

The one who steps in the snow: The making of The Agony of Rasu Niti

Abstract

Indigenous people account for a significant proportion of Peruvian population. However, Peruvian movies and mainstream media tend to depict Indigenous culture in racist and discriminative stereotypes. This short film and thesis project follows the logic of an intercultural dialog, using the methodology of American independent and Iranian films to update an ancient Andean myth. Using Jose Maria Arguedas' story "The Agony of Rasu Niti" as a starting point, this film aims to create a non-stereotypical representation of the daily life and cultural practices inside a community of Indigenous artists who migrated from the countryside of Southern Peru to the shantytowns around Peru's capital city, Lima. This film explores how and why a specific Andean cultural manifestation -the Scissor Dance- is passed on younger generations in urban environments. Based on the principle that film (as well as any other art form) can change the way issues are perceived and thought, this film intends to acknowledge one of many Indigenous traditions Peruvian society can not and should not be conceived without.

The Story & my questions

The Agony of Rasu Niti (tentative title) is a twenty-minute short film that documents the personal journey of a twenty-year old girl, Nina, whose life changes dramatically when her dying father, Eugenio, asks her to fulfill his last wish. Earning a living as a construction worker after migrating from his little village in the Southern Peruvian Andes to the shantytowns of Lima, Eugenio never ceased exercising his true passion: the Scissor Dance, a very physically demanding dance, and one of his hometown's oldest traditions. When tuberculosis severely threatens his health, he fears he might not be able to dance anymore. His daughter's interest on the Dance, however, is evident. Will she make the cut?

This film was shot over the summer of 2007, after a year of preproduction, rehearsals, writing and rewriting. Embedded in the script and treatment, were the following questions we wanted to address from the very beginning: (1) is it possible to create a non-discriminative, from-the-inside visual representation of the Indigenous culture and its transformation in urban environments? (2) Is it possible to use the tradition and methodology of politically committed films (i.e., Italian Neorealism, New Iranian

Cinema, Brazilian Cinema Novo) as a methodological and creative tool for such representation? (3) If professional standards are achieved, can low-budget films with Indigenous stories and a non-white cast successfully reach wide audiences?

The Scissors Dance

I was inspired by the story written by Jose Maria Arguedas in 1962, “The Agony of Rasu Niti”, one of the first and most beautiful recounts of a very old and complex cultural practice. Nobody can actually prove where this Dance comes from, but several anthropological readings have tried to link the Scissor Dance with the *Taki Onqoy*¹, a millenarist, religious movement that appeared in 1564 in the *Chanka* area (Ayacucho, Huancavelica, North of Arequipa and Abancay) in the Southern Peruvian Andes. This movement advocated for a total rejection of the Catholic faith, imposed so violently to the Indians by the Spanish invaders. According to Spanish chronicles, the *Huacas* -pre Hispanic Gods- were angry at the new religion, ‘possessing’ the bodies of a few selected Indians. Able to dance for long periods of time, individuals possessed would prophesy the prompt return of the Old Gods, the defeat of the Spanish Christ and the expulsion of the invaders. Inquisition exterminated the movement rather quickly, which had completely disappeared by 1572.

All subsequent Indigenous rebellions were unsuccessful, but the idea of resistance against the invaders survived, concealed in songs, dances and music. “To create is to resist”, became the Indigenous unspoken, unconscious belief. A long process of cultural *syncretism*² began. Images of Catholic saints and crosses were hammered where the *Huacas* used to stand, with people worshipping to Jesus Christ and the Old Gods at the same time. When Andean instruments were banned, European instruments (harp and violin) were adopted, and traditional tunes were played in secret. Taki Onqoy rituals eventually evolved into the Scissors Dance, always performed away from Spanish eyes.

In the 19th Century, the *hacendados*, powerful Spanish-descendant land-owners, replaced the Spanish *intendentes* and Catholic priests as the group that dominated Indians

1 Taki Onqoy: *sickness of the dance*, in the indigenous Quechua language.

2 **Syncretism** is the attempt to reconcile disparate, even opposing, beliefs and to meld practices of various schools of thought (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syncretism>).

after Peru's independence (1821). The extreme concentration of economic and political power completely marginalized the Indigenous population, until the land reform of 1968 and the disappearance of the *haciendas* system. By the eighties, the value and productivity of the agricultural land had dramatically decreased, unemployment had flourished and political violence rose³. Thousands of Andean and Amazon people left their homelands and moved to the cities, searching for job opportunities and better living conditions. with several important cities set in the Peruvian coast -a long strip of desert land with few, occasional streams- migrants were forced to live without housing services, social security and health care. Few got jobs in the declining Peruvian industry, and most survived working in an informal, service-oriented economy.

