



UOA D33

MUSIC, DRAMA, DANCE, PERFORMING ARTS,
FILM AND SCREEN STUDIES



RESEARCHER

Noe Mendelle

OUTPUT TITLE

Sculpting the Spirits

OUTPUT TYPE

Digital or Visual Media

DATE OF PREMIERE

15 September 2014

FIG. 1

Banca and his son preparing a spiritual sculpture, island of Bubaque, 2014. Photo Noe Mendelle.



Film available at:

<https://vimeo.com/256446274>

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.7488/3e5b057d-1f04-44d0-92c7-f5ce6d79bb0d>

01 / STATEMENT

Sculpting The Spirits (Escultores de Espiritos) is a digital practice-based output, a feature documentary arising from ethnographic and documentary research undertaken by Mendelle about a matrilineal tribe from the Bijagós islands off the coast of Guinea-Bissau.

Mendelle and Luis Correia (co-director & co-producer) were the first filmmakers to visit the Bijagós archipelago and, after spending time with the village chiefs, were invited by them to film their daily life, beliefs, and rituals. Mendelle and her team lived with them for extended periods, twice yearly for 5 years. The elders, alert to radical changes coming their way and conscious that their culture is only orally transmitted, saw a unique opportunity to document their way of life and preserve it for future generations. Their collaboration was essential, both in terms of access and understanding the meaning of their rituals, but more importantly how they perceived change. The film gives voices to the Bijagós in their language without any commentary.

However, unknown to the film makers and the islanders at the time, the film ended up capturing their downfall and their absorption into a modern capitalist and global society.

The film explores how, in the context of a tribe, the dialogue between generations involves other layers of power beyond the living and how their philosophy of life will be affected by their cultural transformation.

Through observation of two main protagonists in a father/son relationship, the audience begins to understand the cultural gap growing between two generations. This is universal to most cultures, but for the Bijagós any change threatens the equilibrium between human beings, nature and the spirits who contribute to tribal decisions about daily and social life.

The film premiered 15 September 2014 at the Gulbenkian Museum of Modern Art, Lisbon, Portugal.

02 / RESEARCH DIMENSIONS



FIG. 2
Sculpture of Spirit, island of
Bubaque, 2014. Photo Noe
Mendelle

Sculpting the Spirits is part 1 of a three-part documentary series filmed over 5 years and commissioned by RTP (Radio Television Portugal), the Portuguese Cinema Institute (ICA), UNESCO and Creative Scotland.

It is concerned with the Bijagós people in Guinea Bissau and what their transition into the modern world tells us about the influence of capitalism. It was co-directed and co-produced by Noe Mendelle and Luís Correia.

This 54-minute story is about the magical world of the Bijagós people, whose close relationship with spirits and nature informs their daily life and every decision taken by the community. Their belief that man, nature and spirits are equal and interdependent makes the Bijagós an excellent model of sustainability. It is through sculpture that the intricate relationship of the Bijagós with nature and spirits is best expressed.

Banca, a famous sculptor of Iras (spirits), feeling tired, old and worried for the future of a culture in profound transformation, makes his last sculpture while instructing his son to take over his role, in the hope he will understand why it matters for their society to carry on communicating with the spirits.

03 / ORIGINALITY



FIG. 3
Balobeira (woman in charge
of women's spirituality), island
of Bubaque, 2013. Photo
Noe Mendelle.

This is the first documentary made about the Bijagós, an isolated tribe from the Bijagós archipelago off the west coast of Africa. This film was mainly shot on the island of Bubaque.

A handful of anthropologists have written about their rituals and dances but access is so difficult that their testimony remained descriptive rather than analytical. The Bijagós had never before agreed to allow anyone to live with them and film them. Through regular visits and a building relationship over five years, the filmmakers gained unique access to their islands and to their secrets.

The documentary explores how the arrival of capitalism transforms every aspect of a tribal society. *Sculpting the Spirits* focuses on the role of spirituality in the Bijagós societal structure, and challenges the filmmakers to evoke the invisible world of the spirits on screen. The film creatively communicates aspects of human experience in a tribal society which cannot be captured by language alone. It is the first in a series of three films, the latter two of which are in preparation.

The film's innovation is in carefully constructing images and sound to create a new perspective drawn from a combination of crafted aesthetics and traditional observational ethnography. The film creates a powerful physical experience for the audience to share the feelings felt by the filmmakers at the time of the recording. By highlighting emotions in the everyday life on screen, we enhance our instinctive ability to understand and interpret the world, despite looking at a foreign culture. It explores the universality of the situation rather than creating a distance between 'them' and 'us'.

04 / RIGOUR



FIG. 4
Still of the world premiere at the Gulbenkian Museum of Modern Art, Lisbon 2014. Photo Martha Appelt.

The premiere took place at the Gulbenkian Museum of Modern Art on 15 September 2014 as part of an exhibition.

