

Slice(s) of Life: Collaboration in Visual Anthropology between Bena and Berlin

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Abstract: This reflective report provides insights into a long-term collaborative research project in the field of visual anthropology. It deals with questions of collaboration in visual anthropological research, ethnographic film-making, and the archiving and usage of ethnographic footage in and outside museal contexts.

[visual anthropology, ethnographic film, Papua New Guinea, collaboration]

Introduction

The CoMuse project ‘Slice(s) of Life’ at the Berlin Ethnological Museum covers the topic of transcultural collaboration in visual anthropology in three fields: ethnographic film-making, the museum’s film archive and public film screenings. More precisely, the project comprises the production of a reality-telenovela of an ethnographic community in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea, collaborative transcultural research in the film archive of the Ethnological Museum Berlin, and a biannual ethnographic film event at the Humboldt Forum Berlin.

The whole project is based on my long-term cooperation with the Bena-speaking community of Napamogona in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea as a visual anthropologist. It has evolved around the huge body of ethnographic film data built up during nearly thirty years of close cooperation. The material was produced with community members during various periods of research between 1997 and 2022. It covers a variety of different anthropological topics, among them culture change and exchange, material culture, cultural practices, religion and belief systems, and conceptualizations of time, person and gender. It also includes many personal stories, tribe’s and clans’ histories, stories of origin and myths. A small number of tapes contain short films that I edited at the request of community members on specific events or topics.

Theoretical and Methodological Foundation

Theoretically and methodologically, I position myself within a framework set out by visual anthropologists and ethnographic film-makers such as David MacDougall (1975; 2005; 2020), Jean Rouch (1974; 1978) and Sarah Pink (2001; 2006). Inspired by MacDougall's observational cinema (1975), with its unintrusive calm and subtleness, and Jean Rouch's direct-cinema approach, which opens up a space for improvisation, self-reflection and the participation of the film's protagonists (1961; 2009), I started off by using the camera as an observational tool, including the flexibility to adjust to circumstances and to leave a space for the persons being filmed to participate actively in the research and filming process. The engagement of community members has indeed been crucial since the beginning of my work on/with film. I share MacDougall's acknowledgement that the film-maker is a participant in relationships with other active subjects, rather than a mere observer (1975). Ethnographic filming and film-making is a joint process. The foundation of any visual anthropological research and the quality of the data therefore lie in the relationship between the researcher-cum-film-maker and the protagonists. I began working with the community of Napamogona during my MA research in 1996 and have since continued the cooperation in various research projects.¹ Needless to say that close relationships have formed over the years and that the long-term and ongoing continuation of our collaboration builds on a strong level of mutual trust.

As MacDougall (1995) points out, ethnographic films are made with others, not about them. The production process can thus be seen as a dialogue between cultures, or rather, between persons with different cultural, social and individual realities. Obviously, the task is not to create an objective audiovisual documentation that represents a 'culture' but to be conscious about (and make transparent, and *work*) the relationships of those involved,² as well as the situational relationality, the multi-perspectivity and the biases, interests and agendas of one's self and of those being filmed. If this challenge is taken seriously, the latter become more than just protagonists or interlocutors – they are then collaborators in a common endeavour.

Like Sarah Pink (2001), I found that visual media are not only tools for documenting, but are themselves part of the research process that are actively involved in the production of knowledge. Ethnographic film-making can be a tool for keeping and possibly even revitalizing collective memories and cultural heritage, and even to reform identity (Ginsburg 1991; Knapp 2021). Moreover, as Faye Ginsburg points out, it is

1 2003–2006; 2012–2015; 2016, 2018, 2019; 2020; 2022; 2023; 2024 (one to six months per year): PhD research 'Culture Change and Exchange'; DoBes Project: Bena Bena language; CoMuse: Slice of Life.

2 This implies an understanding of cultural concepts of relationships, especially regarding principles of reciprocity – a topic too deep to dive into in this article. See, for example, Knapp (2017) for a further discussion.

also a means to fight against colonial representations of ‘indigenous’ persons, peoples and cultures (Ginsburg 1991).

In the following description of this empirical project, I show how this theoretical grounding is played out in practice and demonstrate its benefits for visual anthropological research, ethnographic film production and the further use of ethnographic footage stored in museal archives.

