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Citation for published version:

High, C 2009, 'Victims and Martyrs: Converging Histories of Violence in Amazonian Anthropology and U.S. Cinema' *Anthropology and Humanism*, vol 34, no. 1, pp. 41-50., 10.1111/j.1548-1409.2009.01022.x

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/j.1548-1409.2009.01022.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1409.2009.01022.x)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Author final version (often known as postprint)

Published In:

Anthropology and Humanism

Publisher Rights Statement:

© High, C. (2009). *Victims and Martyrs: Converging Histories of Violence in Amazonian Anthropology and U.S. Cinema*. *Anthropology and Humanism*, 34(1), 41-50. 10.1111/j.1548-1409.2009.01022.x

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Victims and Martyrs: Converging Histories of Violence in Amazonian Anthropology and U.S. Cinema

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SUMMARY *Since the 1950s, indigenous Waorani people of Amazonian Ecuador have had a prominent place in the evangelical imagination in the United States and Europe because of their reputation for violence. Their symbolic status as “wild” Indians in popular imagination reached its peak in 1956, when five U.S. missionaries were killed during an attempt to convert the Waorani to Christianity. With the opening of a U.S.-produced film in January 2006 about the history of Waorani spear killing, entitled *End of the Spear*, Waorani violence has become part of a truly global imagination. In juxtaposing the film’s Christian-inspired narrative with Waorani oral histories of violence, this article explores how indigenous ideas about predation and victimhood are related to the trope of martyrdom that has become prominent in Christian representations of the Waorani since the 1950s. It suggests that visual media such as popular film hold the potential to recontextualize ethnographic representations and allow us to rethink the ways in which Amazonian cosmologies are related to sociopolitical processes that transcend the temporal and spatial boundaries of ethnographic fieldwork. More generally, the article argues that new anthropological knowledge can be produced through the combination of fieldwork and attention to less conventional sources, such as historical missionary narratives and popular cinema. [Keywords: Waorani, film, missionaries, Amazonia, Ecuador, violence]*

In January 2006, as I was in the final stages of writing my doctoral dissertation about the meanings and uses of past violence in Waorani communities of the Ecuadorian Amazon, a feature film about Waorani people opened in more than a thousand cinemas across the United States.¹ The film, entitled *End of the Spear* (Hanon 2006), was based on the history of spear-killing raids, which brought the Waorani international fame in the second half of the 20th century. It focuses particularly on an event in 1956, in which five U.S. missionaries were killed while attempting to make what was assumed to be “first contact” with the Waorani. The release of the film coincided with the 50th anniversary of this event, which became one of the most widely publicized cases of martyrdom in missionary lore among Christians in the United States and Europe. The film largely follows an evangelical narrative of how U.S. Christians sacrificed their lives so that the “word of God” would reach Ecuador’s remaining “savage” Indians, thus ending an ageless cycle of Amazonian revenge killings. Various aspects of the narrative to which I refer have been reproduced in dozens of

books written since 1960, some of which were authored by relatives of the missionaries who were killed.² Although the film in some ways follows the evangelical narrative reproduced in missionary texts about the Waorani, I suggest that it goes even further than previous historical sources in highlighting the relationship between missionary discourses of Christian martyrdom and Waorani notions of victimhood and predation.

When the film premiered, my initial response was one of irritation on seeing actors playing the roles of some of my closest Waorani friends and informants, according to a Christian-inspired Hollywood script. However, on further reflection I began to look at how the film's evangelical narrative might be related to the oral histories told to me by Waorani people, particularly those concerning their experiences of past killings and missionary settlement in the 1960s and 1970s. In this article, I explore how the narrative of violence and subsequent self-sacrifice promoted in the film and in scores of missionary books written about the Waorani shed new light on the intersections between missionary and Waorani ideas about violence, victimhood, and history. Although anthropologists have long since appreciated the value of historical sources in contextualizing ethnography, I suggest that the present case illustrates how contemporary transcultural sources beyond written texts, such as popular cinema, hold the potential for our rethinking of the narratives of past violence we experience in ethnographic fieldwork.

