The Yanomami: Truth and Consequences

By Terence Turner

(University of Chicago)

I was one of those who received the anonymous and pseudonymally mailed questions concerning Napoleon Chagnon’s account of the activities of the Salesian Mission among the Yanomami of Venezuela, against which Eric Wolf and Robin Fox protest in their letters (March 1994, p. 2). Like them, I hold no brief for the bizarre and devious way in which these documents were disseminated. The clandestine manner in which the materials were circulated, however, is not the only issue raised by their contents, nor by the statements by Chagnon to which they respond. Above all, I am concerned that this ugly, public mud-slinging contest has had the effect of transforming the tragedy of the Yanomami massacre into a stage for the drama of Chagnon versus the Salesians, and the persecution of Chagnon’s sociobehavioral theories. Worse, it threatens to have grave consequences not only for the Yanomami themselves and those who are working to help them.

Behind the Verbal Battle Lines

Readers of Wolf and Fox’s letters might not realize that the anonymous mailings consist not of unprompted personal attacks on Chagnon, but of attempts to respond to a series of assaults on the Salesians by Chagnon in the national and international press. In these writings, Chagnon charges that the Salesians are actually killing off the Yanomami they purport to assist. Publication of these charges in the popular press was only made possible by linking them to the massacre of the Yanomami community of Haximu in August 1993, an event that attracted the attention of the news media. Chagnon claims that his investigation of the massacre was “stymied” by the Salesians in an attempt to cover up the Yanomami massacre in order “to keep the plight of the Yanomami hidden.” (New York Times, October 25, 1993). The Salesians thus become accessories after the fact to the massacre itself.

These are extremely serious charges that are very damaging to the Salesians and their ability to sustain their work among the Yanomami, which depends on contributions from the British and American publics that are prompted by the published account of the massacre, in which Chagnon has published his attacks. It behooves anthropologists to give critical consideration to both sides of the case, rather than to uncritically accept one side of the story.

There appear to be strong grounds for doubting Chagnon’s version of his attempt to investigate the Haximu massacre and its alleged obstruction by the Salesians. Chagnon claims that he went to the site of Haximu as a member of an official “Presidential Commission” of investigation, headed by his close collaborator, Charles Brewer-Carias. The President of Venezuela did in fact appoint such a commission on September 9, but dissolved it only five days later after massive protests by indigenous organizations, anthropologists and other academics, politicians, and missionaries against the presence of Brewer-Caras and Chagnon on the commission. This was ten days before Chagnon and Brewer had themselves flown in an Air Force plane to Haximu, representing themselves as members in good standing of the Presidential Commission. Meanwhile, the President appointed a new Commission, which proceeded to the site the following day and arrested Brewer-Carias. Its head—a judge, not a Salesian—told Chagnon and Brewer Carías that they had no right to be there and ordered them to leave. Chagnon was thus not forced to terminate his investigation by order of the Presidential Mission, nor was he carrying out any officially mandated investigation at Haximu.

Investigating the Massacre

It is also untrue to claim—as Chagnon has—that his expulsion from the site of Haximu (not itself the site of the massacre, as he has repeatedly asserted) was part of a “cover-up” of the massacre. The Venezuelan investigating commission that expelled Chagnon and Brewer-Carias proceeded to conduct its own investigation. By that time, however, two months after the massacre there was no site left to cover up the massacre. The real investigation had already been done by the Brazilians, who identified the victims and brought charges of genocide against them. The Brazilian team included several Yanomami who spoke the dialect of Haximu (which Chagnon does not) and internationally respected anthropologist Bruce Albert, a member of the 1993 AAA Special Commission on the Brazilian Yanomami. The results of this investigation were made available to Chagnon before he went to Haximu. In the light of this thorough Brazilian investigation, it is unclear what purpose Chagnon felt would be served by further investigation of the killings. His claims to have discovered significant new data when he visited the site do not stand up when compared to Albert’s published account of the Brazilian findings: with minor exceptions, everything he claims to have found out from his hurried interviews at the airstrip is contained in the Brazilian report (at two points, Chagnon’s figures deviate by one from the Brazilians), but this is more likely an error on Chagnon’s part than theirs.

