

Film/Video Reviews

SanDance!: A Journey to the Heart of Africa's San Dance Culture. 2020. Directed and written by Richard Wicksteed. Produced by Richard Wicksteed and Edwin Angless. Sixty minutes. DVD and DSL (Digital Site License). Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources (DER). In Nharo, Buga-Kwhe, ||Ani-khwe, Ju|'hoansi, and T's'ix with English narration and subtitles.

“He is always the one who dances first, because he is a great healer ... For he is dancing, teaching, healing to the people.” Dia!kwain, Xan San storyteller, 1875

I begin this review with the quote that starts this film, for it in many ways encapsulates the film's wistful tone and nostalgic content. Though the source of the quote is not cited herein, it is easy enough to find. Dia!kwain's commentary is his take on the San artist-healers responsible for the engravings on rock paintings from South Africa's Eastern and Northern Cape Province (Lewis-Williams 1980). Fast forward nearly 150 years to the present, and we are introduced to the San, the click-speaking first peoples who inhabit six southern African nation-states and whose endangered artistic traditions are the subjects of this documentary. It is dance, first and foremost, that is the focus of the film—particularly the trance healing dances. “It's important to dance these songs and make the sound in the village,” says one of the elders. “You must dance these songs. If you don't, then people in your village may get sick. If you do the healing dance, the village will be good.”

This film follows San dancers from rehearsals in remote, scattered villages in Namibia, South Africa, and Botswana, to their annual August full-moon performances at the Kuru San Dance Festival at the Dqae Qare San Heritage Ranch, a San-owned tourist lodge outside Ghanzi, in Botswana. The filmmaker, Richard Wicksteed, is an award-winning independent documentary filmmaker based in Cape Town, South Africa, who, since the mid-1990s, has been making films focusing on and advocating for San culture. As the promotional material accompanying this film puts it, “The film expresses the hopes and dreams of San dancers as they strive to revitalize their beautiful dance traditions, which are threatened by ongoing marginalisation of the San's fragile hunter-gatherer culture.”

For the most part, the filmmaker allows the San healers, dancers, and musicians to speak for themselves, which allow us to better understand the worldview and culture of the many San cultures of Southern Africa. The film employs some voice-over explanatory narration, in a style and tone similar to that of ethnographic filmmaker John Marshall, best known for his work in Namibia documenting the lives of the Ju|'hoansi (also called the !

Kung). This occasional “Voice of God” perspective is not overbearing, however together with the use of admittedly stunning eagles’-eye drone footage, does imply a certain privilege—the San people certainly aren’t able to see themselves or their environs in this way. Here, one could also ask about the nature of San participation in the filmmaking process: how did they interact with the film crew? In what capacity did they advise the filmmakers?

Any viewers searching for more information about the music featured in this film might be further disappointed. For instance, the monochord San stringed instrument seen and heard occasionally in both diegetic scenes and in the non-diegetic portions of the soundtrack composed by Pops Mohamed and Dave Reynolds is nameless, with no discussion of either its performance style or of its ancient, characteristic harmonies (Kubik 1998). Furthermore, there are occasional shots of musicians singing or dancing to the accompaniment of non-descript Bantu-style drums. Drums are not native to San culture—a well-known fact that exemplifies the long *durée* of inter-continental interaction within Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet this is neither critiqued nor celebrated, while other aspects of globalisation and modernity, such as many San youths’ interest and fascination with electronic dance music (EDM), in lieu of their grandparents’ healing trance music, are set up in a wholly negative light. Indeed, there is a thread of mourning indigenous loss in the face of encroaching modernity woven throughout the film. For instance, while spending time with the Buka-Khwe dance group as they prepare for the dance festival, the narrator asks, “What happens if the dancing goes?” Letshogo Ikaegeng, an elder and dancer, replies, “Our history will be over. If our children don’t learn ... if we don’t maintain the culture in our life, we may as well be dead. If we don’t continue to dance, our spirits will not travel to the spirit world and we will be condemned for denying our ancestors.”

Drone footage notwithstanding, the film does contain beautiful cinematography throughout. There is also a fascinating interweaving of archival footage, especially materials pertaining to the backstory of the South African military forces operating in Namibia and Angola in the 1970s which used San trackers in their war against the liberation movements. Thousands of Namibian and Angolan San were forced to leave their hunting grounds and settle in military bases and were conscripted and forced to fight. That the San and their culture have survived, and still survive despite families and communities being torn apart by forced removals and war, is testimony to their resilience—and this film celebrates that fact.

The film’s immersion into Southern Africa’s indigenous cultures touches on a wide berth of subjects including ancient history, recent history, colonialism, genocide, dance, language, subsistence, ecology, and philosophy. Because of its shorter runtime and mass of content, *SanDance!* will easily fit into many curricula. It must be noted also that *SanDance!* is co-produced with a San NGO—the Kuru Development Trust (KDT), which hosts the annual Kuru Dance Festival. Proceeds from *SanDance!* directly benefit the KDT, and the dance groups featured in this film.

References

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***Bulang Music: From the Mountains to the Stars* 《布朗音乐——从高山到星星》**. 2023. Written and directed by Leonardo D'Aimco. Produced by MULTI CULTI. 42 minutes. In Chinese with English narration and subtitles in Chinese and English.

The music ethnographic film *Bulang Music: From the Mountains to the Stars*, filmed in Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, in 2017 provides a summary the music of the Bulang people. It gives an overview of their music and their culture, covering aspects such as geographical environment, religious rituals, architecture, clothing, and language. It is worth mentioning that field researcher Leonardo D'Amico also paid attention to the new forms of Bulang music culture after the intervention of commerce, tourism, and new media in the strong process of global urbanization.

The Bulang people are descended from the ancient Pu people of southwestern China, which is why Han Chinese people refer to them as "Puman people." This may be why the reggae-style band in this film named themselves "Puman Band." Bulang music has its own classification system: Zhuai (拽), Zai (宰), Suo (索), Sen (森), and Tongma (同玛). D'Amico keenly grasped this distinctive feature and illustrates the parts one by one. At the same time, Bulang music has characteristics that are common among several ethnic groups residing in mountains with cheerful tunes and relatively simple lyrics. The film is structured in a similar style with a simple and clear structure, frequent shots of the natural landscape, and a clear narrative throughout.