My aim in this article is not so much to compare the missionary narrative developed in the film with the Waorani stories I was told to establish a more accurate or definitive "history" of Waorani violence, or simply to criticize a clearly Christian-inspired representation of Waorani history evidenced in the film. My intention is, rather, to explore the film narrative through the lens of Waorani ethnography, with the aim of illuminating the shared and contrasting uses to which missionaries, filmmakers, and Waorani people put depictions of past violence. I suggest that although the filmmakers and my Waorani hosts use narratives of violence for different purposes, both strongly engage the notion of victimhood that has been described as lying at the core of Waorani sociality (Rival 2000, 2002). I thus examine how indigenous ideas about predation and victimhood described in Waorani ethnography are related to the trope of martyrdom that has become prominent in Christian representations of the Waorani since the 1950s.

End of the Spear: Waorani History and U.S. Cinema

The spearing of the five missionaries in 1956, an event, referred to in the missionary literature as the "Palm Beach killings", made the Waorani a powerful symbol within the evangelical world. In the 1950s there were no more than about five hundred Waorani living in eastern Ecuador, many of whom were involved in a remarkably intense cycle of interhousehold revenge killing.³ They were also well known in the region for their ongoing conflicts with other indigenous groups and oil companies, whose work camps were often attacked or looted while oil exploration was being conducted on Waorani lands (Cabodevilla 1999). As a result, until very recently the Waorani were referred to

as *aucas*, a term meaning “wild” or “enemy” in Quichua, Ecuador’s dominant indigenous language.⁴

This reputation for violence and self-isolation made them an important target of U.S. missionary work in Ecuador, and by the 1950s, missionaries were dropping gifts from airplanes over remote Waorani longhouses. In January 1956, five missionaries landed a small airplane on an exposed bank of the Curaray River in an attempt to make contact with and eventually proselytize a nearby Waorani group. Only days later, the missionaries’ bodies were found in the river after they had been speared, and the story soon reached the U.S. public via a lengthy article with photographs in *Life* magazine.⁵ As the killings received increasing international attention, the campaign to establish the “Auca mission” intensified. In the years following the Palm Beach attack, a widow and a sister of two of the missionary “martyrs” entered the Waorani territory and eventually established the first mission in the area. By the 1970s, the mission had attracted the vast majority of Waorani to live in a single settlement, where many ceased spear killing and eventually converted to Christianity (Robarchek and Robarchek 1996, 1998; Stoll 1982; Yost 1981). Despite the decades of missionary presence that continued until the missionary organizations were banned from Ecuador in 1981, few Waorani today identify themselves as Christians.⁶

End of the Spear primarily concerns a series of spear killings leading up to and including the deaths of the missionaries at Palm Beach. The story’s central protagonist is Mincayani, a Waorani man who participated in the Palm Beach killings before later renouncing spear killing and converting to Christianity.⁷ The others are Nathan Saint, the pilot who died with the four other missionaries in 1956, and his son, Steve Saint, who returns to live with the Waorani years later to discover that Mincayani was his father’s killer.⁸ The film paints a picture, consistent with much missionary literature, of a remarkably violent society unable to escape a pattern of revenge killing until the Christian martyrs and their surviving relatives teach them to forgive one another and follow the Bible. This transformation is achieved in two ways. First, we see the missionaries choosing not to fire their guns when attacked, a sacrifice that is made clear by Nathan Saint’s dying words in which he tells his killer (Mincayani) that he is his friend. Second, in the film the Palm Beach killers are clearly inspired by seeing that instead of taking revenge, the relatives of the dead missionaries seek to live among them. The missionary narrative becomes less subtle as the film progresses, culminating with Mincayani taking Steve Saint to the Palm Beach site in the 1990s to describe how he killed Saint’s father decades before. As Mincayani narrates the story, the film replays the fatal spearing and shows a bright light forming above Nathan Saint as he lies on the beach with a spear in his body: a clear statement of the martyr’s ascension to heaven. The film concludes with Mincayani’s insisting that his victim’s son spear him, and with Steve Saint’s refusing and thus forgiving his father’s killer.

