

The Jungle Is Still His Home

Missionary Bruce Olson, known as BRUCHKO to those who read about his adventures, has given most of his life to Colombia's Motilone Indians.

Bruce Olson likes to fish, Motilone style.

"The chieftain will say, 'Let's all go fishing,' and 200 people leave the community house on the summit of the mountain to walk two hours down to where the big rivers are," Olson says. "They build a dam across the river to dry up maybe 200 feet of the riverbed, and the fish are trapped inside. For many hours the men spear the fish with these 10-foot-long, very flexible spears."

The lanky Scandinavian from Minnesota, who came to live among the isolated South American tribe 45 years ago, is by his own admission not a good Motilone fisherman. "I have astigmatism, so by luck I spear three fish," he says. "[The Motilone] look at me and laugh. I am so embarrassed. But they say that's wonderful because before I didn't get any fish."

At dusk, the women of the tribe gather up several hundred pounds of fish they will smoke for the tribal larder and start up the steep trail to the community house. By custom, the men challenge one another to a foot race to the top of the mountain.

"They say, 'Since you are not as agile as we are, we will give you a half-hour head start,'" Olson chuckles. "I can walk for eight or nine days in the jungle, but I can't run a race. I'm always the last one to arrive home."

Olson can certainly be excused for a slow finish. He turned 65 last November, retirement age for folks back in Minnesota. But Bruce Olson is certainly not thinking about retirement. "I'm too young," he says with a grin.

Then suddenly he turns quietly serious. "But you see, I didn't think I'd be alive now. I didn't think I'd survive this past year."

A Miracle in the Jungle

Those acquainted with Olson's career would say it is indeed a miracle that he has survived nearly half a century in the jungles. His story is now legend: a 19-year-old genius abandons his university studies and flies to South America on a one-way ticket in search of the feared Motilone, or "Bari" as they call themselves, because he believes God is sending him to tell them about redemption in Christ. At the time, the Motilone were locked in a desperate land war with Colombian homesteaders and oil rig crews who were steadily encroaching on tribal territory.

The outsiders suffered 500 casualties at the hands of Motilone warriors, but the tribe itself was slipping toward extinction. Epidemics and violence decimated the population. By 1961, only 2,500 Motilone remained, less than one-fifth the number that inhabited tribal lands surrounding the Catatumbo River at the beginning of the 20th century.

After months of wandering through uncharted jungles in Venezuela and Colombia, Olson found the tribe—and took a 5-foot arrow in the leg for his trouble. The Motilone did not kill the blond teenager, however.

Years later he learned that an ancient prophecy had probably saved his life. It spoke of a tall, light-skinned stranger who would one day come to the Motilone and bring God out of a banana stalk. They thought perhaps Olson was the fulfillment of the prophecy.

Olson recounts the details of his saga in *Bruchko*, a book published in 1973 under the original title *For This Cross I'll Kill You*. That was soon after Colombian land grabbers gunned down his best friend, Bobaríshora, the first Motilone to come to Christ. The future of the tribe—and Olson's longevity as a missionary—was in serious doubt at that point.

But the Motilone-Bari have not only survived, they have thrived. War, disease and hunger no longer claim scores of lives every year. The homesteaders and oil companies today admire the Motilone culture and respect tribal boundaries, so land wars have not produced a single casualty in decades.

The transformation began when the Motilone-Bari decided to "walk in the footsteps of Jesus on the trail of life's experience," as they put it.

"This was a great spiritual step in the life of the people," Olson recalls. "The Motilone started emulating Jesus."

The first evidence that the Holy Spirit was producing fruit in tribal believers appeared in their treatment of the weak and defenseless. "Motilones abandoned their orphans to the jaguar," he says. "They wouldn't care for the elderly.

"Then they understood that through the shed blood of Christ and His resurrection, God adopts us into His family. So we

must adopt our orphans back into community. We must care for our elderly. It's the first change within the Motilone structure."

That change led to more changes. Tribal elders asked Olson to set up schools to teach Motilone-Bari children to read and write their own language. Eventually, 400 of these students would go on to complete high school in Bucaramanga; more than 40 would earn university degrees in Cúcuta.

Without exception, every Motilone-Bari graduate has chosen to return to the jungles and resume the traditional tribal lifestyle. Some of them are doctors and nurses, staffing the 24 health care centers established in Motilone territory. Others work as agronomists in the 12 farming cooperatives that produce and market the tribe's principal cash crop: chocolate.

