Decolonizing cultural heritage of Indigenous people’s knowledge from images in global films

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Abstract
This comparative case study used a critical visual analysis approach to examine filmic stories, myths, images, and realities of the African people. Drawing on archaeology as a decolonizing practice, the study examines images and filmic representations of the Maasai of East Africa and the Himbas of Namibia. The study’s underpinnings are visual consumption theory and interpretive analysis as methods that encompass realms, such as informational processing and interpretations of images to expose the layered messages and examine the uses of cultural codes and representational conventions, deeper meanings and associations that people bring to images. The critical analysis reveals and confirms that filmic representations found in global media objectify cultural heritage in layered messages, ideologies, biases, and stereotypes, embedded in specific visual narratives about Indigenous people of Africa.

Keywords: cultural heritage; commodification; visual analysis; representation; critical visual literacy
Introduction

The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.  
(Berger, 1977, p. 8)

From analysis, images on film - appearing globally - and creation of African cinema are sources for a growing movement to promote cultural agency as a decolonizing practice. Such a movement rises from alternative and oppositional paradigms which are, in turn, based on Indigenous concepts, analytical systems, and cultural frames of reference (Atalay, 2006; Dei et al., 2000; Mann, 2003). A critical analysis of filmic representations of Indigenous people and their knowledge is a starting point for this systematic process, intended to free cultural meanings and interpretations from prevalent portrayals and interpretations that objectify Indigenous people as commodities of a global culture. Drawing on archaeology as a decolonizing practice (Atalay, 2006; Mann, 2003; Watkins, 2000; Smith, 1999), this investigation examines artifacts and visual representations of cultural heritage—the objects and the spaces artifacts and visuals occupy in the relationships between the specimens and the architecture used to contain the objects, including the medium chosen to contain, represent, or present Indigenous cultural practices to the world (Caro, 2006).

Generally, archaeology includes the study of artifacts and other aspects of material culture but is more importantly about people—understanding people's daily lives, their sense of place in the world, their food, their art, their spirituality, and their political and social organization—in sum their cultural heritage. In piecing together multiple lines of evidence, including written documents, oral histories, analytical data from artifacts and ecofacts, and a range of regional and local environmental evidence, archaeologists attempt to (re)write the stories of the past. Archaeological practice and the knowledge it produces are part of the history and heritage of living people and have complex contemporary implications and relevance for those people in daily life. This is true for many communities around the world but is particularly relevant for Indigenous peoples and the colonized people of Africa. It is predominantly scholars from Western cultures and worldviews who have held the political, social, and economic power to study, interpret, write, and teach about Indigenous pasts, viewing them from within a Western framework or "lens," to create knowledge for consumption by Western public and scholarly audiences.

From the start we acknowledge the role of history in the documentation of cultural heritage and the representation of Indigenous peoples. History reflects the values, interests, biases and distortions of the system that validates it and finds evidence in the biases and distortions produced by the educational legacy of “colonial schooling and Western imperialism (Willinsky, 1998, p. 90). As rightly argued by Willinsky, Western Eurocentric imperialism and its educational legacy of historical “differences” have created the division we see in the world today, teaching us to (un)consciously divide the world (p. 27), distancing us from each other by introducing dichotomous nomenclatures such as North/South, East/West, primitive/civilized, developed/underdeveloped, and so on. The historical legacy of these divisions have not been
limited to the history books but have permeated the entire lexicon of global media including film, television and the popular press, and now more recently, social media.

A variety of efforts of Indigenous archeology, including efforts in photography and film have emerged as counter narratives to the dominant Eurocentric view about Africans. These counter narratives attempt to examine critically the complexities involved in the development of anthropology, archaeology, and museum collections. In resistance to simplistic bad/good, colonizer/colonized, perpetrator/victim dichotomies, this scholarship includes a complex discussion of the positive intentions of Western scholars to collect and save remnants of a dying "race," offering "products of their time" arguments as explanation and reason for behaviors such as robbing graves, plundering battlegrounds for human skulls, and collecting, studying, and storing body parts against the will and desires of Native populations (Atalay, 2006, p. 281).

Within the context of Indigenous archeology, critical voices of non-western sociologists, filmmakers, and pedagogues have emerged to push these narratives further and adopt decolonizing practices. These voices take a more reflexive approach and contextualize the present situation by tracing archaeologists' (and physical anthropologists') current position of power to both colonization and the historical reality of the egregious acts that led to the collections held by museums, universities, and historical societies internationally. As will be explained later in this essay and reflecting on Said’s (1978) *Orientalism*, the colonial past is not distinct from today's realities and practices. The precedents that were set continue to define structures for heritage management practices and have powerful continuing implications for Indigenous peoples in North America and elsewhere precisely because they disrupted the self-determination and sovereignty of Indigenous populations with respect to their abilities to govern and practice their own traditional forms of cultural heritage management.

In this article, we seek to decolonize African Indigenous cultural heritage from images in global films, the Internet, and other public media. We seek to undo physical, psychological, cultural, and economic vestiges of colonialism, post-colonialism and neocolonialism embedded in media’s messages, which present a distorted narrative that is several steps removed from the cultural heritage of Indigenous people.

For the purposes of this study, cultural heritage refers to local and traditional places, rituals, cultural practices, foods, costumes or attire, plants, and areas of cultural, religious, and ceremonial significance (Smith & Jackson, 2006). The intent of decolonizing films’ images is to disengage the unequal relationship among polities, and uncover biased meanings, lopsided interpretations and representations that distort African images with colonial legacies and ideologies. Bias manifests in texts when authors present particular values as if they were universal. For example, bias can be conveyed in the global media through the selection of stories, sequence, and slant in newscasts; the placement or omission of stories in newspapers; who is interviewed and left out in radio or television talk shows and news programs; the advertisements on webpages, television, magazines, radio shows targeted at specific audiences; the lyrics of commercial jingles and popular music, and the images displayed with them in broadcast
commercials and music videos; the goals, procedures, and the rules of video games (Semali, 2002).

Counter narratives emerging from the subaltern

Indigenous archeological practices manifest in a variety of ways and varying degrees in Sub-Saharan Africa. While in North America, native American activism pushed Indigenous archeologists to claim their right to own their cultural heritage, including the right to control the material culture of the Indigenous past (Atalay, 2006: 289), African Indigenous communities took advantage of the political liberation movements sweeping the continent in the 1960s to exert the push for Indigenous languages and Africanization of political positions, which quickly led to a cultural renaissance that aimed at reclaiming everything “African”—religion, rituals, attire, and identity, even though the economy remained in the colonial grip.

In terms of Indigenous people, the situation in the United States is similar to that found among Indigenous groups globally, including Africa, where very few Indigenous people are trained archaeologists, although a majority of the archaeology under examination in many regions are sites used by, lived in, and created by the ancestors of living Indigenous populations (Atalay, 2006). Following the leadership of community activists and scholars in other disciplines, a large number of Indigenous people continue to commit themselves to reclaiming their cultural heritage and repatriation struggles.

It is possible to argue that the seeds of a new awakening of decolonization of cultural heritage has dawned in Africa - at an early stage - and sources of counter narratives seem to emerge everywhere and continue to grow incrementally in present-day Africa, albeit slowly. There are many contestations over the role of cultural heritage for Indigenous peoples in Africa. For example, cultural tourism and the commodification of South African cultural heritage for tourist consumption has since the mid-1990s been promoted by the post-apartheid administration as catalyst for local economic development (Conradie, 2012). Cultural villages, often custom built ‘homesteads’ where visitors can experience ‘living’ displays of traditional culture, were constructed from the 1980s in order to meet a growing tourist demand for South Africa’s diverse cultural heritage. These rural communities rely on their culture and cultural symbols, including artifacts, music, folklore, architecture, heritage and geographic landscapes, as a focal feature for tourism development.

