GIFTS:* A commentary, based on allegations in Tierney's Darkness in El Dorado

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*See Appendices for references from Tierney and interviews with Yanomami spokespersons

"Chagnon could not provide ongoing medical attention or stable terms of trade... because his research...required him to collect thousands of genealogies and blood samples in a short period of time. He had to buy the Yanomami's cooperation in scores of villages across an area larger than New York State. Chagnon arrived with a boatload of machetes and axes, which he distributed within twenty-four hours; the delighted recipients of this instant wealth immediately left the village unattended and went to trade with equally delighted allies. For the steel-poor villages of the Yanomami hill country, Chagnon was a one-man treasure fleet. The remote villages of Patanowa-teri and Mishimishimabowei-teri began sending messengers begging Chagnon to come and visit, but their ambassadors were driven away by Bisaasi-teri and its closer allies, who fought to maintain their monopoly of Chagnon's steel wealth. Within three months of Chagnon's sole arrival on the scene, three different wars had broken out, all between groups who had been at peace for some time and all of whom wanted a claim on Chagnon's steel goods. 'Chagnon becomes an active political agent in the Yanomami area,' says Brian Ferguson. 'He's very much involved in the fighting and the wars. Chagnon becomes a central figure in determining battles over trade goods and machetes. His presence, with a shotgun and a canoe with an outboard motor, involves him in war parties and factionalism. What side he takes makes a big difference. Chagnon has dismissed this charge as 'the bad breath' theory of tribal warfare. Yet Chagnon brought more than breath with him into Yanomami territory. He introduced guns, germs, and steel across a wide stretch of Yanomamiland -- and on a scale never seen before. The Yanomami's desire for steel is as intense as our longing for gold. Westerner's became the Yanomami's metal mines, local El Dorados that dispensensed machetes, axes, and fishhooks that instantly increased agricultural production by 1,000 percent and protein capture by huge amounts. Yanomami groups made heroic odysseys in search of a single secondhand machete. Remote groups traded their daughters for a worn machete or a blunt ax. Villages with more steel always acquired more women. The sociologist John Peters, who lived among the Brazilian Yanomami for eight years, was offered two young girls in exchange for a couple of stainless steel pots. He refused the offer." (Tierney, p. 30):

A gift is an object that moves between different possessors, or holders; as such an object becomes a gift through its transfer from one holder to another. Whereas all objects are polysemous, having layered meanings that may only be understood in the context of larger systems of meanings and relationships, the salient feature of a gift is that it is recontextualized.

The giftness of an item has value not in the object (or act) alone, but in the very movement of it from one party to another. In Arjun Appadurai's discussion of the "biography of things" (1986) he argues that the movement or path of an object becomes intrinsic to it. In other words, the history of the gift is also an attribute of it. This is not unlike Annette

Weiner's (1992) notion that a gift has an "inalienable" quality that derives from the attributes of the giver, and, therefore, is never fully transferred.

Chagnon's gifts, recalled thirty years after they were given, demonstrate the way in which an object means, among other things, where it has been. In Chagnon's case a pan given by him in 1968 is recalled, in 2001, thirty-three years from the time of its transfer, this way: "Chagnon ... had alot of pans. I remember the pans. Our relatives brought them from there. They were big and they were shallow. He bought them in Venezuela." The speaker, Davi Kopenawa, was ten years old at the time, yet the pans and their history remain vivid to him. The gifts from Chagnon, or any other anthropologist, whether they be axes, machetes, fishhooks or soda crackers, carry a history so that the object stands for more than itself.

But if a history accompanies a gift, is it not one history but many, perceived differently by different recipients and donors alike. Although it may be said that the attributions of the gift include its cumulative history and contribute to its meaning (and, relatedly, its value), any such history belongs to the beholder. We cannot, therefore, speak of a single history of an object but innumerable histories of an object.

If a gift carries signification, and part of that is the identity of the giver, then, from the giver's perspective, what is being given? And what, if anything, are the assumptions understood by the transfer?

And, as an outsider, how is an anthropologists to know the many histories attributed to an object of his/her own distribution. Where does that history begin? Does its history begin with the anthropologist, say Chagnon? Or, does it begin in the histories of colonial occupation, industrialization and unequal accumulation? What are the limits (or lack of limits) to that history?

Separating the sides.

In the case of the gift, the histories attributed to it by giver and receiver must be considered separately. The site or moment of exchange, then, is an encounter of meaning(s) between at least two actors or clusters of actors: one the giving party, the other the receiving party.

