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**The river echoes with laughter:
a child-centred analysis of social
change in Amazonia**

CAMILLA MORELLI

University of Bristol

Abstract

This article examines radical social, cultural and political changes taking place in Amazonia from the perspective of indigenous children and youth: a group who despite their demographic prevalence has received limited attention in the regional literature. Drawing on fieldwork with Matses people in Peru, I consider how children and youth are playing a critical role in the transition from a hunter-gatherer, forest-based society towards a riverine lifestyle that is increasingly engaged in trade, the market economy and exchanges with *chotac* or non-indigenous people. I argue that by engaging with their surroundings through playing and working, Matses children are becoming affectively attached to some parts of the world rather than others. This represents a purposeful shift from the lifestyle and worldviews of older generations and highlights how children are active agents who shape possible future directions of Matses society and transform the community's relationships with the world. Accordingly, I propose a child-centred view of social change that seeks to demonstrate the implications of children's creativity and agency for society at large and its future development.



Figure 1. Boys climb a tree on the riverbank.

The photograph above was taken by a nine-year-old Matsigenka girl, Lily, and depicts an activity that is central to her daily life: climbing a tree by the river. On reaching the top, the children in the picture will hurl themselves down into the water far below, shrieking, laughing and shouting. The photograph was taken from Lily's embodied perspective on the riverbank and contains something of her excitement at being the next in line to climb to the tree-top and throw herself into the river. Many other children are already in the water, shouting and screaming: '*Come on! Jump!*' and because the riverbanks form a deep basin around the water, the sound of children's play and laughter echoes all around the village. Later in the day, when they are hungry, the children will head far upstream, unsupervised by adults, and look for fish to catch and eat.

At the exact same moment that the children are playing in the river, many of their parents and grandparents are far away, trekking deep in the forest to hunt animals and collect fruit and medical plants. It is significant that no children or youth decided to join their parents in the forest on this day and instead, like every other day, chose to go to the river. For in a marked contrast to their parents and grandparents, the forest has become marginal to young people's daily activities, knowledge and moral understandings. Lily herself is adamant that when she grows up, rather than spend her life hunting and trekking she wants to live on the banks of a wide Amazonian river, far away from the forest, where she can catch plenty of fish, spend time in the nearby towns and have access to non-indigenous territory. In a society where children are required to contribute to subsistence activities and the social economy from a young age,

the act of choosing the river over the forest is crucial for it means that young Matses are not only experiencing and enacting a very different childhood from their parents, but are setting up a different kind of life for themselves and their own offspring. This article will demonstrate that by developing new forms of practical know-how and emotional attachment to the environment compared to their elders, the children prepare the ground for new possible developments of society and in so doing actively effect social transformation while posing the basis for a different future.

Child agency and the future in ethnographic terms

Over the last four decades, Matses society has undergone radical social change and alongside many other Amerindian communities in the region (Freire 2003, Graham 2005, Cepek 2008) continues to be impacted by far-reaching social, environmental and political-economic transformations, including urbanization, deforestation, food depletion and unprecedented economic hardship. In this article I will demonstrate how children and younger generations of Amerindians are not merely caught up in these ongoing changes but are actively responding to, engaging with and negotiating them, and in doing so shaping the possibilities of a future that remains undefined.ⁱ This reinforces how children are not submissive ‘recipients of adult expectations and knowledge’ (Rapport and Overing 2007: 42) but purposeful agents ‘capable of creating their own world as well as acting in the world others create for them’ (Bluebond-Langner 1978: 7).

The concept of children's agency has been widely discussed in studies of childhood and youth, where traditional theories of socialization have been criticised for overlooking children's capacity for creative action, innovation and decision-making. Following the 'child-centred' turn (Montgomery 2009: 43), there has been a substantial rethinking of theoretical and ethnographic approaches to childhood and a questioning of models in which adult practices and moral worldviews are seen as passively re-enacted and reproduced by children through play, formal and informal education and other forms of socialization (Toren 1993, 1999; Thorne 1993; James 1993, 1998; James and Prout 1997). Child-centred works have emphasised, instead, that children are 'actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live' (James and Prout 1997: 4) and stressed the necessity of engaging directly with children as research respondents by incorporating their voices, opinions and views into the analysis rather than privileging and resorting to adult interpretations and perspectives. However, of late, child-centred works have themselves been criticised for postulating a view of adulthood and childhood as separate spheres of action (Ulturgasheva 2012), particularly in how children's activities and lifeworlds are portrayed as self-contained and detached from the wider political-economic structures of society (Lancy 2012). Consequently, although child-centred research has proved to be invaluable in terms of recognising children's creative capacities and for 'giving voice to children's voices' (James 2007: 261) it has also tended to consider children's interactions with other

children and overlooked the influence and impact of these on the whole of society (Orellana 2009).ⁱⁱ