A Slice of Life: Collaboration in Ethnographic Film Production

The Background

The Napamogona are an alliance of five clans that took up joint residence on a huge tract of land near Goroka, the Eastern Highland’s provincial capital, more than four generations ago. In Bena Bena, the local language, *napa* means ‘group’ and *mogona* is ‘large’. Given that the Napamogona number about one thousand, the name ‘Large Group’ seems justified. Napamogona is the name for the tribal alliance, the community, the village site and the land that belongs to the village. This nominal identification captures the profound relationship that the Napamogona share with their land, which land belongs to the clans because of ancestral relationships expressed in stories of origin. Spiritual beings associated with the clans inhabit the land. Above all, as subsistence farmers, community members depend on their land for survival. Caring for and securing the land is therefore central to their lives. However, Napamogona land has never been officially registered, so there is no legal document proving traditional ownership.

The footage I took in Bena now runs to more than 120 hours. Such long-term documentation brings a specific historical and biographical dimension to the data: we see the same persons as children, as young adults, as parents, even as grandparents. We see and hear of elders or relatives who have died since it started. We witness the dawning of a conflict within the community that resulted in warfare and the destruction of the village in 2006. We witness the scattered survivors’ returning to their land in 2012 and the subsequent revival of the Napamogona. The material documents a crucial part of the community’s history. It is not only of ethnographic value but also of high emotional and, as I was told by the elders, educational and political value to the Napamogona. Clan stories, for example, imply rights to certain plots of land and may be used as evidence to justify land claims, even in court cases today. Land disputes are nothing new in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, but today population growth and the dependence on a cash economy are making questions about land-ownership more pressing. Conflicts over land have become more frequent, larger in scale and numbers, less structured and much more violent than in the past. Thus, the filmed material touches on a number of sensitive topics that have to be dealt with particularly careful.

Copies of the footage were handed over to the community elders regularly throughout the years of my research, first on DVDs, then digitized on a hard drive. In 2022 the Napamogona held copies of about a hundred hours of footage and agreed that the original tapes should be stored in the film archive of the Ethnological Museum Berlin as documentation of their (his)stories and their cultural heritage.

'A Slice of Life: Opena Gosalo'

When I arrived in Napamogona in 2018, I heard that an old local sorcerer, whom I had interviewed a few years before at his request, had died. The footage contained a message to his children and instructions that they were to observe after his death. The following evening, the community gathered to watch his last interview in one of the local *haus piksa*, a grasshouse with a generator-powered screen. Needless to say, that this was a very emotional evening, with many tears being shed. It was one of the many screening events in Napamogona that triggered discussions about the access, uses and purposes of the footage we had produced over the years.

We gathered a few days later on the village's central square to discuss the matter. David, one of the village elders and a spokesman, expressed the Napamogona's happiness about the ongoing documentation of their village and culture ('We are proud to be the best documented community in Papua New Guinea'). Then he proposed that a feature-length film should be compiled from the footage, a film 'that tells the story of Napamogona' from the time before its destruction to the re-founding of the community years later and its prosperous development since. This film, the elders suggested, should be used as a historical document of their village's history and culture, and as an educational tool for future generations to see. I agreed.

When looking through the data, however, we realized that this would be a difficult task. The footage was created primarily in research contexts with a focus on specific research topics. Film had been my main methodological ethnographic research and documentation tool. I had never aimed at creating one big coherent narrative about the village's history. David's wife Esi came up with a brilliant solution to the problem: she suggested combining the ethnographic footage with fiction to fill in the gaps in the narrative threads with scripted and acted scenes. Even more so, we could write a script for a fictionalized history of the village based on true stories, and the Napamogona themselves could become the authors of and actors in their own story. Esi's suggestion was enthusiastically received by the community. Inspired by Nigerian telenovelas that are intensively watched and enjoyed in the local *haus piksa* all over PNG, community members brought up the idea of creating a kind of 'village-reality-telenovela' that should take an entertaining but also educational approach. The Napamogona wanted to show their real history so that 'others could learn from it and not make the same mistakes', as David put it (2023). I was thrilled by the idea of developing a PNG Highlands community telenovela that shows the cultural, social, economic and political contexts of the Napamogona and that reveals personal strat-

egies to deal with the challenges of life in the community today. The idea for 'A Slice of Life' was born.

The Production Process

The subsequent discussions were intense and mirrored the complexity of relationships within the community. It was decided that each clan should be represented equally in the project so that all lineages would be involved in the film process in some way. The overall concern was not to create any feelings of jealousy, since this could affect the whole project.³ Organizing this was obviously a challenging enterprise. A committee of elders distributed the numerous tasks. Some persons were recruited as actors, others to support the film crew, and yet others were in charge of preparative work, such as building bamboo steps on slippery slopes, cleaning the village, and building toilets for the team and a kitchen house for the cooks. Others took care of catering, security, laundry, collected firewood and so forth. The challenging aspect was to assign the right task to the right person given their family and clan positions, their statuses in the community and their personal skills and preferences. It was also important not to leave anyone out.

