

BOOK REVIEWS

Review Essay

Last of the Stone Age Warriors

Noble Savages: My Life among Two Dangerous Tribes—The Yanomamö and the Anthropologists

Napoleon A. Chagnon. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013. 544 pp.

Beth A. Conklin

Vanderbilt University

The most thoroughly scrutinized scholarship in anthropology's history has focused on the Yanomami, indigenous people who live in the rainforest of southern Venezuela and northern Brazil. Over the past half-century that numerous scholars have studied them, developments among Yanomami and developments in anthropological theory have coevolved.

When ethnographer Napoleon Chagnon first met the Yanomamö (a subgroup of the larger Yanomami population) in 1964, he felt he was seeing primitive humanity "as close to the 'state of nature' as one could in the twentieth century" (p. 8). In the 1970s and 1980s, events thrust Yanomami out of that "savage slot" into the spotlight of world attention. In conflicts that encapsulated dynamics of political economy and world systems theory, Brazil's dictatorship built roads and military bases in Yanomami territory; in the late 1980s, the expanding capitalist frontier exploded with a massive, illegal gold rush. Epidemics and violence erupted, mercury poisoned streams and fish, and the government evicted all medical personnel and researchers. Thousands of Yanomami died. Anthropologists working with NGOs mounted an international campaign that tapped globalization's potential for political mobilization.

Yanomami case studies figured in almost every theoretical debate in the 1970s to 1990s, from sociobiology to cultural materialism to reflexive critique of politics of representation. As Yanomami developed intercultural skills to speak for themselves in organizations, activism, and health and education work, they reflected changes taking place worldwide as indigenous people claimed new national and global citizenship. In a long-term collaboration that embodies anthropology's growing emphasis on partnerships in participatory research, Davi Kopenawa, a Yanomami leader, has worked with ethnographer Bruce Albert in a project of

"reverse anthropology" to present Kopenawa's analysis of white people and their civilization, and highlight the contemporary relevance of Yanomami ideas (Kopenawa and Albert 2013).

By the late 1990s, critiques of Chagnon's key analyses, combined with changing theoretical concerns, had left his work being taught mostly as methodological counterexamples. In 2000, attention focused on it anew when a book, *Darkness in El Dorado* by journalist Patrick Tierney (2000), accused Chagnon and other researchers of egregious misconduct that harmed Yanomami (see Borofsky et al. 2005; Gregor and Gross 2004). The most extreme accusations proved false or distorted, but the ensuing scandal embroiled U.S. anthropology in years of acrimony.

The best thing that came out of the *Darkness in El Dorado* imbroglio was another book: *Yanomami: The Fierce Controversy and What We Can Learn from It*, produced by Robert Borofsky and colleagues (2005). Written for teaching undergraduates, it presents arguments from multiple positions to encourage critical reflection. Six ethnographers with different theoretical perspectives and professional allegiances engaged in a series of discussions of ethical issues raised by Tierney's book and the question of how anthropology should deal with these (Borofsky et al. 2005:109). Each stated a position, responded to the others' statements, and then made final comments. While disagreements persisted, significant points of consensus emerged around research ethics, anthropological commitments to human rights, and collaborative partnership with the people one studies. The constructive exchanges of ideas and teachable lessons that coalesced in Borofsky's text felt like a healthy move forward out of a toxic period of disciplinary strife.

Chagnon's *Noble Savages* revives the strife. Having remained largely silent during the controversies, this is Chagnon's first major public statement. He is understandably angry and pulls no punches in denouncing his critics.

For those interested in his perspectives and account of events throughout his career, there is abundant material to parse.

This is also Chagnon's autobiography, written for the general public (p. 13). This format is ideal to tell his story as he wishes, unburdened by the citations and substantive, factual attention to other scholars' work that academic writing requires. The chapters follow, chronologically, the 35 years during which he spent a total of five years visiting and working in 60 Yanomamö villages. He presents his current thinking and some new data about violence, kinship, and reproduction, arguing that the ubiquity of terror and quest for security were driving forces in the evolution of political and social complexity (pp. 9–12). The purpose of tribal social organization is to regulate men's sexual access to nubile females through coalitions organized around patrilineality, marriage exchange, and strategic deployment of violence (p. 217).

Academic arguments alternate with autobiography. Chagnon is a good storyteller, and he recounts fieldwork adventures and misadventures with humor and self-deprecation. He describes ethnography's unglamorous challenges—the logistical headaches, linguistic misunderstandings, social minefields, political rivalries—and captures textures of Amazonia: nighttime sounds in a rainforest village, the mildew-plus-stale-wood-smoke scent that clings to hammocks and clothing no matter how many times you wash them. His account of building a house for his wife and two small children to join him in the field reveals a loving husband and father.

