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EIGHT

Interdisciplinarity as Image

At the Intersections of Historical, Heritage, and Media Approaches in the Indian Ocean World

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IN KEEPING WITH THIS volume’s emphasis on interdisciplinarity, this chapter explores how the use of “image-aided” forms of knowledge production can intersect with archaeology, history, and cultural heritage preservation in Mauritius and Zanzibar. While archaeology allows us to analyze the material and immaterial past and historians can reconstruct earlier times using documentary sources, image-based methods can offer an important counterpoint to these research methodologies to expand our understanding of peoples, their cultures, and their histories. Filmmaking connects the perceptual abilities of the audience to the material and nonmaterial aspects of the culture being represented. Using media this way can also play an important role in filling the lacunae that traditional history may be unable to close because it highlights oral culture’s ability to hold onto objects of significant tangible and intangible heritage. The current democratization of film and video production and
the attendant increasing opportunities for image-based research open a space for experts who come from outside of traditional academic frameworks to operate, and allows for the development of a more diverse vision of the past and present. Such interdisciplinary methodologies can advance historical archaeological agendas in the Indian Ocean world precisely because they permit us to envision new modes of conceptualizing the region and the historical experience of its diverse populations.

Approaching research in this way is particularly important, as has already been noted elsewhere in this volume, because a well-developed “image” of this region and its past has yet to be produced. As authors, we are particularly interested in questioning the disciplinary particularism that characterizes existing research. We are especially sensitive to how narrow research agendas can exclude or misrepresent topics that are already underrepresented in the existing scholarship on the Indian Ocean. Examples are communities that are vulnerable to marginalization and how their use of cultural heritage generates stability in times of change. Accordingly, we seek to lay out a new interdisciplinary research methodology with the belief that such an approach can provide a more complete picture of this vibrant region while respecting the role that cultural heritage plays in these communities.

In pursuit of this objective, we focus on two significant objects of cultural heritage from the IOW: the ravann, a traditional drum, in Mauritius, and the Mtepe, a traditional boat, in Zanzibar, through the lens of film and art. The chapter begins by considering the ways in which different disciplines do and do not intersect and how film can be used to explore heritage and historical topics, including the risks of doing so. We then examine how the ravann and the Mtepe are fabricated and their cultural significance in both the past and present. Doing so includes describing the production of two films that focus on the construction of these objects, and especially on the way in which each object has been (re)created through lost or little-known methods and their attendant cultural heritage value. Both the ravann and the Mtepe act as agents of cultural identity and, in so doing, speak to the archaeological notion of the importance of the “social life of things.”

These films likewise emphasize and valorize intangible heritage in their respective locations. Local experts, who are featured in these films, conducted historical research to unearth the lost techniques used to fabricate these objects. The films reveal not only how these objects
were made, but also how the fabrication process was conceptualized. Lastly, we consider the importance of local communities’ engagement in their own history-making and the “growing recognition of the need for and importance of community-oriented archaeology.” Image-based methods of research offer new possibilities for local community collaboration with historians, archaeologists, and other researchers. Such an approach means that community members cease being merely research subjects. The knowledge produced by such collaborative approaches can in turn be put to more holistic use by the people in question, a result of particular importance for many contemporary communities, including those in the Indian Ocean world, whose ancestral ties have been sundered over the course of time.

In adopting this interdisciplinary approach, we draw on the vocabularies of multiple disciplines, including media studies, contemporary art theory, visual anthropology, and the conceptual considerations of nonfiction and ethnographic film production. This multidisciplinary approach, coupled with the fact that the chapter was written by two authors who are also the directors of the films described, underscores its multivocal and dialogical approach to knowledge production. Such an approach is all that much more important since men and women in the contemporary world lead multifaceted lives that intersect in various ways and at various levels. As Maria Reimondez has argued, “intersections are…the places where integrity is debated and exercised. No story, no history, no film, no article can be written without an overt and covert explanation of what that place is.” Given the complexities inherent in all such intersections, the only way we can hope to understand them more fully is through interdisciplinary collaboration.

THE CONTEXT OF HISTORY

Using film as a research tool requires us to think of this media form not just as a historical source or a kind of popularized presentation of history, but also as a form of knowledge production that can provide us with unique insights into a people’s history. Although some scholars regard film as a legitimate source material for historical scholarship and a powerful tool for analyzing the past, it has seldom been employed as such. Filmmakers often find themselves in a conundrum when faced with historical content or material artifacts that they do not always
understand fully but need to reproduce creatively. Since they are not historians or archaeologists themselves, they invariably find themselves at the kind of intersection that Reimondez has described.

