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GOD IS A WOMAN

by Andrés Peyrot

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Runtime : 85 mn

2023 – France, Switzerland, Panama – 1.90 – 5.1

▷ *INTERNATIONAL PRESS*

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In 1975, French Oscar-winning director Pierre-Dominique Gaisseau travels to Panama to film the Kuna community, where women are sacred. Gaisseau, his wife and their little girl Akiko live with the Kunas for a year. The project eventually runs out of funds and a bank confiscates the reels. Fifty years later, the Kunas are still waiting to discover "their" film, now a legend passed down from the elders to the new generation. One day, a hidden copy is found in Paris...

INTERVIEW WITH ANDRÉS PEYROT

How did you hear about Pierre-Dominique Gaisseau's "lost" film *God is a Woman*?

I met Orgun, one of the young directors we see in my film, at a film festival in Panama in 2010. We got along well, and he said I should come visit his community, the Kunas, who live mainly on the Kuna Yala archipelago, along Panama's Caribbean coast.

Orgun is actually from the island of Ustupu, so that's where I ended up spending a few days. I mentioned somewhat naively that I thought it'd be interesting to shoot a film there, without really having a specific idea in mind. It became kind of a joke, the people I met there laughed and said, "Good luck, a French guy already did it over 40 years ago and it didn't end very well."

I wanted to delve into that story more, but I never imagined I'd spend 10 years on it...

Did you already know the work of this filmmaker?

No, not at all. But there was this entire legend around him in the community. I heard all sorts of anecdotes and everyone had their own idea of what might have happened with the film. Some even thought it became this huge blockbuster...

Almost no one mentioned Gaisseau's name to me, though. It was Akiko's movie for them. Pierre-Dominique, his wife Kyoko and their four-year-old daughter Akiko had stayed in the village for a year. And Akiko was the one who integrated the most. She stayed with a family in the village while her parents worked. So, when I got back, I did some research and discovered that Gaisseau, whose name not even my biggest cinephile friends had heard of, received the 1962 Oscar for best documentary for his film *Sky Above and Mud Beneath*.

And then you meet Akiko Gaisseau...

In 2014 I find out that she's going to present *Cendres*, a documentary made about her mother, at the Forum des images in Paris. I approach her at the end of the screening and mention the film her father shot among the Kunas. She's surprised because only her close friends and family know of it. And she is touched to know that the story is still alive within the community, and that her name is the one that they remember. She tells me she'd love to visit Kuna Yala again one day. And that's how the first idea for my project takes shape: find the original film and go back to the island with Akiko. But she got sick and it became clear that she wouldn't be able to make that trip. She passed away at the end of last year.

Were you sure to find the film?

Not at all, that's what delayed us so much. Akiko had nothing. We just had some leads in Panama. It turned out that Pierre-Dominique Gaisseau had taken out a loan to produce the film himself. And when he went back to New York to try to sell it he wasn't able to, so the bank ended up confiscating the reels. When they finally closed in 2010, the bank donated all the material it had to the Panamanian Ministry of Culture. But after a change in administration there, no one seemed able to locate the reels. And then they just reappeared in one of the ministry's offices, but the film was so damaged that we found ourselves at another impasse.

And then there's a new twist...

In 2017, Akiko received a call from an old family friend who she barely knew and who asked her to come get rid of some boxes that Gaisseau had left with him when he went back to live in Paris...

Among the boxes were some reels labeled "God is a Woman". So, we contacted Eric Le Roy from the CNC (the French National Center of Cinema), who had accompanied Kyoko in the restoration of the Oscar-winning film *The Sky Above and Mud Beneath* but hadn't heard of her daughter Akiko. We went together to the French Film Archives to identify the images. It was so moving to discover the film and all the footage, and even some family movies shot with little Akiko in Ustupu.

In your opinion, what is the value of Gaisseau's film?

Essentially memorial and that's what I tried to show. His images are enormously valuable to the Kunas on a personal level, for the families and community. They're also aesthetically beautiful. However, the ethnographic dimension that the filmmaker claimed undoubtedly leaves something to be desired. There are lots of shortcuts. The film follows certain dogmas of the time, like the romantic myth of discovering populations who have totally escaped progress, which is obviously not the case.

