



If Not Us Then Who?

Seven short films about Indigenous guardians of the forest and tradition

2015–2021 • Directors Kynan Tegar, Paul Redman • Distributed by If Not Us Then Who?

A selection of seven short films about Indigenous peoples that, taken together, tell a story of oppression, resistance, accomplishments, and confidence for future generations.

The first four films explore a successful fight by an Indigenous Dayak Iban community in Indonesia seeking recognition of their historical rights to—and ecological conservation of—their forest homeland in West Kalimantan. The Sungai Utik won land rights as well as the United Nations Equator Prize for their campaign to reduce poverty and advance sustainable forestry. In celebration, the community built the first traditional longhouse in 50 years and is calling Indigenous youth home from the cities.

Three additional short films from Latin America explore the role of government and policy in effecting change and securing rights for Indigenous peoples. In Costa Rica a tax on fuel supports restoration of forests and the advancement of communities like Talamancan. In Brazil a women's movement secures the rights of 400,000 women who harvest oil-rich babassu palm nuts on private land.



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CURATOR

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If Not Us Then Who?
supports a global
awareness campaign
highlighting the role
Indigenous and local
peoples play in
protecting our planet.

SEVEN SHORT FILMS

INDONESIA

Sungai Utik: The Fight for Recognition (21:00)

Building a Traditional Longhouse as a Cultural Center (11:40)

The Dayak Iban Way of Farming (12:30)

Homecoming: Indonesian Indigenous Youth

Return to the Community (8:20)

COSTA RICA AND BRAZIL

A Sustainable Solution:

Environmental tax to maintain forests in Costa Rica (6:30)

Brazil's Warrior Women:

Women's movement for access to babassu oil (7:30)

A Tribute to Dona Dijé, Babassu Woman Warrior:

An interview with a leader of the babassu movement (4:10)

WHY I SELECTED THESE FILMS

These films are unique because they highlight victories for the Indigenous people in their countries. In this series of seven films, we see the impact of the women's movement on the women of the babassu forest, traditional teaching by the elders of the Sungai Utik people, and success in claiming ownership of the forest that they call home. It is important to me to show that Indigenous peoples are not helpless victims but instead are empowered to act as advocates for themselves in standing up to government entities, corporations, and threats. Here we see Indigenous peoples' will, strength, and determination that should be celebrated.

SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

Conservation	Law
Cultural Relativism	Logging
Deforestation	Poverty
Ecotourism	Preservation
Ethnography	Sustainability
Government Taxation Policy	United Nations
Indigenous Rights	Women's Movements

“There are over 460 million Indigenous people on the planet, and they are stewards of approximately 20% of the world’s landmass.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS

There are reminders throughout this film series that the land and the Indigenous people are interconnected. This essential connection has led Indigenous people to defend their land and, by extension, their ability to live as their ancestors once lived. In these films we see a cultural center that is a gathering house for the Indigenous community and visitors; we see a fight for land that is also a fight for a future; we see ancestral farming methods; and we see the impact of modernity on the protection of tradition. While there are many focuses of each individual film, and all are worthy, the fundamental connection between land and people remains the common thread. If land is taken, the Indigenous people disappear. If the land is harmed, so are the Indigenous people. If their land is given to others, pieces of their history are lost. One cannot separate them; they are each part of the other. To provide justice, justice must be given to the land through the people willing to defend it. These films allow us—even if only for a moment—to begin to see what a just Global South would be like.



TEACHING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE WITH DOCUMENTARIES

This guide was created with the intention of exploring the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples in the Global South. These experiences demonstrate the resilience of the people born in these locations and their struggle to maintain the connections to their ancestors through their cultural practices, rituals, and defiance.

I consider this to be a legacy project in which the contributors are seeking to honor the lives of their elders and those who have come before them.

As an educator, I cannot replace seeing the faces, places, and lived experiences through the eyes of another. No matter how graphic a text depiction might be, the essence of experience conveyed through film is far more powerful. I encourage you to embrace this ethnographic approach to cultural anthropology and to embrace the narratives of peoples who have overcome modernization and threats from commercial interests and other harms, and who have found unexpected alliances and opportunities to thrive.

“Still, with such incredible diversity, Indigenous people all have one thing in common: the fight for recognition, respect, and fair treatment.”

