Researchers suggest that a film made by the Rondon Commission in 1916 may have been the first ethnographic documentary

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PUBLISHED IN MAY 2017
team of anthropologists from Brazil and the United Kingdom has gathered enough evidence to suggest that the movie *Rituais e festas Bororo* [Rituals and festivals of the Bororo], filmed in 1916 by Major Luiz Thomaz Reis (1879-1940) at the request of Field Marshal Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon, may be the first ethnographic documentary in history, even predating the existence of the term. *Nanook of the North*, produced in 1922 by U.S. filmmaker Robert Flaherty (1884-1951), had previously been considered the pioneer in this interdisciplinary tradition in which anthropology meets cinema.

*Rituais e festas Bororo* was completed in 1917 and premiered in Brazil that same year. Some scenes were exhibited at an event held at New York's Carnegie Hall in 1918, while Reis was on a visit to the United States. French anthropologists had the opportunity to view the documentary in the 1990s, but few in the United Kingdom saw it. In the early 1990s, a process that permitted a reassessment of the film’s importance began, and it was only then that it began acquiring its status as an ethnographic groundbreaker.

Anthropologist Patrícia Monte-Mór, a professor in the Department of Anthropology at Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ) and curator of the International Ethnographic
Film Festival, says that the starting point for this process was the work of French anthropologist Pierre Jordan, who published the book Cinéma – Premier contact, premier regard [Cinema: first contact, first point of view] in 1992, in which he charted the first film records in history across the continents. Jordan, who used an image from Reis’s movie on the cover of his book, took up the argument that the film was unprecedented in the world of ethnographic documentaries. In 1993, Rituais e festas Bororo was screened at the first International Ethnographic Film Festival in Rio de Janeiro, where it drew the interest of anthropologists, documentary filmmakers, and scholars of cinema. “But the film wasn’t in circulation yet and belonged to the Museum of the Indian collection. We showed a VHS copy of it at the festival,” recalls Monte-Mór.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Fernando de Tacca, an anthropologist who is currently a professor at the Institute of Arts of the University of Campinas (IA-Unicamp), and Denise Portugal Lasmar, an expert in the preservation and organization of documentary collections and formerly the head of the audiovisual department at the Museum of the Indian, analyzed the imagery captured by the Rondon Commission and called attention to the innovations introduced by Reis’s documentary. In his book Cinéma et anthropologie [Cinema and anthropology] (Nathan, 2000), French anthropologist and filmmaker Marc Piault, who is affiliated with the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS), used research conducted in Brazil to analyze Reis’s work; he also considered the film to be the world’s first ethnographic documentary.

In 2014, British anthropologist Paul Henley, director of the Granada Center for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom, was awarded a research fellowship by the Leverhulme Trust, a private foundation based in London, to carry out a project exploring early ethnographic documentaries, particularly those from Brazil and France. Henley, who is an expert in ethnographic topics related to the Amazon and who trained in cinema, studied Reis’s filmography at the archives of the Museum of the Indian, the Brazilian Cinematheque, and the National History Museum. He worked with two other anthropologists while in Brazil. One, Sylvia Caíuby Novaes, a professor with the Department of Anthropology in the School of Philosophy, Literature and Human Sciences at the University of São Paulo (FFLCH-USP), has been conducting research on the Bororo ethnic group for more than 30 years and spent time as a postdoctoral fellow under Henley’s supervision in 1995. The other, Edgar Teodoro da Cunha, is now a professor in the Department of Anthropology, Politics, and Philosophy at the Araraquara campus of São Paulo State University (Unesp). He was Novaes’s advisee during his doctoral studies, which were focused on the Bororo and visual archives. The trio launched investigations in the field of visual anthropology, addressing the filmography of the Bororo ethnic group in particular, and authored an article on Reis’s film, which was published in the journal Visual Anthropology in 2017.

Luiz Thomaz Reis with a 35-mm Debre camera in 1932; the army officer made a number of documentaries.

