

Presentation by José Seripino, Sept. 7, 2001¹

George Washington University,

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José Seripino is a Yanomami leader of Koparima village in the Upper Orinoco in Venezuela. Active in bilingual education efforts, he represents his village in SUYAO (Shabonos Unidos de los Yanomami del Alto Orinoco) and the Yanomami people in the Venezuelan National Indian Council, CONIVE. Recently he was appointed to the staff of the Governor of Amazonas state as Commissioner for the Upper Orinoco. Jesus Ignacio Cardozo Hernandez is head of the Venezuelan Commission to investigate the allegations of Darkness in El Dorado. He is also president of the Venezuelan Foundation for Anthropological Research (FUNVENA) and an adviser to SUYAO.

Sections shown in brackets were added.

Introduction by Jesus Ignacio:

Last year a book was published, "Darkness in Eldorado." It created the biggest controversy among anthropologists and in

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the public in recent years. The allegations included scientists mistreating, bringing harm to the Yanomami, unparalleled in anthropology. One reaction was that Venezuela closed all indigenous territories even to Venezuelans. The Venezuelan government formed a Commission. The AAA set up a Task Force.

I am a member of the Venezuelan Commission. Its goals are 1) to establish the veracity of those allegations; 2) to advise on the current situation of the Yanomami; and 3) to make recommendations. We expect to have preliminary results by the beginning of November.

Allegations included provoking a measles epidemic, breaches of ethics by French and American anthropologists and British film crews. We have asked the Yanomami their point of view. Some of the situations are delicate. Ethical issues that are difficult to judge. What standards do we use? Were cultural traditions violated?

The Venezuelan Commission is made up of twenty people, including representatives from the foreign affairs and health ministries, as well as the Attorney General. We want to guarantee that this never happens again. I am not looking for guilt. But we think, "This should never happen again."

How? What steps to take? Here are some suggestions:

1. Strengthen grassroots indigenous associations. Help these so that such levels of organization can ensure protections.
2. Voice of indigenous peoples must be heard directly and without intermediaries. Our work is opening channels so that their voices can be heard.

Requests to go in [to the Yanomami area] are very high. The territory is still closed; it is only opened for people on official [governmental] missions. We wanted the Yanomami to decide how and whether to open it. Ethics should be part of all research requirements in the future.

From November 7th to 10th¹ all Yanomami will meet. They initiated the idea -- a National Yanomami Conference. Never in the history of the Yanomami have all Yanomami met. This will be an historic event. In the census only half were reached. To bring together people from 200-300 communities is difficult. They will engage in dialogue with government representatives and NGOs and propose a model. The meeting will end with the signing of an agreement by the Yanomami, the environmental ministry, and the armed forces. The meeting will take place in Shakita, near the Mavaca Mission. Over 600 Yanomami and 150 non-Yanomami are expected including members of the Brazilian NGO, CCPY.²

José Seripino Presentation (José speaks in Spanish, Jesus translates into English):

I greet you all. I give you a tender Yanomami greeting. I want to express something of my experience. What is your role in

the US? I want to listen.

I represent the organization SUYAO (Shabonos Unidos de los Yanomami del Alto Orinoco, or United Yanomamo Shabonos of the Upper Rio Orinoco). I also work for the Governor of the State of Amazonas. I bring you the Governor's greetings.

I will speak of two issues. First, health. The Health ministry has many nurses in Yanomami villages. I am struggling for Yanomami health -- to solve the health problems of the Yanomami. What are the diseases that we have? Malaria, infant diarrhea, hepatitis, and respiratory infection. I spoke with Minister Bucaran, the Minister of Health. They are looking for ways to improve Yanomami Health.

[Jesus speaks to José (inaudible)]

Now I will speak about the American anthropologist Chagnon. When they arrived we Yanomami [children] didn't know -- we didn't even understand Spanish at that time. I was in school. We didn't understand. But now we learned something and now we ask people who come to work with us.

We formed a school -- primary and secondary -- that's when we began to defend our communities. So now we know all the bad things that happened. What are the bad things that happened? Taking blood. Taking skin [gestures]. I saw this. I was only ten years old. I thought, "OK. This will help us. But what happened? We haven't seen the outcome. We were not consulted.

[Jesus' translation differs slightly: "I remember. I was 10. I remember the blood, the skin biopsies. We didn't realize why they were doing this. Now we ask. We thought they were going to help us. We thought that blood was to make medicine. But thirty years have gone by and we never learned what happened with those studies. We only know that they are here, in this country (the U.S.)."]

So now there is an investigation. The missionaries didn't show us.

Jesus comments: "When he learned about the book, a friend of his invited Patrick to Venezuela and Patrick told him."

José: Then I knew. So I went to the Upper Orinoco. The founders (elders) are upset. I know a lot of people are saying it's not true but the founders of the villages -- they remember. And now that's why we don't want researchers any more. We can't. We are the owners of the land. It's up to us to decide. Regarding permits for foreign researchers -- the Office of Indigenous Affairs cannot give permits. Because although they may be the bosses in Caracas they are not the bosses of the Upper Orinoco. We are the owners of our land so we want to decide. We want them to ask us. There are many rumours. I would like you to hear from me directly.

Questions from the Floor

Q: The charge is that Chagnon's actions instigated the aggressive acts that he recorded -- to show what mankind was like --

part of our biology -- "the aggressive ape." But in almost every case the anthropologist turns out to have been the instigator.

