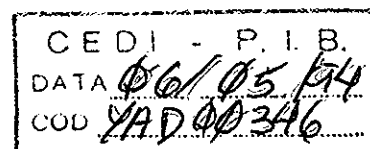


# Correspondence



This section is primarily for the use of AAA members, although contributions from others may be printed if they are considered of value. Correspondents are urged to limit length: The Editor reserves the right to select and edit letters. All letters must be clearly marked for Anthropology Newsletter Correspondence, be typed double-spaced, not exceed 500 words in length and consist of a signed original plus a copy of diskette whenever possible. Letters published reflect the views of the correspondents; their publication does not signify endorsement by the Anthropology Newsletter or the American Anthropological Association.

## Demonization of Anthropologists in the Amazon

At the AAA meeting in November the table with "free literature" in the registration area offered a package of materials signed by "A group of concerned Venezuelans" and addressing "those concerned about the Yanomami." These materials included reports from Venezuelan newspapers that two appointments to the Presidential Commission on the Yanomami were allegedly revoked by President Ramón J Velásquez. The two members allegedly dropped were American anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon and Venezuelan naturalist Charles Brewer Carías. Both were attacked personally and professionally in the materials. Copies were also sent independently and anonymously by the self-same "group of concerned Venezuelans" to individual anthropologists in this country.

Such a package was mailed to me on November 12, 1993. Part of its agenda appears to be to impugn the standing of Napoleon Chagnon within the scientific community of anthropologists, to serve political purposes of the moment. These purposes may include the endeavors of certain missions in Venezuela to maintain the privileges granted them in 1915 to control the frontier province of Amazonas, as well as nationalist efforts to curtail research by US anthropologists in Venezuela. Chagnon has publicly criticized the missionaries for bringing Indians into concentrated settlements, thus intensifying the spread of infectious diseases, as well as for sponsoring the distribution of guns among their converts.

Anthropologists need to arm themselves professionally and ethically against such dubious practices of anonymous character assassination, directed in this case against an anthropologist who has built up an exemplary body of data through long-term and often difficult fieldwork. Even those among Chagnon's colleagues who might disagree with his Neo-Darwinian premises (and these include the present writer) acknowledge his extraordinary devotion to anthropology as a science, which has provided us also with the information that allows us to debate his interpretations and suggest possible alternatives. This was recognized most recently in a meeting devoted to Chagnon's work at the New York Academy of Sciences on September 27, 1993.

It is, moreover, incumbent on us to remember that anthropology deals with both culture and biology in the formulation of possible explanations. Some of us may not subscribe to sociobiological methods of research and theorizing, but there is nothing inherently racist or sexist about sociobiology, nor do sociobiologists necessarily hold that modes of human behavior are under direct genetic control. How biology and cul-

ture intersect remains a fruitful area of research. The search for relevant questions and good answers should not be inhibited by demonization.

Eric R Wolf  
City University of New York

## Evil Wrought in the Name of Good

A spate of hate mail seems to be doing the rounds of anthropologists and associations. It purports to come from one "Jorge Britton PhD," who in turn purports to represent the "Asociación para la Defensa Indígena" of Caracas, Venezuela. Neither the person nor the organization appears to exist, and the whole sorry business seems to be yet another thinly disguised attempt by an Amazonian order of missionaries to denigrate and undermine the work of Napoleon Chagnon and his colleague in Venezuela, Charles Brewer. The missionaries have of course a clear mission to maintain a monopoly of power in the province of Amazonas and to save the souls of the Yanomamö even at the expense of their bodies, which are ravaged by diseases in the mission stations or torn apart by shotguns handed out by the missionaries to tempt them there. Chagnon tells the world the incontrovertible facts and figures of these crimes, hence the attempt to discredit him.

But if the missionaries' attitude is unremarkable, however despicable, the alliance of this right-wing religious oligarchy with the left-wing anthropological bureaucrats in Caracas is truly bizarre. It is the latter who seem to be supplying the "information" to the church that, for example, "Chagnon's work is condemned by the majority of his anthropological colleagues." This is based on one highly inaccurate letter published in these columns (from Brazilians with their own confused grievances) and ignores the universal esteem and admiration of the world's anthropologists for Chagnon's unique fieldwork effort among the Yanomamö. The criticism comes from petty-minded armchair bureaucrats who would never dream of exposing themselves to the dangers and hardships Chagnon has endured for over 30 years on behalf of the anthropological community to document the true situation of the Yanomamö. These left-wing "anthropologists" also have a stake in "owning" the Indians and controlling their fate, which again takes precedence over their welfare.

The whole thing is depressingly compounded by the seeming involvement of various "survival" organizations who have their own similar agenda. The Yanomamö, largely thanks to Chagnon's efforts, have become hot property in the highly competitive world of "survival" charities. Whoever gets to speak "officially" for them wields great power in the fund-raising rain-forest club.

We have here a horrendous example of the confusion of ends and means. The goal of all these groups should be the welfare of the Indians, but this rapidly gets subjugated to their need to control their monopoly of power, however defined. This in turn means that the last thing any of them wants is the objective, scientific recording of, for example, the causes of premature death among the Yanomamö, since it might adversely affect their version of the situation and hence their grip on the religious, governmental or charity worlds that have come to mean more to them than the survival of the

Indians. At least the garimpeiros—the gold miners who have invaded the Indian reservations—have a nonhypocritical agenda: they just want to kill the Indians to get the gold.

American anthropologists, both individually and through their organization, should rally to the support of Chagnon and the absolute value of his courageous and brilliant field studies of Yanomamö culture as well as his practical efforts to save it. The secular authorities in Venezuela, who make the life-and-death decisions, need to know where we stand, and the missionaries and others need to know that we are on their case and will not stand idly by. (Already they claim to have stopped handing out shotguns. The claim has not been verified—and contradicts their previous claim that they never did hand out shotguns—but if true shows that pressure can work.) Unless Chagnon's objective, factual and carefully documented demographic studies can continue, the world will never know the extent of the evil wrought in the name of good causes. Anthropology may be the only institution left with no power axe to grind in this area and only the welfare of the Indians at heart.

Robin Fox  
Rutgers University



Anthropology Newsletter