

▼ MASTER ARCHER KANJURO SHIBATA  
SENSEI, 1998 (photo Kevin Peer)



**KEVIN PEER HAS BEEN MAKING** documentary films for over 20 years. His work has been seen by audiences around the world, and has garnered over 40 national and international film festival awards. His films have explored subjects ranging from Zen archery to the nuclear testing program in the Bikini Atoll and from the wilderness of Alaska to the Wodaabe tribe of Niger, West Africa. Kevin also writes, teaches, and leads workshops on nonfiction filmmaking as a path for embracing and celebrating the sacredness of life. His latest project is a feature-length documentary film on humankind's ancient and abiding relationship with trees, titled *In Search of the Tree of Life*. To learn more about the project visit [www.treeoflifefilm.com](http://www.treeoflifefilm.com).

Kevin is the founder and director of The Institute for Sacred Cinema, located in northern California, which is dedicated to the inspired and skillful use of film and video to encourage humankind's capacity for intelligent, compassionate and creative engagement with each other and with Earth. For further information, visit [www.sacredcinema.org](http://www.sacredcinema.org). You can contact Kevin at [kpeer@sacredcinema.org](mailto:kpeer@sacredcinema.org).

# Sacred Cinema:

AN INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN PEER > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > >



FILMING IN THE DUNES OF THE  
TENERE' DESERT, NIGER, AFRICA, 1998

► WODAABE MAN, NIGER,  
AFRICA

▼ 'LITTLE AGOLA', A  
YOUNG WODAABE FRIEND  
(Photo by Kevin Peer)

...wielding the power of this  
medium is a sacred trust  
that should be used for the  
benefit of all beings...



**WHJ:** *What is sacred cinema?*

**KEVIN:** Most of the art forms that are expressions of Western culture these days have been colonized by the dictates of commerce, and by what I call “the cult of the individual.” So art, to a great extent, is often in service to what furthers economics or individualism, but without much consideration for other dimensions of human and Earthly existence. Much of an artist’s concern for money is certainly necessary because of the lack of financial support for artists by our government. Also, because we are in a culture where economics is regarded with an authority once relegated to religion, art is seen as something that must be in service to furthering the economy in order to justify its existence. And mainstream film has certainly taken this route to a large extent. There have always been exceptions to this, thankfully. But by and large, a lot of what we see in theaters and on television in particular is in service to an idiosyncratic vision of the individual, whether that be sublime or not, and exists to serve the great engine of commerce.

What I call “Sacred Cinema” has several aspects to it, and the first one is the recognition of the tremendous power and influence of the motion picture medium to affect individual

and collective consciousness.

It is the most powerful mass medium in existence today, because of its ability to combine the power of imagery, music, and story in such creative and compelling ways.

The primary assumption of this aspect of Sacred Cinema is that wielding the considerable power of this medium is a sacred trust that should be used for the benefit of all beings, through telling stories with the motivation to genuinely enliven, inspire, challenge and delight, and to ultimately further the individual and collective journey. I try to take my cue from storytelling in traditional cultures, which has always served two purposes simultaneously, namely entertainment and learning. A good story, well told, will naturally accomplish both.

Five years ago I was traveling by camel back in the Sahara Desert and visited a remote and very traditional group of people from the Tuareg tribe. The Tuareg are a beautiful and fiercely independent people who were once the rulers of a huge area of Northern Africa. The desert Tuareg are still known for their prowess as warriors. One night, a revered elder named Ibehra began telling stories. Some of the stories were accounts of recent events from an armed uprising they had waged against the government of Niger, and others were traditional Tuareg stories that were many hundreds of years old. These ancient stories were of things that we in America could completely identify with, like the search for personal growth and the search for love. But in their stories the search for love didn’t involve just going out and asking someone for a date. They were about men going out and having their courage, prowess and fortitude tested by extreme heat and thirst, by lions, by getting lost, and finally by the woman they find who says, “You’re not good enough yet, you don’t have the heart of a lion. Come back when you’re more mature, come back when you’re a real warrior of the heart.”

