

SÉRIE ANTROPOLOGIA

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**BRIDGING TROUBLED WATERS:
BRAZILIAN ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND
THEIR SUBJECTS
Alcida Rita Ramos**

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The gates to the 21st century opened up to North American anthropology with a jolt. Stunned by the uproar triggered by the publication -- or rather the electronic announcement of the publication -- of *Darkness in El Dorado*, a journalist's book that offers more scandal than seriousness, the US anthropological community engaged in one of the longest and ugliest contentions in recent times. The late geneticist James Neel and his research team was taken to task by journalist Patrick Tierney for allegedly having provoked a surge of genocidal measles among the Yanomami in the 1960s and 1970s as part of a scientific experiment financed by the US Atomic Energy Commission. In the wake of accusations and counter accusations of unethical behavior on the part of scientists, both hard and soft, a virtual wall was erected and fiercely disputed in what came to be known as the science versus anti-science debate. This chasm was kept open mainly by hard-core believers in the ethical immunity of scientists for whom ethical concerns jeopardize the quest for pure science. In their defense of Neel, and in the name of the sovereignty of Science, the *hardies* fiercely attacked the *softies* and their obsession with research ethics by dismissing as anti-scientific and ideological the latter's argument that science, being a human endeavor, does not justify unscrupulous conduct, especially among indigenous peoples. As in other incensed and politically unenlightened contests, ideology became a dirty word only applicable to the enemy. In turn, a sector of the softies did not miss the chance to drive the stake a bit deeper into the heart of the nearly forgotten specter of Napoleon Chagnon, Neel's assistant in the measles misventure, and creator of the Fierce People, the most triumphant Frankenstein ever produced in anthropological labs.

The annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association in the year 2000, less than two months after the eruption of the *El Dorado* scandal, became a learned stage on which North American academia did a bit of its dirty laundry. To cope with the commotion, the AAA organized task forces and committees to discuss the damage done to anthropology (read US anthropology) caused by Tierney's book. But ethical and political commitment does not spring automatically from committees. Most of these efforts skirted around the core issues of the anthropologist's social responsibility with limp gestures such as an inconclusive fact-finding mission in Venezuela, some phone calls to Brazil, and a preliminary report that pleased the hardies and incensed the softies (a new, long, and more balanced version is now, a year and a half later, posted at the AAA site). Thus, most of the time, the serious implications of

the *El Dorado* charges were reduced to a tedious exercise in academic bickering.

A curious -- and from my point of view, rather exotic -- spin-off from this whole affair was Rob Borofsky's initiative to hold an electronic "Ethics Week" to be aired in April 2002 addressed to US high school kids who would have their computers saturated with texts on how to handle the Yanomami with care. The idea was to raise the teenagers' consciousness to things ethical. Across the US a sea of adolescents would be dedicated to learning about ethics. An unsettling implication of this "Ethics Week" was that for the rest of the year they wouldn't have to worry about such things. Furthermore, how, in the hearts and minds of the US young, was that week to compete with the barrage of patriotism and xenophobia that flooded North American schools and homes following September 11th, I just don't know.

The controversy generated by *Darkness in El Dorado*, apart from professional bitterness, is a good opportunity to activate long due discussions on such issues as informed consent in the context of field research, the claims of neutrality of "real" science, and the nature of the social responsibility of the anthropologist as fieldworker and author. But my feeling is that to keep our professional focus on these issues we have to swim against the tide of a growing industry of globalized and superficial ethical gestures.

Take informed consent. How informed must consent be in order to insure that what is applied in the field is not simply subtle coercion or friendly persuasion? How is it constructed in the field, is it passed as a benign version of the infamous Spanish *requerimiento* of early colonial days, that is, an empty protocol, or is it the object of prolonged negotiations? Is it established the day you set foot on a village whose inhabitants do not speak your language, or months later, when you can communicate with your hosts with a minimum of competence? Can it be verbal or does it have to be signed? Is a written form of consent a sure warranty against abuses? How empowered must a receiving community be to exercise control over the researcher's acts? Who regulates this process, is it the host community, the host country, the researcher's professional association, or the researcher's government? Taken to its logical conclusion, would informed consent inhibit and in due course even obliterate research? What would absence of research mean for the peoples studied? It might be interesting to compare the ways in which two different countries reacted to the issues raised by the *El Dorado* scandal.

