BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU SAY

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Category: Observations

Most people who have spent a lot of time in rural areas in the developing world end up with a load of funny stories to tell. You can read some of mine here - just don't tell me if you don't think they are funny. However, there is a fine line between legitimate travellers tales and making a meal out of the 'strange natives'. I feel very uneasy about some things I read and I find myself wondering what would happen if the people that the travellers were writing about could actually read what was written. Well, I need to wonder no more as this story in today's Guardian shows:

> *The profiles of the two legally warring parties could not be further apart.*
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> *On the one side are two poor tribesmen living in a remote part of New Guinea; on the other a Pulitzer Prize-winning bestselling author and arguably the world's most urbane magazine, The New Yorker.*
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> *The tribesmen this week filed a $10m (Â£6.8m) lawsuit for defamation in a Manhattan court claiming that Jared Diamond had portrayed them wrongly as vengeful, bloodthirsty killers. The two-page complaint said they were falsely accused of "serious criminal activity and intentional and negligent infliction of emotional distress, including murder".*
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> *The dispute flows from the 21 April 2008 edition of the New Yorker in which Diamond wrote an article headlined "Vengeance is Ours: What can tribal societies tell us about our need to get even?"*

Whatever our profession, missionaries, anthropologists, writers or aid workers, we have to accord dignity to the people we work with. The fact that we often have to write articles, or prayer letters isn't an excuse to treat people without respect. Getting cheap laughs, writing interesting articles or painting passionate pictures of the need for the Gospel are not good enough reasons to misrepresent others - even if we think they won't read our words.