In response, this article takes a child-centred approach that focuses on children's perspectives and activities but attempts to situate these in relation to the broader social and political-economic context, so as to demonstrate ethnographically how children shape and influence the world wherein they live. Children have an impact on society not because they have access to the same resources or means of power as adults (Solberg 1997), but by developing innovative forms of know-how and shared emotional attachment to others and their surroundings through play and other daily activities. Following Toren, I intend to emphasise that children come to maturity as particular kinds of 'historically located, persons who [...] actively constitute a world that is at once the same as, and different from, the world their elders know' (Toren 1993: 463). Consequently, by drawing on fieldwork among Matsigenka children in Peru, I consider how young Amerindians play a critical role in the transition from a hunter-gatherer, forest-based society towards one whose future is based on rivers and is increasingly engaged in trade, exchanges and new forms of moral interaction with the *chotac* or 'non-indigenous' society.

I argue that by engaging with the embodied, sensorial and affective dimensions of riverine life through their daily activities of play and subsistence—or what might be termed 'play-work' (Bloch and Adler 1994)—Matsigenka children are

becoming emotionally and practically attached to the river as opposed to the forest in ways that have significant repercussions. This not only represents a divergence from the lifestyle and worldviews of older generations, in which the forest remains central, but illustrates how children are active agents who continually transform social practices and shared worldviews over time by moving towards new future horizons. By assuming that ‘the human reveals itself as a kind of going beyond’ (Rapport 2013: 3) and people’s ‘activity is directed into the future even when they are not pursuing conscious goals’ (Dreyfus 1991: 68-69), I propose a view of social change that takes into account both the past experienced by older generations as well as the new future goals that children are moving towards. The future here is approached in ethnographic terms, in that although we cannot fully anticipate how children will live as adults or ‘assume that the endpoint of socialization is known’ (Toren 1993: 461), it is equally necessary to consider how children set up tangible conditions through their current activities that open up or close off certain possibilities for their adulthoods.

A child-centred analysis of social change in Amazonia

Matsigenka people lived in voluntary isolation in inland forest areas until the end of the 1960s, and only encountered other peoples infrequently through raiding and warfare (Romanoff 1984, Romanoff et al. 2004, Fleck 2003). Following a period of intense interethnic violence, from the early 1970s onwards Matsigenka leaders began to establish peaceful contact with evangelical missionaries and

non-indigenous society, which led to radical changes in their daily practices, lifestyle and living environments. This has involved a gradual moving away from inland forest areas and the establishment of permanent settlements along wide rivers closer to the territory of the *chotac*, non-indigenous people, and resulted in the abandonment of many forest-based activities and traditional practices such as body painting, tattooing, chanting and myth-telling. It is only relatively recently, since the early 2000s, that Matses people have begun to further develop their relationships with the non-indigenous world, and their lives are becoming increasingly intertwined with money, temporary waged labour and exchanges with *chotac* people in neighbouring urban settlements.

Rapid social, political and economic changes of this kind have radically impacted upon, and continue to affect, indigenous populations throughout Latin America and beyond (e.g. Stocks 2005, Di Gimimiani 2013, McCormack 2011). In highlighting their struggles with both local governmental policies and globalising challenges, ethnographers have stressed that indigenous persons are not passive in the face of social changes and that understanding their efforts, actions and agency is not only key to anthropological analysis but also necessary for policy and development (Aikman 2002, Sillitoe 2010). However, social change is almost exclusively seen from the perspectives of the adult population and little weight is accorded to the standpoints, voices and experiences of children within studies of Amerindian and other indigenous societies, especially when compared to the more substantial literature on child and youth-centred anthropology in industrialised nations (cf. Bird-David 2005,

Corsaro 2011: 308). Children and youth constitute by far the largest demographics across many parts of South America and a recent national census in the Yaquerana district of Peru, where I worked, estimated that almost 70% of the population are under nineteen and 55% are under fourteen (INEI 2007). To omit children and young people's perspectives from ethnographic analysis not only disregards the lived experiences and moral understandings of the largest constitutive group in the region, but also to overlook the significant role children are currently playing in shaping contemporary Amazonian society and its future. Accordingly, at a time when indigenous futures continue to be threatened by global and local challenges, it is vital that young lives are considered in anthropological accounts of the region and recognized as *future in the making* (Cole and Durham 2008: 4-5).