As Olaf Berg warns, “history is not about some truth hidden in historic facts, but about a relation we establish with the past events based on the present-day material and immaterial artifacts.”\(^5\) He sees film accordingly as a presentation of “the multiplicity of forms in which history appears.”\(^6\) Through film, historical testimonies are recounted as versions of what happened in ways that leave the viewer to “build their own opinion…. In other words, film is a dynamic structure that mediates the social relation between those who are filming, that which is being filmed and those who are viewing the film. Like history, film exists only as a theoretically and socially constituted entity.”\(^7\) Film directors share with historians a desire to examine historical materials to uncover hidden insights or heretofore unknown aspects of the past. At the core of this mutual desire is the systematic investigation of a question, problem, or phenomenon. In such cases, filmmaking has little to do with the emotional and rational dimensions of human experience but everything to do with knowledge and creativity. Approached in this way, filmmaking resembles an act of historical archaeological reconstruction that can illuminate the past in the present.

### CONTESTING THE “DOCUMENTARY”

There is a yawning gap between the theory and practice of the “documentary.” Theories of the documentary emphasize the fallacies that surround notions of objectivity, reality, and truth. The practice of documentary thrives, however, on the notion that documentary films communicate objective facts. In this context, mediated images or textual accounts are treated as indisputably impartial evidence despite clear indications that such “documents” are biased because they ultimately reflect the author’s viewpoint. Similar problems plague ethnography, which is frequently viewed as entailing the transparent reporting of “real” social and cultural events, of “people in their everyday contexts.”\(^8\) However, as philosopher and social critic Michel Foucault has argued, documentary is a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays.\(^9\) Media provides a platform for the interpretation of such truths or “power-knowledge.” Since it remains one of the
principal means of imparting knowledge in contemporary visual culture, the credibility and believability of documentary must accordingly be subject to continual assessment.

The two films under consideration provide examples of how research programs that draw on different academic disciplines can be used to encourage cross-disciplinary knowledge production and the methodological challenges that such interdisciplinary undertakings may face, not only while researching the subject under consideration, but also during the production and subsequent presentation of such films. Once again, emphasis is placed on using the medium of filmmaking as an act of historical and archaeological reconstruction of objects whose means of fabrication are little known or lost. The next sections of the chapter will discuss how each film specifically uses the attributes of filmmaking to illuminate this performance of reconstruction.

_LAME LA KONE: THE HAND THAT KNOWS_

Lame La Kone explores the cultural significance of the Mauritian frame drum called the ravann by focusing on how this instrument is made. The film, produced by Diana Heise in collaboration with a Mauritian development organization called ABAIM, focuses on the use of traditional techniques, now little known, that harken back to the slave era (1721–1835) in Mauritius. To examine this fabrication process, the filmmaker was required to devise an ethical manner of approaching the subject matter, which included asking questions about how images are used and represent others and how knowledge is transmitted in the postcolonial era. The filmmaker also considered the ways in which contemporary art can be an important method of research that counters some of the conundrums found in traditional documentary filmmaking.

_History of the Ravann_

The ravann (see drum in fig. 8.1) is one of the three principal instruments in Sega Tipik (traditional Sega), the lament music of Mauritius that traces its origins back to the island’s African and Malagasy slave population during the colonial period. The drum’s origins are unknown, but its form is similar to drums found in continental Africa. The instrument is round in shape and constructed from a circular piece of wood. This turned wood is attached to a piece of stiffened goatskin to create a...
percussive surface. A ravann’s diameter generally varies from twenty-five to seventy-five centimeters. The methods of playing the ravann in Mauritius are thought to be similar to those found in Madagascar that are closely associated with a musical form known as Saleg.11

There can be little doubt that this instrument was created in Mauritius as a source of support and solace for those trapped in a slave system known for its harshness.12 The object itself can be viewed as a symbolic cultural connection to slaves’ diasporic homelands. The rhythmic structure of the music played on the ravann reflects feelings of suffering, lament, and anxiety. This music begins with a slow, melancholy vocal introduction known as an apelasion, which allows for stories to be recounted, usually in a somber tone.13 Silences during the apelasion are also significant, expressing sentiments that cannot be articulated in words. This music’s second section, the roule, has a faster tempo and inspires movement, especially dance. In religious settings, participants dance themselves into states of trance, while high- to low-pitched female voices express the anxiety of their environment.14 According to Mauritian elders, the ravann was also used as a form of medicine to correct imbalances in the brain.15

The use of call-and-response methods of playing indicate that the ravann was also used as a communication device.16 As slaves lost their

FIGURE 8.1. At ABAIM. (Photograph by Diana Heise.)
ability to use and preserve their native languages, the drum became a site for new types of communication that included the development of the Kreol language. There is an intrinsic link between the musical form, Sega, its drum, the ravann, and Mauritian oral culture.17

Following the abolition of slavery on the island in 1835, attitudes toward Sega began to change.18 This musical form, which had once been considered barbaric, gradually became a more “acceptable” cultural practice. As early as the 1850s,19 large estate owners organized Sega nights that encouraged less radical forms of the music as a way of maintaining control over local freed slave populations.20 In the post–World War II era and particularly during the 1950s, Sega increasingly became a form of popular entertainment, and was played out of a home setting for the first time.21 As Sega’s popularity grew, use of the ravann declined because of the increased interest in using Western instruments, especially the drum kit,22 and production of the ravann ceased almost completely. However, after independence in 1968, cultural movements began to revalorize this instrument as part of their search for a symbol of identity in postcolonial Mauritius.23 The social development organization and musical atelier ABAIM was particularly active in doing so.

