

Center for a
PUBLIC *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)

List of Additional Students Supporting Ms. Liang's Letter to You:

Andrew Jadin (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Nida Abbasi (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Allie Feary (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Bobbie Crabtree (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Brittany Boatman (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Valerie Lengerich (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Adenike Adesokan (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Rachel Carlson (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Mai Luttrell (Hawaii Pacific University)
Jeanette Huber (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Alexandra Ritson (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)
Leslie Eme (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Jennifer Ferguson (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Dan Narciso (Pierce College)
Camille Castaneda (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Erika Zaragoza (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Ruo Chen Lin (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)
Lauren Henderson (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Anamae Freehauf (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Jessica Carag (Hawaii Pacific University)
Noah Saunders (Hawaii Pacific University)
Annelise Morris (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Ari Gordon (Pierce College)
Dana Schatz (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Alberto Di Michele (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Abigail Kay (Hawaii Pacific University)
Eleanor Agapito-Mariano (Hawaii Pacific University)
Andrea Henderson (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Jeff Brandt (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Gilberto Juarez (Pierce College)
Elizabeth Finch (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Briana Kearney (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Veronica Garcia (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Natalia Coenen (Pierce College)
Laura Zive (Pierce College)
Qiao Li Huang (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Rachael Mirvish (Hawaii Pacific University)
Brett Siegel (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Jennifer McCluskey (Pierce College)
Janet Villanos (Hawaii Pacific University)
Erin Jacobsen (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Grace Niu (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Clerence (Grace) Galarce (Hawaii Pacific University)

Rikki Cockeram (Hawaii Pacific University)
Danielle Dreben (Pierce College)
Caitlin Bull (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Claire Barker (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)
Mary Bremer (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Jessica Travers (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Brandon Chapple (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Mallory Edgar (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Adrian Mustain (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Sinjen Miller (Hawaii Pacific University)

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

September 22-28, 2005

Dear Dr. Weiss,

I have recently learned of the controversy of the Yanomami and their blood samples. I understand that the subject is a precarious one for you because the blood samples are originally the work of Dr. Neel. As the curator of the samples, you have been thrown into a complex argument surrounding the rights of the Yanomami blood without having a great deal of knowledge regarding the collection of the samples as you pointed out in your response to the letter from the Attorney-General of Brazil.

However, that being said, the responsibility of the blood samples is now in your hands and the Yanomami people are crying out for the return of what they believe to be a sacred part of their ancestors. Your declared willingness to work towards finding a solution is certainly admirable, but no action has been taken after more than two long years of discussion and debate. Words do very little for the Yanomami people. The Yanomami hold the belief that if any part of a deceased person remains, the spirit will not be at peace (Kopenawa). This belief must be respected or else what is the purpose of anthropology?

One of the major reservations I have as an observer of the situation is the question of whether the scientific community has the rights to the blood samples at all. There is no real evidence of formal consent because of the difference in procedures over time. I therefore think it is injudicious to assume that the Yanomami truly understood the full implications of the blood samples. With the strong cultural belief in destroying all remains, I would argue that the test subjects were unaware that their blood would continue to exist once they had passed away. You referenced the questionable methods of obtaining the names of ancestors through bribery. What evidence exists that suggests the ethics of drawing blood was any different? This undocumented consent also may not have been an indefinite consent. In my opinion, the relatives of the deceased Yanomami should now have the rights to the blood samples and a formal, documented consent should be obtained before further study is done on the blood samples.

The proposed solution of offering representative blood samples to the Yanomami tribes is certainly a viable option. However, I think it would be disrespectful to retain Yanomami blood samples without informing the tribal people. The Yanomami deserve the courtesy of honesty. Although little is known about the original sources of the blood samples, the Yanomami people should be granted explanation and be given the option of deciding what they wish to see done with the blood. To retain some of the blood for further study would be an omission of the truth. There should be no continued studying of the Yanomami if the anthropological community's actions are at odds with the desires of the studied culture.

Most importantly, immediate action should be taken. The pleas of the Yanomami leaders cannot be ignored any longer. Apathy is one of the greatest threats to present society and I would encourage you to act now. Please stop the rhetoric and help the Yanomami people gain peace.

