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Listening to the Spirit of Indigenous Aesthetics in *Kantara: The Legend—Chapter 1*

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Abstract

Focusing on *Kantara: The Legend—Chapter 1* (2025) written, directed, and starred by Rishab Shetty, this article explores how land shapes identity in the memory of an indigenous community in South India. Primarily, the study inquires how the film visualizes sound, ritual, and indigenous aesthetics to portray land not as something people just own, but as living and sacred thing shaped by memories, ancestors and rituals showcasing its essential role in indigenous identity and sovereignty. The study aims to examine how the film frames Bhoota Kola and the farming life of Tulu culture in Karnataka through audiovisual elements. It illustrates how sounds, rituals, stories and visual symbols come together to create a way of storytelling rooted in local beliefs. By focusing on rituals, music, the landscape and comparative analysis of mainstream cinematic practices, close reading of *Kantara*'s folk cultures and traditional land, God, spirit and ritual knowledge, the article argues that the film offers a different kind of story where the land has a voice, spirits are listened, celebrated and cinema becomes a platform to remember culture and respect nature. The article employs Shawn Wilson's notion of relational accountability and Margaret Kovach's tribal epistemologies to ensure respect, responsibility and ethical engagement with indigenous knowledge and communities. It also applies visual methodology to examine how images, sound, performances and spatial setting communicate power and identity. In addition, the study draws on sound studies treating listening as a method of understanding place, cultural experience and relationships to land. The article asserts that film's indigenous aesthetics are not just for decoration but are essential to how the story is narrated. Through drumming, chanting, ritual dance and forest soundscapes the film invites viewers to listen to the land and understand identity through relationship with place, ancestors and more than human life.

Keywords: Acoustemology, kinship, soundscape, sovereignty, Tulu culture

The Living Voice of Land: An Introduction

Rooted in the dense forests and living ritual traditions of Karnataka India, Rishab Shetty-directed *Kantara: The Legend—Chapter 1* (*Kantara* hereafter) appears as more than a cinematic practice of mass entertainment, visual effects and commercial success. The Indian Kannada language thriller narrates events in the coastal Karnataka king Jayaram-starred Rajashekara's encounter of sacred stone on his journey to self-discovery, perpetual quest for inner peace in the forest of Kantara. Pictured in the Tuluva culture, the world of Bhoota Kola, forest lifeways and village-based farming life, Shetty's *Kantara* blends myth and memory into a story where people respond to call of the land through deity practices, ancestral spirit, rituals and physical expressions of the people. This article, situating *Kantara* within its social, cultural and mythic background, explores cinematic adaptation of indigenous belief systems into a strong visual language, native culture and history that challenges the usual ways of cinematic practices.

The film begins with a powerful narrative: the mysterious 1970 disappearance of a Bhoota Kola performer (demi-god) Annappa, within a sacred well, forest circle of fire during the ritual performance. When a young boy is concerned to know more about this circle and someone calls it a 'legend.' From which Shetty's cinema moves back into an origin that connects the forest to divine creation. Parvati created a garden for Eeshwara's meditation and guardian beings, including Panjurli, Guliga and Chavundi descend for its protection. This opening scene establishes the film's central idea from the very beginning that the forest is not empty land waiting for human rule rather a sacred space shaped by memory and protected by deities who belong to that place. As the plot develops, this idea becomes the basis of the film's central conflict. The story seems set during the Kadamba dynasty era in the 4th century CE. A king recruits villagers from *Kantara* to build a temple under harsh weather conditions. After the villagers' escape, later, when the king discovers valuable spices, he tries to seize and rule over the sacred forest garden. The film depicts this act not only as an act of exploitation but also as a violation of the land's spiritual order. When the king enters the forest for the same, guardian deities manifest and kill him. Then, his son attempts to control the forest by prohibiting the entry. It seems important as the film does not simply present the nature fighting back as a cinematic fantasy rather, it constructs the worldview where the land has guardians and in which sacred laws are real that stand above royal or political power.

