Reflecting on the Yanomami: Ethnographic Images and the Pursuit of the Exotic

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In the world of ethnography certain images are created of entire peoples which remain undisturbed in the reader's memory. The lovely and companionable Pygmies, the proud and intractable Nuer, or the headhunting Jivaro are evocations that come easily to mind. Malinowski's Trobrianders still maintain the old magic of kula voyagers, even though Weiner (1976) has told another story. That each ethnographer produces a unique portrait of the people studied is neither news nor is it surprising, since field experiences are forged as much, or more, by the ethnographer as by the people. This becomes particularly evident when two or more anthropologists do research with the same people. In most cases pioneer ethnographers are followed by other researchers after long contact with the West has brought about fundamental changes in the people being studied. The result is a substantial historical leap and not merely a temporal distance separating the former from the latter. Apart from those cases of acrimonious accusations of incorrect research procedures (as in the Freeman-Mead affair), the divergences that emerge are most often attributed, with varying degrees of persuasion, to the discontinuity of time and events intervening between the two moments of fieldwork. However, when you have several ethnographers working simultaneously in the same general area, it is easier to appreciate the twists and turns of personal preferences in describing *a* culture.[1]

For two decades the Yanomami, at least in the United States, have been Napoleon Chagnon's Fierce People. They have caught the academic and popular imagination ever since Chagnon put them on the map with the publication of his monograph in 1968. For 30 years the Yanomami have been visited by film crews, linguists, anthropologists, geographers, not to mention missionaries, from a good many places: Germany, the United States, Britain, France, Brazil, Venezuela, Italy, Switzerland, Japan. Chagnon was neither the first nor the last among them, but his book has had more impact than all the others added together.

Being recognized as the largest indigenous group in the Americas still little touched by drastic changes from the outside world has been a mixed blessing for the Yanomami. They have been the object of fantasies both in film and book form, of journalistic sensationalism as well as of vast political campaigns in defense of

their human rights. I want to discuss the phenomenon of image creating by taking the Yanomami as the focus of attention of three ethnographers who have done extensive fieldwork among them throughout the 60s, 70s, and 80s.

What are the Yanomami like? To such an apparently simple question there is no simple answer. Reading the three authors selected here one might be tempted to characterize these Indians as fierce people, or as erotic people, or as introspective intellectuals. Consider also Eric Michaels's comments on two specific instances of film recording: "I was particularly impressed by the pervasive differences between the films and the tapes. The fierce people whom Asch recorded in a manner that made my students recoil became transformed into attractive human figures in the Downey tapes" (1982:135). Add to this the superb photographic work by Claudia Andujar (Tassara and Andujar 1983), where the Yanomami are mostly depicted as contemplative mystics on an endless metaphysical quest, and we have as varied a gamut of representations as we might ever hope to get for a single people: brutal, amiable, mystical, macho, fun lovers, pornographers, sages, warmongers.

Are the Yanomami one of the above, all of the above, or none? The old story of knowing the elephant by piecemeal discovery of its parts by differently located observers does not seem appropriate here (nor perhaps anywhere). There is no such thing as an elephant out there, waiting to be put together as a jigsaw puzzle. The sum of the parts does not make up a positive totality acknowledged as such by all concerned. Rather, each ethnographer constructs his own Yanomami totality, and the tools for his construction are provided by his personal inclinations as much as by the specific tool kit of anthropology from which he draws.

Having done fieldwork myself among various subgroups of the Yanomami, I recognize in all of the ethnographic descriptions available a nagging sense of family resemblance. Yet none quite matches my own perception of the people I know. From 1968 to 1985 I spent 27 months among the Sanumá of the Auaris river valley, two months among the Shiriana of the Uraricoera river valley, and three and a half months among the Yanomam of the Catrimani river valley, all in Brazil. In each location I have found a different ethos, a greater or lesser tolerance toward foreigners, and a definite linguistic and social singularity. Nevertheless, I perceive them all as unquestionably Yanomami. One of the most fascinating intellectual games for me during my last stay with the Shiriana was to witness the transformations and permutations constantly displayed as I heard words and watched actions that were so similar and yet so different from the others I had known before. If there is such a thing as a Yanomami mode of being, such a field of "Yanomaminess" is so vast that many pictures can be made of it, each one the unique result of the combination of particular Indians with a particular ethnographer in particular situations.

My intention is not to do a biography of these ethnographers, a project for which I have neither the competence nor a special interest. What I am proposing to do is a personal reading of their works that would allow me to see them through the images they built of the Yanomami: their choice of genre and style, of themes, of emphases, of theoretical models, of conclusions, hoping to understand why it

is that with each new book or thesis a new face of the Yanomami is drawn. It is, in short, a tricky exercise in seeing the ethnographer through the eyes of his own creation. Being a Yanomami ethnographer myself, my position is not that of an impartial onlooker, but what one might call a "privileged observer."

The opportunity for this exercise is the recent translation into English of Jacques Lizot's *Le Cercle des Feux,* and the appearance of Bruce Albert's important doctoral dissertation. The three texts discussed here are thus Chagnon's *Yãnomamö: The Fierce People,* Lizot's *Tales of the Yanomami: Daily Life in the Venezuelan Forest,* and Albert's *Temps du Sang, Temps des Cendres: Représentations de la Maladie, Système Rituel et Espace Politique chez les Yanomami du Sud-est (Amazonie Brésilienne).* All three write on warfare, aggressiveness, and drama, but each one constructs a different world with these elements. They differ in their emphases on subject matter, on choice of rhetorical style, and on audiences aimed at. It should be pointed out that Lizot has worked in the same area as Chagnon with the Yãnomamö subgroup of the Orinoco-Mavaca region in Venezuela, whereas Albert has done fieldwork among the Yanomam subgroup (more often spelled Yãnomamë by Albert) of the Catrimani river valley in Brazil, many miles away from the other two.[2] All of them have had contact with the Yanomami for at least ten years. Each ethnographer appears as either the main protagonist, an omnipresent but invisible companion, or a diligent observer. Depending on how much each of them allows the curtain to be lifted, his Yanomami appear more or less visible, more or less tangible, more or less believable. The ethnographer is in control.

