Engagement of anthropologists in public dialogue with members of study communities

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Here we inquire into the lessons that anthropologists can learn from Chagnon's engagement in public forums with Yanomami individuals. The Task Force notes that this issue was not one singled out by the Peacock Report. Nor does Tierney raise this issue as a specific allegation in *Darkness in El Dorado*. Instead, it appears in the book as a sort of rhetorical background. For instance, Tierney repeats twice (pp. xxiv, p. 11) that Chagnon is said to have called Davi Kopenawa, a Brazilian Yanomami who has made frequent public statements over more than a decade, a "parrot." In spite of the fact that these statements by Chagnon were not singled out either by Tierney or by the Peacock Report, the Task Force wished to reflect upon them, since they exemplify an issue that is increasingly faced by anthropologists and that is, as far as we know, not generally raised in their training in methodological and ethical foundations. Anthropologists today all work in highly dynamic political contexts where both anthropologists and members of subject populations have access to many arenas, including international mass media, to advance their agendas.

Like most anthropologists working today, Chagnon has had to confront the emergence of new leadership styles and new forms of political discourse, some in direct opposition to his own ideas. Unfortunately, unlike, for instance, in North America, there is no established legal (such as NAGPRA) or political (such as a well-established system through which communities evaluate and approve research) framework within which he and Yanomami interlocutors can engage. Instead, direct access to Yanomami is mediated within a very complex and often highly personalistic field of political players, within which the Yanomami themselves are, to date, profoundly subordinate. Nonetheless, some Yanomami do speak out.

Of all Yanomami who have emerged as public figures, probably the most important is Davi Kopenawa Yanomami. Davi Kopenawa Yanomami has worked closely with organizations such as CCPY and Cultural Survival in the fight for the integrity of Yanomami lands in Brazil, but has also spoken out on many other issues, often completely on his own. Interviews with him examined by the Task Force include Kopenawa Yanomami and Turner (Boa Vista, March 1991; Turner and Kopenawa 1991), Albert and Kopenawa Yanomami, April 8, 2001 (Albert 2001, Appendix 1), and Kopenawa Yanomami and Chernela (Demini Village, Parima Highlands, Brazil, June 7 2001), the last conducted in the name of the AAA El Dorado Task Force.

Regarding public statements by Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, Chagnon has written as follows:

> Davi Kobenawä Yanomamö was educated by the New Tribes missionaries, a mostly American Protestant group, in a village on the Demini River in Brazil. There he learned Portuguese. His non-Yanomamö supporters in Brazil, intelligent and well-intentioned advocates of the Yanomamö cause, are promoting him as a spokesman for his people. Such a role exists largely because *our* culture must deal with other cultures through their leaders – it is the only way we know how to deal with them. Everything I know about Davi Kobenawä is positive, and I am confident that he is a sincere and honest man. When I read his proclamations, I am moved – but I am also sure that someone from our culture wrote them. They have too much the voice of Rousseau's idealism and sound very non-Yanomamö. My concern is that he is being put into a difficult position, fraught with consequences for the future of the Yanomamö. For one thing, there is currently no such thing as a pan-Yanomamö awareness, and so he cannot possibly be speaking for the Venezuelan Yanomamö ...
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> There is also the danger that if outside parties can so easily create Yanomamö leaders, everyone who has a special interest will promote his own leader. For example, in 1990 the Brazilian mining interests introduced their own Yanomamö leader, a young man they called Marcelo Yanomami, who advocated their rights just as strongly as Davi Kobenawä advocates the policies of his mentors (fortunately, in my view, the latter are more consistent with the Yanomamö's future well-being). In an article in the Brazilian journal *Veja* in January 1990, Marcelo Yanomami, obviously reflecting his mentors' interests, argued that the Indian has the right to exploit the material riches in his territory in any manner he wishes – presumably meaning the right to turn them over to powerful Brazilian mining interests for a modest fee (Chagnon 1992:275-76; repeated in similar language in Chagnon 1997:252).

We are unable to confirm that Chagnon ever referred to Davi Kopenawa Yanomami as a “parrot”; this language is quoted by Tierney from an article by Peter Monaghan in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Monaghan 1994:A19) and is not there attributed to Chagnon directly. Monaghan states “ Mr. Chagnon and his supporters dismiss [Davi Kopenawa Yanomami] as a parrot of human-rights groups and say he does not speak for the tribe.” However, the above citations are the only published writings by Chagnon on Kopenawa Yanomami that we have seen cited, or identified ourselves. They are carefully worded and say nothing about “parrots”. However, we suggest that Chagnon’s remarks were problematic in their context. They were written at a time when there was the most serious threat to Yanomami lands; between the mid 1980’s and 1992, when Yanomami lands in Brazil were finally demarcated with their present boundaries, Brazilian anthropologists, accompanied by other anthropologists (the AAA’s own efforts are briefly reviewed in Part I, Section D), international NGO’s such as Survival International, and the Yanomami themselves were engaged in an extremely difficult and dangerous fight to protect these lands. To raise questions, in very widely-distributed publications, about the authenticity of a person who had unquestionably become a very positive symbol of the Yanomami and an important political asset in this fight, could not fail to undermine Yanomami interests. We note also that the opinion ascribed by Chagnon to Marcelo Yanomami is an opinion that a rational person might well advance, and advocates a right of full control over their lands and resources that Arvelo-Jimϑnez and Cousins (1992) have argued Indians should be allowed to have.

Laura Graham, a linguistic anthropologist with considerable experience with shifting styles of indigenous leadership among the Xavante of Brazil, has written very thoughtfully on the challenge posed to anthropologists who must respond to indigenous spokespersons. She points out that linguistic anthropological theory, following Bakhtin, acknowledges that no one is ever fully the author of his own words. Furthermore, she argues that “authenticity” is a “colonial folk category” (Graham 2001:6). Graham argues that to challenge the “authenticity” of a speaker “is a political statement. It is a challenge of boundaries and presupposes asymmetrical relations of power. Such challenges cannot be grounded in an evaluation of the performance as “indigenous” or not because, in the global context, indigenous performance is, by nature, decontextualized, reinvented and hybrid” (Graham 2001:27).

We would argue that Chagnon’s point -- if pro-Indian NGO’s can create puppet spokespersons, then anti-Indian exploiters can do the same – can be turned back on his challenge to “authenticity.” Anyone can mount such a challenge, for good or for evil. Thus anthropologists should avoid this rhetorical strategy. Furthermore, in our view the challenge of inauthenticity is, fundamentally, unanthropological. It fails to recognize the contemporary context in which indigenous people must live, and it fails to grant indigenous speakers autonomy and agency. Certainly it is fair to ask an indigenous spokesperson hard questions about for whom he speaks, or to argue against his position, or even to say that he is a liar. However, such challenges should be made in specific and dialogic terms, directly engaging the content of the speech and the voice of the speaker, rather than simply bypassing both as devoid of intentional content. And they should be made in arenas that include those where the speaker has some chance of answering.

We do, of course, recognize that a thunderous blast against an indigenous leader in the international media may from time to time be precisely appropriate, if an anthropologist has very good information that such a person is a danger to a community. However, to be effective, such attention must be developed on a number of fronts (including in the local contexts), in culturally appropriate ways, and include a “full disclosure” of the anthropologist’s role in the political context.

The lesson that we take from Chagnon’s engagements with emerging Yanomami leaders for the development of anthropological practice is discussion of this and similar cases should be a part of anthropological training, because the future of anthropology will certainly increasingly involve the necessity to maneuver in complex and dynamic political fields such as that presented by the current developments among the Yanomami.