This commodification of culture for tourist consumption within the contemporary post colony has not gone uncontested and scholars have accused cultural villages for their perceived debasement of culture and exploitation of marginalized peoples (Conradie, 2012). However, for many communities the commodification of cultural identity and heritage has become integral to the legitimating and sustaining of a unique identity within a global, neo-liberal marketplace where the sale of labor has been replaced by the sale of services, culture and identity. In this way, communities are taking back cultural agency that was common place prior to European
colonization, when communities were able to act as stewards over their own cultural resources and history—examining, remembering, teaching, learning, and protecting their own heritage.

We would argue, however, that while the strategic commodification of culture may offer marginalized communities an avenue for challenging stereotypical images of themselves through remaking and actively promoting the signifiers of their own contemporary cultural identities, in the context of modern globalization, complex and often contradictory layers of meaning are produced in local societies, and the marketing of one’s cultural expressions can both degrade a particular culture while simultaneously assisting in its integration into the global economy (Atalay, 2006).

This discussion of examples of cultural agency advances decolonization ventures begun by African filmmakers for advocacy and resistance. Elsewhere, in North America, for example, during this time, and in large response to the critiques and activism, archaeologists began to think critically about their right to control the material culture of the Indigenous past. Native American archaeologists along with other Indigenous scholars and activists organized a number of conferences, discussions, debates, and publications that addressed issues of “reburial and repatriation” as a way to take back their cultural heritage (Atalay, p. 289).

For Africans, these debates continue in many quarters. African scholars see many anthropological and archaeological films as nothing more than a tool of colonial exploitation (Seetah et al., 2011; Weiskel, 1988). In response, first, this inquiry considers hidden messages and historic events or memories, long forgotten but tending to reappear in films to illustrate specific stereotypical perspectives.

Second, the analysis exposes the layered messages, ideologies, biases, and stereotypes embedded in visual narratives about Indigenous Africans. The decolonization project begins with eliminating all colonial exploitation of African cultural heritages from Western media moguls and ultimately promoting African interpretations of cultural symbols, including artifacts, music, folklore, architecture, heritage and geographic landscapes, as a focal feature for Indigenous knowledge. This effort begins with a critical analysis of existing films to expose the stereotypes, lies and bias embedded in the narratives intended to entertain Westerners.

The rationale of critically analyzing global media texts is based on the multiplicity of values, meanings, or messages encoded into the form and content of visual images, Internet sources, textbook pages, or audio sources. These media sources contain a wealth of meanings; their images function in contexts, with meanings evolving in terms of narratives, sequences, and resolutions (Kellner, 2000). A critical approach would not, therefore, reduce visual images or global media texts to a single interpretation, although one could privilege a certain reading. As noted by Kellner, one also needs to know how various audiences process media texts and about the variety of ways in which images can be read.

To accomplish this effort, the study we present in this essay draws on a theory of visual consumption that encompasses realms such as information processing and image interpretations, to illustrate the techniques of cultural coding and how representational conventions influence
images in contemporary marketing by infusing visual, historical, and rhetorical presence and power (Hall, 1997; Moss, 2010; Schroeder, 2002).

This study links archeologists’, librarians’ and museum curators’ work of coding, classifying and interpreting cultural heritage materials to recognize that archaeology is based on, and generally reflects, the values of Western cultures. In privileging the material, scientific, observable world over the spiritual, experiential, and unquantifiable aspects of archaeological sites, ancient peoples, and artifacts, archaeological practice demonstrates that it is solidly grounded in Western colonial ways of categorizing, knowing, and interpreting the world. However, it is not only archaeologists who feel stewardship responsibilities toward archaeological materials and locations—many groups have rights and responsibilities to the human and material remains and to the knowledge, memories, and spiritual power that are intimately tied with the places and materials studied by archaeologists (Atalay, 2006).

The social sciences, humanities, as well as archaeology and ethno-cultural museums have used representational conventions to code visual imagery beyond aesthetics and art history in a variety of ways. In the study of cultural identities, engaging a critical view is imperative because bias is both natural and insidious. The underlying assumption of such critical view is that popular culture as represented in nature films or Hollywood films, television, websites, and so on, is a site of struggle over meanings and values. Sometimes, popular culture produces meaning and regulates pleasure. At other times, it subordinates groups’ use of popular culture as means of focusing on a particular ideological reading of the world (Kellner, 1995a).

For example, representations of people are coded as processes that constitute individual and collective identities. Focusing exclusively on individual identities and representations and projecting such mono-cultural worldview as universal instead of privileging multiple perspectives, robs the rest of the world other perspectives that are collective and equally as valid if not more interesting. We define multiple perspectives as a broad term to encompass multiple and possibly heterogeneous viewpoints (including Indigenous perspectives), representations and roles, that can be adopted within both a collaborative and non-collaborative context (Park, et al., 2000, pp. 73-82).

Conversely, social historians have, for decades, coded representations of people to reconstruct the contested pre-colonial past. A case in point is the debate that has raged on between anthropologist Linnekin (1991) and Hawaiian nationalist Trask (1991), and their differences in “representing” the sacredness of the Kaho’olawe, an island 11 miles from Maui. Linnekin observes that Hawaiians see that the island has historical, cultural, spiritual, and social significance. She argues that the tradition of the island’s sacredness is constructed in response to the Navy bombing—a political and cultural symbol of protest which is entirely distinct from its historical significance as a tabooed land.

This example from Hawaii explains the practices of social history, which emphasizes structures and interactions among different groups in society to examine the lives of everyday people—their experiences and beliefs to provide insight into historical events. Social history uses many historic narratives and oral traditions for a descriptive overview of history’s effects on a
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population. Historic narratives are the building blocks of social history but all historic narratives, such as oral traditions and social history, gain enrichment from the context or knowledge of the events that shaped individual experiences. When social historians examine Indigenous knowledge (Cohen, 1985), the interpretation is that knowledge represents lives of everyday people, their experiences and beliefs—which can afford insight into historic events such as the pre-colonial past, enduring institutions, customs, household organization, inheritance, marriage, animal husbandry, social formations, modes of production, customs, ecological systems, and the consequences of migration on demographics (Tilly, 1967).

Equally, museums have involved representational conventions but with a different viewpoint. Some historical accounts document the origins of the “museum” from its development as private rooms used to exhibit collections of wondrous curiosities gathered by colonialists from around the world to more recent public museums that display artifacts that reify a nation’s patrimony (Caro, 2006). In some ways, the silver screen (cinema), television, and the streaming of videos on the Internet have, to some extent, facilitated and advanced public museums’ role in globalizing culture, particularly among/within Western societies.

Museums in Europe and elsewhere in the West have a tradition of marginalizing the images and narratives of Africa and the African Diaspora (Artwell, 2011). This practice is often evident in the frequent appearances and the exotic quality of exhibitions, which objectify Africans in distorted, primitive, traditional displays of artifacts, pictures or other visual narratives that represent historical events or memories. These long past reappearances in museums illustrate a specific stereotypical viewpoint.

Scholars have voiced concerns in regards to European and Western countries’ continuing representations of Africa and African Diaspora as “partial, distorted, or deficient” (Artwell, 2011, p. 106), at a time when involvement of those from the African Diaspora in museums in Europe and elsewhere is problematic. Perhaps, these biased practices are possible partly because people of African Descent do not generally have positions as administrators or curators, and rarely consult for exhibitions, despite displays’ dealing with African life or culture. Humanist scholars question the packaging of African Diaspora for viewing, displaying and entertainment of white Europeans over many years (Artwell, 2011; Coombes, 1994; Grosfoguel, 2006; Handler & Saxton, 1988; Miles, 1982). They raise two important issues. First is the issue of assigning responsibility for gathering and presenting these cultural artifacts, the criteria applied during the gathering and production of exhibitions, and the types of museums motivated to present Africa and the African Diaspora exoticism.

