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"My Natives to Myself": A Critical Perspective on Ethnographic Films

Danilo Giglitto and Rinella Cere

Abstract: *Alongside written reports, the colonial apparatus has often been accompanied by ethnographic films—at least since the inception of the medium—assembling a substantial corpus of footage of the people studied. While this documentary material has occasionally been subjected to postcolonial critique, early ethnographic films—particularly those from the pre-1960s period—have remained largely overlooked, despite the critical insights they can offer into both the colonial legacy and the practice of anthropology itself. This article is an effort in that direction. It examines the work of two women anthropologists, Beatrice Blackwood and Ursula Graham Bower, who conducted fieldwork in colonial contexts during the 1930s and 1940s respectively, compiling extensive visual records of the people they studied alongside their written ethnographies. The films depict indigenous groups in two territories under British colonial rule: Papua and New Guinea and Northern India. The analysis is based on a selection of these films, to which we have applied a decolonial framework structured around three analytical categories: self-referential authority, state of exception, and performative authenticity. What emerges is a contradictory "visual account" that blends romanticised and pseudoscientific views, deeply entangled in the complex and often ambiguous relationship between anthropology and colonialism.*

The relationship between anthropology, ethnography, and colonialism is a complex and controversial topic that has been the subject of debate since the 1960s, when several scholars laid the foundation for a critical reflection on anthropology and ethnography's supportive role to colonial power.

A significant contribution to this debate was made by Talal Asad, who discussed the emerging crisis within British functional social anthropology. In earlier decades, the discipline had experienced a rise in academic prestige and reputation, maintaining a distinctly defined status separate from cognate disciplines (Asad, "Anthropology"). This period of ascendancy was underpinned by the epistemological continuity of anthropological work, which was largely ensured by the stable conditions provided by colonial rule. The colonial system, in fact, immensely facilitated a particular type of fieldwork characterised by an asymmetry of power, leading to a one-sided intimacy and unique, safe access for anthropologists (Asad, "Anthropology"). However, this period of collusion ended with the wave of political independence of African colonial countries, disrupting the continuity that had defined the discipline's methods and practices (Asad, "Anthropology"; Needham).

This shift prompted more critical considerations of anthropology's role in the colonial enterprise, casting doubt on the epistemological validity of the discipline beyond its ties with the colonial apparatus. Some authors equated anthropology to an instrument to further subjugate colonised non-Western, and especially nonwhite, people (Willis), while others predicted its downfall following the demise of its object of study, consisting of isolated, so-called primitive societies (Worsley). In the British context, this "interpretative turn"

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(Malighetti) initially translated into some attempts from the British anthropological community to deliberately disengage from acknowledging the involvement of British anthropologists in backing the ideation of colonial policies (Scholte). However, whatever use anthropologists were to the colonial apparatus, the latter provided the former with "field sites, research opportunities, salaries and posts, grants and expeditions, and protection from political violence or instability" (Ben-Ari 384). These resistances were eventually eroded by two compelling broader developments in the field. Firstly, the Geertzian interpretation of anthropology, which challenged the positivistic separation between those studying and those being studied—a framework that had historically helped to give scientific legitimacy to colonialism and the subjugation of non-Western people (Malighetti; Geertz). The second was the concomitant occurrence of the anthropological crisis with the increasing self-awareness and agency of non-Western people (Lewis; Lévi-Strauss).

The increasing apprehension about the role of social anthropology in reproducing colonial power structures, alongside the disruption of access facilitated by the colonial enterprise, eventually prompted both the demythisation and reinvention of the discipline (Asad, "Anthropology"). Consequently, it evolved into a field no longer exclusively focused on the study of distant tribal societies and peoples but rather on the (less unitary) analysis of both the "complex" and the "simple" (Asad, "Anthropology"). However, it is evident how, as a discipline, anthropology has taken some time to seriously and systematically grapple with its colonial legacy and recognise it within the boundaries of its epistemological foundation and corpus of knowledge, eventually generating a postcolonial turn in scholarship in the 1990s that disrupted more explicitly the complicity of ethnography with colonialism (Bennis; Stoler). This has meant an emphasis on "no longer studying things, but the making of them" (Stoler 89).

