cultural concerns.

Over the course of two days, the symposium collectively explored the convergence of Sámi cultural heritage, soundscapes, acoustic ecology and artistic research, emphasizing the role of sound, rhythm, yoik and storytelling as living, relational archives. Central themes included the politics of listening, biocultural sustainability, and the ethical dimensions of preserving, translating, and circulating research or

digital and physical artefacts rooted in Sámi cultural praxis.

The symposium was organised and hosted at the Arctic University of Norway by SAMFORSK, the research group studying the societal relevance of Sámi research, which I lead, in collaboration with the dissemination Project DigiJoik and the Research Project Sharing Our Knowledge, all part of SAMFORSK. Through innovative methodologies—ranging from sound installations and audiovisual collages to rhythm-based performances and digital dissemination—these works highlighted the resilience of Sámi knowledge systems in the face of a risk of historical erasure or manipulation, environmental challenges, and cultural shifts provoked, among others, by consumerism, linguistic assimilation or cultural appropriation.

By integrating Indigenous methodologies with contemporary artistic and academic practices, the presentations and participants advocated for a deeper understanding of the dynamic interaction between people, place, and sound, engaging with Sámi heritage and its relevance in addressing global ecological and cultural concerns.

The two-day symposium was divided between the Arctic University Museum and Árdna, the Sámi cultural centre, both at the Arctic University of Norway. The participants and the presentations consisted of members from various research groups hosted by SAMFORSK and came from interdisciplinary backgrounds, including aural and visual anthropology, art, music, Indigenous studies and environmental humanities. These two days reflected such interdisciplinary expressions as one interwoven whole, part of a shared conversation.

The first day I opened the symposium in the capacity of main curator, convener and leader of SAMFORSK. I introduced multiple threads that set the tone and contextual ground for the two-day experimental and interdisciplinary symposium. The intention behind each thread also functioned as a response to constraining forces such as colonial legacies, the implementation of public management mentality within universities, and cultural/managerial forces that encroach on freedom in research. I situated myself and my intellectual trajectory within the discipline of multimodal anthropology, stemming from the practice of

ethnography, visual and aural anthropology and critical museology. I grounded the new term of multimodal anthropology temporally and geographically, within a time span of 25 years in Tromsø, and Sápmi (the cultural regions inhabited by the Sámi People) marked by democratization of academic knowledge production, cross-cultural experimentation and processes of decolonisation within the humanities and social sciences, which I experienced since my first visits in the 1990s. Anthropology, as I stated, is an “inflated colonial discipline”, but also the first to attempt processes of decolonisation of its methodology and dissemination.

The symposium threaded some of these elements through each participant’s intervention, demonstrating why such approaches are powerful in shaping how Indigenous knowledge can be performed collectively and shared with the audience. This was expressed by scholars attending as guests and audience, one of whom, retired professor in anthropology, reflected that “this is how it used to be back in the days”, probably pointing to the time span of 20-30 years back, when our university was on the forefront in implementing visual anthropology, peace, Indigenous, and fishery studies, Sámi linguistic and literature and multidisciplinary approaches enriching and democratising the generation and communication of knowledge.

My introduction set the tone for a convivial seminar and I must thank my mentor Professor Terada



Yoshitaka (1954–2023) a renowned Japanese ethnomusicologist, who in 2019 invited me to be part

of his research group on Music, Performance and Conviviality, at the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, where I learned much about research on musical expressions and performativity. In the years where I was part of Prof. Terada's research group, I worked intensely on Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's legacy.

In our symposium in Tromsø, Valkeapää played a crucial role.

Scholars, artists, and other public guests, whose path might have not crossed in a classical symposium, came with curiosity and open minds. The spirit of "pollination" and cross disciplinary conversation was revived over two days, while the symposium paid homage to the deeply relational living archives of Sámi cultural heritage, and the yoik in particular.

The first session invited the participants to deep listening of one of the masterpieces of Sámi musical and multimodal art, the concert *Beaivi áhčážan* by Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1988).

Deep listening was practiced and theorised by scholar Pauline Oliveros. Katri Somby, a Sámi historian specializing in the history of Sámi Media, introduced *Beaivi áhčážan*. She poignantly reviewed the artistic heritage and life work of multi-artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, also known as Áillohaš. Before the collective deep listening session, Somby presented an impressive range of his work, from music and visual art to literature, as well as his political engagement. Yoik was at the core of his artistry and performance of identity, collaborating across generations within the communities in Sápmi which were ready to perform yoik in new contexts.