This is not to argue that Amazonianist scholars have entirely ignored childhood or young people. Children and child-rearing are widely understood as central to Amazonian social life, and children are frequently referred to and described in ethnographies of the region (e.g. Maybury-Lewis 1974; Hugh-Jones 1979; Rival 1997, 2002; De Matos Viegas 2003). For the most part, however, Amerindian children are theorised and written about from the perspectives and viewpoints of adults rather than by carrying out fieldwork with children themselves or engaging with them as primary research respondents. When children do appear in ethnographic accounts they are often incidental to other concerns, such as subsistence and the social economy (Gow 1989), personhood (McCallum 2001, Uzendoski 2005), sociality (Kidd 2000, Belaunde 2000) and

indigenous sexuality (Gregor 1985). Working with children on a sustained and systematic basis is challenging and presents specific epistemological problems in relation to language, ethics, methodology and modes of participation (cf. Friedl 2004). It requires a long-term engagement in the field and specialised methods, and for understandable reasons, anthropologists that do not specialise in childhood rarely have the time to spend the months of patient research necessary to elicit and do justice to children's ideas and lifeworlds. Consequently, the majority of claims about Amerindian children tend to be based on relatively short periods spent with them in the field or by speaking to adults, rather than on a sustained ethnographic inquiry centred on their own voices and views.

Because children have different linguistic capacities and attention spans in comparison to adults, and do not respond well to guided conversations or semi-structured interviews (cf. Thomson 2008), researchers have used an array of child-centred techniques—including photography, film and drawing—as a means of setting up an ethnographic and interactive context with them (e.g. Mead 1932, Toren 2007, Hinton 2000, Young and Barrett 2001, Burke 2008, Kaplan 2008). The use of participatory visual methods has been at once praised for enabling children 'to express their everyday experiences in various self-directed and creative ways' (Kullman 2012: 3) as well as criticised insofar as ethnographers have failed to recognise that 'relationships of power, authority, and difference need to be acknowledged and integrated into the analysis' (Mitchell 2006: 70). Likewise, the use of participatory photography and film in

the research with indigenous peoples (e.g. Ginsburg 1991, Turner 1992) has been subject to criticisms that saw a ‘Western ontology frozen into instruments like video technology, an ontology that, it was argued, would inevitably define the character of indigenous representation from without’ (cf. Boyer 2006: 52).

I acknowledge these critiques and will not claim that cameras can straightforwardly mirror children’s lived experience or offer transparent insight into indigenous aesthetics, visual cultures or ‘ways of seeing’ (Willerslsev 2010: 25, Grasseni 2010). Nevertheless, I use participatory photography as a medium that can produce invaluable results when working with children by stimulating their interest and engaging them as active research participants. Authors who expressed criticism regarding visual child-centred methods have also applied these and recognised that ‘the pleasure that children may experience (...) is almost palpable and can be an important aspect of the analysis’ (Mitchell 2006: 70), and as such the value of these methods cannot be easily dismissed. This seems particularly relevant, or even necessary, when conducting ethnographic work with Amerindian and other indigenous societies where research that addresses children as participants is still limited, and the use of child-centred techniques has been rarely documented.

In my own fieldwork, the cameras not only created a connection beyond linguistic barriers, providing a means of sustained engagement with children in a way that interviews did not. They also offered a visual representation of

children's passion for the river, which is a key object of this ethnographic investigation. My original intention during fieldwork was to investigate Matses children's relationships with the forest environment as a context of learning, play and imagination, but I soon discovered that unlike their elders, children had little interest in the forest world while they spend the majority of their time in the river. Almost all the photographs I collected in the field were taken in and around water, while images of the forest were virtually absent, and therefore they will be used here to accompany the analysis of children's predilection for the river and the relevance of this for the wider society.

Play-work in the river as rupture and continuity

This section introduces the river as a site of child socialization in which children spend much of their time playing and simultaneously developing skills that are key to survival. The images below, all taken by Matses children themselves, portray other children as young as three years old using canoes and paddles. By the time they are six most Matses girls and boys are proficient canoeists and have developed muscular, enskilled bodies. By the age of eight to ten most children will regularly take long expeditions along the river or fish while balancing expertly on the narrow gunwale of the canoe, even when this moves quickly through the strong Amazonian currents.



Figure 2. Learning by playing: paddles and canoes.

‘Play’ and ‘work’ are frequently intertwined in hunter-gatherer societies where children take part in the household economy from a very young age and develop adult skills through play (Lancy 1976, 1996; Watson-Gegeo 2001). This stands in contrast to the more static dichotomy between playing and working in industrialised settings and emphasises what Bloch and Adler term ‘play-work’ (1994): a range of practical, play-based activities through which children start learning how to contribute to subsistence and become competent social actors within the functioning of hunter-gatherer economies. From a young age, Matses children spend much of their time in and around the river playing while simultaneously engaging in practices they have not yet mastered, but which are crucial to becoming self-reliant adults. While not all play is linked to subsistence and work sometimes contains little or no element of recreation, at the same time many aspects of children’s play involve the learning, testing out and development of skills necessary for contributing to the family’s needs and working in the challenging Amazonian environment.