The broader and more broadly based opposition to the Chagnon-Brewer-Carias commission in Venezuela, which led to its immediate disbanding by the President, was not organized by good Salesians (although some in good standing of the Presidential Commission in it), nor was it primarily directed against Chagnon’s nationality or sociobiological views. It was directed much more to Brewer-Carias’s head of the commission. Much of the opposition to Chagnon derived from his association with Brewer-Carias. It is therefore essential to understand why so many people were upset about Brewer-Carias. Wolf describes Brewer-Carias as a Venezuelan naturalist, but he is also more relevantly a businessman of great wealth and political influence and an ex-Cabinet Minister with extensive interests in gold mining. Many of his mining operations appear to be situated in indigenous areas. He has recently been the subject of an investigation by a Venezuelan Congressional commission, which charged him with conducting clandestine illegal mining operations on public and indigenous lands, using Indians as laborers. Most significant, the Commission also charged Brewer-Carias with using “scientific activities”—such as his trips to Yanomami country with Chagnon—as a “veil” for his pursuit of “private interests.” That such a man was able to use his political influence to have himself, as well as Chagnon, appointed to investigate a massacre perpetrated by illegal gold miners was not surprisingly considered a scandal by much of the informed Venezuelan public.

Killed by Kindness?

By far the most important issue raised by Wolf and Fox is whether the Salesians and other nongovernmental organizations who purport to be helping the Yanomami are really doing so, or are rather “killing them by kindness,” in Chagnon’s words. Wolf and Fox repeat Chagnon’s charges that the Salesians have increased the death rate among Yanomami by “bringing them in to concentrated settlements, thus intensifying the spread of infectious diseases, as well as sponsoring the distribution of guns among their members.” Wolf’s words are grounds for doubting their interpretation of the facts.

The Yanomami themselves freely concede that the death rate is higher in the contact settlements, but maintain that many of the Yanomami who come to these posts do so because they are sick and seeking the medical aid that the Salesians provide. The posts are thus in effect like hospitals: they have higher death rates because many of the people who come to them are already seriously ill. The two explanations are not mutually inconsistent; both are probably true to some extent. Both, however, must be interpreted in the larger context of the massive health crisis that has overtaken the Yanomami since 1987 as a result of the invasion of their territory by gold miners. The miners and their placer operations, which create breeding grounds for mosquitoes, have given rise to a virulent epidemic of malaria that has exponentially raised the Yanomami death rate. The scale of the epidemic has overwhelmed the capacities of the few medical teams and clinics operating in Yanomami country. Medical posts are swamped with sick and

1995 Margaret Mead Award

The Margaret Mead Award, jointly sponsored by the American Anthropological Association and the Society for Applied Anthropology, is awarded to a beginning or mid-career scholar for a particular accomplishment, such as a book, film, monograph or service that interprets anthropological data and principles in ways that make them more meaningful to a broadly concerned public. The award is designed to honor a person clearly and integrally associated with research and an intellectual perspective in anthropology.

The nominee must be under 45 years of age on January 1, 1995, or have received the Ph.D. after January 1, 1980. The awardee’s work will exemplify skill in broadening the impact of anthropological skills for which Margaret Mead was widely admired.

Nominations for the 1995 Award are now invited. To be considered, each application must include (1) the nominee’s vita, (2) one or more letters of recommendation describing the accomplishments being nominated, (3) supporting publications and (3) other supporting material. Nominators are judged on this information using the following criteria, in order of importance: (1) intellectual quality, (2) clarity or understandability, (3) extent or depth of impact (how great in the impact), (4) extent of impact (how many people and/or fields were affected).

Please send nominations and four copies of supporting material to 1995 Margaret Mead Award Chair, c/o David Givens, AAA, Suite 640, 4350 North Fairfax Drive, Arlington, VA 22203-1621. Supporting material will not be returned unless specifically requested. The 1995 award will be given at the annual meeting of the AAA, to be held in Washington, DC, November 15-19. Deadline is January 1, 1995.