Drawing from personal experiences and shared histories with Áillohaš and Sámi elders, Somby evoked the past through sharing a memory from her childhood that deeply moved the audience and brought them into the relational and living archives of Sámi cultural heritage. Katri shared a memory from when Valkeapää visited her elder grandparents in the Deatnu (Tana) region. The historian described them as vulnerable, as they were living with their daughter who was ill and with a son that had fled to Canada as a political refugee, due to the protests in the Alta conflict. It was a life crisis that affected both their family life and being Sámi in the larger political context of Nordic colonisation. The artist and friend had come to visit them and had the intuition that perhaps to yoik would be healing. He invited them out in the tundra (vidda) and they chanted for long hours. It was like a sacred form of mourning, it was relieving their anguish, at least for

a period. This testified to the collaborative, relational and caring ways in which Áillohaš was present with the Sámi communities he inhabited, even for a short time. He was highly charismatic and his presence never went unnoticed.

When Somby shared this memory, listeners were deeply moved and were encouraged to reflect on the kind of person this great artist was, as well as the power of freely chanting *luohti* for his communities in moments of crisis. Thus, going into the collective deep listening session after Somby's introduction, one could not help but feel the presence of Valkeapää in the room. The shared moments of sorrow, but also the healing power of *juoigat*, the act of yoik, was perceived by many, according to their comments after the session. After the deep listening session a roundtable discussion followed, co-curated by Jakop Janssønn, a musician and PhD research fellow at Conservatory of Music, UiT, in a conversation with Harald Gaski, Professor in Literature & Valkeapää's translator, Ol Johan Gaup current Director at DAT (the publishing house co-founded by Valkeapää) and director of the Easter Sámi Festival in Guovdageaidnu (Kautokeino, Finnmark), and Katri Somby, Sámi Associate Professor in History.

Following the collective deep-listening session, the panel discussion invited the audience further into Sámi perspectives and worldviews. It highlighted how



HARALD GASKI AND OL-JOHAN GAUP DURING THE PANEL DISCUSSION FOLLOWING THE LISTENING OF *BEAIVI ÁHČÁŽAN*. THE PAPER COVER, ONCE REMOVED, SHOWS THE IMPRINTED RED HARD COVER OF COTTON, BEAUTIFULLY DECORATED WITH THE SYMBOLS OF SUN, *BEAIVI*. PHOTO: ROSSELLA RAGAZZI.

Áillohaš's work was revolutionary in its time—and remains so today—by connecting Sámi histories across artistic forms and linking past, present, and possible futures. The panellists' close personal and intellectual relationship with Valkeapää and his work was evident in their shared reverence for his contribution to Sámi cultural heritage.

Through music, yoik, poetry, photography, and visual art, *Beaivi áhčážan* created a multimodal form that reflected Indigenous storytelling, ways of knowing, and the relationship between art and politics. Janssønn, Somby, Gaski, and Gaup emphasised that, while deeply rooted in classical yoik, Áillohaš's work also expanded and experimented with its form.

Gaski noted that Áillohaš embodied yoik through his exceptional command of the Sámi language. Yoik can speak especially powerfully to those already familiar with its cultural references, offering Sámi-speaking audiences additional layers of meaning (Gaski, oral communication).

Ol Johan Gaup described Áillohaš's *juoigat* as exceptionally powerful and complex, requiring remarkable breath control, vocal strength, and musical precision. Their distinctive length, tone, and harmonies remain difficult to replicate. He also emphasised the importance of the accompanying book, whose photographs and layout portrays Sápmi across regions and generations. For many Sámi readers, it was the first work to convey a shared sense of belonging: one people connected across vast distances, with images in which they could recognize their own ancestors. The book could be found in many living rooms in Sápmi, on the coffee table.

A striking moment in the panel discussion came when Gaup removed the book's paper jacket, revealing its brightly decorated hard cover: a *noaidi's goavddis* (Sámi drum) on the front and the symbol of *Beaivi*, the Sun, on the back. As Mother of Living Beings and protector of Sámi history, *Beaivi* represents resistance to erasure, colonialism, and assimilation.

The drum motif also reflects the music, particularly the extended opening of the first track. Gaup described it as a "protection yoik for Sápmi and the stories within it," referring to Áillohaš's words: "I drum them in; I hammer them in." For Gaup, the prominence of yoik and drum signals an uncompromising act of protection (Gaup, oral communication).

Gaski connected this imagery to the historical persecution of Sámi drum use in spiritual and religious

practices. He further explained that Áillohaš criticized the industrial and materialistic treatment of reindeer, traditionally understood as a gift from the Sun's Daughter. In *Beaivi áhčážan*, Áillohaš suggests that the Sun may reclaim the reindeer when people no longer treat them as companions. The work therefore affirms Sámi ways of knowing and being, urging Sámi people to safeguard traditional values against assimilation.

