

# > **The Jumara Festival of Panamá: Cinema and Body in Motion**

## **Abstract >**

Based on an ethnography of the First Jumara International Indigenous Film Festival, which took place in an Emberá community in Panama, the aim of this article is to delve deeper into the connection between the processes of ethnicity derived from Indigenous cinema and the processes of ethnicity derived from the meaning given to that cinema at specific events. At Jumara, Indigenous cinema was the reason for affirming Emberá culture and for championing, in a markedly festive and performative way, the group's main demands in a celebration in which the body and its ornamentation took on a special role. It is argued that the ethnographic focus on festivals organized in Indigenous communities makes it possible to fully analyze the committed and activist dimension of Indigenous cinema.

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## **Keywords >**

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# > The Jumara Festival of Panama: Cinema and Body in Motion

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## Introduction

The objective of this article is to contribute to Latin American Indigenous Cinema and Indigenous Film Festivals Studies, through an analysis of a particular event that take place in an indigenous community. To this end, I present an ethnography of the First Jumara International Indigenous Film Festival held in Piriati, an Emberá village in Panama, in July 2018. The information was gathered from a participant observation of the Festival, as well as from a series of interviews and informal conversations with the Festival's organizer, Emberá filmmaker Iván Jaripio.

This study will allow us to delve into the connection between the processes of ethnicity derived from Indigenous cinema and the processes of ethnicity derived from the meaning given to that cinema in specific occasions. Because in Piriati Emberá, the activist nature of Indigenous cinema, based on the defense of cultural specificity, of heritage based on ancestral traditions, and of collective rights that allow for this specificity and the inhabited territories to be protected, connected with the markedly activist dimension of the Emberá ethnicity. Thus, in Piriati Emberá, Indigenous cinema was the reason for affirming Emberá culture and championing the group's main demands.

Hence it is argued that the ethnographic focus on festivals held in Indigenous communities allows for an in-depth analysis of the committed and activist dimension of Indigenous cinema, and enables the connection of a continental process, made up of the particular stories of various communities of Native peoples, with the particular story of a specific festival.

The purpose here is to go beyond what I have studied in another paper (IZARD MARTÍNEZ, 2020), and focus on how this affirmation took place in a markedly festive and performative manner in which the body and its ornamentation (dances, clothing, body paintings) took on special presence.



I will begin with an analytical approach to the relationship between Latin American Indigenous film and the internal discourse of identity based on the anthropological literature on Indigenous cinema (section 2). Then, I will turn to the relevance of the studies on Latin American Indigenous Film Festivals and their scope, also on the basis of the anthropological literature on the subject (section 3). Finally, I will focus on the example of Jumara and its performative and bodily dimension (sections 4 and 5). The final conclusions will emphasize the need for this perspective in order to better understand the meaning of Indigenous Cinema and Indigenous Film Festivals in relation to Indigenous ethnicity.

## 1 Latin American Indigenous Film and the Internal Discourse of Identity

Latin American Indigenous cinema must be understood as a means of communication characterized by the will of Indigenous communities to show their own identity to Indigenous groups and to the world. It goes beyond ethnographic cinema which, despite responding to a scientific interest and a desire to disseminate knowledge of excluded minorities, arises from an external perspective. "Subject-generated films", as defined by Ruby, are tools used by marginalized groups to negotiate a new cultural identity (RUBY, 2000, p. 196), to affirm their distinctiveness and the will to survive. This author also stresses the relationship of this type of film with anthropological ideas that for the past few decades have pondered over the value of subjectivity and understand culture, not as something permanent but as something under constant construction by the very actors who participate in social life. Therein lies the great ethnographic value of Indigenous film, in showing culture as an act of creation and recreation.

