

Mark and Ollie and the Machiguengas

Having watched all of the Mark & Ollie episodes relating to the Machiguenga, I'd like to give a somewhat unique perspective, in two parts. In the first part, I write my question upon seeing the film. In the second part, I give a brief answer to some of those questions, based on actually visiting last week with two of the key Machiguenga players in the film.

My parents have worked with the Machiguengas for 50 years. My siblings and I grew up there and we still understand the language. I have personally been through the Pongo de Mainique three times (rubber raft, inflatable kayak and public motor launch), have lived in numerous of their villages and have traveled by balsa raft, trail and canoe to some their most remote locations (Kompiroshiato, Mantaro, Shimaa, Camisea, Shivankoreni, Segakiato, Camana, etc.). We know and love the Machiguenga people, both professionally and personally (my dad has a master's degree in anthropology and both of my parents are trained linguists).

In a nutshell, this series is so totally out of whack that it's hard to imagine anyone taking it seriously. Our response was, "How did they get the Machiguengas to do so many things that are completely out of character and so contrary to their culture?" and "How did they think that anyone would take this seriously, given some of the glaring inconsistencies?"

Start with the bare bones facts. Why did the program not include a brief look at a map of the area? Why is the small river they rafted down not referred to by name? Where is the village they got to by "hacking through the jungle?"

Now carefully watch the river scenes. On the grand pilgrimage to the Pongo, they switch in no logical sequence from the Pongo (start of the trip) to the broad Urubamba river panorama near Timpia (below the Pongo) to a smaller river somewhere, and finally back to the Pongo itself. According to the script, they are on balsa rafts for a 2-day journey, presumably starting above the Pongo since you can't practically go up the Urubamba to the Pongo on balsa rafts. So where did they start?

Why is there no footage of any supplies, even though they claim that the people were preparing food and equipment for a 2-day trip? Why, indeed, do we never see a shot of any other rafts accompanying them on the journey, but only a claim that the Machiguengas left them behind and went on ahead to the Pongo? None of us has ever been abandoned on a journey by the Machiguengas, who would have given their lives for us before they would ever consider abandoning us.

If Mark and Olly went two days downriver on balsa rafts, ask yourself how they got back to the village. It is impossible to go back up through the Pongo on a balsa raft and it would take forever to go up a smaller river on one (e.g. the smaller river where they took the dramatic shots in the rapids). So either they took a motor launch back up (or a helicopter) or they didn't go back up. Which means either most of the whole adventure was staged or the Pongo trip was staged.

Look at the house building scenes. They go from building the framework of a house to cutting down a palm tree (actually a "walking palm" that the Machiguengas rarely use for thatch—I know, since I've been on leaf gathering expeditions to build houses), to thatching a roof. But when they move in, look at the roof. Almost all of the thatch is already brownish-gray—there is only one small section of green leaves at the top. So how do you get an old roof with just a few green leaves in 3 months?

In the section where the mighty hunter goes “missing” in the jungle, who in their right mind thinks that Mark and Olly, two blundering outsiders, and a group of kids will find them by strolling along the riverbank. I myself would never get lost on the riverbank, and I’m no Machiguenga. The Machiguengas’ whole orientation is to rivers—if you can hear a river, you are not lost. You either go katonko (upriver) or kamatikya (downriver) to your destination. That whole section is laughable.

Since we all speak Machiguenga fluently, take our word for it: if you think you know what the Machiguengas were saying by reading the subtitles, you are wrong. The subtitles are sometimes correct, sometimes partially correct, and mostly very misleading. And how did they exchange conversations with no intermediary at times? They knew a couple of Machiguenga phrases that they mostly pronounced badly, but other than that, how could they respond so quickly to each other unless they were all following a pre-written script and hoping that each other was saying what they were supposed to?