BACKGROUND

There are over 460 million Indigenous people living on the planet, and they are stewards of approximately 20% of the world's landmass. These people are also extremely diverse, spanning oceans and landmasses, countries, nationalities, and cultural practices. They are not, however, only in the Global South; instead, Indigenous peoples can be found anywhere in the world, working in any field, and enmeshed in modern society. Still, with such incredible diversity, they all have one thing in common: the fight for recognition, respect, and fair treatment by those in power.



To be a person of power, one must physically resemble those who hold positions of authority in a society. Those in power may include members of the police, government, legislature, or any other non-Indigenous immigrants. Because this difference in power is great, the harms that can be committed by the powerful are significant.



Physical harms that may be endured by the Indigenous people include discrimination, murder, slavery, torture, rape, and abuse. Under the worst of conditions, Indigenous people have also been victims of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Beyond these physical threats, the Indigenous people have often been denied rights and acknowledgment of their existence by those in power.

Still, Indigenous peoples have learned to endure, survive, and thrive despite these acts of oppression. They have learned how to take back their power and to use political movements, advocacy, and persistence to improve their lives and change the course of the future for their people. It is against this background that we explore the lives of the Sungai Utik, the creative use of taxation to preserve forests in Costa Rica, and the successful campaign of Brazil's warrior women through a lens of hope for the future.



KEY LOCATIONS, PEOPLES, AND ORGANIZATIONS

The names of the individual participants can be found in the credits.

Film 1: Sungai Utik, Dayak Iban, Dayaks, Borneo, Indonesia, Embaloh people, Bumi Raya Limited, Lanjak Entimau Limited, Apheng, NGOs, Kampung Galau reserve forest, Kampung Taroh protected forest, Kampung Endor Kerja production forest, Kalpataru Award, Equator Prize from the United Nations Development Programme, hutan adat (customary forest), Ministry of Environment and Forestry of Indonesia

Film 2: Sungai Utik, a Dayak Iban community, West Kalimantan, Indonesia

Film 3: Sungai Utik, West Borneo, Indonesia, Kalimantan (island), Kampung Galau reserve forest, Kampung Taroh protected forest

Film 4: Ro'ong Ampreng, Indonesia

Film 5: Talamanca, Costa Rica, Cabécar Association, Payments for Environmental Services

Films 6 and 7: Brazil, Espírito Santo, Piauí, Maranhão, Imperatriz, Biaxada, Babassu nut breakers movement, Buy Direct



FILM SYNOPSES



The land is our mother, the forest is our father, the river is our blood.

Film 1: *Sungai Utik: The Fight for Recognition* (21:00)

The Sungai Utik, a Dayak community, follow the cultural practices of their ancestors passed down to them by their elders. For more than 20 years, the Sungai Utik people sought to protect their forested land from interference by government and from the greed of outsiders who were decimating ancient forests and homelands to create lucrative palm oil plantations. In response to the community's complaints, the government denied the Sungai Utik electricity, paved roads, and fresh water. This hostile treatment drew the attention of NGOs, who helped the Sungai Utik register legal claims to the land on which they lived.

On May 1, 2020, the government formally recognized the community's historical right and relationship to the land. See also in this collection: *5x5: Voices of Change from the Forests of Indonesia*.



Now and forever, our cultures and traditions will continue.

Film 2: *Building a Traditional Longhouse as a Cultural Center* (11:40)

For the first time in 50 years, the Sungai Utik build a traditional longhouse, their customary home and cultural house. It is the longhouse, given to them by their god Petara, that allows for harmony and secures the unity of their people. This is where they gather, share their knowledge, attend school, prepare food, and live together as a community.

The act of building a longhouse is also a community effort, with all persons contributing to building the structure. This process is shared by the elders and taught to the younger generations. Building a longhouse, though, is not merely an act of building a home; it is a spiritual act of ritual and preservation of the traditional ways of the elders. Longhouses, then, are a living demonstration of the culture of these people and a continuation of the traditions, practices, and rituals that are the foundation of their culture. Note that this film is directed by a young filmmaker from the community, Kynan Tegar, who pays particular attention to his elders and to the ceremony that accompanies the dedication of the longhouse.