In spite of those conditions, Andean migrants found space and time to enjoy their memories, their culture, their past. Every weekend families would get together to sing the old songs, perform the old dances, speak the Quechua language. They would celebrate the weeklong agricultural *fiestas* in a single weekend or during their days off, using modern technology to create and recreate what they had left behind.

Most of those traditions remained excluded from Peruvian mainstream media. With stronger cultural and commercial ties with the United States⁴ than with the culture of its own land, local media has continuously distorted, avoided or even mocked any empowerment attempt made by individuals, groups or institutions that defend, promote or represent the Indigenous culture⁵. Racism was introduced as early as 1521 by the Spanish

3 The Communist Party of Peru (Spanish: El Partido Comunista del Perú), more commonly known as the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso), was a Maoist guerrilla organization in Peru (1980-1992). Shining Path's stated goal was to replace Peruvian bourgeois institutions with a communist peasant revolutionary regime. It has been widely condemned for its brutality, including violence deployed against peasants, forced to flee to the cities. Those who remained complained on Shining Path disrespect for their culture and institutions, and the brutality of its "popular trials" that sometimes included "slitting throats, strangulation, stoning, and burning." While punishing and even killing cattle thieves was popular in some parts of Peru, Shining Path also killed peasants and popular leaders for even minor offenses. Shinning Path came to an end with the capture of its leader, Abimael Guzman, in 1992. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shining_Path)

4 All local film theaters and television stations have 70% of its programming provided by the ten transnational media conglomerates, "The Big Ten": AOL/Time Warner, AT&T, General Electric, News Corporation, Bertelsmann, Viacom, Disney, Liberty Media, Sony.

5 In June, 2006, six Indigenous descendants were elected as Congressmen in Peru. Two of them refused to take the oath of office in Spanish, but in Quechua, wearing their traditional costumes. That created a big reaction in the media, who tried to discredit them in an aggressive and discriminative campaign. Former President Alejandro Toledo, also suffered a strong disdain from the press and television during his election during his five years in office.

conquistadores, and the economic and politic elite that holds the country's key power positions, including major film, radio and television production and distribution companies, has done nothing but furthered such mindset. Only with the massive migrations of Andean and Amazon populations towards the cities⁶ during the second half of the 20th Century, such stereotypes began to change. Migrations triggered a deep process of social change that continues nowadays, with Indigenous migrants and its descendants still fighting for their economic and political empowerment.

However, the Scissors Dance became one of the few that became prestigious and known beyond the migrant world. After its official acknowledgment in 1967 by nationalist president Juan Velasco Alvarado, and the powerful backup of writer and anthropologist Jose Maria Arguedas, Scissor Dance became well known and somehow very respected. However, its rebel origin and political content remains unknown for the general public -although not by some of its performers.

A Scissor Dance film... Has anybody ever done it?

Peruvian literature has successfully portrayed many Peru's social processes, especially the works of writers like Mario Vargas Llosa, Jose Maria Arguedas and Ciro Alegria. However, but only a handful of Peruvian films and television and radio shows have approached those issues. We found then crucial to create a non-discriminative, from-the-inside visual representation of the Indigenous culture and its transformation in urban environments. But, where could we start?

Looking for visual references, we went over many, many Peruvian movies inspired on the Andes and Lima shantytowns. Few, however, had captured what we were looking for. Our main inspiration would then come from other sources, such as *Kundun* (Martin Scorsese, 1997), with a Tibetan landscape and culture with striking similarities with those in the Andes⁷; the Iranian *The Silence* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1998) a tale of a blind boy living in the poor neighborhoods of Teheran; and *The City* (David Riker, 1998),

⁶ Most Third World countries went through the same process after the Second World War. Currently 25% of Peruvian population is concentrated in the capital, Lima (Hobsbawm, 2001).

⁷ In the DVD's director commentary, it says that *Kundun* was actually shot in the Argentinean Andes, since the Chinese government denied permit to enter Lhasa and other places in Tibet.

a compelling story of Latin American immigrants living in New York and playing themselves.

From Riker's movie we learned that the success and importance of the film would be by making it *in collaboration* with the community *we* would work with. In other words, for the sake of realism and verisimilitude, we would have non-professional actors playing *themselves* in the roles of the Scissor Dancer (Father), the Violinist, the Harpist and the little Apprentice (Nina). We would soon discover that all actors we ended up working with had an innate artistic talent and an enormous experience of live entertainment, but no *acting* experience in film or theater. Tradition in the Andean culture never includes the creation, production and delivery of texts (as in a script) because it moves in the oral realm, with everything created and recreated in songs, dances and clothing.

