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Reel Paradise and Sisters in Law

Jennifer Malkowski

Smith College, jmalkows@smith.edu

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Reel Paradise

Director: Steve James. Producers: Steve James, Scott Mosier. Cinematographer, co-producer: P. H. O'Brien. Editor: Steve James. Music: Norman Arnold. © 2005 View Askew Productions. U.S. distribution: Wellspring Media.

Sisters in Law

Directors: Florence Ayisi, Kim Longinotto. Producer, cinematographer: Kim Longinotto. Editor: Ollie Huddleston. Music: D'Gary. © 2005 Vixen Films. U.S. distributor: Women Make Movies.

To some extent, every documentary made about another culture is descended from Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922). Chronicling Inuit life in 1922, Flaherty produced something greater than a travelogue—he told a story with drama, action, humor, and warmth that attempted to truly communicate the spirit of another culture. Eight decades later, the two filmmaking teams behind *Reel Paradise* and *Sisters in Law* embarked on their own expeditions to far-away lands. Indie film guru John Pierson transplanted his family from Manhattan to the Fijian island of Taveuni so that he could show free movies to the locals at “the most remote movie theater in the world.” Seasoned documentarian Steve James agreed to film the last month of the year-long project, at Pierson's request. Meanwhile, British documentarian Kim Longinotto teamed up with Florence Ayisi and ventured to the West African nation of Cameroon, gathering footage of the emerging Women Lawyers Association and their work for local women and girls. The resulting features, *Reel Paradise* and *Sisters in Law*, reveal the good and the bad of how much has changed since Flaherty's time—in the motivation to document other cultures and the politics of doing it.

Witnessing people's first moviegoing experiences and the sheer joy films can bring is appealing to a society saturated with moving images, and particularly to Pierson. As he puts it, “I truly wanted to capture the essence of how fantastic it was to see an audience seeing a movie in a place where there was almost no other media and movies had a primacy that they might have had in 1932.”¹ But cinematic potential becomes a problem in *Reel Paradise*, as inspiring footage of the culturally isolated Fijians excitedly absorbing their first motion pictures can only sustain about five minutes of a documentary. The rest must explore the impact of those first screenings on the Fijians and on the American family that makes them possible. James focuses almost solely on the latter, to the detriment of *Reel*

Paradise. Episodic segments showing the difficulties the Piersons have adjusting to island life dominate the film—John contracts dengue fever and can't find a reliably sober projectionist, his wife Janet surfs the Internet when she's not socializing with her neighbors, and teenagers Georgia and Wyatt wait for the unpredictable bus to a school where theirs are the only white faces. In his focus on the Piersons rather than the Fijians, James even follows storylines that have nothing to do with Taveuni or the screening project. When Georgia stays out late getting hickies from local boys, Janet arrives to pick up her rebellious daughter. Watching them bicker and each accuse the other of “acting for the camera,” I could have been on my couch with *The Osbournes* or *My Super Sweet Sixteen*.

What we do find out about the Fijians and how the free movie project affects them is limited. The only significant Fijian character is Georgia's best friend, Miriama, who latches onto the Pierson household partially as an escape from violence and abuse in her own. Georgia passes on (teenage) American values to her friend, to her parents' dismay—Miriama stays out late, skips school, and gets a tattoo that matches Georgia's. John and Janet point out the dangers of this influence. Georgia will go back to America, but Miriama will have to stay in Fiji and readjust to the mores of her culture. The Piersons could turn that argument on themselves—one year after arriving in Fiji, they go home as planned. The Meridian 180 Cinema closes its doors, and the Fijians have to readjust to life without their American neighbors and the filmic gifts they brought.

James's fixation on the Piersons at the expense of screen time for the Fijians reveals a lesson documentarians have learned perhaps too well from *Nanook*. Since the release of Flaherty's film, criticisms have been leveled against it for condescending to and appropriating the Inuit culture. Damning scenes of the grinning *Nanook* trying to bite into a gramophone record or intertitles that describe the Inuit as, “simple . . . happy-go-lucky Eskimo[s]” represent, for many, a positioning of non-Western peoples as backward, silly savages. Documentary history is full of filmmakers who exploit or condescend to other cultures. And even the most thoughtful, well-meaning ethnographers are haunted by their “inability to do anything but misrepresent that other person,” as filmmaker Ken Feingold phrases it.² As the “ailing genre”³ of ethnographic documentary opens to experimental methods and the voices of the Others themselves, many filmmakers have strengthened their resolve to “know difference differently”⁴ than their ethnocentric predecessors.

