

The Mark and Olly Follies

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Reality TV reached new depths of irresponsibility in *Mark & Olly: Living with the Machigenga* [sic]. Aired on the Travel Channel in 2009 and on BBC in 2010, the show features Mark Anstice and Oliver Steeds, swash-buckling adventurers who travel to remote locales to “get accepted” by exotic tribes. Mark Anstice, a former British Army officer who now spends much of the year “wearing little more than a vegetable,” returned to military life during the Iraq War. Oliver Steeds is a self-styled “21st century Indiana Jones.” Their first hit show, *Living with the Kombai*, was made in New Guinea. A Papua-based pilot posted this review on Amazon.com: “I met some people that work with the Kombai and they told me about how the show was made... [Mark and Olly] requested for the people to act ‘native’ to fit there [sic] plot. It is filmed to make you believe that it’s just these two guys trying to adapt but in reality the whole thing is staged.”

“Chili up the Arse”

Mark and Olly then ventured to Amazonian Peru. As I describe in *AN* (49[5]:30), I happened to be in the same Matsigenka community when a scouting team from Cicada Films visited Manu Park in October 2007. The cameraman, Matt Currington, found the people there too Westernized: “the shorts, the guys playing soccer, the school house, that just won’t cut it with Mark and Olly.” In violation of park permits and against my warnings, the crew sought out isolated groups further upriver. As reported in Peruvian Health Ministry documents and the international press, their visit apparently unleashed a cold epidemic: four Matsigenka died of respiratory infections and dozens became seriously ill. The crew was banned from Manu. Despite the media storm, Mark and Olly persisted, ultimately filming Matsigenka communities outside the park.

In the program blog, Anstice described the village chief, Jacinto, as a “deranged lunatic” who threatens to “ram a red hot chili up my arse.” Jacinto is subjected to an embarrassing interview about his sex life. When he says, “I will have sex another day,” the English translation reads, “I have sex every day.” In the segment, Jacinto appears worried that two men traveling without wives will succumb to the temptations of anal fornication. He supposedly threatens to rub chili peppers on sensitive organs. The Matsigenka are a discreet people, hardly obsessed with sex, and loath to offend. I am certain this segment was scripted.

Irreality TV

As an anthropologist who has worked with the Matsigenka for 25 years, I denounce such disrespectful representations. I refute their false characterization of the Matsigenka as “the most elusive tribe

of the Amazon... so little known.” Anthropologists and linguists have studied the Matsigenka since the 1950s and missionaries have worked there for over 300 years. No one involved in the series appears to have read any of the numerous books or articles about this large, well-documented cultural group: they can’t even spell the name (“Machiguenga” is a Spanish transliteration, “Machigenga” is the show’s neologism).

The Matsigenka are generous hosts. It is inconceivable they would subject foreign visitors to the initiation trials portrayed in the show, forcing Olly to sleep outside for laziness, making them “gather food for the tribe,” sending them to search for a lost child, insisting they take a psychoactive brew before embarking on a phony pilgrimage, abandoning them on a raft in rapids, making them compete with a third suitor for a young bride, and otherwise testing their “manliness.” In one scene, Olly is subjected to painful ant stings, since “according to Matsigenka tradition he must be cleansed” and “endure the



Matsigenka community leaders in Yomybato (Manu Park, Peru) discuss the aftermath of the unauthorized visit of Mark and Olly’s scouting crew from Cicada Productions to isolated settlements in the Cumerjali headwaters. Note the partially erased word “[C]icada Productions” on the blackboard and the name of a Matsigenka man, “Kenkea” (or Kian-Kian). He came from Cumerjali to inform the health clinic in Yomybato about four deaths due to a respiratory epidemic attributed by Peruvian Health Ministry workers to the film crew’s visit. Photo courtesy Glenn H Shepard Jr

ancient punishments” for the supposed *faux-pas* of buying deer meat: the entire scene was fabricated and has no basis in ethnography. Distorted translations suggest that a woman with an ill newborn is considering infanticide. Such portrayals are false and insulting, leading audience members to comment on the program blog that the Matsigenka are mean and savage people.

The producers assume no one in the audience understands Matsigenka, but I do. When a villager “surprises” them in his garden at night and says he thought they were “a herd of boar,” the translation

reads, “If you were colonists, he would have tied you up and cut off all your skin.” The program is rife with egregious mistranslations and outright falsifications. The Matsigenka phrase, “You come from far away where lots of *gringos* live” is translated as “We use arrows to kill outsiders who threaten us.” In a rafting scene, a Matsigenka remarks of the duo, “They’re playing instead of rowing,” but the translation reads, “They’re going to die.” “Good afternoon, what are we here to talk about?” is translated, “When they arrived, I treated them like small boys... now we’re starting to treat them like brothers.” “This time I did it right, the same way as yesterday,” is translated, “Sometimes they tried too hard and hurt themselves.”

Farce Unveiled

Ron Snell, who also speaks the language and visits often, posted his reaction: “How did they get the Machiguengas to do so many things that are completely out of character and so contrary to their culture?... How did they produce the ‘wild pig dance,’ which we have never seen in 35 years of living in Machiguenga villages?... About all we could conclude is that they paid the Machiguengas to perform for them, saying things the Machiguengas wouldn’t ordinarily say and doing things the Machiguengas wouldn’t normally do.” Snell encountered two of the film’s native protagonists in the city of Quillabamba: “Our suspicions were correct. They entered the village on a well traveled path and only veered a few feet off the path to film themselves ‘hacking their way through the jungle.’ They contracted someone to make new *cushmas* [cotton tunics] so everyone would be wearing one. They staged the whole drama about one of the guys being accepted and the other treated as a lazy outsider. Since they couldn’t get to the Pongo [rapids] by balsa raft, they used a motorboat to get there. The translator quickly became disillusioned with the whole thing, but kept going because of the money. He is ashamed and embarrassed that he had anything to do with it.”

I am shocked by Mark & Olly’s narcissistic antics, their gross misrepresentations of Matsigenka culture, and their disregard for consequences inflicted on native communities. I am dismayed with Travel Channel’s involvement since the parent company, Discovery Channel, worked with me on two award-winning films about the Matsigenka, *Spirits of the Rainforest* and *The Spirit Hunters*. Before we began filming,

executive producer Steve Burns insisted I watch *Baka: People of the Rainforest*, an acclaimed documentary about the Congo. He was setting high standards, and it paid off: *Spirits of the Rainforest* won two Emmy Awards in 1993, including “Best Cultural/Informational Film.” I wonder what *Living with the Machigenga* was modeled on. *Borat* comes to mind.

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