The North American Anthropological Association faced the problem by creating a fact-finding task force pragmatically aiming at an objective and "informed" conclusion about what happened 35 years ago. Even if it were possible to establish to everyone's satisfaction that Neel and Chagnon had done the wrong thing, what then? The case was conveniently clouded so as to preclude a definitive conclusion, thus sparing the US anthropological community the decision of what to do about it. The issue of ethics and its vast consequences to the profession very rarely transcended the limits of the Yanomami case about which accusations and apologies proliferated. The Yanomami became, once more, a mere tool to gauge the power of contending parties. The storm that drove US anthropology to panic was insufficient to change its academic routine in a significant way. Other storms have fallen over North American anthropologists, from Boas's denunciation of undercover activities by some

anthropologists in 1919 and his subsequent censure by the AAA, to the infamous Operation Camelot, the most notorious of a number of cases in which the US government used anthropological expertise to silence the voices of the discontent who, by the way, happen to be the object of anthropology's master narrative on the value of cultural diversity. While Boas suffered the censure of his peers for denouncing colleagues and for "not representing the opinion of the American Anthropological Association," no voice was raised within the AAA to censure the spies who helped send to death unknown numbers of people who challenged the powers that oppressed them. With this long past of corporatism it is hard to believe that the AAA of the new millenium will act very differently (remember Geertz' "small potatoes").

If US anthropologists seem to be missing the chance to seriously reflect upon the crucial ethical issues regarding their research activities, in Brazil (and surely elsewhere), the *El Dorado* event brought about the opportunity to problematize the ethical and political components of ethnography in its various moments: fieldwork, inscription, and publication, not to mention teaching. Each one of these moments corresponds to a set of issues that must be earnestly considered, for each one can have far-reaching consequences for both the subjects of research and the profession at large. These are issues that include, not only informed consent and its attendant complexity, but also image making and its potential boomerang effect, and commitment or indifference toward research subjects.

To this effect, the Brazilian Anthropological Association organized a series of workshops over a period of two years, starting in December 2000, in various parts of Brazil, to discuss the political, social, legal, educational, and ethical factors involved in research with and on human beings. The Yanomami case was one among several research situations that contributed to illuminate these issues. Informed consent, for instance, was considered at length in terms of both its positive and negative aspects.

The analyses indicated that informed consent is a necessary, but not sufficient provision for the maintenance of ethical parameters in research. State controls are needed, but how much of them? What instruments and organisms are apt to set norms on ethnographic research? What if an excess of control ends up choking one of the most precious aspects of the long term ethnographic experience, which is the complicity established between ethnographers and their research subjects? Obviously, a discussion that does not contemplate specific anthropological ethos, local particularities, differences in state intervention, and distinct patterns of scientific expression will be an idle exercise in generalities. Just to speak in terms of a generic Anthropology (usually read as North American or "Center") will no longer do. Our proverbial praise for diversity could not have a more apt site of application than in anthropology itself. Conversely, to put an excessive emphasis on casuistry, as in the US reaction to the *El Dorado* episode, and failing to use specific cases as springboards for a wider and deeper discussion of principles is to bury the possibility of setting new standards under the cover of the anecdotal. Old ethics may die hard, but they are beginning to show their age.

Anthropological research in Brazil, whether by Brazilians or foreigners, is subjected to a series of controls that are tighter when fieldwork is done among indigenous peoples. Research proposals have to be approved by the National Indian

Foundation (FUNAI), the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), by the indigenous community involved, and now by a new Council for Research Ethics (CONEP). CONEP was created with the main purpose of controlling biomedical research and inhibiting cases of biopiracy. But, in what many of us judge to be an excess of zeal and even a certain abuse of power, CONEP, whose members are mainly biomedical scientists, has ascribed to itself the role of evaluator of ethnographic projects. In a heated debate during one of the ABA workshops held at the University of Brasilia in 2001, the CONEP representative heard the many arguments that anthropologists presented against the lumping together of biomedical and ethnographic research. One of these arguments is the enormous difference between doing research *on* human beings and *with* human beings¹. In the first case, collecting samples of people's physical substances most often intrudes in the people's lives and beliefs much more deeply than collecting myths or kinship charts. To evoke the Yanomami once more, the ethnographic record, built on research *with*, not *on* them, points to the vital importance of blood and other substances to the destiny of the living and the dead, especially if these substances fall into enemies' hands. This is why the Yanomami are so upset with the news that the blood of their relatives, many of them now dead, is circulating in foreign lands completely out of their control. Despite the revolt of the Yanomami who follow up the case against the bribery that permitted the expatriation of their blood, they are now less concerned with what happened 35 years ago than with retrieving their people's (and their own) blood, preferably with compensation for the moral damage the whole affair caused them.

The often invoked argument that it is very difficult to explain the purpose of, for instance, a genetic research to a community whose language you don't speak or, worse, who couldn't possibly understand the complexities of western scientific thinking even in their own language, camouflages either linguistic incompetence on the part of the researcher or indifference to what the people may think. The recent experience of the Yanomami who have been successfully admitted to the official body of microscope technicians after relatively short periods of training belies such patronizing arguments. They know enough about the ethology of malaria, western style, to do their technical job splendidly. There is nothing that an honest attitude and professional aptitude cannot decipher to the people's satisfaction.

