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Journals explores 'cultural genocide' of shamanism

Pressure to either convert to Christianity or starve causes Inuit to abandon 4,000 years of faith

Mari Sasano

The writing/directing team of Norman Cohn and Zacharias Kunuk astonished audiences around the world with their debut feature film, *Atanarjuat The Fast Runner*. Made in 2001, it won the Camera d'Or at Cannes for that year and was the first feature film written, produced and performed in the Inuit language, Inuktitut. The film (which was actually shot on digital video and later transferred to film) portrayed a semi-mythical story of love and revenge, showing life in the Arctic with its endlessly wide landscapes and clear skies.

But where *Atanarjuat* was action-packed and expansive, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, the latest from this team of Northern filmmakers, is almost claustrophobic, focusing this time on a more intimate family drama of secrets, taboos and a changing way of life. And though there are still scenes of the gorgeous Arctic land, we are shown much more of daily Inuit home life and the smaller-scale dramas and tragedies --though the ultimate implications are much greater.

The title refers to an actual document made by Danish/Inuit anthropologist Knud Rasmussen (played by Jens Jorn Spottag). In the 1920s, he and a couple of other scientists spent time with the family of Avva (Pakak Innuksuk), an Inuit shaman, in order to record stories and study traditions.

In addition to the actual journals, the filmmakers sought out Inuit people now living in that area, who've had the knowledge of that time passed down to them, to help tell the other side of the story.

Superficially, life for Avva's family still strongly resembles the more ancient times of *Atanarjuat*: Hunting is the main way of life, the men and women wear fur parkas and have facial tattoos. But European culture is starting to encroach. White people are moving in from the south, the language is being translated into a written form and Christianity is being spread.

For the anthropologists, however, this is still a relatively untouched part of the world and they silently take it all in. But the family's tensions slowly reveal themselves: Avva's daughter Apak (Leah Angutimarik), who has also been given the gift of being able to communicate with spirit helpers, has been forced to marry, against her will, a man who murdered her first husband. She uses her powers to continue to make love with her ghost-husband.

Meanwhile, Avva tells stories of his birth, how he became a shaman and how he calls upon his spirit helpers, singing, "Joy, joy, joy!" The camera is the anthropological eye, lingering on a woman while she keeps the seal-oil lamps lit, studying the singing and dancing that helps the family while away the hours during a blizzard. More candid moments, like watching a baby dozing on his mother's back while the adults work and chat, are priceless, spontaneous slices of life that reflect the filmmakers' documentary background.

Times don't remain idyllic, though -- during their journey back to Igloolik, food becomes scarce and the family begins to starve. Another family of Inuit arrives, and they appear to be saved -- except that this other family won't share their meat until Avva's people convert to Christianity. Tensions run high, the Danes feel conflicted, but one by one the family joins the Christians.

Though the film never outrightly condemns them for doing so (nor demonizes those who do the converting), one feels that something has been lost forever -- none more so than Avva in a heartbreaking final scene where he lets go of his shamanic powers. It puts so much into context: When you hear Inuit and First Nations people talk about cultural genocide, this is what it looks like.

MOVIE REVIEW

The Journals of Knud Rasmussen Rating 4

Directors: Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn

Starring: Leah Angutimarik, Pakak Innuksuk, Jens Jorn Spottag

Classification: Parental guidance

Warning: Nudity and mature themes

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