

# Witchcraft Accusations in Anthropology

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**W**e anthropologists have the same human foibles as the people whom we study. We have a turbulent social life, with enough superstitions, vices, witch hunts and vitriolic feuds to furnish the shade of Evans-Pritchard with material for a hundred sequels to *Witchcraft, Magic and Oracles among the Azande*.

For us, McCarthyism as witchcraft was no metaphor but an instance of a phenomenon found throughout the world: accusations of malign or deadly influence—often centering on disease or conspiracy—against individuals who are already disliked by one or more cliques. Such accusations are floated experimentally. If the audience seems receptive they circulate as gossip until enough supporters of the projected persecution show themselves. At the same time, the threat of guilt by association pressures family, friends and allies of the target into silence or even denunciation out of self-protection.

If the person accused is disliked by enough people in the village, and the harm is made to seem sinister enough, the accusations are elaborated and enforced as reality on all, regardless of their inherent implausibility or magical nature. The currency of such claims has far more to do with their usefulness in mobilizing opinion against the clique's enemies and in favor of the accusers than their basis in fact. Did Jewish doctors concoct HIV to eradicate blacks? Do US citizens in Latin America kidnap babies for their body parts? The opportunistic persecution of the innocent can be made to look just like the outraged indictment of the guilty, and vice versa. Witchcraft accusations thrive and succeed because of that part in all of us that wants to believe, embroider and pass on bad things about those we dislike.

Being what we study, anthropologists make witchcraft accusations. As Roy D'Andrade commented, this "leads to denunciations of various social practitioners, such as social workers, doctors, psychiatrists, economists, civil servants, bureaucrats, etc., and especially other

anthropologists. Isn't it odd that the true enemy of society turns out to be that guy in the office down the hall?"

Most recently, Terry Turner and Leslie Sponsel circulated a letter resonant with phrases heard before in many times and places: "In its scale, ramifications, and sheer criminality and corruption it is unparalleled in the history of Anthropology" they wrote. "It should cause the field to understand how the corrupt and depraved protagonists could have spread their poison for so long while they were accorded great respect throughout the Western World . . ."

Still, when I got their letter, I thought there must be some truth to it. How else would *Darkness in El Dorado* get so far, and why otherwise would the *New Yorker* and W W Norton publish Patrick Tierney? Investigation was obviously urgent. Live virus vaccines are injected into hundreds of millions of people every year. If the accusations were true, then the CDC should know

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immediately so that it could protect vulnerable populations from future disasters. If they were false, then the media should be informed to prevent misreporting. Widespread public acceptance of immunization programs in developing countries is difficult to achieve, easy to disrupt and literally a matter of life or death; measles immunization alone is estimated to save 6 million lives a year worldwide. If reputable news outlets published Tierney's, Turner's and Sponsel's claim that a measles vaccination can kill a large number of recipients, then many people, especially in poorer countries, might refuse vaccination. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, might die as a result.

So on receiving the email I called the CDC. A day's conversations with various researchers, including Mark Papania, chief of the US measles eradication program, confirmed that every essential element of Tierney's disease scenarios was false. On other issues, it took me two hours after first reading Tierney's claims, just by consulting sources in my office, to find the

same pattern of wholesale falsification that all other independent observers, up to and including researchers at the National Academy of Sciences, have also marveled at.

Then I got a copy of the galley proofs. Although each chapter initially seemed persuasive because of the number and intricacy of the allegations, the density of the documentation and the sheer number of people quoted, anywhere I or my colleagues scratched the surface—on Chagnon, on Neel, anyone—a massive tangle of deliberate falsification broke through. In taking the virtually unprecedented step of commenting on the intellectual integrity of a book, the National Academy of Sciences said, "Although *Darkness in El Dorado* gives the appearance of being well researched, in many instances the author's conclusions are either contradicted or not supported by the references he cites. . . . Mr. Tierney's misuse of source material and the factual errors and innuendoes in his book do a grave disservice" to knowledge. Or, as Susan Lindee put it, Tierney "makes [things] up." (For those in any doubt, read the essay at <http://slate.msn.com/HeyWait/00-10-24/HeyWait.asp>. See also the body of evidence we are compiling, at a pace too fast for reporting in print, at [www.psych.ucsb.edu/research/cep/eldorado](http://www.psych.ucsb.edu/research/cep/eldorado).)

The galleys also raised questions about Turner and Sponsel, who have been bitter academic adversaries of Chagnon for years. As Lou Marano of UPI put it:

Those who have seen galley proofs of *Darkness in El Dorado* say the kind of credit Tierney gives to Turner and Sponsel is consistent with a long-standing collaboration. Far from being surprised by the contents of the proofs and thus galvanized into action, as claimed, Turner and Sponsel seem certain to have been two of Tierney's principal sources.

What does this mean? Given the grave public health implications if the allegations were either true or false, any decent person—even ice-hearted scientists like us—would urgently want to know the truth of the matter. It had taken me only a few hours to discover that the primary allegations in the Turner/Sponsel email were almost certainly

false. But Turner and Sponsel had had enormous amounts of time to investigate—while they read over the manuscript, while they wrote rave reviews for the publisher and Amazon.com, while they drafted and circulated their extensive indictment for the AAA, and before they spoke to the press (the Manchester *Guardian* and others). Whatever Chagnon and Neel might have done decades ago in distant places, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Turner and Sponsel were quite willing to jeopardize lives in the developing world in order to settle academic scores here in the US.

This explains how Tierney as a fabricator could get so far. These allegations spread and gain credibility because they serve a need that many people have. Many anthropologists—and many intellectuals in general—feel passionately that scientific and evolutionary approaches are inherently tainted and immoral, so anything done to discredit those who hold those views is justified.

As many people know, Chagnon ran into difficulties at his field site because he blew the whistle on a few Salesian missionaries whose practices he found questionable—issues involving disease exposure, the possible failure on their part to deliver promised medical care after villages migrated toward the missions, the distribution of firearms, and so on. As a result, witchcraft accusations have been made at these missions as well: Chagnon causes disease, he is an agent of the gold miners and so on. It was not hard for Tierney to harvest and embroider some of these, and clothe them with credibility by quoting or misquoting Chagnon's academic adversaries.

So here we are, discovering firsthand what it is like to live through a period of witch-hunting. Our choices will determine whether this is the end of anthropology as a community. No community can survive when the determination to know and live by the truth becomes too rarely distributed among its members.

And the genuine, searing problems faced by the Yanomamö and other indigenous peoples are eclipsed, once again, by a sideshow. ☐