

'If the new BBC series *Tribe* has fired your interest, learning how to live like the hunter-gatherer bushmen of the Kalahari Desert could be just the holiday you're looking for...' [Anon 2005]). When he visited the Kombai in West Papua, he spoke to them in basic Bahasa Indonesia, the language imposed by the Indonesian government. Bruce Parry has been here before, as an expedition leader with Trekforce, a UK-registered charity with support from 'the British Army and local defence force and security departments' that aims to encourage 'cultural experiences in diverse environments which benefit the host country, in order to educate and inspire participants' (www.trekforce.org.uk), including training in nursing, languages, conservation and jungle survival.

But *Tribe* is not about this charity. It is a Victorian romp where men boldly go out of history, to the realm of the savage at the very heart of darkness, and return to tell their tales, converting suffering to celebrity. Pat Caplan has made major contributions to the discussion of gender relations in anthropology over the years, so I was astonished to find no comment on the reactionary and sexist construction of the 'front man' (sic). In its gendering and formatting of cross-cultural encounters, the series is arguably more primitive, representationally, than the societies it purports to represent.

Tribe inhabits a different moral and intellectual universe from anthropology. It is successful popular mass entertainment, with the second and third series in production. But anthropology's job has always been both to observe and to participate in different worlds, including that of popular culture. The question arises as to what practical accommodation there might be between these two worlds, so as to further anthropology's public presence? And how do we respond to our own graduates working as researchers for the series?

I am committed to the educational power of the moving image, in different media (film, television, hypermedia), as an anthropologist (whose research interests include television), ethnographic filmmaker, and as a member of the RAI's Film Committee. Visual anthropology includes all manner of image-making and analysis. It is now a recognized branch of the discipline, although the visual image continues to invoke the spectre of misrepresentation and deceit. Properly used, however, film and other visual materials have considerable potential to bring home a sense of everyday life in different societies and to stimulate our imagination, in both public and educational domains.

The diversification of broadcast media and the multiplication of audiences constitute more outlets than ever for visual ethnography. Nonetheless, I have strong reservations about how anthropology might fruitfully engage with the mass appeal of programmes like

TRIBES AND TRIBULATIONS

A response to Pat Caplan (AT 21[2])

Last year, BBC2 broadcast *Tribe*, the subject of Pat Caplan's article; the series has since been repeated. She rightly describes *Tribe* as entertainment, not anthropology, and observes that anthropologists (in the UK at least) have failed to create a public version of their discipline.

There is more than a 'hint of the "noble savage" conceit' in the series, which goes against everything anthropology stands for. In each programme Bruce 'Boys Own' Parry supposedly endured a month-long 'tribal experience', including a disagreeable physical ordeal. Anthropology graduates worked as researchers on the programmes, but the first series only vaguely mentioned anthropologists' findings.

Rather than helping us to understand 'tribal' life, *Tribe* encourages tribal tourism. References to Parry abounded in travel pages in the media as soon as the series started (e.g.

this. In Britain there are attempts to make anthropology more widely available in school at A-level to secure its future in universities, and some applaud *Tribe*'s potential to increase recruitment to undergraduate anthropology degree schemes. But surely this is as misleading as describing anthropology as being about 'primitive tribes'? *Tribe* may well become material for research, but as how *not* to do anthropology. It would take considerable skill to extrapolate anthropology – public or academic – from it. *Tribe* may also be recut as an 'educational series for schools geography' (Caplan 2005: 7). Geographers, be warned!

What alternatives are there to *Tribe* as anthropology's visual public face? André Singer, chair of the RAI Film Committee (who was credited, but had no controlling interest in the *Tribe* programme), is one of the few in Britain to have both an anthropology doctorate and a continuous career in anthropological television programming, beginning with *Disappearing world* and latterly on cable and satellite films, including about headhunting, cannibalism and sacrifice. These are still useful.

Some years ago, a proposal by the RAI Film Committee was rejected as not 'sexy' enough by British television executives. But could we not aspire to terrestrial peak-time viewing, in the spirit of the BBC series *Coast*, broadcast last year? Fronted by a heroic man of action who strode the cliffs and coves of Britain, it also included a historian, an archaeologist, a marine biologist, and, yes, an anthropologist. This programme was 'edutainment', an amusing and informative series which went beyond sensationalism and was not ashamed to bring in the experts. Could British television executives not apply these principles to non-

British societies, instead of adopting the parochial celebration of xenophobic self-interest of *Tribe*? There is no shortage of good examples. A remarkable range of high-standard ethnographic films is shown regularly at the RAI and IWF (at Göttingen)'s international ethnographic film festivals (among others), and Masters programmes in visual anthropology, including those at Manchester and Tromsø Universities, produce exceptional filmmakers.

Anthropologists have engaged theoretically with the profusion of media. It is now time to use them for its public ends. Never has anthropology's tolerance and open-mindedness been more urgently needed, but *Tribe* is neither the answer to anthropology's image problem, nor a sign of what anthropology has to offer. We have long been reticent. Now we need to find ways and means to put ourselves in the public's picture, to get anthropology the representations it deserves, and to make its impact more widely felt.

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Anon. 2005. Green choice – Bruce Parry. Travel section, *The Guardian*, 15 January: 3.

Caplan, Pat 2005. In search of the exotic: A discussion of the BBC2 series *Tribe*. *Anthropology Today* 21(2): 3-7.