Chagnon recalls the wonder of entering a radically different world where he feels transported back to an ancestral age. Stalking the wild Paleolithic, he pushes ever farther from civilization, seeking unacculturated Yanomamö with the “glint in their eyes” of true wildness (p. 39). When he finally meets the legendarily fierce Shamatari, he writes, “I felt goose bumps on my arms. I imagined myself being present at a time ten thousand years in the past . . . These were the last of the Stone Age warriors” (p. 82).

Yet no matter how far from civilization he journeyed, metal tools got there first. To anyone familiar with Brian Ferguson's (1995) comprehensive historical analysis of Yanomami warfare, *Noble Savages* reads like a screenplay based on Ferguson's thesis: that unequal access and competition for scarce metal tools were factors in many conflicts. Chagnon's account shows how demands for Western goods dominated his interactions with Yanomamö. Steel was the obsession of this Stone Age.

Noble Savages pursues two main goals: (1) to show that Chagnon's Yanomamö data offer unparalleled insights into ancient human evolution and (2) to discredit his enemies, the Salesian Catholics who impeded his research and the academics who criticized it. The first goal requires representing Yanomamö as exemplars of Stone Age humanity. The second requires showing that Salesians, not he, harmed Yanomamö and that his critics are antiscience ideologues.

These dual purposes weave through the narrative, crossing in tangled contradictions. These representatives of

Paleolithic foragers are village-dwelling farmers who get 70 percent of their diet from horticulture, using steel axes and machetes (pp. 295–296, 467 n. 58). Yanomamö are exemplars of primitive warfare; yet before he arrived, shotguns introduced by Salesians “probably caused an increase in mortality rates in areas near Salesian missions” and may have made Yanomamö more willing to attack enemies (p. 258; see also pp. 113–116). Yanomamö were “isolated” (p. 38), but plantains and bananas, the dietary staples around which key ritual practices revolve, are crops introduced from the Old World (pp. 299–300). In 1964, Yanomamö were “demographically pristine,” unravaged by introduced epidemic diseases (p. 379); yet (refuting charges that the research team he and James Neel brought in 1966 and 1968 worsened health conditions) malaria (another Old World import) was especially bad in 1964, and diarrhea, dysentery, and respiratory infections were serious problems (p. 100). Yanomamö lived “free from the interference of any government” (p. 1), but Venezuelan public health workers, who lived at the mission post where Chagnon set up house next door to a North American family, traveled to distant Yanomamö communities to pass out antimalarial pills and periodically spray the natives' *shabono* dwellings with DDT (p. 3, 466 n.44).

Much of *Noble Savages* reads like a 1960s period piece, frozen in a time before scholarship showed that every society, no matter how remote or apparently isolated, has been shaped by interconnections among peoples and movements of ideas, goods, foods, and biological agents. Yanomami have been affected, directly or indirectly, by centuries of slave raiding, trade, introduced diseases, missions, and rubber tapping, but Chagnon still views them as almost pristine. He argues for biological explanations, but *biology* means only genetic evolution, narrowly conceived. He does not consider how social isolationism, hostility, and intercommunity violence fit into an historical, epidemiological context in which lethal diseases spread by human contact were the greatest threat to survival and reproduction (Conklin 2008).

The centerpiece of Chagnon's evolutionary argument is his analysis, first published in 1988, which shows that Yanomamö men who had killed another human had three times more children than nonkillers (pp. 273–278). Cultural success enhances reproductive success: in a society terrorized by violence, men who display capacities for murderous aggression get more wives and sire more offspring. Twenty-five years ago, scholars pointed out methodological flaws: the statistical correlations are distorted by the way age categories are used and by the exclusion of dead men and their children (because killers are targets for lethal revenge, and dying ends a man's reproductive career; Albert 1989, 1990; Ferguson 1989; see also Lizot 1994). Chagnon (1989:566) promised to provide data on dead men, but those who hoped he finally would do so in *Noble Savages* will be disappointed.

Methodological problems and the disconnect between facts and interpretation led most anthropologists to discount Chagnon's conclusions. He dismisses the scientific objections

as “ad hominem criticism” (p. 278, 410) and focuses instead on personal and political attacks against him: the “secret dossier” circulated by Salesians, Brazilian anthropologists’ concerns about political misuses of his work, Tierney’s malfeasances. Chagnon lumps his academic critics together under a blanket condemnation: cultural anthropology has lost its way because of biophobia (antipathy to evolutionary analysis), postmodernism, and the move away from science into activism and advocacy (pp. 399–403, 452–454). According to Chagnon, cultural anthropologists do not do in-depth ethnography, compare multiple communities, or collect empirical data; many doctoral theses are based on less than six months of fieldwork (p. 66). (I wish someone had told me this when I was sweating through my second year of Amazonian dissertation fieldwork.) The “ayatollahs of anthropology, the Thought Police” (p. 32), outlaw ideas that contradict the politically correct images of indigenous people as harmonious, egalitarian innocents, which activists and Marxist materialists promote. (Ironically, some of the clearest critiques of overromanticism in NGOs have come from the Yanomami activist-anthropologists Chagnon most disparages, Alcida Ramos [1998:267–283] and Bruce Albert [1997:59–60]. Like Chagnon, Albert [2005:215–216] emphasizes that anthropologists must be faithful to facts, even when the facts conflict with advocates’ public relations agendas.)