Sincerely,

Alexandra Ritson (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)

List of Additional Students Supporting Ms. Ritson's Letter to You:

Ruo Chen Lin (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)
Gilberto Juarez (Pierce College)
Mai Luttrell (Hawaii Pacific University)
Diana Schorry (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)
Mei Tang (Pierce College)
Erika Crawford (Hawaii Pacific University)
Anamae Freehauf (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Rikki Cockeram (Hawaii Pacific University)
Mohammad Saleem (Pierce College)
Dana Schatz (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Sinjen Miller (Hawaii Pacific University)
Lisa O'Brien (Hawaii Pacific University)
Arianna Wheat (Pierce College)
Janet Villanos (Hawaii Pacific University)
Noah Saunders (Hawaii Pacific University)
Jennifer Fongers (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)
Natalia Coenen (Pierce College)
Caroline Thrun (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
MaryAnn Andrada (Hawaii Pacific University)
Danielle Dreben (Pierce College)
Bobbie Crabtree (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Jeanette Huber (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Laura Zive (Pierce College)
Ari Gordon (Pierce College)
Tom Hopkins (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor)
Camille Castaneda (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Jennifer McCluskey (Pierce College)
Brittany Boatman (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Abigail Kay (Hawaii Pacific University)
Jennifer Tomita (Hawaii Pacific University)
Erika Zaragoza (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Clarence (Grace) Galarce (Hawaii Pacific University)
Dan Narciso (Pierce College)
Caitlin Bull (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)

Dr. Robert Borofsky

From: Ken Weiss [kennethweiss@gmail.com]
Sent: Friday, October 14, 2005 12:10 AM
To: borofsky@hpu.edu
Subject: Re: Aloha

Dr Borofsky,

I have always said I would do my best to return samples that were legitimately claimed, if I could identify them and confirm the claim. I understand the reasons the issue has arisen. I hope after your phone call that you have a sense of the potential logistic problems, including the identification of samples. Even for an unambiguous request, I may not have, or may not be able to identify, the samples. They are with 40-year old village locations, labeling and other identifying data, and the original computer files from the 60s and 70s are no longer readable. Villages, such as they were, moved around and were not always precisely located in the records at the time.

Because the Brazilian government has gotten involved, to return any samples, I would need documentation of a kind that they would consider legally satisfactory. Since I don't know who may have their ear, the conditions will have to be made clear by them.

Also, I have to say that I cannot do this through you, whether this upsets you may depend on the sincerity of your interests. Whatever your reason for being involved, and no matter how honorable, I don't know you. In our conversation you seemed fair-minded, but given your location and the intrusive and orchestrated (even if courteous) nature of your contacting me, I must make the ethically conservative assumption that you are not a neutral broker. I have to assume that statements you make about who represents who and the nature and specificity of claims, are part of, or pawns in, a long-standing campaign against Napoleon. I was never in South America and can't pass judgment on that dispute, which means that I will have to check statements of credentials on my own. From the funerary resolution point of view, the other 3 sets of samples must also be considered, if this is to be about the Yanomami rather than satisfying Nap's personal opponents.

Not least of my concerns in this respect is one you should recognize as an anthropologist. You're only the most recent of many contacts I've had over the years of this controversy. Not everyone agrees about who Davi Kopenawa speaks for, nor does everyone agree on what it means to say that he was 'elected' to represent a group. Human groups have factions, in Amazonia as well as academia. In that light, I would need clear and convincing -- and that means somewhat independent -- evidence that I am not being manipulated by anti-Chagnon factions into repeating exactly what they accuse Nap of doing, that is, of outsiders disrupting local social structures. I will need some trustworthy documentation about kinship and political structures, because I won't knowingly send Hatfield samples for McCoys to cremate, desecrate, or gloat over--or to serve as yet another trigger for violence down there. It is not clear who has any business speaking for deceased persons (even within our own culture), which applies to most of the samples.

It is also unclear whether 'village' has enough permanency that one today can represent an identifiable one 40 years ago. Maybe it can, but there needs to be justification to identify the provenance of any samples. Any request for samples will need believable assurance about lineal or other kin or village sociocultural issues. No spokesperson I've heard so far, including yourself, has even acknowledged any such cultural issues, but have treated the return of samples as a unitary and simplistic act. Maybe it can be, but as far as I'm concerned this is strictly about the Yanomami.

Indeed, a few years ago some Yanomami said, as relayed to me by spokespersons, that maybe because of the potential scientific value of the samples they might be willing to have them continue in use, under some agreements. There were even tentative discussions through third parties about what might be appropriate. It didn't seem realistic but the point is that not even every Yanomami thought the samples needed to be returned or destroyed.

In the end, there are ethical as well as practical issues that mean that any return of samples is more complicated than

dumping them in a box and FedExing it to Manaus--or Hawaii. The ethics cut both ways. I won't contribute willingly to grandstanding, coup-counting, or posturing in US academic battles.