Thus, Indigenous cinema is an important way of analyzing "selfhood" and the "rhetorics of self-making" (BATTAGLIA, 1995), the internal discourses of identity and therefore of Indigenous ethnicity. This cinema entails a great deal of reflectivity on what it means to be Indigenous and, more precisely, on what it means to be Indigenous at the present time, in modernity (KERAJ, 2014, p. 22)

Indigenous cinema and/or video emerged strongly in Latin America in the 1980s as a tool for self-expression and self-representation of Indigenous peoples, as a way to overcome historical *invisibilization* ("the absent, invisible Indian") or stigmatization ("the backward, underdeveloped Indian") and begin to narrate, through audiovisual media, their own culture and stories (CÓRDOVA, 2011).

In relation to the above, images have enormous potential as intercultural communication platforms because, in the era of "digital convergence," the distance between producers and consumers of images has been reduced (ZIRIÓN PÉREZ, 2015, p. 46). In this sense, Indigenous film productions can not only be seen at festivals or occasionally on television; the new mechanisms for broadcasting audiovisual material (Vimeo, YouTube, etc.) as well as social networks (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) allow films to be shared with a much wider audience. The *Jumara* Festival Facebook page, for example, contains several links to the works of Iván Jaripio, the filmmaker who organized the event and of whom I will speak later.



The “poetic” character of this type of cinema lies in its communicative dimension, according to Salazar and Córdova. If the term “poetry” comes from the Greek *poiesis*, that is, “active making or the process of making,” in this case it is about the creative process of making Indigenous culture visible (SALAZAR, CÓRDOVA, 2008, p. 40).

In addition to its poetic character, Indigenous cinema also has a political character, defined by the desire to show culture in an activist way. Because of this committed dimension, we have to contextualize it in broader movements linked to demands for autonomy and self-determination (GINSBURG, 2002, p. 211), in an entire framework that Juan Francisco Salazar describes as “a sociotechnical assembly that involves and intertwines technologies, resources, social organizations, legal frameworks and bureaucracies, knowledge and images” (SALAZAR, 2016, p. 93). In the particular case we are concerned with, that of Panama and, more specifically, the Emberá group, Emberá filmmaker Iván Jaripio’s films deal with the defense of territorial rights as an indispensable way to ensure the survival of the habitat in which one’s own culture develops. Whether explicitly filming demonstrations demanding collective land titling or protesting against the effects of deforestation, or through metaphors, in which the disappearance of female body paintings as a result of the rain tells us of the loss of culture caused by the destruction of nature, the main focus of Iván Jaripio’s films is the inseparable binomial land-culture.

Therefore, Indigenous cinema and its festivals must be framed in an activist context (IORDANOVA, TORCHIN, 2012). Against this backdrop, the narratives expressed in Indigenous cinema tend to revolve around several main themes: defense of the territory and the sustainable use of resources in the face of the threat from the state and capitalist companies; the need to preserve cultural specificities (language, religious beliefs, stories and legends preserved in the oral tradition, textiles, arts and crafts, gastronomy, traditional medicine); and the defense of human rights in the face of injustice and violence.

The films are mainly documentaries; fiction is scarce. This is possibly not only due to the fact that the production of the latter is more expensive, but mainly because there is a need to bring to light issues related to collective rights (CÓRDOVA, 2011, p. 90). In this sense, the decolonizing strategy implied by Indigenous cinema is based on the consideration of the right to communication as one more of the Indigenous rights advocated for decades in the American continent in a generalized process of ethnic mobilization, together with the rights to political autonomy, the collective ownership of land, and the preservation of language and culture. The right of Indigenous peoples to their own communication, which allows them to manage their own voice and image, was one of the main points on the agenda of the Abya Yala Indigenous Communication Summits held in Colombia (2010), Mexico (2013) and Bolivia (2016).

This link with collective rights and the idea of activism and social commitment explain why it is a cinema which, despite usually having an individual author, is understood by its creators as a reflection of collective expressions. Thus, Indigenous filmmakers who have made a name for







Program for the Transfer of Audiovisual Media to Indigenous Communities launched by the National Indigenist Institute (INI) in 1989 (GLEGHORN, 2017, p. 173). Other events are the Puebla's Indigenous Film and Video Festival, the Smooth Geographies Film and Video Festival, held in Oaxaca and Yucatan, and the Kayche' Visual Fabrics Film and Video Festival, which also takes place in Yucatán.