The film, produced by Every Tribe Entertainment, was shot in Panama; most of the Waorani characters’ roles were cast with local indigenous people. Although it claims to be based on a true story, the film is clearly not meant to be a documentary and is shot within the conventions of a Hollywood production. Despite high hopes, the film’s box-office potential was apparently diminished when Christian writers discovered that the lead actor—cast as Nathan Saint, the

heaven-ascending Christian martyr—was an openly homosexual man who publicly advocated gay marriage on the *Larry King Live* show only days before the film's release. The box-office fate of *End of the Spear* reveals that, despite being a feature film viewed by millions of Americans, it depended in the end on attracting a Christian audience. This became evident in the weeks following its opening, as the official *End of the Spear* website posted numerous personal testimonies by U.S. Christians, who told how the film's story had strengthened their faith or even inspired them to become missionaries.⁹

Contrasting and Converging Histories of Violence

Although the missionary narrative represented in the film has been influential in the United States and Europe for decades, the story it tells is also an important part of Waorani oral history. In particular, the killings that Waorani people describe as plaguing previous generations play a key role in contemporary social life, as individual men and women place themselves morally in relation to various audiences through their narratives of past violence. It should be no surprise that much Waorani storytelling today concerns past killings. In the decades preceding missionary settlement, internal revenge killings and conflicts with other indigenous groups were responsible for as much as half of Waorani deaths (Yost 1981). However, this seemingly extreme case of "tribal warfare" that has attracted so much attention from missionaries, anthropologists, and the Ecuadorian public should not be seen as a purely "indigenous" phenomenon. For example, despite the relative isolation of groups like the Waorani before the 1960s, colonial penetration and state expansion into Amazonia are likely to have had a major impact on violent conflicts within and between indigenous groups (Ferguson 1992, 1995; Whitehead 1992, 1993).

Imagery of violence and victimhood in the oral histories I recorded during fieldwork appears to constitute a view of the past that is central to Waorani conceptualizations of sociality and ethnic identity. Specifically, the "victim's point of view" so often expressed by Waorani people is based on a shared identity as "prey" to aggressive outsiders (Rival 2002). The Waorani are an interesting case within regional ethnography, where notions of predation have been described as a central aspect of Amazonian cosmology (Fausto 2007; Viveiros de Castro 2001). Whereas in many Amazonian contexts society and persons are produced through the necessary incorporation of outside "prey," the Waorani invert this model by placing themselves unambiguously as the victims of outsider aggression (Rival 2002). In narrating past killings critically from the victim's perspective, individuals are able to achieve a degree of moral legitimacy within Waorani sociality. Narratives of violence thus become a practice by which people express their commitment to the idealized conditions for peaceful conviviality in contemporary villages (High 2006).

What interests me in this article is the relationship between the central idiom of victimhood in Waorani oral histories and the Christian narrative of martyrdom advanced in *End of the Spear* and in missionary texts. To some extent, Waorani people tell a story similar to that of the film, emphasizing the intensity and seemingly chaotic nature of past spear killings. In most respects, accounts of the Palm Beach killings I recorded during fieldwork are consistent with that

of the film. There is, however, one key difference that I find particularly revealing, given the centrality of victimhood in Waorani cosmology. Although the missionary narrative emphasizes that, the U.S. martyrs chose to die themselves, rather than to fire their guns on their attackers, several of my informants suggested that a Waorani man was fatally wounded in the head by a gunshot during the struggle. Although they criticized the actions of the killers, it is striking that even this story is ultimately cast in terms of Waorani victimhood. Another telling aspect of this narrative is that, even for the few remaining Waorani evangelical Christians living in the former mission settlements, Palm Beach is a far less common story than the frequent accounts of how their kin were killed by other Waorani in the past. It appears that these stories of internal raids have greater salience for Waorani people insofar as they present an unambiguous image of the self as victim.