This land represents vital to the discourse on indigenous aesthetics and identity. While mainstream cinema frequently reduces land to commoditized property, extractable wealth or a passive backdrop, this narrative values the land to the status of kin and ultimate destiny. A boy named Berme appears in that sacred well and is adopted by the tribal woman Baidi and Jabbanna. Later, he becomes the leader of the forest community. When royal encroachments and violence increase, Baidi is killed, Guliga (ancestral-deity) emerges and possesses Berme, offering him the power to protect the community. The film repeatedly returns to the idea that human identity is not separate from land and ritual. It is shaped by belonging to the community, protected and guided by the ancestors; therefore, it is every individual's responsibility to fulfill in return.

As David Bordel, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson argue that modern popular cinema has traditionally focused on urban stories, love, nature and visual techniques that attract audience attention (24). However, contemporary films based on local, cultural and indigenous traditions offer alternatives to these dominant mainstream cinematic practices. *Kantara* stands as a strong example of this changing trend in contemporary cinema. The film recounts the interconnectedness of spirit, sound, land and ritual. In *Kantara*, land is not just a background setting or resource to human hubris, it is a living presence that listens, remembers and reacts. In the film, the forest, soil, drums, songs and rhythms come together to form a world where human existence is inseparable from ancestral spirits and surroundings. Ritual performance becomes a way of communication between humans, gods, the land and ancestors. Through cinema, these rituals help bring out old histories and indigenous knowledge in a clear and meaningful way. Sound plays a crucial role in this process. The tone and rhythms of traditional rituals, drums, songs and forest sounds work well with the visuals, but they also guide the story and plot and bring emotional experience. These sounds and landscapes create a feeling

of spiritual connection and enhance the belief that the land itself can speak. Through connected performances, especially in ritual scenes, oral tradition, and narrative style woven with sounds, visuals, symbols, and music associated with the land, the film turns cinema into an indigenous aesthetic where shared memories and cultural traditions continue to live on.

Although, *Kantara* (2022) has been widely discussed in relation to indigenous cinema and ecocinema, *Kantara: The Legend—Chapter 1* (2025) remains largely unexplored. Existing studies has paid little attention to the way sound, ritual, and land function together to shape the film's aesthetics. This article probes into in-depth analysis of how the film uses sound, ritual, and indigenous aesthetics to present land as a living and sacred presence and what this reflects about indigenous sovereignty and identity. The study has three main objectives. The first is to examine how the film visualizes Bhoota Kola and Tulu Culture on screen. The second is to analyze how rituals, music, and sound function together to shape the film's narrative in a way that is different from mainstream cinema. The third is to explore how indigenous knowledge can be represented in an ethical and respectful way. The study focuses mainly on close analysis of the film in detail, bringing comparisons from its 2022 predecessor wherever relevant. However, it does not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of Bhoota Kola, the film's box office performance or a wider examination of Indian ecocinema.

Literature Review

Since the success of *Kantara*, scholars have increasingly examined how the movie conceptualizes ritual performances, folk traditions and forest-based belief systems to challenge modern exploitative approaches of natural resources. Anandita Saraswat and Aratrika Das argue that *Kantara* foregrounds indigenous and folk rituals such as worship of a forest, deities, especially Panjurli and Guliga, which resist modern colonial ideas that treat nature primarily as a resource (6). Similarly, Goutam Karmakar and Payel Pal argue that “tribal people of Kaadubettu do not regard land as personal property or tradable commodity... instead linked to mother earth and territories of life” (121). They read *Kantara* as a film that brings indigenous knowledge systems, sacred forest values and local customs to the foreground by showing how these forms of knowledge are often treated as marginal or unscientific within dominant power structures. This reading allows us to see the film not just as a story about environmental harm and who suffers from it, but also as a story about unfair treatment of knowledge. It shows how some ways of knowing are accepted as valid while others are ignored. However, much of the existing research remains focused on the 2022 film and often stays at the level of themes like forest protection, spiritual belief, resistance to landlords or rulers, and related concerns. What seems yet to be addressed is a deeper account of how cinematic form carries these meanings, not only what the film conveys, but how it enables viewers to feel and understand land, spirit, and belonging; at this point, this paper positions its argument. Accordingly, this analysis pays close attention to sound, visual composition, and ritual performance as storytelling methods rather than as background features. Also, it focuses on the specific work performed by the prequel of *Kantara*, which turns the politics of the land into an origin narrative by locating the conflict in the ancient Kadamba era and linking the struggle over land to divine ancestry, sacred wells, and guardian deities. It deepens the movie's engagement with land, memory and belonging and shows these concerns are carried out not only through theme but also by form.