In Colombia we find the Daupará Indigenous Film and Video Showcase, organized by a group of communicators, activists and documentary filmmakers linked to indigenous organizations and CLACPI, which annually alternates its stage between Bogota and an indigenous territory in the country<sup>2</sup>. In 2018, for example, it was held in a multi-site itinerant format in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.

In Venezuela, the leading role is played by the transnational Wayúu group, which is also present in neighboring Colombia. The Wayuu People's Putchimaajana Communications Network organizes the Venezuelan International Indigenous Showcase (MICIV)<sup>3</sup>, a traveling exhibition of films made by the Wayúu and other indigenous groups of the continent, as well as the Wayuu Film and Video Showcase (MUCIW), which screens Wayúu films in communities in the cross-border peninsula of La Guajira<sup>4</sup>.

Ecuador stands out as one of the first Latin American countries where an indigenous organization launched a film festival, as in the case of the First Continental Festival of Indigenous Cinema and Video from the Nations of Abya Yala<sup>5</sup> hosted by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), in Quito, 1994 (GLEGHORN, 2017, p. 172). More recently, the role of indigenous organizations such as the Association of Kichwa Audiovisual Producers (APAK) from Otavalo, which has its own television channel<sup>6</sup>, and academic institutions such as the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), should be highlighted. FLACSO organizes since 2015 the Ethnographic Film Festival of Ecuador in collaboration with indigenous associations from all over the country<sup>7</sup>.

Brazil, where it even exists a production company dedicated to Indigenous cinema (Pajé Films), stands out for its large number of Indigenous film festivals: Brazil Indigenous Cinema Showcase (Rio de Janeiro), the oldest in the country; Indigenous Film Biennial (São Paulo); Paraguaçu Indigenous Cinema Showcase (held in an Indigenous community in Bahia); Indigenous Screen (Porto Alegre); Amotara Showcase – Indigenous Wom-

2 See: <http://www.daupara.org> (viewed on July 12, 2019).

3 See: <https://www.wayuunaiki.com.ve/cultura/la-muestra-internacional-de-cine-indigena-de-venezuela-celebra-10-anos/> (viewed on April 16, 2021).

4 See: <https://filmmakers.festhome.com/es/festival/muciwa-muestra-de-cine-y-video-wayuu> (viewed on April 16, 2021).

5 Abya Yala is an ancient term used by the Guna group (Colombia and Panama) to refer to the American continent. Due to this ancestral Indigenous significance, it has been taken up by many organizations.

6 See: <http://apakotavalo.tv/> (viewed on April 18, 2021).

7 See: [https://flacso.edu.ec/antropologia\\_visual/festival-de-cine/sobre-el-festival/](https://flacso.edu.ec/antropologia_visual/festival-de-cine/sobre-el-festival/) (viewed on April 18, 2021).





Through the workshops, forums and seminars that accompany the screening of films at the CLACPI festivals, these become a source of knowledge transmission, not only about film, but also about the living conditions of Indigenous peoples (PEIRANO, 2017, p. 79-81). On the other hand, many of the organizations and festivals mentioned in the preceding paragraphs are integrated into CLACPI, which increases the intertwined nature of this audiovisual fabric.

In this sense, just as the metaphor of weaving (itself a form of storytelling in many communities) is used by the Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (ACIN), in Colombia, to organize its video production team, with *hilos* (threads), *nudos* (knots), and *huecos* (holes) representing the different units (ALMENDRA, 2009, quoted in GLEGHORN, 2017, p. 181), it can also be used, from its combination of patterns and stories, to understand Indigenous Cinema, as Gleghorn argues, and also Indigenous Film Festivals. Thus, Latin American Indigenous film festivals ought to be conceived as responsible for the creation of global networks that link training, production and exhibition throughout the region, as well as for the reconfiguration of Indigenous film from a marginal practice to a vibrant transnational and transcultural cinema (CÓRDOVA, 2017).