A sustained postcolonial critique of anthropology has also come from Peter Pels and Oscar Salemink in the 1990s, who proposed five theses on ethnography as a colonial practice. In their work, ethnography (the adopted scientific tool to generate accounts of the studied cultures, societies, and communities) is critiqued for its role in colonial domination in that the very categories, terms, and concepts used in ethnography were shaped by colonial ideologies and power structures, which, in turn, contributed to the categorisation and control of diverse populations under colonial rule. This article aims to contribute to the postcolonial corpus by extending the critique to ethnographic films produced by British anthropologists, thus addressing a gap in anthropological postcolonial analysis that has largely spared this medium.

Ethnographic Films

Ethnographic films are a specific genre of documentary films that focus on systematically studying people and cultures from an anthropological perspective. Anthropologists use these films to provide visual evidence that complements their written fieldwork, helping to convey the studied subjects' cultural practices, social interactions, and everyday lives (Mead).

Ethnography and cinematography share a parallel origin and development, both emerging in the late nineteenth century and coming to maturity in the 1920s (Heider). However, the widespread use of ethnographic film wasn't reached until the 1960s, when advancements in portability and technological reliability helped professionalise these endeavours (Hockings). The period between the earliest ethnographic films and more professional productions can be considered a time of experimentation that "had little impact on either film or ethnography"

(Heider 15). As a result, media and film studies have substantially neglected to systematically engage with the amateur and unsystematic nature of the pre-1960s ethnographic films (Heider; Ruby). These early films are a product of the socio-political context of the colonial era in which they were created, marked by power imbalances and cultural domination, inevitably influencing their content and perspectives. The ethnographic filmmakers, namely Westerners documenting non-Western cultures, carried the biases and stereotypes of the time, which made their way into the films through a colonial gaze that portrayed Indigenous cultures through an often exoticising and paternalistic lens (Prins; Ruby).

Although the inherent power dynamics in creating these films should have perhaps called for critical analysis, some consensus on the ambiguous worthiness of this early corpus of films is not exclusive to media and film studies, but it is also historically shared in anthropological circles. This historical neglect is typically explained by the persistence of some enduring biases in documentation, such as a preference for verbal and note-taking activities within the discipline (De Brigard; Mead). Even more poignantly, it has been anchored in a perceived distinction, for instance, in David MacDougall between *ethnographic footage* and *ethnographic film*, where the latter are structured productions made for an audience (comparable to anthropologists' scholarly outputs) and the former raw material from a camera and recorded for personal use (comparable to anthropologists' fieldnotes).

Even if we can acknowledge this semantic and technical distinction, this article is informed by the firm belief in the insightful visual value of these early films (or footage), not only *a priori* but also based on validity drawn from a postcolonial angle. The pre-Second World War silent films, often taken during colonial times, tend to reflect and reinforce colonial ideologies, offering critical insights into both the colonial legacy and the practice of anthropology itself (Loizos). Therefore, this work fills a gap in film studies by analysing films from the first half of the twentieth century and shot within colonial relationships, contributing to a postcolonial critique of ethnographic films.

Beatrice Blackwood and Ursula Graham Bower

In this article, we analyse the ethnographic films by two women anthropologists, Beatrice Blackwood and Ursula Graham Bower, who undertook their fieldwork in the first half of the twentieth century when the British colonial empire still ruled, directly or indirectly, much of the territories and people they studied.[1] The production of ethnographic visual material in such contexts inevitably comes up against many critiques that arrived much later about the compromised relationship between anthropology and colonialism. In the case of Blackwood and Graham Bower, other factors can be considered.