One section involves “conversations” with all kinds of sexual innuendos about these guys coming without wives, and blah, blah, blah. Don’t believe a word of it. It makes the Machiguengas seem as if they are saying things that they would never say unless someone was prompting and paying them. The Machiguengas are a quiet, discreet people, gentle and kind. For them, anger is one of the worst possible sins, so much so that if a person gets angry, he is ridiculed and ostracized and given unkind nicknames. We were dismayed and angry at how our friends were portrayed, and embarrassed for them. One person commented on the internet that they couldn’t understand why the Machiguengas were so “mean.” In fifty years of knowing them, none of us would ever use the word “mean” to describe them.

I could go on and on. No Machiguenga that we have ever known would have let Olly sleep outside the “hut.” (The huts were actually not the style that the most “remote” Machiguengas built—this style came later and was influenced by outsiders). No Machiguenga would have punished them by having them chew manioc to make masato (nice dramatic touch with a decided “ick” factor) as that was always and exclusively women’s work (and what was that purple KoolAid they poured in all about?). If these were such remote people, why do they have Spanish phrases incorporated into their Machiguenga and all have Spanish names, given that the most remote Machiguengas always used kinship terms to refer to each other? How did they get all of the Machiguengas to dress up in white cushmas (robes) when they almost never wore that style of cushma for everyday use (their everyday cushmas were brown and always more ragged)? How did they get the Machiguengas to make a pilgrimage to the Pongo when Machiguengas dreaded the place and never made pilgrimages to it in part because of myths about it (it’s actually named after the Machiguenga word for bear, ‘maeni,’ and the bear has the power to change people into different forms by blowing on them) and in part because it is treacherous or impossible, depending on the water level, to navigate by dugout canoe or balsa raft). How did they produce the wild pig dance, which we have never seen in 35 years of living in Machiguenga villages?

We speculated endlessly about how this was produced. About all we could conclude is that they paid the Machiguengas to perform for them, saying things the Machis wouldn’t ordinarily say and doing things the Machis wouldn’t normally do.

Part 2: Imagine my surprise when I went with my mother to attend a meeting of over 100 Machiguenga school teachers and community leaders in Quillabamba last week, and met two of the key players in the film. One was the translator, brought in from Timpia. The other was the “village chief” in the film, a very mild mannered man. Both have had extensive contact with the “outside world,” so much so that we could easily talk to either of them in Spanish if we chose. Here are pictures of them, and us:



Our suspicions were correct. They entered the village on a well traveled path and only veered a few feet off of the path to film themselves “hacking their way through the jungle.” They contracted someone to make new cushmas 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 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.

He is also disgusted with Mark and Ollie because, he told us, they took about \$150.00 of his money, promising to buy and send him a digital camera. He has never received the camera. And at the end, they told him to put his pay into a bag that they would deliver to his house in Timpia, since they were traveling by a more secure means than he was. He included about \$350.00 of his pay in the bag, which he has never seen since. That money means nothing to Mark and Ollie, but it means the world to a Machiguenga.

In summary, this is not a documentary and it badly represents the Machiguengas’ special culture and engaging personalities. I have no idea why the Travel Channel would show it, but having seen it, I have zero confidence that any of Mark & Ollie’s other cultural adventures are anything but scripted dramas that are made for audiences that have to just take their word for it. If anyone knows how to forward this to Mark & Ollie or to the Travel Channel, I’d love to read their responses.

This project was backed in part by CEDIA, the Center for the Development of the Amazonian Indigenous People, with the belief that the more people know about the Machis, the more they will want to help them defend their land and environment in the face of the incursions of the Camisea gas and oil project, etc. At least they correctly state that if the native community lands are taken away they will lose their whole way of life. That’s a noble goal, but I wish they had carried it out with integrity.

Ron Snell

P.S. At the conference we attended, the “Machiguengas” officially changed their name to “Matsigenka” and formally ratified an official alphabet for their language, which they have submitted to the Ministry of Education of Peru for formal authorization (it has been in use for fifty years, but never formally ratified). They have students attending universities in Cuzco and Lima, they are adept at using laptops and cell phones and internet searches, and they are the same kind, caring, people that we have always known. It was such a privilege to be with them. I’m looking into setting up a non-profit corporation to help them achieve their own vision for community development in a way that honors their past and secures their future.