The 30-minute-long film is divided into three parts depicting various activities related to the funeral ritual.
Indians were dying because of the epidemics and was well aware of how important funeral rites were in the culture of this ethnic group. He had watched and even participated in some," says Novaes. The 30-minute-long film is divided into three parts that depict various activities related to the ritual, including a fishing expedition, a simulated jaguar hunt, and dances performed by Indians wearing traditional dress. It ends with a sequence that shows the body of the deceased woman wrapped in a mat and then buried in a shallow grave.

In his research on the film, Fernando de Tacca analyzed diaries and documents that indicate that Reis changed the order of the scenes to make the ritual more palatable to the public. "Reis was unable to film some aspects of the ritual and cut some scenes, "reorganizing the filmed material," in Cunha’s words. "The funeral ceremony still takes place the same way today, and it’s vital to the Bororo, since it also symbolizes the re-creation of their society," says Novaes, who has witnessed more than 40 funerals.

Novaes contends that the film can be called an ethnographic documentary because it was shot over a period of 10 weeks, giving the director time to experience the Bororo culture personally and thus the ability to portray it later in his film, which underwent a process of cutting and editing. "An ethnographic documentary is a film whose making is based on extended interactions between filmmakers and native peoples and that tries to capture the viewpoint of those who are filmed. Today, this work also involves the active participation of the people portrayed, whether during the script phase, the recording of images and sound, or editing," explains Novaes. According to the researcher, Reis’s film also has a narrative structure, unlike travel films of the era—such as those by Silvino Sinões Santos Silva or Edgar Roquette-Pinto—where the directors arranged images according to the progress of their journeys and did not concern themselves with recording isolated events. “In Rituais e festas Bororo, Reis makes no reference to the journey behind the film but centers the narrative on the funeral ceremony,” Novaes says by way of comparison.

Other important features that distinguish Reis’s film from travel films of the same era are its documentary approach and well-developed narrative form. “Additionally, there is his commitment to a visual description of the Bororo culture aimed at a broader public, which would make it possible to link the film to a tradition that later came to be called ethnographic film,” explains Cunha. In the opinion of Henley, another difference is that travel films made during the same period lacked any narrative autonomy, meaning that someone would often have to stand next to the screen during showings and provide a context for the images, which went by like slides. “But Reis’s film has an internal narrative in the form of subtitles that clarify situations or tie them together,” the British researcher says.

Henley explains that the term “documentary” took root in the early 1930s to refer to the work of Robert Flaherty, especially Nanook of the North and Moana, both produced in the 1920s. “These films involve the dramatization of events, the invention of situations, and constant interference on the part of the director. For this reason, if they were shot today, they would not be considered documentaries,” he says. With the exception of a
few isolated scenes in the film—for example, when
the Indians are told to show their profile—Reis
employs the filmmaking approach now known
as an observational documentary style, in which
the camera merely follows the action, without any
apparent interference from the director.

Novaes argues that Reis was
aware of his film’s aesthetic po-
tential. An example of this is
the opening scene, in which
a group of men are seen fish-
ing among some bushes along
a riverbank. Researchers note
that opting for this frame rather
than placing the fishermen in
the foreground sparks the audi-
ence’s curiosity about what the
Indians were doing. In another
kind of scene rarely found in
documentaries back then, the
director places the camera di-
rectly in front of the dancing
Indians, allowing the viewer
to observe details of their body
adornments and affording a
more intimate look at what oc-
curs at that point in the ritual.

According to the researchers, other films from
the same era that were produced in an ethno-
graphic context were composed of single takes,
had no narrative structure between scenes, and
provided a literal, chronological view of the facts.
This can be observed in the pioneering work of
British anthropologists Alfred Haddon and Bald-
win Spencer and the Austrian anthropologist
Rudolf Pöch. “It’s remarkable how Reis made
a film using a complex moviemaking language
only 20 years after the first cinematic exhibition
by the Lumière brothers in 1885,” notes Novaes.
Monte-Mór notes that Reis introduced aspects
of indigenous community life in the film, shot
panoramic images of the region, and showed
rituals that preceded the burial in addition to
the funeral itself. “Earlier ethnographic films re-
corded a dance or an Indian making ceramics, but
made no attempt at narration,” she emphasizes.

