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From Honey to Ashes

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***From Honey to Ashes.* Lucas Bessire.**

Documentary Educational Resources.

Watertown, MA. 2006.

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Dipped in Honey, Roasted in Ash

Ethnographic film has yet to provide an in-depth view of contact between indigenous groups and mainstream society. *From Honey to Ashes* by Lucas Bessire takes us a step closer in appreciating some of the mechanisms of interethnic contact, describing a Chaco tribe's struggle to come to grips with encroaching development. Bessire, who had previously worked among the Ayoreo of Bolivia, quickly travels from the U.S. to Paraguay after learning that a band from this same ethnic group was recently encountered. After obtaining permits from the Paraguayan government to film the Ayoreo, Bessire transitions well into their community and engages them to relate their experience. While no attempt at dramatic appeal is made to flesh out the dire situation of recently contacted tribes, this low-profile documentary shows the ethnographer and indigenous actors steeped in a rich discussion. Their exchange spells out many of the themes that must necessarily be addressed in portraying these encounters. And although not unexpected, we are still presented with a unique set of elements often shown in the causes and consequences of contact. In *Honey to Ashes* there are the proverbial cast of contact players but we quickly learn of a special scenario among the peoples of the Paraguayan Chaco. Bessire does not rush to the point to explain that regional development eventually forced a small group of seventeen Ayoreo into contact, neither do we witness many face-to-face encounters with the main elements of the Paraguayan frontier that have unceremoniously ushered them into their domain. Missionaries, NGOs, and regional cattle ranchers are spoken of generically. These elements dangle in the background but remain unavoidable factors to be dealt with. With this stage set, Bessire mingles with the Ayoreo and we hear their story unfold.

The Ayoreo humor Bessire and provide him with interesting stories of living in the scrub forest of the Chaco. Honey is a key ingredient to their livelihoods and a myth is unraveled to show its significance to the Ayoreo. It is pleasing to watch Bessire's exchange with the Ayoreo as it reveals a warm and open relationship with a people he has worked with for over three years. He admits to speaking a broken form of Ayoreo but manages well in his interactions and also uses interpreters to learn more about their history.

The film also introduces a key Ayoreo character, Porai, who helped contact this small band, the central focus of Bessire's film. Porai reveals that he had been drawn into contact through missionaries and has resided among them and local ranchers for over twenty years. Previously, he eschewed contact and even killed five whites before finally accepting to integrate himself and reunite with his estranged family. As a key figure in contacting the new group, he urges them to adjust their way of life accordingly, to that of Paraguayan national society. In Porai's dialogue we also see a host of Spanish words already incorporated into the Ayoreo language. Further on, Porai tells his recently contacted brethren that they can abrogate their taboos as, "we live with Jesus here and there are no bad foods." In the meantime, the newly arrived Ayoreo are expected to hunt and provide forest products to the settled

groups of Ayoreo and regional whites. Given these new circumstances, Bessire suggests that the new group should return to the forest and create a community of their own. In a brief encounter with a member of a local NGO, the Ayoreo are deeded a parcel of land. It is not clear whether they actually settle there and, later, members of the settled Ayoreo supplicate: “thank you, God, for bringing these people out of the forest and please touch their hearts.”

As Bessire leaves the Ayoreo, walking off into a proverbial sunset, his camera falters and we are left with a near metaphor of what could be the Ayoreo’s fate. Bessire confides to viewers that his camera was compromised by the hot and dusty Chaco and his closing image emits a hint of twilight as pixels merge and sparkle. Again, we are left with a sense of a fading memory and sense that *Honey to Ashes* dismantles an existence that once was. If the Ayoreo eventually rise from their ashes will again have to remit us to myth, and we are only left with a trail of film and Bessire’s resigned impressions of their predicament.