Do you think Gaisseau believes what he says? Or does he know it's a type of mystification?

I think he convinced himself of the validity of his research, which was largely based on Nordenskiöld's books, a Swedish anthropologist who had written the reference works on the Kunas at the beginning of the century. Turpana, the French-speaking Kuna who had assisted Gaisseau during the shoot, had tried to debate him... but every time Gaisseau had kind of an evasive answer. This didn't get in the way of them developing a real friendship, though.

Can we say that, for the Kunas, God is a woman?

Yes and no. In their spirituality, the creative forces that could resemble God are dual in nature. Everything is based on the balance between the forces, the masculine spiritual force and the feminine

spiritual force. And there are all kinds of spirits represented by animals, which populate parallel dimensions in the jungle and the ocean as well as the depths of the earth and the sky. In each village, there's an administrative head and a spiritual head. Today in Ustupu, a woman is the administrative head and the spiritual one is a man. He's the singer we see in the film as a lot of things are transmitted through song. What's true is that the initiation rites are reserved for women and that women own the land. It's a "matrilocal" society, a term that Gaisseau ended up using at the end of his life.

Tell us about Turpana, who leads the first half of the film...

Arysteides Turpana was a Kuna intellectual, linguist, writer... some of his poetry collections have been translated into French and English. He was a major figure in the community, very politically engaged, particularly when it came to indigenous rights. At the same time, he always advocated for sharing, exchange, openness. He was a genius in some respects and had an unparalleled sense of humor. He was among the first Kuna generation to have had studied abroad some, notably in Paris. After Akiko's journey proved impossible, Turpana was going to be the through line of my film. But he died of COVID in October 2020, before the actual shoot. The images that I kept of him, the whole beginning of the film, come from location scouting we did in 2018 with a small team... or that I even did alone, with the aim of gathering testimonies to help with the writing.

You never thought about giving up, despite the damaged reels found in Panama and despite Turpana's death?

Of course, there were several times making this film when the outcome seemed pretty uncertain. Moments to really dig deep and keep up the energy. Without the reels, I think I would have ended up telling the story of the Kunas' impossible quest for the images they've been deprived of. Fortunately, the images were found and



then restored, and it was a collective effort to pick up Turpana's torch. The film became more collegial, with Orgun and his brother Duiren, who were Turpana's friends and admired him enormously, with Cebaldo, who had studied with him in France and pays homage to him in the film in a Parisian café, etc.

Even the rapper filmed by Orgun and his brother quotes Turpana...

This proves his importance within the Kuna community. The rapper is Sidsagi Inatoy, from the group Kuna Revolution and his song denounces some handed down notions circulating in Panama. For example, there's a story about the destruction and looting of Panama's old city in 1678 by the pirate Morgan. Sidsagi sings about it being an alliance between Kunas and pirates to free slaves. It can also be seen as a positive story, not a negative one, contrary to what's taught in Panamanian schools. The track cites Turpana as someone who, through his writings, was doing this type of historical rehabilitation.

The combat scenes in your film, played out by the inhabitants of Ustupu. What do they represent?

It's an annual ceremony that commemorates the Revolution of 1925, through which the Kuna territories gained more autonomy within Panama, at a time when the government was oppressing them. This ritual was established by the revolutionaries themselves to pass on the memory of their actions. It has grown so much over time that the whole village participates, everyone has a role, like in immersive theater. During his year spent in Ustupu, Pierre-Dominique Gaisseau must have attended the Revolution's 50th anniversary ceremonies, but he filmed very little of them. I imagine that their theatrical aspect wasn't quite "pure" enough for him...

The viewer understands that this is the reproduction of war scenes, but you have chosen not to give precise information through voiceover or title cards...

I trust the viewer to understand the essence of what's going on and, above all, to feel what's at stake. The fundamental principle for me in making the film was to not say anything that the Kunas themselves aren't saying. The Kunas love conversation, I've seen them so many times gathered around a table, discussing different subjects. The shoot was long, I filmed a lot while constantly trying to create spaces for the community to express itself.

The preparations for the screening, and then the outdoor projection, are truly emotional moments for the community and for us, the viewers...

