

Indigeneity

BONIFACIO, VALENTINA. *Casado's legacy: a film by Valentina Bonifacio*. DVD/PAL, colour, 50 mins. Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, 2009.

'Seek and you will find'. So intones an indigenous priest leading a ceremony in the Paraguayan Maskoy community during Valentina Bonifacio's 2009 documentary *Casado's legacy*. The phrase frames this politically acute ethnographic film. In Paraguay, the dominant indigenous language (Guarani) enjoys constitutional parity with that of the country's colonizers (Spanish). Yet does that same parity extend to the social, economic, and cultural rights of today's Guarani communities? For the Maskoy community, the price of freedom has been high. For more than a century, this indigenous community worked in the Carlos Casado tannin factory. Since the factory's closure in 2001, the Maskoy have been reduced to a point of severe economic deprivation. Malnutrition rates are high and poverty is universal. The community finds itself equally marginalized politically. In their favour, they now claim ownership of their historical lands after their repossession from the company. But they are lands stripped of all natural abundance. With a deft cinematic hand, Bonifacio carefully points out a captured bird with which a young Maskoy is playing. If the bird is not fed, she notes, it will starve. The camera pans out to the Maskoy's territory, a fruitless wasteland. This is Casado's legacy. The inference is clear, and their dilemma stark: do the Maskoy stay and hope for help from the government, or risk the move to pastures new?

Filmed in Puerto Casado, in the Chaco region of western Paraguay, the documentary sheds light on Paraguay's pronounced social and economic divisions. Approximately 80 per cent of the country's territory rests in the hands of just 2 per cent of its population. Bonifacio's choice of subject could not be more timely. In June 2012, landless peasants clashed with police over a land dispute in Curuguaty, eastern Paraguay. Seventeen people died in the ensuing conflict, which saw President Fernando Lugo – ironically dubbed the 'Bishop of the Poor' – subsequently impeached and removed from office.

The documentary is framed around three separate events: an indigenous celebration marking the twentieth anniversary of the

Maskoy's ownership of their land; a visit by members of the community to the Paraguayan capital of Asunción to discuss their situation with the government; and an interview with an ex-community official, René Ramirez, as he guides the audience around the abandoned factory, filling in any contextual gaps.

Casado's legacy will not win awards for its ground-breaking format. Ethnographic in style, it interweaves interviews with community members alongside the re-enactment of a recovered Maskoy ritual. Yet its Italian director succeeds where many of her peers so often fail. Bonifacio avoids the temptation towards essentialism. The Maskoy are not an 'exotic' people. They are an ostracized people, bravely reasserting their cultural and political identity in a system that wishes them silent. (In this sense, it continues the vogue for politically orientated films currently emerging from Paraguay, such as Ramiro Gómez's 2007 documentary *Tierra roja* and Bettina Borgfeld and David Bernet's 2011 film *Raising resistance*.) The full force of the ideological and cultural distance that separates the Maskoy from Paraguay's political mainstream is powerfully encapsulated in a closing scene, which captures the visit of the local mayor. It is his first visit to the community; a unique opportunity that he uses to berate the community for their behaviour during their ritual festivities, which he deems inappropriate.

Bonifacio is never patronising, in marked contrast to the government officials depicted in the film. The documentary maker allows her subjects to move and speak freely in front of her lens, not once appearing in the frame and only seldom prompting responses. Nor does the film give into the temptation of being overly melancholy. Bonifacio does not pity these people. Her message to the viewer is clear in this respect: nor should we. Instead, *Casado's legacy* emphasizes the freedom of Maskoy people, who, though suffering from their government's neglect, value their new-found independence above all else.

Perhaps the film's greatest strength is its hesitance to inhibit this liberty by applying any definitive ending to the community's story. As the documentary draws to a close, the audience is left to consider the variety of possible endings that the film points towards. What will become of the Maskoy people? Will those who seek really find? Or are they destined to keep on seeking?

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