

In search of the exotic

A discussion of the BBC2 series *Tribe*

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BBC/BLAST FILMS

Fig. 1. Bruce Parry with a group of Suri children (Ethiopia).

I would like to acknowledge with gratitude those colleagues, students, friends and relatives who responded to my request for comments on the series: some of them sent me lengthy and insightful views which I would have liked to reproduce in greater detail had space permitted. I am also grateful for comments on this piece to Lionel Caplan and the three anonymous AT reviewers, and for assistance and information to Brian Street, Andre Singer, Hilary Callan, Felicia Hughes-Freeland and Marcus Banks.

The New Year edition of the *Radio Times*¹ had a two-page spread headed 'Worlds apart' which announced that 'explorer' Bruce Parry was 'on a visit to the world's remotest tribes' and invited us to 'get a unique insight into their life and customs' and 'reassess our own' in a series of six one-hour programmes entitled *Tribe*.²

The programmes generally followed a similar – not to say formulaic – pattern. Several were preceded by warnings that viewers might find some of the scenes with animals (!) disturbing. At the start of each programme the presenter, Bruce Parry, an ex-Marine in his mid-30s, introduced himself as an 'explorer and expedition leader', and stated that he had spent a year visiting the world's 'most remote tribes', seeking to understand them by 'living the way they do' for around a month at a time. Parry was usually next seen arriving at the remotest location he could find, where 'traditional' customs are still practised, and making contact with the locals. He would make friends, was sometimes 'adopted' by a family, joined in (mostly manly) activities (especially hunting, which features in virtually all the films), and became 'one of them' 'by living and eating as they do'. The film crew did not appear on camera, and we never learned how each location was researched and set up for filming. At night Parry would use a video camera to record his thoughts. At the end of each

stay there was much sorrow as he left, and either he or his hosts noted that 'we are all the same really'.

Anthropologists' views

What are anthropologists to make of this series, for which the viewing figures climbed steadily, so that by programme four it was apparently attracting an audience of three million?³ It has been a long time since we have seen any anthropology on our TV screens. The halcyon days of the 1970s and 1980s, when we were treated to such series as *Disappearing world*, *Face values*, *Other people's lives*, *Under the sun* and *Strangers abroad*, have long gone. While, paradoxically, the genre of ethnographic film has burgeoned and grown in sophistication, it has also now been relegated to specialist festivals and the classroom. Yet this series has been described by many, including viewers and media commentators, even in serious newspapers such as the *Guardian*⁴ and *Independent*⁵, as 'anthropology' – a claim which, it has to be said, is never made by the series itself. Perhaps we ought to be asking (yet again) why this remains the public perception of what anthropology is and why it seems so difficult, at least in the UK, for professional anthropologists to create a public version of their discipline.⁶

It would, of course, be relatively easy to show that what the series presented was far from being an anthropology



Fig. 2. Adi men dancing (Himalayas).

1. *Radio Times* 1-7 January 2005: 30-31.

2. Adi of Arunachal Pradesh, India; Suri of Ethiopia; Kombai of Irian Jaya; Babongo of Gabon; Darchad nomads of Outer Mongolia; Sanema of Venezuela.

3. Jason Deans in *Media Guardian*, 18 January 2005.

4. *ibid.*

5. *Independent*: 'The Information' TV listings for 17 January 2005.

6. See, for example, Chris Shore: 'Anthropology's identity crisis'. In Benthall, J. (ed.) 2002. *The best of Anthropology Today*, London and New York: Routledge.

7. Crick, Malcolm 1989. Representations of international tourism in the social sciences: Sun, sex, sights, savings and servility. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18: 307-344.

8. Selwyn, Tom 1994. The anthropology of tourism: Reflections on the state of the art. In: Seaton, A.V. (ed.) 1994. *Tourism: The state of the art*. London: Wiley.

9. MacCannell, D. 1989. 'Introduction' to special edition on semiotics of tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 16(1).