The completed film was broadcast on RTP (Radio Television Portugal) in October 2015 and repeated several times on RTP Africa. Afterwards the film was distributed to various international festivals. The film received several nominations and won the following awards:

- Best film on survival of indigenous peoples, Parnu International Film Festival (Estonia) 11 July 2015.
- Best film, International Heritage Festival, Lisbon, 2018.

The film was part of two prestigious international markets: IDFA Doc for sales (Amsterdam) and Hot Docs market (Toronto).

This film matters not only because it allows a Western audience to become familiar with a forgotten tribe but because it creates an opportunity to reflect on the importance of preserving our relationship with our environment in order to uphold sustainability.

05 / SIGNIFICANCE



FIG. 5
Screening at Parnu International
Film Festival, Estonia 2015.
Photo Noe Mendelle.

This film was researched and planned during 2011. Mendelle researched the colonial history of the Bijagós as well as interviewing anthropologists linked to the field, such as Dr Chiara Pusseti.

The Bijagós have a very closed society and Mendelle had to be accepted by the leaders before any interviewing or filming could take place. During field work and filming time in the Bijagós, Mendelle and her team were able to show the images created to the people portrayed, enabling those depicted to actively engage in the creation of their image. It allowed them to develop their own critical relationship to the way in which the filmmakers represent them, therefore creating another layer of reflexivity to the documentary work.

During their time with the Bijagós, Mendelle and her team were immersed in a world in which people talk to trees and allow chickens to make their daily decisions. Mendelle's preoccupation as director was to film the appearance of things and people beyond the superficial, create meaning behind the invisible and highlight the significance underlying the words and actions of the Bijagós.

As viewers encounter the main characters, they simultaneously see, hear, and interpret their actions and also create connections between ideas. Banca, the main character, speaks to the Spirits as he would to his next door neighbour, demonstrating how his knowledge and understanding of the world is acquired through the senses. The filmmakers had to find a way on screen for the audience to engage with this invisible world and accept it as real. During the editing phase, Mendelle and her editing team focussed on creating a physical experience for the audience. Through images and sound design the film helps our senses to internalize the lived experience into what anthropologists call embodied knowledge or enactive cognition.

The device used was to create breathing spaces in the narrative of the film in order to turn images into visual poetry. This way, a didactic approach relying on a commentary could be sidestepped. The challenge was to avoid lapsing into an 'exotic' paradigm of lively and colourful moments. From the beginning the filmmakers knew that they did not want to use commentaries to explain what was going on and therefore Mendelle and her editing team had to make sure that the audience could remain engrossed by listening and engaging directly with the Bijagós, reflecting the filmmaker's experience.

During research and filming Mendelle shared the edited material with anthropologists and documentary filmmakers to verify the meaning that Mendelle was intending. Several commissioning institutions were involved, and the filmmakers had to share the work in progress to gauge their satisfaction. Regular screenings of work in progress took place and Mendelle devised specific questions in order to measure the reaction of the audience. This combination of the rigor of academic research with the creative filmmaking allowed the film to be both informative and experiential, turning it into an award-winning film.

06 / APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: Reviews

Review in *Expresso* (Portuguese National newspaper), 13 September 2014.

APPENDIX 2: Screenings

September 2014: Premiere
Gulbenkian Modern Art Museum < Portugal.

November 2014
IDFA Doc for Sales

April 2015
Hot Docs Market

April 2015
Portuguese Cultural Centre, Bissau.

April 2015
AfrikaPlay exhibition, Lisbon.

April 2015
Dada Saheb Phalke Film Festival, India.

June 2015
RAI (UK).
Nominated for Basil Wright Award.

July 2015
Parnu International Film Festival, Estonia.
Award for best film on the survival of indigenous peoples.

September 2015
Indian Cine Film Festival, Mumbai.

October 2015
Kratovo Ethnographic Film Festival, Kratovo, Republic of Macedonia.

July 2019
International Heritage Festival, Lisbon.
Award for best film.

APPENDIX 3: Websites and Related Information

Bijagos Films
www.bijagosfilms.com/sculpting_the_spirits

Scottish Documentary Institute
www.scottishdocinstitute.com/films/sculpting-the-spirits/

IDFA
www.idfa.nl/en/film/00810897-965f-46d5-b7ea-ad0ca5813f02/sculpting-the-spirits/docs-for-sale

International Heritage Film Festival
www.heritales.org/wp/sculpting-the-spirits-2/

Anthropology at the Australian National University
<https://anuanthropology.weblogs.anu.edu.au/2019/08/25/anu-anthropological-film-series-28-aug-sculpting-the-spirits/>

Africa Network
<https://africanetwork.weblogs.anu.edu.au/2019/08/26/film-screening-sculpting-the-spirits/>



FIG. 5
Review in *Expresso* (Portuguese National newspaper), 13 September 2014.



FIG. 6
Poster for the film, 2014.



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