Motilone lawyers advise tribal elders on legal matters, such as the protection of the 320 square-mile Motilone tribal preserve established in 1974. One Motilone lawyer, Roberto Dacsarara Axdobidora, currently serves as director of Indian affairs for northeast Colombia. The details of these more recent events are chronicled in the new book Bruchko and the Motilone Miracle.

Perhaps the most amazing part of this remarkable story is the fact that Olson and the Motilone have accomplished so much without the backing of a missionary organization. (Olson applied to several missions in his teens, but all rejected him as unqualified for missionary service.)

Occasional donations and sporadic government subsidies have come to the tribe through the years, but Olson and the

Motilone generate the bulk of the tribe's operating capital. He funds high school and university scholarships through original textile designs he sells to companies in the U.S. and Europe. The tribe invests profits from its farming cooperatives to maintain its schools and health care centers.

Guerillas in the Jungle

Olson has reasons for encouraging the Motilone-Bari to maintain financial independence. Some of his ideas have sparked vigorous debate within the international missionary community. "God has prepared the terrain to preach the redemption of the cross, but we come in with money, with planes, sophistication and solar energy—all these marvelous things so we can eat beef stroganoff in the jungle.

"My conscience doesn't allow me to put a landing strip in the jungle so we can reach a tribe. And then 15 years after we've reached the tribe, we've devastated their cultural expression and their interpretation of who they are."

Debate over missionary strategy notwithstanding, Olson's no-frills approach makes sense to anybody concerned with the future of tribal peoples because it engenders do-it-yourself independence that sustains them long after the missionary passes from the scene.

"No Motilone has been on the streets of Colombia to beg for money," Olson says. "With the financial benefit brought by the cooperative, he can produce chocolate, sell it to the cooperative and have change in his pocket to purchase the materials he considers beneficial from the outside world. It's very beautiful."

Olson does not paint the Motilone miracle as an unqualified success. "The failures, I will accept as my failures," he admits.

Nonetheless, consensus among missiologists ranks Olson's ministry as one of the finest examples of sound strategy in the history of evangelical missions.

Today the Motilone are facing another severe test. Once again the future of the tribe, as well as Olson's longevity, is in doubt. As was the case 40 years ago, the threat comes from outsiders bent on taking over Motilone lands—by violence, if necessary.

Marxist-inspired insurgents have maintained camps in northeast Colombia for years. In 1988, the National Liberation Army (ELN in Spanish) kidnapped Olson and threatened to shoot him if he did not join their cause. He refused, enduring nine months of grueling captivity—and witnessing the execution of five fellow hostages—before the guerrillas relented and set him free.

Ironically, four years earlier the Colombian National Army had detained Olson for eight months on suspicion that he aided the guerrilla movement. Military men mistook his transforming ministry among the Motilone as communist activism. The indignant intervention of Roman Catholic Bishop Juan de Dios Díaz García eventually convinced the generals otherwise, and they released Olson.

In 1997, Olson was abducted again, this time by a splinter guerrilla group known as the Popular Liberation Army (EPL). "I was in my old '79 Toyota, driving on a dirt road from Tibú to Bucaramanga to pay the bills of the students at the

university. I was stopped, and 30 guerrillas came out of the underbrush.”

Olson suffered three gunshot wounds in the attack. One bullet passed through his torso, one through his left leg and a third is still lodged in his neck. “My car was taken away from me, and I was taken into the bush,” he says. “I realize it’s the EPL, and this is going to be for money. Once you’re kidnapped by them there’s no way out except to pay, and if you don’t pay, you’re shot.”

His captors marched Olson through the lowland jungles for several days, his hands shackled behind his back. When they allowed him privacy in the bush to relieve himself, he quietly slipped away. The guerrillas did not know the terrain as well as Olson, so he evaded recapture and reached safety in a farming settlement a day and a half later.

He has not talked about the incident much, even with the authorities. “It was reported to the police in Cúcuta, and they called me in to give more details. But I never showed up.”

Olson’s reticence is understandable, considering the intrigues of guerrilla warfare in Colombia. He recognized, for example, some of his EPL captors as former patients of Motilone health centers. Corrupt police officers sometimes protect victims, for a price, and sometimes betray them to enemies who offer a better deal.

About two years ago, the violence in northeast Colombia intensified markedly when Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez formed an alliance with Colombian guerrillas and gave them

asylum across the border. Around the same time, Chávez cranked up a public relations campaign to woo indigenous tribes, including the Motilone-Bari, into his “Bolivarian Revolution.”