Taking but a few of the many possible motivations for gift-giving from the anthropologist's point of view, (s)he may give a gift in order to be generous, to show gratitude, to persuade, to receive, or to be accepted. According to one normative position, all work provided or anticipated is deserving of adequate compensation. Indeed, this notion, embedded in Anglo-American assumptions, is commonly held among North American anthropologists. The issue deservesmore profound reflection. If the anthropologist gives in order to receive, what is it s(he) wishes to receive?

To complicate matters, the intentions of the giver may be confused or less than conscious, obfuscating other, more opportunistic motivations of the anthropologist. Even if a gift is given "freely," it may be read differently by recipients than intended. Accepting a gift may, to some extent, "lock in" the recipient. But to what? And how explicit are the terms of

exchange?

A further complicating factor is that the anthropologist, like any giver, may believe wrongly that he controls the message conveyed in his gift. For example, an anthropologist may ostensibly offer a gift inorder to convey gratitude -- say, thanking people for hospitality, their helpfulness. Yet the gift can be read in numerous ways, many of which are quite far from the anthropologist's intent.

An anthropologist may knowingly provide gifts intended to persuade, to motivate the receiver to comply with a desired end, say, provide information. One of Tierney's principal allegations about Chagnon is that he bought cooperation in order to secure information. Tierney refers to this practice as "checkbook anthropology." Speaking of Chagnon, Tierney says, "He had to buy the Yanomami's cooperation in scores of villages across an area larger than New York State" (Tierney, p. 30).

A principal complaint of Davi Kopenawa, a Brazilian Yanomami spokesperson, is the secrecy and deception that accompanied Chagnon's gift-giving. Davi, "He brought pans, knives, machetes, axes. And so he arrived ready, ready to trick the Yanomami. This is how the story goes. I was small at the time...[pointing to a boy] like this..about nine. I remember. I remember when people from there came to our shabono (longhouse). They said, 'A white man is living there. He speaks our language, [he] brings presents -- hammocks.' They said he was good, he was generous. He paid people in trade when he took photos, when he made interviews, [or] wrote in Portuguese [likely Spanish], English, and Yanomami, and taperecording too. But he didn't say anything to me" (Kopenawa 2001).

The anthropological enterprise requires access. Moreover, an outsider-anthropologist is often dependent upon hosts for survival. Through gift-giving, an anthropologist may hope to make of himself a friend, an insider -- to pass from being enemy to ally. This may or may not resonate with local meanings attributed to exchanges of goods. Indeed, Tierney alleges that Chagnon's gifts caused his presence and association to be coveted. He tells the reader, "... remote villages ...began sending messengers begging Chagnon to come and visit" (Tierney, p. 30). Note, too, José Seripino's causal linkage between gifting and access: "[If] he comes without things ...no one will accept him."

Anthropologists, or perhaps all givers of gifts, assume a universal signification to gifts and the way in which they are read. They mistakenly believe they understand the meanings that their gifts carry. Chagnon's own cultural membership in the post-war generation of 1950s America places him squarely among the modernists who believe that both science and technology were beneficial in their own right. These underlying assumptions find expression in Chagnon's field methodologies, research goals, and the utilitarian gifts he supplied. It is likely that he regarded his gifts as simultaneously improving Yanomami life, meeting Yanomami expectations, and producing himself as a local necessity.

As the sole supplier of certain items, Chagnon contributed to a developing need for new objects, as well as a primary

need for himself as supplier. "Where is Chagnon?" the Yanomami still ask. "I need a motor. Where is my motor. People are still asking."

Related to the wish to be welcome is the wish to define oneself as giver and thereby powerful. In employing largesse performatively, a donor can himself accrue the attributes of magnanimity. Not only does the gift carry the attributes of the donor, in Weiner's terms, but the donor himself accrues the attributes of the gift. Tierney claims that Chagnon "introduced guns, germs, and steel across a wide stretch of Yanomamiland -- and on a scale never seen before" (Tierney, p. 30). Thus, by giving axes, machetes and other steel goods in quantity Chagnon may be said to have gained the very attributes of the gifts he bestowed: aggressive; fearless; dangerous; and waiteri (see interviews with Kopenawa and Wichato).

