

“Strong Women Became Weak Under Its Influence”: The Uses of Pituri in Charles Chauvel’s film, *Uncivilised* (1936)

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The 1936 movie, *Uncivilised* by Charles Chauvel is a fantasy film of a lost paradise. The unfamiliar indigenous drug Pituri is used as a vehicle for demonising Aborigines and endorsing the so-called superior values of the white settlers’ culture in Australia.

Keywords: Australian Aborigines; Australian cinema; Colonialism; Pituri.

Introduction

In an account of colonial culture that draws on both fact and fantasy, Charles Chauvel’s 1936 adventure film *Uncivilised* opens with the story of Mara, a white god who has mysteriously entered a remote native space over which he has complete sovereignty. This white chief is the guardian of a community of full-blooded Aborigines living a tribal lifestyle in the Australian outback. Beatrice, a white woman taken captive by white slave traders, also enters this Garden of Eden and shortly thereafter, the viewers of the film are introduced to Pituri, a drug of which few white Australians would have known in the 1930s or recognise today.

What is Pituri?

Pituri is manufactured from the indigenous Australian plant *Duboisia Hopwoodii*, found scattered throughout Australia’s desert interior. The drug is a stimulant which when prepared in particular ways creates a narcotic effect. The plant’s powerful effects are due to two alkaloids, nicotine and D-nornicotine, the latter being more powerful and toxic than the demethylated version of nicotine (Watson, 1983). The plant grows into a small tree of 2-3 m, and is found on Spinifex sand plains and sand hills in all Australian states, except Victoria and Tasmania (Latz, 1995;

Watson, 1983). The Mulligan-Georgina area located near the South Australian border in Western Queensland is a favoured habitat chosen by indigenous people as a site for harvesting the plant. Users select the leaves and stems of particular varieties of *Duboisia Hopwoodii*, which they chew or grind before alkali plant ash is added. Both ingredients are mixed to a paste or shaped into a small roll slightly longer and thicker than a cigarette. This forms the Pituri quid. Pituri was chewed in large enough quantities to achieve alterations to consciousness. It is still used today (Walsh, 1982).

That Chauvel incorporated Pituri into the film as a central part of his narrative seems remarkable, but it reflected the circulation of a mythology surrounding the use of the drug by Aboriginal peoples since its discovery by Europeans. The drug was being traded when Europeans arrived in central Australia in the middle of the nineteenth century and had been known for centuries. One of the first descriptions of the drug by a European is contained in W.J. Will’s diary in an entry made shortly before he and Robert O’Hara Burke died on their ill-fated expedition. Wills records that members of the community of people living on the banks of Cooper Creek had given himself and Robert O’Hara Burke “some stuff that they had called ‘bedgery’ or ‘pedgery’; it has a highly intoxicating effect when chewed, even in small quantities” (Cremin, 2000). The explorer A.W. Howitt noted in 1862 that he had followed tracks around Lake Hope, Cooper’s Creek, and Kyejeron made by natives, “on their journeys to procure the ‘Pituri’ so much used by them as a narcotic” (Cremin, 2000). Ten years later the explorer and public servant, W.O. Hodgkinson, claimed that he was a habitual user of Pituri (Cremin, 2000). At least one

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outback hotel served it with whiskey as a “knockout drop” (Watson, 1983). Joseph Bancroft, a physician working in Brisbane brought samples to London, Edinburgh, and Paris in 1872 where he had it tested and following a lengthy study of the drug, published a series of papers in which he analysed his findings (Watson, 1983).

Uncivilised: An Australian Jungle Film

Uncivilised belongs to the genre of the popular adventure film that came to prominence in the 1930s in Hollywood and rapidly rose to be one of the most popular forms of mass entertainment of the period. It has been compared to the films that make up the Tarzan cycle (Walsh, 1982). Also, it has stylistic features in common with *Trader Horn* (1931) and innumerable B-graders with exotic sounding titles, such as *Tropic Madness* (1929), *South Sea Bubble* (1928), and *East of Borneo* (1931). These were screened in Australia to packed audiences in the 1930s and were so popular that riots were known to erupt if tickets sold out. In 1932, patrons wrecked a box office when they were unable to get tickets for *Trader Horn*, then screening in three large theatres in Sydney.

An early Australian “talkie”, *Uncivilised* was Chauvel’s fourth feature length film. It opened at the Majestic Theatre in Melbourne to fanfare similar to that accorded a royal visit. The theatre had been decorated by Peter Dawson, the Australian tenor of renown, and a large contingent of members of parliament attended. *Uncivilised* smashed all previous records for the Majestic Theatre in its first week of opening and subsequently gained a release in New Zealand, while in the following year, it had a season in the USA. Critics compared it to Zoltan Korda’s *Sanders of the River* (1935), the British epic film on colonial Africa that had appeared a year earlier. The first scenes of *Uncivilised* are directly influenced by *Sanders of the River*, with both opening with Europeans pouring over a map, smoking tobacco, and discussing the trials of traversing wild territories.