ABAIM

ABAIM began as a band in the 1980s that performed protest music. Their work belongs to a form of Sega known as Sega Engagé, or engaged Sega, known for its politicized lyrics and use of traditional instruments such as the ravann, the maravann (a rattle made of sugarcane stems and filled with seeds), and the triangle. During the 1990s, ABAIM focused on the status and position of children in Mauritian society. The organization set up its headquarters in Cité Barkly, an area known for high drug use, gang violence, high poverty rates, and low education levels. The area’s children are particularly vulnerable to these social ills. During the early 1990s, ABAIM started teaching children to play traditional instruments and games as well as learn to read and write the Kreol language.24 By teaching younger generations to play traditional instruments, such as the ravann, ABAIM not only provides a positive outlet for children to avoid the gangs and endemic violence of Cité Barkly, but also functions as a cultural heritage organization that helps to foster family relations and create a broader sense of community identity. Today, ABAIM is a
nationally known organization that has produced five books that collect traditional stories and songs and eleven albums of music.

The Ravann’s Contemporary Status

Despite ABAIM’s efforts, the ravann remains marginalized as a cultural emblem. Many young professional musicians play the Western drum kit or the cajón, a box-shaped percussive instrument originally from Peru. Since the ravann is still strongly associated with the legacy of slavery, the instrument is stigmatized, a fact that some drummers use to reject it.25 Ravann players are associated largely with staged performances put on by the local tourist industry. In these performances, which feature sanitized forms of this powerful music of lament and suffering, the ravann becomes little more than a detached symbol of Mauritian culture.26

One goal of postindependence cultural movements in Mauritius has been to identify objects that can be deemed truly “Mauritian.” The goal of such searches is to transcend the sense of communal identity that is fostered by groups that cling to their ancestors’ territory of origin and cultural practices.27 Mauritian political life reinforces these forms of ethnic communalism, a major consequence of which has been to marginalize those Mauritians of African and Malagasy descent whose ancestors reached the island as slaves during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.28 This forced labor diaspora system destroyed enslaved peoples’ connections to their homelands as well as many of their cultural practices and linguistic traditions. As a result, their descendants do not have the luxury of knowing much, if anything, about their ancestral ties.29 Like the dodo, which has become very much a national rather than communal symbol of Mauritian identity, the ravann has the potential to become a unifying object of national heritage since its methods of fabrication and the manner in which it is played is wholly Mauritian. In 2012, Diana Heise and ABAIM set out to produce a film to explore the ravann’s cultural heritage significance.

Methodology for Lame La Kone

Lame La Kone uses still and moving images to examine the ravann and its role in contemporary Mauritian cultural heritage. The film documents preindustrial methods of fabrication that would have been used during the slave era. These methods were recovered by research that included the collection of oral accounts of the ravann by Alain Muneean,
one of the founders of ABAIM; these methods were subsequently employed by the artisan James Gurbhoo, the father of two ABAIM children. It is important to note that employing these methods was very much an experiment during which it was not clear whether each stage in the fabrication process would succeed.

Conceptualizing and producing *Lame La Kone* entailed drawing on ideas of what constitutes “representation” in contemporary art. This approach has three basic components, the first of which is appreciating the value of contemporary art practice as a form of research. Secondly, it relies on principles enunciated by the noted cultural theorist and philosopher Jacques Rancière to create a working definition of what constitutes an “image.” Finally, this approach builds on Maya Deren’s methodology to use the formal considerations of art practice to understand the rituals and mythology of Haitian Vodoun.

Understanding contemporary art practice involves coming to terms with the precepts of modernism that emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This artistic and philosophical movement glorified the power of humans to shape and generate their own environments through the implementation of scientific inquiry and technology.30 Fueled by a belief in the power of industrial machinery and bureaucratic organization, modernism espoused the pursuit of “progress”31 and the bounties that such advancement could bring. Casting off the traditions of previous movements, modern artists sought to emphasize attributes specific to each medium of art production as a method to advance their practice. One prevalent method was to use technology to find new ways of looking and thinking about the world. Modernist ideals and perceptions affected not only artistic practice and visual culture, but also most systems of daily life, economic production, and intellectual inquiry, including the practice of anthropology, ethnography, and archaeology.