While some elders and their helpers were busy with preparation work, we – that is, primarily David, Esi, Daisy and myself – began working on the script for the pilot film. Writing the script was a collaborative challenge and a wonderful experience in itself. We sat on the lawn at the back of my grasshouse on David's 'Opena Gosalo' or 'Breadfruit mountain' and discussed the plot. People would come by and join in for some time, adding to or commenting on the narratives. No dialogues were scripted; only the contents of single scenes were discussed and noted down. Since most Napamogona are illiterate, we drew storyboards and attached them to the interwoven bamboo wall. The visitors rearranged them and triggered new ideas for the storyline. I often joked about having about 900 writers and directors working on the film. Actually, this is only a slight exaggeration. The process of collaborative script development was in a way like field research. I received new insights into Bena culture and was delighted to find that people explained the actions and thoughts of the film characters with more patience and in more detail than they had ever cared to do during my previous research projects. My partners competed in developing plausible characters and storylines and discussed them intensely based on their own real-life experiences. After six weeks that felt like a year of intense ethnographic research, the script was ready.

Producers for the pilot film were found in Verena Thomas (AUS) and Jackie Kauli (PNG), heads of the production company YUMI PIKSA. Verena and Jackie supported us throughout the script-writing process and the film production. They also organized a local film team that arrived in the village for the ten-day shoot. Some young men

³ Jealousy is a widely feared and despised concept in Papua New Guinean cultures. It can be related to magic (a jealous person may harm through magic) or witchcraft (jealousy is, in Bena, considered a trait of Sanguma witches, who may kill their victims to incorporate their strength/success, see Knapp 2011).

from Napamogona supported them with sound-recording or lighting. The motivation of the community members in participating in the film production was overwhelming. In fact, I have never seen the community members so highly engaged in any of my previous research projects. We started filming early and ended late at night, often sitting around the fire until dawn and discussing plot and production. The Napamogona actors were immensely impressive with their talent to improvise and enrich scenes ad hoc. After each day of filming, every participant received a small payment to compensate him or her for the time spent on the project. The money was handed over publicly and transparently. Collaboration in the project was enjoyed and appreciated highly by all the parties involved. Since written publications are not on the top list of my Bena collaborators, I would like to include their voices in this article by referring the reader to the project's podcast, in which David and Daisy, as representatives of the community, share their views.⁴

The post-production process was organized in Australia. In 2022, *A Slice of Life: Opena Gosa'lo*, the pilot film for the planned telenovela, was finalized and launched. The first screening took place in April 2022 in Papua New Guinea at the University of Goroka. In May it had its world premiere outside PNG at the film festival 'Slices of Life' in the Humboldt Forum. *A Slice of Life: Opena Gosa'lo* is now available to all to watch for free on YouTube.⁵

The Napamogona are very interested in continuing this project and producing new episodes. In fact, I have been asked numerous times when the filming would continue. Unfortunately, I had no immediate answer, as we are currently looking for funding.

Slice of Life: Transforming the Archive

In agreement with the community, the large body of audiovisual data from Napamogona is now stored in the film archive of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. Above I mentioned the political relevance of this footage, for example, in relation to questions of land ownership. This was revealed in the concerns some elders expressed after they had watched the material. They argued that some of the information was not true or was incomplete. This referred to several myths of origin and clan histories and a number of biographical interviews I had recorded. Since these data include information about clan movements, past land disputes, fights and settlements, the elders' just concern was that a false narrative might have an impact on land rights for future generations. They stated that one of my main interlocutors had, in his story-telling, twisted the facts to his and his lineage's advantage to justify his claims to specific pieces

4 <https://podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/gegen-die-gewohnheit/id1741971437?i=1000670913086>, accessed September 10, 2025.

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkMORZBPpGs>, accessed September 20, 2025.

of land. This is a very sensitive topic, especially in times of rapid population growth and increasing disputes over resources. The elders' fear was that the data could be misused to give the wrong people access to resources in the future.