Continuing with the analysis of these events, it is worth noting that certain approaches of visual anthropology emphasize the circulation of visual objects as a form of material exchange (EDWARDS, 2002; BANKS, 2008). The material and nomadic dimension of indigenous films is linked to a growing emergence of cosmopolitan indigenous communicators who travel to festivals around the world and who set political agendas through the creation of transnational networks and democratic spaces that go beyond the relationship with Nation-States (GRAEBER, 2008; HODGSON, 2008; WERBNER, 2008). This can also be interpreted in terms of the negotiation of a certain amount of power in the public space (CYR, 2017).

At indigenous film festivals, film-objects take on an agency of their own and allow for interactions and dialogues between filmmakers, producers, distributors and audiences (GÓMEZ RUIZ, IZARD MARTÍNEZ, 2020, p. 268). Ultimately, these events contribute to the 'visual economy' of indigeneity, that is, to the process through which images and displays of indigeneity acquire value, recognition and meaning according to specific circulation dynamics and markets (POOLE, 1997, quoted in Zamorano VILLARREAL, 2014, p. 92).

It should be stressed that all of these festivals, are presented to us as an arena for the expression of a pan-Indigenous ethnicity constructed around the narratives and themes referred to in the previous section, which revolve around the issues of the value of land and culture understood as heritage, as an inheritance that is reworked in order to persist in a diverse and changing world. So, in Indigenous film festivals, and especially in those festivals held in Indigenous communities, a cultural awareness of the continent's Indigenous peoples is also built. Furthermore, as we will see with the example of Jumara, Indigenous film festivals, allow us to get closer to a performative process of staging that shows how indigeneity is configured.



In addition to Indigenous film festivals, there are – not only in the Americas, but throughout the world – a series of film events on certain social topics, such as human rights or environmental conservation, in which films dealing with Indigenous issues, made by Indigenous or non-Indigenous people, also participate. Later I will refer to a few examples in relation to the work of Iván Jaripio. As for the environment topic, Indigenous Cinema and Indigenous Film Festivals are so related to conservational concerns that some authors suggest they can also be placed in the terrain of eco-activism and ecological film festivals (MONANI, 2013).

Finally, it should also be noted that some film festivals not specifically dedicated to indigenous cinema include sections of this category, such as the Sundance Film Festival in the United States and the Morelia International Film Festival in Mexico (CÓRDOVA, 2017). On the other hand, some alternative documentary film events have become a space for the exhibition of indigenous cinema, as is the case of DOCS[MX] in Mexico City and the Mexican traveling showcase *Ambulante*.

### 3 The Jumara Festival and the Emberá of Panama

At the Jumara Festival that took place in the Emberá town of Piriati, Panama, in 2018, the importance that Indigenous people attach to Indigenous cinema was apparent, as it allows them to tell their own story. This is especially true in the case of the Emberá, who took advantage of the event to defend and celebrate their native culture. Before analyzing the festival, a brief socio-historical introduction to the Emberá group should be made in order to help us understand the significance of the event.

The Emberá are an ethnic group characterized by constant movement as a result of forced displacement. Their language belongs to the Chocó linguistic family, as does that of the Wounaan group, another one of the Indigenous groups of the Panamanian nation along with the Guna, the Ngäbe, the Buglé, the Naso Tjërdi and the Bri-Bri. The Emberá are originally from the Panamanian Darién and Colombian Chocó jungle regions. They have been moving westward in what is now Panama since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, first because of the Spanish conquest and, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, because of the scarcity of game or competition for land with mestizo peasants (COLIN, 2010; FARON, 1962; GUIONNAU DE SINCLAIR, 1990). In addition, there is a lot of violence associated with guerrilla and paramilitary groups and drug trafficking in the border region, especially on the Colombian side.

There are currently some 30,000 Emberá living in Panama, mainly in the province of Darién, inside and outside the Emberá Wounaan Region, an autonomous and collectively owned area created in 1983; in the Bayano Lake Basin in the province of Panama (where Piriati Emberá is located);







mands for collective land titling. The opening ceremonies concluded with an exhibition of traditional dances performed by a group of girls from the community.

