

# YANOMAMÖ

## The Fierce People

NAPOLEON A. CHAGNON

Third Edition



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NAPOLEON A. CHAGNON

*Northwestern University*



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To Kaobawä, Rerebawä, and Dedeheiwä, valiant and cherished friends who taught me much about being human.

*Cover:* Yānomamö archer on a hunting trip.

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# Foreword

## ABOUT THE SERIES

These case studies in cultural anthropology are designed to bring to students, in beginning and intermediate courses in the social sciences, insights into the richness and complexity of human life as it is lived in different ways and in different places. They are written by men and women who have lived in the societies they write about and who are professionally trained as observers and interpreters of human behavior. The authors are also teachers, and in writing their books they have kept the students who will read them foremost in their minds. It is our belief that when an understanding of ways of life very different from one's own is gained, abstractions and generalizations about social structure, cultural values, subsistence techniques, and the other universal categories of human social behavior become meaningful.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Napoleon A. Chagnon was born the second of twelve children in Port Austin, Michigan, in 1938. He is married and has two children. He began his academic training at the Michigan College of Mining and Technology at Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan (now called Lake Superior State College), in the physics curriculum. After one year there, he transferred to the University of Michigan, changed his major to anthropology, and received his B.A. (1961), M.A. (1963), and Ph.D. (1966) degrees in anthropology at the University of Michigan. He then joined the faculty of the Department of Human Genetics at the University of Michigan Medical School from which position he participated in an extensive multidisciplinary study of the Yānomamö Indians of Venezuela and Brazil. During that time he also held a joint appointment in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Michigan, where he taught anthropology courses.

In 1972 he moved to the Pennsylvania State University to continue his data analysis and field research among the Yānomamö, developing a long-term project funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation, the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. This project brought him and several of his graduate students into the field between 1974 and 1976 on several trips. To date, Chagnon has made ten field trips among the Yānomamö and has spent 42 months in their villages, mostly in Venezuela.

In 1968 and 1971 Chagnon was joined in the field by his film colleague Timothy Asch, during which time they shot documentary film that has led to the production of 21 educational films, distributed on a nonprofit basis for use in anthropology classes. These are listed on page 221.

In 1980 Chagnon was an invited participant in the King's College Research Centre, Cambridge University, and a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Social Anthropology, Cambridge University.

Chagnon joined the faculty of Northwestern University in 1981 and was appointed Chairman of the Anthropology Department in 1983. He is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Anthropological Association, and Current Anthropology. He presently serves as Editor for the Psychological Cinema Register, the Pennsylvania State University's nonprofit film distribution unit, and is on the Editorial Board of the journal *Ethology and Sociobiology* and the series Ediciones Venezolano de Antropología.

Chagnon has published numerous articles and book chapters on various aspects of his work among the Yānomamö, and a methods study (1974) detailing the procedures he used in the field to collect the information on which most of his ethnographic publications are based. Since 1975 his interests have shifted more toward the strategies used by individuals in their kinship and marriage behavior; some of this work can be found in his 1979 book, co-edited with William Irons. He plans to return to the Yānomamö to continue his research on kinship, demography, and reproduction.

### ABOUT THE THIRD EDITION

When *Yānomamö: The Fierce People* first appeared in 1968, it immediately became the most widely used study in the series of which it is a part. The second edition appeared in 1977. Its popularity has continued. Instructors of anthropology and students alike are intrigued with the character of the Yānomamö, their conflicts and how they resolve them, and the fact that they yet retain their tribal sovereignty. Though no single people can be held to be representative of tribal life everywhere, before serious inroads have been made by the outside world, the Yānomamö are indisputably sovereign, indisputably tribal, and indisputably themselves. Their sovereignty is now seriously threatened. Some of their villages are now permanently contacted by missionaries and, more recently, they are being increasingly impacted by tourists, developers, and adventurers, whose visits can only lead to misfortune to the Yānomamö way of life. In Brazil, their lands are coveted by others and they may be soon confined to "reservations" that are totally inadequate in size for Yānomamö traditional economic needs. When or if this happens, their fate may be sealed. The situation in Venezuela is more hopeful, but could rapidly change.

But the way of life Chagnon describes in this case study is still intact over a significant fraction of Yānomamö territory where most of his research was conducted. In the last chapter he tells us something of the nature of cultural change and the inroads on the integrity of Yānomamö culture as it developed during his field studies. But this is not the focus of the study. The focus is on the Yānomamö culture and sociopolitical organization as it exists in its own

sovereign environment, a product of long-term sociocultural evolution without intervention from outside alien populations and life ways.