Uncivilised produced Mara as the Tarzan-like figure of the film and Beatrice as the heroine, similar to the role of Jane (Walsh, 1982). Chauvel imported Denys Hoey from London for the part of Mara, and Margot Rhys from New Zealand to play the novelist, Beatrice Lynn. Chauvel may have derived Mara’s name from the Mara people of the Gulf Region. He very likely based Beatrice on Beatrice Grimshaw, a popular Australian adventure novelist of the period. Many jungle films have sub-plots that deal with drugs, slavery and jewel theft. Chauvel may have looked for a local drug to give his story an Australian flavour. In the film, we see Sondra (Marcelle Marnay), the jealous would-be lover of Mara, consulting one of the female elders of

the Aboriginal community, in an attempt to learn how she can use Pituri to cast a spell over her rival. She mixes Pituri with Beatrice’s food in the latter part of the film and sets into train a sequence of events that do not bring her the results she intends.

In the first sequences of the film, Beatrice is informed by her publishing agent that the government is interested in stopping the trade in Pituri, a drug which he tells her, “induces a voluptuous condition.” Therefore, Pituri is represented as a drug possessing the ability to alter mood and to induce sexual desire in women. Most of the early literature on Pituri places emphasis on its harvesting, preparation and ritual use by men (Roth, 1897). However, some accounts exist of its use by women. Aiston (1937), for instance, relates:

Pitcheri had very little apparent effect on the old people who had been in the habit of using it for years, but it gave the young people a swollen bestial look; one young woman I remember at Mungeranie had the appearance of being heavily drugged with opium; her eyes were swollen, her mouth loose and sloppy and she spoke as if in a drunken daze. The effect wore off and the next morning she was apparently normal (Aiston, 1937, p. 377).

The Myth of Pituri

Clearly the idea that Pituri could have a profound effect on women was recorded in academic literature in the mid-1930s, and the film’s suggestion that Pituri could make women lose control of their senses was circulating in the culture around the time that the film was made. In the opening scenes of the film, Beatrice’s agent tells her that Pituri induces “a voluptuous condition.” The use of the rather odd term “voluptuous” to describe Pituri’s effects actually appeared in the work of the anthropologist and surgeon, Walter Edmond Roth, who described Pituri as “producing a dreamy voluptuous sensation” (see Watson, 1983). Chauvel read anthropological literature, and it is probable that he derived this phrase directly from Roth’s studies.

Pamela Watson suggests that pastoral settlement brought changes to the use and cultivation of Pituri and that as a result, old men lost their monopoly on Pituri and women began to use and process it (Watson, 1983). Pituri’s most well-documented effect in the scattered references to it, is that it increased stamina and suppressed the appetite. Therefore, it was useful for desert peoples in keeping their strength during long journeys and periods when food and water were scarce (Cremin, 2000, p. 14). However, the strength of Pituri varies markedly according to the particular plant used and while it may stimulate endurance for long marches, slight miscalculations in quantity can produce stupor. “Similarly, the amount required to produce catalepsy and freedom from pain could easily be miscalculated

with a Pituri containing D-nornicotine, and the dose could produce instead respiratory paralysis and death” (Watson, 1983, p. 46).

Roth (1897) wrote a detailed description of Pituri in his landmark publication *Ethnological Studies Among the North-West Central Queensland Aborigines*, published in 1897. He was appointed surgeon to the Boulia, Cloncurry and Normanton hospitals in 1894, while stationed there he conducted a detailed study of the language and customs of the NW Central Queensland Aboriginal peoples. His account includes a lengthy description of the methods used for preparing Pituri and a detailed description of its habitat:

The Pituri shrub itself flowers about January. The supply for the Boulia district is obtained in the neighbourhood of Carlo (vel Mungerebar), on the Upper Mulligan. As a matter of fact, the plant grows further eastwards than this, though in scattered patches only—e.g., about sixteen miles westwards of Glenormiston head station ; a patch is also said by the Mitakoodi aborigines to be growing in one of the gullies at Cloncurry, on the rifle mountain (wherethe old target-range used to be). From Boulia and Marion Downs, from Herbert Downs and Roxburgh, messengers are sent direct to the Ulaolinya tribes at Carlo with speers and boomerangs, “Government” and other blankets, nets and especially red-coloured clothes, ribbons and handkerchiefs to exchange and barter for large supplies of the drug (Roth, 1897, p. 100).