The two women fit very well the colonial dichotomy of professional vs. amateur. In its beginnings, anthropology attracted many amateurs, often colonial officers or well-to-do tourists who fancied themselves as anthropologists (Tilley and Gordon). Graham Bower was a product of the latter, while Blackwood had completed her Diploma in Anthropology in 1918 at the University of Oxford. Blackwood had then gone on to become, prior to her anthropological travels, a Departmental Demonstrator in physical anthropology, where she was teaching students, researching, and cataloguing the anthropological anatomy collections ("Intrepid Women"; Larson, "Beatrice Blackwood"). Looking at the written ethnographic material they produced about the groups they lived with and observed, this is very much in evidence. If the diaries of Blackwood are systematic and impersonal (taxonomical even),

with detailed descriptions of people, objects, customs, and beliefs that resulted in at least one major scientific publication (Blackwood), the diaries of Graham Bower are very much the opposite; they are often about herself and her trials and tribulations as much as about the people she was living with and describing.[2] This is also visible in some of the early films of Graham Bower, where she often appears in the films, thus becoming both a protagonist as well as a recorder of the groups she lived with. This was not under the auspices of a new conceptualisation of ethnographic film (observer as a participant), which came much later, but part and parcel of her tourist and amateur approach. It is worth mentioning that in time, Graham Bower trained as an anthropologist, and also that some of her ethnographic film works, for instance *Culture and Crafts in Manipur, Northeast India (1939) – Part 1* and *Part 2*, are devoid of her presence and crafted with a less amateur approach. On the other hand, Blackwood never appears in the only film she made (or that has survived) about the Anga and Arawe people of the Solomon Islands in Papua New Guinea. For this article, we will analyse Blackwood's film, problematically titled *A Stone Age People in New Guinea (1936–7)*, and the first three films part of Graham Bower's Apatani collection, *Apatani Part 1*, *Apatani 2*, and *Apatani Part 3*, which were shot between 1946 and 1947. All the films are deposited in the Pitt Rivers Museum archive.[3]



Figure 1: The original film canister of *A Stone Age People in New Guinea (1936–7)*, by Beatrice Blackwood. Picture by the Authors, courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

A Stone Age People in New Guinea (1936–7)

On the film canister (Fig.1), there is writing in blue, which was clearly inserted more recently. The writing in black with details of the filmmaker, the places, and the years the film was taken appears much older, possibly written by Blackwood herself. Inside this canister, there is an invaluable record of two groups of people, the Anga and the Arawe, whose culture and way of life did indeed involve stone tools but who were not "stone age people"; they lived and inhabited the world in the times the film was taken, 1936–1937, contemporaries of the filmmaker. The first aspect to consider is the contradictions at the centre of a field of study born in and of colonial times, and especially in the light of Blackwood's possessive utterance about the people she called "my natives". This phrase clearly came about because of the interference of the colonial apparatus in the undertakings of anthropologists, something that Blackwood clearly resented but which inevitably had to rely on. In the preface to her sole published major work, an extensive and detailed work in the Solomon Islands, she wrote: "Every field-worker is at times dependent upon the good offices of those in authority over the sphere of the investigations" (Blackwood vii).

The good offices were not only from the colonial and district officers of the "Mandated Territory of New Guinea", but also from the missionaries, who received debts of gratitude from Blackwood: "I have received much kindness from Mr and Mrs A. H. Cropp, who have established a Methodist Mission Station on the west coast of Buka" (viii). Blackwood may not have entirely shared the colonial ideology, as there is also much evidence of her criticism of the constraints as to where she could undertake the fieldwork safely because of being a woman and often having to make decisions against the colonial authority. Nonetheless, she could appreciate, as Talal Asad has argued, how "the colonial power structure made the object of anthropological study accessible and safe" ("Introduction" 17).

The film itself is black and white, just over twenty-six minutes long, and the metadata description available online is the one provided by Blackwood herself. The short description of the three reels, edited together in one film, is factual, naming places and people and their various activities while going about their daily lives, with very little personal and professional comment, thus establishing a separation between Blackwood as an anthropologist and as a filmmaker. If in her fieldwork notes she writes meticulously and at length on every aspect of the culture and way of life of the people she filmed, in the film itself she is not as granular, possibly because of the technical challenges and expenses that prevented continuous filming, but also because of her readiness to respect the will of the people she observed not to be filmed when performing more intimate or ritual cultural practices. For example, Frances Larson argued that: "Beatrice Blackwood sensed the element of artifice in the anthropological endeavour, which required you to craft something consistent and eternal out of an experience that was brief, unpredictable and incomplete" (Larson, *Undreamed Shores* 216).

