

# Tracing the anthropology through the films: “The boy who harnessed the wind”

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## Article info

Received: 9 March 2021

Accepted: 8 April 2022

## Key words

Separation, liminality,  
incorporation, visual  
anthropology, ethnographic film

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## Abstract

Since the invention of modern photographic technology, visual methods for anthropological documentation have been an integral part of anthropology, although it was not formally known as visual anthropology until after World War II. The place of film such as ethnographic films which have the cinematographic aspect within anthropological theory and practice and provides a chance for anthropologists to be far more explicit about their field methodology is a medium of record from the beginning of the modern anthropological project. In this regard, the cinematographic features of a film can be used to show the construction and nature of the other races, tribes, and cultures as is in the movie “The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind,” a 2019 British drama film. In this context, this article evaluates the features contributing to the ethnographicness of this film in light with the rite of passage that are “separation,” “liminality,” and “reaggregation.” Some ceremonies in this movie reflect these three stages of rite of passage theory developed by the Durkheimian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in *Les Rites de Passage*. As a matter of principle, these rituals and ceremonies characterize the worldviews, sense of truth, and lifestyles of societies in which they arose. Based on the principle in question, through “The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind,” the current article seeks to point out the significance of visual anthropology such as films in tracing the ethnographic data, and, in the context of ethnographic cinematography, to find out how the stages of rite of passage appear.

## Introduction

The canonical ethnographic film, presented in intercultural terms as a film made by one cultural group (typically Euro-American) aiming to describe another culture, is the model of visual anthropology (usually of the Third or Fourth World) (MacDougall, 2005). Visual anthropology is used to document, preserve, and illustrate culture manifested through behaviors and artifacts, such as dance, proxemics, and architecture (Crowder, 2006). Since the invention of modern photographic technology (still and moving), the use of visual methods for anthropological documentation has been an integral part of anthropology, although it was not formally known as visual anthropology until after World War II (Crowder, 2006). Ethnographic film is a domain of cultural anthropology, which traditionally comprised scientific observation and recording of the lives and cultures of other races, usually indigenous communities in colonized lands (Jayasankar and Monteiro, 2015:620). What is more, it is a field dominated by documentary filmmakers who fancy themselves amateur anthropologists (Ruby, 1991). In other words, many ethnographic films were made by filmmakers without knowledge about anthropology. However, according to Barsam (1992), an ethnographic or documentary film is an ideal method for democratic communication, since it is often concerned with measuring and valuing a present way of life by what it ought to be. In this respect, Nichols (2010) specified that documentaries reflect the world in which we live rather than a world imagined by the filmmaker, and accordingly they differ from various genres of fiction (science fiction, horror, adventure, melodrama, and so on).

Heider, in his pioneering work *Ethnographic Film* (1976) argues that in some cases, a film can present information that written ethnographies cannot. Therefore, he specifies that in an ethnographic film, the documentary or ethnographic component should always take precedence over the cinematographic aspects. This situation has been originating from the reality that visual elements show the phenomenon or fact by revealing all the extensions and dimensions of the reality being observed. The visual element allows researcher to interpret that fact being observed from an objective perspective. Because of this factor, in many places around the world initially in North America, teachers use ethnographic films in the classroom. Due to this reason, it is a useful approach to observe the various attributes and dimensions in a film presenting ethnographic and anthropological data. Moreover, in recent years, some anthropological films attempted to embrace certain theoretical approaches. For example, since Sol Worth and John Adair's 1966 Navajo Filmmakers project, theoretical questions have shifted away from functionalist anthropology and communication science, towards film theory, literary theory, and cultural studies (Heider 1976:43, as cited in Bank, 2010:294). The cinematographic aspect of ethnographic films within anthropological theory and practice is a medium of record (the documentary aspect) from the beginning of the modern anthropological project (Banks, 2010:292). However, it can be argued that a camera also sometimes may reflect a point from a subjective angle that a filmmaker might prefer it to other angles. Albeit this is a fact, on the other hand, it is well known that the visual method gives less room for misinterpretations as compared to the written anthropology. In addition, Heider should have realized this obstacle in advance, he argued that ethnographic films can be effective in the case they are presented by a well-prepared informant or used in connection with a written ethnography, to get around this obstacle (1976:7).