The incorporation of a discourse against the use of Pituri in *Uncivilised* and its focus on its use by the members of the Aboriginal community over whom Mara rules, and the suggestion that its members, especially the women are addicted to the drug, gives a particular emphasis to the narrative. The film makes much of the dangers of Pituri use, and Mara in one of his first scenes with Beatrice, warns her about Pituri. “That very bad stuff,” he says. Beatrice’s rival Sondra, referred to in the credits as “the half-caste Sondra,” fearing that Beatrice will take Mara away from her, feeds Beatrice a potion containing Pituri to make Mara fall out of love with her. When Beatrice does fall in love with him, as a result of taking the drug, Mara thinks that the drug has fooled her. Horrified, he spurns Beatrice: “You just like other Lubras, you Pituri woman!”

The spell works, but Beatrice is unaware that she has been fed the drug and fervently denies having used it. In the end, it transpires that she has come under its influence unknowingly and we also see that this coincides with her falling in love with Mara. The drug, then, is seen to help Beatrice overcome her horror of “the primitive”—a happy consequence of having consumed it. But the outcome, in terms of the narrative is that Pituri and indigeneity are simultaneously con-

demned, the former as a drug that leads to licentious behaviour and the latter as a culture ruined by it. It is made clear that although Beatrice was influenced by Pituri, and the event played a key part in her falling in love with Mara, this is a once-only occurrence which she has no interest in repeating. The drug does however become the means through which Beatrice is given permission to fall in love with Mara. Pituri is an enabling device in the narrative that alleviates the audience’s horror of “the primitive” while giving its members permission to explore their repressed fascination for alterity and indigeneity.

In reality, the drug that was to cause the most widespread devastation in indigenous communities, whether they were in the bush or in the city, was alcohol. By making Pituri, an indigenous drug, the centre of a subplot about drug use, Chauvel intentionally or otherwise, displaces questions about the real drug problem. Alcohol caused a great deal more trouble than this relatively harmless indigenous drug used according to traditional customs. From the outset, Pituri is represented in the film as a means through which Aborigines are made to appear more mysterious, primitive and uncivilised. Hence the taglines in the advertising campaign for the film included the following: “Pituri is uncivilised.” “Strong women became weak under its influence.” The main symbol of savagery in the film is Pituri. Although no Aborigines in the film are actually seen to use Pituri, it nevertheless signifies indigeneity and primitiveness. Mara warns Beatrice against its use, pointing out its dangers that he says can be witnessed among the native population.

In the novel by Chauvel, released around the time of the film, references are made to the preparation of Pituri, to its appearance and to its trade by indigenous communities. The narrative opens with a discussion of an outlaw called Moopil, one of the many rogue black heroes that populate Australian fiction of the period. He is described as a “man of a vanishing race.” This leads, on page two, to an originary narrative in which a sort of pop anthropology is rehearsed:

Whence came these dark-skinned Australians who are the living survivors of the world’s early men? No man really knows. Authorities differ and each has his own theory, but conclusive proof of the Australian’s origin has yet to be satisfactorily established. Wide indeed are the differences of opinion: some hold that the black men came from Africa when the world was young: others again they are Dravidians; still others that they are a Negroid people from Babylon driven to southern India by the confusion of tongues caused by Nimrod’s aggressions, and thence South again by the assaults of central Asian Dravidians... (Chauvel, 1936, p. 2).

This is followed in the book and the film by the depiction of Mara’s kingdom on a map and the dramatic

Figure 1

An Australian federal police officer accosting a Pituri runner in the film Uncivilised.



proposition that opium was being traded through him from Asia. The simultaneous involvement of Pituri in the scheme of things is then presented. In a scene from the film, the Australian Federal Police accost a Pituri runner. He is carrying a dilly bag that fits the description in the literature of the means for carrying and transporting Pituri. The runner, however, is found to be carrying opium, thus confirming the suspicion of the police that Pituri runners were being used to trade opium (see Figure 1). Out of this emerges a popular amalgam of white myths and fears that come together to produce the idea of a fantastic kingdom on the frontier of white settlement that must be penetrated and brought under colonial control. This strange conjunction of opium and Pituri had actually occurred previously. During the 1890s, when there were attempts to prevent Chinese immigrants in Australia using opium, Pituri was sent to members of Sydney's Chinese community from Glenormiston Station in the Mulligan-Georgina area, presumably to provide them with an alternative to opium (Watson, 1983).

