

VOICES FROM THE SOUTH

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Resisting Militarization: The Making of the Film “Village vs. Empire”

Jeju Island, off the coast of South Korea, is also known as Stone Island, Peace Island, and Women’s Island. It is home to no less than seven world heritage sites. But it is a paradise with dark side. Here on this tiny ecologically unique island, a village is confronting an empire. In Gangjeong village, on the southern tip the island, the U.S. and the South Korean navies have been building a huge naval base as part of a geopolitical strategy to ring-fence China. They are thus thrusting the islanders in the crosshairs of future conflict.

In this month’s “Voices from the South,” Emmy-award winning South African film director Mark J. Kaplan speaks with Karibu about his new documentary, *Village vs. Empire*, which sheds light on Jeju and the daily non-violent resistance efforts against the military base. He talks about his motivation in making the film, the moral imagination of the villagers who are resisting the base, and the seemingly immovable forces they face. The film had its first private screening in Cape Town, South Africa in September 2016.

Karibu: Your film tells the story of the villagers of Gangjeong, and their daily non-violent actions against the massive military base. What do you think motivates the protestors to keep coming each day, rain or shine?

Mark Kaplan: Every protestor has a different journey and a different social location. There are anti-war activists, land activists, environmental activists, Catholics, Buddhists, Shamans, Protestants, etc. In this film, I’ve tried to show that despite the differences between people on this island, they all share a history and a background that has been shaped by military intervention in their society.

The film also emphasizes the impact of a major massacre on the people of the island after World War II. For more than fifty years there was a government-mandated silence around this massacre. It was a crime to speak about

the massacre so its reality was left unspoken, even within families. And yet, the trauma was felt by subsequent generations. As a filmmaker interested in memory, how could I confront and depict this system of “forced forgetting” created by the state?

Karibu: How do you think this history of military intervention has affected the villagers?

MK: I didn’t realize the full implications of that reality when I chose to film, but I had to work through and try to understand those implications as filming progressed. For example, the hunger striker we meet in the film, Yang Yoon Mo, realized while in prison that his mother’s abuse against him stemmed from her fear and her sorrow after witnessing her husband and brother being murdered during the 1948 massacre, known today as the 4 by 3 massacre, or The Third

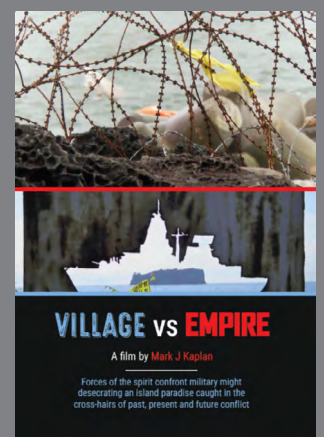


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Founded in 1985, the Karibu Foundation is an independent foundation that supports voices from the Global South who provide alternatives to the dominant paradigms of power, distribution, and development.

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The cover of the new documentary film, “Village vs. Empire”

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Photo: Director Mark J. Kaplan films performance artist Dohee Lee for the film.

of April Massacre. Because of the enforced silence, she never spoke about her trauma. This is also why she preferred Yang Yoon Mo to be in a position of power--a teacher, a civil servant--not in a position that would leave him vulnerable, such as a filmmaker, which is what he became. I try to show some of those motivations that drive divergent characters in the film. I hope that by doing so viewers can recognize themselves in other people. The Danish editor, Niels Pagh Andersen said that documentary filmmakers "look for other individuals to reflect ourselves in." I think this equally applies to how people watch documentary films.

Karibu: You state in the film that the villagers of Jeju have a special type of moral imagination. What do you mean by this?