Eduardo Victorio Morettin, a professor of au-
diovisual history at the USP School of Communica-
tions and Arts, notes that works such as Reis’s
had a limited reach, while Flaherty’s films en-
joyed broader circulation and were seen by the
general public. “Of the films made in Brazil from
the late 19th century through the early 1930s,
fewer than 10% have survived,” he says. Moret-
tin believes that while it is possible that Rituais
e festas Bororo was the first ethnographic docu-
mentary, it should not necessarily be categorically
accorded this status. “Given the small number of
remaining Brazilian films, naming one work or
the other as the first is always risky, because we
don’t fully know what was circulating back then.”

Documentary filmmaker Aurélio Michiles,
who directed a film that presents the career of
Silvino Santos (1886-1970), one of the pioneers in
the world of documentaries and director of the
1922 film No paiz das Amazonas [In the land of
the Amazons], asserts that Flaherty’s works can-
not in fact be considered ethnographic since they
recreate the climate of the culture instead of registering it from an observational stance. “On the other hand, today we can state that every single movie, fiction or documentary, when stored in a film library, becomes a source of anthropological and ethnographic references,” Michiles says. He argues that Flaherty’s films should be thought of as documentaries precisely because they offer the audience a view of this cultural universe, even considering how the director intervened in the reality he intended to portray. “Every documentary filmmaker intervenes in reality. The people who are filmed are never the same in front of a camera,” he contends. Michiles also explains that Reis’s filmography has been better preserved than that of other filmmakers, such as Silvino Santos, favoring research that investigates the importance of the former’s filmmaking path. Other films by Reis include Os sertões de Matto-Grosso (1912); Ronuro, selvas do Xingu (1924); Viagem ao Roraima (1927); Parimã, fronteiras do Brasil (1927); Os Carajás (1932); Ao redor do Brasil – Aspectos do interior e das fronteiras brasileiras (1932); and Inspetoria de fronteiras (1938).

CLASHES WITH THE SALESIANS
Cunha explains that given its distinct cinematic nature and narrative, the film should be interpreted in light of the climate of conflict between the Rondon Commission and Salesian missionaries. “Newspapers published in the early 20th century feature articles by Rondon criticizing the missionaries. There was a dispute that was meant to sway public opinion about what the government should do with the Indians,” the researcher says. With this in mind, Cunha notes that Reis’s documentary portrait of the Bororo emphasizes their traditional culture with the purpose of disseminating images of these Indians as untamed and pure in their savage authenticity. These characteristics went against Salesian principles, which sought to extinguish expressions of indigenous culture and incorporate native peoples into a project for a mixed-race, hard-working Christian nation.

Chiara Vangelista, a historian of Latin American anthropology at the University of Genoa in Italy, is an expert in Bororo history, particularly their relations with the Rondon Commission and Salesian missionaries. Vangelista says that both Rondon’s and the Salesians’ projects were aimed at protecting the Indians and paving their road to Brazilian citizenship. “However, the projects were diametrically opposed,” she says. Rondon’s initiative was infused with positivist thought, then widespread in the military. Positivism advocated the establishment of a free federation of independent states divided into two categories: western states, originating from the union of European, African, and American groups, and so-called Brazilian-American states, made up of tribal ethnic groups.

“Writings by Rondon and the chief proponents of his project constantly reaffirm the duty to protect but not to direct tribal groups,” says Vangelista. On the other hand, from the standpoint of the Salesian priests, if the Bororo were to attain Brazilian citizenship, they had to give up their culture entirely, be “civilized”, embrace Catholicism (Rondon was against conversion), and join the world of the whites as wage earners. “Relations between Rondon and the Salesians settled into a climate of ‘armed peace’, and military visits to the missions had a vague flavor of inspections,” she says in conclusion.

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Film
Rituals e festas Bororo: www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIn6eKqMBtE