

Allegations of inappropriate sexual relationships with Yanomami by anthropologists.

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We take up here the allegations made in *Darkness in El Dorado* about inappropriate sexual contact with Yanomami boys and young men, in exchange for gifts, by the French anthropologist Jacques Lizot. We note that Lizot is not the only anthropologist who has had sexual relations with a Yanomami person or persons while working among them. Kenneth Good (1991) has written about his relationship with his ex-wife, Yarima, to whom he was betrothed within the Yanomami system when she was about fourteen years old (although the marriage was not consummated until a much later time), and whom he eventually married under U.S. law in his home state of Pennsylvania. Good, of course, has written with considerable frankness about this relationship and its eventual sad end, providing ample material for reflection by all anthropologists who may be drawn to such relationships. In contrast, Lizot has had much to say about the sexual life of the Yanomami themselves, but, as Tierney quite correctly observes, has implied that his involvement in this life was entirely that of a neutral observer. The El Dorado Task Force believes that the allegations about Lizot's activities among the Yanomami made in *Darkness in El Dorado* are well-founded. These activities continued over many years. We have confirmation independent of Tierney's book that many people knew about them, beginning in the late 1960's. One of Lizot's habits that aroused suspicion was his use of teenage boys as guides. Contrary to Tierney's statement (2000:127) that many anthropologists preferred hiring young boys as guides, in fact most anthropologists when they could find them preferred mature men who knew the territory better, had many allies, and were competent hunters. One of our sources states that he saw Lizot inviting young boys to his hammock in his village. A number of Tierney's sources reported that Lizot attracted and rewarded boys with gifts of the type that would usually be made only to senior and influential persons.

We have also found support for Tierney's allegation that the kinds of sexual behavior that Lizot encouraged were not acceptable to Yanomami. Lizot's sexual exploitation of adolescent boys was greatly resented, very repugnant, and totally unacceptable to the Yanomami, and left them suspicious of anthropologists in general, whom they fear may share Lizot's sexual proclivities. Hames, a member of the Task Force, spoke in 1998 to an elected Yanomamö leader, Fermín (from the village of Cejal), who was a deputy to the *municipio* established for the Ye'kwana and Yanomami in Venezuela. This leader officially stated that he had personally spoken to three or four Yanomami boys who had had relations with Lizot and strongly objected to Lizot's prostitution of boys and young men.

We believe, however, that it is unfortunate that Tierney focussed so extensively, and exclusively, on Lizot's case. While we share Tierney's view that Lizot's behavior was unacceptable, and are baffled that Venezuelan authorities and the Salesian missionaries permitted it to continue over a very long period of time, we must point out that sexual exploitation of the Yanomami that is far more dangerous to them than anything undertaken by Lizot is reported by those who have observed the behavior of soldiers around Brazilian army posts, where young Yanomami women (and probably boys as well) are prostituted in a context that includes epidemic levels of venereal disease including AIDS (Peters 1998:247). The Yanomami have requested that the posts be withdrawn from their territory.

In reflecting on the Lizot case, we observe that anthropologists, like other human beings, are sexual creatures. Inevitably, sexual attraction and sexual relationships will develop between anthropologists and those they encounter during field work, including members of the populations under study. Every anthropologist is familiar with successful long-term partnerships that began in such relationships, and every anthropologist is equally familiar with cases where such partnerships failed, or where relationships seemed from the beginning to be ill-advised and exploitative. The task force notes that sexual exploitation is not always imposed by the anthropologist on a member of the study population; there are cases in the literature of the opposite type, including violent rape (Moreno in Kulick and Wilson 1995). There are also cases where members of study populations cynically exploit the attractions they hold for an anthropologist to gain access to perceived wealth or privilege. Nonetheless, the task force points out that in most field situations, most of the power in a relationship with a member of the study population will reside with the anthropologist. Given this problem, we believe that sexual relationships with members of study populations should be undertaken only after the most careful reflection on this point, and with full attention to the dignity and autonomy of the potential partner. The contemplation of sexual contact with children or young adolescents should not survive such reflection and attention. Indeed, we note that the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child (<http://www.unhchr.ch/map.htm>) specifically protects

children against “exploitation.” Furthermore, entering into sexual relationships in a responsible way requires special attention to ethnographic considerations: What material and emotional responsibilities is the anthropologist assuming, not only to the object of his or her desire, but perhaps to a wide network of that person’s kin and friends? Is the anthropologist prepared to take on these responsibilities? What is expected in the way of duration of sexual relationships? Will the anthropologist be able to manage in an ethical way the consequences of the dissolution of a relationship that is shorter than an expected duration, especially where children may be involved? Very few anthropologists will be prepared to think seriously about such questions until many months or even years of fieldwork have passed.