Taking the information above into consideration, it is seen that the use of visual methods has a significant place in tracing the ethnographic data in anthropology tradition. In this frame, this article is attempting to use visual methods to trace ethnographic elements such as the 'rites of passage' by reviewing the film "*The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind.*" *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* is a 2019 British drama film screened in the Premieres section at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival. It was written and directed by Chiwetel Ejiofor in his feature

directorial debut. Its duration is 1 hours 53 minutes. Movie actors who are Felix Lemburo, Maxwell Simba, and Chiwetel Ejiofor took part instead of real people in the movie. The story of the film tells the true story of William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer's memoir.

William Kamkwamba was born in Kasungu, Malawi living in the village of Wimbe. He is a young student, and his family comes from a family of farmers. William has the skill to fix radios and he looks for the local junkyard for salvageable electronic components in his free time. Even though he is banned to attend class because he could not pay his tuition fees, William blackmails his science teacher in order to allow him to attend his class and library where he makes his dreams about electrical engineering and energy production come true. The family's crops fail due to drought over time. This condition leads villagers to riots over government rationing. Even some villagers robbed of William's family's already meager grain stores. William seeks to protect his village from the drought and devises a plan to a mechanism which works successfully. However, he needs his father's permission in order to dismantle his family's only bicycle in the village and the family's last major asset. In his father's opinion, this struggle and exercise futile. Therefore, the father destroys the prototype and wants William to work in the fields. As conditions are getting worse, William's mother urges his father to reconsider William's project. After some time has passed, William and his father reconcile, and with the help of several other villagers, they construct a windmill, which results in a successful harvest being sown. Hence, William is awarded a scholarship to attend his school, ultimately he receives a degree from Dartmouth College.

The rites of passage manifesting in this movie are worth evaluating as an ethnographic data from an anthropological point of view as well as the storyline of the movie. The two funerals and one education ceremonies in this movie describe the reflections of rite of passage theory with the extensions and dimensions of separation, liminality, and reaggregation. However, to better understand the references of rites in "The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind," the current article, will comprehensively discuss the nature of these rites. Thereafter, it will evaluate the relationships of the ceremonies in the movie in question in terms of three stages consisting of separation, liminality or transition, and incorporation or reaggregation. In addition, the objective of this humble paper is to understand the importance of visual anthropology and ethnographic data, and to show how to trace ethnographic or anthropological data through films (the use of visual methods). For this purpose, as a qualitative (focused on interpreting and understanding) research, the current article is based on analysis of secondary sources (books, articles, papers etc.) and content analysis (film as a visual instrument).

## Rite of passage theory

Variouly known as "life crisis" ceremonies, "rites of passage," or by the French term *rites de passage*, this complex of practices involves changes in personal or collective identity such as birthing, coming of age, commencement exercises, ordination, marriage, recruitment into secret societies or military formations, and mortuary processes (Auslander, 2006:2022). The term "rite of passage" was first used in anthropology to highlight ceremonies that shows the transition of an individual or a group as their changing status, but soon it took the interest of other disciplines. This phrase has become widely known and used to describe rituals related to significant life transitions of individuals in a community (Larson, 2010:788). The flexibility of this theory enabled different disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, history to implement in a vast array of contexts. Durkheimian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep developed this concept in *Les Rites de Passage* in which he observed the background of ceremonies that reflects changes in identity such as childbirth, initiation, puberty, marriage, motherhood, death, besides collective celebrations of seasonal change (Tzanelli, 2007:3940).

Gannep outlined three stages through rites that transform the social identity of individual or social group:

- (1) **Separation:** This stage is the detaching of an individual from his or her former status. In nature, usually it is abrupt or violent and involves alienation or movement across boundaries (Berry, 1984:2).
- (2) **Liminality:** Transition or often called the liminal stage, refers to where the initiand is in 'limbo' between the old status and new status. Ritual dislocation of the self may involve mutilation of self, losing name and language, dying symbolically, losing normal diet of foods, disguise, sex reversal, behavioral reversals, and breaking taboos (Berry, 1984:3).
- (3) **Incorporation:** It is also called reaggregation. This is the last stage and refers to the passage from one status to another is consummated symbolically (Marshall, 1998:570). Incorporation rites are determined by the removal of borders, and adaptation of the equipments required by the new status or situation that the subject participated in (Özbudun, 2003:325). The individual or group is reaccepted to the community as the bearer of a new status.

