



The Bororo on screen

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

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Scenes from *Rituais e festas Bororo*: dancing (left), fishing (center), and water being poured over a woman's body during a funeral ceremony

A 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 anthropology* [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 Caiuby 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,



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

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.

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LUMIÈRE BROTHERS

Reis, a military officer, established the Rondon Commission's Film-making and Photography Division in 1912. In 1914, he traveled to France, where he purchased cameras from Auguste and Louis Lumière, the brothers who invented the early motion-picture projector known as the cinematograph. Field Marshal Rondon assigned him to film the approximately 350 Bororo Indians who lived in a village on the banks of the São Lourenço River, 100 kilometers from Cuiabá, in Mato Grosso. The Rondon Com-

mission was a Brazilian government agency established in 1907 to construct a telegraph communication network linking the largest cities in northwestern Brazil. Botanists, zoologists, and other scientists took part in Rondon's expeditions, studying the fauna and flora along the routes, conducting ethnographic research of the material culture of indigenous groups, and recording anthropometric measurements of these peoples.

The documentary, filmed between July and October 1916, shows a woman's funeral ceremony. "Rondon, who had Bororo roots, knew that the



Reis, Rondon (middle) and an Indian of the Paresi ethnic group circa 1912

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. Bororo funeral rites are lengthy. Shortly after death, the body is placed in a temporary grave in the middle of the village, where it is watered daily to speed up putrefaction. After the body decomposes, the bones are cleaned, adorned, and placed in a large funeral basket. After remaining in the village for approximately a week, the basket is carried to a lagoon, where it is submerged in the water. The entire process can last one to three months.

During this period, a number of rites are celebrated to honor the dead. 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 Simões 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

Men (right) and women (next page) in one of the rare scenes where Reis directed the Indians in *Rituais e festas Bororo*



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 potential. An example of this is the opening scene, in which a group of men are seen fishing among some bushes along a riverbank. Researchers note that opting for this frame rather than placing the fishermen in the foreground sparks the audience's curiosity about what the Indians were doing. In another kind of scene rarely found in documentaries back then, the director places the camera directly in front of the dancing Indians, allowing the viewer to observe details of their body adornments and affording a more intimate look at what occurs at that point in the ritual.

According to the researchers, other films from the same era that were produced in an ethnographic 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-

The documentary film should be interpreted in light of the climate of conflict between the Rondon Commission and Salesian missionaries

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 recorded a dance or an Indian making ceramics, but made no attempt at narration," she emphasizes.

Eduardo Victorio Morettin, a professor of audiovisual history at the USP School of Communications and Arts, notes that works such as Reis's had a limited reach, while Flaherty's films enjoyed 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. Morettin believes that while it is possible that *Rituais e festas Bororo* was the first ethnographic documentary, 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 cannot 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* [The backlands of Matto Grosso] (1912); *Ronuro, selvas do Xingu* [Ronuro, the jungles of the Xingu] (1924); *Viagem ao Roraima* [Journey to Roraima] (1927); *Parimã, fronteiras do Brasil* [Parimã, the frontiers of Brazil] (1927); *Os Carajás* [The Carajá Indians] (1932); *Ao redor do Brasil – Aspectos do interior e das fronteiras brasileiras* [Around Brazil: features of the Brazilian interior and frontiers] (1932); and *Inspetoria de fronteiras* [The inspectorate of borders] (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. ■

Scientific article

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