

A review of Noble Savages by Napoleon Chagnon.

The core of this article is a review of noble savages by Napoleon Chagnon. It is, however, more than that. It is the story of the anthropologists I have known throughout my own long life, reflections of my own experiences with Indians in the Amazon and elsewhere, and connections with my extensive reading, as reflected by approximately 540 reviews on Amazon.

A history of the science of anthropology

Franz Boas, a German immigrant who had graduated in physics in 1881, founded the science of anthropology with the establishment of a department at Columbia University in 1899. His specialty was the Inuit of Baffin Island and the Indians of Canada and northwestern United States.

Boas' staunch liberalism characterized the field from the start. He was opposed to the eugenicists of his era, men such as Francis Galton, and presumably against the contemporary intelligence researchers such as Fisher, Pearson and Binet. He, like a majority of anthropologists who followed him, preferred to attribute human diversity to cultural rather than genetic factors.

The first PhD that Boas awarded in 1901 went to A. L. Kroeber, founder of the anthropology department at the University of California. Kroeber's most famous subject was Ishi, the last of the Yahi Indians. Hungry and alone, Ishi wandered into the town of Oroville looking for food. Kroeber took him to Berkeley, gave him a job, and taught himself the Yahi language and learned Ishi's history.

Several years after Ishi's death, Kroeber took one of his students, Theodora, as his second wife. My mother, Janet, edited her popular press book "Ishi, the last of his tribe" in the late 1950s, at which time I briefly met Kroeber himself. The book came out in 1961, shortly after Kroeber died.

Through my mother's connection with the department, I met other anthropologists for whom she edited, among them Yolanda and Robert Murphy. Robert, who worked briefly with the Yanomamo tribe, is mentioned by Chagnon. In 1972 Yolanda wrote *Women of the Forest*, about the Mundurucú Indians among whom the Murphys did their fieldwork in 1952. Janet Chernela, the anthropologist who led the trip to the Kayapo in which I participated, wrote a forward for the 30th anniversary edition of Yolanda's book.

The Amazon is huge. The Mundurucu live in the Brazilian state of Para. The Kayapo, among whom Chernela has worked, are in Mato Grosso, 500 miles to the north. The Yanomamo straddle the Venezuelan border 500 miles northeast from there.

By 1964, when Chagnon was looking for a tribe to study for his PhD work, the only remaining "wild" peoples, those minimally contaminated by civilization, were in the Amazon and New Guinea. Even they were not pristine. While they might never have seen one, they knew about white people. They used steel machetes, knives, cooking pots and fishhooks obtained by trade. Their staple foods included bananas, which had come from southeast Asia during the Columbian exchange half a millennium earlier. Graduating from a pure hunter-gatherer existence, they grew most of their food through swidden agriculture, slash-and-burn garden plots.

As of the 1960s the Indians of the Amazon did not have reservations. Villages of people migrated through the vast forests as their garden plots became unproductive, neighboring tribes too bothersome, or disputes caused villages to split and move apart. The Kayapo got their 11-million-hectare reservation in the 1960s. By the time Yanomamo got something, and the Mundurucu got their 2 million in 2004, competing interests made the governments less generous.

Though they diminished over time, each of the reservations is the size of a US state.

Warfare was a constant in the Indians' existence. Chagnon writes about the continual fights among the Yanomamo. My age-mates among the Kayapo had lost fathers and uncles in wars prior to agreeing to stay on their reservation. My impression was that they had fought other tribes, though they almost certainly fought among themselves as well. Ferocity – courage - was a virtue much appreciated in every tribe.

Chagnon's studies Chagnon personal history

Despite the lack of reservations or even regular contact with the governments, Brazil and Venezuela exercised some control over the coming and going of anthropologists. Political considerations weighed heavily as Chagnon examined his several options before settling on the Yanomamo.

In November 1964 he arrived at the New Tribes evangelical mission next to a Yanomamo village called Bisaasi-Teri on the Orinoco River at the mouth of the Mavaca River. In his first years the New Tribes people and the Salesian Catholic missions both treated him fairly well. None, however, could teach him language.

Chagnon learned the language the same way that Boaz and Kroeber had done, by pointing and gesticulating until he developed an appreciation of the structure of the language. He developed his own shorthand for writing it down. As his knowledge of the language increased, he more boldly ventured into the forest to other villages within walking distance.

The Indians would not waste their time on him for nothing. He paid attention with trade goods such as fishhooks, knives and pots. Even after he became proficient in the language, he remained tethered to the evangelical mission first by the local Indians' reluctance to give up their cornucopia.

Chagnon discovered that duplicity is a part of the Indian character. They made up impossible stories, fictitious demons and everything else to keep him from wandering out of their clutches. His story about breaking loose to meet some Yanomamo who had not had contact with white men is one of the most gripping in the book.