Opting instead to mostly ignore their Others, James and Pierson create this documentary that is ostensibly about the effects of Hollywood cinema on a remote Fijian community, but that is actually about the effects of *showing* Hollywood cinema to Fijians on charitable, vacationing Americans. In trying not to offend, Pierson and James reveal very little about the culture in which they were immersed. James's failure here is particularly disappointing, considering his compelling portraits of different subcultures in *Hoop Dreams* (1994) and *Stevie* (2002). The real problem is that if sensitive, thoughtful filmmakers like James are unwilling to bring foreign cultures into focus for American audiences, the task will fall solely into the all-too-eager hands of reality TV producers. In shows such as *Survivor* or *The Amazing Race*, American contestants try to "survive" living or working the way natives of the countries they visit do, with locals serving as props or side-kicks in these adventures. Competitors experience foreign lifestyles as game challenges that exhaust and disgust them—walk two blocks balancing baskets of corn on your head, drink a pint of cow's blood, eat four pounds of regional meat at a traditional barbeque.

Thankfully, Longinotto and Ayisi's *Sisters in Law* resembles *Reel Paradise* just as little as it does *Survivor* or *The Amazing Race*—though its release was, unfortunately, far more limited than even *Reel Paradise*. This is a film that really digs into another culture and reveals something important and moving about its people while maintaining a high level of respect for its difference. The format here is total immersion, with no white faces to guide audiences. Instead of repressing change and trying to preserve another culture, as Flaherty did, Longinotto and Ayisi focus on change, exploring the shifting legal system in Cameroon as it clashes with traditional gender roles. *Sisters in Law* opens almost immediately into the middle of a legal case. A young mother comes in with a complaint: her child was stolen by its father, with her own father's compliance. The men protest, but the woman behind the desk—Vera Ngassa, who we soon learn is a state prosecutor—quickly straightens them out. "It is called kidnapping," she declares, "That's not the way to behave . . . That's what you men do. You just harvest children all over the place without marrying the mothers." The mother instantly gets her child back. For an audience trained to believe in the hopeless oppression and powerlessness of third world women, this scene—and the film that it opens—plays like a quiet miracle. Here is a justice system in Africa where women's rights are starting to be successfully upheld—by women, no less. This particular miracle is one of many that have passed before

Longinotto's lens throughout her impressive career documenting trailblazing "women elsewhere." These women include unusual drag kings in Japan in *Dream Girls* (1994), wives seeking divorce and runaway girls in Iran in *Divorce, Iranian Style* (1998) and *Runaway* (2001), and girls undergoing and fighting against female genital mutilation in Kenya in *The Day I Will Never Forget* (2002).

The rest of *Sisters in Law* is similarly structured around a series of Ngassa's cases. Two Muslim women—Amina and Ladi—file suit against their husbands for rape and domestic abuse. Amina's story is developed most as we see her go before many different authority figures—lawyers, judges, the men of her family, and an all-male Muslim divorce committee—trembling each time, but insistent. The other two cases in the film involve young girls. Sonita, a ten-year-old, must testify against her twenty-five-year-old rapist. Manka, age six, hardly says a word, but bears witness with her scarred body to a series of brutal beatings from her aunt. Each time, Ngassa and her female colleagues far exceed their legal obligations, visiting clients at home after the cases are over or buying new clothes for the mistreated girls. Ngassa even buys medicine for Manka's abusive aunt, now in prison, and assures the repentant old woman that though she did a very bad thing, "We don't hate you."

Although the differences in style between *Reel Paradise* and *Sisters in Law* are quite striking, one of the most significant is subtle. While both James and Longinotto depart from Flaherty's style of direct, bias-laden commentary on his subjects like "poor old Nanook," the two handle the sticky ethical situations they are so fond of documenting differently. Ethical ambiguity is the stuff James's documentaries are made of, and he wants his audience to know it. In *Reel Paradise*, different sides of the unresolved issues are lined up neatly: is Pierson an altruist or an egotist? Do the free movies help or harm the Fijians? Here is a scene that supports one side; here is a scene that supports another. The judgment is left to the audience, but the stakes of the case are clear and plenty of evidence is presented. Ironically, the same cannot be said of the legally themed *Sisters in Law*. Longinotto and Ayisi present a complex

Maybe Benjamin's idea that everything on this planet can and will be reproduced is no longer the primary threat because it has already happened.



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Reel Paradise, clockwise from top left: the theater, Fijian spectators, John lecturing, the farewell ceremony, Miriama and Georgia, Wyatt in a crowd

sociopolitical situation and make it look simple: Cameroon has changed, so traditions must catch up with women demanding equal rights. Any challenges the Women Lawyers Association faces are minimized by a tone of strength and triumph. For example, it is not until the last scene as everyone is celebrating Amina and Ladi's liberation that we find out that in seventeen years as a prosecutor, Ngassa had never before secured a spousal abuse conviction. Also, comments that might raise flags are quickly uttered and quickly lost in the narrative, such as Ngassa's accusation in the opening scene: "You, Father, your daughter has become merchandise. The way you people play in the villages, the way you play with women and children . . . That's what

makes her his wife? 80,000 Francs and a pig?" The sight of an educated, probably middle-class woman condemning poorer, rural people who "play" with silly customs could certainly offend, but the filmmakers never overtly *identify* this or any other complicating issue the way James would. If there is a problem with the way the women on screen operate, audiences have to find it themselves.