But gifts carry meanings that the giver, including anthropologists, can not control. The complex layering of meanings carried by a gift and the distance between anthropologist and "informant" may be such that the giver can never know all about the gifts (s)he offers. To enumerate just some of the challenges: a giver cannot know: 1) all of the messages the gifts carry; 2) all of the impacts of the gifts they give; 3) the power carried by the gifts they give; 4) the power that acccrues to the giver of the gift, or 6) to the recipient of the gift. Finally, a giver cannot know the "history-becoming" -- the future of a gift.

If Appadurai's analysis is correct, the gift should accrue power as it passes from hand to hand. The receiving group does not only receive the initial value of the gift, as it combines the identity of the anthropologist embedded in the gift itself, but also its value in a future system of exchange.

The effects of giving gifts to some, and not all, individuals or communities creates invidious distinctions and tensions. Yanomami spokesperson José Seripino: "In those days we didn't have our own motors and he came with all that material -- his research materials. The Yanomami needed these things -- we were getting them from creoles. So one community has them and another not. Then other communities will get "fighting mad" (Spanish bravo)" (José Seripino, Sept. 7, 2001).

It is also likely that providing some communities with trade goods gives unfair advantage to groups in contact with outsiders. Tierney -- borrowing from Brian Ferguson's 1995 book -- argues that the consequence of this is the monopoly of some communities over others. According to this argument, the receiving group's monopoly on trade provides it with a special, and not prior, power over neighboring groups. Ferguson (1995) notes the leverage held by a group with steel tools over others. He, and later, Tierney, maintain that groups with steel goods had greater opportunities for alliance than have others, giving them advantage in warfare. Ferguson argues that manufactured goods attract or, pull, Yanomami toward centers of trade where they forfeit mobility and become increasingly dependent on outsiders. This, in turn, leads to increased feuding between groups vying for acess to trade centers. According to Tierney, villages with more steel always acquired more women (Tierney, p. 30). Presumably this too would lead to feuding.

A balance of power, assumed to be delicate and fragile, may well be shifted by goods accumulation. Surely this is an

outcome of anthropological gift-giving that deserves further consideration.

Of greatest concern is Tierney's allegation that Chagnon openly intended his gifts as rewards for fighting. Davi Kopenawa takes the same position:

Davi, "'**That** shabono, three or four shabonos,' as if it were a ball game. 'Whoever is the most courageous will earn more pans. If you kill ten more people I will pay more. If you kill only two, I will pay less.' Because the pans came from there. They arrived at Wayupteri and Toototobi. Our relatives came from Wayupteri and said, 'This Chagnon is very good. He gives us alot of utensils. He is giving us pans because we fight alot'" (Kopenawa 2001).

First, I see a difficulty in reconstructing Chagnon's motives. The fact will always remain that the motivations that underly gift-giving, as intended by donor and as perceived by recipient, may differ from one another. This is likely to be a common occurrence. And, moreover, it can proceed without any awareness by the participants of the differences in readings. Chagnon is quite frank about having erred in leading a group that ostensibly would have invaded another village. If acts of aggression were in fact rewarded or encouraged by an anthropologist it would be reprehensible indeed.

Second, in my opinion, the simple deterministic logic between unequal distribution of goods, outright rewarding of aggressive acts, and "warfare," disregards the capabilities of the Yanomami to manage their own political affairs. The analysis attributes absolute power to the westerners and passivity to the Yanomami.

It points, too, to the facile and unsubstantiated use of the term "warfare" to refer to a wide range of different forms of conflict. Dueling activity, as Kopenawa has insisted, is not warfare, but a form of ritualized combat with rules that protect players' safety. It may, under certain conditions, escalate into warfare. But those conditions are culturally and historically prescribed, and, according to all informants, infrequent.

The cultural specificity and innovation with which the Yanomami have put some steel objects to use is worth mentioning here, since it demonstrates the lattitude in interpreting what might appear to an outsider as "deadly." The 1975 film by Asch and Chagnon, named The Ax Fight in order to frighten by its name, suggests greater violence than is ever manifest. Apparently (though not shown) the ax is used to fell trees to prepare new gardens. However, when used as a weapon, the Yanomami do not use it as anticipated by Western onlookers, but rather reinvent the ax as a pounding, not a cutting tool. Yanomami use of the ax as a weapon is rule-bound so that the heavier, back end, not the cutting edge, is the point of contact.

Steel goods and other manufactured goods always coincide with the presence of outsiders who may be missionaries, health practitioners, or anthropologists. In both Brazil and Venezuela, the centers established by these outsiders (medical, administrative, or health posts) characteristically have higher population densities both within individual communities and in total number of resident communities. Ferguson's data suggest that the presence of a post, by drawing populations to it, may result in increased instability. This suggests that the bearer of gifts creates distribution centers with consequences for the

balances of power.