I was so taken with the fact that these stories, which held all the young people around the fire in total rapture, were not only very entertaining--there was violence, sex, adventure, beauty, and lots of humor—but they also contained a great teaching: to have the heart of a lion, to live from the heart, to be a person of integrity, and to bring these gifts back to your people when you have finally found and earned the love of your life. So essentially, the first aspect of Sacred



...telling stories  
which will genuinely  
enliven, inspire,  
challenge and  
delight...

Cinema is about embracing the goal of storytelling to both entertain and teach and making films that are congruent with that goal.

But accomplishing this takes skill, and a certain kind of devotion that is also savvy, so the second dimension of Sacred Cinema is to learn the considerable amount of technique and craft that are part of being able to successfully tell a story in a compelling way. Making a film, like any endeavor of art and craft where one is deeply engaged, is a challenging process. And this is especially so in the case of documentary filmmaking, where you're encountering the real world in all of its uncertainty, and all of its changeability, and where you're bringing your vision for the story you want to tell into a world that can at times be chaotic and uncooperative. Sacred Cinema sees this challenge as an opportunity, a path for developing greater awareness and compassion and understanding of one's self and the world.

**WHJ:** *Do you think that that's not true about films that are made in Hollywood?*

**KEVIN:** By and large I don't think it's true of Hollywood, and by Hollywood I take it you mean mainstream filmmaking. But there are exceptions, and exceptional people as well, like Sean Penn and Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon, Peter Weir, Carroll Ballard, sometimes Stephen Spielberg, Tom Hanks. But it certainly isn't the norm.

**WHJ:** *But considering the two aspects you've mentioned, it seems like a lot of people whom you wouldn't necessarily think of as "sacred filmmakers," do in fact set out to tell a good story that often has a message, they certainly have the technique to do it effectively, and the making of it definitely impacts them in the ways that you're referring to.*

**KEVIN:** Sure! The potential for that exists whenever a person brings awareness and good intent to the process they are involved in, and a number of filmmakers in the realm of documentaries and theatrical films would fall into that category. What I have done in coining the term "Sacred Cinema" is to say, "Let's make it a central goal to pay conscious attention to the potential, the process, and the consequences of making films."

I have taught this approach to filmmaking for several years to people of many ages and backgrounds, and am in the process of starting a school based on its principles. What I have heard many, many times from my students is that when they have checked out more traditional film programs, they have experienced an environment that may promote technical competence, but which also fosters a great deal of self-absorption and competition. These programs tend to be completely secular, where the mythical and spiritual dimensions of storytelling and the creative process, and the implications of this process on the filmmaker and on society, are minimized or not discussed at all. I encourage students to



What  
I have done  
in coining

the term "Sacred Cinema" is to say, "Let's make it a central goal to pay conscious attention to the potential, the process, and the consequences of making films."

▲ (above) FILMING NEAR SABLE PASS IN DENALI NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE, ALASKA, 1982

experience filmmaking as a way of developing meditative awareness, mindfulness, and an active form of compassion for self and for others.

**WHJ:** *Do you have a meditative practice?*

**KEVIN:** Personally? Yes.

**WHJ:** *How do you work with students to help them develop mindfulness, and how do they apply it to their filmmaking?*

**KEVIN:** One of the things I emphasize a lot in teaching Sacred Cinema is that in the process of making a film one is foremost a thinking, feeling, subjective human being living one's life. I really advocate that people feel a deep personal response to the subject matter that they're dealing with, to the life situation that they have put themselves in through the making of the film, and to engage this portion of their life in such a way that they have empathy and compassion and even identification with the things that are around them.

I also advocate for the development of what I call "the witnessing presence," which can be developed very keenly in meditation practice. This presence is what allows one to consciously bring the perspective of the storyteller to the situation, and to be able to say, "Okay, here I am with this wonderful African tribe, having a profound and life-changing experience, *and*, I'm also making a film—so what is the story that I want to tell? How do I want to relate this story in terms of wide-angle shots, and medium shots and close-ups, and what kind of dialogue and ambient sound do I need?" At the same time that I am interviewing a subject and feeling their energetic presence, realizing that conscious-

ly or subconsciously they are feeling and being effected by mine, the witnessing presence is there asking, "Okay, what is the best and most honoring way to engage this particular personality in order to draw out their wisdom, humor or whatever elements I am wanting to bring forth in order to tell the story that I am here to tell?"