The establishing shots of the film introduce the location and context with a short sequence from the small aeroplane over the surrounding landscape and villages; the scene then moves to a Western-style building in Otibanda with a few white men and a few indigenous people standing in front and around it, perhaps to provide a context, although it is incongruous with the rest of the film. After this short introductory scene of the arrival, the following film sequences are entirely centred on the lives and customs of the people in Blackwell's ethnographic study.

There is about an equal number of shots of men and women going about their daily tasks and lives. The overall effect is unlike other anthropological films and the images do not seem excessively intrusive; for example, women are not running away from the camera as in other anthropological films of that period. This film at least seems to stray from the context of collusion between anthropology and colonialism but perhaps a more articulated view of the descendants should have the final word on this.

Apatani Part 1, *Part 2*, and *Part 3*

Ursula Graham Bower's ethnographic film output was quite extensive and underwent much change over the years, from its amatorial beginnings to more detailed and aesthetically powerful productions. That is not to say that she was always critically aware of some of the implications of the images she filmed in the colonial context she was part of and was operating in, as we will discuss further below. The three short films considered here, one in black and white and two in colour, *Apatani Part 1*, *Part 2*, and *Part 3*, respectively 14:38, 2:52, and 19:21 minutes long, were filmed post-Second World War in 1946, when India was still part of the British Empire, although the so called "Jewel in the Crown" was very much alive with the independence struggle.[4] In fact, as the metadata on the films declares, she was in Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India as a result of her husband being appointed Political Officer of that area, although this was an area she had visited before (Graham Bower 4).

The films are a loose assemblage of shots attempting to give an overview of the Apatani people, land and culture; nonetheless, in places, there are sequences of people performing for camera (and the colonial administrators?) and/or in the service of the colonial apparatus, especially in the first sequences of the first film, which features numerous shots of herself with the Apatani people, many porters from the group helping her carry her stuff across the river with their system of ropes and rafts, across the forests, and to their final destination. As in Blackwood's film, these initial shots, although meant to provide context, are somewhat incongruous and problematic in ethnographic terms. These first shots are then followed by actual ethnographic sequences of the culture and daily lives of the Apatani with abundant views of their natural environment and villages, with close shots of the Apatani homes (sophisticated and complex bamboo buildings on piles with different levels), and lengthy sequences of women and men working in the rice fields. Some scenes are not clear as to their meaning, for example, the sequence of Graham Bower tearing what appear to be white sheets/paper with members of the Apatani groups, and another enigmatic close-up of an Apatani male smoking a pipe with a wooden block around his foot and leg. Other sequences include groups of men dancing with their weapons, others assembled with their lances, all seeming to perform for the camera. There is a general crowding of people in the films, principally males, but it is unclear whether connected to their rituals or the appearance of the white political colonial delegation. In the metadata which accompanies the films in the archive, there is a mention of the book Graham Bower published in 1953 following these journeys to Northeast India. The chapter on the Apatani (Ch. 3) reveals a very different point of view from that of the camera. For instance, the women present in some of the shots are described in colonial and, at times, racist language, which contrasts greatly with her professed "love" for their world and culture and some written benevolent stances, as demonstrated by the following quotation:

> Then there were the women. Filthy grimy, like all the Apa Tanis, their greasy black hair was screwed on top of their heads in a pointed knob; they wore bunchy handwoven skirts and quilted jackets, both sooted dark grey; their necks were hung and their ample

> bosoms loaded with string upon string of blue beads, their faces were tattooed, and their noses were turned into hippopotamus snouts by large black resin disks thrust into the pierced wings. (Graham Bower 35–36)

Graham Bower waxed lyrical about the Apatani valley and its natural, agricultural and architectural landscape but offered few insights as an ethnographer.