After all is said and done, what questions would we like to see answered in Bessire’s film? From a purely academic standpoint we may ask why we are not given a brief history of these people, their language, and historical trajectory. These and other ethnographic data have been left out in favor of an almost bereavement for their loss. Yet for the benefit of those engaged in this genre of film it would be interesting to explore the issues of contact in more depth. Scholars are presently engaged in much discussion about the nature of contact, its intensity, and consequences for native peoples. Also in this pursuit, a number of scholars are questioning the ethnographic present. As archaeology and ethnohistory fine-tune our knowledge of first-nation peoples, our characterization of the Ayoreo as hunter-gatherers may also be put in check. As with many “foraging” populations currently “found” in the Amazon of today, linguistic, historical, ecological and archaeological data are reunited to raise the possibility of an agricultural past, raising questions about contact before contact. All of these new inputs force scholars to inquire about social complexity, ecological adaptations, and landscapes. Many of these questions could have been included in Bessire’s documentary, although their absence does not diminish the Ayoreo’s story. His exchange with them is captivating and provides us with information on mythical time and current engagements among the Ayoreo.

I would submit that this film can serve as a pedagogical tool for university and public forums. As a heuristic device it also provides us with some of the processes of interethnic contact. The short amount of time in which the Ayoreo have established contact reveals plenty in terms of their views of Paraguayan nationals, anthropologists, missionaries, and NGOs, and their mythical relationship with nature. Similarly, there is a fair amount of exchange between previously contacted Ayoreo and the new group encountered by Bessire. Coupled with his upcoming book, *Becoming the Ayoreo: Two-Way Radio, Power and Emergent Indigenous Identities in the Gran Chaco, Bolivia and Paraguay*, both students and scholars have a valuable package to examine transnational discourses on indigeneity and indigenous appropriation of radio technology.

While it is evident that the Ayoreo seem to subordinate their concept of the world to that of local missionaries and farmers, choices are still being made and we wonder how much of their individuality is being compromised. And the how and why of these dynamics beg other questions. For example, there are many discussions regarding the ethos of contacted groups and what would encourage them to approach and sustain their engagement with mainstream actors and other indigenous groups. In Amazonian studies Tupians are sometimes portrayed as willing to assimilate, Gê groups are viewed as more conservative, and Xinguano communities would be more diplomatic, conciliatory and engaging. Still, questions of agency, free will, the momentum of heavy-handed development, incorporation, or forced assimilation, may gain ground by seeing this film. Thus, as much seems left out in Bessire’s portrayal of Ayoreo contact, paradoxically, these lacunae only help add to the discussion of what seem to be subordinated themes. Those engaged in development studies would also find it interesting in that it would also generate discussion on the implications of contact and settlement among foraging groups.

Perhaps films of this genre should be packaged together to pair up with different contact situations. This would provide a more global and comparative perspective of contact in different regions, to get a better grapple on the mechanisms that drive contact and settlement among previously isolated groups. A few other films come to mind in that they explore different issues of contact and its implications. *Serras da Desordem* by Brazilian filmmaker An-

drea Tonacci portrays the saga of an Awá-Guajá man estranged from his people after suffering an ambush by settlers in the Amazon region. On another note, the *Tribe that Hides from Man* and other films in Adrian Cowell's series of the *Decade of Destruction* also illustrate the implications of first contact. In all instances, there are different approaches to filmmaking, location and direction; different messages abound, and different engagements transpire between film subjects—yet all of these still converge on the issue of contact and its consequences for indigenous peoples. Thus, for educational and illustrative purposes, Bessire's film should not stand alone and needs to be contextualized among this series of film and the accompanying literature that would captivate and inform interested parties. This would help both novices and professionals working among indigenous peoples to promote more debate, disseminate news, and share their experiences of contact and forced assimilation of recently settled peoples.

At a day and age when many reflect on the nature of ethnographic film and its representation of indigenous actors, *Honey to Ashes* does not fall into the category of "indigenous media." Here, one could easily concede ethnographer as "authority," yet Bessire is not stating the final word on the Ayoreo. Nor, for that matter, can we sense an objectification of his subjects, although this film does help fine-tune and adjust the nature of processes and interactions; thus, parties interested in establishing more "objective" parameters for studying contact could dialogue with these aspects. Many indigenous filmmakers now press for their own agenda in constructing reality, yet perhaps there is little likelihood that recently contacted groups would be found directing, acting, interviewing or marketing their own media. As such, this approach still awaits an indigenous signature where indigenous filmmakers could be enlisted to film first encounters. Mainstream media, in general, have conventionally framed indigenous issues and stories and comprise one of their biggest enemies. In the meantime, perhaps it still remains necessary for ethnographers to bridge this gap until such topics in ethnographic film can be put squarely in the hands of indigenous peoples.