

## ANTHROPOLOGY

## Chagnon Critics Overstepped Bounds, Historian Says

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA—The scene was familiar. Almost exactly 9 years ago this week, a packed session at the American Anthropological Association's (AAA's) annual meeting rancorously debated the inflammatory misconduct charges in journalist Patrick Tierney's book, *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon*. That 2000 session went



When worlds collide. Napoleon Chagnon (left) was attacked for his dealings with the Yanomamö people.

over its allotted time and dissolved into acrimony. On 2 December, the AAA annual meeting held another panel discussion on *Darkness*. It, too, was packed (though the room was smaller), filled with ethics charges and bitter, sometimes personal debate, and unable to finish on time, as arguments spilled into the hallways. Leaving the room, Robert Carneiro of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City told *Science*, "I don't know if this is ever going to end."

This year's meeting had a different slant on the ongoing fight over Tierney's book, which focused on anthropologists' treatment of the Yanomamö Indians of southern Venezuela and northern Brazil. Nine years ago, much of the meeting echoed Tierney's book in attacking Yanomamö researcher Napoleon A. Chagnon, now a professor emeritus at the University of California, Santa Barbara. This time around, most of the criticism was leveled at Chagnon's accusers and the AAA itself. In the 2 December session, historian Alice Domurat Dreger of Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago, Illinois, reported on her research into AAA's role in the affair, as part of a book on scientific controversies. So

problematic were AAA's actions, she charged, "I can't imagine how any scholar feels safe" as a member.

The Yanomamö have become something akin to anthropological celebrities: A relatively large and non-Westernized indigenous group that still largely makes a living by hunting, foraging, and slash-and-burn agriculture, they became well-known through Chagnon's work. His book, *Yanomamö: The Fierce People* (1968), and documentaries launched a cavalcade of research on the Yanomamö, who have since been studied by as many as 50 anthropologists. From the beginning Chagnon's work attracted criticism, especially his view that warfare is a key building block of Yanomamö society. This attracted the ire of both opponents of evolutionary psychology and indigenous-rights activists, who charged that Chagnon's ideas were being used to justify taking Yanomamö land. Eventually, these criticisms helped to get Chagnon banned from research in both Venezuela and Brazil.

But Tierney's charges went well beyond the scientific. Although *Darkness* excoriated many anthropologists, the book focused on Chagnon, and especially a 1968 incident in which Chagnon and the celebrated late geneticist James R. Neel vaccinated Yanomamö and observed their immune responses. Tierney argued that the pair had never obtained informed consent and exacerbated or even caused a fatal measles epidemic.

AAA, apprised of the book's charges in September 2000, asked a commission led by former AAA President James Peacock for a confidential report—"inevitably meaning that Chagnon couldn't confront his accusers," Dreger said in an interview, and heading "down the path of violation of due process." Peacock, as he said at the AAA meeting last week, decided the charges had enough evidence to merit "an investigation." However, the AAA ethics code, adopted in 1998, forbids "adjudicat[ing] claims for unethical behavior," so AAA assembled a

task force to conduct an "inquiry."

The task force exonerated Chagnon and Neel of the epidemics charges (*Science*, 19 January 2001, p. 416) yet concluded that Tierney's allegations "must be taken seriously" and said Chagnon's work "had been damaging to the Yanomamö." In 2005, the AAA membership voted by a large majority to rescind the task force report, but it remained on the AAA Web site until September.

Despite the task force's conclusion, Dreger obtained an e-mail from the task force chair, former AAA President Jane Hill of the University of Arizona in Tucson, describing the book as "just a piece of sleaze." And task force member Janet Chernela of the University of Maryland, College Park, Dreger said, told her that "nobody took Tierney's book's claims seriously." The inquiry was conducted, Dreger charged, largely because AAA wanted to safeguard U.S. researchers' future access to the indigenous peoples in Latin America; they didn't want other anthropologists to become tarred with the same brush.

In an e-mail to *Science*, Chagnon said he had been "dumbfounded" to learn from Dreger that task force members had thought little of Tierney's work but "went ahead with their shameful witch hunt of Neel and me."

Invited to respond, Terence Turner of Cornell University, a longtime Chagnon critic, argued that last week's meeting was unfairly set up—he had 15 minutes to respond to what amounted to an hour of critique. Moreover, he

observed, Tierney's book did much more than attack Chagnon, and neither the AAA task force nor Dreger had addressed its discussion of other, putatively unethical work. Tierney did not respond to Dreger's inquiries and was not at the meeting. Reached by *Science*, he echoed Turner's point and defended his work against specific allegations.

As Dreger observed, many of the most bitter feuds in social science erupt over questions of "human identity." Because that

question is central to anthropology—and because indigenous peoples are often involved in political struggle—battles are common. Yet AAA has made no institutional changes to better handle the next eruption, says Dreger, such as altering its code of ethics. "They've learned nothing," she said.

—CHARLES C. MANN



Turning the tables. Alice Dreger criticized Chagnon's critics.