The political maneuvering sparked violent clashes between guerrilla groups, Colombian armed forces and right-wing paramilitary units. Civilians caught between the warring factions find it impossible to maintain neutrality. One day the guerrillas suspect them of spying for the government; the next day the paramilitaries accuse them of aiding the insurgents.

“They found one mass grave in a small town called Sesenta that had 30 corpses in it,” Olson recalls grimly. “Of those 30 people, I knew 20 of them.”

The Motilone have not suffered casualties because the armed groups are unfamiliar with the tribe’s virgin jungle. However, insurgents have plundered eight of the 12 chocolate cooperatives that underwrite the tribe’s schools and clinic. Two years ago a guerrilla unit virtually destroyed the most profitable Motilone cooperative at Saphadana, carrying off stores of cocoa, tools and a truck (which they promptly converted into a rolling bomb). Olson was obliged to borrow \$250,000 to cover the loss.

“That bankrupted me as an individual,” he says. “I told the Motilone that there is no way I could go to a church in the U.S. and ask for funds. They would never understand the complexities of these involvements.”

Nevertheless, a few friends in the U.S. learned of the need and networked to raise \$35,000 to help. Olson is repaying the

rest of the loan with personal resources. Royalties from Bruchko, contracts for his designer textiles and payments for translation work have whittled down the debt to under \$100,000.

Coca or Cocoa Beans

Recently, an even more sinister enemy moved into Motilone territory: cocaine cartels. The newcomers, aligned with the guerrilla groups and corrupt government officials, move their merchandise across the Catatumbo and Rio de Oro rivers to Maracaibo, Venezuela, for eventual shipment to the U.S. and Europe. They not only want safe passage through tribal lands, but are also trying to persuade the Motilone to grow coca leaf, the raw material used to produce cocaine.

Olson has publicly pronounced himself against drug trafficking and urges the Motilone to consider the consequences of an alliance with the cartels. "About eight months ago we had an intertribal meeting, and the Indians asked me to speak to the assembly," Olson recalls. "I said: 'Remember two words: independent and autonomous. You are the races of peoples who've been here for 5,000 years. Don't align yourself with any opportunist, factional group surfacing in the now.'"

Olson's counsel eventually reached the ears of the cartels. "The drug traffickers said that it would cost me my life," he says. "But I had to make a statement."

The dilemma has impelled Olson to contemplate a career change. The prospect of assassination does not frighten him. On at least three occasions he has faced violent death and says the experiences aroused curiosity more than fright. But he worries that his presence on tribal soil might force a deadly confrontation between the drug runners and the Motilone-Bari.

"I realize I'm putting the Motilone in a precarious situation," he says. "It might be noble to remain in the area, but that's not my place to say. I must react on what is most beneficial for the Motilone. So, between myself and God and with great sorrow in my heart, I would leave the Indian territories."

Where would Olson go if he left? Not far—probably to Bucaramanga or Cúcuta to teach in a university and work on translations. He would travel some, to Norway and Sweden perhaps, the lands of his ancestors, and to the Middle East to do research in ancient biblical languages, his true academic love.

Speaking of love, bachelor Olson thinks he might even marry. In his 20s, Olson was engaged to Gloria, a Colombian doctor. However, his fiancée died in a tragic auto accident just weeks before they planned to wed. The shock caused him to immerse himself in his work in the jungle.

Whatever the future holds for Olson, he knows it will not be easy to leave the people who have become, in many ways, family. When Charisma asked how he would want to be remembered, the man who counts presidents and kings among his friends said simply, "As someone who got adopted by the Motilone-Bari."

Olson believes that, after nearly a half-century, the tribe itself considers him a part of the family too. "A while back we were bathing in the headwaters of the Rio de Oro river," Olson says. "Bisandora came and thrust his finger into the scar on my leg and said: 'Do you know who shot you? It was I. If I hadn't shot you, you would have run away.'"

“Do you understand what that means? He wouldn’t say, ‘I love you.’ But after 45 years he’s saying to me, ‘Don’t go.’ I appreciate that.”

So don’t be surprised if Bruce Olson, adopted elder son of the Motilone-Bari, steps into self-imposed semiretirement sometime soon. But wherever he goes and whatever he does, he will likely still find time to go fishing—Motilone style.

David Miller is a missionary-journalist living in Bolivia. For more information on Bruce Olson’s books go to . To read an excerpt from Bruce Olson’s book Bruchko and the Motilone Miracle, log on at