

# Features



Rerebawa, shown with tobacco tucked in his lip, is a longtime friend of Chagnon's who has helped him with his work.

*University of California Santa Barbara Professor Napoleon Chagnon set out 23 years ago for the Amazon jungle to complete his anthropology field research and study the Yanomamo, one of the last warring tribes on Earth, who live in a remote region of the South American rain forest. Now, after numerous visits, long periods of participatory observation, and worldwide acclaim for his books and films dealing with the subject, Chagnon talks about his experience of...*

## MEETING THE FIERCE PEOPLE

*By Stacey Silva*

Back in 1956, Napoleon Chagnon didn't even understand the meaning of the word anthropology. Now he is one of the world's leading authorities in cultural anthropology, the second most cited anthropologist of all time. Currently entering his fourth year of teaching at USCB, Chagnon plans to remain here indefinitely. His research with the South American Yanomamo tribe, located in the Amazon Basin on the Venezuelan and Brazilian borders, has led to series of films and revolutionary discoveries, which in turn has brought about his world-wide acclaim.

However, his 25 years in the anthropological field haven't always been so glorious. For Chagnon, it has included several brushes with death. In one instance, one notorious Yanomamo demanded that the researcher hand over some of his personal possessions, one of which was a shotgun. As a result of Chagnon's refusal to comply, the native threatened him with mortal violence several times. This incident caused Chagnon to take a two-year leave of absence from the field. Other trying moments include complications with malaria, hepatitis, attacks, attacks from wild animals, two run-ins with jaguars and a near strangulation by a large anaconda snake.

But, difficult circumstances have always been a part of Chagnon's itinerary in his efforts to understand the culture of the Yanomamo, a title literally translated as "human." Several tribesmen have offered him their sisters or kin as wives, sometimes with expectations of reciprocity and other times out of gratitude. His introduction to the Yanomamo language presented another significant trial, since he had only an understanding of 20 sentences when he first made contact with the tribe in 1964.

Chagnon's first visit to the natives also marked his first experience in field research, and that initial experience quickly broke down any misguided notions and expectations he had about the Yanomamo people and the work that lay ahead. "one of the things that field research does to practicing anthropologists is to make them realize the fundamental and sometimes extraordinary differences that are maintained by cultures other than their own," he explained.

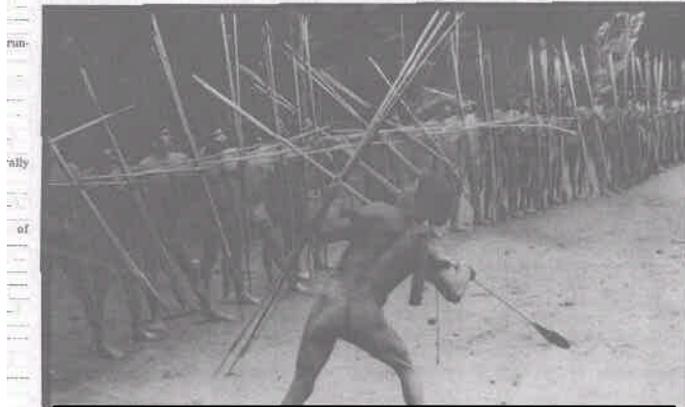


Napoleon Chagnon conducting field research among the South American Yanomamo tribe.

“Many of the books that I had read in my studies tended to portray native peoples as some sort of ideal Rousseauian savage that had high standards of sanitation and were noble and altruistic. That image tends to be true for a large number of tribal societies. However, anthropologists who have studied truly primitive peoples who have had no contact whatsoever ... discover these people rarely conform to the Rousseauian image.”

The image of the Rousseauian savage quickly disappeared with Chagnon’s first sight of the Yanomamo. Not knowing the tribesmen were warring with another village, he naively stepped out into the clearing only to meet “dozens of heavily-armed Yanomamo glaring at me down the shafts of their drawn arrows,” Chagnon recalled.

“All of them were hallucinating, as they had just taken large doses of ebene, their hallucinogenic snuff, with large strands of green mucous dripping down their noses,” which in turn splattered all over their sweaty chests,” he explained. While Chagnon was standing there, dogs surrounded him, nipping and biting at him, he added.