Fierce?

Waiteri is translated by Chagnon as "fierce." Other renderings both from the Yãnomamö and from other subgroups stress different features. Lizot glosses *wait^{h}eri* as "both physical courage—the capacity to bear great pain—and the ability to return blows" (1985:194). To Albert the term *waithiri,* as used by the Yanomam of the Catrimani region, ties together the virtues of humor, generosity, and bravery.

> The *waithiri* man must therefore be capable of showing himself fearless in battle and ready to publicly demonstrate the power of his determination when the situation so demands, but also to show little concern for his possessions and be a virtuoso in matters of irony and, better still, of self-derision. [Albert 1985:97]

Out of the multivaried complexity of this important concept, Chagnon chose the English word "fierce" as its sole translation. Actually, the innuendos one finds at several points in his book belie this oversimplification, for much of the proclaimed Yãnomamö fierceness is displayed tongue-in-cheek, which, in turn, is interpreted by the ethnographer as demonstrations of not quite trustworthy behavior, or plain mischief.

Chagnon's writing is vivid, dynamic, and at times very funny. Some examples: "Many amused Yãnomamö onlookers quickly learned the English phrase

'Oh, Shit!' . . . and, once they discovered that the phrase offended and irritated the missionaries, they used it as often as they could in their presence'' (Chagnon 1983:12).[3] On the interchange between him and a Yãnomamö man, first, when the anthropologist was being watched eating frankfurters: '' 'Shãki! what part of the animal are you eating?' . . . 'Guess.' He muttered a contemptuous epithet, but stopped asking for a share'' (Chagnon 1983:14); later, when the anthropologist was being watched eating honey: '' 'Shãki! what kind of animal semen are you pouring onto your food and eating?' His question had the desired effect and my meal ended'' (Chagnon 1983:15). *Waitheri* exchanges such as these occur often throughout his book in situations not always as lightweight as having a meal on stage.

His Yãnomamö society is a strongly emphasized male world. It is the men who tell stories, take drugs, kill people, hunt animals, do all the exciting things a Westerner would hope to find in the jungle. They are the quintessence of the primitive tribe in the wilderness of unspoiled lifeways. They are ''fierce'' in doing all those thrilling things and even in their domestic endeavors, when they occasionally chop an ear or two off their wives. In Chagnon's exuberant style the Yãnomamö come out as energetic, high-strung, vicious, and vivacious men. By contrast, his women, when at all visible, appear as overburdened, battered, meek, uninteresting, or worse: ''By the time a woman is 30 years old she has 'lost her shape' and has developed a rather unpleasant disposition. Women tend to seek refuge and consolation in each other's company, sharing their misery with their peers'' (Chagnon 1983:114). In Chagnon's analysis they are the cause of all the fighting and warfare of their men. And yet, somehow, women manage to press and impress the men enough to keep them on their toes:

> They are therefore concerned with the political behavior of their men and occasionally goad them into taking action against some possible enemy by caustically accusing the men of cowardice. This has the effect of establishing the village's reputation for ferocity, reducing the possibility of raiders abducting the women while they are out collecting firewood or garden produce. The men cannot stand being belittled by the women in this fashion, and are forced to take action if the women unite against them. [Chagnon 1983:114]

So much for female powerlessness.

In May 1976, *Time* magazine published the following:

> . . . the rather horrifying Yãnomamö culture makes some sense in terms of animal behavior. Chagnon argues that Yãnomamö structures closely parallel those of many primates in breeding patterns, competition for females and recognition of relatives. Like baboon troops, Yãnomamö villages tend to split into two after they reach a certain size. [*Time*, 10 May 1976:37]

That was before the second edition of *Yãnomamö: The Fierce People*. *Time*'s piece triggered off angry responses from anthropologists and missionaries (see *Time*'s Forum section of 31 May 1976:1), and probably overwhelmed Chagnon himself, judging by the considerable changes he made in the third edition, toning

down or deleting statements that precipitated such embarrassing publicity.[4] Tone down he did, but readers of the 1983 edition still find reason to agree with the *Time* article in saying that Chagnon is "chronicling a culture built around persistent aggression—browbeating, goading, ritual displays of ferocity, fighting and constant warfare."

The third edition totally eliminated the discussion of what had been one of the main pillars of his argument for explaining aggressive behavior, that is, female infanticide, also picked up by *Time:*

> . . . the Yãnomamö practice female infanticide—on the grounds that males are more valuable to a people always at war. Yet infanticide sets up fierce competition for marriageable females, both within and among villages, and this in turn produces chronic warfare.

Throughout the years this vicious circle received decreasing attention in Chagnon's writings, starting with his doctoral dissertation in 1966, until it was dropped altogether in the latest edition of *The Fierce People.*

The reason for abandoning the female infanticide theme may not have been entirely due to the incredulity of critics or the use made of it by the news media, but perhaps to its having been adopted by Marvin Harris and his followers as a major prop to their protein theory of warfare. Chagnon takes issue with them in the third edition, not once confirming or denying the existence of female infanticide. It is as if he had never mentioned it in the first place. So, not only do the same people look different in the eyes of different observers, but the same observer, for whatever reason, can change his outlook about them as time goes by. Yesterday Yãnomamö women shocked the world by killing their baby girls. Today no one would know that ever happened, were it not for Harris's reminders from time to time.