Andreas Kühne: "Sounding Rávdnjevággi: In between currents and the overgrown árran. Unfolding the audiovisual collage of the Rávdnji exhibition"



ANDREAS KÜHNE DURING HIS PRESENTATION AT THE MUSEUM OF THE ARCTIC UNIVERSITY OF NORWAY. PHOTO: ROSSELLA RAGAZZI.

Andreas Kühne is a Dutch sound artist and PhD Fellow. His current research "Feedback improvisation: On reciprocal modes of listening and sounding" aims to look into sound as "multisensory modes of radical attentiveness and transformative imaginaries to face industrialisation and settler entanglements to human and more-than-human landscapes in Sápmi, where the feedback between listening and sounding calls for situated ethical futures" as he states.

As a non-native, Kühne tells that his formal jazz education in The Netherlands lacked awareness of "politics of listening" and the materials that he engages with as an electronic musician are "linked to contested mineral prospects in Sápmi". Therefore, this



ELLEN M. STEEN, KATE MAXWELL, ROSSELLA RAGAZZI, CAMILLA BRATTLAND, TRUDE FONNELAND. PRESENTATION OF A NEW LUOHTI (YOIK) ON THE DEATNU (TANA) RIVER AND ITS ENDANGERED SALMON. EXHIBITION "RÁVDNJI, THE TURBULENT STREAM". THE ARCTIC UNIVERSITY OF NORWAY MUSEUM. PHOTO: MIHAI LEAHA.

informs his reflexive practice as a musician and scholar in the engagements with Sápmi in his research, as well as the relational "feedback" from the land and collaborators that in turn shapes and changes his practice. He enhances this approach through reflexivity and collaboration by grounding the terms "feedback" as "reciprocal listening", and "improvisation" as "the attitude needed when dismantling hierarchies

and colonial structures, when listening relationally, when carefully avoiding imposing cultures onto others, when unlearning harmful patterns, and learning to respond ethically in the moment with what is at hand." (Kühne, oral communication).

His engagements span from different experiments with various research groups at our university and with artists. His presentation acted as an extension of his collaborations with artist filmmaker Polina Medvedeva and Sámi-Norwegian composer and singer Elina Waage Mikalsen. Together they contributed

to "Rávdnji the Turbulent Stream: on Sámi traces in the Romsa region", the permanent exhibition at The Arctic University Museum of Norway, which opened in June 2024. The symposium visitors and participants visited the exhibition after the session. The lecture was an articulation on his work for the exhibition as well an important part of the case study for his doctoral research. There, a new luohi from Deatnu (Tana) was introduced by Harald Gaski, who wrote the dajahusat (lyrics), and Camilla Brattland who leads the research project "Sharing our Knowledge" which acted as commissioner for the new yoik about the Tana River and the crisis of wild salmon.

On the second day of the symposium, 4th of November, the entire symposium moved from the university museum to Árdna, the Cultural Sámi House at the university campus.

The opening session was an improvisation of Jakop Janssønn (percussion), Ol Johan Gaup (juoigat, luohi) and Mildrid Taklo, cellist.

Jakop Janssønn: Sámi Ritmmat / Sámi Rhythms.

Jakop Janssønn is a percussionist and composer from Tromsø. He holds both a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in jazz performance and composition. Currently, he is pursuing a PhD in artistic research titled "Sámi ritmmat / Sámi Rhythms."

His presentation was held in Sámi language, subtitled in English.

As a Sea Sámi drummer with nearly fifteen years of experience accompanying yoikers, the researcher explores "how to engage musically in Sápmi in ways



"YOIKING WITH THE RIVER", FRAME FROM THE VIDEO "THE ADVOCATE OF YOIK" WITH ÁNDE SOMBY. DIRECTED BY NICOLA RENZI. COPYRIGHT: NICOLA RENZI.

that feel personally authentic" as he puts it. Trained in jazz drumming and Western music education, musicians experience a growing separation between their professional musical practice and their Sámi background, despite having grown up with Sámi language, family, and landscapes.

His project seeks to reconnect these worlds. It examines authenticity not as a fixed quality, but as something relational and artistic, emerging through encounters between the instrumentalist and Sápmi. The research asks whether Sápmi has distinctive rhythmic sensibilities, whether Sámi ways of thinking and relating can inform rhythmic practice, and how these questions may be explored holistically through language, yoik, drumming, landscape, duodji (Sámi craftsmanship) and dance.