Chagnon's experience echoes my own with the Kayapo Indians. They eagerly traded small souvenirs they had made for whatever we had to swap, cheating and stealing when they could. This was less true of the five Portuguese-speaking elder "professors" charged with teaching us about the forest. They were far more accustomed to whites – "kuban" in their language – than Chagnon describes.

Chagnon describes the privations of Indian life. First, your clothes get dirty. You smell. The daytime gnats pester you incessantly, to the point that you get used to them and your body possibly makes itself a bit less tasty to hold them at bay. Snakes, some large and poisonous, are everywhere. As are large spiders. Jaguars snoop around at night, looking to make a meal of you. You have to shake your clothes off and boots out before getting dressed. You get weird digestion problems and diseases. Malaria is endemic. The Indians have no sense of privacy.

In Kayapo country we slept in tents to avoid vampire bats, had shots against yellow fever and took pills to prevent malaria. They had not warned us about a skin disease called scabies, caused by microscopic arthropods.

The Indians had little notion of time. They would eye the sun to tell you it was an hour or two before lunch. They don't keep track of birthdays or age. Chagnon reports that the Yanomamo

don't count beyond about two. The Kayapo were a little better. When they collected 120 tortoises to eat at a feast, they reckoned that they had 12 racks of 10. 120 was beyond their numbering scheme.

The Indians have a great sense of humor. They play with each other's names. A trick that Chagnon describes, and the Kayapo played with me, was to have the foreigner mispronounce the name of another Indian. In my case the guy's name was Kubanil. They had me shout out Kubaniley, which turns out to be a diminutive – feminization. Chagnon said it was dangerous to the foreigner. I'm glad I didn't find out. Kubanil is now a chief in the tribe.

On the other hand, they have a great sense of direction. Chagnon reports that wherever they were in the forest, they could accurately point in the direction of another village and tell you how many nights it would take to get there. After we stopped for lunch as the Indians led us through the jungle all morning on our first full day in Kayapo country, they abruptly asked me as the oldest student in the group and the only one who spoke Portuguese where we had come from. I pointed. They laughed and pointed in the other direction. I laughed and once again pointed back to where we had come. Not hard to do. The winter sun is in the north in the southern hemisphere. We had walked due South for two hours and due East for one hour along straight logging roads.

Chagnon major theories:

Marriage patterns – the moité system

Chagnon's major effort over the course of his fieldwork was to document the genealogy of as much of the Yanomamo population as he could. This effort brought him in contact with a large number of villages and individuals, facilitating his many other observations.

It is a considerable advantage to have a large number of relatives by blood and marriage. Belonging to a large clan provides a numerical advantage in war.

A lack of marriageable women is a constant problem among the Yanomamo. The biggest factor is polygamy. Given that powerful men in a tribe have several wives, and that women are scarce in the first place, some men are bound to do without. Persistent as he was, Chagnon could not conclusively demonstrate that it was a problem of female infanticide, though the numbers strongly suggest it.

There are several reasons that men in the society remain unmarried. They may come from families with few children, leaving them no sisters whom their father could offer in marriage in exchange. They may come from outside the village and lack important alliances. The men may not be considered fierce – people who have proven themselves in battle by killing an opponent have decidedly better odds of getting a wife and fathering children.

Inbreeding is a persistent problem in populations as small as an Indian tribe. They have appropriate taboos against incest. On the other hand – a big other hand – custom encourages marrying cousins.

Assume two powerful men have both sons and daughters. They arrange two marriages in which the son of one marries the daughter of the other. The two marriages in this second generation produce sons and daughters as well. They repeat the process of cross marriage.

Assume that the same thing happens in the third generation. There are four grandchildren, each equally descended from the same for grandparents. And so on down in future generations.

There is an additional important rule. A child can only marry the offspring of an opposite sex sibling of their parent. A man cannot marry the daughter of his father's brother, but he can marry the daughter of his father's sister. And vice versa.

Yanomamo villages typically have two powerful clans under such a system of intermarriage. Among the Kayapo they are called by the French word *moités*. It is of course diluted by a number of factors. Since the powerful men have many wives, there are lots of half siblings. Powerful men have wives captured from other tribes – outsiders. Their children may marry unrelated, or rather, more distantly related sons and daughters daughters of weaker members of the same tribe.

In the final analysis it amounts to cousin marriage, inbreeding, which would be impossible to avoid in the population numbering in the few thousands such as that of the Yanomamo, and at that scattered so widely that most members of the same tribe don't know one another.

The biggest villages Chagnon encountered numbered no more than two or 300 individuals. At that number they were highly fractious, with many fights among the men over the women. A more comfortable size village would number around 70 individuals. Self-defense is the primary reason that an oversized village does not split. There is strength in numbers.

Scarce resources – material or women

Wives are hard to come by. The *moité* system puts close to half of them off limits. Men secure alliances by giving their daughters away in marriage. Those with nothing to offer in exchange lose out.