Some elements of ceremonies related to changes in the seasons may be considered incorporating acts of separation and incorporation, but these are not customarily called rites of passage (Alexander and Edward, 2020). Encountered in Christianity and other religions along with small-scale societies rites of passage are rituals concerned with transferring individuals or groups between social statuses and marking their incorporation into a more valued status such as when a student ceases to be an undergraduate and becomes a graduate (Forth, 2021:1). In this respect, Forth points out an interesting perspective referring to this example saying such rites do not need to have reference to religious ideas and can be entirely "secular" (p. 1). Since rites of passage sign a sacred time not the profane of everyday life, they are formalized and strict in their performance (Gennep, as cited in Tzanelli, 2007:3941). As the concept of the "rites of passage" was first developed by Arnold Van Gennep, it is useful to evaluate this theory from his own point of view and framework.

Arnold van Gennep in his prominent book *The Rites of Passage* (1960) tries to concrete stages of rites of passage by the history of some geographies on the earth. He claims that the rudimentary portal of Africa is most probably the original form of the isolated portals which were developed in the Far East, and at least in Shintoism and Taoism, are used as ceremonial instruments (p. 21). He is adding that this evolution from the magic portal to the monument may have occurred in the case of the Roman arch of triumph. According to him, the victor was first required to separate himself from the enemies through several rites in order to be able to return to the Roman world by passing through the arch. In this case, the rite of incorporation was a sacrifice to Jupiter Capitoline and to the deities protecting the city (Gennep, 1960:21). Consequently, he describes the rites of separation from a previous world, as preliminal rites, those executed during the transitional stage as liminal (or threshold) rites, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world, as postliminal rites. According to van Gennep (1960:viii), rites of separation come into prominence in funeral ceremonies, rites of incorporation at marriages. He argued that "transition rites may play an important part, for instance, in pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation; or they may be reduced to a minimum in adaption, in the delivery of a second child, in remarriage, or in the passage from the second to the third age group."

## “The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind”: tracing the ‘rite of passage’ through visual anthropology

*The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* gives various examples of ‘rite of passage’ theory if the subject is handled from an anthropological perspective. Throughout the movie, it is possible to differentiate the stages of separation, liminality, and incorporation. Firstly, there is a death rite that one of the major rites of the movie attracts the attention. Taking John Kamkwamba’s status, it is clearly understood that death is associated with the “separation stage” which is the first stage of the rites. This is because even the subject is not aware of himself. He forsook and separated from his living identity and, spiritually, at least on the ontological ground, adopted or entered into a new identity called dead. As a matter of principle, this transition phase can be usually violent, sudden, or painful in its nature, ruptures ties to self, family, community, or society, in short, his all surroundings. John Kamkwamba’s funeral sets an example for this kind of transition that is abrupt and painful.

The second stage is the “liminality stage” or often called “liminal stage” as a rite of passage can be drawn from the death rite in the movie. Firstly, if we look at John Kamkwamba’s funeral ceremony, per their belief, it is clearly understood from the priest’s sermon speech (see Figure 1) where he said that “God alone has decided to take John Kamkwamba” (in the 3.03 sec.), although he died, he has not disappeared completely but moved spiritually to the hereafter, from one realm to the another. In this sense, ontologically the subject’s existence is between spiritual existence and bodily extinction. Therefore, he or she is between the old status and the new status. As Berry (1984:3) stated, about dying symbolically as a factor relating to the liminality, John Kamkwamba also died just symbolically, and his soul is in the living world.



**Figure 1.** John Kamkwamba’s funeral ceremony

The last stage of the rite is “incorporation,” or is also called “reaggregation.” Accordingly, the relationship of the death in the movie with the incorporation stage can be evaluated as well as separation and liminality stage. In the movie, we see that the passage of John Kamkwamba’s soul from one status to another is consummated symbolically (Marshall, 1998:570). Through death as a phenomenon transcending space and time, John Kamkwamba’s soul exceeded the borders, and he participated to a new status and adopted a new identity. This new identity is identified and accepted in the context of transcendental existence by his

community. In this stage of the rite, the subject is regarded as the bearer of a new status as John Kamkwamba is.