The second issue refers to issues connected with “representing” living history as authentic “representation” of the African reality. The term “living history” was borrowed by Handler from Anderson (1985, 3: 459) to reflect the task aimed at both to document the existence of a living history “movement” and to legitimate living history as a scholarly sub-discipline (Handler & Saxton, 1988). Living historians explicitly define “authenticity” as isomorphism between a living history activity or event and that piece of the past it is meant to recreate. The troubling questions that persist for this study are: Can museums provide an
“authentic” piece of the past in its displays? Can displays of Africans in museums and in the media be “authentic?” What then might be the benefits of exposing distortions about African cultural heritage by non-Africans in global media?

Distorted and derogatory attributes of Africans and African Diaspora, common in the 19th century at the height of colonial oppression, ignored progress of Africans, in general, and the Maasai and Himbas, in particular, have made in recent years since independence from colonizing nations. Members of the Maasai and Himba communities live and work in major cities, similar to citizens of other countries. Maasai’s and Himba’s identities and the identities of many other Indigenous people seem frozen by past ideologies. Avid travelers and world cartographers can find in European and North American “travel” literature and Airline magazines derogatory representations of African identities or nomenclatures of Indigenous people such as “Baka pygmies” (in reference to the Mbuti of the Congo; the Bakaya of the Cameroon, or Binga of Gabon, (Verdu, 2010), the Bushmen (the San, a.k.a., Basarwa) of Botswana or more recently, the Lost Boys of Sudan.

These identities are gleaming examples that continue to appear in global media. A focus of scholarship therefore, that questions the reifying of artifacts, objectifying identities of Indigenous people and their cultures is timely. Critical analysis is needed, despite Indigenous cultures’ only tangential consideration in current literature but clearly acknowledged in contemporary ethnic studies (French, 2006), museum studies (Cain, 2011), cultural anthropology (Cohen, 1993), and identity politics (Baumann, 1996). Our interest in bringing up these examples is to offer a critical perspective on the ways global media are constructed, to point out some of the prevailing cultural ideas about others that are portrayed, and to raise questions about what could be done in the classroom and in the school curriculum to develop critical perspectives. We need to know how to make knowledge and knowing meaningful to the students we teach, so that the knowing they acquire affects their lives as adults. Developing such critical perspectives is a first step in decolonizing young minds (Wa Thiong’o, 1986) and to ‘break the Western code’ embodied in its rhetoric of modernity and logic of coloniality (Mignolo, 2000; Schiwy, 2009).

Background and theoretical considerations

The goal of this descriptive comparative case study of the Himbas of Namibia and the Maasai of East Africa (Kenya and Tanzania) is to expose the layered messages, ideology, bias, and stereotypes embedded in the filmic narratives (Younus, 2012). The goal for such comparison is not necessarily for the purpose of constructing an explanatory theory. Our purpose is to create a frame of reference to which varying observations in the case-films can be related. The purpose of a descriptive comparison is to construct concepts according to which phenomena can be classified and arranged. We opted purposely to do a comparative case study because, as we noticed during the analysis, indigenous peoples have been represented in public media as a homogeneous group of people. For example, as shown in the Milking the Rhino film, the Maasai
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of Tanzania and Kenya are represented in the same film as a people who live close to nature, and therefore no marked difference from the Himba of Namibia. A comparative lens becomes important to this analysis and aims to avoid falling into the trap of “Essentializing.” Essentializing basically refers to stereotyping and assuming that when indigenous people unite under a banner (such as ‘Africans’) that they must have similar attributes.

Moreover, analysis of filmic narratives tend to yield, according to Said (1978), a “new object of knowledge—a ‘complex Orient’ suitable for commoditization or display in museums, for ‘reconstruction and managed images’ for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, racial and historical themes about humankind and the universe” (pp. 127—129). Said made the point that institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, colonial bureaucracies, and colonial styles have perpetuated Western discourse of “others.” The decolonization of visual languages, images, and symbols addresses these factors. This discussion problematizes and exposes conflicts and tensions between native and non-native, local and global, cultural heritages, global interests, conservation, commodification, individual characteristics, and cultural identity.

Visual language as a function of representation

The display of artifacts and screening of images in global media are, broadly defined, examples of representation of cultural heritage. Such displays and representations, the core of cultural representation, use a visual language of imagery, which is a form of copying or simply “presenting again” (Hall, 1997). The characteristics of cultural representations include style, figures of speech, settings, narrative devices, and historical and social circumstances, not the correctness of the representations or their fidelity to some significant original (Said, 1978, p. 13). From the earliest surviving human paintings that sought to copy the environment onto cave walls to the present-day murals and billboards, visual art has collectively involved copying either scenes from the real world or copying the works of other artists, including photographs. Said (1978) reiterates that language itself is a highly organized and encoded system, which employs many devices to express, indicate, exchange messages and information, and represent. At least, in any instance of written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a “re-presence,” or a representation (p. 21).

The extension of representation (in the sense of “re-presence”) is always the consequence of some version of “truth.” If Africa could represent itself, it would, but since it cannot, representations are the default, the “faute de mieux” (meaning, for lack of anything better) for the West, since “Sie konnen sich nicht vertreten, sie mussen vertreten werden,” (translated as: they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented, as cited by Said from Marx in the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte). Simply put, “Define yourself or else be defined.” In turn, as a visual language of storytelling in modern times, films have adopted a powerful role of “representing” and in doing so, share much in common with other historical or fictional narrative genres, which often include narrative structures of plot, theme, characters, setting,
conflict and resolution (Semali, 2003). For example, the maneuvering of camera angles, cutting, lighting, and costumes, the manipulation of time and space, effectively accomplished, give a sense of a film’s realism (authenticity) for audiences. Film producers have used these techniques for decades as visual languages to communicate, fully aware that visuals are powerful iconic symbols and, in most cases, resemble the things represented, adding veracity (authenticity) to the aphorism, “Images speak louder than words.” In fact, images speak directly to audiences in the same ways experiences speak, that is, emotionally and holistically (Semali, 2000, p. 163).

However, film producers and visual artists sometimes use old, negative stereotypical visuals combined with myths, beliefs, and history to capture the attention of audiences and to elicit predetermined feelings, attitudes, and emotions. While the storyteller’s words and the images that such stories conjure may be fleeting, the stories often have long lives or become fixed in minds, deeply influencing “the flesh-and-blood individuals” who hear them, and also by extension, the social groups to which individuals belong (Dubois, 2008, p. 1). Typically, such reinforced or first impressions tend to sway opinions or audiences’ value systems for Indigenous peoples’ heritage, events, or histories. These concerns are common among media analysts and represent the core consideration of this study.

To disrupt the colonial lens and distorted gaze of Africans, indigenous cinema must approach the visual narrative and visual representation differently (Mignolo, 2000; 2008). The decolonization of visual representation of Africans, as illustrated later in this essay in the example of the film, Himbas are Shooting (2012), directed by Solenn Bardet, is work in progress. Indigenous African cinema has to adopt a different grammar and syntax. The Hollywood formula can only perpetuate the status quo. Perhaps Schiwy’s (2003; 2009) analysis of indigenous media can shed light on the African indigenizing project. Focusing on films from Bolivia, Ecuador and Columbia, Schiwy’s critique of the Western genre of cinema in Indianizing Film: Decolonization, the Andes, and the Question of Technology, encourages readers to consider how indigenous media can contribute to a wider understanding of decolonization and anticolonial study against the universal backdrop of the twenty-first century. Through questions of gender, power, and representation, Schiwy argues that, instead of solely creating entertainment through their work, indigenous media activists are building communication networks that encourage interaction between diverse cultures. As a result, mainstream images are retooled, permitting communities to strengthen their cultures and express their own visions of development and modernization.

