

*ARELA / A SHORT
MIGRATION
WEST*





A FILM BY


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LOGLINE

Arela, a 17-year-old indigenous Shipiba, lives in a small village in the Peruvian jungle surrounded by ayahuasca retreats. Resentful of her self-sacrificing, yet largely absent mother, Arela must confront her pain and make sense of her place in a culture that is as much empowered as it is invisible.



ABOUT THE FILM



Arela, A Short Migration West is a film that lies somewhere between fiction and documentary, set amongst the Shipibo—an indigenous people in the low jungle of Peru and cultural keepers of the tradition of ayahuasca. As hundreds of spiritual tourists from all over the world descend upon the small native village of San Francisco each year, the Shipibo are obliged to live their culture as both identity and spectacle. With this tension as its backdrop, the film follows a local family as they enact a complicated and compelling melodrama situated within their real lives. That is, the narrative of the film is an amalgamation of stories and events set in the place where they occurred and starring the people who lived them. Additionally, the film will document the lives of the ‘characters’ as they move in between this drama, seamlessly interweaving with the narrative to produce something richly layered, entangled, and engrossing.

Spoken entirely in the Shipibo language, the film is a collaboration with the Inuma family, who act as both subject and author, delving into a world that is equally as mythic as it is dramatic.

As ayahuasca turns into an international phenomenon, captivating people from around the world, this film takes the perspective of those from whom this culture arose, and explores the radical changes that this exposure brings, for better and for worse.

PURPOSE

We want to make a film with a complicated indigenous character, while sincerely looking at the complex situation in which the Shipibo find themselves—a culture pushed to the fringes and often exploited, yet wildly attractive to spiritual tourists as ayahuasca continues to gain attention in popular culture.

There are dozens of films involving ayahuasca or the Shipibo, most often documentaries, but none seem to take the Shipibo perspective as their primary prism. As we've grown closer to the Inuma family, we've come to fully appreciate their incredibly funny and heartbreaking stories from which we've woven this narrative.

We have been developing the project over the course of five years, in collaboration with Jeny, Andrew, and Justina Inuma. Through the incredible openness of the Inumas, we've been able to dive deep into the history of this rich and dynamic culture. We started by developing a character based on Jeny's experiences of growing up with a mother who traveled often to sell crafts, taking a subjective perspective and setting it against the larger background of contemporary Shipibo life. As the culture expands, we wanted to explore the chasm between the jungle and the city, local and international, indigenous and colonial, and how that distance affects a culture, a family, a woman.



SYNOPSIS

Arela, a 17-year-old indigenous Shipiba and minor introvert, lives in a small village in the Peruvian Amazon, surrounded by ayahuasca retreats. In between cooking, chores, and selling textiles to spiritual tourists, Arela watches over Lila, her rapidly maturing younger sister. Meanwhile in Lima, their brother Andrew and mother Cecilia, share a small room where Cecilia plans to soon reunite the family again. Cecilia is a dedicated, long-distance-mother, who doggedly walks the beaches of Lima, selling her native crafts and textiles with the hope of providing a better life for her children.

Arela feels conflicted about leaving the jungle and confides in her grandmother, Manuka, who shares in her skepticism of Lima. Boiling under the surface of Arela's teenage angst is a growing resentment of her mother, whose presence has largely been remote. In turn, Arela finds security in her grandmother, despite her antiquated ideals, while the younger Lila is unencumbered by either guilt or the responsibility of familial obligation. Instead, Lila opts to lounge around the village with her new boyfriend and prepare herself for the upcoming beauty pageant.

When news breaks of a mass grave of 50 bodies discovered nearby, a scare runs through the village. Officials immediately begin looking for a gang of Pishtacos, a mythic figure who steals the fat of natives. The legend, still feared today, dates back to the Conquistadors and is tied to a bearded white man. Arela's worries are compounded when her estranged father, Manuel, has a nightmare involving Cecilia and a bearded white man. Understanding this as an omen, Manuel begins spreading a rumor that Cecilia has put a spell on him.

