



Yanomami

THE FIERCE CONTROVERSY AND
WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM IT

Robert Borofsky

Praise for Robert Borofsky's *Yanomami*

If there is one book that redefines anthropology for the twenty-first century, this is it. It is a ground-breaking study that takes us to the ethical heart of the social sciences. Using the Yanomami controversy as a lens for examining anthropology itself, Borofsky asks anthropologists—from introductory students to advanced scholars—how we should craft the values that define our work and ourselves. This is an essential book for our times. **Carolyn Nordstrom, *University of Notre Dame***

Finally, a text that truly illuminates the issues of anthropological ethics and helps anthropologists to think and act effectively. In the form of an inquest on the Yanomami controversy, Borofsky lets all sides and the AAA be heard in their own words, creating a context where no reader is left to be carried away by any one set of arguments. The debates reveal deep perplexities that lie at the heart of our discipline. Marvelous for undergraduate and graduate teaching and for professionals and equally suited for reflective reading and class discussion, this book will forever change my teaching of anthropology as well as my own thinking.

Fredrik Barth, *Boston University*

What better way to learn anthropology than through one of its great controversies? Written in a lucid and concise manner, *Yanomami* is really two books in one: first, it is a riveting, issues-oriented text that is ideal for sparking interest and provoking discussion among introductory students; second, it is an invaluable analysis of critical disciplinary questions that every anthropologist and anthropologist-in-the-making need ponder.

Alex Hinton, *Rutgers University*

The discipline of anthropology has a great debt to Rob Borofsky, who has given us a careful, deliberate reflection that is both specific and general: specific, because the book takes up a fierce debate that has riven the community of anthropologists, scientists, and health personnel working with the indigenous people of the Amazon Basin; general, because, as Borofsky reminds us, this debate is at heart about the imbalances of power that characterize our world. *Yanomami* is not only a great teaching tool, one shaped by the input of students, but also a cautionary lesson that should be read by all scholars and journalists who work across gradients of class, culture, and language.

Paul Farmer, *Partners in Health*

This is a terrific book for teaching students about the possibilities and practices of anthropology. As ethical individuals and as engaged scholars, we have to confront the deep and ongoing contradictions of anthropology's relationship to the vulnerable peoples it studies. Borofsky shows the potential for revitalizing anthropology in the twenty-first century and challenges students and teachers to work for change right now.

Philippe Bourgois, *University of California, San Francisco*

Yanomami

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Yanomami

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Robert Borofsky

Hawaii Pacific University

WITH

Bruce Albert, Raymond Hames, Kim Hill,
Lêda Leitão Martins, John Peters,
and Terence Turner

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the 119 students who, at a critical time in the Yanomami controversy, heeded the call for involvement and through their thoughtful comments ultimately made a difference in shaping the final El Dorado Task Force Report. (The students' names and college affiliations, where available, are listed below.) We, as a discipline, are in these students' debt. Thank you.

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One might wonder why an anthropologist who has spent the past thirty years residing in Hawaii and three and one-half years conducting fieldwork in the Cook Islands would be writing about the Yanomami controversy. Literally and figuratively, I am far from “home” in working on this book and, as a result, have a number of people to thank for guiding me through the nuances and complications surrounding the controversy. I particularly appreciate the help of two people: Ray Hames and Les Sponsel. Both provided what I view as honest, thoughtful commentary that reached beyond the “boxed” positions of the two opposing camps. The book is much richer for their assistance. I am also deeply grateful to the six participants in part 2’s roundtable discussion: Bruce Albert, Ray Hames, Kim Hill, Lêda Martins, John Peters, and Terry Turner.

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A NOTE TO TEACHERS

What better way to learn about anthropology and how anthropologists practice it than to study one of the discipline's great controversies? It is all here: crucial intellectual and professional questions that confront the discipline, the practical politics of being an anthropologist, and where we go from here as a discipline.

The way anthropology and anthropologists are sometimes presented in textbooks brings to mind the Wizard of Oz. We perceive anthropology (like the wizard) as it wishes to present itself—in ways that inspire awe and respect. *Yanomami: The Fierce Controversy and What We Can Learn from It* lets readers step behind the screen the discipline presents to the world. We gain a sense of what anthropologists, in fact, are like: how they conduct fieldwork, grapple with difficult issues, and live professional lives. One sees the discipline's very human side, up close and clear.