A scholarly discussion of *Kantara* requires moving beyond the simple observation that the film merely features a ritual dance and instead recognizing the ritual as a culturally embedded practice that carries important spiritual, social and symbolic meaning within the narrative. What seems required is to explain what Bhoota Kola represents, how it functions, and why it holds significance within the cultural world from which the film draws. The MAP Academy's cultural overview clearly describes Bhoota Kola as a form of spirit worship practiced in the coastal districts of Dakshina Kanada and Udupi in Karnataka and Kasargod in Kerala a region often referred to as Tulu Nadu (“Bhuta Kola”). The overview further explains that the central feature of the ritual involves possession by Bhootas [spirits] or deities, who are believed to protect people, offer blessings and punish wrongdoing. This framework closely reflects the logic of the film in which the forest falls under the protection of deities [Bhootas] and acts of moral or social violations lead to consequences.

Miho Ishii's ethnographic work holds particular significance. Ishii presents Bhoota ritual beyond a simple opposition between low caste and high caste beyond an interpretation framed solely through the language of resistance (88). Her analysis focuses on relational divinity, highlighting how ritual brings human, spirit, animal, and place into an interconnected living relationship. This idea is key to studying *Kantara* as the film shows that authority is not limited to humans but takes shape through relationship with land, spirits, ritual practices and possessed body. Meera Baidur and Tapaswi H. M. offer a useful framework for film analysis by linking the aesthetics of Bhoota Kola to collective memory and shared experience (395). Their argument shades light on the powerful impact created by ritual scenes in *Kantara*. These scenes move away from the traditional idea of a single hero's inner journey; rather, they are shaped by collective experiences where community comes together for sacred celebration. Here, ritual is staged in a way that goes beyond simple cultural representation. The story develops a sense of shared ritual authority and displays how holy celebration becomes meaningful through collective experience.

Another important aspect introduced by Faye Ginsburg's idea of embedded aesthetics. Ginsburg argues "cultural products must be understood within the social and cultural system in which they are produced" (365). This perspective reflects rationality in this context, since ritual aesthetics remain connected to cultural world shaped by responsibilities and social meaning. While the *Kantara* situates ritual aesthetics into popular cinema, this representation fosters visibility, recognition, and cultural pride. At the same time, it highlights the aesthetics of responsibility and relationship that sustain their meaning in lived experience. For this reason, the reception and criticism of *Kantara* must be treated as part of the scholarly discussion. Mint's review of 2025 prequel describes it as "super-sized," visually grand and highly intense, thrilling at moments and excessive at others. The review praises the cinematography, ritual choreography and accuracy-based rating, while also suggesting that scale and spectacle occasionally displace emotional intimacy. *The Indian Express* reviews an appreciation for the film's visual world and describes it as more emotionally sustaining than the prequel, highlighting how ritual culture appears appealing on a big stage for larger mass audiences.

Also, *Kantara* has received a lot of attention from scholars regarding the connection between indigenous life, nature, ritual, storytelling, and land. Looking at the film as ecocinema, Swapnit Pradhan and Nagendra Kumar discuss the sustainability and argue that "tribe's sacred belief in forest deities highlights the notion of sustainable living through an emphasis on cross-species interconnections" (17). They contrast this with the landlord's controlling and exploitative view of the forest. Similarly, Sathis Kumar C claims, "The film imbues traditional narratives with ecological agency, demonstrating how local stories and belief systems inform sustainable practices and environmental consciousness" (1). *Kantara* presents traditional belief systems as important sources of ecological wisdom and environmental care. Argha Basu and Priyanka Tripathi situate *Kantara* within the framework of Indigenous media, women and representation. They critique "the use of indigenous media and epistemology in the film as a symptomatic representation of fourth cinema and then to address the representation of women from the perspective of faithful representation and indigeneity" (2). The film challenges colonial ideas of development and values indigenous language and self-reliance. Suptitha Pal and Dhishna Pannikot also locate *Kantara* within a larger indigenous response to ecological crisis and state "the Bhoota Kola ritual in *Kantara* is not merely a shamanistic performance but a sophisticated indigenous mechanism for conflict resolution and environmental governance, where the deity acts as the ultimate arbiter between human greed and forest preservation" (11). They assert that traditional knowledge offers a deeper and better way to address environmental damage than Western secular ideas.

