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UN spotlights film as a window into indigenous lives



[UN marks International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples](#)

9 August 2010 – On the frozen Arctic, a hunter in search of seals watches in horror as one of his tribesmen murders another. Then the killer begs him to forget what he saw and help dispose of the body. Andrew Okpeaha MacLean's short film, the first ever made in the Inupiaq language, asks what constitutes justice in an isolated community where everyone needs each other just to survive.

The 2008 prize-winning film *Sikumi* (On The Ice) offers an insight into a culture and a people largely unknown to the rest of the world, and it is also one of four films screened today in New York as the United Nations celebrates the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous filmmaking is the theme of this year's Day and Mr. MacLean hopes that films such as his own provide a chance for audiences worldwide to understand a bit more about peoples who find themselves frequently marginalized, dispossessed of their lands and impoverished.

"Online, in one day, half a million people saw the film," he tells the UN News Centre. "And of those half a million people, maybe 99.9 per cent have never met an Inupiaq person... They didn't get some deep education into what the culture is, but they got something. They got a taste. They got to hear the language they got to see the environment. They got to see a piece of what life up there is like."

Sonia Smallacombe, an officer at the Secretariat of the UN's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, stresses that indigenous filmmaking offers not only an opportunity for audiences to learn about communities they never previously knew, but also for indigenous peoples to "get their voices out there into the public arena."

By doing so, she explains, they can help countervail the often overly simplified portrayal of indigenous people in mainstream films that is used to "develop [detrimental] government policies on indigenous people."

Mr. MacLean agrees. "I think that's definitely accurate... It's so amazing that film can do that for people and I think that it is a window that kind of goes both ways."

The master of ceremonies at today's celebrations in New York, which were attended by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, was Roberto Múcaro Borrero, the Chairperson of the NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) Committee on the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples.

A former president of the United Confederation of the Taino People, who are based in Puerto Rico, he says that indigenous "film is really important because it allows us to transmit a story that few people have heard."

Indigenous filmmakers say that while not all films about indigenous peoples made by outsiders are shallow, even those that are complex tend lack the type of accuracy that only indigenous people themselves can provide.

"I think it's possible for outsiders to have a complex viewpoint and be an observer with a kind of integrity...but I don't think it's possible for an outsider to write something inside. I think it's only so far that you can go unless you grew up within," says Mr. MacLean.

"Historically, I think there are a lot of great films that have been done by people coming from outside of [indigenous] communities that have helped to raise a lot of awareness. But there is just another way of looking at things and to get at that, to get at the heart of community, these stories have to come from the communities themselves," says Mr. Borrero.

Like the Taino people, the Inupiat also place a strong emphasis on community. Because "the landscape [in northern Alaska] is so harsh, the lifestyle is so harsh, people had to rely on each other to a pretty amazing degree," says Mr. MacLean. "It may be that a hunter is unsuccessful for a couple weeks, and if his family is only relying on him, they're basically going to starve. But the fact is that they can survive that because his neighbour went out and got himself a seal, so they don't go hungry."

However, Mr. MacLean worries that the Inupiat's strong communal ties are being threatened by an "assault from mainstream culture."

"We have Western culture – this juggernaut that's just piped into our homes over TV and the Internet, this onslaught that fills our brain and our lives. I think it's important that it become a two-way thing. I think instead of us just absorbing the

culture of the mainstream, it's important that we start to project our own culture out as well," Mr. MacLean says.

It's precisely that dynamic, the tendency of a dominant "mainstream" culture to absorb indigenous culture, that makes the right to self-determination so important, says Mr. Borrero. "When other people are allowed to determine your identity, to determine your history, you lose your rights. You lose that part of your selves that has been around even before some of these governments were formed," he says.

Article 3 of the [**UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**](#) states that "indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development."

The UN is intrinsic to protecting the rights of indigenous peoples, says Mr. Borrero.

"I think UN plays a critical role because it's an opportunity for indigenous people, like the Taino, to bring their story to the international forum. Oftentimes, local and state governments are unresponsive, and communities have no choice but to go outside those realms to try to seek a redress and seek assistance for problems."

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