10. Other recent programmes made by the company include *Serious desert* and *Serious jungle*.

that any practitioners of the discipline would recognize: (1) Parry is not a trained anthropologist; (2) he did not speak any of the local languages; (3) he spent only an average of a month in each area; (4) there was little or no reference to previous anthropological research in the region; (5) the material presented lacked much in the way of social or cultural context.

I emailed a number of colleagues and asked them to give me their reactions. These were unsurprising: 'appalled... *Boys' Own* idiocy'; 'I had to switch off as I was so appalled by the take of the programme, in the five minutes I did see'; 'reality TV with tribal peoples'; 'lack of contextual information and cultural analysis[...] woeful, a totally missed opportunity[...] surely there must be plenty of research on this [subject] to give better information'; 'talk about the Exotic Other! A complete ego-trip'; 'weird foods, violence, TV-friendly rites of passage, must be the directing forces'; 'reconstitutes an extremely dated catalogue of anthropological exotica'.

Their irritation perhaps stemmed in part from having territory they considered their own invaded by 'amateurs', but their comments also reminded me somewhat of criticisms of the early literature on the anthropology of tourism. Some years ago, Crick⁷ noted that biases included a grossly inadequate framework of economic analysis, a lack of local voice, and manifestations of the noble savage syndrome. He also pointed out that international tourists – of whom 'explorers' in search of the experiential are one category he identified – are in 'ludic' or 'liminoid' realm, 'out of place and time'. Selwyn⁸ added another tourist category – that of the tourist as child. McCannell⁹ suggested that many tourists are seeking to recover those senses of wholeness and structure absent from everyday contemporary life [in their own countries]. All of these observations could equally well have been made of *Tribe* and its presenter.

Judging the series on its own terms

The series was made by BBC Wales and screened on BBC2 at peak time. There is some material about it available on the BBC website (www.bbc.co.uk). However, it is discussed in much greater detail on the website of Parry's company Endeavour Productions,¹⁰ which describes itself as follows: 'We specialise in extreme outdoor television production. The harder, the faster, the more mobile the better. We like to think that we thrive where most other production companies and advisers fall by the wayside.'

In the FAQ web pages for *Tribe*, Parry lays out the purpose of the series,¹¹ so I propose that we look at the programmes in terms of what the series set out to do.

(1) *Did they 'banish many of the tribal stereotypes'?* This is debatable, since rather predictably, the customs included those which a Western audience would deem most bizarre. For the Adi of Arunachal Pradesh it was the eating of food such as 'toilet pigs', strangled buffalo, live beetles, rats and frogs. For the Mursi of Ethiopia it was men's stick fighting and women's lip-plates. For the Kombai of Irian Jaya it was cannibalism, although here Parry drew the line¹² and instead tried penis inversion. With the Babongo of the Gabon it was initiation into the Bwiti cult through ingestion of the drug *iboga* ('people have died doing this and I am two days away from the nearest doctor'). For the Darchad nomads of Outer Mongolia, it was the annual migration to winter pastures with their animals. For the Sanema of Venezuela it was their shamanic practices and drug-induced trances. But is that really all one can say about such societies, many of which have been researched by anthropologists – despite the impression given that they were virtually 'discovered' by the series?¹³

(2) *Did they 'tell the truth about their changing lives'?* Well not really, and not at all in some programmes, although there were some references to changes which had taken place such as nearby conflicts and the influx of guns

11. See www.endeavourproductions.com

12. In an interview with Jan Moir of the *Telegraph* (15 January 2005), he says that it had been decided in advance that there were some things he would not do: practise cannibalism or have sex with local women. In the event he was faced with neither possibility, since cannibalism appears a thing of the past, and he notes that 'happily' no opportunity for the latter presented itself.

13. In the first programme on the Adi, for example, Parry claimed that 'there is no information about them' and 'I had to turn to old books written during the Raj', yet a Google search turned up several publications, as well as a current ESRC-funded research project on people of Arunachal Pradesh (including the Adi) based at SOAS (tribaltransitions.SOAS.ac.uk).14. This was particularly surprising in the last episode, the only one to have a named programme (as opposed to series) anthropology consultant, Marcus Colchester, who is in fact the director of the World Rainforest Movement.