Together, these studies show that *Kantara* is an important example of indigenous ecological and cultural knowledge. However, they do not pay enough attention to the role of sound, drums, land, and ritual performance as powerful sensory forms through which this knowledge is shared and experienced. This article fills that gap by closely listening to how the film's sounds and rituals create meaning. Michel Chion's concept of audio-vision clarifies the mutual relation between sound form plus visual form in *Kantara*, showing how drumming, chanting, the thrilling sound of calling/yelling the sacred deity, silence, and environmental texture shape the viewer's perception of ritual, landscape, and sacred presence. Similarly, Steven Feld's concept of acoustemology: sound-based ways of knowing and

experiencing the world, extends the discussion by framing how listening, sound and environments shape people's knowledge, culture and belonging with place. Available academic research has concentrated on ritual practice, cultural context, social issues and environmental concerns. This paper offers a more integrated reading through close attention to the connection of sound, ritual, story, and visual theme, demonstrating how local belief as indigenous aesthetics requires cinematic form. Its originality lies in this combined sensory approach, which offers a plausible account of how *Kantara* constructs sacred meaning through story progression, sound force, ritual performances, sacred belonging, and symbolic imagery.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology through a close reading of *Kantara* as a cultural and aesthetic text. This study highlights the key elements of film, including story sequence, ritual scenes, visual style, sound, music and recurring patterns. It also draws on plot summaries, reviews and production details to understand how the film has been reviewed and discussed by critics. The analysis draws on indigenous research perspectives of Wilson, Kovach and Smith. This study interprets research as a relational practice. Wilson argues that "research is ceremony" (11) in which knowledge is perceived through meaningful engagement with people and culture rather than by observing them as an outsider. It allows this paper to remain engaged in the film's cultural meaning of rituals instead of seeing rituals as only a source of information. Similarly, Kovach's indigenous ways of knowing perspective helps the analysis of *Kantara*, in which ritual scenes are examined not merely as entertainment but as cultural practices that express ways of understanding the world, relationships, and collective belonging. Likewise, Linda Tulhiwai Smith emphasizes the need of ethical responsibilities in studying indigenous cultural practices. As she notes, "research through imperial eyes" (56), reminds how indigenous traditions have been misunderstood when analyzed from external or colonial frameworks. Her warning guides this study to treat Bhoota Kola as a living tradition with respect, its own authority, and its own understanding of the world. In this way, ritual culture becomes a practical way of life rather than a spectacle. Also, sound analysis combines soundscape assimilating with Michel Chion's audio-vision plus Steven Feld's acoustemology. Chino's concept explains how sound and image shape perception together, while Feld clarifies how listening functions as a way of knowing place, environment and cultural presence. For visual analysis, the paper draws on Gillian Rose's visual methodology. Her framework supports attention to composition, setting, social context audience reception, which reflects how film is shaped by ritual costume, bodily performance, forest imagery and widespread conflict. It allows the study to ask what kind of world the film constructs visually, whose authority the world accepts.

