

Film Review

– *Bila Burba*, directed by Duiren Wagua, Panama, 2023¹

Bila Burba is a 2023 documentary film directed by Guna(dule)² Indigenous filmmakers Duiren Wagua and Orgun Wagua. The Wagua brothers have significantly contributed to Central and Latin American cinema, participating in film festivals and schools across the region. In addition, they have served as producers, translators, and cultural mediators for Netflix's *La Casa de Papel* (Money Heist, 2017-2021) for scenes filmed in the Guna Yala territory, along the Caribbean coast of Panama. Their latest work, *Bila Burba*, recalls the 1925 rebellion by the Guna(dule) Indigenous communities against the Panamanian colonial government. After a three-day battle, the Guna(dule) prevailed, ending police brutality and securing political and cultural autonomy, safeguarding their collective heritage. The battle is annually reenacted by Indigenous community theatre groups to convey the story and spirit of the revolution to younger generations. This reenactment, called "Bila Burba," reaffirms the communities' identity and autonomy amid resurgent threats of land dispossession. Since June 2024, several island communities have been relocated to prefabricated mainland houses due to rising sea levels, prompting concerns from Guna leadership, NGOs, and human rights organizations over government delays, overcrowding, and inadequate healthcare and infrastructure.

The film uses the reenactment as a lens to present Guna history to a broader audience, incorporating archival footage and community interviews, interspersed with imagery of the Guna archipelago. It pays homage to the revolutionary leaders as well as to the cultural and political resilience of the Guna. The reenactment and the film's use of testimonies exemplify the "symbolic labouring of postmemory" (Hirsch, 1997, p. 22), which can be understood as "the novel setting and acting out of a secondary, post-generational memory" (Nouzeilles, 2005, p. 265). This "postmemorial" transmission of the memory of the revolution across generations differs from the direct 'traumatic memory' of the conflict due to its generational distance. However, it also contrasts with the indirect inscription into 'history' as a distant past, because of the strong ongoing emotional and personal connections to the events.

The reenactment is an example of a performative event that “question[s] processes of subjective memory formation” (Lattanzi, 2016, p. 231) and seeks to “reactivate and reembody more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (Maguire, 2017, p. 11). The postmemorial transfer of the rebellion onto newer generations intertwines traumatic experiences with resilience and solidarity. With an emphasis on the Indigenous community’s commonalities, the film supports and reinforces the community’s current battle against attempts to reclaim and sell Indigenous territories by the Panamanian State.

Due to the film’s subject matter and the filmmakers’ cultural identification, the documentary can be seen as an example of “Fourth Cinema”, i.e. the political cinema by and about Indigenous communities. *Bila Burba* serves a political purpose without (auto)exoticizing its subject matter through a Western lens. The film’s non-linear narrative does not impose an outside perspective on the story, nor does it feature explicit intervention by a narrator, director or interviewer. Instead, it gives on-screen space and voice to the community to narrate and enact the story from their perspectives. The Guna have a long tradition of oral storytelling, which is highlighted in the film through references to the use of community interpreters during the reenactments. Visually, the film pays attention to the ancestral land’s rich natural surroundings, the ocean and the colourful textile designs of *molos*. The film highlights the social roles of communal architecture and symbolism like the revolutionary flag’s swastika, which has been adopted since the early 1900s to connote well-being, peace and unity.

Bila Burba does not directly specify its critique of the repressive measures currently imposed by the Panamanian government. This could make it challenging to draw a clear connection between the climate-induced struggles of forced displacement in 2024 and the resistance to police brutality by a colonial government in 1925. Instead, the film points more generally to the ongoing structural inequalities affecting Indigenous communities in Panama. Notably the film highlights the annual commemoration of the 1925 rebellion, a tradition that keeps the historical memory alive within Guna culture, aiming to preserve their territory, heritage, language, and opportunities for future generations. While the film indirectly denounces human rights violations against Indigenous communities, it also exposes the social issues and polarization currently affecting Panama. Across Central and Latin America, Indigenous communities continue to endure discrimination and other systemic denials of their humanity, a loss of culture and identity, and pressures from deforestation, mining or other extractive industries that disregard the wellbeing of these often marginalized communities.

Ultimately, *Bila Burba* reflects the Guna cosmology in both narrative and style, integrating a focus on oral storytelling, performative memory, visual culture, and highlighting the interconnectedness of social and natural elements. The film serves as a powerful testament to the enduring spirit of resistance and

resilience, using cinema to preserve history as well as shape the present and future of the Guna people in their ongoing fight for autonomy and justice.

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References

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Notes

- 1 *Bila Burba* is the result of script and project development funding from Panama, Argentina, Mexico and Colombia and has been distributed by Utopia Docs (<https://www.utopiadocs.net/bila-burba>). Since its release, the film has been travelling the international film festival circuit, including the 2024 editions of the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), IFF Panama, Costa Rica International Film Festival, Indifest, Ecofalante Film Festival, and Documenta Querétaro Film Festival.
- 2 Formerly known as San Blas, *Guna Yala* means “land of Guna” and indicates the territory bordering Colombia to the east, the province of Colón to the west and Darién to the south, while *Dule* means “people”.