

Interview with Julio Wichato, José Antonio Kelly, and Guillermo Domingo Torres

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Julio Wichato is a Yanomami who has worked as a nurse with the Venezuelan health ministry for 18 years. He lives in Maikoto, vicinity of the large mission center, Platanal. I was accompanied in the interview by José Antonio Kelly, a Venezuelan anthropology student of Stephen Hugh-Jones who is completing an 18-month study of health care among the Venezuelan Yanomami. Kelly speaks a good amount of Yanomami, and appreciates the role of basic scientific research. Kelly's position prior to this interview was that the Yanomami did not object to extraction of blood since it is done routinely in examinations for malaria. Moreover, blood transfusions are freely chosen by Yanomami suffering from malaria. I sought out, first Kelly, and through him, Wichato, in order to obtain a knowledgeable opinion. I requested that Kelly introduce me to a Yanomami speaker who was unbiased, and familiar with the professional aspects of blood collection. He introduced me to Wichato as a Yanomami nurse who performs transfusions and understands the medical uses of blood extraction.

At the end of the interview we are joined by Guillermo Domingo Torres, Coordinating Physician for the Orinoco District with the Ministry of Health.

The interviews were conducted in Spanish in the medical clinic at Shakita, Nov. 24, 2001. When he

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thought it necessary, Kelly translated or clarified a question in Yanomami. I begin with transcription in shorthand and later shift to tape.

Transcribing with note pad (see ahead for taping):

Kelly: I first heard about this book in Ocama. It was in the sermon. Nobody really paid attention. People of Ocama had very little to do with Chagnon. I don't see this being an issue for the Yanomami. Most people don't know about the book or the Commission. If something good can come from the blood samples, that would be good. Malaria is a problem here. If you want to treat it you need to be able to carry out continuous blood analyses. The conditions here are nurturing resistant varieties [of mosquitos, the vetors of malaria]. Unless you have an active voice saying "We want them back," I see no reason for returning the samples. People also willingly submit themselves to blood transfusions in the hospital [in severe cases of malaria]. I have never noticed any trouble associated with blood collection.

Janet: Do you know a Yanomami who practices blood extraction and transfusion and who is not part of a faction who might be willing to be interviewed?

Kelly: I know two. One is Wichato, an older nurse from Platanal.

I ask to meet Wichato and we go to speak to him. The first part of the interview I note on paper in shorthand (it is the last evening of the meeting and all my audio tapes are used). When the interview seems important enough, I seek Fernando, who lends his video camera. It is night; we use the video camera for its audio recording capability.

From notes:

Wichato: I was young when Chagnon came. I barely remember.

Janet: What did you learn about this?

Wichato: I heard that he took all the blood.

Kelly: How much? A slide's worth?

Wichato: He used vials.

Kelly: What's the problem? You collect blood also -- do you not?

Wichato: The problem is that they studied it and didn't send us the results. If they help us it's different.

Is this blood from a person or an animal?! [note similar phrasing by Kopenawa and Seripino]

Kelly: When people go to Ayucucho to get a blood transfusion what happens to the blood?

Wichato: I don't know. Maybe they save it.

Kelly: Do they send the results?

Wichato: No.

Kelly & Janet: And you don't object to that?

Wichato: No. But that is to help us.

Janet: What is your view of this case? What should be done? What do you think?

Wichato: They can never use this blood. They can never study it. They should send the results or destroy it or send it back. But they cannot study it. Never.

Janet: Did you know Patrick?

Wichato: No, but Alfredo did.

At this point I realize that the interview must be taped. Although we are out of audio tapes, we must find a way to tape the interview. We borrow a video camera from Fernando.

TAPING:

Janet: What is your name?

Wichato: Julio Wichato

Janet: And you are a nurse? From where?

Wichato: I am a nurse from Platanal.

Janet: How long have you worked as a nurse?

Wichato: Eighteen years.

Janet: Where were you born?

Wichato: I am not from there [Platanal]. I am from another community -- from Kuyuko Kayateri above Ocamo. My father liked fighting [peleando], fight, fight -- so when he got tired of fighting we settled over there when I was still young. Also, I didn't know my mother. So we went to Platanal.

Janet: When you say he got tired of "peleando" what do you mean? [The Spanish verb pelear can be used to indicate play or fight.]

Wichato: Fighting with clubs -- Xeu.

Janet: Do you remember the time when Chagnon was here?

Wichato: I was about ten or eleven.

Janet: so you never saw him?

Wichato: Yes, I saw him when I was eighteen. He contracted a plane to where he always went -- over there near the Rio Nuna in Torita. He contracted a helicopter. The pilot knew me and I had no way to get there. So he said, let's go. He took me [to the helicopter] and there was Chagnon. We got to Ocamo. He said he was tired. He took me to Siapa...we went...there was a VERY large shabono. "Let's go down here" [he said]. The helicopter was BIG -- it blew out houses within twenty meters! So people came out with bows and arrows to shoot the helicopter. Chagnon said to go back down. The pilot said no and went up again. Then Chagnon wanted to go back. ..he ruined the shabono...This is what he was like, Chagnon. He got fuel and we went again. There was Chagnon with his brother-in-law. I knon't know his name. They took me to Akirito to Platanal. They left me and went to Parima.

Janet: Did you know Patrick? Did you speak with him?

Wichato: No. But Alfredo knew him.

Janet: So you weren't there when they extracted the blood?

Wichato: No. They took blood over in Torito. Those people are here. [NOTE: Although they knew our mission, they didn't choose to speak to us.]