*Yanomamö: The Fierce People* is a particularly useful aid to instruction in anthropology because it is about a tribal people celebrating their own sovereign existence. Its value is enhanced by the availability of films shot in Yanomamö villages by Chagnon and Timothy Asch of a wide variety of events and behaviors, ranging from everyday domestic activities to elaborate feasts and gripping duels and fights. In our extended experience as instructors of introductory anthropology at Stanford University, the combination of a challenging, exciting case study and well-executed ethnographic films is unbeatable. The behaviors and norms of people who are very different from us become, though shocking and disturbing at times, real and comprehensible when placed into anthropological perspective. An annotated list of available Yanomamö films is included at the end of the study.

This case study is also valuable as an aid to teaching anthropology because it deals with processes that are found in some form in all of human social life. Violence, for example, is explicitly represented in some form in nearly all human societies, and implicitly represented in the rest. Violence among the Yanomamö in its several graded forms from chest pounding, side slapping, club fighting, ax fighting to all-out warfare and treacherous massacres is described and explained in this case study: far from being random and senseless, it is well regulated and an integral component of both internal social organization of villages and political dealings between villages. An important feature of this edition is a more extensive analysis of fissioning of Yanomamö villages, a phenomenon noted in prehistoric archaeological materials and in many areas of the tribal world outside Amazonia. Chagnon provides exceptionally rich data on the kinship, demographic, and ecological dimensions of this important process and relates it to the important political variables characterizing all tribal societies of the kind that the Yanomamö represent.

This new edition is marked by major additions and changes that enhance the utility of *Yanomamö* as a Case Study in Cultural Anthropology, many of them stemming from the fact that Chagnon spent many more months among the Yanomamö after the first and second editions were written. He also has acceded to requests from readers and from the editors to include more on his own field experiences. Opportunities to learn about fieldwork among sovereign tribal peoples soon will be nonexistent. Chagnon's experiences are entertaining. They are adventurous at times. They also tell us something about the Yanomamö, about anthropology, and about Chagnon. Their inclusion in the first chapter is, we think, an excellent introduction to the case study.

The author also has completely rewritten the chapter on social organization. He has provided enhanced descriptions of daily routine, the roles of men and women, and the experience of children. He has added significantly more material on myth and ideology. His treatment of social organization in this edition is more streamlined and contrasts the more formal approach of structuralism with the more quantitative approach of statistical models, focusing largely on the process of village fissioning as an outcome of the

interactions among several variables, especially relationships among kin and marriage allies. His analysis is not a standard textbook treatment: it introduces new kinds of data and new ideas, and applies them to standard anthropological problems in a refreshing way.

Chagnon has not avoided discussing controversies, some of which have been provoked by earlier editions of this case study and his other publications. His response to critics who accuse him of overemphasizing violence or failing to consider the politics of protein maximization are all too brief but interesting. Readers who are familiar with past editions will see that Chagnon's thinking as well as his knowledge of the Yąnomamö have expanded.

We recommend *Yąnomamö: The Fierce People* as one of the most instructive and compelling writings available in anthropology. The first two editions of this case study have made the Yąnomamö one of the most important examples of tribal culture in the ethnographic literature; this edition will enhance our understanding of a truly remarkable and exciting people.

GEORGE AND LOUISE SPINDLER

*General Editors*

## Preface to the Third Edition

I have visited some sixty Yānomamö villages since I began my initial field research in 1964 when I was a doctoral candidate at the University of Michigan. I have been back to the Yānomamö ten times thus far and have spent a total of 42 months living among them in various villages. Most of that time was spent in several clusters of villages near the headwaters of the Orinoco River in Venezuela, and this case study is largely based on my many experiences in that region, especially in the village of Bisaasi-teri where my first work began. The general pattern of my long-term field research has been to travel further and further into uncontacted regions attempting to document political histories of specific villages as the Yānomamö know them from memory, to document the process of village (population) growth and dispersal by collecting meticulous data on demographic variables (births, deaths, marriage, 'divorce'), to identify and verify all genealogical ties between all individuals, and to collect data on conflicts both within and between villages. In addition, I have investigated Yānomamö religious and mythical beliefs and a host of other anthropological topics commonly studied by fieldworkers. While most of my field effort in collecting these kind of data has been concentrated in some dozen villages, I also collected a good deal of similar information in the fifty or so other villages I visited in other regions. I am very much aware of the variations that occur from region to region and the similarities that can be found as well. I would like it to be clearly understood by both the students who read this book and my colleagues who have done field research in other regions of the Yānomamö tribe that this case study does *not* purport to describe all Yānomamö villages everywhere or suggest that there is no variation among villages and regions. A significant fraction of my published work in fact emphasizes and draws attention to some of the differences between both villages and whole clusters of villages, particularly for village size, composition, intensity of warfare, mortality, alliance patterns, marriage patterns, demographic properties of villages and village clusters, reproductive variation, styles of headmanship, and other cultural attributes (see Chagnon, 1968b; 1974; 1975b; 1979a for examples).