The problem, especially for ethnographers, is the time involved to allow the researcher to gain fluency in the people's language and escape the often misleading interpreters' interpretations. In the 1960s and 70s to get informed consent from the Yanomami required either recourse to missionaries as interpreters or months of language learning before minimally intelligible messages could be uttered. It is precisely this need for a prolonged stay that permits ethnographers to develop a reasonable degree of complicity that frequently, but by no means always, reverts in their political engagement in the defense of the people's rights.

If, at the stage of data collecting in the field, biomedical research can impinge

1. Directly relevant to this discussion is the commentary by Luís Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira to the Workshop in Anthropology and Ethics held by the Brazilian Anthropological Association (ABA) in the city of Porto Alegre, December 14-15, 2000.

on the people much more directly than ethnographic inquiries, the post-fieldwork effects may not be so different. Transforming biological materials into laboratory goods with market potential is not necessarily a lesser evil than character assassination through ethnographic imagery. Again the Yanomami are an icon of both. What is worse, to have blood samples circulating in US labs with the expectation that some day Yanomami DNA will become a valuable commodity, or to have their ethnographically contrived image as fierce and perverse kicking around the world? And what about teaching, when beguiled professors feed generations of graduate kids with the ingredients of Leviathan at the expense of a distant people who have nothing to do with western anxieties, and are far from being the living example of the war of all against all?

Since I trust the power of dialectics, I see the repercussions of the Neel/Chagnon scandal as containing in themselves the potential for new and more interesting intellectual prospects. On the one hand, anthropologists of various nationalities and persuasions can now seize this opportunity to seriously reflect upon their role in the world as social and political agents. On the other hand, peoples such as the Yanomami are increasingly wiser in their interactions with outsiders. The problems raised in *Darkness in El Dorado* have the great potential of awakening the Yanomami to a new set of issues they previously either ignored or were impotent to handle. The cyber revolution, which has served movements such as the Mexican Zapatistas, is now opening new channels for the Yanomami as well. Internet round tables are in the air², and one of the ideas that now circulate is the possibility of a lawsuit by the Yanomami to retrieve the blood samples taken from their villages by the Neel/Chagnon team more than three decades ago and demand compensation for the harmful effects on their well being generated by the researchers' unethical behavior.

Portrayed the world over as the most primitive people on earth, thanks to the personal leaning of a not so distinguished US anthropologist, the Yanomami are now coming to the position where they can superbly refute this decades-old abusive imagery by showing, for example, their competence in one of the most cherished western fetiches, that is, formal education. They read, they write, they master the microscope and soon the computer. In seven years of schooling, the Yanomami in Brazil, assisted by anthropologists, produce their own texts, read malaria slides, demand more courses, and enchant the team of Brazilian teachers with their lively intelligence and thirst for western knowledge. Through what sort of warped spectacles is it still possible to label the Yanomami the most primitive people on earth? Perhaps through what Verena Stolcke called cultural fundamentalism, now raging over parts of Europe.

On another front, Brazilian anthropologists are constantly requested by the State to provide expert reports not only on matters of land demarcation, but increasingly on ethnic definition. This is a complex issue that I have no time here to expand. I will limit myself to a brief description of some of the problems involved.

2. See www.publicanthropology.org; www.anth.uconn.edu/gradstudents/dhume/darkness; www.tamu.edu/anthropology/Neel.html. See also Document 2 titled *Research and Ethics: The Yanomami case (Brazilian contributions to the Darkness in El Dorado controversy* published by the Brazilian NGO, Pro-Yanomami Commission in 2001).

The proliferation of demands all over the country by groups of people who now claim indigenous or African ancestry, and hence the right to a specific territory, has occupied FUNAI officials and State attorneys in the arduous task of deciding on the authenticity of these claims. We now witness the rising tide of ethnogenesis that hits the shores of ethnic politics with a force most of us are not prepared to deal with. In the absence of parameters to decide on such delicate issues, anthropologists are called upon to do the job, as if we were by definition the natural holders of all knowledge needed to clarify all doubts. Obviously, being ethnically invisible, these groups have never been the subject of ethnography, but common sense expects anthropologists to be able to say something intelligent about everyone everywhere. It is flattering to see all this faith in our capacities, but this flattery is also a trap and can have a high cost. In the absence of in-depth ethnography, we have seen cases of different anthropological reports making totally opposed judgements about the same people's claims to indigeneity: are the people who call themselves Caxixó Indians Indians or not? One anthropologist says no, a second one says yes, and a third one is summoned to give the final word (which in this case was yes). This episode entailed more guess work than thoughtful ethnographic reflection. The uneasiness that such cases generate in the profession does not seem to convince State authorities that anthropologists don't have magical powers of divination that would replace the lengthy and painstaking field research. They need to decide now and they can't wait for protracted field results.