Aesthetics Sovereignty

Shetty-directed *Kantara* expands the idea of indigenous aesthetics beyond just the traditional way of looking at art or showing folk costumes on screen. The term instead points to a deeper aesthetic system in which beauty, fear, spirituality, and truth emerge through relationships with land, ancestors, rituals, and community. In *Kantara*, ritual does not appear as an important part of the story, not just a decorative element in a typical action plot. Ritual functions as the foundation of the narrative itself. The film opens by naming the forest circle a legend, then develops a mythic origin to explain why the forest holds sacred value and receives protection. This indigenous mode of perception is captured in the film's own words: "our people who worshipped nature stood there seeing the *daiva* in the stone" (00:03:39), demonstrating that the community does not require explanation or justification for what they see; the sacred is simply visible to those who belong to it. From the opening scene onward, the film signals that its world rests not on modern realism alone rather on sacred memory. Udit Jhunjhunwala notes that the struggle for supremacy in the story cannot be detached from the favor of deities, while Bhoota Kola occupies a central place within the myths of film. Once the ritual performance takes central position, the aesthetic experience changes. This idea influences the movie's major scenes, many of which feel more like ritual than simply fights. This blending of politics and ritual matters for the analysis, rather than keeping viewers at a distance as many mainstream cinemas do; *Kantara* encourages viewers to understand the land conflict through beliefs, rituals, and traditions instead of a direct legal or political

framework. Land conflict is not shown as just a political issue between people; instead, the land is presented as something morally important where ancestral spirits or deities still shape everyday social life. In this way, indigenous aesthetics remains closely tied to identity. The film shows that identity is shaped by a person's connection to the land and by their responsibility to follow ritual practices.

The protagonist, Berme does not gain meaning simply through physical strength or individual capacity, his significance develops through his connection to the sacred well, his adoption into the community and his incarnational possession by a guardian *daiva*. This pattern indicates a kind of identity that is different from the usual hero, whose strength normally comes only from personal talent. Using Rose's visual methodology, the film's visual world performs at least three functions. First, it presents the forest as endless, powerful which supports the idea of the forest as a vast scared territory rather than a small village background. Second, the film frames ritual through intense costume, movements, lighting, crowd choreography, ritual feels like a moment when another world enters the scene. And third, the film applies scale to highlight the meaning. By displaying temples, sacred places, and community gatherings, the film reflects that the conflict over land, authority, and sacredness is not a simple local issue but is shaped by history, time, and destiny.

Land Belonging



Figure 1. Protagonist and tribal community living in the sacred forest (00:53:37).

One of the film's key concerns is land ownership. It repeatedly displays how rulers and politicians seek control over land, whereas the indigenous communities give land a high value. Because of their close bond with the land, they also intend to protect it, considering it their precious cultural object. The presence of myths within the film, Parbati creating a garden for Eeshwara's and guardians descending and protecting it matters since it reflects a special connection and meaning to the land. The forest does not appear as an empty land; rather, it holds history, memory, and sacred value. The tribal song within the movie expresses this clearly "the garden where Lord Eeshwara planted flowers, the land shaped by Berme, the soil that holds the *daivas*, this is the land of Kantara" (00:18:56). The film asserts the community's claim to the land through such powerful song and myth rather than legal language. In doing so, the film affirms that the community's relationship with the land cannot be explained in terms of ownership. Instead, it is based on an older and deeper sense of ancestral legitimacy that lies beyond the power of law or political authority. As Figure 1 illustrates, the community is not separate from the forest. They come together inside it, under the trees, as part of its natural life and order. It appears as part of a sacred social order that humans live within that order. The forest does not stand as a passive background it has guardians; it carries moral force and passes judgment on those who try to seize or violate it. Then, the historical plot shows what happens when royal greed tries to destroy this order. King Vijayendra forces villagers to work in harsh conditions to build granite temple. After he sees herbs and spices, he decides to control the sacred garden too. The moment he enters into the forest then guardian *deities* appear and kill him. The noticeable point here is what the film offers, it does not simply punish the

greedy royal king but also makes a strong point that land cannot come under human power alone because sacred land has protectors as well as boundaries.

This idea reflects to Leanne Simpson's argument that land means more than a resource. For her land works as a teacher, a source of identity, a base for political life. Simpson's insight helps clarify the film's logic as she writes from her own indigenous tradition: "she learned both from the land and with the land and this mode of knowing creates communities . . . to uphold and move forward our political traditions and systems of governance" (7). The community's bond with land does not rest on legal papers or private ownership. It grows through learning from place, living with it, caring for it, remaining answerable to the ground that feeds, shelters and sustains the people. In that sense, land shapes not only survival but also duty, memory and collective life. She argues that many indigenous worldviews treat humans, animals, forests, rivers and the wild natural world as members of one extended family with shared origins. From that point of view, land becomes more than property or material wealth. It becomes kin, so harming land does not count as only economic damage, also hurting human kind itself, breaking a relationship of care, responsibility and respect. This relational understanding of land corresponds with Kovach's view that "in choosing Indigenous epistemologies, respect must be paid to their holistic, relational nature" (58). In the film, land is not treated as resource but a living relationship that unites the community and calls the audience to a shared sense of responsibility. *Kantara* conveys these ideas through its visual scenes and narrative events. It portrays land as something sacred and powerful that responds when violence takes place. The forest serves as an active force; guardian spirits protect it and judge and punish those who try to seize or violate it.