The book is directed at two audiences. Introductory students can read part 1 as a way of “getting their feet wet” with the discipline—learning anthropology by being anthropologists in how they evaluate issues. It is slightly more than a hundred pages and can be read in one week. It provides an overview of the controversy as well as a discussion of the central issues at stake in it. Rather than being told what to think, students have an opportunity to think for themselves about a set of critical disciplinary issues.

Advanced students concerned with contemporary issues—from ethics, research methods, and the uses (and misuses) of ethnography to theory and the discipline's present (and future) dynamics—will also find much food for thought. The book is not only about how anthropologists engage with “others” but about how anthropologists act as a discipline, how they engage with one another—the anthropology of anthropology. Part 2 includes an extended discussion by six experts of the issues at stake in the Yanomami controversy. It constitutes the fullest, most open discussion of the controversy to date. Students are encouraged to wend their way through the various arguments and counterarguments and come to their own conclusions. The last chapter draws students into assessing the discipline and deciding where we might go from here.

Yanomami: The Fierce Controversy and What We Can Learn from It is not meant simply to be read. It is meant to foster discussion and, through that discussion, insight into how anthropology reproduces itself as a discipline. For example, stu-

dents might explore the questions raised in chapter 6 in small groups and then bring their answers back to the larger class for discussion. They might take a particular issue—such as informed consent or just compensation—and develop a class position on it. They might also reenact the part 2 discussion with its arguments and counterarguments.

Embedded in the text are a number of student aids. A personal note to undergraduates suggests how they might effectively read the book, especially the part 2 discussion. A list of movies relating to the Yanomami is provided for teachers to consider showing in class or to have students watch on their own as a supplement to the book. In addition, each section of chapters 8, 9, and 10 presents key points and questions to help clarify that section's arguments. And questions are set out in chapter 6 for students to ponder. Of critical importance is the Public Anthropology Web site (www.publicanthropology.org), where students can gain additional information and, critically, can help foster change.

In using this book, then, students gain insight into

- the practice of modern-day anthropology, not only as an abstraction but as a reality embodied in a controversy with real people;
- the disciplinary dynamics that shape (and reshape) the anthropological enterprise through time;
- ethical and professional dilemmas that lie at the heart of the discipline today; and
- the excitement of anthropology as a field—as something not only to read but also to participate in actively.

A PERSONAL NOTE TO UNDERGRADUATES

Yanomami: The Fierce Controversy and What We Can Learn from It deals with one of the most explosive controversies in the history of anthropology. It has all sorts of ideas that will intrigue you, that will challenge you, that will make you think—just what you want from your college education. But it is important to see the forest through the trees in this controversy, to grasp the bigger picture rather than getting lost in a mass of details. What follows are some reading techniques that you can apply not only to this book but to scores of books in other classes. These techniques will be especially useful in reading part 2.

Deciding on a Reading Strategy

Selecting an effective reading strategy is probably the most important decision you make when you begin a book. Different reading materials require different strategies. (One does not read newspapers, for example, the same way one reads Shakespeare.) Choosing an effective strategy depends not only on the book's subject matter but also on how you are to be tested on it. Multiple-choice exams require a different reading strategy than essay exams.

Focusing on Broad Themes When Reading for Essay Exams

Details are important in relation to the book's overall thesis but less important in and of themselves. To do well on an essay exam, you should know a book's argument and how it is constructed. I refer to this reading strategy as "searching for meaning."

Searching for Meaning

Doing well on an essay exam requires more than passively reading words on a page. You must think about what you are reading and, like a detective, actively put together various pieces of information to grasp the author's meaning. Boiled down to its basics, "searching for meaning" involves four steps:

Using chapter headings and subheadings to gain an overview. Before reading a chapter, skim through it, focusing on the headings and subheadings to get an

overview of what the chapter is about. The section titles of this volume, especially in chapters 8, 9, and 10, are written with this in mind. Thus, for example, a section in Ray Hames's contribution in chapter 8 is entitled "Is the Critique of Chagnon Justified?" You know, just by looking at the heading, what Hames is going to discuss.

Reading by paragraphs. One of the most effective ways to read chapters in a book such as this is to read "by paragraphs." This technique allows you to concentrate on a chapter's main ideas. Reading by paragraphs means focusing on the key sentence in each paragraph, that is, the sentence that enhances the author's overall argument in the chapter.

