

CRITIQUE

Sama in the Forest

Directed by Carlos G. Gómez, 2023, 75 minutes, color. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources

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Sama in the Forest rivetingly shows that folklore provides a catalyst for social change. This creative, colorful film reveals how women use storytelling to contest gender roles in South Asia.

For this project, anthropologist and producer Coralynn Davis draws on the community-based filmmaking skills of director Carlos Gómez and the local expertise of collaborator/writer M.S. Suman to bring the audience into the material and social lives of women in Davis' long-time host community in the Mithila region North India. The film is made in Maithili with English subtitles.

The filmmakers skillfully weave together stories, theater, folk festival, and interviews to illustrate the story about Krishna's daughter Sāmā and her beloved, Cakevā, and ask what it means to local men and women. Even though it draws on Hindu mythology, this story does not appear in scripture, nor is it written down. But women all over the region know the folk tale; they depict it in their paintings and enact it during a yearly festival, during which women castigate people who gossip and give blessings to their brothers.

The folk story portrays the deep love between Sāmā and her brother Samb, both children of Krishna, the king. When Samb goes away to school, Sāmā grows curious about life outside the palace and begins innocently and piously to take care of ascetics in the nearby Vrinda forest, where she falls in love with Cakevā, the son of a sage. Chugla, the court gossip who hopes to marry Sāmā, reports this situation to her father, Krishna. Enraged and worried about his kingly reputation, Krishna curses Sāmā and all of the ascetics in the forest to become birds. When Samb returns home, he seeks his sister and learns of the curse. He scolds his father Krishna (a well-known profligate lover) for his double standards and vows to rescue Sāmā by, according to different tellings, meditating for 100 years, encouraging villagers to engage in a folk ritual, or pleasing Vishnu with his asceticism. Meanwhile, Chugla seeks to kill all the birds by setting fire to the forest but instead gets burned himself. When Sāmā and the other birds return to human form, Samb marries his sister to Cakevā.

This story unfolds throughout the film through powerfully intermingled footage that includes storytellers relaying the Sāmā Cakevā story and scenes from a colorful community theater project (organized by the director) that dramatizes the events in the story. In addition, the filmmakers visit the Mithila Art Institute, where women artists leaf through stacks of hand-drawn ink-and-paint images that illustrate this and other stories important to their lives. To emphasize the many mediums in which women and girls celebrate Sāmā Cakevā, the film depicts the yearly street festival, including the songs they sing and the clay figurines that they make, treat with food, fire, and water, and, finally, ask their brothers to break as they reenact the story.

Ethnographic interviews conducted by anthropologist Davis and translator Suman provide the voices and faces of contemporary Maithil women and men as they reflect on a variety of topics, including gender, education, work, reputation, gossip, marriage, caste, and family honor. Interviewees include art students at the Mithila Art Institute, storytellers,

actors, and community members. The film draws one directly into the kitchens, bedrooms, workplaces, and lives of women and men in Mithila, creating a sense of intimacy and authenticity. The film also provides beginning- and end-of-film voice-over ruminations from the anthropologist, the translator, and the film producer, giving it a dynamic sense of contemporary relevance and reflexive positionality.

Sama in the Forest makes key points about the importance of stories in human life, the role of gender and family in framing people's life possibilities, and the changing horizons for women in India with respect to education, employment, and marriage options. The film also engages with the ubiquitous and damaging presence of gossip and jealousy. The folk ritual ends with the valorization of Samb, the loyal and helpful brother, and the castigation and burning of Chugla, the jealous gossip. The film concludes with reflections on the importance of women's folk traditions to create spaces of female strength and solidarity.

As an anthropologist who studies kinship and social change in South Asia, I was curious about the types of gender issues that the film explores. In early 2023, I had the privilege of previewing the film with fifty students in my online course on the Anthropology of Folklore. I asked students to view the film in conjunction with reading Davis's 2005 article "Listen, Rama's Wife!": Maithil Women's Perspectives and Practices in the Festival of Sāmā Cakevā" The film works well in the virtual classroom, prompting trenchant discussion- post conversations about visual representation and gender norms.

Students enjoyed seeing the ethnographic process in action (for example, watching Davis struggle to find the Maithil word for "connection"). They also appreciated the collaborative way that Gómez and Davis engaged the community in staging the local theater production and making the film. Students recognized the uniqueness of seeing the same people speaking in interviews and acting as actors in the community's theatrical enactment of the story. Identifying the actors with the characters helped show how the themes in the Sāmā Cakevā story and festival remain central to contemporary gender relations in Mithila today. Students commented favorably on having the material presented through multiple (sometimes conflicting) voices rather than narrated in a know-it-all, objective, documentary fashion; this approach strengthened the film's focus on "storytelling" while vividly illustrates the point that oral stories pass from person to person, with variation being a key diagnostic for identifying an element of folklore.

People only retell or reenact stories that have contemporary relevance. Students speculated that the community engagement likely opened venues locally for discussing difficult issues and addressing social change around gender norms. They appreciate the openness and passion generated by this approach. They recognized the importance of gender norms in Maithil society and saw for themselves how women negotiated with men for small freedoms, such as going out at night to undertake the Sāmā Cakevā festival or claiming the right to earn a living by painting at the Mithila Art Institute. The film left students curious to find out "what happens next." They felt hopeful when the men in the film claimed that they were actively fighting to change the social norms to support their sisters and daughters.

Sama in the Forest is engrossing, visually stimulating, and emotionally compelling. Multiple forms of information come together to convey to the viewer the importance of visual arts, folk festivals, local theater production, and storytelling. The film made increasing sense the more times I watched it. On a single viewing, I found it a little challenging to figure out the story and identify all the people in front of the camera. With no overbearing narration in the film, the viewer has to work harder to figure out what is going on.

My students enjoyed the film's colorful play and paintings, the dynamic scenes of daily life and nighttime ritual, the animated storytelling by four raconteurs, and the engaging interviews with artists, actors, and storytellers. The story of Sāmā clearly provides a touchstone for local people to think about important kinship relations between daughters and fathers, sisters and brothers, and husbands and wives. Kinship and gender form the backbone of feminist anthropology, and thus I recommend *Sama in the Forest* for use in courses on gender, kinship, folklore, art, and contemporary South Asian studies.

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REFERENCE

Davis, Coralynn. 2005. "Listen, Rama's Wife!": Maithil Women's Perspectives and Practices in the Festival of Sāmā Cakevā." *Asian Folklore Studies* 64(1): 1–38.