Once more I was confronted with the responsibility that we – the Napamogona and I – share for the material. David told me that we would have to go through all the footage to uncover and add comments to 'wrong' information and then to record the 'true' version of the stories. The material in the museum's archive, I was told, must be complemented and must not contain (uncommented) false information. Obviously that makes sense, although the question over which are the 'true versions' is impossible to answer. It may not be the right question to ask in the first place. Rather, the material reveals different perspectives on relationships between groups, persons, spirits and land, and I take it as my task to add as many crucial perspectives as possible. In doing so, it is not possible to create a complete and true archive of the community's 'true' history, but through an interrelated ensemble of views on the same topic it may be possible to reveal an image as close to the community's collective truth as possible. It is therefore of crucial importance to go through the archival footage collaboratively to add comments and record additional narratives and perspectives on issues that were deemed wrong by most elders.

Working collaboratively on the Napamogona film collection has thus become the second 'column' of the CoMuse project 'A Slice of Life'. During their six weeks fellowship at the Ethnological Museum in 2022, David, Daisy and Karufe began to research the Napamogona material more thoroughly, defined questionable parts and starting work on their comments. In 2024 I started recording other versions of clan stories of origin in Napamogona and collected comments on what were identified as the critical scenes. This process is still ongoing, as is the collaboration with the community, who have been incredibly supportive and engaged, and are teaching me so much.

Slices of Life (SoL): Ethnographic Film Days in the Humboldt Forum

The third part of this CoMuse Project brings the aspect of transcultural collaboration with regard to working with audiovisual data to a broader level. Its name, 'Slices of Life' (SoL), refers to the film project described above, but in the plural it refers to a variety of ethnographic films – slices of different lives, so to speak.

SoL is a biannual public film event at the Humboldt Forum Berlin, with a focus on contemporary ethnographic films. It is grounded in cooperation between the Ethnological Museum Berlin, the Stiftung Humboldt Forum and the German Ethnographic Film Festival (GIEFF). SoL is a two-day event with the potential to grow. The first day consists of public film screenings and discussions. The second day is a closed workshop format that allows for more intimate exchanges between the film-makers.

SoL addresses the central topic of collaboration in ethnographic film-making all over the world. Many collaborative turns have been made since Jean Rouch's 'Moi,

un Noir' (1958); SoL provides a platform to discuss these turns and to raise questions about roles, rights, respect and reciprocity in ethnographic film-making. With a focus on Indigenous film-makers and community productions, SoL shows films that may not be widely known and that were often produced on a small budget; but they open windows into the lives and living conditions of others that delve into political, social, cultural and personal topics and provide insights into often unfamiliar contexts. The public film screenings are followed by Q&A sessions and panel discussions with international film-makers. The audience is encouraged to participate in the discussions. The workshop on the second day is reserved for the invited film-makers. It provides a safe space to present new work-in-progress, and to exchange and discuss ideas with colleagues. This day has proved particularly valuable, and great networks have evolved from this less formal gathering.

The first SoL Event took place in May 2022. It hosted the world premiere (outside Papua New Guinea) of the film 'A Slice of Life: Opena Gosalo' in the presence of Daisy Samuel and David Papua'e, two of the main actors from Napamogona, and Karufe Kotile, who was involved in the production process.

As 'Traveling GIEFF', SoL can access films from the vast GIEFF archive. At the two SoL events in 2022 and 2024, films from Nepal, Tanzania, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, Cameroon and many other countries were shown, all collaborative productions that deal with topics like gender, exploitation, identity and culture change.⁶

Conclusion

The parts of this project – ethnographic film-production, archival work and film screenings – approach collaboration with a different emphasis. The collection of audiovisual data and the production of the film *A slice of life* stress the importance of the relationships. The key to collaboration lies here in reciprocity, transparency and continuity, and in the common endeavour to explore the world together with the participants (Pink 2001). The archival work, which includes the collecting of additional data in PNG to complement existing ones in the archive, as well as research on the material in the archive, focuses more on the shared interests. The purpose is to produce, keep and revitalize intangible cultural heritage. Here collaboration with the community becomes a social, even political enterprise, as well as a means to reform the group's identity (Ginsburg 1991). Central is here the shared responsibility for the data and their completion, archiving, storage and accessibility. The aim of establishing an ethnographic film festival that deals with questions of collaboration is to strengthen the academic and

⁶ <https://www.smb.museum/en/whats-new/detail/slices-of-life-ethnographic-film-day-at-the-humboldt-forum-on-13-may-2024/>, accessed September 20, 2025.

artistic discourse about transcultural and interdisciplinary collaboration. It has a focus on the productions of indigenous film-makers and has become a platform connecting academics, artists and communities, following MacDougall's (1975) understanding of ethnographic film as a dialogue with cultures rather than a representation of them.

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