The community let Gaisseau film them knowing that they'd have these images for posterity and over time many gave up on the idea of seeing them one day. When I told them that I was going to do everything to make it possible, I felt like some hope was restored, in a very strong, touching way. When I found Demetria, the little girl at the center of one of the rituals Gaisseau filmed, and learned that she had not returned to the community for more than twenty years, it added a lot of emotion.

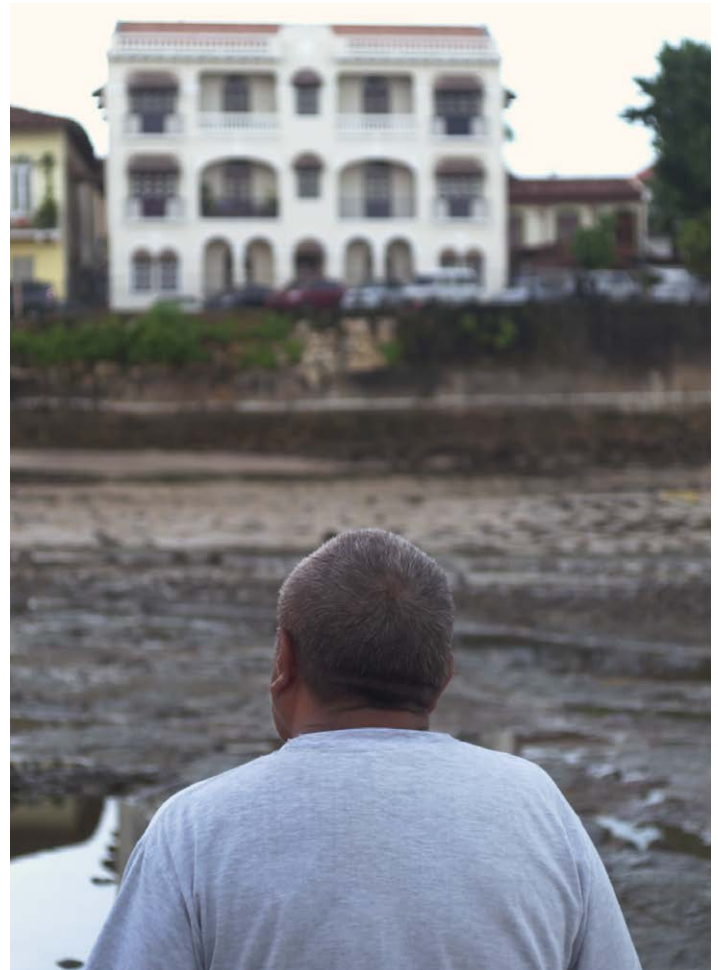
You play poetically with the faces of yesterday and today, filming some community members bathed in the beam of the projected movie. What is the meaning of these superimpositions?

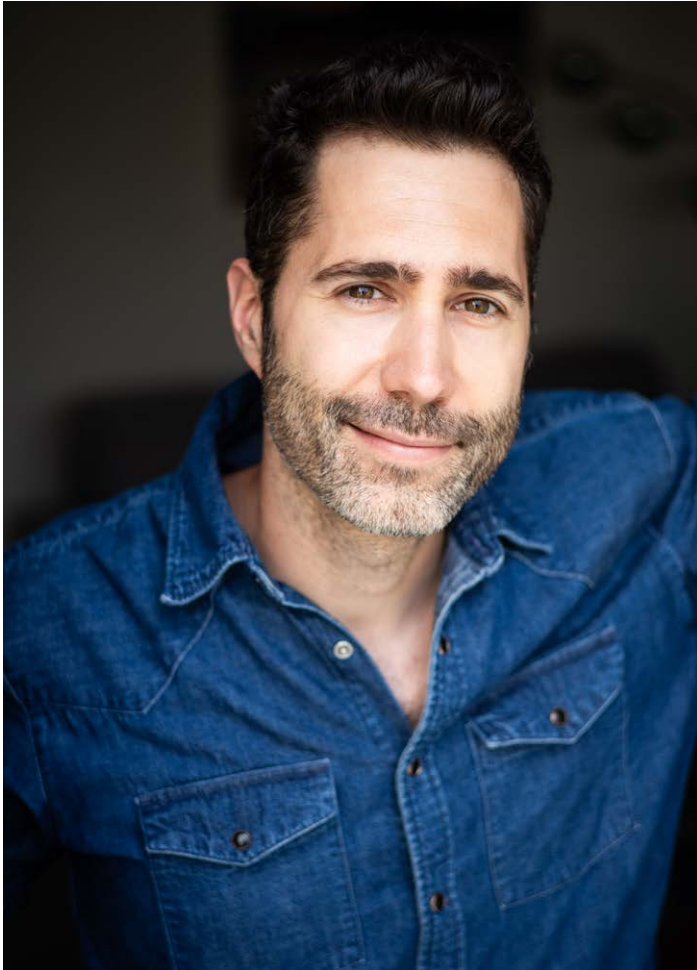
It was one of the directing intentions that remained since the project's first written versions. I was interested in superimposing eras with the same people in the same places. I wanted to try to transcribe the experience of the projection of the film in a spiritual way. I didn't give them any instructions on how to dress, but it's quite common for Kuna women to dress in bright colors, like they

