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ARTS TELEVISION REVIEW

## ‘Tribal Justice’ Review: The People’s Court

Anne Makepeace’s documentary looks at the courts of two different American Indian groups in California that place community at the center of justice.



Abby Abinanti, chief judge for the Yurok of northwestern California  
PHOTO: ANNE MAKEPEACE/POV

*By John Anderson*

Aug. 17, 2017 1:09 p.m. ET

A lovely, bittersweet film about an intensely delicate subject, the “POV” presentation “Tribal Justice” looks at the community courts of two different American Indian communities in California and the women in charge of those courts: Abby Abinanti, chief judge for the Yurok of

northwestern California, and Claudette C. White, Ms. Abinanti's counterpart among the Quechan who live in the southeastern part of the state. How their system negotiates with California's state courts is an essential part of the story, but so is the community-centric basis of each woman's approach to justice—as the film says, “healing and resolution, not punishment and incarceration.”

### **Tribal Justice**

*Monday, 10 p.m., PBS*

“There's a winner and a loser when you walk out of state court,” says Ms. Abinanti, who was the first Native woman lawyer in California. “That isn't OK here.” State court, she says, “is essentially justice by strangers. But in a village, that's not true.” No Yurok, she said, would have thought of going outside the tribe for justice a couple of hundred years ago. And while Ms. Abinanti agrees that the people she serves have to live “in this world, how it is now,” the tribal court is still the model. “If we had not been invaded,” she says, “how would that have evolved?”



Taos Proctor at his wedding  
PHOTO: ANNE MAKEPEACE/POV

Veteran documentarian Anne Makepeace, who has made several films with American Indian themes, gets wonderful access to her principal subjects as well as those she uses as case studies: a young boy with neurological problems who has spent time in state care; Taos Proctor, a hardworking father who's had skirmishes with methamphetamine, and 17-year-old Isaac Palone, who is Ms. White's nephew and whose legal problems are traced to his time in state custody and group homes. The issues raised, like meth use and the removal of children from their parents, are sensitive for the people we meet in "Tribal Justice," and for all American Indian people, but Ms. Makepeace manages to get them addressed openly and honestly. There is, as a result, a somewhat melancholic tone to much of the movie. But also a reassuring wisdom to be found in the women Ms. Makepeace has made that movie about.