15. Turton, D. 2004. Lip-plates and the people who take photographs. *Anthropology Today* 20(3): 3.

Fig. 3. A Sanema family group (Venezuela).

(Mursi), and logging (Babongo). But there was little information about the various political movements of and for indigenous peoples and their struggles to maintain their land. Parry constantly referred to them as living in 'jungle' and the term 'rainforest' was never used.¹⁴

Furthermore, a few literature and web searches soon revealed that several of the 'isolated' areas filmed for the series are today the site of tourism. For example, tourists have long visited the Mursi to take photos, as a recent article by David Turton in *ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY* notes.¹⁵ Tourists are also visiting and photographing painted warriors and 'head hunters' in Irian Jaya's neighbour Papua New Guinea. And if they want to experience a trip (in both senses) like that Parry had with the Babongo, they can book a holiday to do so¹⁶ – or just go on an excursion from their hotel to see a Bwiti ritual.¹⁷

(3) *Did the programmes 'humanize them and give them a voice'?* It's ironic that, in an interview with Jan Moir published in the *Daily Telegraph*,¹⁸ Parry states that '[a]ll the anthropological programmes I have seen before just had some God-like voice pontificating on the behaviour of these people' – since in this series the voice we hear most is that of Parry, who is on camera virtually all of the time. We hear few of the local voices (although at least when local people speak, sub-titles are sometimes used).

(4) *Did these programmes 'give a small impression of what it must be like to live in a different culture'?* Well, yes, but it was indeed very small and partial. We didn't actually learn much about everyday life, much less about social relationships, and we learned almost nothing about women, since the focus was on male activities. In each programme, there were many shots of Parry doing difficult things: drinking warm cow's blood¹⁹ and having a scar made (Suri); taking his clothes off, hunting, going bare-foot, having his ears cleaned with sago grubs, putting a long thorn through his septum, and having his penis inverted (Kombai); hunting, sleeping without mosquito

net or insect repellent, going through an initiation ritual (Babongo and Sanema) with use of hallucinogenic drugs.

(5) *What about 'viewing another society from the inside and [finding] what it is that we have maybe lost along the way'?* There were often comments from Parry about how loving people were, how much time they have for each other, and he was frequently seen to be dancing, laughing, hugging – it was a very touchy-feely series – but his claims to be viewing society from 'the inside' have to be treated with caution. Even anthropologists with long residence and total linguistic fluency would be chary of such statements. In each case, the viewer was invited to participate vicariously by identifying with the presenter, who was willing to try most things, and not afraid of making a fool of himself, as he often did. Yet at the same time, the presenter was also hero, able to cope with things which would be far beyond most Westerners, and revelling in activities which required an unusually high degree of physical fitness, such as hunting.

The lay view: blogs, bloggers²⁰ and spectatorship

However, comments posted on numerous 'blog' sites, in chatrooms, as well as those received from non-anthropological friends, indicated a reaction quite different from that of anthropologists: the series was described as 'brilliant', 'eye-opening', 'fascinating', 'fab', 'genius TV' and Parry as having 'first class communication skills', and deserving 'complete respect'. Here is one example:

Originally Posted by mrfreeze²¹

Excellent program, really good to see how other people live (assuming they were natural for the camera).

Not sure how much of the food I could of eaten, eg rat pie, or pigs that are used as toilets and then eaten

Wonder how the veggie lot felt about the hanging of the cow?



16. <http://archive.salon.com/travel/feature/1999/11/03/iboga/>; <http://www.iboga.co.uk/iboga-tourism.htm>

17. www.hotelalako.com/bwiti.htm

18. Jan Moir 2005. Do you really want to be in our tribe? *Arts Telegraph*, 15 January.

19. Personal note: as a northerner brought up on black pudding (and tripe and onions) I found myself laughing when Parry expressed disgust at drinking cow's blood!