This refusal to identify issues lines up with Longinotto and Ayisi's larger attitude of non-intervention and self-effacement—a strictly observational style. Just as there are no outsiders on screen to guide the audience, there is also no narration, no intertitles, and only one interview scene in the whole film. So little infor-



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Sisters in Law, clockwise from top left: Ngassa takes a break with her son, Kumba Town, a lawyer counsels Amina, Ngassa celebrates with Amina and Ladi, Judge Beatrice Ntuba, a court officer reprimands an abusive husband

mation is given about the filmmakers that a casual viewer would certainly miss one of the film’s most important safeguards against ethnocentrism: British Kim Longinotto is the more experienced filmmaker of this pair, but her co-director and translator, Florence Ayisi, was born in Cameroon. This style of partnership is standard practice for Longinotto, who always finds (and generously credits as co-director) a woman to collaborate with who knows the culture and the language. More than acting simply as translators, these women frequently advise Longinotto on creative and ethical decisions—as do the subjects themselves, significantly. Thus, Longinotto demonstrates a genuine effort to consult and understand the people of whatever country

she is filming in rather than just throwing them up on screen.

Sisters in Law is not the corrective for *Reel Paradise* and this is not a case of “good filmmaker, bad filmmaker.” There are certainly problems with Longinotto and Ayisi’s invisible style. Unavoidably present outsider perspectives are not acknowledged, issues can seem one-sided, and audiences may be misinformed or confused due to the lack of contextual information. Bill Nichols confirms that observational ethnographies, “once valorized as part and parcel of observational respect for one’s subject,” have since been attacked within the field as deceptively self-effacing.⁵ But what *Sisters in Law* does offer that *Reel Paradise* does not is a sense of

this Other that is not deliberately dripped through the filter of American (or British) whiteness. Longinotto and Ayisi give us a well-crafted, focused film that really says something about a small, manageable aspect of another culture and the people who shape it. As the credits rolled, I knew that I was not an expert on Cameroon, I knew that I did not truly understand its people, but I also knew something about them that I did not know before. The only people I really knew (far too much) more about by the end of *Reel Paradise* were the Piersons themselves.

Flaherty's impulse to make *Nanook of the North*, and its popularity upon release, evoke one of the most eloquent ideas in film theory: Walter Benjamin's notion of the annihilation of the "aura"—that slippery, magical quality that emanates from an object when witnessed in-person. Benjamin says that our desire to eliminate physical distance, to bring the world (for example, the Inuit lifestyle) "closer" through technological reproductions (such as photos and films), is robbing these objects and places of their auras. But maybe Benjamin's idea that everything on this planet can and will be reproduced is no longer the primary threat because it has already happened. We feel like we've traveled to every land and met every person through our TVs and computers. Now we're bored with those reproductions and to keep our interest, the powers-that-be must re-manufacture them in our own image. It's the difference between taking a picture of Mt. Everest and taking a picture of Mt. Everest with Aunt Betty smiling and waving in the foreground. We want proof that we were there, and, if possible, we want to leave a footprint; we want "there" to register our presence. And maybe it's this kind of egoism that dictates the focus of *Reel Paradise* and Pierson's free-movie project as much as the fear of cultural disrespect. Once upon a time, we asked Nanook to show us his world. We wanted to understand it, however naïve and condescending our attempts may have been. Filmmakers like Longinotto and Ayisi still want that. But if *Reel Paradise*, *The Amazing Race*, *Survivor*, and the like are any evidence, now most of us just want Nanook's world on loan. We'll play in it, pat ourselves on the backs for our adventurous spirits, and, above all, take some pictures of ourselves there for the folks back home.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Anthony Kaufman, "PG-Fiji: A Pacific Whim Leads to a Remote Movie Theater," *Village Voice*, 16 August 2005, <http://villagevoice.com/film/0534,kaufman,66916,20.html>.

2. Ken Feingold, "Notes on *India Time*: The First in a Series of Videotapes," *CNA Newsletter*, May 1998, 16–22, quoted in Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 66.
3. David MacDougall, "The Subjective Voice in Ethnographic Film," in Leslie Devereaux and Roger Hillman (eds), *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology, and Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 218.
4. Nichols, 91.
5. *Ibid.*, 68.

JENNIFER MALKOWSKI is a graduate student in Film Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, working on death in documentary film and video.

ABSTRACT Steve James's *Reel Paradise* and Kim Longinotto and Florence Ayisi's *Sisters in Law* exemplify divergent paths in the field of ethnographic documentary since 1922's formative *Nanook of the North*. The observational style of *Sisters in Law* bests the self-indulgence of *Reel Paradise*, though both films present ethical challenges.

KEYWORDS documentary, ethnographic documentary, observational documentary, Steve James, Kim Longinotto

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