Jesus: You put me in a spot. I am not able to make the findings of the Commission public. We find an imbalance of power. An anthropologist arrives with all this wealth in the context of a very vulnerable people.

To José in Spanish, "Waiterismo -- Chagnon showed the Yanomami fighting all the time? What do you want to say?"

José: It's not all the time that the Yanomami are angry.³ Sometimes not. It's not all the time. This is a lie that he invented in his book. If he treats the Indian badly then the Yanomami could get angry.

Jesus translates: "It's not true that we're angry all the time. But if an anthropologist arrives and maltreats the Yanomami they could become waiteri⁴."

Q: "This anthropologist leads a group to go and steal women. Do they see this anthropologist as having led these fights?"

Jesus' translates question to José: "One community has so much more and another community has nothing -- does this contribute to fighting? Did Chagnon use his own boat to bring people to war?"

José: In those days we didn't have our own motors and he came with all that material -- his research materials. The Yanomami needed these things -- we were getting them from creoles. So one community has them and another not. Then other communities will get mad.

Jesus' translation: There were so many things brought to the community and the Yanomami wanted them so much..and he brought them to one village: this created tensions.

Jesus (in Spanish to José): Did Chagnon help the Yanomami fight?

José: Well, I don't remember.

Jesus (in English): Yes, he also got involved in fights. He would help one village attack another village.

José: He made people angry.

Jesus (in English): He said there was a disrespect shown to the Yanomami. He would run the Yanomami away from his house. It was mistreatment.

Q: Chagnon went back 2-5 years ago. Can you tell us about this?

José: He hasn't come to study other things. He works on how much blood is taken from Indians; how much excrement taken from Indians; how much urine. That's the only work that he has done...He comes without things so no one will accept him.

Jesus (in Spanish): This is from before -- he's asking about recently.

Jesus (in English): What happened was this. According to Venezuelan law, he needs local anthropologists to give him institutional support. Chagnon had support in 1968. But the welcome wore thin. Between 1974 and 1995 Chagnon was not allowed in.

In 1995 he got an architect to put up a front, saying that he will write on Yanomami architecture. That was when he wrote the Science article. The School of Architecture [later] denied him the permit. He got involved with the mistress of the Venezuelan president. She made a foundation and they got together with Charles Brewer Carias, linked with Robert Friedland's Colorado River project on cyanide. So Chagnon returns with Brewer-Carias, and takes 200 Americans in. Tierney calls it "market exoticism." He wanted to create a private reserve. [The] the president was ousted. The interim president gave Chagnon permission to enter. Chagnon was ousted after 1993 when he tried to investigate the Haximu massacre. From 1993 until the present he has been unsuccessful in getting research permits. The last time was when he was involved with the mistress.

Linda Rabben, session organizer: "What do the Yanomami think Chagnon owes to them and do they want the samples? Do they want them back?"

Jesus (in Spanish): Should they destroy the blood? Burn it? Or pay? And how much? What would resolve the problem with the blood?

José: This is true. Chagnon should keep his promise. But he never kept his promise to the community. Xakita -- with the founder -- he worked with this man closely. Now -- he died three weeks ago -- he promised this person a motor and he disappeared without giving it. He never paid that debt.

Jesus (English): that's a really Yanomami answer!

José: In communities further out -- he promised motors. I don't know when...

Jesus (Spanish): Sabelito's wife is waiting. She wonders when she will see her motor. What about the blood?

José: You can destroy it. But if you destroy it here, we won't know whether it will be all destroyed. You should send it all to us. We are talking about this.

Jesus: That blood has been given by some researchers to the human genome project. The Brazilian Yanomami are asking for their blood back. According to Yanomami culture, once someone dies, nothing of his can remain. So the idea that blood of people who died is still in use is disturbing. There are two alternatives -- either destroy it here or in Venezuela.

José: ONLY if it is impossible to send should it be destroyed here. It HAS to be destroyed! They are treating us like animals! We are human beings!

Jesus: There are new regulations and protections of indigenous peoples' rights over their body parts.

Jesus: Only two Yanomami live in Caracas. José has met with the president of Venezuela. The book will be translated into Spanish and the Yanomami will be able to read it "for internal purposes only." Several Yanomami went to speak with Patrick. We [the Commission] have invited Tierney to return to Venezuela but he has refused.

Linda Rabben: It's wonderful to know that The Fierce People is not the only source of information on the Yanomami. Our purpose is not to hunt for Napoleon Chagnon's scalp. We are here to discuss issues of general concern.

Jesus: In September, when the galleys of the book were circulated, an unprecedented exchange of e-mails followed. I was acquainted with the information -- I was included in the galleys because I knew many of the people involved."

NOTES

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1. These dates were later changed. The meeting was held November 22-24, 2001.
 2. In fact, Brazilian anthropologists were not invited. The only non-Venezuelans invited were Terence Turner and Janet Chernela. Chernela represented the US Anthropological Association along with Venezuelan citizen and University of Michigan anthropologist, Fernando Coronil.
 3. The Spanish term bravo, used by Seripino, glosses as angry or warlike.
 4. The Yanomami term Waiteri, much debated, may gloss as angry, warlike, fierce, brave, courageous, valient. Waiterismo refers to the representation of the Yanomami as 'fierce.'