Memory and Ancestral



Figure 2. The ritual brings the community together around the Bhoota Kola performer (00:00:53).

The sacred well and mysterious circle of the fire in the forest symbolizes the idea of land belonging. The narrative starts in 1970, displaying the Annappa's sudden disappearance during the ritual performance inside the circle. At the end, Berme, the protagonist of the movie disappears diving into the sacred well surrounded by fire as one of the characters describes it "a legend for another day" (02:44:47). By refusing to address what happened to Annappa, the film indicates that some knowledge belongs to the land and its ritual traditions rather than fully being revealed to the audience. The land is presented as a visible presence that uncovers its memories and truth only at the right time. The beginning narration of the film confirms this clear "whenever the land of Dharma grows parched the Almighty brings rain, thus divine forces are born in this soil again and again" (00:09:34). The film treats land as a living and changing entity, not fixed, and it carries memory and sacred meaning across generations.

As Figure 2 presents, the Bhoota Kola scene forms a circular community gathering around the possessed performer holding the ancestral fire. It visually reflects that memory exists in shared ritual, in a particular place and sacred presence rather than written records. Through this, the film presents land as an archive, not one made of paper, but one made of place, story, and sacred presence. This reflects a deep indigenous idea that history does not live only in written documents; it also lives in landforms, sacred sites, and oral stories connected to place. The film constructs this idea through the circle and the well. These do not function as life meets the sacred world but also hold the community's story within them. This also explains why the film's land politics go beyond rights in a modern legal sense. It deals with belonging across long time, while land carries the stories of ancestors and the presence of deities, which means taking land does not mean only stealing territory, but also damaging a relationship that links beyond a single generation too. It explains why the conflict seems so powerful in the film; it is not only a political struggle but also a carrier of ancestral weight.

Sound: The Land Speaks



Figure 3. The drum as ritual voice: percussive sound leads the *Bhoota Kola* procession (01:50:52).

Listening to the spirit of the land offers one of the strongest ways to read this film. In *Kantara*, sound does more than create emotion. Sound functions almost like a character in the story. When the ritual drums begin, the viewers not only hear a beat and rhythm but also feel that something sacred is arriving. This is captured precisely when a priest warns the King, “When you have humiliated Eeshwara’s elements, do you think he will dwell in your temples? It is not a stone that cracked but his heart. Until he is happy the Brahma Kalasha cannot be instead” (01:56:05). The film allows viewers to hear the pain before they see it on screen. Through the story, sound often reveals what has happened before image does, urging audiences to rely on listening rather than seeing to understand the sacred. It links Feld’s idea of acoustemology that listening is a way of understanding and knowing a place. Figure 3 also demonstrates that the drum is not just placed at the side of the ritual. It leads the whole procession from the front and center. This means the sound of the drum comes before the people, letting the land and its gods know the community is there even before anyone speaks. This connects well with what Chino describes as audio-vision: “a sound enriches a given image, so as to create a definite impression for the viewer” (5). He asserts that sound and image work together rather than separately, producing a powerful experience that shapes how viewers understand what they see.

This concept aligns with critical responses to the film. Mint’s review observes that the score increases the film’s sense of excitement and tension through its cinematography, especially through “thundering percussion during rituals” (Jhunjhunwala). This denotes that viewers understand ritual sound as a key force in the film rather than background music. Sound forms the core of the film’s emotional atmosphere, meaning, and ritual experience. It functions as a narrative method, not as background decoration. Music selections link sound with place, ritual, and history that strengthen

the film's feel and make it more cultural and spiritual. Also, Feld's idea of acoustemology adds clarity here. He links sound and knowledge suggesting that people understand place through and listening and sounding calling it "acoustemology, a knowing-with and knowing-through the audible" (12). This suggests listening functions not just as receiving the sound but also as a way of understanding the environment and the world around.