Kelly: Will they speak about this?

Wichato: Oh, they're angry.

Janet: How then did you learn about the taking of the blood?

Wichato: The communities from there told us -- we heard about it all the way in Platanal.

Janet: What did they say?

Wichato: That Chagnon took blood -- alot!

Kelly: Was this along time ago?

Wichato:...They say that Chagnon took blood. I heard this. The same day I think that Chagnon vaccinated these people to see if they would die. These people of Torita -- they say that Chagnon vaccinated them to see if the medicine worked or if it was poison. Then he would go. People started to die and Chagnon left. And they died -- all of them!

Janet: Alfredo says this?

Wichato: Yes.

Janet: The same Alfredo that knows Patrick?

Wichato: Yes, he knows him. This is how the story goes. This is what they say.

Kelly: The news from Torito, who told you?

Wichato: I heard all about it when Alfredo told it. Another time Chagnon arrived with the helicopter. Alfredo said you can visit the shabono, but not with the camera. Chagnon got angry. He said, "That was then; this is now." Chagnon got angry.. they arrived in Platanal [at the air strip] -- there was Chagnon with his brother-in-law. There was this old guy also. We don't want photos -- enough! If you have machetes [not quite audible??] take photos. If not, put away your camera.

Kelly: And he put his camera away?

Wichato: He put it away. He was mad.

Janet: What did the people of Torito say?

Wichato: They don't want Chagnon to return. They know him very well. If he goes back they will shoot him with arrows.

Janet: So no one knows the results [of the blood samples]. And they should? You said earlier they should have returned the results of the samples. You are a nurse. You understand these things; and for you the results are important.

Wichato: It's important that they send the results. They either return them or destroy them. We don't want them to continue studying our blood. [9:52]

Kelly: Why?

Wichato: Because they didn't send us the results. And even if they were to send the results now we would not want them to continue studying with this blood.

Janet: But now it is no longer Chagnon who is studying the blood.

Wichato: Who is it? Other whites?

Kelly: Other whites.

Wichato: Other napu took blood or Chagnon gave it? I ask you -- this blood -- how do they regard it?

Janet: They see it as a source of information about human beings and the differences between different populations -- groups of people. They are interested in investigatory questions about the health of humanity. [14:15]

Wichato: Does this blood run out or is it still frozen in freezers?

Janet: It's still frozen.

Wichato: Has it been frozen all this time?

Janet: Yes. It's in vials, with a couple of drops in each vial.

Wichato: Like slides? Hmmm.

Now Guillermo arrives. [12:12] [interruption....]

Janet: These are younger people -- the students of the first ones. The first died. Before he died he gave over his work -- all of it -- he left it to his students to continue working and studying. [12:49]

[Kelly repeats in Yanomami "to OTHER person -- NOT Chagnon"]

Kelly: Chagnon had worked for this doctor, and when the doctor died, he gave the samples to other students.

Wichato: Not to Chagnon?

Kelly: Not to Chagnon.

Wichato: So this white had the blood. And when the white died -- another white took it to study? [14:10]

Kelly: Yes, for scientific study.

Wichato: To study?

Kelly: Yes, and they keep it frozen.

Wichato: They take the blood, study it and return it to the frozen state? Do they leave it frozen?

Janet: The scientists stopped work and are waiting to hear whether they may continue working with the blood.

Wichato: No, they can't continue. We don't want it. If they still have blood, we don't want them to continue working with it. They can return it or destroy it.

Kelly: And the results?

Wichato: As I said --- it's the same -- whether they send the results or not -- they cannot study it anymore. They have to return it or destroy it. That's all! If they send the results we won't know whose blood belongs to whom anyway. [16:39]

Kelly: To whom do the results belong?

Wichato: Right. We don't want them to continue working with this blood.

Janet: You will continue working in Platanal as a nurse -- is that correct?

Wichato: Yes.

Janet: So they could be in contact with you. I thank you very much.

Guillermo: Regarding the question of the Yanomami and obtaining samples, I think it is best at this moment to only take samples when there is a specific problem to resolve. We call this "operational investigation" or "applied research." We are only [carrying out research that is related] to solving a current problem. If they will continue research and want to continue their presence it must be in order to solve problems, not to gather knowledge about ethnicity. But there are times, as in the year 1996, when there was an epidemic and 15-20 died -- then it was necessary to draw blood to test for malaria, [inaud], and hemorrhagic viruses. This is justified. Also, in 1998 it was again justifiable to take samples. It is justifiable when it is used to solve a specific problem. When there is a special problem, they ask for help and they [the Yanomami] will give the authorization. This is different from when investigative researchers arrive with a large research project. If the Yanomami don't think it responds to a problem they have now and in the future, the Yanomami feel that they have been unjustly treated. They have been studied alot, alot of blood has been taken, but this hasn't resulted in improvements in their health conditions. There are books of information, registers of antibodies, genomic sequences.... But, in sum, there haven't been any direct repercussions [for them] of these studies, not in function of resolving problems. They feel that they want responses, to say epidemics -- prevention, application. I also think they want to restrict the extraction of blood to people of the Ministry of Health or others in which they have confidence. [20:50]

Janet: And if this experience were to be transformed into something positive -- what would that be? Could that happen? Let's imagine that they are not going to continue. If there is a way to transform this "flawed" experience into a good one -- what could be done? Could, for example, there be a transference of resources to assist in Yanomami health?

Guillermo: Yes. I think so. I suggest going through CAICET...because they have the most experience...and the Yanomami would be most directly affected by assistance that goes through CAICET.