This edition of *Yānomamö: The Fierce People* differs from the two previous editions in several significant regards. The first edition (published in 1968) was based on my initial 15 months of work. The present edition takes account of some of the additional data and understandings that resulted from two more years of continued field research in Yānomamö villages. The second edition (1977) differed from the first only by the inclusion of a new chapter that focused on the kinds of changes that were then beginning to be significant in Yānomamö culture as missionary activity and government presence in the tribal area began to accelerate. The final chapter of this edition is substantially



the same as it was in the second edition, but it must be assumed that in 1983 much more change has taken place and at a faster pace, and is no longer confined to the mission posts where it began.

This edition also provides a more simplified description and treatment of Yąnomamö kinship and marriage. Students and teachers alike have indicated that the original chapter on Yąnomamö social organization was too detailed and complex for a case study intended for new students in anthropology. Hopefully the revised treatment, which is more "behavioral" and "empirical" than "structural," will be easier to read and follow. It does, however, focus on an important set of anthropological issues and theory—"ideal" versus "actual" social organization/structure.

Several additional changes and modifications should be noted. I have substantially extended my discussion of Yąnomamö myth, attempting to provide material that, when supplemented with the films on myth, will give those teachers and students interested in this dimension of culture more to work with. I have also added a large amount of information on Yąnomamö settlement pattern and village histories to underscore the tremendous importance of past history on contemporary social relationships within and between villages, to provide a larger cultural ecological framework for the data on social organization, and to make it more possible for archaeology teachers and students to develop "ethnographic models" that might be used to interpret ancient settlement patterns that are revealed partially through archaeological field studies.

As in the first two editions, I have presented much of the description in a historical context, particularly the intervillage conflicts and wars. In this fashion, the reader can more easily appreciate and understand how specific events in particular villages set the course for many subsequent events and influence the quality of political ties between groups—and understand more fully how conflicts, once begun, endure for many years.

Finally, I have extended my discussion of what it is like to do field research as a member of North American culture. Students have responded very enthusiastically to this material in the first two editions and have indicated an interest in having more of it. In this edition I have added a section on what it is like to make first contact with a remote, previously uncontacted village and the dangers, risks, mishaps, frustrations, fun, excitement, and satisfaction that goes along with it. The possibility of having this sort of experience is rapidly vanishing. I dearly hope that the bigger picture of a shrinking world and the disappearance of whole types of human societies is clear to the reader. There are very few places left on earth where "first contact" with an unknown tribe can still happen, and it is rapidly disappearing even in Yąnomamö land. When such societies are gone forever, we will be left only with the recollections of old informants who might be able to recite important events and facts, but who can never communicate the quality of life that exists in a sovereign, primitive culture whose members firmly believe that they are the only people on earth or, if there are others, they are degenerate, inferior copies of themselves. These beliefs and convictions invest their daily behavior with a quality that

cannot ever be obtained second hand or simulated in even the most sophisticated computer. When it disappears, it is gone forever, a page torn from human history.

It has been a distinct privilege and onerous responsibility to have been able to read that historical page when it was still in the book, a book that still has a few chapters left yet to be read, but what must be gleaned from them depends very heavily on the skill of the reader.

N. A. C.

May 1983

## Acknowledgments

The research on which this case study is based has been supported by a number of public and private foundations. My initial field research for the doctorate degree at the University of Michigan was supported by a Predoctoral Fellowship from the National Institute of Mental Health (1964–1966). During the six years I was on the faculty of the Department of Human Genetics at the University of Michigan Medical School (1966–1972), I made a series of field trips as a participant in a multidisciplinary study of the Yānomamö. Funds for that work were initially provided by the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (see footnote 1, Chapter 7) and, later, by the National Science Foundation. The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research supported one of my field trips (1968). Support for the film work I conducted with Timothy Asch was provided by the National Science Foundation, resulting, to date, in 21 documentary films distributed on a nonprofit basis (see p. 221). Between 1974 and 1978 my field research and data-analysis efforts were supported by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Science Foundation, and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. Additional support from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation after 1978 has enabled me to continue my data analysis and develop new methodology and theoretical approaches to human kinship behavior, conflict resolution, genealogical relatedness, demography, and the reproductive attributes of individuals.