The images above show a key aspect of Matses children’s everyday life: the absence of adults and adult supervision from the vast majority of their daily activities. Even by the age of two, Matses children are actively exploring and independently engaging with the world beyond their parents’ home. Erik, a two-year old boy in the family I lived with, who could only toddle, barely talk and could not swim, would wake up every morning and take himself to the river unaccompanied to wash, play and socialise with the other children. To reach the river Erik had to leave his home, cross part of the village and then

climb down a steep riverbank while holding onto small plants along the way. Erik's parents were not only content to let him to go the river on his own, but were proud that he could look after himself without supervision.

This kind of practical engagement with the world outside the realms of adult guidance is embedded within a culturally situated view of childhood and youth, typical of hunter-gatherer societies, in which children are not seen as vulnerable 'cherubs' (Lancy 2008: 2) to be protected and safeguarded by their parents but rather as capable actors who should foster skills for survival from their earliest years. While children do not live in isolation from adults and are not completely self-sufficient, they are nevertheless left to their own devices from the early stages of life, and although parents are expected to provide and prepare food to a certain extent (see Gow 1989), children must also actively contribute to household activities by chopping firewood, collecting water from the river, fishing, and other tasks. So to an extent, play-work in the river can be seen as crucial to child socialization insofar as it (re)produces shared moral worldviews and key social skills, such as the key values of independence and self-reliance that are of uppermost importance in Amerindian moral economies and are encouraged from the earliest years (Hendricks 1988, Overing and Passes 2000, De Matos Viegas 2003).

But the river is not just a functional site that children engage with for survival and subsistence. It is also a favourite space of interaction where they choose to

spend much of their time together, playing and joking with each other. Words and images can never fully convey the feeling of joy and adrenaline of playing in the river, the sensation of the freezing water on the skin in the Amazonian heat, or the thrill of jumping down from the height of a huge tree into the muddy waters below. Children's passion for the river is rarely described in propositional statements, speech and language of the kind that could be easily elicited through conversation or interviews. Rather, their words emerge with intensity in the midst of their actions, enthusiasm and immersion when playing in the river, as well as in the *sound* that accompanies play. The children call each other, scream and laugh loudly as their laughter resonates all around.

'Playing' and 'laughing' are described by the same word, *mamë nec*, and it is through play and laughter that the river becomes an emotional, multi-sensorial and affective environment that they make their own and becomes a key site of learning, knowing and embodied activity. Like other kinds of play, *mamë nec* cannot be dismissed as 'frivolous activity' (James 1998: 104) but must be recognized as crucial to how children learn about themselves, others and their environment. *Mamë nec* or playing-and-laughing is simultaneously a means through which children develop and enact skills that will be key to their survival and a shared activity through which they invest the world with meaning and value. As such the emotional, sensorial and affective dimensions of play are not simply ends in themselves but are means of developing, transforming and negotiating a social and moral understanding of the world rather than simply reproducing pre-existing ones (Briggs 1998, James 1998).

Children develop specific modes of knowing and aesthetic appreciation through play that has consequences for the development of current and future society (e.g. Thorne 1993, Corsaro 2003), as explored in the following section.

Being and becoming riverine dwellers

Children themselves understand their role as that of active economic agents and contribute to subsistence from an early age through skills they have learnt and embodied through play-work. When they are hungry and there is no food in the house, they take their canoes out onto the river to search for fish rather than waiting for their parents to feed them. To illustrate this, below is a picture of eight-year-old Francisco as he holds a huge catfish he caught himself that comes up to his chest. When Francisco caught the fish, he took it home for his eleven-year-old sister Gilda to cook and it was shared with as many people as it could feed.



Figure 3. Francisco, eight years old, holds a catfish he caught.

Fishing on Amazonian rivers is arduous: paddles are wrought out of hardwood, heavy and cumbersome, and using them to propel a canoe upstream across the river's currents not only demands skills and technique, but also considerable muscular strength. It is an activity that requires a strong upper-body, arms, wrists, hardened hands and physical stamina: all of which, Matses people start developing at an early age through the combination of playing-and-working in the river. In doing so, Francisco is growing a strong body and a will to *chonuapec* or 'hard physical work', and is becoming *dadambo*, 'very much of a man': that is, a man who is brave, strong, resilient, and skilled. Here a particular kind of Matses masculinity is being enacted but also transformed. For whereas Francisco gets up in the morning and heads out to the river, his father, Walter, will trek deep into the forest. When the above photograph was taken, Walter was away trekking and looking for game animals. For his generation, being *dadambo* encompasses the physical know-how of the forest, good marksmanship and the mastery of hunting skills that boys of Francisco's age are not developing. His father's generation laments that Matses boys rarely go to the forest and are not as tough as they were themselves at their age, while the boys can be seen as developing a different way of being *dadambo* that pertains to the skills and prowess of the river.