In the closing ceremony, Jaripio's final speech addressed the need to tell one's own stories as well as to view other Indigenous stories from other places, through film. The local cacique's concluding speech dealt with the need to fight for the survival of one's own culture by defending territorial claims and maintaining traditions (clothing, dance, language). The event concluded with another dance exhibition by a group of local girls, followed by a concert-dance of traditional Emberá music.

The opening and closing ceremonies were experienced by the residents of Piriati Emberá as a celebration of their own culture. The speeches, music and dance performances were met with enthusiastic applause; there was dancing; people wore traditional attire and body paint, which is one of the group's most important ethnic emblems; body paintings were also selflessly made for visitors who wanted them. As for clothing, it should be noted that common everyday attire in any Emberá community does not differ from "Western" attire as far as men are concerned, but it is different in the case of women, who always wear the emblematic printed skirt known as *paruma*. On special occasions, as in the case of the *Jumara* Festival, the women may add a metal ring bodice to the *paruma* and the men may wear a *guayuco* (underpants) made of fabric or a beaded skirt.

The previously mentioned documentaries filmed in Emberá territories, *Nuestro hogar*, *Arimae* and *Identidad* were screened, along with other films, during the closing ceremony. And they were probably the ones that were most closely followed and enjoyed by the audience.

#### 4 Jumara and Cultural Celebration: Film and Body in Motion

The festival organized in Piriati Emberá was a festive communicative gathering, a moment of activist cultural climax revolving around cinema, a performative celebration of Emberá identity. Focusing on Jumara allows us to place the spotlight not only on the production of Indigenous film but, above all, on its consumption.

This is related to the "theory of reception" of media anthropology, dedicated to the analysis of the impact of media on its users (the audience), since "[it] recognizes that messages are not inherently meaningful, and that which is perceived and understood by media audiences depends largely on the characteristics of the audience, rather than the intentions of communicators or any intrinsic features of media programs" (CALDAROLA, 1990, p. 3-4, quoted in RUBY, 2000, p. 183). The questions that are posed from reception analysis are of the type: How do Native spectators understand this new form of communication? In what social situations does the viewing take place? (RUBY, 2000, p. 217).



What happened in Piriati Emberá demonstrated the festive-activist nature of the Emberá identity, characterized by the desire to show performatively, in events such as the festival, the most visual dimension of culture, in particular traditional attire and body paintings. In this sense, *Jumara* can be conceived as a creative stage in which, through performance, we are shown, in all its strength, a group's capacity to express its narratives, its paradigms and its cultural symbols (Bruner, 1993, p. 321).

So the poetic, creative dimension of Indigenous cinema to which we alluded in the second section and which can be observed in Iván Jaripio's own film work, especially in the aforementioned *Identidad*, also has parallels in this festival. This performative dimension must be understood as the desire for ethnic affirmation of a group that is concerned about the survival of its territories and, in relation to them, its culture.

Focusing on the *Jumara* Festival allows us to stress the idea of the double dimension of Indigenous cinema: onscreen, in relation to the stories told in the films, and offscreen, in relation to its social role, by enabling practices in film festivals in which new forms of solidarity, identity and community are created (DOWELL, 2006).

And it allows us to emphasize the staging that takes place in Indigenous Film Festivals, which makes use of objects and images that are exchanged and ideas that are materialized in video productions. This staging establishes a ritual temporality that is dedicated to the viewing of the films as a performative and communitarian event (GÓMEZ RUIZ, IZARD MARTÍNEZ, 2020, p. 268).