A major reason why many anthropologists reject evolutionary psychology is that its common assumptions about sex, gender, and kinship look like ethnocentric projections of Western values (McKinnon 2005). In Amazonian anthropology, long-term, empirical field research and comparative studies of the kind Chagnon champions are alive and well. There is extensive work on indigenous warfare, violence, sex, gender, and even reproductive fitness, but the data undercut such simplistic models. Partible paternity is a prime example. This is the belief, shared by Yanomami and many other Amazonian peoples, that a child can have more than one biological father because every man who has sex with a pregnant woman contributes semen to form the fetus. While obviously not medically true, this belief (which appears to be of considerable antiquity) influences sexual behavior, kin-based exchange, and child support. In their seminal volume, *Cultures of Multiple Fathers*, Stephen Beckerman and Paul Valentine (2002:3–9) found cross-cultural attitudes ranging from puritanical to quite tolerant of married women having multiple lovers, refuting the sociobiological claim that “in no society do men readily share a wife” (Pinker 1997:490). Among Yanomami, Catherine Alès (2002) documented high rates of partible paternity and gender relations at odds with Chagnon’s model. Evidence that individuals with “multiple fathers” have higher survival rates (Beckerman and Valentine 2002:7–8) suggests possible evolutionary implications that are complex, contextual, and a focus of ongoing research and debate (see Walker et al. 2010).

Cultural complexity also came to the fore in a study of violence and reproductive success among the Waorani

(Huaorani) in Ecuador, who in the past had “the highest rate of homicide of any society known to anthropology” (Beckerman et al. 2009:8134). Employing a methodologically rigorous approach to avoid the problems in Chagnon’s 1988 analysis, this study found that among Waorani “more aggressive warriors have *lower* indices of reproductive success than their milder brethren . . . the Yanomamö situation . . . does not apply to warlike tribal societies in general. The culture-specific particulars of the situation are important” (Beckerman et al. 2009:8134, 8139, emphasis added).

In *Noble Savages*, many significant culture-specific particulars go unexplained, leaving readers to puzzle over questions such as, Why does the highest ritual honorific, *unokai*, which killers earn by completing a posthomicide ritual, apply also to girls who perform this ritual during their first menstruation (p. 92)? And how does the male reproductive imperative to sire many offspring and ensure paternity certainty (p. 207, 218–219) fit with the frequent divorces, gang rape, domestic violence, and beatings that kill wives or make them leave their husbands (pp. 228–232)? A poignant moment comes when Chagnon feels that Yanomamö finally recognize him as a human being like themselves, after a mortuary ceremony when he sets aside his ethnographer’s role to express his own, heartfelt sadness and cry with them (p. 97). Though he does not explore his indigenous companions’ response, this resonates with Alès’s (2000) analysis of how compassion for the suffering of others motivates much of the anger and violence that Chagnon found so salient.

Throughout his career, Napoleon Chagnon has been admirably forthcoming about his research activities; one reason his work has received so much scrutiny is that he has told so much. *Noble Savages* does what an autobiography should do: reveal something of its subject’s life and tell his story as he wishes. It offers rich insights into the inner world of one of today’s best-known anthropologists. Those seeking to understand the inner worlds of the people whose stories he tells, however, must look elsewhere—perhaps, increasingly, to hear directly from Yanomami themselves.

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Single Reviews

¡Venceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba

Jafari S. Allen. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 256 pp.

Parvathi Kumaraswami
University of Manchester

This study, a consolidation of the author's fieldwork and theoretical reflections, both formal and informal, over a period of some ten years, takes a fresh look at the interplay of race and sex in the lives of contemporary Havana citizens (and some Cubans living in the United States). Jafari Allen sets out to provide a counterpoint to previous approaches, to add complexity and texture to the often-oversimplified and politically polarized question of how race and sexuality are played out in the lives of ordinary Cubans, using research methods that he describes as a "deep hanging out" (p. 7), which is not only self-reflexive but also aware of how he is perceived, as a

black man talking to black respondents. His insistence on examining the small, often private or domestic, spaces where the self is made—the home, private parties—and on the importance of the erotic and friendship in making that self offers many brilliant insights that might otherwise be missed. Indeed, through these methods, he sets out to create a new set of tools to add to the "toolkit" required to understand agency and self-making. Overall, then, the study is elegantly balanced, avoids many oversimplifications about Cuban society, and presents a nuanced and self-aware understanding of contemporary Cuba that emphasizes its complexity and the multiplicity (and often contradictoriness) of the ideological and social forces at play. Allen mostly depicts the revolution, quite rightly, as both enabling and constraining,