Accordingly, play-work in the river is not simply reproducing adult skills, practices and worldviews: the children are also developing new forms of engagement with the world and becoming different types of adults. While

Francisco is being socialised to the value of *chonuapec* and self-reliance typical of Amerindian and hunter-gather moral economies, he is also developing a different form of attachment with his surroundings and becoming a riverine dweller rather than a skilled hunter and forest trekker like his father. The river for Francisco is not just the site where he spends his days engaged in play and work, but also constitutes his immediate and future horizons. It is the space in which he is learning to become Matses while also redefining what it means to be a Matses person in both its practical and moral dimensions. This reinforces how learning and socialization do not involve the straightforward inter-generational transmission of skills or a continuity of worldviews and instead shows how younger Matses are attending to their surroundings in new ways that entail becoming different types of adults in the future.

The children's move away from the forest has relevant gender implications. Matses girls begin actively contributing to household activities at an equal or earlier age than boys, and by the age of six or so, they are expected to help fish, gather, cultivate, prepare and cook food, to collect firewood and make fires, and to wash clothes and take care of younger siblings. By engaging in play-work and subsistence activities, the girls are also reproducing values and skills established amongst the older generations of women while simultaneously redefining them. On the one hand they are learning to become *dayac*, 'industrious hardworking women' like their mothers and grandmothers who can fish, cultivate the garden and carry out physically-demanding house chores. But on the other hand, they are not learning about the forest like their

grandmothers did at their age by accompanying their brothers, fathers and husbands on hunts to carry home their prey (Romanoff 1983), and instead are developing new forms of desires and expectations for the future. In particular, most girls openly wish to dwell closer to non-indigenous towns and have *daschute dapa*, ‘plenty of clothes’.

These changes are intertwined with the growing centrality of the river: when Matses people lived nomadically in the forest, women relied on men for providing proteins given that hunting was primarily a male activity. But since settling down along major watercourses, women have become proficient at fishing and can provide protein for themselves and their families. Girls are learning how to fish and often remark that when they grow up, they do not want marry a man who is a good hunter, like their grandmothers did at their age, but rather someone who is good at making money (also considered as a primarily male activity). While Matses girls are becoming *dayac*, hard-working like their mothers, they also aspire to have what their mothers do not: money, clothes, shoes and, as many girls told me, a wealthy and possibly *chotac* husband.

‘Does your father have a motor for his canoe?’