The latest edition of the *Fierce People* also presents clearer theoretical stances than was the case previously. Paying lip service to structuralism via an unconvincing presentation of a Yãnomamö nature/culture dichotomy, Chagnon declares his allegiance to sociobiology, a trait already detectable in the first edition, but only implicitly so. Such a theoretical inclination is very consistent with his emphasis on aggression, demography, reproductive patterns, and territorial expansion. It is to Chagnon's credit that he succeeds so well in keeping an interest in the people, maintaining a constant relationship with their individuality, while working on such depersonalizing issues. At no time do Chagnon's Yãnomamö men show themselves to be boring, faceless, mere objects of research. They are full of life, verve, and humor, or unbearable at times, making the ethnographer wish he were doing fieldwork with someone else, such as the neighboring Yekuana.[5]

Chagnon is the uncontested boss of his text. He tailored it in such a way as to keep a constant counterpoint between the aggressiveness of the Yãnomamö and his own feats of daring. He is in full command. He never lets any of the proverbial and inevitable clumsiness, ignorance, and blunders of the incompetent neophyte impair his authority in the field. Once he masters his kitchen and laundry chores,

under the entertained gaze of the forever joking Yãnomamö, he is in business: he makes canoes, he hunts, he dispenses medicines, he may or may not permit the Indians to share his food or his cigarette butts, he shouts back at them, he takes hallucinogens, chants to the *hekura* spirits and gets himself photographed by tourists, he even has a close encounter with a live jaguar. In fact, the more intractable the Yãnomamö and the jungle show themselves to be, the more exciting his life in the field becomes.

Especially in the now much longer introduction and in the new conclusion, it is as if the Indians are there for little more purpose than to provide the necessary local color and scenic backdrop for his adventures, be they negotiating clogged rivers, visiting hostile villages, or challenging the missionaries. Narcissus in the bush, Chagnon casts his own shadow too far onto the Yãnomamö *shabono* and onto his text. Like Evans-Pritchard (Geertz 1983), he involves the reader by choosing the right pronoun at the right time: "Once *you* are on good terms with *your hekura, you* can engage in sex without having *your* spirits abandon *you*" (Chagnon 1983:107, emphasis mine). Like Lizot, he pays a lot of attention to sexual matters, with the justification that "sex is a big thing in Yãnomamö myths . . . If I were to illustrate the dictionary I have been patiently collecting on my field trips, it would be, as one of my puckish graduate students once commented, very good pornography" (Chagnon 1983:94).

Between 1968 and 1983 prolonged contact with the Yãnomamö has mellowed his pen, to a certain extent. He now writes dearly of his Yãnomamö friends and shows other dimensions of their world besides violence: "Some Yãnomamö play with their rich language and work at being what we might call literary or learned" (Chagnon 1983:90). Or,

> Some of the characters in Yãnomamö myths are downright hilarious, and some of the things they did are funny, ribald, and extremely entertaining to the Yãnomamö, who listen to men telling mythical stories or chanting episodes of mythical sagas as they prance around the village, tripping out on hallucinogens, adding comical twists and nuances to the side-splitting delight of their audiences. [Chagnon 1983:93]

His engaging style, with imagery drawn from Western *waitheri* realms ("I was learning the Yãnomamö equivalent of a left jab to the jawbone" [Chagnon 1983:16]), is greatly responsible for the wide acceptance of his monograph, catching the imagination of undergraduates, journalists, and other exotica-hungry audiences.

Erotic?

Lizot's Yãnomamö don't just make love. They do it with a vengeance. A good part of his book is dedicated to descriptions of masturbating practices, amorous encounters between boys, between girls, between boys and girls, as well as descriptions of many adulterous trysts. Chapter 2, entitled "Love Stories," begins with the amusing remark: "The young Yanomami's sexuality is not repressed as long as it remains discreet and limited"! Moreover, "Everything here is very natural"! (Lizot 1985:31).

Discretion and naturality, however, are overridden by Lizot's voyeurism. For six years, as stated in the preface of this English edition, he was a go-between in most of the love stories he tells and sometimes a witness too. The results are passages such as this:

> She discovered then that prolonged fondling could give pleasure. She learned how to recapture the sensations she experienced with her friend: She could bring about her own body's enjoyment. She would go off alone to rub her vulva softly against a hump on a tree trunk, or she would invite her friend, or others whom she would initiate in turn. [Lizot 1985:68]

or this:

> Brahaima puts her leg on the young man's thighs, and his desire is aroused by that invitation. They go on with their conversation; Tõtõwë is excited and no longer knows what he is saying. Soon a hand is touching his groin; he wants to prevent the expected caress and protects himself with his hand. Intimidated by Rubrowë's presence, he wants to leave, but is asked to stay a while. He is about to make up his mind to make move when the bright disk of the sun slowly emerges, casting its light under the roof. [Lizot 1985:42]

Parenthetically, romantic as it may be, this passage would very likely get a chuckle of disbelief from the Yãnomamö, for no one in their right mind would remain in bed, or rather in hammock, by the time the sun is up (apart from the sick or the anthropologists). Healthy human beings are up and about while it is still dark; the loving couple would have been disturbed many times over before the bright disk of the sun emerged from behind the tall trees of the forest surrounding the village.

This brings us to an aspect of Lizot's book that is clearly its most striking feature, falling as it does into that fuzzy gray area between ethnography and admitted fiction. Unlike Chagnon, he does not impose on the reader the weight of his presence in the narrative, or the forceful assertion that he was there, really, factually, positivistically. Of course, Lizot is perfectly aware of all this: "I wanted to recede into the background as completely as possible. Nevertheless, it is an obvious fact that I am the one who is observing, reporting, describing, organizing the narrative" (Lizot 1985:xiv). His unorthodox way of resolving his experiences into ethnographic writing is explicitly acknowledged: "The way of presenting an incident or a story and of arranging it according to one's fancy is one form of ethnographic reality" (Lizot 1985:xiv). Be that as it may, his invisibility is his special tool for carving out of memory his image of the Yãnomamö, and he uses it to the full by taking liberties that would make many a conservative colleague cringe with discomfort.