I am greatly indebted to many friends, colleagues, teachers, students, missionaries, government officials, and others who have helped me in many ways during my long study of the Yānomamö. These are legion and the kinds and amounts of support they provided are too varied and numerous to list here. I do want to thank my life-long friend William Irons for the many stimulating discussions we have had about anthropology as a science, discussions that have caused both of us to pursue new directions and tackle old problems in new ways (see Irons' publications in the bibliography).

As the pages that follow will indicate, I am deeply indebted to a large number of Yānomamö who generously took me under their protection and into their confidence and shared the many secrets of genealogy, political history, and kinship relationships on which most of this case study is based. Hopefully their descendants will be pleased with what it was that we did, and that I will continue to enjoy the esteem of the Yānomamö in the future.

Finally, I owe the greatest debt to my wife, Carlene, who patiently and selflessly encouraged me in my work during the many years I have been studying the Yānomamö and the many months I was away, in some unnamed, unmapped, unexplored jungle “doing fieldwork.” Few will be able to appreciate how difficult this is or can be for family life when the children have to be

told that “dad is living with the Indians again.” Our children are neat people, and many of their desirable, admirable qualities are in large measure due to my wife’s indefatigable extra efforts brought about by often having had to be a double parent. For years the children thought that everyone’s father, if out of town, was living somewhere with “the Indians.” Now that they are young adults, they understand and appreciate what it was that compelled me to be away from them so often and so long when they were children, and I am grateful for their understanding.

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# Prologue

There is a large tribe of Tropical Forest Indians on the border between Venezuela and Brazil. They number approximately 12,000 people and are distributed in some 125 widely scattered villages. They are gardeners and they have lived until very recent time in isolation from our kind of culture. The authorities in Venezuela and Brazil knew very little about their existence until anthropologists began going there. The remarkable thing about the tribe, known as the Yānomamö, is the fact that they have managed, due to their isolation in a remote corner of Amazonia, to retain their native patterns of warfare and political integrity without interference from the outside world. They have remained sovereign and in complete control of their own destiny up until a few years ago. The remotest, uncontacted villages are still living under those conditions.

This case study is about the Yānomamö and about their sovereignty. It is based on 41 months of residence in many of their villages, on fieldwork that began in 1964—before the major vectors of change began to impinge on some of their villages. My initial 15 months of field research, between 1964 and 1966, was conducted when very little accurate information existed about their culture, geographical distribution, tribal size, and cultural history.

I want to begin with a story, a description of an event that happened 15 years before I went to live with the Yānomamö, an event I had to reconstruct from bits and pieces of information given to me by many Yānomamö informants after I learned their language, for they spoke no other language when I first went there and I did not know their language then. The event that I describe below led to the development of political relationships, alliances, and wars between many Yānomamö villages and dominated their social activities while I was there, but I had to proceed in ignorance because I knew nothing about the event. The story contains a message about anthropological fieldwork on the one hand, and the nature of Yānomamö political organization on the other. As to fieldwork, the lesson is that it is in some cases impossible to understand a society's 'social organization' by studying only one village or community of that society, for each community is bound up in and responds to the political ties to neighboring groups and the obligations and pressures these ties impose on them. Regarding Yānomamö political organization, the lesson is that past events and history must be understood to comprehend the current observable patterns. As the Roman poet Lucretius mused, nothing yet from nothing ever came.

## *The Killing of Ruwāhiwä*

The members of the village of Bisaasi-teri lived several days' walk from their southernmost neighbors, the Konabuma-teri. The Bisaasi-teri were a splinter

village of a much larger village: Patanowä-teri. They were themselves at odds with the larger 'mother' village and beginning to fission away from them, forging their own new identity and seeking new allies. They saw in their southern neighbors, the Konabuma-teri, an opportunity to strengthen their political image by cultivating friendship with them.

The recent history of both groups (Patanowä-teri/Bisaasi-teri and Konabuma-teri) entailed a gradual, general migration from the northeast to the southwest as past wars and current alliances caused their villages to periodically relocate in new, virgin areas of the Tropical Forest. They spoke slightly different dialects of Yānomamö, but no different from what obtains between North Carolina and Upstate New York. Hunters from each group began running into each other in the lands between their villages and eventually, in the late 1940s, they decided to begin visiting and trading with each other.