did half a century ago. I only asked them to sit or stand in front of the projected images. I let the camera roll for a long time. The images aligned emotionally. It was an organic and visual way to film this union of memory and present. To create an alternate space, which isn't concrete, and which fits with Kuna spirituality where souls can travel through dimensions. The emotional charge is such that the spirit of these people is both here and somewhere else, between yesterday and today.

You show that Pierre-Dominique Gaisseau's film is, in fact, more of a family film than a scientific document. Does that mean you're questioning a whole section of ethnographic cinema?

That's probably the case, but it's not really my place to say. It's up to the communities that were filmed to respond, and they talk about it in my film... The most important thing is to go back to these communities and ask them to tell their own story. This is what Orgun does with his work. He defends indigenous cultures and as soon as smartphones arrived he has encouraged the Kuna populations to film themselves. There is now a whole debate within the community about the Internet, which they got quite late. Orgun is among those who see it as an opportunity for indigenous cultures to create their own images and disseminate them; other Kunas, older, more purist perhaps, see the risk of a youth glued to YouTube. Duiren has just finished a documentary, *Bila Burba* (The Warrior Spirit), edited by Orgun, on the commemorations around the 1925 Revolution. We see them camera in hand during the final celebration in my film. It's entirely dedicated to the Revolution, it's a memorial piece based on interviews, made by community members. As for my own film, I plan to show it in Ustupu at the end of the year.





DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Andrés Peyrot is a Swiss-Panamanian filmmaker based in Paris. After graduating from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, Andrés most notably shot Jonathan Caouette's film *Walk Away Renee*, selected for the 2011 Cannes Critics' Week. He has filmed and edited numerous arts and culture documentaries for French TV. He also co-wrote and edited *Emperors of Nothing* (2023), a feature documentary by Cédric Gerbehaye about an infamous Belgian prison. *God is a Woman*, his first feature documentary, premiered at the Settimana della Critica and Toronto Film Festival in 2023.



WITH

Arysteides Turpana, Laida Diaz de Prestan, Olonigdi Chiari, Cebaldo Inawinapi, Orgun Wagua, Dui ren Wagua, Demetria Prestan Diaz, Demetriaiana Prestan Diaz, Sidsagi Inatoy



CREW

Director	Andrés Peyrot
Screenplay	Andrés Peyrot & Elizabeth Wautlet
Production	Brieuc Dréano, Andrés Peyrot, Johan De Faria, Sebastian Deurdilly, Bénédicte Perrot
Coproduction Associate Producers	Xavier Grin Orgun Wagua, Duiren Wagua, Isabella Gálvez Peñafiel, Moisés Gonzalez
Music	Grégoire Auger
Image	Patrick Tresch (SCS) & Nicolas Desaintquentin
Editing	Sabine Emiliani
Sound	Luis Bravo, Luis Lasso, Damien Perrollaz & Samy Bardet
A Production by In Coproduction with	Industrie Films, Upside Films P.S. Productions
With the participation of In association with With the support of	Ciné+, Pyramide Distribution, SerTV Cineventure 8 Région Ile-de-France, Cinéforum, Loterie Romande, Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée
Associated Production French Distribution International Sales	Wagua Films, Mente Pública Pyramide Distribution Pyramide International

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