A meditation practice, by cultivating this witnessing presence, also helps allow one to be in very difficult filming circumstances and to emerge with a fine film. Filmmaking has led me into some incredibly challenging situations! When I made films for the National Park Service, I was in sub-zero cold for days and weeks at a time in Alaska, and in blazing heat and humidity amongst hordes of mosquitoes and poisonous snakes in Florida's Big Cypress Swamp. I'm talking really intense! And I have also been terribly ill and sleep deprived while filming in foreign lands amongst people whose language I did not speak. Not fun.

So having a mindfulness practice helps one to be in these uncomfortable kinds of situations and to maintain a capacity for skilled and compassionate observation and action that allows one to learn from the experience and also emerge from it with the ingredients for a fine film. If you are completely identified with just having the experience, then you can be overwhelmed, and you may walk out without getting the elements that you need. You may end up in the editing room saying, "Oh my God, what was I doing?! Why didn't I get that shot, or ask that question a different way?"

In my teaching I try to impart how filmmaking can actually bring a great deal of richness into your life—how it can be a profoundly deep way to engage the world—and how to be aware enough in that engagement to come out of the experience with a great story to tell. With the advent of digital video technology, it has become possible for nearly anybody to buy a camera and tell the stories they are yearning to tell. This possibility is unprecedented in human history. Certain

► WILLAMETTE NATIONAL FOREST, OREGON, 1995

(Photo by Janet Lewis)

▼ EAST RIM OF CRATER LAKE, OREGON, 1984

(Photo by Helga Motley)



questions naturally arise, like what stories will we choose to tell, and with what motivation?

**WHJ:** *I've heard that there's often an instinctive aversion to cameras among indigenous people. Have you noticed that?*

**KEVIN:** Indigenous cultures are all about relationship. The more traditional cultures that I've been with don't see a big separation between themselves and the natural world, or between each other. The sense of the individual is not emphasized in traditional cultures to the extent that it is in our culture. Here on this side of the mindscape we live with the consequences of our individualism through a lot of feelings of isolation, fragmentation and loneliness, because we focus so much on what sets us apart from each other and the world around us. We spend a lot of our lives in our heads, by ourselves. And I say that without judgment, because there's a tremendous innocence to it—it's just what we're trained to do in so many ways from the time we are born and set off by ourselves in our crib.

I've actually had no problem going into indigenous cultures and filming, because I've taken the time to get to know and to have a relationship with the people. And what I have found is that if the people trust me, and they have a sense of what I'm doing, that I'm there to tell a story which is going to highlight their wisdom and the gifts that they have to bring to the world, then usually they're happy to participate. Unless they've had a terrible experience with someone else prior to my arrival. But even with the best of relationships, the folks I've filmed have usually had areas of their lives that were off limits to filming, and I have respected that. I think that the notion that a camera will take away a person's soul came from anthropologists who were going into traditional cultures and were seeing themselves as scientists, who could not and would not have personal relationships with the people they were "studying." They were there to be objective and removed, in their own little superior scientist world. And that's completely alien to the people whose lives they had entered.

So if one goes into someone's home with the attitude of separation and superiority, then the act of scrutinizing them and then taking an image, or footage, is going to be taking something fundamental away from them and offering nothing in terms of relatedness and true respect in return. Sacred cinema involves the conscious desire for the production that I am doing with an indigenous culture to somehow be of real benefit to them. So my approach is to say, "You have so much to offer to the world through your way of life and through your wisdom, and I'm here to learn. I'm here with your permission to record some of these things and to share them with the people of my crazy culture, because we sorely need it. And my hope is that my people's perceptions of your culture will be honorable and sympathetic and it will help to protect your way of life."



"Mr. Peer, listen I just want to tell you — remember that film you showed on the Watoobees or whatever their name was? Well listen, I thought it was such an awesome film, and I really got inspired, and now I've decided I'm going to join the Peace Corps, so thank you very much, okay see you later bye!"