An invisible observer, or absent participant, omnipresent and indiscreet with the sardonic eye of a voyeur, he takes the reader along to watch intimate encounters, listen to myth telling, probe into emotional states, or accompany devious acts. He does not tell us how he does it. But then, he doesn't need to; his style is self-revealing. His tense is the present, his narrative, being an amalgamation of multiple events, cannot be fixed in points of time. Past and present are fused; his

denial of retrospection makes the present tense imperative. The following example has been picked at random:

> The others follow suit, walking on the bank. They come near the *rahara* [a water monster], and it is Hebëwë, who has been here before with his father, who first realizes it. They are going to cross on an enormous trunk spanning the stream. Around them spreads a tapir's feeding ground etched with countless hoofprints and trails that the big herbivores use to come here and forage in the earth. Fear and foreboding rise in Hebëwë as he recognizes the place more and more positively. He is thinking: "This is it, the monster lives here." He is about to speak and warn the others, when Frërema, who is walking ahead, suddenly turns back. He makes hand signals telling the others to squat down and, in a low voice, warns them of the danger. [Lizot 1985:151]

Having the ever-present narrator hovering over them has the effect of lending the Yãnomamö an unreal quality, as if they were characters in a play rather than people going about their daily lives. It also arouses cravings for the exotic. Even though hidden from view, Lizot is reflected on the Yãnomamö figures he creates. Here is an ethnographer who weaves a plot of characters where certain things are done: daily chores, quarrels in the village, raids against other villages, shamanism, magic spells, and a lot of sex. But rather than just letting the Yãnomamö do them, he makes them perform them, as if intent on amusing an audience that is always there, waiting for the next skit. Perhaps having Chagnon just across the river, at least some of the time, and missionaries all around would be enough to make anyone self-conscious and stage-oriented. Provoking as it is, nevertheless, Lizot's sometimes-belabored style has the effect of nearly stifling the Yãnomamö, who go about the text displaying their Yanomaminess as *dramatis personae* in a script. They seem to depend, more than usually, on the narrator to control their moods and actions. Yet, oddly enough, or perhaps for this very reason, his Yãnomamö are less adventuresome, less vivid, and somewhat more cynical than Chagnon's. The same could be said of Lizot himself, as mirrored on his own writing.

The interesting quality of his narrative is not diminished by these remarks; it is an engaging and lively piece of writing, as, for instance, in the village scene where visitors sojourn:

> The shelter hums with overflowing life. Long-sustained, shrill, and repeated cascades of laughter flare up everywhere, provoked by jokes or funny memories. News items are passed along, often amplified and distorted; tattletales take delight in gossip and scandalmongering. Plans are laid, never to be realized. Youths compete for the girls' attention, and jealous, suspicious husbands tighten their vigilance. Special friendships are strengthened, others are born. Personal alliances are formed, jealousness and hatreds are set off. What dominates, however, is the breath of friendship that circulates through the whole shelter, warm as a fire after a drenching rain. [Lizot 1985:127]

Picturesque prose such as this compensates for lack of depth. Lizot does not reveal any particular theoretical inclination when it comes to *Tales of the Yanomami.* Loosely woven, his narrative lets people in and out of view, leaving behind vi-

gnettes that succeed each other with no recognizable line of development, as if at random. With perhaps one exception, there are no portraits, only snapshots or camera sequences.

Lizot makes an effort (or so he claims) to minimize the image of the fierce Yãnomamö, which is laudable but not entirely successful. Women are still brutalized, at least some of them; men are still aggressive and warmongering, at least some of the time; youths are still a nuisance to adults, at least to some adults. What is especially disturbing is that Lizot's Yãnomamö seem to be so very whimsical in their nastiness, inflicting pain on others for no other reason than that it strikes their fancy. This, too, contributes to the impression of characters on stage. In the attempt to free his text of any cluttering academic jargon, Lizot falls into the other extreme, with the unfortunate result of making his protagonists seem rather inconsequential. In this respect it is interesting to point out that the English title captures the spirit of the book much better than the original, *Le Cercle des Feux: Faits et Dits des Indiens Yanomami,* as a series of stories, tales, where the deeds and words of the Yanomami are heavily filtered by an overdose of what Sperber has called "free indirect speech" (1985:18).

Like Chagnon, Lizot attributes to the women the aggressive behavior of the men: "Men fight first of all because they are competing for the possession of women" (Lizot 1985:114). Also like Chagnon, he finds war to be a constant. But unlike Chagnon, Lizot attempts to put violence into a more balanced perspective, even though his tales go a long way to undermine his initial claims:

> I would like my book to help revise the exaggerated representation that has been given of Yanomami violence. The Yanomami are warriors; they can be brutal and cruel, but they can also be delicate, sensitive, and loving. Violence is sporadic; it never dominates social life for any length of time, and long peaceful moments can separate two explosions. [Lizot 1985:xv]

He feels the need to assert that "these Indians are human beings" (Lizot 1985:xv).

If that is so, why do these two authors place so much emphasis on violence? They can hardly describe a trip to the garden without getting involved in stories of aggression, sometimes with gory details. Are the Yãnomamö of the Orinoco-Mavaca region forever giving each other a hard time, do they tailor their figures to impress their ethnographers, or could it be the other way around? Other tribal societies have been reported for their violent practices, such as the headhunting Jivaro and Mundurucu, or the Guaikuru, for instance, yet violence has not stuck to their ethnographic reputation in any outstanding way compared to the Yãnomamö. Chagnon claims that the sensationalism built around the Yãnomamö has to do with the fact that their aggressive behavior is not something of the past, but still goes on and can actually be witnessed by fieldworkers. Not entirely convincing, this argument raises some issues which will be expounded in the last section of this article.

Intellectual?

Bruce Albert rebels against what he calls lyric impressionism and the myth of violence. His long doctoral dissertation (833 tightly typed pages) departs drastically from both Chagnon's and Lizot's books. The nature of his text is more Malinowskian in its unrelenting ethnographic detail and realism than anything we find in the other two authors or, for that matter, in most ethnographies. His position is quite clear in this respect:

> The impressionism more or less lyric with which one might describe their way of life and its framework seems to me . . . to be much less satisfying than the theoretical effort to do justice to the complex intricacies of their intellectual universe. [Albert 1985:136–137]

It is possible to read this passage and, adding the impact of the plethora of ethnographic data that follows, interpret it to suggest that justice to the people studied is in direct proportion to the theoretical effort and the toiling of the ethnographer who attempts to unravel the tangle of ethnographic material. Following this line of reasoning, as a parenthetical remark, I would like to touch upon another dimension of ethnographic writing. Since reality can never be exhausted—some say it may not even be representable—anything that the ethnographer chooses to concentrate on, no matter how detailed, is always the result of a personal option. Ethnographic facts are not out there on the ground to be picked up by the competent anthropologist, but are the result of a complex process of give-and-take in the interaction between observer and observed. On the other hand, for whom he writes and what he writes about have immediate bearings on how the ethnographer writes. Rich ethnographies are always welcome, but a flood of ethnographic detail, although a valuable reservoir for anthropological thinking, may not necessarily do more justice to the people than an impressionistic piece, if all it does is bore the reader and pass unnoticed. Fortunately, this is not Albert's case.[6]