Versions of the Captivity Narrative

Chauvel's film represents what is seen to be the encroaching threat of Pituri within the broad framework of the captivity narrative, but here the genders are re-

versed from that of the classic captivity narrative in which white men rescue white women living with native men. In *Uncivilised*, it is Beatrice who is sent to do the rescuing—to remove Mara who has been living with Aborigines, and return him to civilised space, but the ideological function of the captivity narrative remains in place. Its function is to explore the alien culture in relation to sexuality and desire in order to stereotype and demonise that culture (Creed & Hoorn, 2001). Adhering to another powerful myth of frontier society, that of the white woman as civiliser, it is her role to tame Mara's primitive sexual desires and bring him back into the civilising realm of white colonial culture. In a scene by the campfire in which Beatrice and Mara witness a night corroboree, Beatrice instructs Mara about marriage and "the ways of my people," and makes it clear that it is her responsibility to "elevate" him. In the Tarzan movies, Jane performs a similar civilising function when she teaches Tarzan how to speak the language of white civilisation, but in *Uncivilised*, Beatrice has a more missionary-like propriety. Apart from the scene in which she is under the influence of Pituri, Beatrice comports herself within a framework of respectability.

The problem in both *Uncivilised* and the Tarzan movies is not the fact that white women are taken against their will to live with "savage" men, but that

they fall in love with them and refuse to “come home.” In *Uncivilised* other issues complicate this narrative line. As with the Tarzan films, it is not just a playful fantasy about “going primitive,” free from the politics of race; *Uncivilised* has a more pointed political agenda than most jungle films. There are certain moral lessons being promoted in *Uncivilised* and an agenda that warns against the dangers of “primitivism,” and openly seeks to place whiteness at the pinnacle of the popular imaginary. One of the vehicles for this moralising is the representation of Pituri that through a process of slippage in the film becomes entangled with the sub-plot that relates to opium dealing. The local trade in the mysterious drug Pituri, which while it is not the subject of police interest is conflated with the opium trade, becomes a vehicle through which Aboriginality is negatively positioned and perversely sexualised.

Colonialism and Fantasy

Indigenous Australia is represented as a place where black communities are “intact,” “authentic,” and “full-blooded.” The only problems that bother these communities, the film argues, are in-fighting between powerful men, the use of black magic and the abuse of Pituri. Just and kindly white men, who through a flourish of strength and goodwill maintain peace within that community, can deal with all of the latter. The main role of Indigenous Australia, if the logic of the film is followed, is to provide an exotic backdrop for the playing out of romantic adventures by members of the white settler society. Aborigines provide spectacle in the form of corroborees for white tourists when they undertake sojourns in the outback. In this sense the film prefigures the increasingly important role of indigenous culture in the white Australian economy as a draw card for the tourist industry.

Unlike his white brothers, Mara has assimilated to the ways of Indigenous Australia. He has taken the place of the real life Chief Aboriginal Protectors of the period who actually created the opposite effect, breaking up black communities they took children away from their families and imprisoned the men. While in reality, many indigenous communities had, by the mid-1930s, been forcibly removed from their traditional lands and relocated on pastoral stations and government or church missions, in *Uncivilised*, Aboriginal communities remain intact, speaking local languages, wearing local dress and performing tribal songs and dances. Unlike most indigenous subjects in Australia in 1936, the Aboriginal community in *Uncivilised* is ruled by a white man who has no knowledge of the white man’s laws. He is a benign, resourceful, artistic man who can resolve their internal conflicts, provide them with food from his successful hunting expeditions and protect them from black

magic and the ravages of local drugs such as Pituri. He is an impossibly fantastic character—a mixture of white supremacist and benign utopianism; a man who despite his whiteness, wants to “go native” and never return. Together Mara and Beatrice offer the promise of establishing a new kingdom in which they will present themselves as humane and beneficent rulers living in harmony with indigenous people in their jungle paradise. This is the narrative lure of *Uncivilised*—the impossible fantasy held out to white audiences who yearned to return to a lost Arcadian past that could ironically only exist in a pre-colonial world. The film of course exploits the civilised-uncivilised dichotomy, which justifies colonisation and subjection as a social tool with which to further the project of white settlement. Then there are the tenets of psychoanalytic theory (extremely popular in the 1930s) that divided the human psyche also into civilised (ego) and uncivilised (repressed instincts). In the convergence of these related schemas, the “native” tends to become part of the natural landscape for colonisation; the “native” also tends to become hyper-sexualised in the colonialist imagination. Anxiety over Pituri spills over into panic about miscegenation in this tale about cohabitation in the outback. white commercial interests had, of course, been illegally introducing black communities to alcohol and cigarettes, the white man’s drugs, and it was these products, rather than Pituri, that were to become the major constituents of substance abuse in black communities. It was not only the virtues of white settler society that ultimately were preferred, but also its own brand of vices.

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