Apparently the trading visits increased in regularity and frequency, and members of the two groups got to know each other well. They got to know each other's personal names, a task that is not easy in view of the stringent taboos on using a person's real name.

In Yānomamö politics, members of allied villages often need each other's support, but often they cannot and do not trust each other much—especially if the allies are not historically and therefore genealogically related to each other, as was the case here.

All deaths other than those obviously caused by human or animal intervention—killings with arrows or being attacked by jaguars for example—are attributed to harmful magic. The Yānomamö, and all tribal populations, suffer a high infant mortality rate: babies do not have a good chance of survival, but die frequently for a host of reasons that we, with our technical medical knowledge, could diagnose and describe in precise, mechanical biomedical terms. But the Yānomamö do not have such knowledge, and to them, babies die because someone sent harmful spirits—*bekura*—to steal their souls, or someone blew magical charms at them from a great distance, charms that caused them to sicken and die. Thus, in every village, the shamans spend many hours attempting to cure sick children and sick adults, driving out the malevolent forces that have caused their illness, and in turn, sending their own spirits and charms against the children in distant villages for revenge.

Several children died in the village of Bisaasi-teri as the alliance with the people of Konabuma-teri was developing and maturing. Shamans in Bisaasi-teri began suspecting that men in Konabuma-teri were secretly sending harmful charms and magic against them and their children and ultimately convinced themselves that their new allies were truly enemies. Unaware of this, one of the prominent men from Konabuma-teri arrived at Bisaasi-teri to visit and trade. His name was Ruwähiwä, and he came alone. He entered the clearing in his pose of the visitor: erect, proud, motionless, and showing no fear. He was greeted by the host men, who came out with their weapons, cheering, hooting, and growling symbolic threats and intimidations as they inspected him. After a few minutes, he was invited to take up a hammock until food was prepared for him. Presently, a gourd of plantain soup was ready and



he was invited out to drink of it before the house of the local headman. He squatted on his haunches, picked up the gourd, and began drinking, oblivious to his surroundings, happy to be welcomed in this customary way.

A man approached him silently from behind, a man named Mamikininiwä, a mature man of 40 years whose decisions few would challenge. He carried the battered, worn remains of a steel ax, hafted clumsily to a short, stout handle. Ruwähiwä paid him no attention and kept drinking the plantain soup. Mamikininiwä raised his ax high above his head and then smashed it down violently, sharp edge forward, into Ruwähiwä's skull. He lurched forward, trying to stand, but was mortally wounded. He fell to the ground and died in a pool of his own blood. Later that day, several old women carried his body out and off to his village.

Thus began the war between the village of Bisaasi-teri and Konabuma-teri, a war that was going on 15 years later when I went to the Yānomamö, but a war I was ignorant of when I went there.

Ruwähiwä's group then set about to avenge this killing. They enlisted the support of a third village that was on friendly terms with the Bisaasi-teri and managed to get them to host a feast at which the Bisaasi-teri would be the guests of honor. They invited men from a fourth village to join them in hiding outside the village. The unsuspecting Bisaasi-teri had come en masse for the occasion: men, women, and children. Shortly after the feast began, and while the Bisaasi-teri men were lying motionless and helpless in their hosts' hammocks, someone gave the signal: the hosts suddenly set upon them with clubs, bowstaves, and arrows, attacking them in their hammocks. Many died instantly, but some managed to escape outside. There, they ran into showers of arrows from the hidden archers. More died and more were wounded, some badly enough that they later died. Between a dozen and fifteen adult men were killed that afternoon. A number of women and pubescent girls were taken captive, never to be seen by their families again. The survivors retreated deep into the jungle, to the north, and hid for many days while the wounded recovered enough to move on. The survivors, depressed and anguished, sought refuge in a village to the north, Mahekodo-teri. They arrived early in the year 1951, a date recorded by Mr. James P. Barker, the first missionary to make a sustained contact with the Yānomamö a few months prior to this. He saw the Bisaasi-teri arrive at Mahekodo-teri, the village he had chosen for his mission station.

The Bisaasi-teri moved away from the Mahekodo-teri about a year later and settled further down the Orinoco River. They were the people I came to live with when I first went to the Yānomamö, but I knew nothing of this tragic event in their recent history when I joined them to begin my field research. But the significance of that event slowly unraveled over the months as I learned more of their language and set about to discover something about their history and recent settlement pattern. Only then did much of what I initially witnessed begin to make sense, and only then did their raids and political dealings with neighbors become comprehensible.

Much of what follows in this book is about the Bisaasi-teri and the people who live in that village.