Guiding his remarkable ethnographic effort is the model of structuralism, the search for mental structures that would counteract catchy epithets and facile characterizations:

> "Fierce people" or "Amiable savages," the Yanomami appear all too often in the literature dedicated to them as lacking the taste for a *"pensée sauvage"* and cut a poor figure among lowland South American societies reputed for their profuse "idealism." In this work we hope, therefore, to also contribute to reestablish an image of their culture which can be more congenial with reality. [Albert 1985:137]

Reality in Albert's work is revealed in a long, highly elaborate and complex interlocking set of symbolic realms, which he chooses to cluster around the central theme of representations of disease. This rich, symbolic apparatus, in turn, makes sense of much of what goes on in political and social affairs. Since I am dealing with an unpublished dissertation, a summary of its major thrust must be provided, even at the risk of distortion and impoverishment. It is an intricate weaving of a lush symbolic world that defies any urge for brevity.

Like a Magister Ludi, Albert constructs a refined glass bead game, in which each pearl of information is expandable into a universe of its own. The Yanomam concept of blood is the thread holding the pieces together, be it the blood of enemies (in substance or in symbol), or of first menstruation. Too little of it makes time go too fast, too much of it makes time go too slowly. In the oscillation between prolonged immaturity and precocious senility resides the secret of keeping the world in order by obeying death and puberty rites. What causes disease and death is not a simple matter. It requires a long march through layer upon layer of esoteric and practical native knowledge.

Albert starts his analysis with a schematic account of village distribution, their historical interconnections, marriage networks, matters of residence and descent: a preliminary skeleton onto which much symbolic flesh will be attached in the remainder of the work. That is followed by a richly detailed presentation of how the Yanomam person is constructed and what its strengths and weaknesses are. It is the vulnerability of the human (that is, Yanomam) body that permits the formulation of an array of magical procedures designed to attack or protect various kinds of people, that is, coresidents of the same communal house, allies, actual enemies, potential enemies, and those totally unknown. Thus, there are five spheres of social cognition to which an intricate ideology of magical aggression is applied. Yanomam war, Albert says, is better for thinking than for killing (Albert 1985:98). And think they do, all the way from the practical business of cultivating and preparing magical plants to the endowment of supernatural powers to material and nonmaterial entities.

Of course, expressions of violence are not limited to warfare, which by Albert's account is relatively rare. Violence includes such things as physical and magical assault, but never in a blind or capricious fashion:

> . . . everything is done in Yanomam culture so as to channel violence by avoiding it or by providing it with formal frameworks: the rules for expressing anger, the ritualization of confrontation (duels, war), or its attendant loop-holes (humor, generosity). [Albert 1985:98]

The degree of virulence of magical formulas and attacks defines the tenor of political relationships between villages. Magical agents (what Albert calls "pathogenic powers") include the use of special plants, dirt with footprints, shaman's assistant spirits, and "alter ego" animals, the obligatory double of every human being (that is, Yanomam). Within the same residential unit there is no incidence of magical attack; among friendly neighbors "sorcery of alliance" is responsible for some illnesses, but not deaths; between enemies "war sorcery" can kill twice as much as it causes diseases; with distant villages ("virtual or ancient enemies") aggressive shamanism can do harm with little killing; and with unknown people, those who live in the outer limits of the social world, the killing of one's animal double is the only way of aggression, resulting in few casualties. It is important to emphasize that one's double is always located far away, in the territory of those people on the fringes of recognized humanity.

Most illnesses can be cured with shamanism, particularly if caused by sorcery of alliance. War sorcery is much more serious and may kill people. Deaths caused by human intention—and most of them are—send the killers into a state of extreme danger and pollution. While the deceased's body is decaying, hung from a tree somewhere in the forest, the killer has to "eat the trace" *(unokaimu)* of his victim. In seclusion, he fasts and remains silent for days, while going through the symbolic motions of cannibalism, eating the flesh, fat, and blood of the deceased. Before he consumes all that, and grease oozes out of his forehead, he cannot return to normal life. His ordeal ends with vomiting, by which time the cleaned bones of the corpse are ready for cremation. Cremation and burial or consumption of the bone ashes ensure the definitive separation of the dead from the living. This system defies, of course, concrete verification, for a killer in one village may not in fact have caused anybody's death. In turn, death in a particular village, when diagnosed as the result of war sorcery, or the killing of an animal double, presupposes the *unokaimu* rite by an alleged killer. The Yanomam do not need empirical proof to have their symbolic system in operation.

Should the killer fail to perform this ritual, he would shrivel away into premature old age. Of crucial importance here is the place of blood in the cosmic order:

> Blood *(iyē)* which irrigates the flesh *(iyēhikë)* thus constitutes for the Yanomamë the fundamental agent of physiological development and for that reason it is the privileged symbolic referent of biological time. [Albert 1985:349]

By the same token, the first menstruation is equally surrounded by ritual care. In seclusion, the young girl fasts and remains silent for days, just like her murderous male counterpart. Should she break the rules of the ritual, a cataclysm would ensue in the form of an ominous flood which, according to mythical lore, would destroy village, people and all, and, last but not least, bring about the Whiteman.

The combination of controlling the blood flow of humans with the care to separate the living from the dead by means of cremation is the backbone of normal life. On the one hand, male death rites maintain the normal time rhythm of the individual and the dead/living distinction; on the other, the female puberty ritual ensures both individual normal timing and an adequate cosmic periodicity.

A universe of intellectual elaboration is opened up by Albert, shedding unprecedented light into Yanomami ethnographic materials. Much of what seems spotty or whimsical in Chagnon's and Lizot's accounts make more sense in view of the symbolic articulations spelled out by Albert. Granting the fact that he has worked with a different subgroup, one can easily recognize within the bounds of family resemblance what would or would not be pertinent to the Yãnomamö of the Orinoco-Mavaca region.