As the twentieth century unfolded, events including war, genocide, colonialism, and global ecological devastation undermined this belief in the inherent promise of progress.32 Those who had once celebrated the overthrow of established social, economic, and political systems as cleansing rites witnessed and experienced the misery of violence and questioned how modernism could be so wrong. The quest of modernism lost its unifying abilities, all the more so as its supporters found that the modernist narrative implicitly excluded the history and culture of many non-Western peoples.33 Contemporary artists responded to this
anxiety by moving away from a reliance on a single medium to develop works that were interdisciplinary and intermedia\textsuperscript{14} (art activities that exist between established genres) as a way to avoid Western cultural hegemony and give voice to more diverse perspectives.

This expansion of contemporary art practice resulted in the development of more nuanced considerations of how “images” are produced, a process that Jacques Rancière has discussed at some length. His notion reiterates another break with modernist thought. The dominant function of Western art since Aristotle has been to imitate and reproduce the experience of human vision. Rancière asserts that contemporary art (art produced since the collapse of modernism) has striven to not mimic the working of the human eye. Instead, he argues, these new ideas of “image” have a quality that allows them to simultaneously make meaning of the past and the present in some ways, yet remain inexplicable in other ways.\textsuperscript{35} To clarify, he does not define “image” as only that which is visual; collections of words can also create an image that is blindingly clear.\textsuperscript{36} The practitioners of such “images” are not rejecting the visible; instead, their goal is to find new methods of making art that are “capable of dispelling the simulacra of resemblance, the artifices of art and the tyranny of the letter.”\textsuperscript{37} In short, these artists seek to make an art with the promise of freedom from the maze of endless simulations that do not reach an understanding about the past, an art that does not support the broken promises of monument (envision “heroic” public sculptures of colonial subjugators), and an art that challenges the oppression of proscribed thought, such as philosophic positions used to justify horrors such as the Holocaust (consider Nazi propaganda films). These artists are instead looking for a type of art that can represent a direct understanding of the human condition while allowing for the complexities of this experience from diverse perspectives.

The result is an idea of images that have the ability to be simultaneously transparent in some areas and opaque in others, leaving an opening that can allow for those aspects of experience that do not fit neatly into a dominant or overarching narrative. If we take the example of a photograph, there may be areas in the image that are completely black or completely white. There may not be details in these areas, yet the areas are still holding space. We can apply the same concept to history as containing areas of considerable detailed knowledge and others about which little or nothing is known. The ability to think about images in
this way is particularly important in the representation of marginalized or undervalued aspects of cultural heritage, such as the ravann. Most people descended from slaves (in this case in Mauritius) have no substantive way to know about their ancestral lineage. Their connections to their homelands were purposefully broken by the colonial system, which justified its actions with the proscribed and accepted attitude of the time (think of Rancière’s idea of the “tyranny of the letter”). Such a lack of information creates a hole or blank area in the past, an area with no detail, which in turn affects the construction of such individuals’ identities. These blank areas are frequently overlooked, ignored, or considered to be of little value or consequence when reconstructions of the past are made. Rancière’s idea of image can be used to acknowledge this missing information, consider the reasons why such information is lacking, and give space for the unknown aspects of these human experiences in the form of opacity or silence. The production of *Lame La Kone* uses this expanded notion of image to conceptualize the ravann and its community.

The third influence on the film’s conceptualization and production is Maya Deren’s work on Haitian Vodoun. In the preface to her book *The Divine Horsemen*, Deren writes that she intended originally to produce creative films about the dances found in Vodoun rituals. Once she began studying these dances, however, she found that the premise upon which her project was originally based was untenable since there was no way she could distill the significance of these dances from the dance movements themselves. In short, she was left without a methodology to collect data or a way to categorize it. At the same time, she recognized a connection between how “native” cultures were studied in the 1940s and how artists were treated in modern industrial society: “We too are exhibited as touristic curiosities on Monday, extolled as culture on Tuesday, denounced as immoral and unsanitary on Wednesday, reinstated for scientific study on Thursday, feasted for some obscurely stylish reason Friday, forgotten Saturday and revisited as picturesque Sunday.”

This insight, coupled with her strong aversion to making aggressive inquiries, led Deren to develop another research methodology—subjective formal analysis. More specifically, her approach emphasizes the need to respond intuitively to the “form” of the visual and sonic environment being studied. Form is the one of the principal characteristics that an artist uses to assess a work of art. For example, the inclusion of
an apple in a painting by Paul Cezanne is not its primary connotation; meaning is made by the manner in which the apple is rendered. In the case of Haitian Vodoun ceremonies, Deren saw the movements that occurred during these rituals not as abstracted dances, but as visual configurations molded by the community members’ bodies, which renders meaning in Vodoun culture. Her approach affords us an opportunity to better understand the diverse ways in which people can ascribe and interpret cultural value.