AN Commentaries are designed to explore diverse views of the discipline from an anthropological perspective. The views of the authors: their publication does not signify endorsement by the Anthropology Newsletter or the American Anthropological Association. Authors are expected to verify all factual information included in the text. Manuscripts should be less than 500 words in length and must be submitted on both disk and in double-spaced hard copy.
Commentary
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Dying Yanomami, and the weakened patients naturally become susceptible to other diseases. Their health care system, which is not very sophisticated, nor able to deal with the burden of illnesses, is thus being challenged. The Yanomami are in need of long-term medical care and support. This is especially true for those people who are homeless or living in poor conditions.

Survival Groups at Risk

Chagnon has not confined himself to attacking the Salesians, but has made general accusations against unnamed "survival organizations," including the Salesians. This is a significant development in the way people perceive the role of these organizations. It stands to reason that any organization that is active in the Yanomami communities would have to be considered a potential threat.

Meeting Calendar
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Inaugural Issue for New AA Editors

By Barbara and Dennis Tedlock

(AA Editors)

The September issue of the American Anthropologist, the first to appear under our editorial board, will be devoted to a new section called "Forum." Our intent is to provide a space where anthropologists can discuss and critique educational, multicultural, national, and public policy issues of importance to the discipline as we approach the millennium. The initial contributions to this section include Anne Ferguson's "Gendered Science: A Critique of Agricultural Development," Linda Marie Fedigan's "Science and the Successful Female. Why There Are So Many Women Primateologists?" and Renato Rosaldo's recent address to the Modern Language Association, "Whose Cultural Studies?"

Other contributors to our first issue include Gary Gossen, who traces the role of soul concepts in the formation of ethnic identity among Mayans, from the dawn of Mesoamerican civilization through the Olmec to the emergence of Zapastatis in recent newspaper headlines. The story of Celts for whom the subject of an article by Michael Dierler, who explores its implications for archaeological research and the interpretation ofpan-European unity, nationalism, and regional resistance. Paul Stoller questions the language-consciousness of anthropological perceptions, contributing an essay on the embodiment of colonial memories in West African spirit possession. Katherine Ewing writes of her encounters with Pakistani sufis, raising questions about what she calls "anthropological atheism and the temptation to believe." The process by which professionals shape vision to create objects of knowledge is subjected to scrutiny by Charles Goodwin, who uses tape transcripts and video frames to discuss the work of linguists and archaeologists, as well as that of lawyers and expert witnesses at the Rio Tinto mining trial. Insights into the ethnographic gaze are offered by Frances Mascia-Lee and Patricia Sharpe, who combine text and image in an exploration of anthropological "unconscious" that turns out to be an "optical unconscious."

The film review section of the American Anthropologist has been reconceptualized by our film review editor, Paul Stoller, who includes theoretically engaged essays featuring stills and video grabs taken from ethnographic and experimental films of importance to anthropologists. The book review section includes an increased number of contributions that cover multiple disciplines, and we have added a new "virtual" book review editor, Paul Stoller, who will be responsible for selecting books and also reflecting our efforts to open up the peer review process. We are trying to keep pace with the rapid growth of publication in such areas as biocultural anthropology, material culture, ancient trade and agriculture, writing systems, body as text, performance and visual arts, ethnic identity, gender, lesbian and homosexual studies, racism, diasporas, and historical and scientific paradigms.

We would like to thank our authors and the readers of their manuscripts for their patience and responsiveness. Our efforts to open up the peer review process have met with some success. So far, all authors but one have opted against anonymity, while slightly more than half of all readers have done so. We are also happy to report that most anthropologists, in their roles as authors, readers, reviewers and correspondents, do not seem to comport themselves as if they are members of a civil society.

Annual Meeting PR

Looking ahead to this year's Annual Meeting in Atlanta, give some serious thought to sharing the results of your latest research project with a wider audience. The AAA Press Office is preparing a press release kit that will be sent to over 400 reporters for newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV. Last year more than 80 members of the media attended the Washington, D.C., meeting looking for insights on modern society, ancient mysteries and what it means to be human. This year's meeting is expected to attract even more media attention. If you would like your paper or session to be featured in the press room, send a 2-page, jargon-free summary of your results no later than October 15 to Susan Smokal, AAA Press Offi-

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