



A Yanomami of the Majecodoteri tribe in the Amazon rainforest.

ANTHROPOLOGY

# Tribal warfare

Douglas William Hume assesses a first-hand account of controversial work with the Yanomami people.

Napoleon Chagnon is perhaps best known for his classic 1968 Amazon ethnography *Yanomamö: The Fierce People*, now in its sixth edition. He is also among a handful of scholars whose research prompted the 2001 creation of an American Anthropological Association (AAA) investigatory body, the El Dorado Task Force, to investigate claims of ethical and scholarly wrongdoing during research with the indigenous Amazonian Yanomami.

Although a referendum “to rescind the AAA’s acceptance of the Report of the El Dorado Task Force” passed with a clear majority of the AAA’s membership in 2005, Chagnon’s work and character have, in my view, been scarred by the accusations of misconduct and even genocide that prompted the investigation and split anthropologists into camps representing the false dichotomy of ‘for science’ or ‘for indigenous rights’.

That controversy drives Chagnon’s autobiography, *Noble Savages*. The title is a satirical nod to the romanticization of indigenous peoples as intrinsically good and close to nature, a concept often attributed to eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau — and still accepted by some anthropologists. Chagnon makes it clear that he views neither the Yanomami nor anthropologists as “noble savages”.

**Noble Savages: My Life Among Two Dangerous Tribes — the Yanomamö and the Anthropologists**

NAPOLEON A. CHAGNON

Simon & Schuster: 2013. 544 pp. £23.20/\$32.50

The book begins with Chagnon’s arrival in 1964 at his first Yanomami village, Bisaasiteri in Venezuela, where he was greeted by drawn arrows. His description of how he experienced Yanomami life is candid and vivid, from challenges to his preconceptions about the daily lives of so-called primitive peoples to the joy of discovering symbolic meanings of ritualized behaviour. Chagnon goes on to describe how he learned about Yanomami genealogy, violence and other cultural traits by participating in village life and rituals, and collecting family and conflict histories, between 1964 and the late 1990s.

Chagnon’s central narrative focuses on how he applied biologist E. O. Wilson’s sociobiological theory to genealogy and violence among the Yanomami. Roughly, Wilson posited that evolutionary processes shape social interactions such as altruism. Chagnon explains how he collected and analysed ethnographic data by finding statistical patterns between kinship and violence; reached conclusions on probable causes of warfare such as abduction of women; developed new questions about the impacts of violence on

reproductive success; and repeated the process over decades of research.

Towards the end of the book, Chagnon addresses the debate over his work. He gives a full description of his contentious relationships with many anthropologists, missionaries and indigenous-rights activists.

His first conflict was with anthropologists who favour postmodernism (rejecting absolute truths and focusing instead on the experience of the anthropologist) and advocacy (actively engaging in human-rights campaigns with indigenous peoples), who viewed his work as anti-Yanomami, deterministic and racist. The second was with Catholic missionaries who saw Chagnon’s influence as harmful to the Yanomami, and successfully lobbied the Venezuelan government to expel him from the country. The third attack — with which I am most familiar, because I manage the online archive of material on it (<http://anthroniche.com>) — is related to the ‘Darkness in El Dorado’ scandal, sparked by a book of the same name by journalist Patrick Tierney (W. W. Norton, 2000).

*Darkness in El Dorado* levelled accusations that Chagnon, several medical researchers and other anthropologists working among the Yanomami were individually and sometimes collectively guilty of exploitation, paedophilia and genocide — the latter by the introduction of measles and other contagious diseases to the indigenous community. *Noble Savages* is, to a degree, the long-awaited response to Tierney’s book, and its final chapter relates Chagnon’s perspective on events that unfolded after *Darkness* was published, both in the task-force investigation and among anthropologists. It is Chagnon’s detailed accounts of his research, however, that serve to refute Tierney’s claims, which were based on interviews with missionaries, anthropologists and the Yanomami.

Sadly, however much evidence Chagnon presents, his detractors will remain his detractors: the controversy has become more about a moral cause (indigenous human rights) than about facts.

*Noble Savages* is the story of a man who for decades has tried to bring evolutionary theory and scientific methods to the study of humanity in anthropology. In short, it is Chagnon’s philosophy-of-science case study, as he struggles against anthropology’s retreat from science. His book is an important contribution to the debates over the methods and theories used to understand humans in anthropology and evolutionary sciences — and to debates over how visionaries become the targets of those who do not share their vision. ■

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