



◀ **Face-off.** Jared Diamond is being sued for allegedly defaming Papua New Guinea tribesmen in an article in *The New Yorker*.

# 'Vengeance' Bites Back At Jared Diamond

**Two tribesmen from Papua New Guinea sue the prominent biologist over a popular magazine article about the human thirst for retribution**

IN APRIL 2008, WELL-KNOWN BIOLOGIST and author Jared Diamond penned a dramatic story in *The New Yorker* magazine, a violent tale of revenge and warfare in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Titled "Vengeance is Ours" and published under the banner "Annals of Anthropology," the 8000-word article tells the story of a clan war organized by a young Papua New Guinean named Daniel Wemp to avenge the death of Wemp's uncle, Soll. In Diamond's telling, the war started in the 1990s over a pig digging up someone's garden, went on for 3 years, and resulted in the deaths of 29 people. In the end, Diamond wrote, Wemp won: His primary target, a man Diamond referred to as "Isum," had his spine cut by an arrow and was confined to a wheelchair. Diamond juxtaposed Wemp's story with that of his own father-in-law, a Holocaust survivor who never exacted retribution for the loss of his family, to draw an overall lesson about the human need for vengeance.

In recent weeks, Diamond's article itself seems to have come back with a vengeance. On 20 April, Diamond, 71, was sued in the Supreme Court of the State of New York for allegedly defaming both Daniel Wemp and Isum Mandingo, the alleged target of Wemp's revenge war. The lawsuit, which also names as a defendant Advance Publications Inc., the owner of *The New Yorker*, demands at least \$10 million in damages. It follows a yearlong investigation led by Rhonda Roland Shearer, an artist and the widow of evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould. Shearer directs the Art Science Research Laboratory, a non-profit organization based in New York City that she and Gould founded before Gould's death in 2002. Among its activities is a journalism ethics program and a Web site called Stinkyjournalism.org, which published the Shearer team's 10,000-word report, "Jared Diamond's Factual Collapse," the day after the lawsuit was filed.

In the report, Shearer and her colleagues,

who included three researchers in PNG, claim that Diamond and *The New Yorker* got many important facts wrong in the original article, including the contentions that Wemp had personally organized the warfare, that Soll was his uncle, and that Mandingo had been paralyzed by an arrow. Indeed, the Stinkyjournalism.org report includes a recent photograph said to be of Mandingo standing and looking strong and healthy. The report maintains that neither Wemp, Mandingo, nor any other of several New Guineans named in *The New Yorker* were told about the article beforehand. It also claims that Wemp's life is now in danger from other clans that might want to avenge Mandingo's alleged injuries, or even from members of his own clan for portraying them as ruthless killers.

Diamond stands by his story, arguing that it was based on detailed notes that he took during a 2006 interview with Wemp as well as earlier conversations the two men had in 2001 when Wemp served as his driver in PNG. "The complaint has no merit at all," Diamond told *Science* in an interview in his office at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he is a professor of geography. Diamond adds that he still considers Wemp's original account to be the most reliable source for what happened. David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, also defends the magazine's story: "It appears that *The New Yorker* and Jared Diamond are the subject of an unfair and, frankly, mystifying barrage of accusations."

The affair has raised concerns among anthropologists familiar with PNG, who worry that *The New Yorker's* "Annals of Anthropology" banner has tarnished the field's reputation. Anthropologist Pauline Wiessner of the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, a leading expert on tribal warfare in PNG, thinks Diamond was naïve if he accepted Wemp's stories at face value, because young men in PNG often exaggerate their tribal warfare exploits or make them up entirely. "I could have told him immediately that it was a tall tale, an embellished story. I hear lots of them but don't publish them because they are not true."

## Different worlds

Three worlds collide in this case. First is the world of science, specifically anthropology, which uses fieldwork and scientific methodology to study human cultures. Next is the craft of journalism, with its own set of ethics

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and practices aimed at reaching the general public. Finally, there is Papua New Guinea, a young nation still struggling to integrate many hundreds of tribes and clans into a modern state. For many years, Diamond, a physiologist by training, has worked in all three domains: He is a member of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and a winner of the National Medal of Science, as well as a highly successful writer. In 1998, he won a Pulitzer Prize for his bestseller *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, on the geographic factors that made some societies rich and some poor. His most recent book, *Collapse*, about the environmental forces that brought some societies down, has also sold well. And he has regularly visited PNG for nearly 50 years, although primarily to study the island's birds rather than its people.