20. All quotations from blogs are given with original spelling and punctuation.

21. <http://forum.digitalspy.co.uk/board/showthread.php?t=178407&goto=nextnewest>

22. Lucien Taylor 1996. Iconophobia: How anthropology lost it at the movies. *Visual Anthropology Review* 7(2): 48-106.

23. L.A. Mallin on <http://www.perfect.co.uk/2005/01/tribe> calls the series 'a bad joke' and cites Chagnon's depiction of the Yanomami as 'the Fierce People'.

24. S.A. Hostick, 18 January 2005, on <http://www.perfect.co.uk/2005/01/tribe>

Really friendly people tho, treated the stranger much better than we would treat a stranger here. (again camera excepted).

Edit: oh good he stays with an African tribe next week.

As Lucien Taylor²² has noted:

Cinematic production and reception is not some transhistorical, transcultural given. Spectatorship is a 'total social fact' [...] it is embedded in a cultural context and historical moment, and thus susceptible to sociological as well as psychological interpretation.

How does this help us understand the reception of this series? It clearly has many aspects in common with 'reality TV' (especially *I'm a celebrity – get me out of here*), with travelogues (for example Michael Palin's recent series on the Himalayas), with 'survival' programmes (Ray Mears' *Extreme survival*) and of course also with wildlife programmes. In other words, the primary purpose was entertainment, and in that respect *Tribe* is very much of its time and place. One blog site discussion demonstrates this particularly clearly – it is a response to one of the very few lay criticisms of the series:²³

In response to L A Mallin's comments....

Perhaps you should realise that Parry's series is a BBC series for the British Public. I think that Parry's series has provided a great starting point for many Brits to get interested and involved in anthropology. I don't feel he has in any way shown the tribes he has visited as 'fierce people'. The programme last night on the Kombai gave the British public a chance to change their preconceived ideas on cannibalism. Parry showed that the Kombai ate/eat humans for very good reasons, which challenges Western ideas.²⁴

Martinez²⁵ has argued that visual anthropology is in need of stronger theories of spectatorship (Martinez 1992). He found, for example, that students appear to 'read' ethnographic films in a way that confirms rather than corrects the prejudices they hold about non-European soci-

eties. So who are the people who chose to watch *Tribe*?

The blog sites are extremely varied, but their very variety makes it clear that one reason for the programmes' success was that many different categories of people can 'take' something from the series. I found discussion of it on sites for people interested in New Age philosophies, military matters, geography, climbing, school-teaching, bushcraft and ancient history. Many of the commentators were admiring of both Parry's toughness and his willingness to 'try anything'. But it is clear that many are also vaguely discontented with Western society:

Looks brilliant – seen some trailer stuff and tonight its in the Himalayas With this guy Bruce Parry living with a tribe for 6 weeks who do not mix with civilised society....

.... although to call us civilised is somewhat of a joke really.....²⁶

Others are captivated by societies which appear to manifest more love for strangers than Western societies do, a virtue which even overcame one writer's moral objections to cannibalism:

The explorer, Bruce Parry, was with the Kombai tribe in the south pacific who live on an island where cannibalism is naturally in their culture. Hearing them explain this was not particularly shocking, their accounts of hunting and killing other humans, something that as a Christian I guess I should be appalled at²⁷

or societies with less clutter:

I think Parry's tribe programme has been a great success, well enjoyable, the Kombai programme actually showed them to be a very warm and loving community in an environment that is very hard to live in, and if i have any concerns it would be that no one is warning the relevant tribes that western life is fast approaching and more peace and happiness is not assured, their life's look good life's to me, and without Parry and the BBC i would never have had the

Fig. 4. Bruce Parry with horse during his stay with the Darchad of Mongolia.





BBC/BLAST FILMS

Fig. 5. Bruce Parry learning 'to become a shaman' among the *Sanema* of Venezuela.

25. Martinez, W. 1992. Who constructs anthropology knowledge? Towards a theory of ethnographic film spectatorship. In Crawford, P. & Turton, D. (eds) *Film as ethnography*. Manchester University Press.