Interestingly, this insistence on victimhood also surfaced in an official denouncement of the film, published on the Internet by the Waorani political organization (ONHAE) soon after the opening of the film.¹⁰ The announcement stated:

as the legal representative body of the Huaorani Nation we give to you our formal denouncement against those who have taken advantage of our innocence and produced a film by the name of "END OF SPEARS" [*sic*], the same one which speaks of our Huaorani history and that was filmed in Panama by actors who were looking to imitate us. [ONHAE 2006]¹¹

Despite the organization's rejection of the history depicted in the film, the story of Christian martyrdom, introduced by the missionaries through biblical teachings and translations in the 1960s, still resonates strongly in Waorani communities today and can be found in many of their own victimhood narratives. Although in the film, relatives of the martyred missionaries teach Waorani killers to forgive, subsequent missionaries were accepted at least partly because they were close kin of the Palm Beach victims (see Rival 2002). That is, seeing that the outsiders were not intent on attacking them, many Waorani identified the missionaries as members of a victim group much like themselves, thus creating the potential for sociality between themselves and the missionaries. I suggest that it is this relationship based on local conceptualizations of common victimhood, rather than the Palm Beach attack itself, that has made particular missionaries an important part of Waorani history. This is because, in the eyes of many Waorani people in the former mission settlements, the missionaries shared the same history of losing close kin to violence.

Despite the relatively small number of Waorani Christians today, my informants often evoked clear imagery of Jesus-like martyrdom in their stories about how their own kin became victims of violence. In describing to me how his maternal uncle was killed by an enemy group in the 1960s, one of my closest friends and informants provides a brief example of how this Christian narrative still resonates today: "With spears in his body, [my uncle] said that he had no problems with the men who had speared him, forgiving them, saying that he was a real Waorani person. He said 'don't kill' and 'I die so that you should no longer kill.' Then they speared him more and he cried."¹²

It is clear from the brief quote that missionary theology, and particularly the idea of compassionate self-sacrifice emphasized in the recent film, continues to have a significant place within Waorani narratives of violence and victimhood. I suggest that stories like these contain within them the intersection—or perhaps convergence—of a Waorani version of Amazonian ontological predation described by Viveiros de Castro (1992, 1996) and the narrative of missionary martyrdom in the recent film. It would be difficult to argue with any certainty that the Waorani identification as paradigmatic victims was simply introduced by missionaries. However, this case does reveal how native Amazonian ideas are often part of a history that extends far beyond relations between indigenous people. What is at issue here is not whether Waorani notions of victimhood are “authentic” expressions of indigenous Amazonian cosmology. As with all practices and ideas described by anthropologists, “indigenous” conceptualizations of violence are produced within diverse and changing sociocultural environments that include multiple ethnolinguistic, religious, and other groupings. What is at stake is the issue of how and where anthropologists locate ethnographic knowledge among the diverse sources available to them beyond fieldwork and ethnographic texts. The case I have described demonstrates that popular cinema and missionary narratives can provide important epistemological tools in anthropology, especially when combined with participant observation and other conventional ethnographic methods. In the case of Waorani violence, popular media such as film allow the rethinking of a particular historical relationship between Amazonian people and missionaries and, more generally, the ways in which Amazonian ontologies are related to broader sociopolitical processes beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of ethnographic fieldwork.

Conclusion: The “Local” and the Visual in Anthropology

In this article, I have contrasted Waorani oral history and the missionary narrative exemplified by the film in terms of a few details and the uses to which they are put before radically different audiences. Even this brief comparison reveals, I suggest, a historical convergence of missionary and Waorani visions of past violence. I am not suggesting that the Waorani identification as paradigmatic victims was simply produced through biblical teachings on the mission in the 1960s. However, this case does reveal how indigenous Amazonian ideas are often part of a shared history in which colonialism and U.S. missionaries have an important place. I suggest that the ideological project of Christian martyrdom, promoted by missionaries, their various books, and the recent film, constitutes a useful ethnographic object through which we might better understand the historical relationships between Waorani and popular North American Christian notions of violence. Regardless of the claims we make about what ideas and practices are “indigenous” or not to Amazonian people, it is clear that the missionary narrative expressed in the film has become an important part of the Waorani lived world.

There is a growing consensus among anthropologists that we should envision ethnography not as the study of bounded “cultures” or “societies,” but, rather, as the study of the historically constituted connections and interactions

between people and things from often-disparate locations and sociocultural contexts (Appadurai 1991; Nordstrom 2004; Tsing 2005).¹³ I suggest that popular cinema and other transcultural media, such as the film discussed in this article, provide valuable sources for this kind of insight, insofar as they tend to draw on social imaginations that can seldom be adequately demarcated within specific geographical, national, temporal, and cultural boundaries. For example, my juxtaposition of cinematic and “indigenous” representations of past violence illustrates how any attempt toward an ethnography of Waorani violence is also in part simultaneously an ethnography of U.S. evangelical ideology.

