

Man Called "Bee", A

The Yanomamö are a tribal people of "Foot Indians" that live deep in the jungles of southern Venezuela and northwestern Brazil. They are a "autonomous" society composed of about 10,000 people in some 125 villages. They are specialists in hunting the birds and monkeys of the upper canopy of the triple-tiered tropical rain forest with giant bows & arrows. Each village is a single "communal hut", a circular thatched lean-to with an open cleared "plaza" in the middle reserved for ceremonies and other public activities such as games (you will see a playful example of women & children playing a "tug-of-war" in the rainy plaza). Families sling their hammocks (a South American Indian invention, as is the word) in "apartment" segments within this cylindrical structure, each centered on their own hearth. Lineages, extended family-like structures founded by men and traced through the male line ("patri", as in "patriarchs" and "lineal" as in a line of related men, fathers, brothers and sons, e.g., "patrilineal lineages"), which are composed of related men with their wives and children, live together in segments of the hut circle. These big communal huts are called "**shabono**".

The Yanomamö are one of the few native peoples that were discovered in recent times and therefore still engage in their traditional warfare, small-scale hit-and-run raids conducted for prestige and for women ("wife-stealing" is one of the most common ways of obtaining a wife in traditional society; one gets around the "mother-in-law" and "father-in-law" problem via the simple expedient of killing them, as members of enemy villages, and taking their young daughters as captives and later wives; we make war for petroleum, they make war for what they consider their most precious resource, women!). Thus, one of the principal cultural "values" that the Yanomamö have is ferocity. Their men must be "fierce", **waiteri** (see P&B's discussion of this on page 19 of your textbook).

The American anthropologist who has made the Yanomamö the most famous tribal people in the world, Napoleon Chagnon, has been accused (and it has made Time and Newsweek) of exaggerating their ferocity, and thus making it easier for the surrounding Western societies to extinguish them, which they are currently doing). This is a conflict in anthropology, between the "study" of a traditional people and "advocacy" for them in an effort to protect them from modern culture contact and exploitation. Advocates believe you should emphasize the "positive" aspects of their clients, scientists like Chagnon respond that one should portray a society on its own terms; if they regard themselves as "fierce" and independent, then raiding and fighting should also be documented.

In addition, while most cultural anthropologists are of a liberal political persuasion, believing that there is little inherent biological basis for human behavior (despite many of the lessons of primatology), and that most of what we are is learned, a product of culture, Chagnon is a political conservative who believes in the importance of biological imperatives within culture. Thus, he follows a

"theoretical orientation" that is controversial within cultural anthropology, as approaching the dangers of "biological determinism" (see P&B), but accepted within evolutionary biology as articulated by Edmund Wilson, "Sociobiology". This is the belief that what is important about all organized life, including people, is the transmission of our genes, via breeding, to the next generation. This is what Darwin called "reproductive fitness", the ability of some individuals to have more offspring than others and thus to transmit more of their genetic information (genes, the units within DNA) to the next generation, thereby changing the course of evolution. They do this within the context of "natural selection" (one half of the modern theory of evolution), by being better adapted to the natural or social environment than others of their species, thus surviving better to reproductive age than others and being more fertile.

Liberals also dislike the fact that Chagnon got financial support for his fieldwork from, of all agencies, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), the industry advocacy group for fission energy. The problem was, what human population is so isolated from others and from the regions exposed to nuclear testing since WWII that their genetic inheritance has been minimally altered by the mutations that are a result of exposure to nuclear fallout? That would be the Yanomamö, hidden away in the depths of the South American Amazon far from the northern latitudes where nuclear tests and power facilities are found? Thus, in cooperation with a blood geneticist, Chagnon's "problem orientation" (the specific topic that he was sent to study) was therefore to do a census of the Yanomamö, and then construct complete genealogies to trace their population genetics as a rare example of a "natural" uncontaminated human population, a reference group against which to measure modern exposed populations.

Based on his statistical studies Chagnon has published the highly unpopular conclusion that "successful homicides", that is, warriors who have killed other men (enemies) and stolen their women to become their multiple wives, have more children, and therefore are more reproductively "fit", than non-killers! This is of potentially great importance in human biology due to the commonness of violence in our own history, which may have shaped our modern genetics and our potential for conflict and competition. Liberals, of course, tend to emphasize human peacefulness, and dismiss war and raiding as a mere set of culturally-learned behaviors that can be modified or even gotten rid of completely via social engineering. There are ideological conflicts in anthropology as in all other social science fields and Chagnon and the Yanomamö have been in the thick of them.

In addition, the personality of the anthropologist affects how he or she sees such a society. This is called "personal bias" in anthropology. Chagnon is an aggressive and "macho" kind of fellow who relished the danger and violence of Yanomamö life. You see him in the movie parading to the center of the village plaza in his feathers and bow & arrows, like a visiting Yanomamö warrior (shorts and

sneakers to the contrary notwithstanding). Thus he has emphasized the role of fights within the village and raids between them in his studies and in his films.

However, such a view can be countered by 2 techniques in anthropology: (1.) Team Study, and, (2.) Restudy. Both have been applied to the Yanomamö. With regard to **team study**, Chagnon travels into the field as part of a team; he had his films shot by Timothy Asch, an anthropological filmmaker (this sub-field is called: "Visual Anthropology") as part of the task force (note, you hear Asch off-camera asking Chagnon to hold the Poloroid print towards the movie camera. Asch is a less aggressive figure and, as part of the team, qualifies Chagnon's viewpoint. With regard to restudies (2.), the Yanomamö have been studied by male anthropologists from other national traditions, such as Jacques Lizot from the French perspective (much more humanistic; his book reads like Rabinow, the ethnography as a stream-of-consciousness novel), as well as by female anthropologists. Just to the north of us, in Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, Judith Shapiro, a female anthropologist, has studied Yanomamö women in much smaller peripheral villages, which are more peaceful, there is less gender conflict and raiding, than the big central village that Chagnon studied. Thus gender and spatial differences have been accounted for in the restudy concept and unique personal preoccupations in the team study method.

You saw the fieldwork process in this film; how Chagnon uses trade goods like machetes and nylon line and fish-hooks, or matches, to win **rapport** (cooperation, friendship), but not by giving all his things away initially. The other key Yanomamö value to "fierceness" is "generosity", and he must respond to their requests, often by **barter**, the exchange of a good for a good (see him getting spun cotton and bows in exchange for his manufactured items).

You also saw how he uses his medical supplies and expertise to treat the eye infections of children and other ailments. He must make himself useful to the villagers so that they will tolerate him.

(1.) First, you see him do a census (the **demography**) by counting noses, ages, sexes, and gathering data on dead ancestors. Some villages are small, 50-80 people, others large; this is a very **big** central village, up to 250 people!

(2.) To do that he takes a Poloroid picture of each person and notes their sex, age (estimated) and name. Today one could use a digital camera and portable laptop computer linked to solar cells to record this information--he must use binders and note cards. See how organized he is (a typical American, he brings heavy tech. and equipment into the field). He must process his field data and print it out after every return from the field prior to his new expeditions. Note the woman who sobs because she saw her daughter among his Poloroids, a young woman kidnapped by raiders from an enemy village, thus showing how common "wife capture" is.

Then you see him begin the study by mapping the village, so that he can place the residents in their spatial context, armed with a 30 meter tape, a lensatic compass and some string (and a native helper).