This study examines films about the Maasai and Himba using a critical visual analysis of filmic stories, myths, images, and realities of the African people for decolonizing. Academicians and industry leaders have long since scrutinized the discursive frames adopted by visual languages of media and films’ portrayals of ethnic groups and minorities (Canby, 1990; Hall, 1997; Kellner, 1995b; Semali, 2003). Yet, largely due to photography’s realism, combined with technological and artistic expertise, these images produce realistic, pervasive, compelling visual imagery, and persuasive simulations. The goal of a critical analytical practice is to reveal the mapping of filmic visuals found in a variety of media that commonly present images of
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Indigenous people to empower and preserve their heritage, when in fact the opposite is the case—exploiting people’s heritage and objectifying that heritage as exotic, primitive, traditional, and collectively, as a group of people, a generation out-of-touch with modern civilization.

Over many years prior to African countries gaining independence in the 1960s, the characterization of the entire continent by anthropologists and journalists in the global media was the “dark continent” (Semali, 2000, p. 173; Leighton, 1856). In 1885, during the Berlin Conference, European countries scrambled for African territories and subsequently partitioned the continent into colonial territories that split ethnic groups by externally imposed borders. From that time, images of Africa and Africans seem to be static in “colonial eyes,” frozen in the past, giving the impression of ethnic groups as primitive people, obsessed by traditions, rituals, and dubious religious practices (Wesseling, 1996).

After independence, however, Africa has failed to uproot the century-old stereotypes of Africans and seems powerless to eradicate the “dark image.” The colonial expansion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries still thrives ideologically when we link expansionism with the notion of researching far-flung lands and exotic people. The discipline of archaeology emerged from a colonial desire to conquer the unknown worlds with artifacts as material proof of a nation’s conquest, establishing what Said (1978) called the “positional superiority” of the colonizers. The attitude is neither invisible nor natural for depictions of the “Orient” (p. 7). An encounter with a cultural “other” became, theoretically, “exotic” and therefore, worthy of scholarly attention (Huggan, 2001).

The collections of the colonizers in the colonial past and in some ways in the present times represent the paradox of unknowable yet known worlds, or the “frontier.” When placed in museums (photographs, artifacts, human remains or other specimens), each new display, transformed by its context, became a symbol of European ability to know and control uncharted, exotic worlds (Huggan, 2001). Perhaps the surreal story of Saartje (Sara) Baartman (1789-1816) captures the example of an extreme case of reifying the “other” as “exotic.” Baartman, a Khoisan slave woman, was transported from Cape Town to London and then to Paris, appeared naked in the streets and circuses like the animal European audiences perceived her to be. Her story is illustrative of every African, treated most grotesquely, used as "scientific proof" of "European white superiority." A back room of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris later exhibited her remains until 2002, when her remains including her organs in jars gained repatriation to South Africa (Crais & Scully, 2008).

Integral to this story of the colonizing process that epitomizes positional superiority and privilege was the appropriation of Indigenous cultures achieved through research and representation as products of exteriority, with the complicity of an underlying anthropological process that sought to delve into people’s most private and secret sanctuaries without acknowledging that sharing of these confidences would be worldwide. The essence of displays in many museums (Smith & Jackson, 2006) is a precise example. For anthropology, interest was in the “other,” not the “self,” and yet the conceptualization of “self” was in relation to the “other.”
In sum, apparently, the concept of “civilized” gains meaning only in relation to the concept of “primitive” (Two Bears, 2006).

Critical reading of global media

Critical visual analysis of media enables examination of all forms: printed, visual, virtual, audio, etc., in a manner distinct from traditional, literal “readings”. Humanist scholars argue that texts exist in contexts that intertextually exist, that the pressures of conventions, predecessors, and rhetorical styles limit authors’ or originators’ creativity from wild exaggeration. Critical visual analysis provides a framework to sort the media’s representations of people and events to uncover the underlying intended and unintended meanings the creator perpetrates. Interpretation is in this case tentative and constantly being subjected to interrogation and qualitative inquiry.

As stated previously, representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts as mentally interpreted through language. Representation is an essential part of the process that produces meaning exchanged between members of a culture (Hall, 1997) and involves signs and images. Meanings embedded in these texts and visual narratives, subjected to critical visual analysis addresses the “naturalness” of dominant ways of seeing, saying and doing, by provoking consideration of why things are the way they are, how they got to be that way, what ways change might be desirable, and what changes are necessary to create a different milieu (Semali, 2000). This framework of “critical reading” recognizes that media’s texts and images are constructed by groups who have vested interests and do not act merely as neutral conduits of information.

For decades, the mass media have revealed in their images an interest for visual narrative representations of Indigenous peoples and in turn, journalists, writers, and broadcasters willingly delivered the content. As a genre, Indigenous people have been displayed as participating in exotic cultures with appeal to Western viewers. The quest for Indigenous images, for example, has taken National Geographic photographers to Australia, New Zealand, Botswana, Alaska, Mexico and elsewhere in the world in search of that “unique” picture (Lutz & Collins, 1993). For its millions of readers, the National Geographic has long been known for this unique representation and characterized as a window to the world of exotic peoples and places.

In Reading National Geographic, Lutz and Collins explicate the National Geographic Society, its photographers’, editors’, and designers’ selection of images and texts to produce representations of Third World cultures. Through interviews with the editors, Lutz and Collins describe the process as one of negotiating standards of "balance" and "objectivity," informational content and visual beauty. Then, in a close scrutiny of some six hundred photographs, they examined issues of race, gender, privilege, progress, and modernity through an analysis of the color, pose, framing, and vantage that represent non-Western people. The result of the analysis is a complex portrait of an institution and its role in promoting a “kind of conservative” that acknowledges universal values and celebrates diversity while allowing readers to relegate non-Western peoples to an earlier stage of progress (p. 66).
Such gazes into earlier stages of human development is the focus of this study’s probe into filmic images to explain the reasons for a such appetite for the “unusual and unfamiliar,” and the rationale for the persistence of the “distant” and the “unlike” commodifying or objectifying other people’s cultural heritages. Approaching visual images through interpretive stances offers researchers a method for understanding and contextualizing images as well as the “cultural centrality of vision” (Schroeder, 2002). In connecting images to the external context of consumption, researchers gain a more thorough—yet never complete—understanding of images’ functions within contemporary society, embodying and expressing cultural values and contradictions (Schroeder, 2002). The visual approach to consumption afforded new perspectives to investigate specific historical artistic references in contemporary images, such as gaze, display, and representing identity. In addition, researchers access useful tools developed in art history and cultural studies to investigate the poetics and politics of images as representational systems.

Some anthropologists who have studied cultures in remote areas assert that the unusual traits are appealing to visual consumption and curiosity—the nudity, the stark physical features, the costumes, the rituals, and the extraordinary (Artwell, 2011; Blanchard et al., 2008). (See the film Milking the Rhino, discussed in this study, or the portrayal of the traditional dance of Bakaya).

Most American audiences are familiar with images brought to their living rooms via television and archaeological films by the National Geographic Society, ethnographic filmic representations of the peoples of the world with images that populate television broadcasts on the Discovery Channel, Nova, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Frontline and others. Stories from distant lands, exotic scenes, and extraordinary excavations, constitute the staple of evening entertainment and information delivered to audiences, captured by journalists returning from distant lands and brought home. The irony of filmic products is that the reporting of distant people’s images and stories in visual narratives provides no way for the people, who are the subjects, to read or see what is being shown or said about them to the outside. However, due to the rapidly growing influence of the Internet, mobile devices, and social media, the situation is changing rapidly.

The mapping project as a decolonizing practice

Attempts to decolonize local heritage from filmic images and visual representations of Indigenous people is part of a larger project: “Mapping Visual Language and Empowerment of the Voices of Indigenous People.” This larger project is a critical, visual venture into literacy practices that aims to explicate the visual language of storytelling that is most commonly used in films but more so in recent years on the Internet. This project recognizes that with the ever growing possibilities brought by the Internet and various applications spawned from it, numerous videos hosting services, such as YouTube, various social networking sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, and many other applications, readily accessible due to the ubiquity of mobile devices,
the world is better equipped to instantly access images, pictures, and other messages about people, events, and ideas around the globe, than ever before.