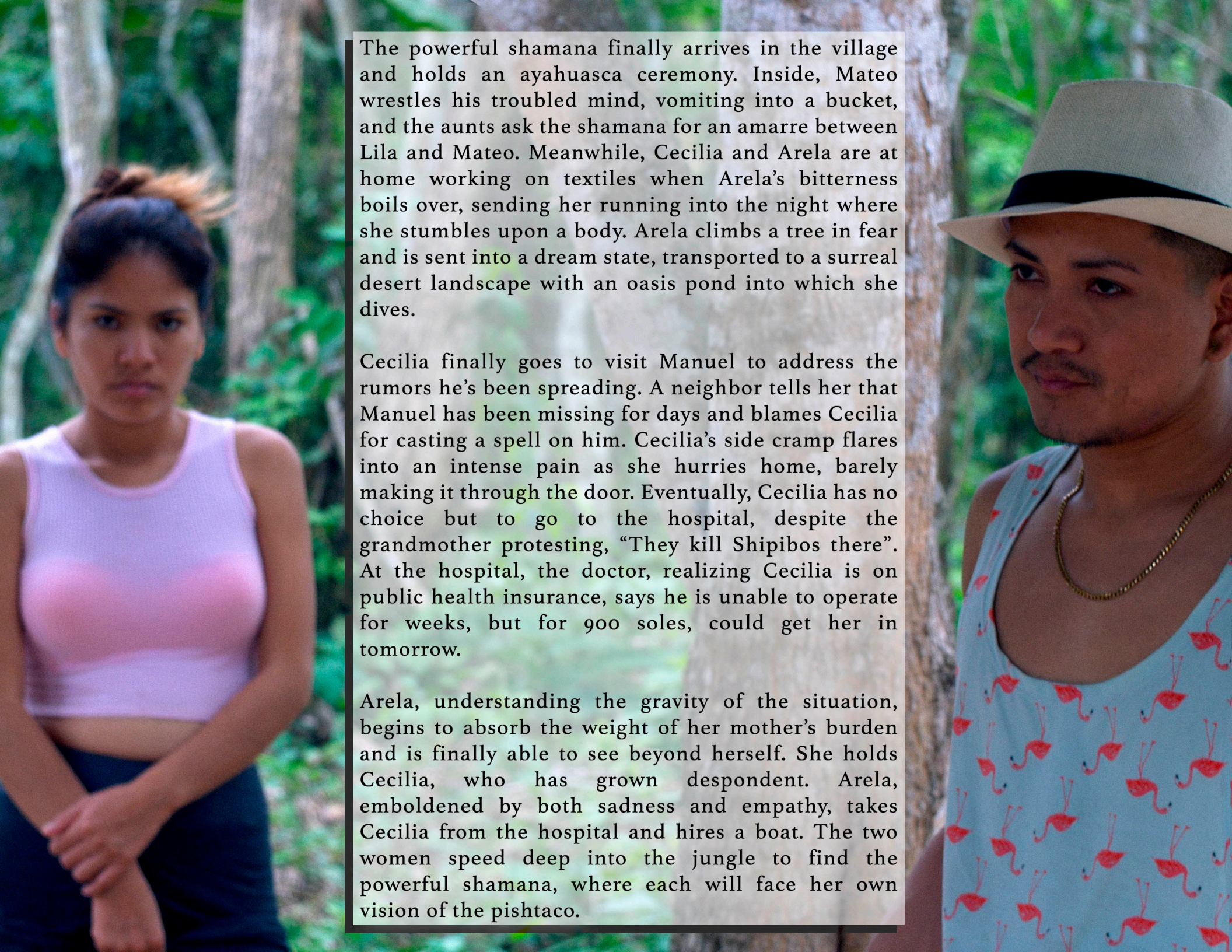




In Lima, Arela's gay and empowered older brother, Andrew, who is especially protective of his mother, is sent into a frenzy when Arela calls to retell the rumor. Andrew becomes determined to return to the jungle and set their name straight. Cecilia, feeling hesitant to confront Manuel, finally concedes, reasoning that at least she will be able to sell her crafts at the the upcoming festival of San Juan.

Back in the village, Mateo, an Argentine ayahuasca tourist battling psychological demons, starts to take an interest in Lila. Despite her school girl age, Lila's aunts watch on with excitement. Mateo, looking to make a good impression, shows that he has money to burn, but not before Arela sees him fly into a violet episode after losing his talisman. Mateo's hopes to regain his mental health are renewed when he hears that a powerful shamana with a cult following is making her way to the village from deep within the jungle.

When Andrew and Cecilia arrive in the jungle, the aunts have planned to make an amarre love spell between Lila and Mateo, unbenounced to anyone else. With the family reunited again, Arela's thinly veiled resentment begins to unravel, while Andrew, a hair stylist, holds impromptu salon appointments behind the house. Cecilia, meanwhile, has developed an intermittent side pain which she attributes to all the stress from Manuel and the Pishtaco.



The powerful shamana finally arrives in the village and holds an ayahuasca ceremony. Inside, Mateo wrestles his troubled mind, vomiting into a bucket, and the aunts ask the shamana for an amarre between Lila and Mateo. Meanwhile, Cecilia and Arela are at home working on textiles when Arela's bitterness boils over, sending her running into the night where she stumbles upon a body. Arela climbs a tree in fear and is sent into a dream state, transported to a surreal desert landscape with an oasis pond into which she dives.

Cecilia finally goes to visit Manuel to address the rumors he's been spreading. A neighbor tells her that Manuel has been missing for days and blames Cecilia for casting a spell on him. Cecilia's side cramp flares into an intense pain as she hurries home, barely making it through the door. Eventually, Cecilia has no choice but to go to the hospital, despite the grandmother protesting, "They kill Shipibos there". At the hospital, the doctor, realizing Cecilia is on public health insurance, says he is unable to operate for weeks, but for 900 soles, could get her in tomorrow.

Arela, understanding the gravity of the situation, begins to absorb the weight of her mother's burden and is finally able to see beyond herself. She holds Cecilia, who has grown despondent. Arela, emboldened by both sadness and empathy, takes Cecilia from the hospital and hires a boat. The two women speed deep into the jungle to find the powerful shamana, where each will face her own vision of the pishtaco.



FILM /
REFERENCES



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Carlos Reygadas Barguín



Tropical Malady - 2004
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