Although Diamond's frequent merging of these worlds has brought him both success and some criticism, this time it may have landed him in legal trouble. When Diamond's article appeared in *The New Yorker*, it drew the attention of Shearer, a fierce media critic who in recent years has gone after numerous reporters for alleged transgressions of journalistic ethics. (One of her most celebrated campaigns was against journalist William Langewiesche, who asserted in a book that firefighters had looted blue jeans from stores in the World Trade Center after the 9/11 attacks.) Shearer says that after reading Diamond's article, which appeared in the 21 April 2008 issue of *The New Yorker*, she immediately was "very skeptical" at the suggestion that Mandingo could have continued to live in the remote, rugged PNG Highlands while confined to a wheelchair and perhaps needing special medical care. She e-mailed Diamond and *The New Yorker* asking if they had verified this and other details; Shearer says that she received no response from Diamond and that the magazine's initial reaction was to say that it stood by its story.

Shearer already had contacts in PNG from an earlier investigation during which she chased down rumors that a Komodo dragon was running amok in the country. (It turned out to be a hoax.) She asked her contacts to try to find Wemp. One, biologist Michael Kigl of the PNG Institute of Biological Research in Goroka, explained to *Science* that he was able to contact one of his own relatives in Wemp's province, who in turn managed to help locate one of Wemp's relatives. Thus Kigl found Wemp in his Highlands village in July 2008 and tape recorded an interview with him. According to Shearer and the 10,000-word report, Wemp denied organizing the revenge warfare attributed to him in Diamond's story.

The report says that Wemp expressed surprise at *The New Yorker* article and claimed that Diamond had never told him about it. (Wemp's attorneys in New York City and PNG declined to make him available for an interview for this story, saying that their clients preferred to tell their stories in court and not in the press.) According to the report, the following month Kigl also located Isum Mandingo and took several photographs of him standing and walking.

At least one other Papua New Guinean supports the account of Shearer's team. "Diamond's article is a confused story that names real places and persons but mixes up false, wrong, and defamatory allegations that bring into disrepute the good name of the named clans and their members," said Mako Kuwimb, a member of Wemp's Handa

the Diamond article. Among Diamond's biggest errors, Kuwimb told Hughes, were his statements that the war he described had begun with the "pig in the garden" episode and had lasted 3 years. Kuwimb contends that the war was sparked by a gambling dispute and lasted only a few months.

Some anthropologists have their own concerns with Diamond's article. For starters, many think that the "Annals of Anthropology" banner was misleading. "*The New Yorker* was wrong to imply that Diamond was an anthropologist or that what he wrote was anthropology," says Dan Jorgensen of the University of Western Ontario in London, Canada, who has worked in PNG since the 1970s. Cultural anthropologist Alex Golub of the University of Hawaii, Manoa, who says *The New Yorker* fact checker spoke with him for about 10 minutes while the story was being prepared, agrees. "This affects our discipline's brand management," he wrote on an anthropology blog he participates in called Savage Minds. "It's important for people to know that if they meet an anthropologist, they are not going to be written up in *The New Yorker* without being told about it." Savage Minds has now teamed up with Stinkyjournalism.org to produce a series of invited essays on the case.

A number of researchers say that Diamond should not have used the names of real people and real clans; cultural anthropologists

often use pseudonyms for the people they write up and follow strict ethical guidelines for informed consent when they do name people. Wiessner thinks Diamond should have refrained from naming even the tribes involved. "That was a very big mistake," she says.

### Journalism versus science

But both Diamond and Remnick insist that such anthropological criticisms are irrelevant, because Diamond was working as a journalist for a popular magazine, not as an anthropologist writing a scholarly article. Although Diamond says he did not find out about the "Annals of Anthropology" line until shortly before publication and now regrets it, Remnick points out that the magazine routinely uses the "Annals" logo for stories not written by trained experts in the field at hand. Says Diamond, "Everyone knows that *The New Yorker* is not a scientific publication; it's journalism." That's why he used the names Wemp gave him, he says. "In journalism, you do name names so that people can check out what you write." Remnick agrees: "Journalistic practice differs from scientific practice in a number of ways," he says, "and this seems to



**Annals of unease.** Some anthropologists thought *The New Yorker* banner reflected poorly on their discipline.

clan and a PNG attorney now doing graduate work at James Cook University in Queensland, Australia. In an e-mail to *Science*, Kuwimb added that PNG Highlanders are accustomed to having anthropologists among them, "and we know what [they] do and how they gather information." Diamond, Kuwimb says, "converted a simple, casual conversation [with Wemp] into an article that looks and sounds like an anthropological piece" but "never followed [anthropological] procedures and protocols." On 21 April of this year, Kuwimb sent *The New Yorker's* publisher, Lisa Hughes, a detailed, 30-page refutation of



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be one of them. Using real names is the default practice in journalism.”

Diamond insists that he followed good journalistic practice and that his article was based on detailed notes he took of the stories that Wemp told him. In 2001, Diamond says, Wemp drove him and Australia-based ornithologist David Bishop around the oil fields of Highland PNG as they conducted a survey of local birds. During several long drives, Diamond says, Wemp told them stories about the Highlands war that had supposedly begun when a man from Mandingo’s clan, the Ombal, found that a pig had ruined his garden and blamed a Handa man for the damage. The ensuing warfare eventually killed Soll, whom Diamond says Wemp identified as his uncle, and it fell to Wemp to take responsibility for organizing a war for retribution.