Nicola Renzi "Towards biocultural sustainability in soundscape conservation. Listening from Sápmi".

After brunch, Nicola Renzi, Researcher in anthropology and the ecology of sound at the Universities of Bologna and Turin, presented his lecture, "Towards Biocultural Sustainability in Soundscape Conservation: Listening from Sápmi." Renzi is an Italian ethnomusicologist and sound ecologist working with Arctic sonic environments on Indigenous lands. His PhD in "History and Cultural Heritage" at the University of Bologna and at the University of Helsinki, is titled "More-than-music: Ecosystems, acoustemologies and histories of listening from Sápmi".

At the symposium, he addressed conceptual and methodological blind spots in ethnomusicology when engaging with Sámi acoustemologies. As a non-Indigenous scholar trained within Western and colonial frameworks, he reflected on both his positionality and the disciplinary assumptions shaping

his research.

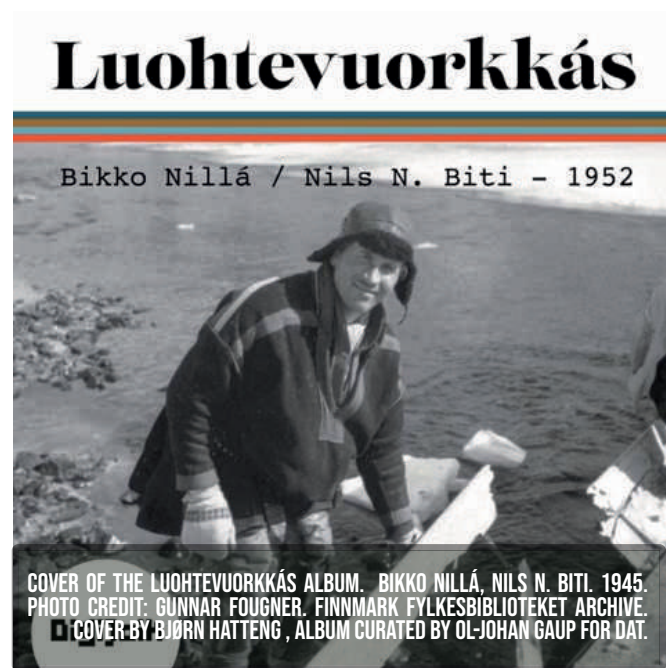
Nicola was first introduced to yoik at the age of six; while travelling through Sápmi with his parents and listening to a cassette of Beavi, áhčážan. He later returned to study Arctic soundscapes and the juoigat (act of yoiking) tradition. This work, he explained, has humbled him and encouraged him to examine the epistemic limitations of methodologies he had previously regarded as universal "truths." According to Renzi, ethnomusicology's division between "ethno" (culture) and "musicology" (sound) reproduces a Cartesian nature-culture divide. Yoik, by contrast, is deeply relational, embedded in and "shared between people and their animate environment" (Renzi 2025). Sámi acoustemologies do not fit neatly into these categories; instead, they "transcend human exceptionalism," representing a biocultural heritage shared by Sámi people and other earth beings (Renzi 2025).

This strict separation of nature and culture can obscure Sámi living heritage, in which people and nature are understood as one. Renzi therefore called for forms of listening rooted in Indigenous and locally grounded practices that recognise the interconnectedness of people, places, and environments. He connected his research to a video (work in progress) winner of the Carpitella Prize (Italy) which he is making with the renowned artist and professor of Law, Ánde Somby: "The Advocate of Yoik" which will premiere in Venezia at the end of 2026.

Camilla Brattland, Rossella Ragazzi, Trude Fonneland, Harald Gaski, Ol-Johan Gaup, Risten Anine Gaup: "LUOHTEVUORKKÁS and DIGIJOIK - Yoik Collections of the museum: publication and research with Guardians of the Yoik Tradition".

In 2024, our museum's collection of music and yoik was added to Norway's Documentary Heritage list, recognising it as a unique cultural repository. UNESCO Norway highlighted its exceptional value in documenting diverse musical traditions from Northern Norway and Sápmi. Scientifically curated, the archive is an important resource for artists, researchers, and cultural preservation. Its collection of luodit (plural of luohi) is regarded as "one of Sápmi's greatest treasures."