The goal of the Mapping Project is to develop counter narratives, stories and alternative media using readily available digital applications to support students and novice filmmakers to rethink the seriousness and calculated representations of Indigenous people in mainstream media. Consequently, if colonialism meant that Indigenous peoples, living within a framework of non-Indigenous control, decolonization must involve researchers’ and filmmakers’ working within a framework of Indigenous control, a framework in which the research process, the film’s cast, identification of native, non-native private, and public information, outcomes and benefits, are genuine negotiations among researcher, filmmaker and Indigenous communities.

In addition, Indigenous archaeology must include research that critiques and deconstructs Western archaeological practice as well as research that works toward recovering and investigating Indigenous experiences, practices, and traditional knowledge systems. The critical analysis of visual languages in filmic representations of people reported in this study is the conceptualization of both a decolonizing practice and a form of negotiation between industry and ethnic minorities, and between Indigenous people and academic institutions. This study’s frame of reference is the analysis of images of African heritage as commodified in films and travelogues and the methods African filmmakers use for film as a tool of resistance.

Since the 1950s, filmmakers of African descent have embarked on the creation of an African cinema which constructs meaningful imagery by drawing on ancestral, historical, political aesthetic narrative structures and cosmogony of African continental and diasporic realities. Table 1 lists examples of African filmmakers, the works of whom the West (countries of Europe and North America) continues to overlook as counter narratives. Instead, these filmic endeavors are assigned to the realm of exotic entertainment. The West relegates the content of such films, which includes the spirits of things, thoughts, images, verbalizations, and performative rituals, as superstition or exotic entertainment.

To-date, the library of films by African filmmakers (See Table 1) currently available is large, but academic institutions choose to restrain and continue to promote the "Nanooks of the North" and other romantic ethnographic films made by westerners or at the least from a western perspective of "discovery," "vanishing tribes," or the "White Man’s Burden."

Table 1

Films by African Filmmakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twilight Revelations: Episodes In The Life And</td>
<td>Yemane I. Demissie</td>
<td>Ethiopia/South Africa/USA</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>English, Amharic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times Of Emperor Haile</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The presence of Indigenous knowledge (Cohen, 1985) with its complex histories, cultures, and lived realities are currently reemerging in a response to a growing awareness of the marginalization and displacement of the world’s subordinated people and their values. While the characteristic of Indigenous knowledge is the absence of colonial and imperial imposition, such knowledge emerges in a contemporary sense partly in response to colonial and neocolonial intrusions.

For the discussion of the visual elements of the portrayal of Indigenous people and their knowledge, the story of the Maasai of Tanzania in the film series *Meet the Maasai*, and the Himbas of Namibia in the film, *Milking the Rhino*, become examples of projects, conceptualized and executed as a cultural commodity for commercial gains and publicity in university libraries,
and in brochures while simultaneously purporting to provide a voice for Indigenous people. Before offering a detailed analysis of these two films, situating each film in a class of similar films is appropriate to contrast those that offer a message of counter-narrative.

Arguably, the concept that the myths captured within the accepted conventions of film, video, and other photographic representations of Indigenous people, everywhere, are mere neutral carriers devoid of implicative content, is no longer valid. To the contrary, as Said (1978) suggested, such conventions and images are (and continue to be) part of a discourse by which European colonial culture remains able to manage and even produce a worldview of “the Orient,” politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively begun during the colonial period.

Images of the Maasai in film

This analysis introduces a discussion of images of the Maasai of East Africa in films that appeared in cinemas in recent years (See Table 2). But before this discussion, it is appropriate to clarify the positionality of this interpretation. As Sword (1999) cautions those who indulge in interpretative work to be aware that although some scholars would criticize the subjectivity that is inherent in “interpretative” work, no research is free of the biases, assumptions, and personality of the researcher (p. 277). The author (Author #1) was born in Tanzania and lived in the southern region of the Rift Valley that borders with the pastoralist Maasai. The author is positioned as an indigenous person and as an individual who brings to the topic of indigenous heritage a deep understanding about historic and politics surrounding the Maasai and their land rootedness. Insights from these positions privilege the author with gaze of the insider but also as an outsider who brings critical mindedness to the subject and the contested nature of critical analysis of media has been practiced for more than two decades.

Table 2
Films about the Maasai of East Africa

2000—2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Producer / Source</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The White Maasai (Die Weisse</td>
<td>Directed by Hermine Huntegburth</td>
<td>A film about a woman named Carola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maasai (2005)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet the Maasai: Maasai</td>
<td>Director: ANDREA and PETER HYLANDS.</td>
<td>The life of the indigenous Maasai: Filmed in the Rift Valley, Kenya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life -- Film essays of</td>
<td>Cinematography: ROB PIGNOLET. DVD:</td>
<td>Maasai: The films are: Women at work and women at home; Enkang life;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maasai life in the Kenya</td>
<td>duration 32</td>
<td>Changing times; Food and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rift Valley</td>
<td>minutes; audio English. celebration; Keeping knowledge; Birds sing and lions roar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maasai Women / Odyssey</td>
<td>Animal Herders in the East African Rift Valle Program considers the women of the tribe from childhood through marriage to old age.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diary of a Maasai Village Series</td>
<td>A series of five films Daily life among Maasai presented in a diary format in a 7-week visit to the village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Der Documentary: Maasai Migrant Series</td>
<td>Seven videos shot in Tanzania between 2008—2010 Shot by participants in the Maasai Migrants Field School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginals Meet the Maasai</td>
<td>Films for Survival International Exhibiting solidarity, aboriginal people of Australia meet with the Maasai in Kenya to share experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a show of solidarity, aboriginal people of Australia meet with the Maasai in Kenya to share experiences</td>
<td>DEv. TV The Magadi Soda Company and land grabbing in Kenya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya Maasai: The Race to Preserve the Past</td>
<td>Director: UN News and Media Division Producer: Andi Gitow A centuries’ old culture is at risk of disappearing, the Maasai in Kenya. A film of their journey deep inside this world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digitizing Traditional Culture in Kenya</td>
<td>This project is part of WIPO’s Creative Heritage Project, which is developing an integrated set of practical resources and guidelines for cultural institutions, such as museums and indigenous communities, to manage intellectual property This film is a result of collaboration between WIPO and the United Nations Television (UNTV). The camera tracks efforts by two young Maasai in Kenya, John Ole Tingoi and Ana Tome, in their quest to document valuable cultural expressions handed down by generations of Maasai elders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women at work and women at home</td>
<td>Filmed in the Rift Valley, Kenya Maasai is the first of six Film essays of Maasai life. Director: Andrea And Peter Hylands. Cinematography: Rob Pignolet Maasai women describe their way of life—Maasai hut, a medical dispensary and go shopping in a Maasai market.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled by authors.

*Meet the Maasai* (Creative Cowboys Films, Australia) is a film series set in the Rift Valley of Kenya. The series consist of six film essays of Maasai life but the narrative implies Maasai life everywhere in East Africa. The series, created by Andrea and Peter Hylands, cinematography by Rob Pignolet have durations of about 30 minutes each. Creative Cowboy Films, an award winning company that makes documentaries and publishes e-books and e-
magazines about art, culture and nature produced and distributed the series. The company’s website claims to access some of the “remotest places” on earth and with some of the world’s most significant artists. All production, including these series is available online for a fee.

The titles of the six Maasai films are: (1) Women at Work and Women at Home; (2) Enkang Life; (3) Changing Times; (4) Food and Celebration (the Maasai making soup); (5) Keeping Knowledge (young Maasai warriors jump and chant and the women sing); (6) Birds Sing and Lions Roar. The series is a perfect example of commoditization of cultural heritage. The Kenya Maasai describe their culture and the ways a rapidly changing world continue to impact their way of life, an extraordinary and semi-nomadic Indigenous world. In each film, the Maasai stage a scene to demonstrate their culture, decorated colorful attire, cultural dance, and a setting that reflects their homes.

