

The yanomamo and the fierce anthropologist



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Fierce Anthropologists The controversy revolving the tribe of the Yanomamo and the professionals linked to anthropology has caught the world's attention. Rapid and unforeseeable events have set the tone for the controversy. The study of these Amazonian Indians, who live in regions of the Venezuela and Brazil border, has turned in western exploitation. Accusations about of unethical anthropologist are abundant, but little facts about such accusations are evident. The grand attention that these events have attained has turned into a focus on larger issues in anthropological practices.

By comparing the approach and relationships of other research projects, we can identify just ethical standards. Most of the controversy stems from the publications about the Yanomamo tribe by anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon. His 1968 volume Yanomamo: The Fierce People made the tribe famous due to good writing and extensive interaction with one of the most isolated people on the planet. But ultimately, the way that he portrayed them-violent and fierce-is what attracted wide audiences.

Much of his books and his video productions are centralized around the theme that the Yanomamo have an immutable trait of violence. According to Chagnon, he collected data, interacted with opposing Yanomamo villages, and received testimony to arrive to his findings. His researched was very lucrative; his book sold more than 4 million copies, which is well beyond the average of other ethnographies. He not only gained financial benefits, he began to be praised and attacked by people around the globe. People accused Chagnon of exaggerating the fact that violence is a part of their culture.

For instance, French anthropologist Jacques Lizot, who lived with the Yanomamo for more than twenty years, said that violence is periodic; it does not govern their social life for long periods of time. It is worth noting that Lizot was accused of homosexual acts with young Yanomamo and distributing guns. Others, like Kenneth Good, accused Chagnon of sensationalizing violence, which he elaborated in his book, *New Yorkers: The Mugging and Murdering People*. He explains that just because violence occurs within the Yanomamo, does not mean they should all be generalized as violent.

Good also received backlash for his research because he married a young Yanomamo girl, whom he now has three children with. Another compelling argument came from the studies of Brian Ferguson. He identified Chagnon's representation of violence as a historical situation. He states that there is a spike in violence during contact with Westerners. As it relates to Chagnon, because he brought western manufactured goods, such as steel and iron tools, he disrupted trading relationships, which lead to inter-village violence for the unequal access of those scarce and desired tools.

Among all the accusers, journalist Patrick Tierney gave the controversy the most attention. Tierney's book, *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientist and Journalist Devastated the Amazon*, explored the affects of Yanomamo's exposure to the outside world. Published in 2000, the book accuses Chagnon of misrepresenting the Yanomamo as fierce people, being responsible for warfare by interrupting trading relationships, staging film scenes, fabricating data, giving unsupported claims of being the first to contact with the Yanomamo, violating Venezuelan law, and overall unethical practices.

The next set of accusations involves geneticist James Neel, who joined Chagnon in the fieldwork of the Yanomamo in 1968. He accuses Neel of helping the measles epidemic worsen because he provided outdated vaccines and misadvised the Yanomamo, which resulted in the deaths of thousands. Many of these accusations were prevalent since Chagnon's work in the 1960's, but Tierney's publication brought them together for mainstream audiences. Subsequently, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) was compelled to launch an investigation on the controversy.

After investigating the abundant accusations, the AAA exonerated Neel from worsening or causing the measles epidemic, found insufficient evidence to charge Chagnon with all of Tierney's accusation, but did find that he did not have the Yanomamo's best interest in mind. It is undisputed that this controversy is repelling. Even if all of the accusations were false, the mere accusations show that ethical standards were broken. Surprisingly, the controversy does reap some positive consequences; it encourages personnel-within and outside the field-to consider the appropriate standards that anthropologist should be held to.

Ethical questions arise, such as: how an anthropologist explains and gains consent from the targeted group, what is just compensation, or the dynamics and limits of 'doing no harm' to the subjects. The unbalance of power between the anthropologist from developed societies and their isolated subjects is a relationship that needs to be treated with delicacy to avoid exploitation. We can compare the relationship that researcher and filmmaker

John Marshall had with the Juhoansi people of the Kalahari Desert for ethical analysis.

John Marshall first went to the Kalahari in 1950 and researched the Juhoansi for fifty years thereafter. His relationship with the Juhoansi was one of friendships. He, like other anthropologists, compensated the Juhoansi for their cooperation with western goods, but he did not stop there. During one of Marshall's visits, he found the Juhoansi living in government settlements, which provided food relief and low wage jobs, but also inflicted alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and the lack of independence.

In the late 1970's, Marshall began to advocate for more water access and agricultural opportunity from the government. Because there was such a significant interruption to the traditional way of Juhoansi life, desired changes beset different challenges. Marshall justly compensated the Juhoansi and kept their best interest in mind to avoid causing harm to them. The latter characteristic is one that is of greatest importance because harm can come in direct and indirect ways that are temporary or permanent.

The American Anthropological Association standard, labeled the 'do no harm' rule, is one that anthropologists often have little ability to prevent. At bare minimum, anthropologists almost always interrupt a group's way of life when doing research and compensating with goods that are scarce to their environments. Interruptions in general, require adjustment and adaption, and when dealing with groups that have customs and traditions that have not changed for possibly hundreds of years, those adjustments are problematic and often prove to be vitally harmful.

For instance, Chagnon's and other Yanomamo researchers brought western goods and weapons into their community, which created an interruption in trading and likely contributed to their state of warfare. Further, John Marshall also unintentionally created a significant interruption when his tire tracks that he created during his visits facilitated the contact with government entities, which ultimately changed most of the Juhoansi traditional ways of life.

The difference between the two examples is that Marshall actually returned and improved their situation by advocating to their interests. Chagnon not only used more coercive techniques in gaining cooperation, there is also no trace of tangible efforts made to improve the harm he contributed to in the Yanomamo community. If the AAA standards were altered to 'do not harm only while researching' or compensate for cooperation, little ethical analysis would be needed, but that is not the case. Doing no harm to the group is indefinite and needs to be examined even after research is complete.

Additionally, a "just" amount of compensation means that it needs to be fair, not just in the context of the region researched, but also that of the western entities benefiting from it; i. e. ten machetes given to the Yanomamo for an ethnography research is not equivalent \$500k and advancement in the anthropologist respective career. Alike the Yanomamo, the Juhoansi continue to face challenges due to outside interference. However, their interference mostly comes from governmental entities, and the Juhoansi have been assisted by Marshall and treated ethically by other anthropologists, like Richard Lee.

On the other hand, the Yanomamo face problems from miners camping in their territories, destruction of the environment by mining and other outside forces, along with other governmental issues, but it is also clear that the Yanomamo have been significantly exploited by the western world. This could be because of the lack of oversight and/or due to little ethical standards. In any case, these unfortunate chain of events should serve a greater purpose to the ethical standards of practicing anthropologist and aspiring students.