

The Altar Boy and the Anthropologist

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Anthropologists have ignored many books, among them Patrick Tierney's first, *The Highest Altar* (1989). The blurb on the back cover called it "an engrossing mix of adventure, mystery and anthropology." The subject was human sacrifice. Tierney's investigation into it suggests why he gravitated to Napoleon Chagnon as his next subject. "From the time I was an altar boy in a Roman Catholic church, I was disturbed and attracted by sacrificial motifs," he tells us. After majoring in Latin American studies at UCLA, he joined archeologists looking for the freeze-dried mummies of pre-Columbian children on Andean summits. Citing scholars such as Johan Reinhard and Tom Zuidema, Tierney argues that local nobles were offering sons and daughters to ratify covenants with the Inca empire and the mountain gods.

COMMENTARY

Tierney also followed up contemporary murders that seemed to fit the old pattern. In southern Chile he investigated the 1960 dismemberment of a five year-old Mapuche boy at Lago Budi. Two men had already done time for the murder. Undeterred by considerable opposition, Tierney was able to implicate a wider circle of elders and shamans, including a grandfather and great-grandfather of the child, who had been offered to the sea to save his community from a tidal wave.

At Lake Titicaca, Tierney investigated murders at Aymara hilltop shrines. Helped by a victim's widow, he tracked down a ring of shamans making clandestine human sacrifices to the Tiu mountain deity (often glossed as the devil) for Aymara beer distributors and cocaine smugglers. Two of the victims were sons and nephews of shamans who apparently consented to turning them into blood offerings.

To explain how fathers could sacrifice their own offspring, Tierney refers to the Old Testament, as in-

terpreted by Hyam Macoby in *The Sacred Executioner*. The story about God stopping Abraham from killing his son Issac turns out to be a sanitized version of what was, until the sixth century BC, a customary offering of the first-born child. This is the "unspeakable sacrifice" according to Tierney, "the oldest and most universal form of piety. . . . Like a black hole in space, which destroys all light around it but somehow gives rise to galaxies, sacrifice is a vacuum at the center of culture which somehow spins the web of life."

Obviously, this is a level of generalization with which few anthropologists are comfortable. But I will be frank: I love this book, I've assigned it to students and, judging from their discussions, it is one assignment they will remember. Unable to find a single scholarly review, I decided that *The Highest Altar* was at least ethnographically credible because Tierney seems very candid about his methods, his mistakes and the reactions he arouses—just like Napoleon Chagnon.

To investigate homicides, Tierney tracks down suspects and, concealing how much he knows, traps them into incriminating themselves. When a Mapuche sorcerer objects that the information he's collecting will harm her, he reassures her that it will be published far away. To unmask a homicidal shaman in Peru, Tierney hires him to do a human sacrifice which he ultimately cancels. He buys information with cash and gifts and, like Chagnon, becomes known as powerful and dangerous. The Mapuches address him as Holy Father, under the impression that he is a Catholic priest, but some also suspect him of being a *huitranalwe* or ghost skeleton. Like Chagnon, he becomes *persona non grata* to some of his hosts, to the point of setting off a riot with his camera. Yet he persists even though he realizes his investigation could endanger the people helping him.

Tierney is not blind to the parallels between his own methods and Chagnon's. The new book acknowledges that he used to regard the anthropologist as a role model. It also refers to *Highest Altar* as "distinctly Chagnonian." While Tierney

is a charmer, not a brawler like Chagnon, both men learn their lessons the hard way. They are both adventurers, they are both fascinated by violence, and neither will have an easy time with their next human subjects review panel. They can both be accused of sensationalism and, in their powerful writings, both describe how they exploited the power differential between themselves and their subjects. Needless to say, they are not alone in some of these respects. More than a few anthropologists, and quite a few more journalists, live in the same glass house.

By suggesting that Tierney is attacking his own "monstrous double," I don't want to belittle the genuine issues he raises. However, his relentless attitude toward Chagnon reenacts the paradox of the scapegoat that he analyzed in *The Highest Altar*. According to the theorist René Girard, who Tierney cites occasionally, social groups require scapegoats, upon whom blame can be heaped for the inevitable tensions of living together. By killing or expelling a scapegoat, a group defines itself by displacing tensions between its members onto an outsider. Scapegoats can be demonized like Judas or worshipped like Jesus Christ, but either way they become a source of moral legitimacy and consensus. Scapegoats also have a way of coming in pairs, Tierney noticed. While the first pays for the sins of his people, the second pays for the sin of scapegoating the first. In the case under consideration, Chagnon is paying for the sins of anthropology; Tierney will pay for the sin of scapegoating Chagnon; and, in our righteous indignation at one or the other of these individuals, or both of them for good measure, the rest

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of us will convince ourselves of our moral authority to keep doing anthropology. Since Chagnon and Tierney were both raised as Catholics, I hope they can both enjoy being hung above the altar, side by side, for the salvation of their critics. ☒

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