Situations of this sort are routine in anthropological circles in Brazil and elsewhere, perhaps in most of Latin America. The role of Brazilian anthropologists as public actors is widely recognized by the nation due to our long and sustained commitment to ethical and political issues involving our research subjects. I couldn't help noticing the contrast between our position in this respect and that of anthropologists in the United States, when I heard the complaint of a US colleague specialist in the Middle East who showed his deep frustration for being ignored by the media in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. In the absence of a tradition of engaged anthropologists, in which Margaret Mead is a solitary exception, US media turned to their own club of public figures of which anthropologist don't seem to be members.

Now tackling a slightly different issue, all this discussion is to show that the ethical and political engagement of Brazilian anthropologists has pushed them into situations that compel them to look for new research strategies. Involvement in the public sphere of human and ethnic rights necessarily influence the anthropologist's choice of research topics, which in turn requires methodological means and theoretical moorings seldom found in the profession's traditional tool kit³. In other words, the militant activities of the anthropologist are not secluded from the academic interests of the profession. Quite the opposite, one nourishes the other.

3. Just to give a few examples of new anthropological interests directly related to ethical postures we can mention the work of Stuart Kirsch and Andrea Muehlebach in the United States, Françoise Morin and Saladin d'Anglure in France, Marie Dominique Perrot in Switzerland, Nelly Arvelo-Jiménez, Silvia Vidal and Berta Perez in Venezuela, and among others, João Pacheco de Oliveira Filho and Antonio Carlos de Souza Lima in Brazil.

Let us consider the recent surge of ethnogenesis. The difficulties now facing Brazilian anthropologists regarding issues of ethnic identification are showing us that the current models of ethnographic research in the country are insufficient to equip us to produce the kind of knowledge that is required of us. Neither traditional fieldwork in the villages of a specific group nor the focus on interethnic friction in contact zones, important as they still are, cannot by themselves unravel the intricacies of today's political metaphors and ethnic realities. The persistent eruption of new indigenous and black ethnic identities must be taken seriously and not disparaged as opportunistic gambits to extract benefits from the State (specially land rights). To dismiss the legitimacy of these claims (a not uncommon attitude) is to take the easy way out of the arduous job of finding a theoretical idiom in which to express the complexities of emergent ethnicity and abdicate the privileged role that has been attributed to us. If we are to maintain the position of consultants in these matters, how can we equip ourselves to conclude for or against ethnicity claims?

Along with the meticulous synchronic inquiry we are accustomed to do among uncontested ethnic milieus, a greater emphasis on historicity and social memory is bound to give us elements to compose a picture of the intricate network of interconnected ethnicities which, for a number of historical reasons, have remained underground. Indigenous societies that went on record as having lived in region X and now surface in region Y; groups that now appear to be unrelated, but historiography reveals their common ancestry; peoples who were made to lose their recollections of a past cultural world, but who suddenly meet their version of a Proustian madeleine, experience the force of involuntary memories and the desire to retrieve their identity gone astray.

Take the case of the 19th-century Amazonian uprising known as *Cabanagem*. For a short few months, the rebellion that congregated multitudes of Indians, mestizos, and former black slaves formed a separate State until it was ruthlessly crushed by the army. A huge dispersal followed their defeat and a thick silence shrouded the event, in a traumatic diaspora that left a gigantic trail of mutilated ethnic identities over a large portion of the Amazon. Now -- and a big question is why now, if it is only now, and not before -- segments of the regional population, unsuspected generic *caboclos*, claim indigenous status with the justification that they descend from *cabanos*, the protagonists of the *Cabanagem*. How many other manifestations of this huge network of subterranean ethnicity are still to surface is an issue that awaits both intensive and extensive ethnographic research. It is not hard to visualize a "Deep Amazonia" in the spirit of Bonfil Batalla's "Deep Mexico." We can say the same about the Brazilian Northeast, the present day hub of emergent ethnicities, although I doubt that many Brazilians would envision a "Deep Brazil" as a whole (which raises yet another set of research concerns, more akin to what I have been referring to as the construction of the nation via indigenism).

Moreover, the exhumation of unknown ethnic worlds buried under the weight of steamrolling History, be it by the peoples' own initiative or the result of ethnological curiosity, should strike the definitive blow on the fallacy of the big demographic void

the Amazon allegedly represents, a fallacy created to justify the loot of the region⁴.

Research prospects such as these are directly inspired by the engagement of anthropologists in the world of ethnic politics and show how one can blend anthropological activism with the quest for knowledge.

4. Very interesting and promising in methodological and theoretical terms is the work that Venezuelan anthropologist, Nelly Arvelo-Jiménez has been doing for the last two decades on the ethnic network of the Orinoco River Basin.

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