Maasai: Women at Work and Women at Home is the first of the six in series of filmed essays of Maasai life and describe a way of life by depicting a staged Maasai hut, a medical dispensary, and a Maasai market. In Maasai society women are responsible for traditional chores like carrying water, cooking, rearing children, and building huts. Maasai women create the intricate and colorful beaded jewelry that make Maasai dress distinctive and exclusively attractive to outsiders who assume authenticity, and therefore, part of the “exotic” tapestry. However, this commodified display is an essentialized portrayal, not at all representative of Maasai women’s lives in Kenya.

To decipher the meaning of this film as a visual representation of cultural heritage, an examination of the construction and location in the message of the film in the context of Kenya is necessary. In this task, the analysis reveals the contested nature of cultural identity and the play of cultural /ethnic politics to influence allocation of resources, and in turn frames “who the Maasai are” in their native Kenya.

Audiences must view or “read” the film series “Meet the Maasai” as a contrast to an opposing vision expressed in “counter-narrative” videos now showing on the Internet. Examples like “Mimi Mmasai” demonstrate the tensions between national goals and inter-group needs and aspirations. The “Meet the Maasai” series contrasts two films: “Aboriginals Meet the Maasai,” made by Films for Survival International, which demonstrates solidarity with the aboriginal people of Australia who met the Maasai in Kenya to share experiences of governmental exploitation and disempowerment of Indigenous peoples. The second film, “The Magadi Soda Company and Land Grabbing in Kenya,” shows the struggle of the Maasai, tension between conservation and industrialization, and an initiative by powerless people to preserve their wealth (“cattle”) and lifestyle. The story is about a large mining company usurping land that has been traditional grazing grounds for generations, without compensation or possibility of sharing profits resulting from the enterprise. These two films expose the colonial legacies that continue to oppress the Maasai and exposure of the path of decolonization, despite success being problematic.

The Meet the Maasai film series uses the name “Maasai” to refer to the Maa-speaking society. The Maasai form the central core of East African pastoralists and the term Maas-speaking
people includes neighboring societies who share the same language but have separate identities. The label *Maasai* also more broadly refers to the language or (politically) to the whole grouping. The reference is sometimes useful for identifying this central core as Maasai proper, in order to distinguish among other Maa-speaking people, who compose about 40 percent of the total Maa population (Spencer, 2012). Other Maa-speaking groups to the South include, the El-Arusa, Ndorobo, Samburu, Parakuyo, Wakwavi and their cousins to the North (Kenya) that consist of the Borana, Gabra, Rendile, Turkana, and many others.

Spencer (2012) indicated that the distribution of the Maa-speaking people throughout East Africa serves to identify their relative scale and the proximity between the various groupings, while a view of their representations of the *Maa* in the literature charts a history of their status within the region, before, during, and since the colonial episode. Spencer’s explanations replete in colonial literature are, seemingly, the result of perceptions of the Maasai as an exotic problem but reveal of the origins of conservatism, and hence tautologically: “pastoralists are conservative because they resist change; they resist change because they are conservative.” As rightly exposed by suggestions in colonial literature, this “resistance to change” is attributable to cultural, or even psychological phenomena, the notorious “cattle complex,” a notion invented by Herskovits (1926), becoming accepted as “fact” that pastoral societies tend to be nomadic, semi-nomadic, transhumant, or at least highly mobile.

“Sedentarization” of the Maasai and other pastoralists was a subject of the nineteenth century as an early goal of missionaries and governmental administrators in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda), representing a policy which continues in Kenya despite its proven failure in history. Since the historical and conflicting arguments aimed to situate the Maasai within a national ethos and political economy, the present study becomes not only relevant but also strategic in decolonizing the “deficit” argument of previous years perpetrated by the *Meet the Maasai* series, and therefore potentially contributes to advancing knowledge, policy and practice.

*“Meet the Massai” series as historic events of cultural heritage*

This section examines the content of the filmic series as historic message and events and applies the complex issues surrounding culture, identity and ethnicity. The representation of the Maasai as a group of Africans coincides with old prejudices that have prevailed in films, museum displays, novels, and textbooks. In subtle ways, this film series uses the concepts of “naturalization” as part of Maasai identity and authenticity. As defined by Hall (1997), the concept of “natural” is a representational strategy used to “fix difference.” “Natural” distinguishes the Maasai from the White Europeans who are “cultural.” Hall insists that if the differences between the Maasai and the Europeans are “cultural,” then, the Maasai are open to modification and change. But if people are “natural,” then, people are beyond history, permanent and fixed. Hall seemed to imply that “natural” is a good strategy to stop the inevitable “slide” of meaning to secure a discursive or ideological “closure.”
In most films, the Maasai appear in a trademark posture; standing on one leg, or herding cattle and occasionally doing a signature dance, jumping high in the air. This portrayal is pervasive and remains so in pictures. The fifth film in the series, Meet the Maasai: Keeping Knowledge, young Maasai warriors jump and chant and women sing. They are Maasai morans [warriors] doing what they have always done on the screen—providing a visual effect and exotic background for Hollywood and other international moviemakers. In this episode, they perform an event from their culture that involves singing and jumping which posits a signifier that fixes the meaning of “natural” as implied by Hall.

Kariuki, (2003) of the East African (independent weekly), summarized this episode by saying that the Maasai are the Red Indians of today’s Hollywood adventure movies, largely faceless, pliable, and with no speaking roles other than occasional chanting. Kenyan film director, Kariuki, recounted one instance when an American director told his Maasai cast to stop making “native” noises. “I only want your images,” he called out. The Maasai are not new in the cinema, but Hollywood’s fascination with them appears to have increased lately, and today, Maasai from Kenya and Tanzania find more roles.

This episode of the African Maasai is reminiscent of the days when Red Indians of the Americas were in vogue, depicted as mindless savages who foolishly rode into a hail of bullets from the cowboys and lost every battle. But this was before big-name Hollywood celebrities such as Marlon Brando objected to such negative portrayals and became the voice of Native Americans in the movie industry. Since then, many more lobbyists emerged and rejected ridiculing minority cultures. Lobbyists include Survival International, the movement for tribal people, by Richard Gere that deals with the issue, globally, and lists protection of the Maasai among its areas of interest.

The new awareness has obviously restricted what a film director may do with the Maasai. But even without forcing the Maasai characters to play degrading roles, their parts do not require any acting skills. They are required to appear as symbols to satisfy the filmmakers’ ideas of exotic Africa, an imagined representation of cultural symbols and unique attire, chocolate bodies decorated in red ochre and scantily clad postures. “We do not see their humanistic value, which is important if one is to really appreciate them as people,” says Sultan Somji, an ethnographer of the Museums in Kenya who has lived among the Maasai for many years (Somji, 1999).

Films on the Himbas of Namibia

Like many Indigenous groups, images of the Himbas of Southern Africa have been subjects of still photographs since early settlers brought cameras to the continent. Recently however, the Himbas have appeared in films worldwide, and in documentaries on channels such as the Discovery Channel, BBC & PBS and as part of feature films like Kin (2000) in which they are not the main characters but are part of the tapestry.

As in previous sections, before delving into the treatment of the images of the Himbas, (See Table 3) the position for discussion is a necessary requirement to clarify interpretation from
experiences, origin, and character, for qualitative research (Takeda, 2012; Sanghera and Thapar-Bjorkert, 2008; Louis & Barton, 2002).