Bhoota Kola: Living Law



Figure 4. Bhoota Kola as living law: the ritual encounter between Paniurli and Guliga (02:42:23).

Kantara sets itself apart as a unique film through its authentic portrayal of indigenous culture and traditions. Mainstream cinema generally treats ritual as superstition or background decoration however, in this film, rituals carry authority and present the forest garden receiving protection from deities like Panjurli and Guliga. When the royal rulers attempt to control the land, punishment occurs. This represents more than fear of gods and shows a moral and political claim. Guardians protect the land and violations bring consequences. The possessed Bereme as Guliga directly warns the wrongdoers, "for every sin you have committed, I will offer your blood to this soil like flowers and uphold Dharma" (01:49:57). This scene reflects ritual justice as real action guided by sacred authority and connected to the land. Figure 4 presents Bhoota Kola practice takes place in the forest rather than in a temple, a formal power of space unfolding its close connection to land. Drawing on Wilson's idea that "indigenous epistemology and ontology are based upon relationality" (11). This analysis sees the ritual of Bhoota Kola as more than a spectacle. It is a living practice that connects the possessed body, the community, ancestors, and the land. This marks the point where indigenous media theory becomes crucial. As Ginsburg argues that indigenous aesthetics remain embedded in social and political life "for the sake of discussion, I will call this orientation embedded aesthetics, to draw attention to a system of evaluation that refuses a separation of textual production and circulation from broader arenas of social relation" (368). She refers to an evaluative framework that understands cultural production and circulation as inseparable from the wider network of social relation in which rituals take shape.

When mainstream cinema expands ritual imagery on a huge scale, it can generate pride and recognition, and also turn rituals into spectacle that overwhelms meaning. Ishii's work deepens this point by reflecting that spirit worship works through relationships "the transactional network created by the *Bhoota* ritual constitutes and mediates . . . the complementary relationships among human beings, wild cultures and spirits" (105). It creates connections among humans, spirits, animals, ritual things, and place. In the film, possession is not just shown as magic or through a king but as a way power works through rituals, relationships and sacred places. In this way, ritual itself becomes a form of governance. Ritual scenes generate collective feeling through shared experience. The film stages these scenes to make the viewer feel like they are part of a shared spiritual moment, not just quiet observers.

Kinship

Shetty-directed *Kantara* develops kinship as a central theme, closely connecting this blood relation with indigenous identity. The protagonist is not presented as a prince or a person born into power in the film. He appears as a child found in sacred well and raised by a tribal woman named Baidi together with Jabban. This carries significance because belonging grows through care, relationship and shared life rather than merely through blood ties. The movie suggests that a person becomes part of a people through being raised by them, through sharing their land, through carrying their responsibilities. However, the film's idea of kinship does not end with human relationships. It extends beyond human connection.

The community receives protection from *daivas* like Panjurli and Guliga, while the story repeatedly shows human life depending on them, reflecting a worldview in which humans, nature, and spiritual forces exist within a shared relationship of care and belonging. After the clash between royal powers and Kantara Berme's statements to Kanakavathi "Who are you to make space for our Daivas? We live in the land they gave us" (01:58:35). This shows the shared identity, where belonging is not based on ownership or bloodline but is given through the *daivas*, connecting humans with the sacred as part of one extended family. The film reinforces the idea by presenting the forest and the spirits not as a force outside the community, but as part of its moral protective force. Possession carries special importance in the movie. When Guliga possesses Berme during a violence, the film presents the body as a bridge between worlds. This reflects Ishii's argument that spirit and ritual do not function as symbols alone, but through lived experience of connection. The film's narrative perspective shows kinship going beyond living humans to include ancestors and deities, with identity shaped through these relationships.

