

## **Culture Behind Camera: A Note on Ethnographic Film**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The attempt is for the beginners who are very interested in conducting ethnographic work and documentary. This effort reflects ethnographic film not only a movie about a culture, rather it simultaneously questions the power positions of ethnographer to their filmic representations in very brief. The article further reflects ethnographic film as a classroom technological aid, text, fieldwork document and at the same time tries to portray the colonizer-colonized silent power conflict into this brief entry.*

**KEYWORDS** *ethnography, film, anthropology, methodology, visualization of cultures*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

To start the discussion about the multiple dimensions of ethnographic film, it is noteworthy to quote Tim Asch in 1971-It is not enough to have a reason for ethnographic filming, such as the desire to record "primitive culture" before it vanishes; one must have a method for shooting and editing footage which will not only justify the tremendous expenditure of capital and human effort but also provide useful documents that present as clearly as possible the culture one is recording.

Asch further mentioned that the fundamental objectives of the ethnographic film making can be divided into two directions- (a) to illustrate in detail a particular aspect of culture and (b) for cross-cultural study of human symbolic livelihood.

Situating ethnographic film as a scientific discourse, David MacDougall in 1978 opined that- Ethnographic film-making owes as much to the rapidly evolving forms of the cinema as does written anthropology to styles of scientific discourse that have developed over several centuries. The cinema inherited dramatic and literary conventions, and almost from the start the narrative efficiency of words (at first in the form of titles) vied with that of photographic images. The story-teller's voice still retains a hold upon documentary films in the form of spoken commentary, but in dramatic films it has largely dropped away, leaving language to the dialogue of fictional characters. This difference in the employment of language has produced one film traditions in which images illustrate a verbal argument and another tradition that carry the burden of revealing a coherent line of development.

The 'so called' ethnographic people can be seen from two boarder perspectives- (1) as a fundamental part of the sub-discipline- 'visual anthropology' to explore and illustrate the meanings attached with the photographs, documentary and diagrams, and (2) a part and portion within many cultures as art forms that shares the perspective of drama and literature.

#### **The Historicity**

Apart from the complex debates about ethnographic film i.e. ethnographic film in India is only a 'colonial' representation of the 'colonized' rather than an alternative methodology of anthropological researches, it had been used to reflect specially the tribal life on the ethnographer's voices (Singh, 1992). Contrastingly, Mead in 1942 is of opinion that- for the purpose of making documentary films and photographs for which one decides a priori upon the norms and then gets the Balinese to go through these behaviors in suitable lighting.

Filming cultures through ethnographic film since its gestation are in constant flux of its changing nature. Setting any fundamental features is difficult due to the ethnographer's concern and objectives of the concerned film. Ruby in 1975 set four criteria- (a) an ethnographic film is to be about whole culture or the significant portions of a culture, (b) should instigate the implicit and explicit theories about cultures, (c) explanation in detail about the use of the filming methods an ethnographer has had used to reflect cultural performances, and (d) use of distinctively anthropological lexicon in ethnographic film making. Schauble in 2018 tried to compartmentalized the very complex notion of ethnographic film into different national traditions, i.e.-

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(1) **American Tradition:** Schaublein 2018 opined that-

In contrast to photography, which mainly operates and represents people and events retrospectively, film—including ethnographic documentary film and video—works via anticipation. Filmic narratives are structured in such a way that the viewer is curious to find out what comes next. This attribute initially made it more difficult for ethnographic film to be considered a more serious social research instrument than photography.

Further, to reach broader audiences and to maintain the fundamental objectives of the subject Anthropology, a sound number of pioneering American Cultural anthropologists came together to document cultural performances behind the camera as texts in contexts. Robert Flaherty, AsenBalikci, Franz Boas, and Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson are the leading figure of this tradition.

2) **French Tradition:**Schauble suggested that-

In France, anthropologist MarcelGriaule had already systematically used photography, film, and sound recording since the 1930s in his ethnographic studies of the Dogon in Mali.

In this time the nature of anthropological ethnographic film was micro-poetic, and the leading figures of this era are- Jean Rouch, Edgar Morin, and Dziga Vertov.

3) **Indian Tradition:** In Indian case, the chapters of visual representation of cultures and the era of visualization were completely neglected. The British, the Americans and the French Anthropologists were dominated to document Indian cultures, specially the tribal cultures, but none of the Indian anthropologists were found to document their 'own' culture from the standpoint of experimental ethnographies, combing aesthetic and ethnographic elements that are committed to a humanist, poetic realism.

The ethnographic film preserve to be seen as a process of representation and understanding different cultures that is not normally seen, there are some issues in the case of portrayal, but the camera continues to roll the 'selective' arenas of a culture under interest of the concerned ethnographic filming.

In this context, it is suitable to mention that some fundamental questions are emerging from the entire scenario of ethnographic film. This are-

1. Who handles the camera?
2. What are the aspects and categories of the concerned culture will be studied?
3. The political representation and deduction of reality while coming to its audiences?, and
4. What will be the challenging issues and development nature of ethnographic filming?

### **The Challenges and the Future of Ethnographic Film**

Now it is clear that there is a great difference between Ethnographic Documentary and Ethnographic Film. In the formative phase the filming were used to dominate the colonized people, and in the contemporary times it has many functions though in this matrix ethnographers are not in single stand. David MacDougall in 1978 opined that- Ethnographic films cannot be said to constitute a genre, nor is ethnographic film-making a discipline with unified origins and an established methodology. Contrastingly, Block in 1988 suggested that- Ethnographic Films can be very useful if they can be used as data which is incorporated in teaching.....the kind of thing one tries to teach in anthropology is, if you just share at exotic sense and listen to the things people are saying without knowing anything about this people, you understand less about them...

Further, it can be said by the words of Sue Marshall Cabezas, Mary Anne Wolff and Judith Nierenberg, in 1986- There is tremendous potential for combining elements of film, written materials, and teacher-student activities to create exciting curricula that fulfill specific educational needs. For example, ethnographic film can be used to: • sensitize students to another culture; • encourage a comparative perspective on our culture; • provide an illustrated lecture; • simulate a field experience; • Show students career possibilities in anthropology; • heighten awareness of filmmaking content and structure; • improve language arts.

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