

Center for a
P U B L I C *Anthropology*

September 22-28, 2005

Dear Dr. Weiss,

Dr. Michael Brian Schiffer, an Anthropology professor of the University of Arizona says, "Anthropology is the only discipline that can access evidence about the entire human experience on this planet." While this holds true, our 'access' to this evidence may be controversial at times. Dr. Weiss, although I am just an observer of the Yanomami and clearly do not have your extensive credentials, I strongly believe that your actions concerning the blood samples should be seriously reassessed on behalf of the Yanomami.

Dr. Weiss, you have previously said that you, "and other scientists who have these samples would like to be able to continue studying them. But if this is not the wish of the Yanomami, I would not do so." Your willingness to cooperate with the Yanomami is commendable, but the reality is that the blood is still within the confines of your ownership. Please note, Davi Kopenawa makes it extremely clear that, "the Americans did not respect our custom in this regard. Therefore we want the vials of blood sent back along with everything else they extracted from the blood to study". Furthermore, in a letter from three prominent Yanomami (including Kopenawa), they passionately urge that, "our concern will only end when you return our blood". If these strong words do not propel you to take action, then you are seriously questioning the ethics of your field.

Along with the written wishes of the Yanomami, I believe that it is also your responsibility to follow the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association. The 1998 statement on ethics declares that, "anthropological researchers must do everything in their power to ensure that their research does not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research, or perform other professional activities" (AAA 1998). Standard rules like this are not to be taken lightly, and reinforce the fact that we should respect the long-held values of the Yanomami culture.

Dr. Weiss, the issue regarding the blood samples is not a tug-of-war between vastly different parties, but rather it represents the ability to promote justice in the ever-expansive field of anthropology. I think it is safe to say that it is your duty to respect the wishes of the Yanomami and immediately return the blood of their ancestors. Although the deceased are long gone, we cannot let the present Yanomami continue this sorrowful burden of controversy.

Sincerely,

Maria Liang (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)