Through the government-funded DigiJoik project, our research group explored the translation and digital publication of luohi from the museum's collection for international audiences. We examined the restitution of the recordings to communities in Sápmi, considering



new forms of returning musical heritage. We also briefly presented the museum's history of collecting artefacts and sound recordings. One of the main Sámi contributors to the museum's luodit collection was Bikko Nillá (1906–1986), from Šuoššjávri, between Kárásjoka and Guovdageaidnu in Finnmark. We presented the objects he brought to the museum when recording some of his luodit. These recordings are preserved alongside ethnographic objects from the same regions. We discussed ways of returning both intangible and material heritage to Sámi communities, particularly through digital platforms and museums.

Bikko Nillá's luodit are rich in allusions, evoking landscapes and characters through distinctive rhythms and repetitions that sound strikingly contemporary and blues-like. Other juoigat (yoik singers) created Bikko Nillá's own luohi, portraying his personality through rhythm, beat, melody, and dajahusat (yoik's lyrics). The museum recorded several performances of this luohi.

Through DigiJoik, excerpts of the lyrics (dajahusat) were newly translated and poetically interpreted by juoigi Risten Anine Kvermo Gaup and Sámi literature professor Harald Gaski. We described the museum's collaborative process of publishing archival recordings with Sámi cultural experts and music producers.

As part of the DigiJoik project, the first album in the "Luohtevuorkkás" series was published in 2023, featuring recordings of Bikko Nillá - Nils N. Biti from Šuoššjávri. The recordings were made in 1952 by Arnt Bakke at Tromsø Museum.

Several albums in the series include recordings with members of the Fávrrsorda siida at Kvænangsfjellet in 1955, and a collection of luodit about animals from the archive (Eliid Luodit). Publisher of the series is the Sámi book publisher and music company DAT, founded in 1985. DAT has worked with Sámi music and yoik for 37 years and has released over 100 publications featuring artists and jouigit from all over Sápmi.

Concluding the Symposium

The symposium concluded around the glowing fireplace, the árran, which had burned at the centre of Árdna since the event began. Sitting in several concentric circles, participants and contributors shared their impressions. To begin, artist, jouigis and DigiJoik research assistant Risten Anine Gaup yoiked the symposium, honouring the organic relationality that had developed over the two days.

Ellen Marie STeen: Summing Up, Opening the Final Discussion

Ellen Marie B. Steen, PhD fellow at the Music Conservatory of our Faculty (UMAK), specializing in Sámi music. Ellen is very interested in listening as more than something done by ear, and in her research, she is inspired by Sámi listening; listening with the whole body to both the audible and inaudible things we are surrounded by in our life. Another interest is music and expressions of resistance, as well as how teachers can learn more about the Sámi culture and music so that they can teach these topics better in schools and universities.

She offered the closing reflections, drawing together the various contributions and reaffirming the symposium's purpose. She suggested that through juoigat, acoustic ecology, music and listening, the symposium created a relational space for shared knowledge, collaborative listening, and exchanges across cultures and disciplines.

Reflecting on the deep-listening session of Áillohaš's Beaivi, áhčážan, Steen emphasized—as Jakop had also noted—the power of listening collectively while making room for different experiences. She described how the session evoked a vivid sensory journey through Sámi landscapes: sunrise, reindeer footsteps and bells, birds, melting snow, forest, and yoik. For her, this experience offered both a space to breathe and a profound sense of Sámi cultural strength (Steen, sum up of her oral communication).

Steen also reflected on Andreas Kühne's contribution,



Rossella Ragazzi in an Associate Professor in Visual and Museum Anthropology at UiT The Arctic University of Norway, a professional filmmaker, and a member of the CVA advisory board. Her research spans indigenous and Sámi museums, migration, and transcultural cinema, with current work on critical cultural heritage and indigeneity in Sápmi. Recent book: *Memory Institutions and Sámi Heritage* (co-edited with Trude Fonneland, Routledge, 2024). Her prize-winning films include *La Mémoire Dure* (2000), *At Home in the World* (2003), and *Firekeepers* (2007). She leads the SAMFORSK research group and co-edits TRAJECTORIA.

THE FINAL FEEDBACK SESSION AROUND THE ÁRRAN (FIREPLACE) IN ÁRDNA. ELLEN M. STEEN (FIRST ON THE LEFT), ANDREAS KÜHNE, RISTEN ANINE GAUP, ROSSELLA RAGAZZI, OL-JOHAN GAUP, JAKOP JANSSEN, MARIT HAUAN, NICOLA RENZI (ALL IN THIS PHOTO) AND SEVERAL OTHERS (NOT IN THE PHOTO) TOOK THE WORD (PHOTO: ERIKA DE VIVO)

describing the Rávdnji project as an interdisciplinary exploration of landscape, memory, and time. Listening to Rávdnjevággi, she argued, involves attending both to what has disappeared and to human interventions in the environment. In this way, sound can connect past, present, and future (Steen 2025).