...we need good stories, well told, to help us find our way to a future more congruent with our deepest longings and capacities.

**WHJ:** *Do you ever feel frustrated that millions of people will see Police Academy 7 on opening night, and you're creating these beautiful, meaningful, spiritual visions, and have a much more limited audience and resources to get it out?*

**KEVIN:** My feelings on that have varied over time. I had the really good fortune of some wonderful opportunities opening up when I was in my twenties, and by the time I was 30 years old I had directed 11 films for National Geographic and three films for the National Park Service, and my films had been seen literally all over the world. It was a time of feeling great purpose and meaning in my work. But when I was 31 my inner world shifted, and as I looked at the outer world, it didn't seem as though any of that passion and hard work had made even one little bit of difference. I went into a kind of dark night of the soul, because I was demanding that I see evidence that my work had somehow made a positive difference to the millions who had seen my films. My ego was having a field day with me, in the classic way that is often part of the journey of many an artist who wants to have a visible impact on the world.

**WHJ:** *Where are you with that now?*

**KEVIN:** What I eventually realized was that it is enough that I tune into my soul, my calling, and that I follow that calling with as much intelligence, fidelity, love and passion as I can muster. It is enough that I simply share what I am called to share with the world, and the rest is up to the Great Mystery. And that *has* to be enough, because of course I cannot control what the rest of the world chooses to support and watch. I have learned to trust, though, in the power of a good story well told.

A turning point in my trust of the power of story came after showing a film that I made about a wonderful African tribe called the Wodaabe to a group of high school students in Ojai, California. Now, normally after I show this film to an adult audience, there are lots of questions and lots of interest and response. But when I looked out into the high school audience after the film was over, I saw that half of them had their arms crossed and were slumped down in their chairs, not making eye contact, looking bored. The few questions that they did ask were like, "Well don't the camels really smell?" And, "How did you go to the bathroom when you were out there?" I remember feeling really discouraged and thinking, "This is the audience that's going to go out in droves and watch *Natural Born Killers* three times and obviously my work has no relevance to their life, so what the hell am I doing?"

About two weeks later, as I was walking into the Ojai post office, a small group of teenagers waved to me and I recognized a couple of them from the school. One of the girls followed me into the post office and blurted out, "Mr. Peer, listen I just want to tell you—remember that film you showed on the Watoobees or whatever their name was? Well listen, I thought it was such an awesome film, and I really got inspired, and now I've decided I'm going to join the Peace Corps, so thank you very much, okay see you later bye!"

I was just stunned. I stood there trying to lick stamps with tears in my eyes, and what came to me was that all I can do is honor my calling and put my films out there, and that the self-doubting part of me that looks for immediate gratification doesn't have a clue about the larger picture. I can't ultimately know what the effects of my work will be, though in



PHOTOS FROM LEFT:

YOUNG WODAABE MEN READY FOR THE YAAKE DANCE, NIGER, AFRICA, 1998 (Photo by Kevin Peer)

CLEARCUT IN WILLAMETTE NATIONAL FOREST, OREGON, 1995 (Photo by Kevin Peer)

KEVIN (LEFT) AND WODDABE FRIEND PEROJI 1998 (Photo by Leslie Clark)

this case I was certainly given a powerful example, which was a great encouragement at a time when I needed it. That young gal gave me a potent reminder of the power of the film medium, and how if I focus on telling a compelling and uplifting story, that story will indeed do its mysterious work in the world, in ways and in time that are beyond my knowing. Of course, one can also tell a confused story of narcissism and decay and viciousness and betrayal and end the story without any kind of meaningful resolution, and *that* story is going to do its work in the world also.