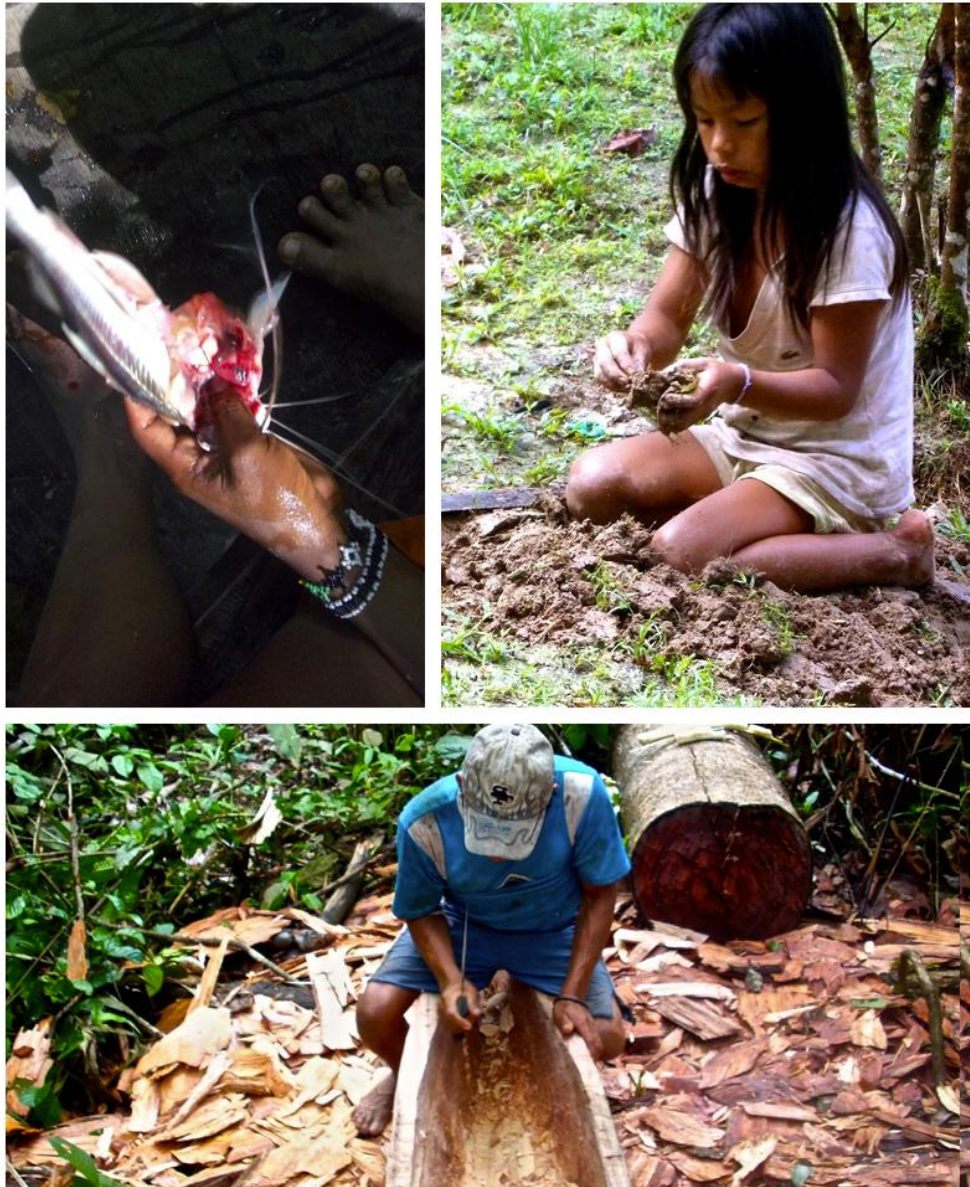


Figure 4. From the top left: Elsie guts a fish; Marta digs for bait worms; Raúl crafts a canoe for his family.

The photographs above were all taken by Matses girls and show eight-year-old Elsie gutting a fish with her fingers, which she will then cook by collecting firewood and making a fire; six-year-old Marta digging in the soil as she looks for worms to use as bait; and finally the father of twelve-year-old Flora, Raúl, who photographed him while he was crafting a canoe for his family of two

wives and eleven children. I would sometimes join Matses families on fishing journeys. We would leave the village before sunrise and canoe far upriver where the riverbed is wider and fish more abundant, before arriving back at the village at dusk, exhausted but cheerful, with a canoe full of fish. Both boys and girls take an active part in these trips: they help set up the canoe, dig for baitworms, fish with hooks and line, gut the fish, collect wood, make a fire and cook lunch. Although Flora's father Raúl can fish and is highly skilled in canoeing and other riverine activities, he much prefers to spend his time hunting and only goes fishing as a last resort. Like others of his generation he complains that the river is dull and tedious. Consequently, on the joint fishing trips, the elders would leave the group at the fishing spot and head deep into the forest looking for game animals, returning only at dusk to join the others to go back to the village.

Raúl is unsure of his exact age because he was born before missionary contact in 1969. When he was growing up, Matses people lived scattered in small communities deep in the rainforest and avoided navigable watercourses for fear of the *chotac* people who dwelled along them. As a child Raúl never saw a river and it was not until his teens, when his father took him on a two-day trek to the banks of a wide Amazonian river, that he first encountered one. He still recounts the feelings of fear, astonishment and trepidation at seeing such a wide body of water for the first time. When a dolphin broke the surface and spouted water into the air Raúl thought '*this must be a deadly spirit!*', whereas

his daughter Flora grew up with the river being a central part of daily life and she sees dolphins on a daily basis.

Unlike his own children, Raúl became a skilled hunter and trekker at a very young age. People from the village used to hunt every day until no more game was left in proximity of their dwellings, at which point the whole village would move and settle in a different area of the rainforest. Raúl's itinerant youth in the forest was also defined by intense warfare whereby Matses people regularly raided settlements of the *chotac*, killing the men with arrows and taking young women captive (Romanoff 1984, Fleck 2003). The captive women brought in diseases they could not cure with medicinal plants, and accessing pharmaceutical treatment was a contributing factor to Matses people agreeing to establish peaceful contact with evangelical missionaries, who not only offered protection from further attacks, but also medicines and new tools such as machetes, axes, radios, sharp knives and steel cooking pots.

Over the course of Raúl's life, Matses people have gradually moved from deep inland forest towards navigable rivers and closer to non-indigenous territory. Following sedentarization they hunted extensively around the villages, leading to game depletion, and as a result the river became an increasingly important alternative to the forest as a source of nourishment. Raúl and his generation have therefore developed a relationship with, but never became fond of or emotionally attached to, the river environment. While adept at canoeing and

knowledgeable with regards to the habits of fish, Raúl and most other Matses people born before the early 1970s still spend much time in the forest hunting and gathering. Raúl does not see fish as proper food and often complains that *pete nidbēdec*, ‘there is no food’, despite the fact that the river is abundant with fish and an easy source of protein. For Raúl riverine life is *chieshe*, ‘boring’ and like the men and women of his generation he remains emotionally attached to the forest.