The methodology employed in producing Lame La Kone builds on Deren’s approach by paying attention to the formal attributes of the medium used, including sound, mise-en-scène, cinematography, and montage. To update her approach, formal aspects from a poststructuralist standpoint are also considered, including performance, the camera as participant, collaboration and shared authorship, and self-reflexivity (aspects of the film that reference its own making).

Lame La Kone is a film that was shot almost completely in close-up; the focus remains constantly on the ravann (see example in fig. 8.2). This cinematographic technique seeks to make watching the film an act of engaged viewing, not emotional manipulation. This intent is emphasized by the inclusion of still images in the montage to reengage the audience’s attention by means of stopped movement. The film is shot on James Gurbhoo’s farm and emphasizes the source of the preindustrial materials used in making the ravann. The sound was recorded with two microphones, a technique that permits much of this environment’s “wild sound,” which includes the nearby Cité Barkly, to be captured.

This act of cultural heritage preservation was performed for the film. The fabrication process was staged with Gurbhoo’s active participation and that of ABAIM members. To draw attention to this fabrication process as performance, the camera itself is an active participant, moving self-reflexively from subject to subject at the direction of both Gurbhoo and Alain Muneean. The director’s voice can likewise be heard, as can Gurbhoo’s comments to the director. These activities point to the film as a cinematic construction, not naturalistic reportage. As noted earlier, it is important to remember that the film is a collaborative undertaking between Diana Heise and ABAIM. Muneean and Gurbhoo conducted the research on which the film is based and organized the location and materials used during it, while Heise handled all aspects of production.
These three individuals, as well as other community members, participated in the final editing process to ensure cultural accuracy.

**Approaching Representation**

In the production of *Lame La Kone*, the director/cinematographer was acutely aware of her presence as an invited outsider. The methods of depicting Gurbhoo maintained the film’s focus on the “image” of the drum itself; this work was not intended to be a portrait of this individual. Because the ravann is not part of the director’s ancestral tradition, it was important that the film did not become the voice for another person or historical tradition. In short, the film seeks, to quote filmmaker and postcolonial theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha, “to speak nearby.”

To more fully understand what the film sought to do, it is important to know something about how Gurbhoo would be typically viewed in Mauritian society and culture. He is a farmer from Cité Barkly. He attended school until the third grade and earns his living as a day laborer. He speaks the kind of Kreol that is considered “low” or “crude” by many of those who completed higher forms of education. Because of his limited educational background and language skills, many would not consider him very knowledgeable, much less an authority. However,
the film clearly treats Gurbhoo as an expert. At various points during the film, disembodied voices enter the filmic environment to ask him questions. He is, at all times, the stable, visible source of knowledge, contrary to the stereotype propagated by societal judgments of him based on his educational background and economic livelihood. The film works accordingly to dislodge common assumptions about those living in the margins of Mauritian society. It should be noted that *Lame La Kone* is the first film to be produced that includes use of this particular form of the Kreol language.

Gurbhoo, via the film’s “image,” speaks of traditional knowledge and, in so doing, reveals a previously little known or understood history. He describes the tools that he uses and their historical significance, as well as the various ways in which the materials he uses are employed (fig. 8.3). Rarely, however, does he speak of how he acquired this knowledge. Although the film works to solidify Gurbhoo’s potential role as a cultural expert in Mauritian society, it does not describe his life story or attempt to manipulate the viewer’s emotions as many traditional documentary film narratives do. Instead, these aspects of Gurbhoo’s life remain opaque. To use Rancière’s terms, the “image” operates on the level of sheer presence to convey its potency by purposely giving space to Gurbhoo’s past through his references to his own family and the slave history of Mauritius yet not treating this lack of information as a deficit. Instead, this aspect of Gurbhoo’s representation in the film functions as an embodied void, giving space where historical knowledge would be if it were known (fig. 8.4).

This representational approach includes the ravann itself. The same strategies of image production apply to the drum as it rhythmically speaks through its players. Its goatskin cover attests to the craftsmanship that making this instrument requires. The film makes clear that the process of fabricating this ravann took five weeks, reflecting the community’s deep desire to make this kind of music. Despite its ability to speak for and to this community, the ravann also remains mute since it does not tell what its ancestors witnessed or speak of its close proximity to cultural extinction. However, the drum’s sheer presence can still help fill in the lacunae that the historical record cannot. As such, this image has the potential to let that historical past and heritage exist in the present and persist.

In 2008, anthropologist Rosabelle Boswell noted the lack of attention paid to the preservation of cultural heritage, and especially to intangible
FIGURE 8.3. Collection of James’s tools. (From Lame La Kone.)