The second film (*Part 2*) in the archive is only made up of a few sequences, and is very short, just under three minutes long. It is mostly composed of long shots of the Apatani valley cultivated with rice fields, the mountain ridges and, incongruously toward the end, shots of an aeroplane with local Apatani running to get a view of it. Interspersed within these long shots are various close-ups of Apatani people in various activities, although much of it demonstrably performing for the camera, especially the dancing young males with their weapons.

The third film (*Part 3*) contains many same sequences as in the other two, edited together in this longer version. There are, however, many more shots of the Apatani performing ceremonies (for example, the killing of a bullock) and processions, along with additional shots of the mountainous landscape surrounding the Apatani valley and their rice fields. These images are enigmatic insofar as it is not clear what they are celebrating, and although they sometimes appear baffled by the camera, they are also performing to it. The opening sequence focuses on a large bamboo building flying the British flag on its roof and Graham Bower, along with her husband and another unidentified white man, making a toast, again rendering the film as much a colonial home movie as an ethnographic document.

In all these films, Graham Bower is often seen, along with her husband, in activities and *in charge* or *playing*, which reflects the ambivalence at the heart of Graham Bower's ethnography, where the ethnographic visual record of the Apatani environment and cultural practices remain entangled in the performative logic of colonial authority and personal narrative.

A Postcolonial Analysis of Graham Bower's and Blackwood's Ethnographic Films

As outlined above, proposing a postcolonial critique of early anthropological films acknowledges their intrinsic historical biases and enables a deeper understanding of how such biases shaped the portrayal of colonised cultures, informing contemporary discussions on colonialism and its enduring impact on media and cultural heritage. The analysis that follows was built around a thorough film critique, complemented with additional material released by or about the two anthropologists, such as a two-part video interview by Alan Macfarlane with Graham Bower and Blackwood's magnum opus *Both Sides of Buka Passage*.

The analysis proposes a comparison between Blackwood and Graham Bower across three key concepts operating at the level of the relationship between anthropology and colonialism: the self-referential authority, referring to the self-perception of their anthropological endeavour and as replicated in the films; the state of exception, referring to a manifested tendency to operating above the existing social conventions, customs, and rules; and performative authenticity, referring to the trade-off between the overall informativeness and the ethnographic value of the films and the impulse of fitting pre-existing Western narratives. A fourth dimension of analysis, built around a typically uncritical perception that fails to acknowledge the colonial contexts in which the films were generated, runs across the other three concepts.

Self-Referential Authority

The first aspect that offers an insightful comparison between Graham Bower and Blackwood lies in how their films reflect a narrative that the two anthropologists constructed about themselves and the people they were filming. Certain colonial tendencies are far more pronounced in Graham Bower's films, reflecting a more self-interested approach and a tendency to "other" the people studied. In contrast, Blackwood maintains a more scientific approach that did not, however, prevent the enjoyment of colonial privileges.

In her films, Graham Bower provides a self-interested approach, where the film becomes a vehicle for constructing a narrative about her own identity as much as an ethnographic medium. For instance, *Apatani Part 1*'s opening shots show Graham Bower leading a group of porters through a rural area (Fig. 2). The visual framing positions her as an authoritative guide, overshadowing the locals' renowned familiarity with the Ziro Valley and their deep mastery of environmental practices and forest management (Dollo et al.), subordinating her porters in a colonial narrative of dependency and guidance. Furthermore, given the rudimentary camera technology of the 1930s, capturing several scenes that deliberately place Graham Bower as the central figure would have required careful planning, positioning, and coordination, indicating the significant effort produced to craft her image as the narrative's protagonist. Later in the film, these themes emerge again when she appears to give instructions on how to fold some sheets (Fig. 3). This shot is again centred on the anthropologist-filmmaker, whose intervention, even on mundane aspects, constructs a subtle yet pervasive hierarchy through the anthropologist's self-representation as the expert.