In other words, for older Matses, trekking through the forest is not simply a subsistence activity but a means through which they maintain emotional connections and affective relationships with the forest world and understand it as a ‘giving environment’ (Bird-David 1990, Rival 2002). Raúl’s generation talk about the forest with passion, awe and respect and their activity in the forest is couched in a similar kind of emotional and affective engagement as the river is for their children. Hunting is hard, arduous and time-consuming work and pushes the body to its extreme, testing its strength and resilience, while *pamboshë* or ‘being in much pain’ and ‘struggling’ is an important moral quality that is much valued and discussed. The soil is hard and filled with thorns that test their ability to walk barefoot; the path is difficult to find and a wrong turn can be precarious, even fatal, pushing the trekker to remain vigilant and focussed; the presence of jaguars, poisonous snakes and spirits makes the forest thrilling and dangerous, and the hunters return from their treks filled with adrenaline and share tales of the day’s adventure.

Earlier generations of children regularly accompanied their parents on hunting and gathering expeditions that would last many days or even weeks, and in doing so learned about the forest and developed forest-based skills. Raúl's generation would spend their days playing with bows while aiming their arrows at fruit on the trees to improve their marksmanship. As they grew older they would play by hunting small monkeys in the forest and thereby develop skills that later enable them to catch bigger animals such as peccaries and tapirs. By contrast, the forest remains peripheral to young Matses' concerns and is seen as *chieshe*, 'boring', and *dacuëdën*, 'frightening'. They have not developed their skills and bodies through play-work in the forest but in the river, and as such trekking hurts and damages their feet, and they are also afraid of animals, spirits and of getting lost given their poor sense of orientation.

Such intergenerational differences can be partially understood as a consequence of the social, material and economic constraints that young Matses have grown up with, including the diminishing of animal stocks caused by an overexploitation of the forest fauna after sedentarization (so that even if children desired to learn how to hunt, there would be no nearby game to practice with). A further reason for Amerindian children's inexperience in terms of forest skills and knowledge might be seen in the recent introduction of State-schools that ethnographers have seen as preventing young generations of Amazonians from developing traditional skills and knowledge (Rival 1992,

1997, 2002; Aikman 2002; Rockwell and Gomes 2009). Their argument is that following the introduction of schooling, Amerindian children cannot participate in subsistence activities or learn about the forest to the same extent as their parents because they must attend school, and thus they have shifted from active food-providers to pupils that need to be provided for by adults (Rival 2002: 152-176).

But while these external constraints should be taken into account, Matsigenka children must be recognised as partial agents who are neither simply adjusting to economic and environmental constraint nor reproducing the knowledge and attitudes of their elders. The children could choose to accompany older Matsigenka and engage with the forest, like their parents and grandparents did when they were themselves young, but it is something they actively decide not to do. Knowledge of the forest is not transmitted between the generations, and while the future is undetermined and open-ended, when the current generation of children grow up it is far more likely they will pass on their emotional and practical engagement with the river to their own children. By attending to and learning about the world according to their interests and passion, the children are actively engaged in social change and their play and shared activities can be seen as part of a dialectic mediation between their capacity for active choice and the social and material possibilities of their environment.

These intergenerational differences emerged from children's embodied enthusiasm of playing in the river and their manifest refusal of spending time in the forest—as well from their photographs, where children play in the river and adults are virtually absent from it—but they were also partially expressed in speech and conversations. 'There is no better introduction to child logic than the study of spontaneous questions' as Piaget argued (2002: 165), and the centrality of the river to the children's lifeworlds can be discerned in a question that nearly every child in the village asked me when I first met them: '*does your father have a motor for his canoe?*' Over recent years outboard motors have become a symbol of social and economic privilege and children's question about my father's canoe reveals both their understandings of the river being central to life in my homeland and a curiosity regarding my social and economic status. As Moran suggests, 'in order even to be able to pose a question we must have some presupposition or pre-judgments of what we are asking about, of how things will be' (2000: 236) and it is notable that whereas older Matses would ask '*is your father a good hunter?*' or '*how big are the forests in your homeland?*', Matses children's questions highlighted a view of the world where the river is foundational.

Conclusions: children as agents of change

The article has shown that while Matses children are to an extent being socialized to traditional Matses values of working hard and contributing to the household economy, thereby reproducing the skills and knowledge of older

generations, they are also becoming new types of persons with different desires, hopes and expectations for the future. Neither boys nor girls are becoming experienced and skilled trekkers, and instead they are expressing the desire to make money and access waged labour in neighbouring towns. When I interviewed them about the future, all boys aged between six and fifteen year old said they will work in the *madera*, cutting timber, even though they know from their fathers and grandfathers who have done so that these types of jobs are wearing and badly paid. The river is a central part of children's future horizons: both girls and boys told me that when they grow older they want to live closer to the Yaquerana, a wide body of water where fish is abundant and non-indigenous territory closer.