Based on all of the above, what happened in Piriati Emberá can be seen by emphasizing the perspective of the Emberá, who took advantage of the festival to celebrate their culture rather than to watch all the films that were being screened. In this regard, it is important to stress once again the great interest of the Emberá in the conservation of their cultural heritage, including their lands, and the relative profusion of inter-community cultural events in different villages that respond to a firm desire to keep this heritage alive by performing it. To give just one example, in July 2018, the same month that the *Jumara* Festival was held, the Emberá Ancestral Games were organized in the nearby town of Ipetí Emberá, in the Bayano River Basin, which were a qualifier for the World Indigenous Games. In this sporting event, apart from the specific sports activities, particular importance was attached to music and dance performances and talks by Emberá leaders on the threat of disappearance of their native language and culture. As in Piriati Emberá, the events were passionately experienced by the inhabitants of the town and neighboring villages as a celebration of culture: the sports competitors were cheered enthusiastically and the music and dance performances held at night at the *Casa Comunal* were attended by people in traditional attire and *jagua* body paintings. Another instance of this performative dimension is the tourist activity which several Emberá communities in the Canal Basin, near Panama City, are engaged in. Day trips are organized with the lure of meeting an Indigenous group that will show visitors its wood and palm architecture, its clothing and body paintings, and its music and dance. It is important to emphasize the



significance of these two elements in events of this type: clothing and body paintings, which show us the value of the visual and bodily performative dimension of ethnic specificity, understood as a traditionalism that must be put into practice for it to survive.

Jumara, the Ancestral Games of Ipetí Emberá and Panama's Emberá tourism form a *mise-en-scène* in which the body and its ornamentation (dances, attire and paintings) take on a special role. Therefore, what Indigenous cinema means was followed attentively in Piriatií Emberá, especially during the opening and closing ceremonies. But in addition to, or beyond that, the speeches of organizers and leaders stressing the importance of collective land titling and the preservation of language and traditions, and above all, the cultural events centered on music and dance, as well as the cheerful and assertive display of attire and body paintings constituted the main elements of a festive and communicative event, and a demonstration of the pride of being Indigenous; the pride of being Emberá. The Indigenous audiovisual productions that were screened at the *Casa Comunal* were the trigger for this other production in which the Emberá of Piriatií set their traditions in motion.

### **By Way of Conclusion: Indigenous Cinema, Body and Ethnicity in Piriatií Emberá**

The ethnographic documentation and analysis of the events in Piriatií Emberá in July 2018 show us the link between Indigenous cinema, communication and ethnicity for the Emberá of Panama, an ethnic group concerned about and mobilized in defense of their threatened lands and culture.

Indigenous film is the means of expressing awareness of what it means to be Indigenous today based on specific narratives and actions. The characteristics of the communicative process of Indigenous film can be analyzed, on the one hand, from its production, by focusing on the creation of messages, and on the other hand, from its consumption, by studying the reception of these productions. The latter allows us to understand Indigenous film festivals as global networks made up of the exchange of visual objects and the establishment of an allied field. And it also allows us to consider Indigenous film festivals held in Indigenous communities as scenographic arenas where indigeneity is performed. For this reason, the spotlight of this article has been focused on Iván Jaripio and his work, as well as on the festival he organized in his community.

Indigenous cinema tells us particular stories that show an internal discourse of identity and revolve around the close relationship between land and culture. It is a construction of political resistance that defends the idea that the survival of Indigenous culture requires a territory, and Jaripio's films go exactly in that direction. Studying what happened in Piriatií Emberá enables us to look closely at the particular story that took place there, where, for a few days, Indigenous cinema was the reason for affirming one's own culture in a lively and activist way, with the body used as a banner.



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## O Festival Jumara no Panamá: cinema e corpo em movimento

**Resumo:** Com base na etnografia do Primer Festival Internacional de Cinema Indígena Jumara, realizado em uma comunidade Emberá do Panamá, o objetivo deste artigo é mergulhar na conexão dos processos étnicos derivados do cinema indígena com os processos étnicos derivados do significado atribuído a esse cinema em eventos específicos. Em Jumara, o cinema indígena foi o motivo para afirmar a cultura Emberá e reivindicar, de maneira marcadamente festiva e performativa, as principais demandas do grupo em uma celebração na qual o corpo e sua ornamentação assumiram um papel especial. Argumenta-se que o foco etnográfico nos festivais organizados nas comunidades indígenas permite analisar com profundidade a dimensão comprometida e ativista do cinema indígena.

**Palavras-chave:** Emberá; Panamá; Festival; Cinema Indígena; Etnografia.

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