This article reveals that attention to missionary discourses may lead to a better understanding of how “indigenous” ideas are adapted to historical changes, even when they appear in a Hollywood feature film steeped in evangelical symbolism. Students of film, literature, and anthropology have long recognized the allegorical value of fiction writing and film as responses to and evidence of the social contexts in which they are produced. Keith Hart (2005) recently suggested that, to come to grips with studying the politics and moral dilemmas of the world today, anthropologists will benefit from looking to art and literature, which may reveal increasingly translocal and intercultural processes in a more productive way than the traditional ethnographic monograph. Although anthropologists have argued for the capacity of visual media, such as film and photography, to make anthropological statements of their own, rather than merely provide support for ethnographic texts (MacDougall 1998; Wright 1998), these sources also allow us to rethink the historical and cultural milieus about which anthropologists write. Visual media do more than just support ethnographic text; they also hold the potential to challenge and recontextualize ethnographic representations derived from fieldwork.

My aim in this article has not been to suggest that ethnographic and historical evidence gleaned from fieldwork and the archives is obsolete and should be replaced by reviews of films and novels. Rather, I suggest that less obviously “local” sources, such as *End of the Spear*, allow for the deepening of ethnographic knowledge within a wider intercultural space and time span. More broadly, I have argued that new anthropological knowledge can be produced through the combination of fieldwork and attention to less conventional sources, such as missionary narratives and popular cinema—even when the latter appear initially at a distant remove from the words and practices of our informants.

Notes

Acknowledgments. This article is a revised version of a paper I presented for the “Ethnographies of Violence” panel of the Society for Humanistic Anthropology at the 2006 conference of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, DC. I would like to thank the panel discussants for their comments, and particularly Neil Whitehead for inviting me to write a paper about the film discussed above. This article benefited from the critical commentary and suggestions of my colleagues at Goldsmiths College, as well as from Liana Chua, Timm Lau, and Mette High. My greatest debt is to the Waorani communities for sharing their homes and their stories with me during the course of my fieldwork. I also thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Fulbright Commission, and the Central Research Fund of the University of London, all of which provided crucial funding for the field research (2002–04) on which this article is based.

1. The ethnonym *Waorani* is often spelled *Huaorani* in Spanish. I use the former spelling in part because it has been adopted by the official Waorani political organization.
2. See, for example, Wallis 1960 and 1973, Elliot 1957 and 1961, Kingsland 1980, Liefeld 1990, and Saint 2005.
3. Today there are around two thousand Waorani living in more than 30 settlements.
4. The Quichua word *auca* has also been incorporated into popular Ecuadorian Spanish usage, with similar connotations of "savage" or "wild."
5. The January 1956 article was entitled "'Go Ye and Preach the Gospel': Five Do and Die."
6. The missionary organizations were the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) and its sister organization, Wycliffe Bible Translators.
7. The film character "Mincayani" appears to combine the actions associated with a number of Waorani individuals, including one of the well-known elders who took part in the Palm Beach killings and still lives along the Curaray River.
8. Steve Saint continues to be involved in Waorani communities today. He was a consultant for the film and appears in an interview at the end of the film. He also authored a book by the same title, *End of the Spear* (Saint 2005).
9. A similar description of *End of the Spear* can be found in my previous article (High 2008:81–82).
10. The acronym ONHAE stands for Organization of the Huaorani Nationality of the Ecuadorian Amazon. The organization has since been replaced by NAWE, which stands for the Waorani Nationality of Ecuador.
11. This statement appeared on the People of the Path website: <http://www.peopleofthepath.com/newpath-NEWS2.htm>. It was signed by a well-known Waorani ONHAE representative and political activist.
12. This quote is taken from a much longer narrative I recorded in 2003.
13. The work of Wolf (1982) and Mintz (1985) contributed significantly to this approach.

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