More broadly, she stressed that yoik, rhythm, sound, and listening carry extensive knowledge. Bringing traditions into the present requires respect for Sámi ways of knowing and being, as well as careful listening to people, land, animals, and other-than-human beings. Drawing on Nicola Renzi's presentation, she highlighted the ethics of care embedded in Sámi acoustemology: soundscapes hold stories, histories, and relationships, challenging the separation between culture and nature. They are integral to Sámi music, artistic practice, everyday life, and landscape knowledge.

Steen concluded that the symposium had shown how knowledge often situated beyond academic institutions can be shared and brought into dialogue with them. Creating a space for cross-disciplinary and more-than-academic communities, she suggested, is only the beginning of this journey (Steen 2025).

Conclusions

As Léopold Beyaert wrote (2026: 185): "The joik is not limited to a singing technique or a body of knowledge, but more broadly opens up a field of experience and

reflexivity regarding life".

Therefore, in seeking to enable a collective listening of such phenomena, it was extremely revelatory and touching when Risten Anine Gaup stated that she had yoiked (juoigat) the luohi evoking the "Yoik Archive". At the end of the symposium, she performed this new luohi in front of the audience, timidly at first but with growing firmness. To yoik an archive is not a common practice. In bringing to life the archive in "new clothes," as it was revived by Digijoik work, she was offering to the listeners her experience of the work, the feelings of working so many months with it.

I believe that it was the first time that somebody yoiked the Yoik Archive! What a good way to conclude several years of work on these Sámi archives. In fact, through the work with the study, circulation, restitution via internet, and the re-appropriation of archives by Sámi guardians of traditional knowledge and practitioners continues, we are stepping into another phase in our research journey.

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Transforming Research in and through Film

by Christine Moderbacher

CameraWise Film Festival 2026

15-16-17 April, CREA, University of Amsterdam

“We should have these meetings monthly”, writes a colleague to me a couple of days after the first CameraWise Film Festival that took place between the 15th and the 17th of April, at CREA - Student Cultural Center in Amsterdam. I could not agree more, thinking back on these three wonderful days of watching and discussing films made by anthropologists.

Around 20 scholars accepted the invitation of Martha-Cecilia Dietrich (UvA) and Mattijs Van de Port (UvA) to engage with a selection of recent ethnographic films, to launch and to promote CameraWise, the Amsterdam Hub for Visual Anthropology.

CameraWise is a new collective of researchers and filmmakers who critically explore what the aesthetic, sensorial and emotive affordances of film can bring to anthropology’s intellectual journeys of discovery. The recently inaugurated Media Lab at the University of Amsterdam provides them with a physical space where they can experiment with filmmaking, and organize debates, screenings, courses and seminars. The team, which further includes visual anthropologists Ildikó Plájás, Jorge Nuñez and Lana Askari, also runs the Visual Anthropology Masters course at the University of Amsterdam that increasingly attracts students who are interested in “Transforming Research in and through Film”, as the group defines their main goal. In

one of the breaks, I had the chance to visit the editing suites alongside lecturer Darcy Alexandra where a bunch of students eagerly worked on their MA films. Their topics – ranging from right-wing politics in a German migrant community in Brazil and democratic renewal in the Hungarian countryside to potatoes as a

case of human/non-human relationships – mirror the MA programme’s goal to explore how film can contribute to exciting conversations in anthropology. Filmmaking, for them, should shift perspectives, introduce new frames, and question what is taken for granted.

The students were also well represented in the cinema room. The idea of the event was simple, yet effective: in three days, 8 films were screened, allowing ample time for in-depth discussion. With no parallel screenings, all the film directors present, and two well-prepared discussants per film – this is a format that is known within the film world since the end of the 70s and often a sign of very good

quality, allowing audiences to engage in detailed critical reflections with the filmmakers. The concept also proved successful for CameraWise. The selected films were an inspiring showcase for what’s currently going on in Visual Anthropology in Europe:

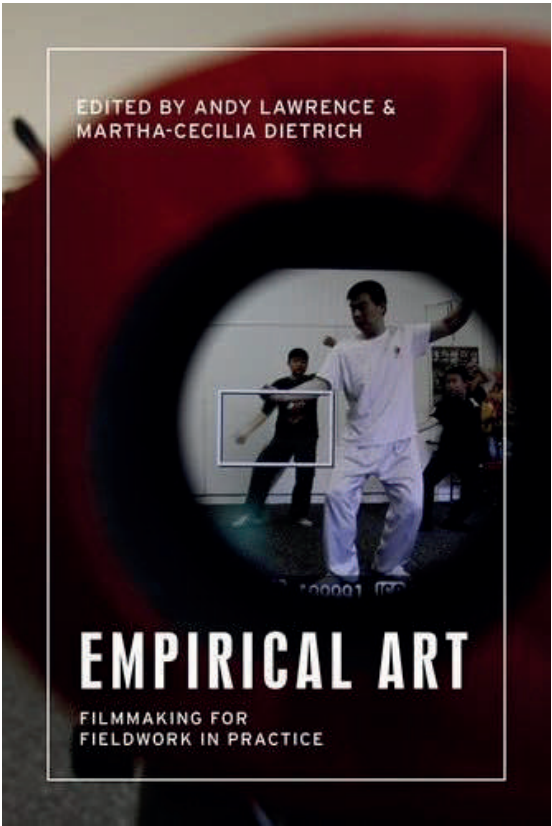
Christian Suhr (Aarhus University) showed the rough cut of his new film *In Every Heart, Every Love* (work in

progress). Those who know Suhr’s previous work filmed in Cairo will find themselves back in this enormous city through images full of love for the place and the people who live there: images and conversations that can only stem from long-term engagement with a field site. The director explores how Sufis cultivate the heart to realize divine love. Using the camera as a tool for inquiry and devotion, he asks how we might learn to see and listen to the world – and to one another. Even in its rough-cut stage, the film shows what Michael Jackson (2002) highlights as the central role of storytelling: it is not only a way to understand other life worlds which leads to understanding human experiences at large, but a way of healing which allows us to go on.

Talking about long-term engagements that have become increasingly rare in anthropology, Metje Postma from Leiden University showed her 110 min. long observational film *Ayda, Lioness Among the Free Lions* (Netherlands, 2024). This provides a glimpse into the life of Ayda Saeed, a female member of the Free Lions Forces, an armed militia established by Sudanese Rashaida rebels between 1999 and 2006. The film builds on more than 20 years of fieldwork in Sudan and shows that observational cinema as a mode of contemporary anthropological practice still matters.

Still seldom practiced in anthropology, three essay films – a genre that embraces using words and images “to preserve

something of the process of thinking” (Rascaroli 2008: 26) were shown. In Mattijs van de Port’s *Where Can I Get Lost?* (70 min., 2024), the filmmaker meditates beautifully on the many ways one can be lost: in wilderness and in madness, in encounters with the sublime and in the ecstasy of lovemaking. The experience of being lost, Van de Port suggests, places you in a world that is larger than the one you knew: an



EMPIRICAL ART: FILMMAKING FOR FIELDWORK IN PRACTICE, DIETRICH, MARTHA AND LAWRENCE, ANDREW (EDS.). 2025.

experience eagerly sought by misfits, outcasts and “perverts” such as himself. It is his fourth film made in Bahia, Brazil, and living proof that there are no purely “visual” or “textual” anthropologies; “there are only hybrid anthropologies, mixed-media anthropologies, multi-

channel-modes-of-communication anthropologies”, as he writes (2018: 136).

The same goes for Michaela Schäuble’s (University of Bern) and Anja Dreschke’s (University of Köln) *Tarantism Revisited* (105 min., 2024). Winner of the important Golden Dove (German Competition) at the DOK Leipzig, shown at numerous film festivals outside of anthropology, the film is

living proof that research films can communicate anthropological knowledge to the world. Using film footage, photographs, and audio recordings, this essayistic documentary traces the history of Tarantism, a southern Italian possession dance.

Similarly, editing with found footage – albeit using a more personal archive – Alyssa Grossman (University of Liverpool) showed her work-in-progress version of *The Silver Cord* (approx. 60 minutes). The project stems from an extraordinarily touching collection of home movies shot by her great grandfather’s brother, who emigrated with his family from Russia to New York in the 1890s. Grossman revisits this material and edits it into a new film, adding contemporary video footage, audio recordings, musical scoring and a narrative voiceover.

Referencing philosophers like Siegfried Kracauer in a beautifully crafted voiceover on memory, the first images of the film remind one of Hito Steyerl’s *The Empty Center* (1998), a foundational film on memory that subverts traditional documentary conventions.