Death, cremation, puberty, magic, and specters are not only good for Yanomam thinking, they are also extremely fascinating for an anthropologist with structuralist inclinations. Albert's work is generous in matrices and tables demonstrating by permutations and combinations that murder and menstruation are

transformations of each other, and are statements about the minds through which they are elaborated. To the extent that Albert allows his formalist vein to take charge, his Yanomam become pieces in a clever intellectual game. This game, however, is not the main gist of his work. The spirit, and often the letter of his study is to pay tribute to the inventiveness and creativity of the Yanomam, a far cry from the rather impoverished figure of Chagnon's "homo bellicosus" or Lizot's "homo/femina eroticus/a." The many contemplative moments in Albert's journey into Yanomam symbolism turn into lively action in the description of a death festival and in the myriad of colorful remarks in his footnotes. There is, however, the sensation of great redundancy in that intellectual universe, as if the Yanomam, or their ethnographer, could not risk having their point lost on others or on themselves.

A diligent and admiring observer, Albert probes into Yanomam minds and lets them talk through long quotations in their language. He only concedes to appear to his public in one short passage and in a footnote, once his credentials as a student of anthropology and assiduous fieldworker have been established in the introduction. In these brief moments he handles material that occupies many a page in Chagnon's book: being deluged with requests for his possessions:

> The ludic paroxysm of the *reahu* [death festival], and even the few instances of respite on that night, will be occupied, for want of something better, in driving to derision one last time (at least for the guests) an ethnographer who too often clings to his notebook: "aren't you asleep? lend me your flashlight! the enemy sorcerers will kill me if I go out for a piss in the dark!" . . . "give me your pen! my body paint is fading away!" . . . "I'm bringing a piece of meat . . . I want a piece of your manioc cake to go with it!" . . . "my thigh itches! I want medicine!" ". . . give me beads right away . . . I'm furious . . . the women refuse me their vaginas!" [Albert 1985:493]

and being reproached for meddling in the secret realm of personal names:

> The ethnographer, impudent and clumsy collector of names of the dead, is often threatened with death right after his blunders. "If you were a Yãnomamë I would have killed you long ago," concluded one of my informants regularly; a genealogist despite himself, he heroically attempted to change his extreme irritation into mere condescendence at the end of our interviews. [Albert 1985:399]

What is highlighted by Albert in these passages is not violence or obnoxious behavior, but the humorist ethos of hedonist men at the peak of a high-power festival, and the humility of an outsider who recognizes how his importune intrusion can drive to its limits the patience of his informants. It is noteworthy that throughout his long dissertation not once does Albert drop a single Yanomam name to identify people. All in all, Albert provides us with a profound, scholarly, and refreshingly new way of looking at the Yanomami, counterbalancing the appeal to exoticism that is present in so much that has been said and written about these Indians.

The Cost of Being Exotic

Popular visions of primitive peoples with bizarre customs are usually generated by travel writers, colonists, and the like, often exploiting cruelty and other shocking practices.[7] These are then followed by sobering, professional works by anthropologists who then attempt to cut down on the exotica and bridge the cultural gap between those primitives and Western audiences. Not so with the Yanomami. The sensationalism that has plagued them has been precipitated by the first publication of *Yãnomamö: The Fierce People* in 1968. A rare occasion in the history of anthropology, for ethnographic writing seldom achieves so much visibility outside academia. But, with the book's success goes the dubious merit of exposing the Yanomami people to a barrage of abusive imagery.

Following in Chagnon's footsteps, Lizot produced a collection of Yãnomamö tales (originally published in 1976), which was meant to counterbalance the stereotype of fierce people by then attached to the Yanomami. The 1970s and early 80s have been prodigal in outlandish stories told in film and book about these wild Indians of South Venezuela (for a number of reasons the Brazilian Yanomami have been spared much of this). A particularly hideous example was a film called "Canibal Holocausto," an Italian production with an all-white cast purportedly depicting Yanomami Indians engaged in extraordinary orgies of cannibalism and sadistic relish. Its pornographic content was so extreme that the Swiss government prohibited its exhibition, so the story goes; it was also denounced by the Interamerican Indigenist Institute during a meeting held in Ecuador in 1981.

Less delirious but also controversial is *Shabono,* a book authored by Florinda Donner, whose identity remains somewhat mysterious. At play in the fields of Amazonia, somewhere in a nonidentified piece of Venezuelan jungle, Donner tantalizes the reader with great adventures and love affairs with the Indians, thus detonating a minor scandal in the profession (Holmes 1983; Picchi 1983; see also Pratt 1986). Indeed, there seems to be no end to sensationalism when it comes to the Yanomami. Recently, another North American anthropologist, Ken Good, has made his debut into the Hall of Fame via *People* magazine (19 January 1987:24–29), by telling the story of his marriage to a Yãnomamö girl. Profusely illustrated, the article picks up on her newly acquired taste for Philadelphia's junk food. Good is quoted as saying:

> That's all she wants to eat [unsalted french fries]. That and plantains. Bananas won't do, so I spent half my time buying out the city's supply of plantains. Then there's all the tobacco leaves I buy. She rolls them in wads, then puts one behind her lower lip and that keeps her satisfied for hours.

As husbands go, it could be worse, or so Chagnon might perhaps say. At this Yãnomamö girl's expense, wild thing turned into a zoo attraction, much mileage is being made into the realm of exotica.

What is there about the Yanomami that so ignites white men's and women's imaginations? Bruce Albert calls it "*nostalgie de l'exotism*" (Albert 1985:3). Let us take a closer look at this idea. Exoticism is not created by a particular subject

matter as such, but by the mode of expression used to describe it. The exotic, says Stephen Foster, "is thereby reified and institutionalized, no longer a metaphor for the culturally unknown." With rhetorical devices, one can create "the illusion that the exotic is in the world rather than of the imagination" (Foster 1982:27), a point magnificently demonstrated by Said in his *Orientalism*.