In addition to that, there is one another point that is remarkable to pay attention to. It is the relationship between the way of giving inheritance and the patriarchy model in that community. In the forward scenes in the movie, from the conversation (in the 36.05 sec.) between Trywell Kamkwamba and company man, we understand that John left his heritage to his eldest son, Jeremiah Kamkwamba, not to his brother Trywell Kamkwamba. What is more, from the priest's sermon speech (in the 3.46 sec.), where he drew attention to John's eldest son and said that "...Jeremiah, who must now take over the work of his departed father," it is understood that the man is the representative of his father. This data gives clues for some points to be evaluated in terms of the ethnographic analysis. Firstly, these elements demonstrate that men have priority over women in Wimbe's community. Besides, these indicators that are the way of giving inheritance and the priest's drawing attention to John's eldest son demonstrate that patriarchy community model consists of a dominant social and cultural structure among this community. In this frame, we can draw a conclusion that the Wimbe community follows a patrilineal descent, and they are an inheritor community.

On the other hand, the death of the old Muslim man also can be considered from the same point of view. Due to its ethnographical and anthropological aspects, this muslim figure can be taken into consideration based on his funeral ceremony, his status, and importance in his community. The nickname of the character who is died elder Muslim is Chief Wimbe, and he is an opinion leader and chief of his community. This person is one who has influence over the community and is listened to. We see his status, place, and importance where the villagers came together to listen to the company man, he directed and advised the people (in the 18.45 sec., see Figure 2), and when he is given a chance in the election program to speak (in the 48.00 sec., see Figure 3). Based on this picture, we found out that Wimbe community is a community which needs a leader in order to direct and make suggestions to that community. Therefore, it is crystal clear that this community has a society model that is the opinions of the "single person" are more valuable, come into forward, are more dominant instead of every single individual's.

As we mentioned before, Chief Wimbe is a Muslim. When he died, he was washed, shrouded, and buried (in the 1.42.54 sec., see Figure 4) according to the religion of Islam. According to Islam belief, when a person dies, he or she does not disappear completely. Even the structure and belief are different in these two religions, both of them have death stages of separation, liminality, and incorporation based on their religious principles. This principle holds for all religious beliefs and doctrines that have a transcendental dimension. To illustrate, Buddhism shares with Hinduism the doctrine of reincarnation (Gellner, 2010:98) which is the rebirth of the aspect of an individual that persists after bodily death in one or more successive existences (Britannica, 2020). In this regard, since the subject is not annihilated forever, separation, liminality, and incorporation stages can be traced to these religious beliefs. However, this point should be highlighted that, although Arnold van Gennep claimed that the rites at death are detailed, and all the stages of separation, transition, and reaggregation can be traced clearly on it (Alexander, 2020), this sometimes may depend on how that culture or community perceives and how attaches meaning to the death. If a religious belief and doctrine have no transcendental dimension, then the separation stage cannot be traced from this faith system.



Figure 2. Muslim chief is sharing his opinions to the villagers



Figure 3. Muslim chief speaks in the election meeting



Figure 4. The washing and shrouding the muslim chief

In order to evaluate the death rite in this movie more accurately, the clothes of some people who participated in John Kamkwamba's funeral ceremony can also be commented in the context of the rites of passage. Through their clothes and priest's ceremonial uniform which is a black cassock and purple church scarf, it can be understood that they attach a special meaning to the passage of death. From this point, it can be said that there is a relationship between participants and the death rites as well as the person who died. In a sense, it is a sign of personal or collective identity changes for the person who died. This behavior is considered in the context of the ceremony of social life cycles.

Another considerable point in the funeral ritual is that a few native persons with indigenous masks on their faces came to the funeral ceremony by dancing. These natives are dressed according to their local and traditional beliefs. This apparently holy dance with embellishments of visible or invisible parts of the body, distinctive garments, bodily decorations, and insignias corresponding to symbols of their rite are worth reviewing to understand how a death ceremony or passage is conducted. It is worth drawing attention that, their masks are carrying a significant meaning in Wimbe's traditional life. When a sorrowful event is manifested among the community, these persons with masks come out. We can see these masks in various points such as in John Kamkwamba's funeral ceremony (in the 4.10 sec.), in the Muslim chief's funeral ceremony (in the 1.43.57 sec.), and when Jeremiah sold his trees (in the 23.59 sec.). African masks play different roles depending on the culture they are in. Masks worn to revive gods, ancestors, supernature powers are worn in death and puberty ceremonies, and the mask is regarded as holy as it is believed that the one who wears the mask takes attributes of the one whose mask is worn (Emiroğlu, 2003:576). African masks consist of the secret society, fertility, initiation, and festival masks. Initiation masks are very sacred and it may be forbidden to wear certain masks but they may be displayed (Russel and Etmanskie, 2006:1547). According to Russel and Etmanskie (2006:1547), masks are a means of communication between the two groups of living and nonliving individuals.