Figure 2 (left): Ursula leading a team of porters. Figure 3 (right): Graham Bower appearing to give instructions. *Apatani Part 1*, by Graham Bower. Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

In *Apatani Part* 3, the self-referential authority of the anthropologist/filmmaker is evident in the deliberate juxtaposition at the beginning of the footage. The sequence opens with the camera lingering on a waving British flag (Fig. 4), before repositioning to what seems a porch just below it, where two white men and a local man are shown. One of the white men is then replaced by Graham Bower, who appears cheerfully toasting with the remaining white man (Fig. 5). This scene is followed by footage of physical competitions attended by an Apatani crowd, showcasing the community's crafting skills, colourful features, and physical prowess, elements that hold ethnographic value in their own right.

However, the insertion of Graham Bower and other British emissaries into what is ostensibly meant to be ethnographic documentation raises questions about the purpose of their presence in the narrative. The prelude of a prominently displayed British flag, followed by the supervisory-looking presence of British emissaries, creates a visual hierarchy that prefaces the competitions, as if these were occurring under the auspices of the colonisers. This arrangement implicitly established a dichotomy between "us" and "them", the British and the non-British, the "civilised" and the "uncivilised". Such an "othering" process is a recurring trope in colonial representations (Sajed), reinforcing the authority of the coloniser while relegating the colonised to the status of observed subjects.





Figure 4 (left): British flag on local building. Figure 5 (right): Graham Bower, happily toasting. *Apatani Part 3*, by Graham Bower. Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

In Blackwood's *A Stone Age People*, the self-referential authority is much less evident. Notably, and in remarkable contrast to Graham Bower, she never appears in the footage. While this may partly stem from a more introverted personality than the more flamboyant counterpart, as demonstrated by her dislike for personal publicity (Larson, "Beatrice Blackwood (1889–1975)"), it is arguably also the result of her formal ethnographic training. Unlike her "tourist-turned-improvised-anthropologist" colleague, this deontological formation may have led her to leave the centrepiece of the shot scenes to the Anga and Arawe people. However, a closer look beyond the footage, and specifically at some of the correspondences regarding her experience in Papua New Guinea, reveals that a self-interested approach, even if it has not crept its way into the footage, still plays a role in informing her relationship with the people studied.

For instance, in planning her fieldwork logistics, Blackwood showed a deliberate effort to distinguish herself from the people studied (Larson, "Beatrice Blackwood (1889–1975)"). While this could be seen as a scientific attempt to distance herself to observe the people studied neutrally, which is something she showed ambition for, it also manifested in her insistence on having a house built for herself (refusing institutional accommodations or other provided spaces) in the centre of Kurtachi, a village of her interest. This decision not only granted her a privilege certainly not afforded to the other local women but also allowed her to assert a central spatial position, thereby overlooking and controlling the surrounding environments. While this accommodation certainly facilitated easier access to ethnographic work, it was also made exclusively possible by the embodiment of a colonial privilege (two aspects that do not exclude one another and that, to the contrary, go hand in hand).

State of Exception

The second aspect, state of exception, stems from our observations that the anthropologists' scientific status, coupled with the colonial context, allowed them to bypass questions of consent and disregard local rules. This manifested in a systematic prioritisation of transforming living cultures, people, and their crafts into collectables for museums, while local boundaries were either ignored, misinterpreted, or outright belittled.

In her lengthy 1985 interview with the British anthropologist Alan Macfarlane, Graham Bower had no hesitation admitting, rather nonchalantly and uncritically, the main privileges she would enjoy in her fieldwork experiences. For instance, when living among the Naga people (another ethnic group in Northern India she studied), she was granted permission to reside in areas considered taboo for women, provided that she did not "exercise too much" her privileges as a British woman. Another example concerns the practice of "fish poisoning", a method of fishing that the government had prohibited because of its disruptive outcome. Despite its prohibition, Graham Bower was given special permission to carry it out for filming purposes. Perhaps the most striking instance of this state of exception occurred when she started to be perceived as the reincarnation of a local young goddess. As the worship of her intensified (and this is where her moniker, the "Naga Queen", comes from), she actively leveraged this newfound status to extract information more easily, further blurring the line between ethnographic observation and exploitation.