Granting that Chagnon or any of us "Yanomamists" must have appeared to the Yanomami as exotic in the extreme—eating phallic sausages or inserting contact lenses into one's eyeballs—neither he nor any of us have ever had to worry about the consequences of their judgment for the future of our lives or those of our compatriots. At the time of our first meeting them I am sure the Yanomami did not think of that either. It is when missionaries, government agents, and private entrepreneurs close in on them, demanding that they become more like us (whoever those "us" may be) that the awareness of themselves as being exotic dawns on them. There is no possible symmetry in the mutual disjunction that Indians and anthropologists feel in their first encounters. The consequences of exoticism may be cute for the latter but can become devastating for the former.

The idiom of exoticism has served the West in its crusades of conquest for a long time, but certainly ever since a feather-cloaked Tupinambá Indian was displayed at the French court in the 16th century. What that Tupinambá experienced then may not have been so very different from what Rerebawë, Chagnon's close informant, felt when the anthropologist took him to see Caracas to be convinced once and for all of the vastness of the white man's world (Chagnon 1983:192–198); a mind-boggling, sobering lesson on differential power.

In this day and age, when exotic customs are said to be in short supply, the Yanomami come in handy as scenarios for the projection of narcissistic fantasies which, in turn, are fed into the rhetoric of the "civilizers." From rhetoric to action there is but a short distance. In a world that sees Amazonia as one of the last frontiers to be tapped for its mineral and floral riches, there is little room for tolerance of quaint, unpalatable primitiveness. The more the Yanomami are represented as fierce, immoral and otherwise unchristian, the more easily it is to justify their subjugation, a measure deemed necessary by the powers-that-be if those riches are to be attained. Perhaps inadvertently—and here goes the benefit of the doubt—anthropologists have made their contribution to all that. Foster's timid suggestion that "it may at times have been a pursuit of the exotic rather than the pursuit of an understanding of human society which motivated and motivates anthropologizing" (Foster 1982:30) echoes through Yanomamiland with a disquieting ring of *déjà vu*.

When Bruner says that both anthropologist and Indian are coauthors of ethnographic writings because they are "caught in the same web, influenced by the same historical forces, and shaped by the dominant narrative structures of our times" (Bruner 1986:150), he is talking about a situation of long centuries of contact between North American Indians and whites. Even so, it is questionable whether even the acculturated North American Indian speaks the same ethical and political language as his white ethnographer; and becomes much less likely of indigenous peoples such as the Yanomami who have so far lived according to their

own historical forces. They are caught in the same web only by the appropriation that the anthropologist makes of them. Not even the "unhappy conscience" of a self-perceived exotic Yanomami would make him automatically coauthor of, say, *The Fierce People*. Coauthorship takes more than being the subject of a narrative or contributing to the idiom that will be woven into it. I have no qualms against Bruner's assertion that "narratives are not only structures of meaning but structures of power as well" (Bruner 1986:144), so long as the authority of the writer is properly established and recognized. To attribute power where there is none may be as insidious as hiding behind the rhetoric of the exotic.

The consequences of what one writes can go much farther than one might have intended in the first place. Lizot (1970) was the first to point out the risks of exaggeration when he took Ettore Biocca (1971) to task for having edited an account depicting the Yanomami as brutes who, among other things, were in the habit of bashing the heads of little babies against tree trunks. The reputation that such writing generated, argued Lizot, would only supply the national (and international) powers with ammunition for the repression of the Yanomami.[8] Yet one does not assassinate character with impunity. Like Lizot, other anthropologists in Venezuela, Brazil, and elsewhere have objected to such manifestations of insensitivity and have positioned themselves in defense of Yanomami rights, aware of the commitment that goes with our profession.[9]

Much of the work by Anglo-Saxon anthropologists shows that they are not usually concerned with the ethical or political implications that their writings may have for the people they write about. The tradition of telling-it-like-it-is, which values truth above anything else, has downplayed the importance of the anthropologist's social responsibility. An unshakable faith in the notion that one can discover truth and truth shall make one free of responsibility has kept the limits of commitment quite narrow. Now aware of the power that ethnographic writing can have, Chagnon makes a belated and rather dubious as well as presumptuous attempt to call attention to the need for protection of the Yanomami:

> I also hope that my Brazilian and Venezuelan colleagues understand that there are still some very noble people in the remaining isolated and uncontacted Yãnomamö villages who are able to, as Dedeheiwä once proudly told me, teach foreigners something about being human. They are, as one of my anthropology teachers aptly phrased it, our contemporary ancestors. [Chagnon 1983:214]

Exotic indeed![10]

It might be worth remarking that the image of fierceness of the Yanomami has not reached Brazil—in part, no doubt, because Chagnon's book has not been translated into Portuguese and has, therefore, a very limited circulation. More important, however, than this perhaps not so fortuitous oversight, is a very different attitude with regard to the ethics of our métier. The anthropological profession in Brazil cannot afford to ignore the political implications of its own production, given that it is fairly visible as a social agent and thus rendered accountable to a wider and often critical public. To do anthropology in Brazil is already in itself a political act. Academic and politically critical matters are part and parcel

of the same professional endeavor where the quality of the former is not jeopardized by the practice of the latter. This commitment to uphold the social responsibility of the anthropologist is all the more apparent in the field of Indian studies, given the activism of most Brazilian ethnologists who study indigenous peoples. The Indian question is a particularly privileged field for the exercise of a twofold project of academic work and political action. There are reasons for this. Indian peoples are the most dramatic example of oppression for the fact of being different. Also, until recently, they had neither place nor voice in the national arena, a gap that was filled by committed whites, among them, anthropologists (see Ramos 1986a). One of the most imposing aspects of their lives is, naturally, contact with the dominant Brazilian society. There are in Brazil studies of mythology, ritual, kinship, and other matters considered nonpolitical, but virtually all of us, Brazilian ethnologists, have also worked, either through writing or through action, or both, in the political arena of indigenous affairs. We might say that the trademark of Brazilian ethnography has been its focus on interethnic contact with its ramifications in the historical, dialectical, and political components of the fundamental asymmetry that characterizes Indian-white relations. In our view, no Indian society can any longer be studied as if it were isolated, unaffected by the surrounding populations. Even Albert's Yanomam, for all the autonomy of their rich intellectual world, have to cope with invasions, epidemics, decimation, and prostitution, and the authoritarian rule of the nation-state to which they are increasingly submitted. As shown by Albert, the Whiteman has already made his entry into that world.