Working with non-pro actors in impoverished environments is not new in the history of Peruvian filmmaking, but has never been attempted in the context of the Scissor Dance tradition. When facing landscapes of rural and urban poverty, few Peruvian filmmakers had attempted to recreate it using a naturalistic, yet stylized look, in the tone of *The Silence* by Mohsen Makhmalbaf or *Children of heaven* by Majid Majidi. We had a reason for it: this story was told from a twelve-year old girl point of view. Her neighborhood and her city would be not only everything she knows, but it would also embody everything she loves.

A small part of the film is set in the highlands -Nina's imagination and dreams. Since it had to have a a different, colorful strong look, we would use carefully composed shots and more complicated equipment, in the tone of the dream sequences of *Kundun*. We decided to use film instead of digital video, to manage high contrast ratios when shooting exteriors in the Andes, but as a rule of thumb our cinematographer would try to use as much natural light as possible.

Now, how do we make a movie out of this?

A writer that immerses himself in a community, or an anthropologist doing participant observation on the field, only have to worry about the little chaos they create. But what about a whole film crew? How could we proclaim to construct a “non-discriminative, 'from' the inside' representation” and at the same time claim neutrality in one of the most non-neutral activities- a film shoot? A movie completely disrupts the daily routine of everybody, from the first star in the cast to the last person on the crew. The only way of creating a not-so-intrusive shoot was to get involved with our actors as soon as the script was ready for rehearsals. That happened in April 2007.

Our initial idea was to create the most horizontal relationship between the crew and the cast (most of them artists from Ayacucho) that we could get. Of course, there were many disadvantages: most crew members were not familiar at all with the Scissor Dance; there were many *whiter*, single women in the crew's top positions (director, director of photography, art directors), who, although fluent in Spanish, would communicate among themselves in English. Furthermore, we were also working with an expensive, delicate format (s16mm film) that required careful rehearsals and lots of planning. Most musicians, singers and dancers had worked on low-budget music/dance video clips but never within a disciplined schedule, rehearsals and production conditions that apply to fiction films. For the cast and the crew, the film would be an unfamiliar territory.

Looking back, however, we can say we did great. We managed to create the horizontal workflow we were looking for. We approached the Scissor Dance community, looking for people who resembled the characters in the script, and managed to incorporate their life experiences in the story. We designed rehearsals that lasted a full month. Our intention was never to make them *act*, but to get them to *know* us, and vice versa. On time, they would feel more comfortable and less afraid of the camera. It also helped the director to understand the motivation and feelings of each person involved.

This *horizontality* between filmmakers-those who are filmed was applied to every step of the pre-production and production process. After nine months of script's rewrites, the main storyline was already established, but it suffered changes until the very

beginning of the shoot. Final dialogs were developed and re-written collectively. Minimum crew was always a must. Minimum lighting and audio equipment was available at all times.

Real locations were also preferred. We used locations in the area where most Ayacuchan migrants live (Villa Maria del Triunfo district, Tablada de Lurín sector, South of Lima), which added a very realistic atmosphere to the set. It was our intention to shoot the mountain part of the film in Ayacucho, but the August earthquake destroyed several villages in the Peruvian Southern coast, making any travel virtually impossible. However, we were able to find *punas* and lakes at La Cordillera de la Viuda (4500 meters above sea level) a mountainous landscape right off the limits of the Department of Lima.

By following those steps, we consider that we built a relationship of trust and engagement with the cast, the *horizontalidad* we were yearning for. After a period of mistrust and insecurity, our actors/artists became really excited with the film, putting their professional and familiar obligations aside. There is one event that might show their commitment: the night of the earthquake the crew was stationed in Canta, a small village three hours away from Lima. The cast (two musicians and one dancer) was supposed to arrive the following morning. After the earthquake hit (18:30pm), communications shut down, lights went off and the news on the radio revealed the magnitude of the tragedy (five hundred deaths and thousands of people homeless). We thought that the actors wouldn't like to come and leave their families alone. But in a stroke of luck, we managed to contact them and, to our amazement, they promised us to come as long as there were buses still running between Lima and Canta (which happened to be on the northeast of Lima, further away from the epicenter). The following morning just three buses left for Canta, and one of them was carrying our actors. In the middle of national turmoil and total chaos, we were able to continue with our shooting plan.