The key sentence tends to be either the first, second, or last sentence in a paragraph. On first reading, you will usually discover it is best to put a paragraph's details to one side—not to ignore them but to focus on the central issue raised by the chapter as a whole. Later on, after you understand the chapter's overall argument, you have the option of going back through the chapter and noting these details.

Move quickly from paragraph to paragraph, focusing on the key sentence in each paragraph. When you reach the end of a section (that is, a new heading), pause to see if you have grasped the main idea of the section. You might summarize it in a sentence or two.

The object of reading by paragraphs is not simply to get through a chapter quickly. Rather, it is to distinguish details from main themes. It allows you to comprehend the main points of an author's argument.

Reading slowly does not necessarily improve comprehension. It may, in fact, decrease comprehension. The slower you read, the more details you become mired in and the less likely you are to comprehend the chapter as a whole. Also you do not need to know the meaning of each and every word in a paragraph or to recognize each and every citation to grasp the idea of a chapter. Many terms and citations can be understood in a general way from the context. Key terms may be looked up in a dictionary later. Terms or citations that relate to minor points may be set aside during a first reading.

Reconstructing an author's argument. After finishing a chapter, review the chapter's headings and subheadings again. Having read the chapter, you can now reflect on the author's argument: (1) why the chapter moves in a certain direction; (2) what points are central (and which are tangential) to the chapter's themes; and (3) why one point follows another.

Assessing the author's argument. After reading a book, assess the author's argument. Understanding what the author intends to say, you are now in a position to decide to what degree the argument makes sense, to what degree it is sup-

ported by the author's data. Does the author convincingly develop his or her position? Or does the author leave you with unanswered questions?

Instead of conceiving of reading as a passive process—taking in information presented to you—think of reading as an active thinking process. You are searching for meaning from various clues presented in the text. Discovering the clues, making sense of them, is an intellectually stimulating process.

SUGGESTED YANOMAMI / YANOMAMÖ FILMS

The Feast (1970, 29 minutes) Yanomamö feasts are more than ceremonial events. They also have important economic and political implications. In this film one village (Patanowä-teri) invites another (Mahekoto-teri) to a feast to renew an old alliance in the hope of then attacking a third village. *The Feast* won first prize in every film competition in which it was entered. Patrick Tierney asserts the film was staged.

Magical Death (1973, 28 minutes) A study of a Yanomamö shaman in action. Dedeheiwä and a fellow shaman from Mishimishimaböwei-teri conduct two days of rituals in which, through speaking with *hekura*, or spirits, they seek to kill a man from another village. The film's depiction of Yanomamö shamans under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs, with green mucus dripping from their nostrils is graphic. Tierney writes of the film that Timothy Asch (who coproduced many of the Yanomamö films with Chagnon) "begged Chagnon to remove it [the film] from circulation because he had found that his students at USC [University of Southern California] were horrified by the Yanomami's symbolic cannibalism. . . . Chagnon attributed this to jealousy on Asch's part; . . . Chagnon had made the film all by himself, and it won a blue ribbon at the American Film Festival" (2000:112–13).

A Man Called Bee: Studying the Yanomamö (1974, 40 minutes) Provides a sense of an anthropologist (Napoleon Chagnon) at work in the field: his entering a village adorned with feathers, sharing coffee with Dedeheiwä, offering medical help to a baby, and collecting genealogies. The commentary helps viewers understand the problems faced in working in this setting (including the problem Chagnon faced in collecting genealogies).

The Ax Fight (1975, 30 minutes) Discusses an escalating conflict between members of Mishimishimaböwei-teri and guests from another village (who had once belonged to Mishimishimaböwei-teri). The film is divided into four parts: an unedited version that shows what was observed by the camera, an explanation by Chagnon of what transpired, a discussion of the kin relations among the individuals involved, and, finally, a coherent, edited version of the conflict. The film conveys how ethnographic filmmaking, like ethnography, strives to bring coherence out of confusion in making sense of such events. Napoleon Chagnon discusses the contexts surrounding the filming, as well