The anthropological gaze is the

focus of three more films that were discussed at length:

The Hospitable Gaze by Kostis Kalantzis (work-in-progress), as well as Wind and words (12 min, 2019) and The Color of Spirits (13 min, 2024) by Roger Canals. The former is an ethnographic film that distills two decades of research in Crete's region of Sfakia, celebrated for its rugged traditionalism, while stereotyped for its fierce illegality. By highlighting photography and photographic practices as a central arena, the film delves into the social imaginary concerning Others – tourists, and locals, hosts and guests, perpetrators and victims, the ethnographer and his interlocutors – while examining the power of photographs to reconstruct the past. Wind and Words by Roger Canals discusses the production process of his film Chasing Shadows (2019), a portrait of a prophetic movement in Guinea-Bissau. Deciphering how Others gaze back at the anthropologist, the film “deconstructs the production of anthropological films” (2025, Online) and thereby stands in a long and important tradition of films contesting anthropological representation. Freely accessible on JAF – the Journal of Anthropological Films – it certainly is a recommendation for every classroom in (Visual) Anthropology.

A glimpse into one possible future of Visual Anthropology is given by Martha-Cecilia Dietrich's new film Unquiet Ground (in progress), that takes one to the Peruvian Andes through the framing of a 360-degree camera. Literally diving into a scarred landscape, the film introduces people dedicated to remembering the “disappeared” of the Peruvian internal armed conflict (1980-2000). The film's fractured, nonlinear visual language and its accompanying reflections on framing practices through an unfolded spherical image challenge the notion of a single historical truth. Instead, the film suggests how violence and injustice resonate across the diverse experiences and practices of those who remain. War, even many years after the guns have fallen silent, continues as a living, unsettled reality, inhabited and unresolved, the film concludes. The sensitive music adds to the feeling of grief that remains in the room. Martha-Cecilia Dietrich, visibly touched by the first screening of her film in public, her colleague Mattijs van de Port, and co-organizer Charlotte Grandury made the community feel like home – at the event location, as hosts to the event's participants in their own homes and across the many homes we saw on screen.

The festival finished with the book launch of Empirical

Art: Filmmaking for Fieldwork in Practice, edited by Andy Lawrence (Filmmaking4Fieldwork) and Martha-Cecilia Dietrich. With some contributors present in Amsterdam and others online, Jeannette Polls (UvA) moderated a vivid discussion about the process and outcome of an attempt to publish texts and visuals via QR Code. The book is an insightful exploration of what the craft of filmmaking brings to social science research. Providing creative avenues on how to narrate encounters, relationships and experiences during fieldwork, this comprehensive volume offers a rich tapestry of theoretical explorations and exploratory methodologies. Skilfully connecting the worlds of ethnography, art and cinema, the contributors to this book act as a compass for filmmakers and researchers venturing to use a camera and microphone to relate and narrate their research collaborations and field sites.

The films screened, as well as the discussions in the cinema room and beyond, will certainly extend well beyond Amsterdam, with new networks created, new ideas and projects germinated, and at least one of the films selected for the upcoming EASA Film Programme this summer in Poznań. Planned originally as a one-time inaugural event, Martha-Cecilia Dietrich suggested cautiously during the final evening to make CameraWise happen biannually. The fact that the festival is now described as the “launch edition” on the CameraWise homepage, gives hope to this idea.

Having started this article with an email from one colleague, I might as well end with the words of another, who simply wrote: “I am feeling grateful for such a special community we have”.

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Selected films and discussants

Where Can I Get Lost? (70 min., 2024) by Mattijs van de Port, followed by a conversation with Alexandra D'Onofrio (Manchester University) and Darcy Alexandra (UvA)

The Hospitable Gaze by Kostis Kalantzis (98 min., 2025), followed by a conversation with Kenni Eilert (Aarhus University) and Anne de Jong (UvA)

In Every Heart, Every Love (work-in-progress) by Christian Suhr followed by a conversation with Christine Moderbacher (University of Tromsø) and Mattijs van de Port (UvA)

Tarantism Revisited (105 min., 2024) by Michaela Schäuble and Anja Dreschke, followed by a conversation with Alyssa Grossman (University of Liverpool) and Olga Sezneva (UvA)

Unquiet Ground (in progress) by Martha-Cecilia Dietrich, followed by a conversation with Lotte Hoek (Edinburgh University) and Felix Stein (UvA)

Ayda, Lioness Among the Free Lions (110 min., 2024) by Metje Postma, followed by a conversation with Sanderien Verstappen (University of Vienna) and Rachel Spronk (UvA)

The Silver Cord (work in progress) by Alyssa Grossman as well as Wind and Words (12 min., 2019) and The Color of Spirits by Roger Canals (12 min, 2024), followed by a conversation with Pedro F. Neto (Lisbon University) and Jorge Núñez (UvA)

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