

The Yanomamo Are Objectified Curios
of the Modern Era

" I have the distinct impression that much anthropological research is carried on for reasons and motives unclear to the anthropologist, as if he were working in a personal moral vacuum. Why Chagnon studies the Yanomamo or Malinowski the Trobrianders and what they hope to accomplish through their study remains vague in their writings. In fact, Chagnon doesn't address the issue at all, he simply arrives in the jungle, does his observation and leaves, apparently somewhat disillusioned by the 'natives', and ultimately quite a bit richer, economically speaking.

'In just a few moments, I was to meet my first Yanomamo, my first primitive man. What would it be like? I had visions of entering the village and seeing 125 social facts running about calling each other kinship terms and sharing food, each waiting and anxious to have me collect his genealogy. I would wear them out in turn. Would they like me? This was important to me; I wanted them to be so fond of me that they would adopt me into their kinship system and way of life, because I had heard that

successful anthropologists always get adopted by their people. I had learned during my seven years of anthropological training at the University of Michigan that kinship was equivalent to society in primitive tribes and that it was a moral way of life, 'moral' being something 'good' and 'desirable'. I was determined to work my way into their moral system of kinship and become a member of their society.'

"Hoping that Chagnon was being facetious, I searched the book for some other place where he might deal with his own motivations. Unhappily, there were none. What we are left with is an incredibly naive and shallow hope that he can be adopted by the Yanomamo, apparently because someone told him that this is what anthropologists do. There is no depth other than this, Chagnon enters the tribe armed with his cultural superiority-- he is going to study 'primitive' man-- collates his findings, all the while trying to trick them into thinking that he is their 'soul brother', and comes home to write a book on 'burly, filthy, naked, hideous men' who

are, according to Chagnon, essentially aggressive. This is supposed to add to our understanding and knowledge of mankind.

"If Chagnon had truly entered into the world of the Yanomamo through dialogue he could never have written this kind of ethnography. Throughout the book, I find a basic lack of respect for the dignity of human beings; the Yanomamo are objectified curios of the modern era. Chagnon's lack of purpose, other than to 'do' anthropology, results in a book that only confirms our cultural superiority and lead^s us further away from true understanding. What Chagnon learned about himself and what he brings back to enhance his own culture is not stated. I think Stanley Diamond's criticism (see, Diamond's, "Anthropology in Question", in Dell Hymes, editor, Reinventing Anthropology, 1969) is apropos here:

'Unless the anthropologist confronts his own alienation, which is only a special instance of a general condition, and seeks to understand its roots, and subsequently matures as a relentless critic of his own civilization, the very civilization which objectifies man, he cannot understand or even recognize himself in others or the other in himself.'

"If, in fact, one basic anthropological tenet is that every culture is as valid an expression of human potentiality as every other culture and every human being within that culture equal to every other human being in another culture, then to enter any culture in any way other than dialogical becomes a contradiction to our shared humanity and an insult to the other."

-- Sister Mary Rogers,
quoted from "Dialogue:
The Liberation of
Anthropology", paper
submitted to Anthropology
531, Boston University,
Summer 1976