FIGURE 8.4. James with completed ravann. (From Lame La Kone.)
cultural heritage, in Mauritius. Six years later, however, Mauritian attitudes about cultural heritage were clearly changing. In February 2014, an application was made to UNESCO to safeguard Sega Tipik, an application which, incidentally, included images from *Lame La Kone*. The application was approved in November of the same year. Although the country already housed two UNESCO WHSs (the Aapravasi Ghat, which commemorates indentured labor migration during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the Le Morne Cultural Landscape, which commemorates slave resistance to oppression), Sega Tipik is the first form of intangible cultural heritage in Mauritius to be accorded such international protection. This form of intangible heritage is also beginning to be acknowledged in other ways. Information about the ravann and its fabrication, which included images from *Lame La Kone*, and the instrument’s significance was included in elementary school textbooks for the first time in 2014. ABAIM completed its first book on the ravann and its history in 2016. As these developments attest, pursuing research methodologies that engage archaeology, heritage studies, history, and art can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of the human experience in Mauritius.

**SAILS OF HISTORY: THE PROFESSOR AND THE FUNDI**

In 1991, film critic and theoretician Bill Nichols warned that the ethnographic film was in trouble because shifts in the discourse about documentary studies were altering accepted academic ideas of representation. He also observed that ethnographic film no longer occupied a single niche within the narrow boundaries of anthropological studies, but a variety of niches, including those of history and memorialization. Rosabelle Boswell notes a similar trend in how people think about cultural heritage, observing that there is a consensus among heritage scholars that tangible and intangible heritage are no longer seen as being mutually exclusive. The distinguished anthropologist Clifford Geertz subscribes to the same basic premise when he argues that exploring the skill of craftmaking offers historians, ethnographers, and cultural enthusiasts an opportunity to have at least a subtle view of the “other” side(s) of life. These ideas about the value of interdisciplinary study are at the heart of *Sails of History*.

Relatively little is known about shipbuilding and the details of seafaring in the Indian Ocean before c. 1600. Studying the ships that plied
this oceanic world is frequently a difficult task given the limited information we have about these vessels, especially the dhow, which, more than any other boat, symbolizes the linkages between and communication among the diverse cultures that are a hallmark of life in the Indian Ocean world over the longue durée. Recounting the story of the Mtepe, a boat closely associated with Zanzibar, on the basis of the memory of those who have seen, built, or otherwise have knowledge about this vessel, however, provides a unique perspective from which to view the cultural world of people in the western reaches of this oceanic world. Doing so through film permits us to explore not only the cultural significance of the Mtepe, but also the conflicts and contradictions that are inherent in memory and knowledge creation. Documentary filmmaking can allow us to analyze the processes that underpin historical events and social action and understand how narrative can generate new meanings of causality.

The history of the Mtepe attests to the ingenuity of the peoples of the East African littoral. Abdul Sheriff’s account of the Mtepe Shingwaya makes it unnecessary to recount in any detail how these vessels are constructed. Suffice it to say that the Mtepe (fig. 8.5) was a sailing ship made entirely of wood and held together by coir (rope made from the outer husks of coconuts) rather than metal nails. Mtepes plied the Indian Ocean for centuries until they were ultimately supplanted by Arab and European technologies.

As with the ravann, the filmed discussions that occurred between Fundi Mohammed Bwana of Kizingitini, Lamu, and Abdul Sheriff illustrate how film and video can serve as a valuable research tool to deepen our understanding of how lost knowledge can be recovered and transmitted, especially in the postcolonial world. While the ephemeral nature of constructing an object such as the Mtepe may not seem, at first glance, to be all that important because the fabrication process is often seen as marginal to understanding the object itself, examining this process provides a unique opportunity to explore the ways in which notions of sociocultural and aesthetic “acceptability” or “unacceptability” are created and maintained.

Sails of History seeks to connect the different viewpoints about the Mtepe that can be found in both the historical record and contemporary media so the audience can better understand how academic specialists and artisans look at and understand the world in which they live. We
see, for example, how oceanographers and anthropologists have been trying to prove that sewn boats were more flexible than vessels built within the “Western boat-building tradition.” We also witness the differences of opinion between Fundi Mohammed Bwana, the only known
living person to have built a Mtepe, and naval historian Robert Adams, who refers to the craft as an “oddity.”

Identity and Memory as Knowledge

Construction of the Mtepe is intimately bound up with questions about how social systems define and construct identity. From Darwin and Freud to structuralist and post-structuralist theorists, inquiries into how the “self” is defined have revealed that group and individual identity are both coherent and constructed. Indeed, a biography can be defined as a discovery of self. In Sails of History, reconstruction of the Mtepe illuminates how different constituents conceptualize themselves and reflect larger cultural narratives.