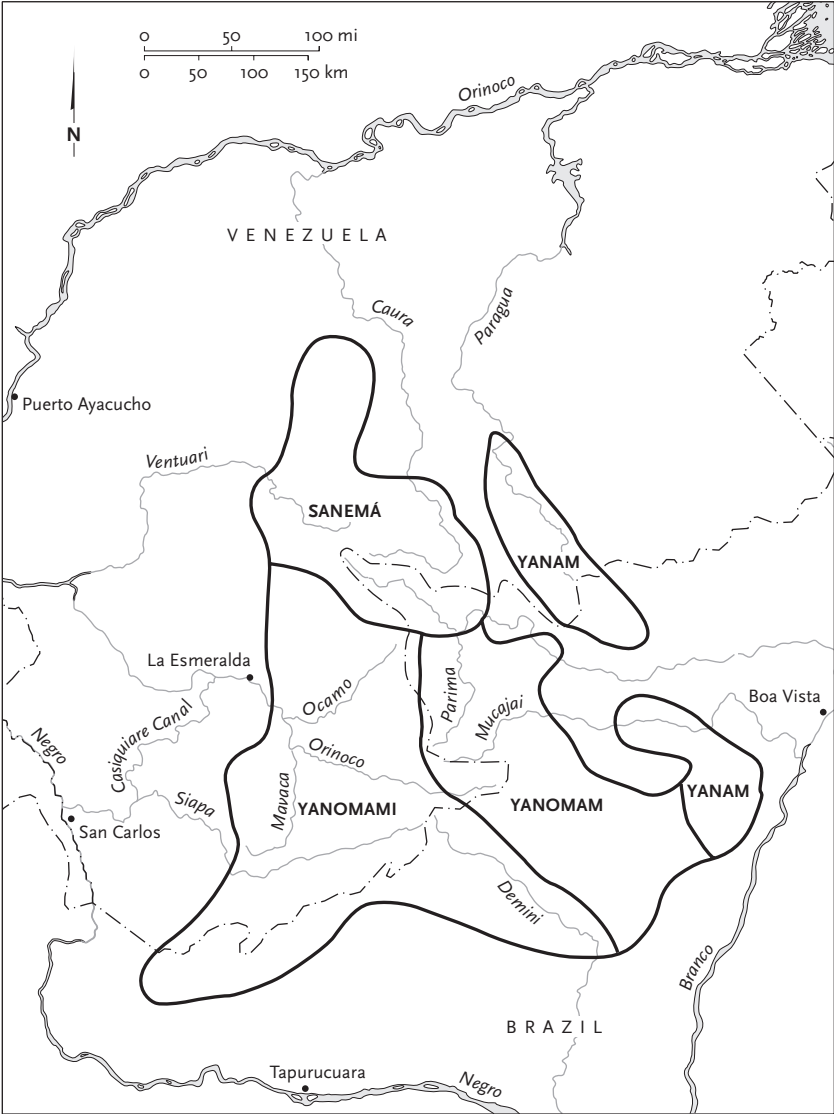
as his strained relationship with Tim Asch, at the Web page “Ethnographic and Personal Aspects of Filming and Producing *The Ax Fight*” (<http://www.anth.ucsb.edu/projects/axfight/updates/filming.html>) and in the CD-ROM “Yanomamö Interactive: *The Ax Fight*.”

Warriors of the Amazon (1996, 56 minutes) Produced by Andy Jillings (for NOVA/BBC), the film portrays a feast that seeks to bring together two formerly opposed villages to form a new alliance. Most of the film was apparently staged, but it presents in vivid terms an event that was not: the death and cremation of a young mother and her child. Most problematic is why the film crew allowed the young mother to die without offering medical assistance. In the preliminary report of the El Dorado Task Force, Jane Hill writes: “It would have been easy to take the woman, who is quite young, perhaps even still a teenager, to the hospital” (AAA 2001b:18). She continues “There is a grim lesson here for us all: decent ordinary people, in the grip of a racializing representation that the film reproduces in almost every dimension, can behave in ways that deeply shocked members of the Task Force . . . and that must have been a dehumanizing experience for the Yanomami” (19).

HELPING THE YANOMAMI

Purchasing this book *new* has important implications: all royalties from the book go to assisting the Yanomami. There are no royalties for the Yanomami if you purchase the book used. (How the royalties are allocated—to which parties in which amounts—is publicly available on the Public Anthropology Web site [www.publicanthropology.org].)

Here is a small but significant way to help the Yanomami that extends beyond good intentions. Your commitment to provide the Yanomami with royalties, combined with similar commitments from others, means that the Yanomami will to some degree benefit from the controversy that has swirled around them and disrupted their lives.



The area where the Yanomami live in southern Venezuela and northern Brazil with the names and locations of the most prominent Yanomami subgroups. (This map is drawn from Roberto Lizarralde's *Grupos Lingüísticos Yanomami*, prepared for the Venezuelan government's census.)