Table 3
Films of the Himbas of Southern Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Director/Source</th>
<th>Release Date</th>
<th>Synopsis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sacred Fire Of The Himbas</td>
<td>Russia TV</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>The film crew attends and films Himbas rituals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Himbas Are Shooting</td>
<td>Solenn Bardet</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>A group of Himbas men and women decide to make a film showing who they are from their own perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milking The Rhinos</td>
<td>David E. Simpson</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Milking the Rhino examines the deepening conflict between humans and animals in an ever-shrinking world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Trip Into Himbas</td>
<td>Juan Herrero</td>
<td>Producer: Jose Alcazar</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep The Dance Alive</td>
<td>Rina Sherman</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>A unique voyage through the music, dance and possession by spirits of the OvaHimbas people of Northwestern and Southwestern Namibia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Himbas Of Namibia - The Namibian Tribes Series.</td>
<td>Richard Wawman and Wayne Derrick Discovery Channel</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Focusing on the death of Headman Vetamuna Tjambirua Uoherero, this program explores life among the Himbas as they struggle with their sorrow - and the volatile question of who will be the next headman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribal Wives: Episode 4 - Himbas/Namibia (Clip) (2012)</td>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>A woman from the UK, a single working mother of three, stays with the Himbas in northern Namibia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Himbas - Últimos Indigenas (Salamanca, Spain)</td>
<td>Francisco Giner Abati</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>“This documentary shows the first meeting of Dr. Francisco Giner Abati's team with the Himbas tribe of Angola.”--Videodisc container.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cry Of The Owl The Himbas In Namibia</td>
<td>A film by Erez Laufer</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>The film follows three generations of strong Himbas women, as they raise their children, trying to cope with the immense difficulties to simply survive.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled by authors.
The author (Asino) was born in Namibia and grew up in the Omusati region, which borders the Kunene region, in which many of the Namibian Himbas live. After years of traveling outside of Namibia and studying in the US, this author became increasingly uneasy about the projected image of the Himbas, because it was contrary to actual experience. The author often found that the narrative of the Himbas as savage, exotic, and backwards seemed dominant for a country rich in ethnic, linguistic, and geographical diversity. Characterization of the Himbas was often as separate from other groups and seemingly visitors in their own country. The author sees the Himbas as not separate but parts of Namibia, as such a misconception, misrepresentation, and exploitation is not only of the Himbas but of Namibian cultures, and by extension, a misrepresentation of the Afrikan people. This study critically examines the portrayals of Namibians on film and argues against the “danger of a single story” (Adichie, 2009) of the Himbas of Namibia. The perspective offered here is therefore not to argue for one correct view, but rather that multitudes of stories exist, and research, films, and images should portray the Himbas, and to a larger extent the Namibians and Afrikan people, as multidimensional.

“Milking the Rhino”

Set in Namibia and Kenya, *Milking the Rhino* (MTR) is a documentary by David Simpson (2009) which focuses on conservation involving the Himbas in Namibia and Maasai in Kenya. According to the promotional materials, the film “examines the deepening conflict between humans and animals in an ever-shrinking world. It is the first major documentary to explore wildlife conservation in Namibia from the perspective of people who live with wild animals. Shot in some of the world’s most magnificent locales, MTR offers complex, intimate portraits of rural Africans at the forefront of community-based conservation: a revolution that is turning poachers into preservationists and local people into the stewards of their land.” ([http://milkingtherhino.org/film.php](http://milkingtherhino.org/film.php)). In the Namibian segment, the film focuses on the Himbas in the Marienfluss Valley in Kaokoveld, and their relationship with conservation. Rather than tell a story of community based conservation, the film succeeds in equating conservation with the commodification of the Himbas cultural heritage. Two of the film’s scenes capture this portrayal more fully, with divergent viewpoints, (one from the native people and the other from the tour lodge operator) when according to the narrator, the Himbas community establishes an agreement with a resort that operates on Himbas land, paying 8% from proceeds for use of the communal land, a situation that illustrates that the Himbas can contribute to the local economy both as commodity and as conservationists.
Scene 1: An elderly woman explains the conflict they have with an arrangement between the community and the lodge

“I’ve been here so long that the parents of these kids weren’t even born yet. All these houses when they were being built, I was already here. I used to graze goats where they built that lodge. And because goats weren’t enough, we planted crops. When we were planting by the river, we also burned [bushes] . . . because animals come out of the river and eat people. We were burning the bushes so that crocodiles in the river will go elsewhere for bushes. But the lodge said they’ll give us food if we stop planting. They said: ‘If you burn trees, the birds will have no place to sit and people won’t be able to take good pictures. The grass and trees need to grow so the birds can eat.’ That’s why we stopped planting.”

Scene 2: The lodge owner

“Guests coming to this part of the world, they’ve got a certain picture in their head already. They want to discover a really remote place and it’s not a nice feeling when you have travelled all the way around the world and then you clearly can see that 700 people have been there before you and have all left a mark on the place (as the lodge owner speaks, the camera cuts away to a shot of two black men using rakes to sweep away footprints so that the land appears untouched and that the tourist would find the virgin soil they seek instead of evidence of the “700 people” who may have been there previously). So, of course, we try to give the people the experiences they are looking for.”

In using the image of black men sweeping away foot prints from the sand before a car full of white tourists arrives, and in portraying the Himbas as incapable of taking care of their land, the film succeeds in reinforcing the image of the ignorant and disrespectful tourists as well as that of a savage indigenous people. The film serves as a reinforcement that “wildlife and cultural tourism thrive as contemporary manifestations of a Western primitivist’s desire to make Africa the ‘Other’ to modernity, creating idealized, and objectified views of the continent. Westerners want ‘the myth of a wild Africa,’ and African communities are aware that representations of their culture and places must fit this fiction in order to procure tourism’s benefits” (Talmor 2010).

The two viewpoints show the mismatch between the expectation of the community that sacrificed on their way of living on the grounds that they will be compensated and the lodge owner who expect that the community would put on a show for the discerning tourist as grounds for getting the compensation. The scenes further evidence the shift in Milking the Rhino, from being a film about conservation to one with depictions of stereotypes about indigenous communities whose worth rises and falls like a commodity; whose way of life can be appended and raked over so as to fit “a certain picture” in the head of the tourist. The message communicated is that conservation is only as valuable as the community’ profiting from such practices.
Many images used in the film are of a community whose existence is to serve the tourist, whose very identity is solely for the purpose of picture taking by visitors from distant lands, seeking “to discover a really remote place.” In another scene that captures the conflict between offering an “authentic Himbas experience” to the visitors and the need for the Himbas to earn a living from visitors, is of a group of tourists who bring pens to give as gifts in the Himbas village. The group enters the village, shakes hands with the local people, takes pictures, and distributes pens. One person in the group [not clear if it is a tour guide or visitor], takes a piece of paper and teaches a Himba woman how to write the name “Magdalena,” while the rest of the tourists look on, seemingly in amazement as a Himba woman, miraculously, in that instant becomes “civilized.” At the same time during the scene, the resort manager—in voiceover—complains that the Himbas’ selling their merchandize reduces the authenticity of the experience that the tourists might have for which they travelled from all over the world to see.

The film presents a “decontextualized ethnography” in which characters are mere “foils in an edifice of poorly explored contradictions, present[ed] only to add momentum to the film’s realism effect” (Biella 2011, p. 306). Although the film is about conservation, the filmmaker’s use of the Himbas’ amounts to what Singer (1988) calls the “tits and spear” philosophy designed to appeal to and excite non-anthropologist (p. 374). In other words, the image of the Himbas in MTR seems to be “concerned primarily to project images of the 'other' which entice the viewers enough to justify the film being broadcast” (Wärmlöf, 2000, p. 187).

The film, Milking the Rhino, contrasts with a counter-narrative film: The Himbas are Shooting (THAS). In this film, the Himbas, working with a French film director, Solenn Bardet, who has been part of their community for 18 years, decide to create a film addressing the misconceptions of their culture. In THAS, the Himbas are the storytellers, acting scenes of marriage, death ceremony, and relationships with their land and cattle. The image presented is that of a people who live in a community while interacting with an outside world. The Himbas are Shooting provides a counter-narrative by showing Himbas exist simultaneously in their community and as part of the Namibian society. They milk their cows and use the butterfat as part of their customs but also freely go to the supermarket to buy various necessities or even butter in the event that they’ve not produced enough especially during the drought season. Although this discussion is not an endorsement of THAS as a perfect representation of Himbas on the screen, the film succeeds in presenting another side of the Himbas as people who live their daily lives not laying in wait for foreign tourists’ patronage to justify their existence or validate their way of life.