In the final act of the film, Guliga introduces his sister Chavundi, aiming to defeat Kanakavathi. This scene presents Chavundi as a goddess of feminine power who also possesses Berme and defeats the female royal figure. Tulu belief system understands divine sibling relationships as meaningful. Guliga possesses the power but he does not harm women. This suggests a rule where divine beings follow gender boundaries. A woman therefore faces only a woman. So Chavundi steps in, possesses Berme, and defeats Kanakavathi. Here, power stays within the same divine family but is shared based on gender. The brother steps back and the sister takes charge when needed. It shows that men and women have different but connected roles. At the same time, the film makes a clear difference, Chavundi's power is respected because it is sacred, while Kanakavathi's power as she attempts to trap *daivas* through black magic and politics is punished. The film does not present a general argument about gender. Instead, it applies the same distinction between rightful and wrongful power to gender roles, respecting power rooted in relationship and ritual over individual authority and politics.

Mint praises the cinematography for giving forests, ritual dances a "palpable sense of life and frenzy". The review also stresses the film's larger scale through endless forests, towering temples, grand chariots, and elaborate scenes of possessions. The film depicts Tulu culture as a strong source of knowledge, authority and beauty. Even though it is made for entertainment, it also helps define and present the community's identity. It respects local beliefs by treating *daivas* as real powers, showing sacred places as meaningful and presenting the forest community's way of life as important, not backward. At the same time, the film's commercial nature creates a risk of treating and misleading these visual elements as aesthetic pleasure rather than cultural meaning. This highlights the importance of respect, responsibility and careful interpretation of culture in studying such films.

What the Land Remembers: Concluding Reflections

Based on the analysis, the paper shows how *Kantara* uses sound, ritual and indigenous aesthetics to present land as a living and sacred part of life and how this representation expresses indigenous sovereignty and identity. It goes beyond the story of the conflict over land or forest; it constructs a moral world where land holds memory, rituals function as law, and kinship moves beyond blood ties. The film does not focus on land ownership but the relationship people build within. It moves away from control and conquest toward responsibility, presenting land as something people must respect and care for, not own. The sacred well and the guarded garden go beyond decoration. They reflect a worldview where places carry history, expose greed, and remember those who enter in. This analysis illustrates that the

film displays Bhoota Kola as more than a visual spectacle. It portrays the ritual as a living system of law that maintains sacred power and guides justice within the community. What makes *Kantara* powerful in popular cinema lies in its sensory elements. This study shows that ritual, music, and landscape interconnect to construct a unique way of cinematic narrative rooted in Tulu beliefs and traditions. Sound, images, movements, and ritual rhythms create a sense of the land as living reality instead of background scenery. The ritual drums do not simply create emotion within the film; they call guardians, sacred presence, and possession carries divine authority. The grand visual scenes showcase that the conflict over land carries importance beyond the spectacle, it connects to ancestral memory and cultural values. These artistic choices help the film to communicate indigenous values through relationships, memory and lived experience rather than entertainment alone.

The commercial success of the movie also impacts how indigenous knowledge reaches wider audiences, highlighting its visualization in mainstream cinema as morally significant. *Kantara* stands out stronger despite not being a large-budget movie, bringing the emotional force of the rituals to a broader viewership. The film, released in five different languages simultaneously in Kannada, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam, earned INR 100 crore within two days. Later, it went on to become the highest-grossing Indian film of 2025, with more than INR 832 crore worldwide. This success maintains the significance of its cultural meaning. It brings *Tulu* rituals and the spiritual view of nature to mainstream viewers, offering indigenous aesthetics a place in mainstream cinema. The cultural meaning carried by films should be respected, and rituals need to be understood with care rather than treated as mere entertainment. Therefore, *Kantara* goes beyond spectacle. It presents a world where the land holds memory and responds to human actions. The movie encourages critics to respect traditional forms of justice based on spiritual responsibility, expressions of identity connected to place, and shared memories embedded in the landscape instead of documented records. This invitation promotes the significance of the study. Beyond a cultural artifact, it portrays how indigenous communities preserve their ways of life, where memory emerges from the land, rituals safeguard history, and responsibility fosters a sense of belonging. The findings of this study argue that *Kantara* validates land as a living and sacred presence, one that calls for responsibility, respect, and honor.

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