MK: The people in the village of Gangjeong have an ability to combine past, present, and future in their view of the world. These people have, in the past, been exposed to extreme

forms of violence perpetrated by the government. It is not an exaggeration to call it a genocide. They were killed in the most humiliating ways possible, where every cultural taboo was broken and where their suffering was often extremely prolonged. Today they are again made victims in their struggle against the naval base. This reality allows them to envision a future that is also marked by violence and victimization, one in which they are caught in the crosshairs of a conflict between the U.S. and China. The peace activists in Jeju have the experience, knowledge, and the moral integrity to see these connections between past, present, and future and to understand that

“From afar, this nonviolent struggle seems futile, and yet, because of this, also historic and vital. It is a struggle that invites us to reimagine the future where there is, once again, respect for all life.”
– Mark J. Kaplan, Village vs. Empire

theirs is a just cause. They are driven to stop violence in the present so that they can prevent it in the future.

Karibu: You illustrate the impact of the base by highlighting a number of stories and narratives from Jeju. One is the story of the Haenyeo diver women, who dive to the bottom of sea to collect sea urchins and oysters for the village. Why did you choose to tell the story of the Haenyeo women?

MK: The Haenyeo diver women are part of a two-and-a-half-thousand-year-old tradition that is now dying out. This is the life that these women know. It's how they put bread on the table and how they put their kids through school.

These women divers were used by the state to hoodwink the people in the Jeju village into allowing the site to be used as a naval base. The women were told that the naval base would bring economic development. They were also promised that their diving lifestyle would not be harmed. They received differing amounts of money for their tacit agreement with the construction project. All of these promises were, of course, lies.

The waters around Jeju are now so polluted that no sea life is left. This has in turn created anger and division in their society. All of this because they were deliberately manipulated by the government.

Karibu: You also tell the story of Dohee Lee, a Jeju-born performance artist now living outside of the country. What role does Dohee's story play in the film?

MK: In creating this film, I asked myself, "what is it about what is happening in a place so far away that I can relate to?" Working with Dohee was a different and impactful way to tell what is essentially a David and Goliath story. We were, in the story-telling frame of the documentary, able to show the best and worst of what we're capable of as humans beings. Dohee's work expresses that creative, intuitive, and empathic sense of inhabiting this world; a world in which peace activists put their bodies on the line to fight a military-industrial behemoth.

Karibu: What insights did you yourself take from making this film?

MK: For me, it's that we are living in a mad world where "MAD" stands for Mutually Assured Destruction. We are all, to some extent, both implicated in the creation of wars and caught in the crosshairs of powerful forces. In this world, civilians are not collateral damage; rather, they are the deliberate targets in modern day warfare.

Similarly, when we look at the impact of humans on the planet and the destructive forces we have unleashed, we are really seeing the ways our presence is destroying languages, cultures, and peoples across the globe. We have to find ways to stand up against these seemingly immovable forces and to show that we are capable of being deeply empathetic towards life in all its forms. Village vs. Empire is therefore a microcosm of these larger, global processes. The work of the people living there suggests that we all have the power to stand up to these destructive forces.

Karibu: What do you hope can happen as a result of "Village vs. Empire" being made?

MK: In making this film, I was interviewing people who were hoping against hope that the base would not be opened. Now, of course, the base has opened, despite the number of people that stood in the way and despite the destruction that was wrought on the environment. We are witnessing the unleashing of military-industrial forces that can turn what was once a flourishing, self-sustained village into a wasteland. In that sense, the struggle continues. The people who were originally motivated to stop the construction of

the base are now working to have it shut down. They are not going to stand aside or find some other cause to which to devote their attention.

I hope to find audiences for the film who are empathetic and who respond with their hearts and well as their head. I hope viewers will be both repulsed by the injustice and inspired by the resistance. I hope that this is something people can take into their hearts and that will in turn encourage them to take up their own struggles, wherever they may be.■

Mark J Kaplan is an award-winning filmmaker, whose 25-year documentary film-making career has been committed to human rights. His work treats themes of memory, social justice and the search for accountability.

For more information on the film "Village vs. Empire", and where to see it, contact Mark: mark@greymattermedia.co.za.

Visit also the website to Grey Matter Media's co-producer, Integral Film:

http://integralfilm.com/