There is a considerable debate about the place of the formation of sexual partnerships and marriages in participant observation. Indeed, in the case of Kenneth Good’s documentation of his own marriage to Yarima, his decision to accept betrothal to her was accompanied by a realization that a marriage to her might solidify his relationships in the study community. He reports his reflections as follows:

“Finally, Longbeard’s persistence began to wear on me, and I found myself thinking that maybe being married down here wouldn’t be so horrendous after all: certainly it would be in accordance with their customs. In a way the idea even became attractive. After all, what better affirmation could there be of my integration with the Hasupuweteri? But I vacillated. No “marriage” here was going to endure. I wasn’t going to stay with the Yanomami forever, and aside from my personal plans, the practical requirements involved simply in mounting an expedition here (not to speak of living here) was immense – none of which meant anything at all to Longbeard. Still, as his monologue went on I thought, What the hell, what would be so wrong in saying yes? I didn’t feel that I had to avoid insulting Longbeard. We knew and respected each other. But if he felt so strongly about it, why not? You want me to have a wife, brother-in-law? Sure, okay, I’ll have a wife.

“Good,” he said, smiling broadly. “Take Yarima. You like her. She’s your wife.”
(Good 1991:83)

Some anthropologists have argued that in certain contexts sexual relations can have an appropriate place in participant observation. Others have taken the position, parallel to that generally held in other professions, that sexual involvement should never be a part of fieldwork. Some take up a middle ground, that sexual involvement during fieldwork is appropriate, but that it should not be undertaken for the purposes of collecting data (Bolton in Kulick and Wilson 1995). Still others have pointed out that in some situations, such as work in bathhouses that are sites of transitory sexual liaisons, not to participate in sexual contact would be to adopt a perhaps even more dubious sexual role as voyeur (cf. Bolton 1992).

One solution is obviously to carefully observe not only international but local laws, against, for instance, sexual involvement with legal minors. However, anthropologists are familiar with situations where local laws are profoundly unjust, as in regimes where miscegenation, homosexuality, prostitution, or adultery are felonies or even capital crimes. In some cases, a larger responsibility strongly militates in favor of work with populations among whom such illegal sexual practices occur, for instance, a study of the behavior of prostitutes and their clients in a community at serious risk of the spread of sexually-transmitted disease. In such cases it is difficult to prescribe absolutes about behavior. We recommend again very careful reflection on the possible consequences of sexual involvement in the field. For instance, if the forms of sexuality in which the anthropologist will be involved are illegal, the anthropologist will probably be putting the partner at considerably more risk than is faced by the anthropologist him- or herself. Anthropologists may be relatively conspicuous presences in a community, and thus draw attention to the illegal sexual activities of partners. The penalty faced by the anthropologist might be deportation, but the partner may face very serious consequences including ostracism or even execution. Anthropologists should not only be thoroughly familiar with local law, but should be able to answer the most probing ethnographic questions about the possible consequences for a partner of an illegal or even of a legal liaison. It is unlikely that an anthropologist will be able to answer such questions after a short period of fieldwork.

We believe that anthropologists contemplating sexual liaisons of any type should reflect also on their responsibility to the discipline. From the time of Boas, we have recognized that behavior by any anthropologist reflects on all anthropologists. An image and reality of probity and responsibility benefits the discipline as a whole, while an image, or, worse, a reality of sexual libertinage or irresponsibility restricts the ability of every future anthropologist to develop research at the field site that has been thus compromised. Indeed, such compromise may put a future anthropologist at genuine risk, for instance of rape if it is believed locally that all anthropologists are sexually loose. From this point of view, one of the

early goals of ethnographic involvement perhaps should be to determine the sexual behavior appropriate to a person with a high reputation, unlikely to be the object of gossip, in the local community (which may ramify into regional and even national contexts), with the goal of adopting that sort of behavior. Anthropologists will inevitably be the objects of gossip and thus may have to hold themselves to a slightly higher standard than would a local person. However, as we have noted above, some have argued that exceptions can be advanced, where participation, or the appearance of participation, in sexual contexts that may be locally regarded as illicit would be evidence of adherence to a higher ethic of addressing significant human problems.

Finally, we urge that the issue of sexuality in anthropological practice be addressed in the training of anthropologists. Discussion of the sort of case-study literature presented in recent volumes such as (Kulick & Wilson 1995, Lewin & Leap 1996, Whitehead & Conoway 1986) should be a standard component of methodological training, and development of this literature should be recognized as a legitimate contribution to anthropological practice and theory. The Committee on Ethics has drafted a "Briefing Paper for Consideration of the Ethical Implications of Sexual Relationships between Anthropologists and Members of a Study Population" (COE November 2001), and has presented also a draft "Plan of Action for Developing Dialogue on the Ethical Implications of Sexual Relationships between Anthropologists and Members of a Study Population." We urge that the briefing paper be widely read and that the plan be carried out.