**Lessons learned, future research and conclusions**

This discussion considers developments in decolonization of filmic media that traditionally markets, displays, and commoditizes Indigenous peoples and their cultures and returns attention the question, “Who owns the past?” which was the focus of a landmark symposium in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil two decades ago (United Nations, 1992). This symposium laid groundwork for
the negotiation of relationships among archaeologists, journalists, anthropologists, conservationists, and Indigenous people, and encouraged African archaeologists to recognize the political implications and moral responsibilities of their activities. The Indigenous past is the rightful province of Indigenous people—captured in films, photographs, and artifacts, including human remains. It is their cultural heritage.

A critical visual analysis of images of the Maasai and the Himbas offers researchers an interdisciplinary method for understanding and contextualizing images—crucial concerns, given the cultural centrality of visual languages in the two filmic episodes. If marketing depends upon images, including brand images, corporate images, product images, and images of identity, then research methods in marketing must be capable of addressing issues that such images signify. Since most people believe that pictures tell the truth (Lefferts, 1982), treating advertising’s imagery and filmic visual representations is necessary, much the same as an art historian treats pictures. This methodology is necessary for analyzing illustrative examples embedded visual cases such as in “Milking the Rhino,” “The Gods Must Be Crazy,” to yield what Said (1978) called the “complex Orient.”

A comparison between films’ representations of the Maasai and the Himbas reveals complex issues surrounding culture, identity and ethnicity. Identifying similarities between the Himbas and the Maasai, particularly from the two group’s portrayal in MTR, side by side is not difficult. Similarities exist for construction of images of the people to create a common physique, attire, nudity of women, and the rugged terrain. These comparisons seem to be beneficial in understanding both the commonalities as well as the divergences between the two groups.

The discussion proceeds from the assumption that a central debate within the research of visual consumption concerns images polysemny, which suggests that images float in the “postmodern” world—signs disconnected from signifiers—leaving viewers free to generate novel, resistant, and idiosyncratic meanings. Certainly, consumers generate their own meanings, as they focus their cognitive, social, and cultural lenses on whatever they see. However, researchers agree that this does not mean elimination of the historical and political processes that also generate meaning; that is, images exist within cultural and historical frameworks that guide production, reception, circulation, and interpretation. In both types of films discussed in this study, the genre thrives on the distortion, stereotyping, and manipulations for spectacle. On this basis, underlying conflict is present, and tensions exist between global interests and cultural heritage, commoditization and conservation, individual characteristics and cultural identity. The decolonization of visual languages, images, and symbols addressed these debates.

Global media and the non-Africans who drive projects of films of cultural heritage have distorted the reality of Africa. For centuries, beginning with perceptions of the remote “Dark Continent,” myths and stereotypes have clouded the worldview of many non-Africans, particularly Europeans. Since these myths and stereotypes remain viable today in the global media (however unintentional the distortions and omissions may be), images of Indigenous peoples continue to nurture racist doctrines and practices of white superiority and privilege.
Africa is often misunderstood, however, because of the western media’s dismissal of the continent as backward and therefore unworthy of coverage, until disaster strikes—as the famine in Ethiopia (1983-1985), Somalia (2011), the Rwandan genocide (1994), or the Darfur conflict in Sudan (2003). Some Western media do not portray Africa as a diverse continent, of fledgling democracies, and consisting of many countries, climates, geographies, histories, languages, or people. The confluence of these omissions is sometimes insidious, as in the films examined and in many others.

Arguably, the conclusion is that the emerging stories and storytellers represent a variety of sources and places with different intentions. They sometimes promote images, myths, and impressions, seemly innocent on the surface, but in fact, promulgate pregnant messages that could be untrue or far from innocent. In an increasingly globalized world, colonizing stereotypical stories persist and images that tend to romanticize indigeneity continue to flourish throughout the media. In sum, in neocolonial times, the notion of the “Orient” persists, captured in a variety of visual forms that are metaphoric, idiosyncratic, and psychologically cultivated.

For example, recently the codenaming Osama bin Laden, “Geronimo,” insulted members of the Native American community by using a Native American patriot’s name as a moniker for the most wanted terrorist in the world (Fletcher & Vicaire, 2012; Nichols, 2011). However, codenaming is not unusual or new by any means. LaDuke & Cruz (2011) demonstrated the pattern of appropriation of Native American names and imagery by the U.S. military is not unique: Blackhawk and Kiowa helicopters to “Shock and Awe” campaigns, a reference to the Wounded Knee Massacre. From their use of Native American names to the outright poisoning of native people for testing, the U.S. military’s impact on Indian Country has a long and troubled history and is, as evidenced by recent events, ongoing. The result is commodification of cultural heritage that is part of a people’s history but now appropriated by outsiders to reflect “dark images” that represent evil, which by reference reflects native people. Such innuendo is particularly worrisome when repeated or replicated in films and inevitably turns viral when circulated through social media. This phenomenon represents this discussions’ concept of the “filmic language” of storytelling. By connecting visual languages and images to the cultural context of consumption, researchers gain a more thorough - yet never complete - understanding of images’ embodiment and expression of cultural values, contradictions, and sometimes, innuendos.

Future research must acknowledge the dilemmas and contradictions in the images that represent historical, representational, and the effects of coloniality of power, as both cultural artifacts and deceptive bearers of meaning, reflecting broad societal, cultural, and ideological codes. Research studies focused on the political, social, and economic implications of images, coupled with an understanding of the historical conditions influencing their production and consumption require cross-disciplinary training and collaboration with other indigenous communities within Africa and beyond to reveal the insidious exoticism perpetrated by non-indigenous filmmakers to produce what Schiwy (2009) called the logic of hegemony-subalternity (p. 9). Such attempts should aim at decolonizing biases, colonial exploitation and the distorted
imagery of indigenous peoples wherever they continue to exist in order to provide a balanced (hi)story about people’s lives and cultural heritage.

In addition, research that extends previous study of visual representation into realms of history, ontology, and art may provide a necessary bridge between visual meanings residing within producers’ intentions or individuals’ responses, and the tension between visually attractive images and the integrity of images that represent other people’s cultures. Key questions remain for the rationale for the celebration of certain images and the ignoring or vilifying of others. Understanding the role that visual consumption plays in identity information, visual history, and representation signals a step toward understanding market structures and subsumes basic sociological concerns of power, desire, and identity.

Elsewhere, we have underscored the continued vigilance necessary in reading images critically that involves cultivating a critical visual literacy education that enables teachers and students to situate themselves in global media texts and take a critical stance relative to social and political positions implicit or explicit in a given media event as expressed by the author of the text or producer of the film (Semali, 2000). Taking such a stance directs one’s attention toward bias, manipulation, and distortions introduced by the ideological, value, and cultural positions taken by readers and authors or producers. Such critical reading is a form of decolonization stance, which in part, acknowledges the range of meanings and effects present in the filmic text and, consequently, taking a stance affirms one’s political position and courage to criticize texts that promote “blameworthy phenomena such as exoticism, racism, sexism, or homophobia” (Kellner, 2000, p. 85).

Finally, this discussion, of necessity, must note that decolonizing cultural heritage is an on-going project and an unrelenting endeavor. To disrupt neocolonial intrusions, African scholars, activists and academic journals, must continue to exert relentless determination to expose the calculated (intended or unintended) misrepresentation of Indigenous people in mainstream, global media by relying on conceptual and empirical analysis from African countries including Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia, South Africa, and so on. By creating and encouraging a dialogue between producers in interdisciplinary fields of film, anthropology, new media technologies, and education, African scholars can focus African agency, representation and power, not from a deficient European model, but rather in contrast, to reveal African visual representations that transcend those basic stereotypes and arise from root in African metaphysics and the noumenal plane dominant in African culture in films like Sarraounia (1986) and The Himbas are Shooting (2012).
References