The Yaquerana is located downriver from the village where I worked, and leads to the town of Colonia Angamos that is set further ahead on its banks. This is a small rural town, but for the children it offers many of the material and economic opportunities that Matses villages lack and which appeal to the young generations: concrete houses with tin roofs, artificial illumination, television, telephones, electricity, running water, shops, manufactured goods, an airstrip, a military base and a *posto de salud*, or 'rural clinic'. The journey to Colonia Angamos requires a motorized canoe and petrol, which are expensive, and so families will only travel there a few times a year. Nevertheless, Colonia Angamos and the non-indigenous world occupy a year-round importance in young people's play, imaginative practices and games even if it remains geographically distant (Morelli 2015). The river is the connection to the non-

indigenous *chotac* world and its social, economic and material opportunities, and is thus understood as the means to establish their future life and the gateway to travel to non-indigenous cities including Iquitos and Lima, where less than twenty Matses people out of a population of over two-thousand are known to have ever been. For most of older generations, moving further downriver would mean shifting even further away from the forest where they grew up and holds little interest. For them, the current geographical position of the village is an optimal compromise insofar as they can still spend time hunting in the forest while also taking part in the money economy and being able to access machetes, flashlights, cartridges and the local clinic in Colonia Angamos in case of medical emergencies.

The likely shift in the centre of Matses life from the forest to the river over the forthcoming years has important implications for Matses society. Although the future cannot be predicted on the basis of the present, especially given the indeterminacy and uncertainty of life in the Amazonian region, it is nevertheless possible to consider the children's engagement with the river as the site upon which it will emerge. By engaging only minimally with the forest, the children are reducing the possibility and likelihood of a future lifestyle or household economy that is based on hunting, while at the same time they are opening up spaces in which a riverine economy is the primary mode of subsistence and movement, together with the possibility of increasing exchanges with the *chotac* and urban environments that can only be accessed via the river itself.

By proposing a child-centred analysis of socioeconomic and environmental transformations in Amazonia, this article has examined how Amerindian children are not simply caught in these processes of change but are purposefully participating and reformulating them on a daily basis. Children need to be understood as competent social actors (James 2007: 261) whose perspectives, experiences and modes of knowing are not determined by, but are embedded within day-to-day social, political and economic interactions with other children and adults (Toren 1990).

Through an ethnographic account of Matses children's daily lives and activities in the peer group, I have sought to emphasise that the children play an active role in how Matses people's relationship with the environment is changing through time and between the generations – whereby children's own activities have an impact not simply on the fleeting moments of play in the peer group, but more broadly on current and future society. I have shown that the river affords a series of unfinished and under-determined possibilities as it constantly changes in relation to specific modes of embodied engagement and for various ends of human activity. As Harris (2005: 200-204) argues for the *ribeirinhos* of Amazonian Brazil, the river becomes a source of nourishment when hungry, a means of connection while travelling and a playground for children who constantly recast it for their own purposes. But unlike long-term riverine dwellers of the Amazonian floodplains, Matses people have only

recently settled along major watercourses and are still adjusting and becoming attuned to the rhythms of riverine life, including learning about and understanding the habits of fish-stock, river fauna and other species. Children play a key role in this process by developing strong attachments to the river and aligning themselves with the world of cities and *chotac* people. The river is the very means of accessing the non-indigenous world and moving closer to bigger cities and whereas older Matses are critical of the *chotac* and urban environments, Matses children are curious and fascinated by them and in doing so are projecting their attention towards new future horizons and steering the course of social life towards new directions.

Notes

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Note on Contributor

Camilla Morelli completed her Ph.D. at the University of Manchester in 2014, and she is now a Teaching Fellow at the University of Bristol.

Official Address, Institutional Affiliation and Email

Department of Archaeology and Anthropology

University of Bristol

43 Woodland Road,

Bristol, BS8 1UU

camilla.morelli@bristol.ac.uk

Author Statement

I confirm that the submitted paper has not been published or submitted elsewhere, either in whole or in part, and that pending a decision by the editor on its appropriateness for the JRAI, it will not be published or submitted elsewhere.

ⁱ Given that childhood has long been recognized as a historically constituted, culturally variable and problematic category (Lancy 2008, Montgomery 2009: 50), for the purposes of the article I use Matses own definitions of those who are regarded as *bacuëbo*, ‘children’, which generally refers to boys and girls from two up to around twelve to fourteen years of age. In order to protect the anonymity of my respondents, all names have been changed and the name of the exact village where I worked will not be disclosed.

ii The work of Christina Toren (1993, 1991, 1999) represents a relevant exception in the anthropology of childhood, for she has pioneered an approach that considers how children develop new forms of everyday habitus and embodied knowledge in mediation with others, and how they at once reproduce meanings established amongst the older generations while also reinventing these in autonomous ways.

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