Now, in post-production, what have we really done, and where do we go from here?

Is it possible to use the tradition and methodology of socially committed films as a methodological and creative tool for a non-racist, from-the-inside visual representation

of an Indigenous culture? At this point of our work, we believe so, but it means that the filmmaking process has to be significantly different than the one used in the industry. Some of the many things we discovered during the shoot was how time-consuming non-professional actors are (in rehearsals and performance), how expensive location shoots could turn to be, how physically demanding a film in the Andes is for a non-Andean crew, and how uncertain and complicated production becomes when re-writing becomes a long, endless task.

We consider it is too early to answer the last question of our quest (*If professional standards are achieved, can low-budget films with Indigenous stories and non-white cast successfully reach wide audiences?*), since the film is still on post-production stage. We still believe that there is a potential for this short film to get a wide release – either on the formal market (festivals, television, etc.) as well as in the Peruvian *black market*, where most of the traditional and more modernized folk music and dances are commercialized. The fact that this is a short film (20 minutes maximum) might present a problem for formal distributors as well as for informal sellers. However, the enthusiastic response of the cast and the intention of the Association of Scissor Dance Musicians and Dancers to make a feature-length film with us made us think that our approach had not only been honest, but we have created the conditions for future creative collaboration -clearly, a desired result.

Epilogue - why I made this film?

The idea of making this film came after been involved on two documentaries in Peru in 2003 and 2004. The first, “My Destiny’s Road”, followed the struggles of a twelve-year old gang member living in one of the many shantytowns surrounding the city of Lima. It was a rather pessimistic portrait of a group of impoverished, lonely teenagers, victims and victimizers of all imaginable forms of structural violence. The second documentary was a moving report of the village of Paucartambo and its famous *fiesta de la Virgen*, one of the largest of its kind in the Southern Peruvian Andes. There, the story was quite the opposite: an uplifting, get-together-once-a-year tale of a community celebrating the beginning of the agricultural year in an open display of joy.

How, you may ask, could those different, almost opposite two stories be possibly related? Youth gang activity was born out of government neglect and discrimination, along with rising rates of malnutrition, domestic violence, and underemployment. The atmosphere in those shantytowns stood at the opposite of what I saw in the Paucartambo *fiesta*. Teenagers, young adults, even kids were visibly thrilled, excited, eager to join and rejoicing in the traditions (music, dances, songs) their parents and grandparents had been performing over decades. I found there a sense of hope that was missing among urban teenagers, a strong sense of placement and security invading most participant's eyes, an ecstatic feeling in the air. Where did that spirit come from?

Thinking about it many years later, I think that both social groups could share many things in common (same cultural and geographic origin, same age group, etc.) but their perception of themselves, their sense of identity, was different. In the city, beyond rampant poverty, youth breaths historic amnesia in powerful doses. Urban teenagers are mostly second-generation Andean migrants, whose parents fled from the misery of the countryside and the bloody war between Maoist guerrilla organization Shining Path and the Peruvian Army. Usually illiterate, migrant's economic situation would in most cases not improve, but get worse. In those cases, children would experience first-hand and at a very early age high amounts of emotional abandonment and domestic violence. Growing up virtually alone, their connection with their parents' history and cultural identity would be therefore rather weak. School would not help them either. With the quality of Peruvian education dropping dangerously over the last decades, public curricula would depict Indigenous culture as less worthy (analphabetic), less developed, and subordinated to the Western, white civilization. When such an essential institution reinforces historic amnesia and blurs the present, identity also becomes a problem. *Without a notion of who you are, where do you come from, it is hard to see where you are actually standing, and where you can go from there.* Living without a past, surviving by the minute, those kids were so incapable to explain their present as they were to define any possible future. Add the lack of opportunities for social mobility, and the discrimination and racism of a society that does not need, like, or does know what to do with poorly trained, emotionally

disturbed teenagers, and you could easily imagine the frustration and pain those kids are coping with.

Why, then, make a film like this one?

Over the years, I came to believe that in order to create social change I needed to look into who we are as a country, where do we come from, what is our place in the world. In a way, those two emotional extremes (loneliness vs. deep sense of placement) could and should to be combined into a single narration, because that is part of our experience as a society. I believe cinema could potentially fill our memory gaps, the amnesia suffered by all of us. On the other hand, when I make films I try to base my work on the principle that any art form film can change the way issues are perceived and thought. This film intends to acknowledge one of many Indigenous traditions Peruvian society cannot and should not be conceived without.