Diamond says that he made a few notes of these conversations when back in his room but did nothing with the story until another trip to PNG in May 2006. By then he had begun work on a new book about tribal societies and contacted Wemp to get a more detailed account of the war Wemp had described 5 years earlier. Diamond says that in 2006, he told Wemp explicitly that the story would go into the book. But he was unable to find Wemp again in 2007 when he decided to excerpt one of the book’s chapters for *The New Yorker*; Wemp had left his job without leaving contact information, Diamond says.

In 2006, “I said to Daniel, ‘Would you be willing to tell the whole story in one piece and I will take notes?’” Diamond says. He pulled out a large, red notebook and took “sentence by sentence” shorthand notes of the conversation, Diamond says, adding that Wemp spelled out the names of the warriors and other individuals who would later be named in *The New Yorker* piece. (Both Diamond and Shearer agree that Bishop was present during some of the May 2006 conversation; reached by telephone, Bishop declined to comment.) The Shearer account agrees that Diamond took notes in shorthand in a red notebook but differs markedly about what Wemp said.

Diamond says that although Wemp clearly understood that he would be named in the book, he did not try to get permission from Mandingo and the others: “I trusted Daniel’s

judgment about what was appropriate to discuss.” Diamond says he did double-check Wemp’s story with some younger members of his tribe, who confirmed that some of the people Wemp named had been involved in a tribal war. Diamond also told *Science* that he heard conflicting accounts about how serious Mandingo’s injuries were and that Mandingo now may have recovered from his wounds. In regard to *The New Yorker*’s fact checking, Remnick says that the fact checker was unable to find Wemp before the story was published. After Shearer’s team found Wemp,



**Fierce advocate.** Media critic Rhonda Roland Shearer (*above*) charges that Jared Diamond’s article included errors about Daniel Wemp (*left*).

however, the fact checker did speak with him by telephone, on 21 August 2008. Soon afterward, Shearer, who had kept in regular touch with the magazine, scored her first victory: In a 12 September 2008 letter to a London attorney, *The New Yorker* general counsel Lynn Oberlander agreed, “as a sign of good will,” that the magazine would remove Diamond’s article from the freely accessible part of its Web site, although it is still available online to registered subscribers.

Remnick nevertheless defends the magazine’s efforts to verify Diamond’s story. He says that this particular fact checker “is one of the best I have ever had the privilege of working with.” And he adds that “we had Jared Diamond’s meticulous, detailed notes from the 2006 interview with Daniel Wemp, ... and we consulted with people with expertise in the Southern Highlands, who confirmed that Daniel Wemp’s description of the revenge battle was consistent with known practice.” Remnick also insists that in the August 2008

conversation between Wemp and the fact checker—which was tape recorded by mutual consent—Wemp raised only relatively minor factual objections to Diamond’s account and asserted that the stories were basically true. In Diamond’s view, the case is really about scientists coming under fire for popular writing.

Whether or not Diamond got the facts of Wemp’s case right, it is true that the tribes of PNG do practice revenge warfare, says Wiessner, who has studied war in PNG’s Enga Province, just north of the region where Wemp and Mandingo live. In Enga, more than 300 tribal wars have taken the lives of nearly 4000 people since 1991. That’s one reason Wiessner, who is active in local efforts to bring peace to PNG clans, is worried about the outcome of the case if it results in a large monetary award: She fears that the money could eventually go to buy weapons that would make the wars even more deadly. “When these wars first started, they were fought with bows and arrows, but now they have M-16s,” she says. And although Wiessner faults Diamond for apparently taking Wemp’s stories at face value, she also believes Wemp himself violated clan ethics by telling them in the first place. “For him to have given the names of tribes and implicate[d] other people than himself,” as Diamond reported, “that was wrong,” she says. “He should have sought approval of the clan elders beforehand.”

In Wiessner’s view, *The New Yorker* article gave a one-sided view of tribal warfare. Although the death toll often seems high, she says Highlanders are expert practitioners of what anthropologists call “restorative justice”: the mediation of disputes in which aggrieved parties receive compensation from those who have wronged them, thus avoiding warfare. “Diamond did not put it into that context,” Wiessner says. She thinks that Diamond should travel to PNG and engage in some restorative justice of his own. “Diamond has been wonderfully respectful of PNG and has done so much to raise the image of the country in the world, until that story,” Wiessner says. “He should be taken to a village court; he should apologize; he should say that he was told this story and he should have checked it; and in compensation, he should give some money to each tribe, for their schools, a health center, or some community project.”

—MICHAEL BALTER

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