It should not come as a surprise, then, that Graham Bower's films give a sense of unequal footing between the filmmaker and the people being filmed. This becomes particularly evident in the apparent absence of consent, as Graham Bower operated above any consideration for the potential interest in (or resistance to) being filmed by the people studied. Beyond the obvious fact that such an approach would be deemed ethically unacceptable by today's research standards, she also displayed (and openly admitted) a tendency to "stalk" women of her interest. According to her, as she recounts in the interview with Macfarlane, while men were typically unbothered by the camera, women were often more reluctant. This is visibly reflected in the footage, where women appear camera-shy or exhibit a passive, resigned demeanour in the presence of the filmmaker (Fig. 6).



Figure 6: Apatani woman looking at the camera while working in a rice field in *Apatani Part 1*. Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

Besides the instance of having had a house built for herself, which clearly indicates a state of exception, Blackwood was overall more restrained, arguably because of her formal anthropological training, which might have made her more cognisant of ethical and participant observation protocols. While the academic community has often praised her work and ethnography style, with no acknowledgement of the coercive role played by the colonial context on the people studied (Petch) or even focusing on the impact it had on her (Larson, '"Did"), her film still reveals a state of exception through elements of intrusiveness and deification of the colonial apparatus. The first is evident in a prolonged shot of a woman breastfeeding and head binding her child (Fig. 7), while the second in the choice of including the Celebration of King George VI arranged by the District Officer at Salamona (Fig. 8).




Figure 7 (left): A woman breastfeeding and head binding her child.
Figure 8 (right): people celebrating King George VI. *A Stone Age People in New Guinea (1936–7)*.
Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

Performative Authenticity

The third and final aspect refers to a tension between documenting cultural practices and the influence of the camera's presence, which often prompted—deliberately or inadvertently—the people studied to perform for the filmmaker in ways that cater to them. Contrary to the other two analytical concepts, the difference between Graham Bower and Blackwood is less remarkable in this case, perhaps due to a perceived duty to aestheticise (or even museify) the lives and cultures of the people studied for a Western audience.

The challenge of maintaining authenticity in ethnographic research is a long-standing methodological concern. The presence of the researcher—and even more so, the camera—inevitably influences the behaviour of the people studied. In qualitative research broadly, and ethnography and participant observations more specifically, this reactivity or observer effect has long been seen as threatening the validity and authenticity of the data collected (Goffman; Hammersley and Atkinson; Becker). However, in the case of colonial-era ethnographic films, the issue is significantly magnified. Not only does the camera (and the filmmaker) provoke performative responses, but these performances are often shaped by asymmetrical power dynamics of colonialism, where people studied may feel compelled to conform to the expectations of the colonising observer, resulting in staged or exaggerated representations.

As noted throughout this article, the films exhibit a near-unmistakable element of performance. Numerous scenes show the studied people clearly aware of the camera's presence, often glancing toward it, posing for it (Fig. 9), or even seemingly seeking affirmation

from the person filming (Fig. 10). In some instances, the films give the distinct impression that specific actions were not only performed *for* the camera but potentially *directed* by it. This dynamic not only contravenes fundamental ethnographic principles of ethnographic observation but also underscores a prioritisation of narrative construction (that inevitably aligns with the colonial framework) over faithful and neutral cultural documentation.





Figure 9 (left): Young man posing for the camera in *Apatani Part 1*.
Figure 10 (right): Young woman looking at the camera in *A Stone Age People in New Guinea (1936–7)*.
Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

Consequently, it is difficult not to question the anthropological authenticity of such material, considering how their ethnographic value is further compromised by the fragmented and incohesive nature of the footage, which often offers brief, disjointed scenes that follow one another without clear continuity or contextualisation (a shortcoming that, however, could be partly attributed to the technical limitations of the time).

Closely examining the reaction of the studied people to the camera (and, potentially, to the directorial input) leaves room to unearth a faint but significant occurrence of resistance from the people studied. In moments such as those represented in Figures 6 and 7, we can detect a subtle sense of discomfort or irritation. Whether prompted by the camera's physical intrusion or its disruption of everyday rhythms, these reactions not only challenge the account of passive complicity that typically underpins colonial narrative but also further shed doubt on the anthropological authenticity of the films. The camera did not only capture; it was seen. And in being seen, it was acknowledged, recognised, and, at times, defied.