*Yanomamo warriors paint, “dress” and parade themselves for visiting members of other villages as a way to demonstrate their fierceness.*

Although Chagnon knew the Yanomamo were a warring tribe before he made his decision to study them, he had little understanding of what their violence would mean in terms of living with them. He chose the tribe for his research because of the fact that so little was known about them anthropologically.

Though no anthropologists had previously lived in the region inhabited by the Yanomamo, several missionaries had made contact with the tribe and one missionary guide accompanied Chagnon on his first visit. The guide, however, returned to his Protestant mission the following day, marking the last sight of a North American Chagnon would have for three months.

Alone in a distant jungle with a 20-sentence vocabulary and a native tribe which was totally detached from civilization as he knew it, Chagnon said he suddenly realized the complexity and remoteness of his situation. “The stench of all the decaying vegetation and the dog feces and the garbage in the village just overwhelmed me and I nearly fainted from the shock of what it was like to meet my first primitive savage,” he recalled. “They were very much different from the textbook Indians that I had read about as an anthropology student.”

“At that point I pondered quietly the wisdom of my choice of leaving physics and engineering to become an anthropologist and wondered whether I had made a horrible mistake,” he added.

Chagnon’s decision to change his major at the University of Michigan from engineering to cultural anthropology was quite by accident. He was introduced to anthropology through a general education course required by his major. After discovering that there were opportunities to enter the field and actually make a living he made the decision that would change his life.

But, Chagnon carried his commitment to the scientific method of research into anthropology, leading him to place a great deal of importance on substantive data to back up any claims he might make. This heavy use of data has caused his work to be considered among the most authoritative in his field. He used extensive amounts of data to document his work in *Yanomamo: the Fierce People*, a textbook he uses in some of his classes.

According to UCSB anthropology Professor Phillip Walker, this method of research has proven extremely useful in the field. “Many anthropologists have made extensive and qualitative contributions to the field but lack data to back up their theories,” Walker explained. “Unlike most anthropologists (Chagnon) has both the qualitative and quantitative input to back up his theories.... He has collected such extensive amounts of data that there are no other ethnographers in his league.”

Chagnon was acutely aware that the uniqueness of his experience living with the Yanomamo could not fully be captured with a tape recorder and a



*A younger Chagnon, in a photo taken in the early ‘70s, makes himself more warrior like in an attempt to become Yanomamo, or “more human.”*



still camera. After spending about four months with the Yanomamo, he contacted a friend in Caracas who loaned him a 16-mm motion camera, then began making his own films. In this way, he eventually compiled some of the most remarkable research and observation data ever seen in the anthropological field while being a participant observer in a Yanomamo village. It was the profound information provided in these films that shuttled him into fame throughout all anthropological circles.

A film entitled "The Feast," produced by Chagnon with the help of cameraman and assistant Timothy Asch, quickly brought Chagnon international renown. The film, which portrayed an exchange between two Yanomamo villages and revealed the determinants and structure of the Yanomamo social organization, further substantiated previous theories by leading anthropologists Marcel Moss and Emile Durkheim.

"When the film was first released in the late '60's, it immediately won international acclaim and won first prize in every film competition it was entered into," Chagnon said.

The British Historical Society, which proclaimed the film at its release as "one of lasting scientific, historical, and artistic value," preserved a copy of "the Feast" in its permanent record for future use by anthropologists.

But it is another film, "The Ax Fight," which Chagnon feels has been the most significant contribution to his overall research. "it illustrates very clearly the nature of the methodology of an anthropologist has to develop in order to render intelligible and explain an event that otherwise seems chaotic and disorganized," he explained.

"The Ax Fight" portrays and subsequently analyzes an argument which quickly escalates into violence. The film reveals the systematic development of the argument which led to chest pounding, then to spears and clubs, and climaxing in the warriors' use of the blunt ends of ax heads.