**WHJ:** *And it has.*

**KEVIN:** And it has, and it does. The stories we are told influence the world we create. It may not be possible to quantify precisely, but I deeply believe this is so. I am not advocating that all films and media should be nice and sweet, however. You know, often when I use the word “sacred” connected with cinema others think, “Oh it’s spiritual, and everything’s really sweet, and it’s really cuddly and the music is very tender etc.” That’s *not* what the sacred is about to me at all. When I was listening to the Tuareg telling stories where there was violence and flesh-tearing lions and dying of thirst and lust for a woman, it was a story of the sacred, because all that juicy drama was fueling a story about the challenge to become a whole human being. So when I say Sacred Cinema, I mean being a storyteller and regarding the forces of life, death and creation in a respectful and conscious way, and telling stories which help people to essentially feel that the path of life is a worthwhile endeavor, even though it can be full of all sorts of unpleasant and challenging experiences that can be difficult to understand. Storytelling can be a great gift to help us, to guide and delight and inspire us, and that to me is sacred.

**WHJ:** *Do you want the process of creating a film to alter the way your students see life itself?*

**KEVIN:** Yes. The journey of filmmaking has given me so much in terms of varied experience and perspective and has led me to a place of seeing life in terms of the unfolding of a mythic story. Sometimes it’s a story that is understandable to me and full of meaning, and sometimes it’s just one big damn mystery—but the perspective of life as story has ultimately been useful and enriching to me, and many of my students have reported the same. We all have Joseph Campbell to thank for that!

**WHJ:** *We might be using the word “story” in two different ways: often in meditative practices, one kind of drops one’s identification with the story of one’s life, in order to be in the present expansiveness of the moment.*

**KEVIN:** I really grappled with that greatly in the past. The spiritual traditions that have most attracted and influenced me have been Zen, Advaita, and the realm of Tibetan Buddhism known as Dzogchen. And those are all about dropping the sense of identification with one’s story and being present with what is, right here, in an open sort of stillness. Now, what’s interesting is that the teachings of those traditions themselves are full of stories! They’re full of inspiring tales of the personal heroic struggles of the Buddha, Milarepa, Ramakrishna, their disciples and so forth. So we never get completely away from story.

**WHJ:** *It’s a paradox.*

**KEVIN:** Yes, both story and no-story can coexist. When I’m seeking greater understanding of the flow of events in my life, then I go to the story: What are the forces that are

active in my life? Who are the characters that are showing up, and the roles that they seem to be playing out? What are the archetypal energies that are present or that need to be activated? In teaching storytelling for the filmmaking process, I talk a lot about archetypal and mythic energies, because all over the world, people tell stories, and stories are the expressions of these energies doing their timeless dance. And we can't get away from those invisible energies that are manifest in the world—that is what the unfolding drama of life is about. And yet behind all of the phenomena is the great Stillness, in the sense of a place within that we can access where there is no apparent story at all. And there is a great sweetness and vitality to that placeless place when we make contact.

**WHJ:** *And perhaps the stillness of the filmmaker can help allow the story of the subject to come forth, because you're not in the way?*

**KEVIN:** Yes, and that's why in my teaching I talk so much about the necessity of the dance between form and formlessness. And by formlessness I am referring to this great Stillness, which is the realm of pure potential. This is where creativity comes from, and especially the creativity that has the capacity to carry the numinous dimension of existence. I offer students some processes for contacting this realm within themselves, and techniques for clothing what emerges in the stories they will tell. So there is a dance between story and no story, of being receptive to a pregnant state of formlessness and then bringing what arises into the world of form through the telling of a story. If a film originates from that level of depth and timelessness, it will potentially help viewers to contact that place within themselves, and there will be an opportunity for inspiration, insight, and even healing.

**WHJ:** *That's true of virtually any creative endeavor.*

**KEVIN:** Yes, if it is coming from a "larger" place within the artist. There is an immense difference between what is created from the ego-identified drama of the isolated individual and what emerges from touching into that collective, mythic, timeless level, with the intent of being of benefit to other beings. Creating from this larger immensity will more likely result in works that will have the potency and relevance to speak to others long after the creator is gone.

The older I get the more immense and mysterious the journey of life seems, but such is the nature of a great adventure, eh? What I do know is that the world is in a crazy state at present, and we need good stories, well told, to help us find our way to a future more congruent with our deepest longings and capacities. I believe that films have a significant role to play in the journey out of our many mass delusions to a place of healing in our relationship with Earth and each other. Ultimately, I am optimistic. This is the nature of the stories I want to tell.

