

Project Narrative

Significance

The global trade in emeralds bridges cultures, continents and religions. Men and women from the most diverse backgrounds come together to mine and trade these fascinating green stones. Jaipur, Rajasthan in Northwest India is the global hub of the emerald business. Stones from South America, Southern Africa and Central Asia flood into the famous Pink City. A small group of Jains, devotees of a strict and ascetic religion, controlled the Jaipur gemstone trade for centuries. Their austere religious ethics have gone hand-in-hand with successful lives in commerce. Today, their dominance is threatened as Hindus and Muslims move out of their traditional roles as craftsmen and artisans to become international gemstone traders in their own rights.

These three religious traditions are often held to be at loggerheads. The relations among their members are all too often depicted as violent and intolerant. But in Jaipur they come together peacefully and profitably. Practitioners of each tradition occupy niches in a religious division of labor and they cooperate to bring emeralds to the world. Their story is a story of tolerance, interdependence and understanding. It is a story that the world needs to hear. It is a story that I will tell using the tools of ethnographic documentary film.

Project Purpose

The purpose of this project is to produce an ethnographic documentary film on the religious dimensions of the emerald trade as it is practiced in Jaipur, Rajasthan, India. I have already compiled extensive footage from the emerald cities of Brazil. I have filmed in the open pit mines on the Zambian Copperbelt in southern Africa. I will soon travel to Manhattan and meet the wholesale jewelers and gemstone dealers of 47th St. Jaipur is the crucial node that links these far-flung places together into a global web woven by green gemstones.

In each place the emerald trade proceeds according to religious logics and it unites practitioners of the most diverse religions into a single, global community. Catholics and Protestants, Hindus and Muslims, Jains and Jews meet to trade in gems. The links between the religious life and the life in trade emerges most clearly in Jaipur. A Svetambar Jain enclave in the Johari Bazaar has controlled the global emerald trade since it was established by royal decree in 1727. A few miles away in the Pahar Ganj, an equally ancient Muslim community cuts and polishes the stones that the Jains import from all over the world. They meet and make their deals in the shade of mosques and temples. They funnel their profits into projects for personal development and religious philanthropy. Their relations are characterized by guarded trust and grudging but mutual respect.

My preliminary ethnographic fieldwork in Jaipur has given me wide networks of friends in both communities. I have willing and eager collaborators among local religious leaders, philosophers, academics and gemstone tycoons. I know the city, its history, its economy and its religious traditions. I am fully prepared to integrate interviews with scenes from the lives of the men and women of the emerald trade into a documentary film of the highest quality.

Objectives and Outcomes

The main objective for this project is the production of a 22-minute ethnographic documentary suitable for broadcast, electronic distribution, classroom use and professional presentation. This documentary will integrate the footage I have already captured from Brazil and Zambia with the material that I will gather in Jaipur. Postproduction will take place in the Advanced Laboratory for Visual Anthropology, here at CSU, Chico. I will explore broadcast distribution options with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, electronic distribution through Alexander Street Press and traditional distribution through Documentary Educational Resources.

I will present my results in professional meetings including the American Anthropological Association, the European Association of Social Anthropology and the Society for the Anthropology of Religion. Finally, I will use this material in my ongoing efforts to secure external funding from sources including the National Geographic Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Alexia Foundation.

Relevant Background Information

A small but prolific cadre of scholars has taken up the examination of the global emerald trade. They include Lawrence Babb, Kris Lane, James McHugh, Núbia Rodrigues and Surendra Bothra. They are historians, anthropologists, philosophers and experts in religious studies. I am working to integrate their diverse perspectives, methodologies and areas of research into a project rooted in anthropological theories of value. I am in contact and consultation with all of these scholars. They are excited to work with me on the production of this film.

I have also conducted extensive research on my own. I spent several summers conducting field research in the emerald mines and markets of Carnaíba, Bahia, Brazil. I spent the winter of 2011 in Carnaíba collecting footage for this project with the Brazilian cinematographer. In the summer of 2011, I conducted research in the mines of Lufwanyama and the emerald markets of Kitwe, Zambia. I filmed interviews and scenes from the daily lives of miners and traders there. I spent the summer of 2010 in Jaipur doing preliminary research for this project. This documentary project will integrate footage from all of these research trips. A modest amount of funding will enable me to bring this project to a successful conclusion.

Proposed Activities

I will travel to Jaipur on December 27 and stay until January 15. I will be accompanied by the cinematographer and professional photographer, Lilian Haidar, a longtime mentor and

collaborator. We will bring a suite of professional cinematography and audio recording equipment from the Advanced Laboratory for Visual Anthropology. I will direct and produce the film, conducting interviews and selecting verité sequences. The technical and aesthetic aspects of cinematography and field audio recording will be in Ms. Haidar's able hands. I have included a letter of commitment from Ms. Haidar with this proposal. When I return to Chico on January 16, I will begin postproduction of the film in Advanced Laboratory for Visual Anthropology. The documentary will be complete and ready for distribution by the end of the spring semester 2012.

It is important that this film will be produced now because it will provide an important counterpoint to the conventional depiction of religious difference in the media. We see a never-ending stream of images of religious violence and conflict. These narratives convince the viewing public that religion divides people, that religious differences are insurmountable and that religious violence is inevitable. The results are predictable and we confront intolerance, ignorance and xenophobia in our classrooms and in our communities.

However, the religious history of the world has more often been a history of mutual accommodation, cultural interchange and profitable exchange than a history of violent conflict. Emeralds have been remarkably effective in bridging the gaps among cultures whose beliefs are often held to be diametrically opposed. Emerald trading communities encompass extraordinary religious diversity. We will use the fascination that the stones exert to convey a message about tolerance, diversity and inclusivity.

Timeline

December 27: Travel to Jaipur

December 29- January 15: Documentary film production in Jaipur

January 16: Return to Chico

January 20-May 15 Postproduction

May 15-June 1: Promotion and Distribution

Additional Benefits

This project promises to advance our knowledge, not only of the emerald trade, but of the religious lives of the people practice it. It will show how members of diverse religious communities are united into an international network of mutual interdependence. It will bring additional external resources to our campus as it contributes to my ongoing efforts to seek major grant funding. These efforts have met with considerable success in the past, and I hope to build on those successes. This film will enhance the reputation of the Department of Anthropology and of our University. The Advanced Laboratory for Visual Anthropology is already the most sophisticated facility dedicated to ethnographic documentary production in the world. In order for its excellence to be recognized we must start producing and distributing films. It represents an important contribution to my own professional development. The Department of Anthropology and the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences recognize the importance of documentary film in conveying the results of scientific research to ever broader audiences. The successful production of the film will therefore be a valuable addition to my dossier for retention, tenure and promotion. Students will benefit as they are incorporated into the project as postproduction interns at ALVA and as this material is incorporated it into my teaching. This film will find its way into lower division GE classrooms as well as upper division courses dedicated to teaching research methodology. It is collaborative and interdisciplinary. I am in close consultation with scholars all over the country and on three different continents. It will allow me to continue and to complete research that has been in progress for my entire career at CSU, Chico. It holds the potential for a revenue-generating copyright when it is distributed.

Support from RESP will enable me to bring a long-term project to a successful conclusion and to communicate its results to the world.