Understanding the director’s approach in this film must include comprehending how he conceptualizes the biographical subject. One way to do so is to draw on prosopography, which can be defined as “the idea of collective, but individual, biography.” Prosopography provides an approach that permits us to understand a group of people while not having to understand the past of each individual member of that group. This approach can be particularly potent when considering postcolonial contexts, which do not value all individuals’ experiences equally. The individuals in Sails of History accordingly not only explain specific cause-and-effect relationships when they discuss the Mtepe’s fabrication, but also speak for the group to which they belong. More specifically, the prosopography in Sails of History aims to show how the impact of social or economic change differs according to the unique qualities of individual men and women by exploring the relationship between these individuals’ ability to take action (exercise agency) and the economic, social, and political structures that surround them. These subjects explain their life through culturally available stories, which allows the audience to hear how the individual participates in such activity.

One example of this relationship between the individual and the impact of social change is during the construction of the Mtepe when Abdul Sheriff states,

That is why when we wanted to have an exhibition on the dhow culture, we decided to construct a boat not the kind that you can see everywhere which have modern influences in them, but to try to construct an old one using the old methods. Now
that [is] easier said than done. Because there was nobody who had any experience in building it. Eventually we found somebody, in Lamu, whose grandfather used to build not real boats but the models, and therefore we were relying to some extent on the memory of this fundi from what his grandfather told him when he was a young boy. But we were also able to collect information from written sources to find out how it was built, what was the shape like, and also what were the traditions that went with it. And it was quite interesting that when we began to build the boat, the fundi was quite particular that certain things you cannot do. Now some of these would be considered very sexist now. For example a woman was not expected to go on the boat while it was being built. We never got the full explanation why but that this is part of the tradition.51

Looking at his arguments with the fundi, we see the fundi’s belief that “an object is defined by the effects of its use: a definition that works well is a good definition. An object is an experience. Objects do not exist apart from a subject that thinks them.”52 Here we find the link between belief and truth: the fundi believed in what he was doing and arguing for, while the professor was concerned with finding the truth.

This disagreement demonstrates that to some people, truth can be a form of knowledge that does not necessarily have an impact on daily life. Here we see how the person, the collective group to which that person belongs, and the idiosyncratic stories that are being told differ yet still relate to the larger cultural narrative. As Robert Marshall Adams warns, “Although the references allow an accurate description of the sewn boat, a quantifiable analysis of the boat is not possible due to lack of accurate dimensions.”53 Indeed, there can be many inaccuracies in the descriptions provided by various people.54 This reality prompted a qualitative interpretation of the hull’s construction during the Mtepe Shungwaya Project of 2003, an undertaking that included an assessment of the participants’ belief systems, in this case the fundi and the professor, and how these belief systems came into existence. As qualitative researchers involved with human beings, we are searching for meaning from the perspective of those being studied.

Coming to terms with the various viewpoints and belief systems that surround the Mtepe required gathering information from multiple
sources, beginning with firsthand literary accounts and observations and academic studies that draw on secondary source materials. Visual sources included drawings, photographs, and models. Other sources of information included the results of archaeological excavations and research and reports generated from careful studies of the remains of old vessels. The film asserts, however, that the most important source of information is the attempted reconstruction of the vessel by a living person trained in the seafaring skills and traditions of a living culture.

Horst Ruthrof provided important insights into some of the issues raised in both the film and this chapter. He took particular interest in Fundi Haji Gora Haji’s statement that “the skill no longer exists, it is only in our mouths!” This statement acknowledges that while the kind of skills needed to build a Mtepe still exist, the community no longer possesses the details of how to do so, hence such knowledge can be found only “in our mouths.” Ruthrof would argue the essence of “technique” involves highly refined sets of technical skills assembled over thousands of years by a community, and the Mtepe Shungwaya Project illustrates as much. Using coir rope to hold the ship together and fire to shape its timbers, for example, reflect ancient skills and techniques that, like family recipes, remain only in people’s memory or imagination unless they are used and passed on to succeeding generations.

HISTORY, HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY, AND FILMMAKING IN PERSPECTIVE

Both *Lame La Kone* and *Sails of History* focus on past forms of material culture whose process of construction has been lost and use filmmaking as a method of historical archaeological reconstruction to understand these objects’ social and cultural significance. By intermingling intangible knowledge, artisans’ material understanding of contemporary construction, older men’s memories, and information from the archival record, these projects represent attempts to (re)create important markers of the past in the Indian Ocean world. The act of filmmaking allows mute materials to speak by taking “skills out of our mouths” and reconstructing culturally valued objects using techniques lost during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as Western cultural hegemony became increasingly pronounced. These attempts to reenvision construction of the ravann and Mtepe can, in essence, be seen as acts of resistance
against the loss of indigenous cultural heritage and identity and a desire to reassert the value of that heritage and identity.