Then came the companies taking the trees, destroying the forest and ruining nature, and we became their scapegoat.

Film 3: *The Dayak Iban Way of Farming* (12:30)

The Sungai Utik, Dayak Iban way of farming is that of their ancestors. Their cultivation techniques involve rotating fields and crops so that some fields lie dormant while others are farmed. It is this traditional method of opening a field for planting that has been deemed problematic, even illegal, since the Sungai Utik use carefully [controlled burning](#) to open their fields for planting. These fires have been said to cause pollution and forest fires, though the clearing of land by palm oil plantations, said to be the main source of these problems, faces little scrutiny. The loss of this traditional method of farming, including the right to burn the fields, would fundamentally change what it is to be Sungai Utik, Dayak Iban. Lost would be their way of farming, the rituals used to open fields, blessings and offerings, and their ability to provide for themselves.



The task of Indigenous youth is to identify the potential that exists in our Indigenous territories.

Film 4: *Homecoming: Indonesian Indigenous Youth Return to the Community* (8:20)

Many of the Indigenous youth in Indonesia have left their communities to study in the cities. Yet after their studies they have chosen to remain

there rather than return home to their traditional lives. But the threat to their communities posed by deforestation, pollution, and land grabbing is giving rise to a homecoming movement. Their concern is that if the youth do not protect and manage their territories, who will?

As they return, they are bringing with them plans to use the land for herbal gardens and organic farming. As a result, land that had lain dormant could now be farmed in a new way. At the same time, their communities are exploring ecotourism, coffee plantations, keeping sheep, and replanting damaged forests with new seedlings to restore damaged forestlands. This new generation is aware of global warming and the harm it poses to their way of life and future generations, and they recognize how important it is to protect their territories and the planet.



We are a seed that was planted here and grew up here.

Film 5: A Sustainable Solution: Environmental Tax to Maintain Forests in Costa Rica (6:30)

Through the efforts of the Indigenous people, Costa Rica is the only country that has been able to reduce illegal logging in the past 20 years. It has done so through a fuel tax program designed to protect the forest, provide incentives for

maintaining standing forests, and require permits for tree removal. The benefits of the tax include investment in schools, colleges, housing, food purchases, and health care expenses. Transnational industries remain a threat as they continue to search for minerals and farmland, build dams, and seek oil. Yet from 1997 to 2009, the Indigenous people have reclaimed over 4,200 hectares of land actively returned to forest.



They are warriors because they have the courage to fight and say things.

Film 6: Brazil's Warrior Women: Women's movement for access to babassu oil (7:30)

In Brazil, women without land have been left to find ways to provide for themselves. 400,000 women harvest the nuts of the babassu palm, which is used to produce soap, oil, bread, and charcoal, providing them a modest living. Still, this way of life was not without threat, sometimes physical, by ranchers and farmers who sought to ban the women from their fields. In response, the babassu harvesters joined a women's rights movement advocating their right to harvest babassu without fear. They have since established the "Free Babassu Law" in seven states, guaranteeing them free access to the forests. The passing of this law has now enabled women to provide for themselves and their families, and to craft long-term plans that were never possible before.



Do not fall, arise.

Film 7: A Tribute to Dona Dijé (4:10)

A leader of the Babassu movement reflects on the central place of the babassu industry in the protection of women, culture, the forests, and the Amazon as a whole.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can the government develop programs and regulations that protect Indigenous people? Should there be required rights or programs specifically for Indigenous people?
2. Many of the films mention sustainable living. Discuss what the term means. (i.e., using only what you must and replacing what you have taken). Do you think that modern societies should practice this? Can you think of a time when you gave back to nature?



3. How would you describe what environmental or climate justice should be for Indigenous people? What examples can you think of that involve environmental or climate injustice? What rights should they be able to claim, or should they be given, in their home country or traditional territory?

4. What is your definition of modernity? Should traditional societies embrace modernity and give up traditional ways? Or adapt modernity to their needs? What examples have you seen of Indigenous communities adapting modern practices while retaining traditional ways? What are the challenges facing communities that are combining old and new? What is the role of education in the process? Describe modernity through the eyes of an elder in the Sungai Utik community or a young person returning to it. What does the future look like? Is sustainability a traditional or modern concept?