Some of Chagnon's most recent research reveals how violence plays a vital role in Yanomamo culture. "Seventy percent of all Yanomamo who get to age 40 have lost one of the following kinds of relatives to violence: a parent, a sibling or a child," he noted. Also, "men who are engaged in mortal violence have more wives, more children, than men who aren't engaged in mortal violence ... thus reflecting values which the Yanomamo deem as important," he explained.

But Chagnon does not believe the Yanomamo are necessarily any more inherently violent than people of other cultures. "The bomb dropped over Hiroshima by 'civilized' people killed more humans in the flickering of an eye than there are Yanomamo in existence," he said.

Chagnon's films and books have found their way to numerous college campuses, thus the anthropologist's fame extends far beyond UCSB. Anthropology graduate student and teaching assistant Herb Maschner, who received his M.A. in anthropology from the University of Alaska, said Chagnon had a big influence on his research with the Tlingit Indians of southern Alaska.

"When I was an undergraduate student in New Mexico and also when I was working with undergraduate classes in Alaska, (Chagnon's) films and books were many of the primary resources used in teaching at those schools, as they are at many other universities around the world," Maschner said. "In fact the Yanomamo are becoming the dominant culture studied by undergraduates as a direct result of his work."

According to Walker, Chagnon's renown among university students has been a drawing factor for UCSB's anthropology department "it is in large part because of Chagnon's presence here at the university that many exceptional graduate students are present," he said.

Professor Emeritus Albert Spaulding an archaeologist who has been teaching in the UCSB anthropology department

---

*" There is so much to learn from the Yanomamo about the nature of primitive society, mainly because they're one of the last, large, relatively unacculturated tribes left in the world."*

*-Napoleon Chagnon*

---

since 1966, attributed Chagnon's success to his intense dedication to his research. "Although I'm not a specialist in his field, I do know that he has produced a lot of oftentimes controversial data which we frequently don't get in ordinary ethnography," Spaulding said. "He's working in the heart of anthropology."

According to Chagnon, the study of anthropology is important for student in all disciplines because it helps them to better understand their place as world citizens. "That understanding makes it possible for people to live together in greater harmony," he said. And this, he believes, in turn creates an increase in general tolerance, a reduction in racism, and greater overall societal cohesion.

Students who have taken Chagnon's classes agree that the class is both useful and practical. "I originally took the class to meet a G.E. requirement and walked away with an understanding that simply because we are more civilized doesn't necessarily mean better," sophomore James Sullivan said.

"I was impressed how knowledgeable he was," said freshman Linda Wheeler, who was raised in Colombia where her father worked as a sociolinguist among the Indians.

But Chagnon is quick to credit his knowledge of the Yanomamo to "the scores of Yanomamo" who contributed to his fieldwork. Many served as informants, providing him with crucial information concerning kinsmen and genealogy. A few village chiefs and their wives stand out in his memory as having an "enormous impact" on his work, and he has stayed in contact with these people during his frequent trips to the region.

*In an ancient cultural practice, a Yanomamo native receives a painful blast of an hallucinogenic drug called ebene.*



This continued contact recently presented Chagnon with one of the most memorable moments of his anthropological career, he said. Last month he learned that the Yanomamo had written to the Venezuelan government requesting that he be allowed to enter the country in order to ascribe the tribesmen "Christianized" names. This was done so that they would not be arbitrarily given names by the government, thus breaking up the kinship and genealogical bonds of people who are related by name, he explained. The Venezuelan government sent Chagnon an invitation, and he plans to travel to the basin this summer.

What lies ahead for the Yanomamo? As the South American rainforest daily continues to disappear as it is destroyed for economic purposes, the Yanomamo's struggle for survival will also continue, Chagnon predicted. That native struggle for survival is one that has occurred for centuries, and one that he believes was well captured in the 1986 award-winning movie, "The Mission."

But Chagnon is prepared to continue the struggle to preserve native cultures. "There is so much to learn from the Yanomamo about the nature of primitive society, mainly because they're one of

the last, large, relatively unacculturated tribes left in the world," he said. "And I'll probably study the Yanomamo until the day I croak."

*\*Note: all images and photographs herein are personal property of Dr. Napoleon Chagnon who gave permission to the author for these to be used in the publication of this story.*