Yet a different charge by Tierney is that Chagnon distributed too many gifts, accusing him of being "a one-man treasure fleet" (p. 30). Tierney sees Chagnon's gift-giving as extravagant, inflationary. In contrast, Yanomami interviewers accuse Chagnon of supplying goods in insufficient amounts. Kopenawa makes a comparison between the values of Chagnon's gifts and the expected returns and finds that the gifts fall short: "The life of the indian that dies is very expensive. But he [Chagnon] paid little" (Kopenawa, 2001).

The interpretations of Yanomami spokespersons have been sadly neglected in favor of in-fighting within the academy. I suggest reversing the scholarly gaze to give space to Yanomami speakers to interpret and analyze the actions and meanings of anthropologists, journalists, and writers of all kind.

I present here but one example, derived from an interview with Yanomami spokesperson Davi Kopenawa (see appendix).

Davi opens his analysis of Chagnon's behavior with the assertion that Chagnon considered himself to be waiteri, or fierce:

Davi: He is waiteri because he was there. He is waiteri because he was giving orders. He ordered the Yanomami to fight among themselves. He paid with pans, machetes, knives, fishooks.

Janet: Is this the truth or this is what is being said?

Davi: It's the truth.

Janet: He paid directly or indirectly?

Davi: He made them fight more to improve his work. The Yanomami didn't know his secret.

Janet: But why did he want to make the Yanomami fight?

Davi: To make his book. To make a story about fighting among the Yanomami. He shouldn't show the fights of the others. The Yanomami did not authorize this. He did it in the United States. He thought it would be important for him. He became famous."

Davi, whose description is based upon childhood recollection, reports from relatives, and conversations with other researchers, judges Chagnon's motives: he gave gifts to encourage fighting. The entire enterprise was driven by desire for achievement and recognition, characteristic of the academy.

One can judge Davi's statement as one would judge any other ethnological insight. That is, how does he "know"? On what basis was this claim made? Is it substantiated by other sources? Is it convincing?

When he includes Tierney and Lizot in his analysis and finds commonality among the three, Davi's insights go beyond the individual to what may be called a "culture of writing":

Davi: "I see and hear that an anthropologist is becoming famous. Famous -- why? Some think its good. So he became famous, like a chief. So among them nothing will be resolved. One becomes famous, the other one [his critic] becomes famous, and they go on fighting among themselves and making money...

Janet: Did you know Tierney?

Davi: I met him in Boa Vista. I went to his house. He didn't say anything to me about what he was doing.

Davi: So, Chagnon made money using the name of the Yanomami. He sold his book. Lizot too. I want to know how much they are making each month. How much does any anthropologist earn? And how much is Patrick making? Patrick must be happy. This is alot of money. They may be fighting but they are happy. They fight and this makes them happy. They make money and fight.

Janet: Yes; the anthropologists are fighting. Patrick is a journalist.

Davi: Patrick left the fight to the others! He can let the anthropologists fight with Chagnon, and he, Patrick, he's outside, he's free. He's just bringing in the money -- he must be laughing at the rest. Its like starting a fight among dogs. Then they fight, they bark and he's outside. He spoke bad of the anthropologist -- others start fighting, and he's gaining money! The name Yanomami is famous [and valuable] -- more famous than the name of any anthropologist. So he's earning money without sweating, without hurting his hands, without the heat of the sun. He's not suffering. He just sits and writes, this is great for him. He succeeded in writing a book that is bringing in money. Now he should share some of this money with the Yanomami. We Yanomami are here, suffering from malaria, flu, sick all the time. But he's there in good health -- just spending the money that he gained in the name of the Yanomami Indians....

I am speaking to the American Anthropology Association. They are trying to clean up this problem. They should bring three Yanomami to their meeting. There are three anthropologists who understand our three languages: Chagnon, Alcida, and Bruce. These anthropologists could translate. We could speak, and people could ask questions of us. I could go myself, but it would be best to have three from Venezuela, or four, perhaps one from Brazil. They need to see our faces. Alcida doesn't look like a Yanomami. Nor do Bruce or Chagnon. They don't have Yanomami faces. The Americans will believe [us] if they see us. I went to the United States during the fight against the goldminers. They believed me. For this reason, I say, it's important to go there and speak to them."

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