Conclusions

The three categories we adopted for our postcolonial lens are certainly not exhaustive (Cere et al. 152–55). Nonetheless, these three categories are intrinsic to understanding the formation of anthropology as a discipline imbued with Western values, which sought to explain and study cultures, normally from the Global South, predefined as "primitive". Equally, the ethnographic films discussed here are a testimony to the problematic relationship between the then-nascent discipline and its colonial context.

The two women anthropologists in our research, Beatrice Blackwood and Ursula Graham Bower, perhaps unusual at the time in a sea of male anthropologists, were nonetheless operating in a state of exception with authority granted and secured by the British colonial apparatus. Alongside the exception and the authority status, the idea of studying authentic primitive cultures was intrinsic to the anthropological research and could potentially clash with the aims of the colonial project of converting and civilising.

Blackwood, unlike Graham Bower, certainly had some reservations, or at least some awareness of the inherent contradictions between the two, the anthropological and the colonial. As Larson aptly stated in her book on early women anthropologists (but the same could be argued for men): "There was no truly untouched community where an anthropologist could safely work, nor was there a completely coherent, self-contained story to be told that revealed the timeless essence of a society" (Larson, *Undreamed Shores* 201).

Despite their remarkable value as records of people whose lives were turned upside down by both the anthropological and colonisers' intentions, the film cannot be approached without a postcolonial critical understanding of everything that was determined on their behalf and their inevitable subjection, and ultimately reduction to "objects" of study, whether visual or writerly.

As suggested in this article, the use of ethnographic film has come a long way since Blackwood and Graham Bower were filming, photographing, and undertaking their fieldwork on the cultures they had chosen to study, but it is now an imperative that, anthropologists and filmmakers alike, descend from the indigenous communities themselves to provide the epistemic shift necessary to remove the colonial paradigm, which is perniciously still attaching itself to much documentary filmic production of "the other" (Cere). Or at least conduct filming and research in a collaborative and consultative way.

Although the interpretations of the cultures and customs of the Anga and the Arawe by Blackwood, and the more seriously problematic one of the Apatani by Graham Bower, are now undoubtedly questionable, the gaze of the people filmed without their consent stands as testimony of the unequal relationship of what Bhabha called "[t]he gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" (112).

Notes

[1] The ethnographic films of both women are digitised and hosted in the Pitt Rivers Museum's film collections.

[2] The fieldwork diaries of both women are deposited at the Pitt Rivers Museum's manuscripts collections.

[3] Blackwood's film is titled *A Stone Age People in New Guinea (1936–7)* on the Pitt Rivers Museum's film collection homepage but only *Papua New Guinea (1936–7)* in the Vimeo page.

[4] India declared its independence from the British Empire the following year, on 15 August 1947.

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Danilo Giglitto is an Associate Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. He has several years of experience in researching at the intersection of cultural heritage, digital technologies, and social innovation, and has collaborated in several international projects exploring these themes. He has coedited *Digital Approaches to Inclusion and Participation in Cultural Heritage: Insights from Research and Practice in Europe* (Routledge, 2023) and *Advanced Research and Design Tools for Architectural Heritage: Unforeseen Paths* (Routledge, 2024), and published in journals such as the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* and *Museum & Society*. He holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Aberdeen. He has led and co-organised numerous national and international outreach and academic events focused on cultural heritage.

Rinella Cere is Reader Emerita in Film, Media and Cultural Studies at Sheffield Hallam University (UK). Recent publications include *An International Study of Film Museums* (Routledge, 2021); “Uncovering the colonial legacy in a British digital archive: The Pitt Rivers Museum case” in *Digital Approaches to Inclusion and Participation in Cultural Heritage* (Routledge, 2022); “The Eco-Documentary Form in a Postcolonial World: a Force for Good?” in *La società (in)sostenibile. Ecologia e comunità tra letteratura, cinema e altri media* (Franco Cesati Editore, 2024).