I do not wish to glorify the ethos of Brazilian anthropologists, for, if we look for them, we can easily find what may be called ethical pitfalls and academic weaknesses in their discourses. I simply want to point out the difference between their posture and that found in other national anthropologies, particularly of the so-called First World, vis-à-vis indigenous societies. Perhaps also because the Indians are geographically, if not socially, closer to us, they are not burdened with the same load of exoticism as one finds in anthropological writings elsewhere. Books have been written by ethnologists (Melatti 1983; Ramos 1986b) for the explicit purpose of informing the public about Indian societies, highlighting the importance of knowing their customs beyond the packaged simplifications of stereotypes. Thus, they emphasize the legitimacy of different ways of life and point out how dangerous cultural misunderstanding can be to indigenous peoples. The time invested in the writing of such books, diverting us as it does from high-power intellectual endeavors, is not regretted; publications of this sort reach a certain slice of the public and do have an effect, small as it may be.

Far from being the savage baby killers depicted in the English language, the Yanomami have become associated with the political struggle of indigenous peoples in that country. While Euro-American audiences, be they susceptible undergraduates or cocktail party small talkers, indulge in embroidering images of Yanomami fierceness, in Brazil a large number of people dedicate a lot of their energy to pressuring the government to abide by the existing Constitution and legislation, which guarantees these and other Indian peoples their rights to land, health care,

and cultural autonomy. Repeated measles epidemics and other contagious diseases have taken a heavy toll of Yanomami lives; the continuous incursions of miners, the tearing open of their territory by futile roads, the constant threat of colonist invasions have all contributed to the state of extreme vulnerability and insecurity in which the Yanomami are now living. Rather than being the epitome of primitive animality, the Yanomami have become a symbol of pristine good life endangered by the brutality of capitalist expansionism. Thus a different stereotype has been created; side by side with important and committed efforts to protect the land and freedom of choice of the Yanomami, there is a whole rhetoric of conservation that clings to the romantic idea that a good Indian is a naked, isolated Indian. Perhaps also inadvertently, Brazilian anthropologists have, no doubt, contributed to it. But that is another story that will some day be told.

Notes

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[1]Beverley Gartrell (1979) considers at length divergences between hers and Mariam Slater's ethnographic results from fieldwork in East Africa. See also Goldfrank (1956), Thompson (1956), and Bennett (1956) on this phenomenon. I am grateful to Bruce Grant and Vincent Crapanzano for having brought these articles to my attention.

[2]Chagnon's complaint that his colleagues misspell Yãnomamö is foreshadowed by his own persistence in ignoring subcultural variations. While Yãnomamö is the autodenomination of one language group (the other three, to the best of my knowledge, are Yãnomam, Sanumá, Shiriana or Ninam; see Migliazza 1972), some sort of consensus is beginning to gather around the term Yanomami as the designation for the language family as a whole. Chagnon's apprehension that spelling Yãnomamö as Yanomami runs the risk of becoming Yanomami is well founded, albeit for different reasons. It is unfortunate, however, that he gives the impression that his study applies to all of the nearly 18,000 Yanomami, both in Brazil and Venezuela. This is no mere quibble. The richness of this indigenous group resides, among other things, in the variation that exists among the subgroups. Being one of the first anthropologists to do intensive and prolonged research among them, Chagnon had initially no reason to suspect big differences. However, there is now a growing body of material from other parts of Yanomamiland that clearly shows considerable variation. It is tempting at times to pitch Chagnon's descriptions against one's own when we come across flagrant differences, but it would be as inappropriate to disagree on matters of substance as it is for him to insist on uniformity, as if the entire language family were one undifferentiated monad.

[3]Quotations from Chagnon's book refer to its 1983 third edition, unless otherwise stated.

[4]See, for instance, the last section of the third edition, subtitled "Balancing the Image of Fierceness."

[5]But see, for instance, what David Guss has to say about the Yekuana (1986). Having worked with both groups on the Brazilian side of the border, I can appreciate Chagnon's

admission, even though my inclination goes more easily toward the outgoing Yanomami than to the solemn, no-nonsense Yekuana.

[6]This raises another issue regarding audiences. Albert's work, being a doctoral dissertation, has much more freedom to be maximally thorough in building a *corpus inscriptionum* (Albert 1985:106) than Chagnon's and Lizot's books, directed to a lay audience. Nothing in Albert's dissertation is affirmed without the authentication of indigenous discourse. In sharp contrast with Chagnon and Lizot, where indigenous citations are precious few, Albert's work is laden with them. What can a nonspecialist do with them? On the other hand, his translation of Yanomam passages is free in the French language, which limits its value for the specialists. Albert's compromise may satisfy a doctoral dissertation committee but it does not serve either a strictly "Yanomamist" readership or a wider audience. However, this is a technical problem and should not be insurmountable.

[7]See, for instance, the Ilongot case examined by Rosaldo (1978).

[8]A similar point is made by Picchi (1983) about Donner's *Shabono,* and by Davis and Mathews (1976) about Chagnon's *The Fierce People.*

[9]There is a reasonably large body of papers written by anthropologists in Brazil, Venezuela, and elsewhere regarding the defense of Yanomami land rights and respect for their culture; for example, some documents published by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) in Copenhagen by Lizot (1976), Ramos et al. (1979), and Colchester (1985).

[10]I cannot resist commenting on the fact that, sacrosanct as the secrecy on names seems to be for the Yãnomamö, Chagnon's and Lizot's books are strewn with them. Where does respect for the people studied begin?

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Notes

[5] **Keeping It Oral: A Yekuana Ethnology**
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[8] **Review: [Untitled]**
Reviewed Work(s):
Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the Heart of the South American Jungle by Florinda Donner
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