26. www.ukclimbing.com/forums/t.php?t=112974#15523 59

27. <http://nickbailey.co.uk>

28. 'Nick' on www.perfect.co.uk/2005/01/tribe

29. www.tes.co.uk/section/staffroom/

30. active.sln.org.uk/ubb/Forum5/HTML/001737.html

31. www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/malaria.shtml

chance to see. well done good programmes are to much a rarity...²⁸

This commentator raises an important point – not everyone can be as privileged as anthropologists who get paid to go off and do exciting things, but at least TV programmes can allow 'a chance to see'. Nonetheless, at least some participants in blog sites also appear to have travelled themselves, as indicated by the following conversation from the *Times Educational Supplement* staffroom:²⁹

'What a fab programme'

'It reminds me of when I lived with bedouins in the negev desert.'

'My sister tells me stories of the shamens in South Africa where she lives. Fascinating stuff.'

'I love watching stuff like this'

'The programme was excellent'

In other words, spectators took what they wanted to see from each programme. Many of them have shared their views with their friends, hence the steadily climbing viewing figures.

What we don't find on the blog sites are the thoughts of

those whose viewing of the series merely confirmed their existing prejudices about primitives and savages. Yet it would be surprising if they were not an important category of viewers in a society where racism remains entrenched, and football matches are marked by 'monkey-chanting'.

I found only one site, for geography teachers, where there was somewhat more caution. 'Littlemisssunshine' cites the *Telegraph* interview with Parry, in which she asks: 'Should we even be bothering these people in the first place?' 'ValVannet' comments that: 'They have been fascinating viewing but more in a voyeuristic sense than anything else' and concludes that 'a virtue is being made out of primitiveness'. Littlemiss replies that the programmes do indeed lie between nature programmes ('the lesser-spotted tribe') and reality TV ('look at these freaks'), while another commentator, 'jd', asks: 'Could we be educated by this? There was a hint of the "noble savage" conceit'. I did myself wonder what a multicultural classroom in an inner-city school would make of *Tribe* and how it would feel to be, for instance, someone of African descent sitting in such a classroom during a screening and discussion.

Anthropology's position

So where is anthropology in all of this? This is a particularly pertinent question when there are reports that *Tribe* may be recut as an educational series for schools geography,³⁰ possibly with the assistance of the RAI, and when, as Brian Street notes in a recent edition of *AT* (20:6), the RAI Education Committee is working again on an anthropology A-level and ways in which anthropological film can be used in schools. Given the wealth of ethnographic film now available, is the footage from this series the kind of thing we would want A-level students to learn of non-Western societies? Perhaps it is – after all, the pages of *AT* have recently, yet again, been filled with a debate on cannibalism. A colleague teaching first-year undergraduates passed on an email from one of her students: 'My friends [who have viewed *Tribe*] are all asking – is this what anthropologists still do?' That's the most important question, and for all those who answer that yes, it is, many more would say that the kind of societies seen in this series have not, for many decades, been the sole object of anthropological efforts.

One of my anthropological colleagues noted in her comments that it is all very well to criticize such a series, but what would we put in its place? Her suggestions included some of the films of Sorious Samora and the recent documentary *Fever road*, about the death toll from malaria in Africa. Here the chief of a Kenyan village, who is struggling against the odds to prevent his people from dying of malaria, is the presenter of a programme distinguished by sensitivity, good multi-sited ethnography and enough background information to enable the viewer to understand the situation. Judging from the viewers' feedback,³¹ this programme had an exceptionally powerful impact. Many described themselves as moved, shocked, appalled and horrified. They berated the BBC for putting it on late at night: 'everyone needs to see this programme'. An African viewer, Toyin Agbetu, writes: 'These programmes are a rare and excellent example of what the BBC can do when it utilises its resources for social good.' Steve Brooke, who had switched over from the Spain vs. England match on BBC1, found it 'compelling' and wrote:

I was struck by the fact that on one channel we could watch 22 footballers earning £1 million a year, while on another we could see parents watching their children die because they didn't have enough money to buy quinine or mosquito nets.

Now if that had been labelled 'anthropology' by the TV critics, I for one would not be complaining. ●