There is one another point that should be taken from an anthropological and ethnographical point of view. That is, these native persons appear irrespective of the dead person's faith or religion. It does not matter which religion she or he is from. They regard death as a single event that reflects the common feeling, the common sadness. People can feel the same sense in both Islam and Christianity religions. These feelings bring these native persons together in John Kamkwamba and the Muslim chief's funeral ceremony. These all signs, symbols -due to symbolic aspects of them in the ceremonies, rituals, transitions- are another sign to interpret the nature of their rite of passage.

On the other hand, William Kamkwamba's education adventure also contains some remarkable anthropological and ethnographic data in order to be evaluated in terms of rite of passage. William Kamkwamba's first day of school is a significant initiation ritual in terms of separation and incorporation. For his first day in school, his family members celebrated his new status by praying and having a meal among themselves (in the 10.00 sec. see Figure 5). The new stage that William Kamkwamba entered as a bearer of new status can be associated with separation since he separated from his previous classmates and jumped a higher class in the school, alienated his new friends, and changed his previous clothes. William Kamkwamba's attending to this meal with his school uniform signifies a celebration of a rite of passage for his new education status. What is more, thereafter, William Kamkwamba cannot pay the school's tuition fee and therefore he is dismissed from the school. He loses initially his dreams, his studentship status, his title, his uniform, his school and friend circle. He sorrows a lot for this case and psychologically and socially falls into a big gap. He leaves all these what he had behind, and could not enter into a new stage, could not have a title. He maintains neither his previous status nor adopts a new status. Based on Berry's (1984:3) determination about the



liminality stage, we realize a ritual dislocation of the self and mutilation of self in William Kamkwamba's case. This gap represents William Kamkwamba's liminality stage.



**Figure 5.** William Kamkwamba and his family celebrate his new school period



**Figure 6.** William Kamkwamba sets the machinery system to water the lands

However, William endeavors and achieves his objective and successfully designs a mechanical system (in the 1.39.23 sec., see Figure 6) to water the village's lands during the gap he was in. This success brings prestige and reputation to him among his people, and therefore he exits the gap which he was in before and enters a new stage. This stage is between his previous studentship in the school and his new official status that he will have a title later. This stage refers to and addresses William Kamkwamba's incorporation stage. In this stage, he owns the equipments required by the new status and he is reaccepted to the community as the bearer of a new status (Özbudun, 2003:325).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this article first attempted to point out the importance of visual anthropology such as films (documentary or ethnographic films) in tracing the ethnographic data by finding

out the inevitable relation between the use of visual methods and anthropological or ethnographic data. Besides, it tried to show the place of ethnographic film in the context of cultural anthropology, which traditionally played a significant role in scientific observation of communities. In light of the above, it can be drawn that visual anthropology has been used to document and illustrate culture manifested through behaviors and artifacts. Additionally, it is highlighted that ethnographic film is a domain of cultural anthropology, which involved scientific observation and recording of the cultures of other races, usually indigenous communities in colonized lands. With the invention of modern photographic technology, visual methods in anthropological documentation have been an integral part of anthropology, although it was not formally known as visual anthropology until after World War II. Secondly, it attempted to show the extensions and dimensions of rites of passage -separation, liminality (or transition), reaggregation (or incorporation)- that Arnold Van Gennep identified basing on the two funeral and one education ceremonies through the film "The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind." As we can see in The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind film, films are playing a significant role in the pursuit of accurate ethnographic data through visual instruments. For instance, as we interpreted an ethnographic factor such as rites of passage through a film, and as Arnold van Gennep claimed, the rites at death enable us to see three rites of passage. It is possible to evaluate separation, liminality, and incorporation stages through the film (visual anthropology) in question in the light of the two funeral and one education ceremonies. These sorts of rituals, ceremonies have been enabling an observer to understand the worldviews, sense of truth, and lifestyles of communities, races, and cultures by observing and evaluating how they conduct their rites of passage. In this sense, how people conduct specific ceremonies and the relation of these ceremonies to the cultural codes of societies bear a significant mission in terms of the rites of passage. In brief, documentary, ethnographic film (the use of visual methods, visual anthropology) is one of the most efficient ways of illustrating, documenting, and recording anthropological and ethnographic data in anthropological tradition.

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