In addition to reasserting the cultural value of the ravann and Mtepe, these films offer members of marginalized communities the kind of window onto their past that can play an important role in asserting their identity in the postcolonial era. First, the films elevate aspects of their cultural heritage and valorize them as significant objects. Secondly, the films offer individuals and communities a space in which to consider their ancestral past and validate their own experiences. In *Lame La Kone*, for example, Gurbhoo says, “We are returning to two hundred years ago. It is like I am seeing my great-grandfather…. As for me, my name… I don’t know my origin, for sure.” This kind of self-reflection demonstrates that he is able to connect with his past and make space in the present for his ancestors even if he does not know where they were born or what language they spoke. Gurbhoo’s observations in turn aid others in his community to connect with their own individual and collective past. When the film was shown at large-scale screenings and the ABAIM center, it was clear that his knowledge was valued and he became a respected cultural expert. His presence accordingly holds out the promise that other people’s experiences may also be seen as valuable. This use of cinema can thus contribute to the creation of a new sense of identity, one that permits people to disassociate themselves from the negative consequences of social and cultural marginalization.

These films also demonstrate that this medium can generate more diverse and nuanced voices than would normally be found in the creations of authors and filmmakers such as Joseph Conrad and Walt Disney. Anthropologist Faye Ginsburg notes as much in her discussion about indigenous media-makers and ethnographic filmmaking. More specifically, Ginsburg argues that the clearest understanding of the past and present is produced by conversations between members of a community and an outside participant, such as an ethnographic filmmaker, both of whom contribute their perspectives and expertise in ways that allow a sharper picture of a people’s past and the legacy of that past to emerge.

Both *Lame La Kone* and *Sails of History* adopt a modified version of this approach that includes not only the knowledgeable artisan and the filmmaker, but also an outside expert (the professor). Because they generate alternative forms of portrayal in a space between biography
and self-representation, the films legitimize multiple perspectives about the past and the present that emerge from a dialogue that takes into account both the known and the inexplicable, the clear and the opaque, that which can be talked about openly and that which can never be discussed publicly, and the revelations and silences that exist in the archival record. In essence, this process permits the filmmaker to combine the insights generated by historical analysis and archaeological evaluation of material culture with the local community’s intangible knowledge to create a deeper understanding of the human experience and the heritage of that experience.

In 2001, film critic and theoretician Bill Nichols wrote of “cinema’s primal love for the surface of things, its uncanny ability to capture life as it is.” Such is especially true of the branch of filmmaking we call documentary, which combines photographic realism, narrative structure, and time-based montage in ways that can create an immersive experience full of meaning. As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, the kind of encompassing experience that cinema can generate when combined with the insights provided by historians and archaeologists can not only facilitate historical and archaeological reconstruction, but also provide communities, especially marginalized ones in the postcolonial era, with a way to reconnect with their past and value their cultural heritage. There are, of course, potential pitfalls to such an approach. The seamless nature of cinematic storytelling can easily result in a linear narrative story that fails to acknowledge the complexity of the human experience and the different ways in which that experience may be perceived and understood. However, as we have sought to demonstrate, such problems can be avoided. Doing so requires us to embrace, rather than deny, the messiness of memory, heritage, and the creation of identity and meaning that are central to capturing and savoring the richness of life in the Indian Ocean world.

NOTES

1. Appadurai, Social Life of Things.
2. See Krish Seetah, this volume.
3. Maria Reimondez, “Integrity at the Intersection: Peripheries, Her-stories and Film,” in Integrity in Historical Research, ed. Tony Gibbons and Emily Sutherland (New York: Routledge / Taylor and Francis, 2012), 167.


14. ABAIM and Heise, 2.

15. Antoine, “Rakont Mwa.”


17. Muneean.

18. Muneean.


24. Kreol, which did not have an official orthography until 2011, was the primary household language of 84 percent of all Mauritians in 2012 (“84% of Mauritians, Census Says, Speak Only Kreol at Home,” *Lalit Mauritius*, 3 July 2012, http://www.lalitmauritius.org/en/newsarticle/1407/84-of-mauritians-census-says-speak-only-kreol-at-home/).


27. Muneean, “Interview.”

29. See Diego Calaon and Corinne Forest, this volume.
32. Eriksen, Us and Them, 2.
33. Eriksen, 2.
35. Higgins, 1.
37. Rancière, 8.
39. Deren, 8.
40. Deren, 8.
41. Deren, 10.
44. See Calaon and Forest, this volume.
46. Boswell, Challenges to Identifying, 15.
49. The title “Fundi” refers to a highly skilled person with technical skills.
50. Robert Marshall Adams, Construction and Qualitative Analysis of a Sewn Boat of the Western Indian Ocean (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985), 12.
52. Sheriff.
53. Adams, Construction and Qualitative Analysis, 8.
55. Horst Ruthrof, interview by Martin Mhando, 1 July 2013.
56. Hall and Silliman, Historical Archaeology, 5.