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Social and cultural anthropology
Standard level
Paper 1

8 May 2026

Zone A afternoon | **Zone B** afternoon | **Zone C** afternoon

1 hour 30 minutes

Instructions to students

- Do not open this examination paper until instructed to do so.
- Read the passage and answer questions 1 and 2. Choose either question 3 or 4. Answer question 5.
- The maximum mark for this examination paper is **[30 marks]**.

Read the passage.

Passage adapted from Morelli, C., 2017. The river echoes with laughter: a child-centred analysis of social change in Amazonia. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 23(1), pp.137–154.

In childhood studies, child-centred approaches stress children’s capacity for creative action and agency and incorporate their voices into the analysis. I focus on the perspectives of Matsés children in Peru, situating them in the broader social and political-economic context to show ethnographically how children shape their world. Children 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 engaging with the *chotac* or “non-indigenous” society.

By contrast with industrialized societies, “play” and “work” are intertwined in hunter-gatherer societies where children participate in the household economy from a young age, developing adult skills through play. Through play-based activities, children learn how to contribute to subsistence, becoming competent social actors.

The Matsés people lived in forest areas until the 1960s, only encountering other peoples through warfare. Following a period of interethnic violence, from the 1970s they established peaceful contact with missionaries, leading to radical changes in their lifestyle. They gradually moved away from the forest and established permanent settlements along rivers closer to *chotac* territory, abandoning many forest-based activities. The Matsés’ lives are increasingly intertwined with money, temporary waged labour, and exchanges with *chotac* people in urban settlements.

Working with children is challenging and presents specific problems related to language, ethics, and methodology. It requires systematic long-term engagement in the field and specialized methods to do justice to children’s ideas and lifeworlds. Compared to adults, children have different linguistic capacities and attention spans and do not respond well to guided conversations or interviews, so researchers use different child-centred techniques—including photography, film, and drawing. I used participatory photography with children to stimulate their interest and engage them as active research participants. The cameras created a connection beyond linguistic barriers, offering a visual representation of children’s passion for the river.

My original fieldwork intention was to investigate Matsés children’s relationships with the forest as a context of learning, but I soon discovered that unlike their elders, children had little interest in the forest, spending most of their time in the river, a site of child socialization. Matsés children took photos portraying other children as young as three years old using canoes and paddles. By the age of eight, most children take long expeditions along the river or fish while balancing expertly on the canoe through strong Amazonian currents. Practical engagement with the world outside adult guidance is embedded within a culturally situated view of childhood, typical of hunter-gatherer societies, in which children are not seen as vulnerable infants to be protected but as capable actors who should foster skills for survival from their earliest years.

Through “play-work,” the river becomes an emotional and multi-sensorial environment, a key site of learning and embodied activity. Play becomes a means to develop, transform, and negotiate a social and moral understanding of the world rather than simply reproducing pre-existing ones.

Earlier generations of children accompanied their parents on hunting and gathering expeditions, learning about the forest and developing forest-based skills. By contrast, the forest remains peripheral to young Matsés and is seen as “boring” and “frightening”. Such intergenerational differences result from the economic constraints caused by an overexploitation of the forest fauna after sedentarization*. Another reason could be the recent introduction of state schools.

45 The significance of the river is clear from a question that most children asked me: “does your father’s canoe have a motor?” Recently, outboard motors have become a symbol of socio-economic privilege. This question reveals their understandings of the river as central to life in my homeland and a curiosity regarding my status. Whereas older Matsés would ask “is your father a good hunter?”, Matsés children’s questions highlighted a view of the world where the river is foundational.

50 By disengaging from the forest, the children limit the possibility of a future based on hunting, while simultaneously opening up spaces in which a river economy is the primary mode of subsistence and enables increasing exchanges with the *chotac*. The river is the means of accessing the non-indigenous world and moving closer to bigger cities. Whereas older Matsés criticize *chotac* and urban environments, Matsés children are curious and fascinated by them, projecting their attention towards new future horizons and guiding social life towards new directions.

* sedentarization: the process by which migratory or nomadic peoples establish permanent settlement

Answer question 1 **and** question 2.

1. Define the term **age** and describe how it can be understood and applied in the context of the passage. [4]
2. Analyse the ethnographic data presented in the passage using the concept of **culture**. [6]

Answer **either** question 3 **or** question 4.

3. Compare and contrast the way in which the key concept of **change** or **materiality** is evident in this passage with how it is evident in **one** other ethnographic example you have studied. [10]

OR

4. Compare and contrast the approaches to research adopted by the anthropologist in this passage to the approaches to research used by **one** other anthropologist you have studied. Make reference to concepts and ethnographic material in your answer. [10]

Answer question 5.

5. To what extent is knowing others possible? Discuss with reference to **at least two** sources of ethnographic material and examples from the passage. [10]
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References:

Morelli, C., 2017. The river echoes with laughter: a child-centred analysis of social change in Amazonia. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, [e-journal] 23(1), pp. 137–154. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12548>. [Accessed 23 April 2024]. Source adapted.