5. How should business and trade be regulated to protect the interests of Indigenous people?
6. The film, *Building a Traditional Longhouse as a Cultural Center*, begins with views of a longhouse. What do you think is its significance? Would you like to live that way?
7. Describe the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in helping Indigenous people and local communities retain or regain their land rights. Have there been other examples of this in other nations. Do you think the process of the Sungai Utik could help others?

“If the land is taken,
the Indigenous people
disappear.”

8. A question of perspective: Some of the films in the *If Not Us Then Who?* collection focus on the roles and perspectives of male activists and elders in the community, while others focus on female activists and elders. Is there a balance in the films you viewed? Or is this kind of diversity missing? To gain a greater insight into the contributions of both men and women who are leaders in their communities, you could view one or more of the following short films, many of them by the same group of filmmakers:

IN THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE COLLECTION

Fight for Areng Valley, Lost World, Youth Unstoppable

ADDITIONAL TITLES IN THE IF NOT US THEN WHO? LIBRARY

Eyá Pavara: The story of a people who want to recover their forest, Elements of Life for Timor People, Indigenous Culture Needed to Protect Forests



ACTIVITIES

1. Investigate the Free Babassu Law to see whether it has been extended into other states. Discuss what is involved in adding or changing laws in Brazil.
2. Create your own NGO. First, research another country from the Global South that needs help. Next, create a name and a mission for your own NGO. What would you want to help with? Whom do you want to help? Be sure to explain your reasons. Partner together with your classmates in this work. You can create a logo, establish goals, etc.
3. Research human rights for Indigenous peoples as established by the United Nations then discuss what right may have been omitted or whether another right should have been included. Is there a right that could be pernicious?
4. Research field burning. Is it used in other places in the world, does it have a scientific benefit, and should it be used? What information might be compelling enough for the government to confirm or deny Indigenous farmers' right to continue the practice? Break the class into two groups: one to argue in favor of allowing the Sungai Utik to burn their fields and the other to ban it. Is the answer simple or more complicated than expected?
5. Construct your own longhouse. Create a floor plan and discuss privacy, living so closely to others, and whether you would want to live that way.
6. Develop a plan to use a carbon tax to effect climate change in the same way that the environmental tax is used to preserve the forest in Costa Rica. Could it work the same way? How should the tax money be spent?



Kynan Tegar, Filmmaker

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Visit the website for [If Not Us Then Who?](#) and read about the protection of human and Indigenous peoples' rights.

[The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR) is a milestone document in the history of human rights. Drafted by representatives with different legal and cultural backgrounds from all regions of the world, the Declaration was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 (General Assembly resolution 217 A) as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations. It sets out, for the first time, fundamental human rights to be universally protected and it has been translated into over 500 languages. The UDHR is widely recognized as having inspired, and paved the way for, the adoption of more than 70 human rights treaties, applied today on a permanent basis at global and regional levels (all containing references to it in their preambles).

Read the [United Nations' statement on the abuse of human rights of Indigenous people](#). Violence, forced assimilation, abuse. Despite all the positive developments in international human rights standard-setting, Indigenous peoples continue to face serious human rights abuses on a day-to-day basis. Issues of violence and brutality, continuing assimilation policies, marginalization, dispossession of land, forced removal or relocation, denial of land rights, impacts of large-scale development, abuses by military forces and armed conflict, and a host of other abuses are a reality for Indigenous communities around the world. Examples of violence and brutality have been heard from every corner of the world, most often perpetrated against Indigenous people who are defending their rights and their lands, territories, and communities.

See the report of [Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission regarding cultural genocide and the forced attendance of aboriginal children in residential schools](#).

BOOKS AND ARTICLES

[Carry: A Memoir of Survival on Stolen Land](#), by [Toni Jensen](#), September 8, 2020

[Everything Ancient Was Once New \(Indigenous Pacifics\)](#), by Emalani Case, February 28, 2021

[Southern Green Criminology: A Science to End Ecological Discrimination \(Perspectives on Crime, Law and Justice in the Global South\)](#), by David Rodríguez Goyes, October 10, 2019

[New Brazil bill puts cattle pasture over Pantanal wetland](#)

[Payments for Environmental Services Program, Costa Rica, UNECCC](#)

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