Chagnon agrees with Marxists that wars are fought over scarce commodities. Claiming that women, and not material possessions, are the scarce commodity in question puts him at odds with the academic Marxists have been dominant in cultural anthropology since the days of Franz Boas.

As Chagnon tells it, the Yanomamo do not have much of a material culture. Prior to contact with the whites, they didn't manufacture any products of great value. Everything they made was for personal use, never more than one person's investment of a week or two's labor. They don't have anything like gold as a store of wealth. There was more than ample space in the forest for their simple garden plots, and abundant game and fish.

The Yanomamo, like every creature in existence, evolved to reproduce itself. As Richard Dawkins wrote in *The Selfish Gene*, the phenotype is nothing more than the genotype's vehicle for reproducing itself. A thousand millennia of male behavior was evolved to pass on their genes. They did so by mate guarding, wife stealing, philandering and warfare.

[\[\[ASIN:0199291152 The Selfish Gene: 30th Anniversary Edition--with a new Introduction by the Author\]\]](#)

The escalating scale of violence, and the prevalence of violence.

Chagnon write about escalating levels of violence, all of which seem quite violent to western sensibilities. All serve the same purpose – to prove courage, the refusal to be dominated and the will to do the domination. Domination, in turn, is intimately related to the potential for reproduction.

The levels of violence he identifies are (1) ritualistically taking turns punching one another as hard as possible in the chest, (2) club fights, in which two men take turns smacking the other on the head with a club. There are two kinds of clubs, one harder and more lethal than the other, and (3) fights with bladed weapons, arrows and guns, which leads to (4) warfare. Wars may be started to

avenge a death or the stealing of women. Or, they may be started without provocation to show dominance and to steal women.

Sex among the Yamomano

Chagnon writes that his accounts are bound to be inaccurate. There were questions he could not ask, especially to women, and people who would not talk about sex. His opinion is that there is more sex than one would expect.

Marital fidelity was enforced by the husband's reputation for violence, not any tradition of feminine modesty. Rather than being expected to be discreet, women are denied the opportunity to philander. They are expected to like making love.

Therefore, unmarried men can have sex with women in their forties, past childbearing age, who are either unmarried or whose husbands are no longer concerned with paternity issues. Chagnon's genealogical charts showed several instances in which incest taboos were broken by liaisons on the wrong side of the *moité* system, and even brother-sister (or half-sister) relationships.

Among the Kayapo I heard that the chief had the power to reassign women to new mates. Marital fidelity was a foreign concept to them as well. I did not hear of fights over women.

Reconstruction of Yanomami history

Chagnon's reconstruction of Yanomami history was based as much on geography as chronology. While they did not keep track of dates, the Yanomami remembered where they had been and sequences of events. Chagnon therefore had to figure out the locations of garden plots that a given Yanomami group had used in the past, the sequence in which they had been inhabited and events such as births, deaths and wars that had taken place in those villages.

In doing so he determined that there had been a general southerly movement over the course of the past couple of centuries. He was unable to construct earlier history.

Geography had a good deal to do with Yanomami migrations. The best territory was in flat bottomland, high enough above the rivers not to flood. It was a disaster when rising water flooded the slash and burn gardens and ruined the crops. On the other hand, the soil was poor and there were fewer game animals at higher elevations. The result was that the well drained, low-lying villages tended to be larger but were more frequently at war. Villages at higher elevations were smaller and had a greater danger of going hungry.

Divisions among the anthropologists

Since its inception the field of anthropology, particularly cultural anthropology, has been dominated by leftists. Not a few of them were outright Marxists.

Early anthropologists were at odds with the eugenicists, intelligence researchers, geneticists and others who posited that there were genetic explanations for differences among peoples. The anthropologists' preferred explanations were totally cultural.

Harvard University was a cauldron of dissent in the 1970s, with the sociobiologists led by E. O. Wilson on one side and the Marxists led by Stephen Jay Gould on the other. Chagnon's research put him in the camp of the biological scientists, including in their number Robert Trivers, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Sarah Blaffer Hrdy. Gould's small but vocal group included Richard Lewontin, Steven Rose and Leon Kamin. The anthropologists bitterly attacked and disowned Chagnon, drumming him out of their groups. They are the second dangerous tribe to which the subtitle of the book alludes.

Jealousies and Competing Interests

Though at first the Salesian priests befriended Chagnon, they later pressured him to choose between them and the evangelical New Tribes mission. He refused to do it. He also refused to participate in a scheme to hide the scandal whereby a Salesian priest had children by a native woman. The Salesian's had a lot of influence in the Venezuela government, effectively making themselves the government's representatives in Yanomamo territory.

The Salesians collaborated with Chagnon's enemies among the cultural anthropologists to get him thrown out of Venezuela. Also active in Brazil, they hindered his work among the Yanomamo on that side of the border.

Chagnon says that the Salesians curried favor with the Yanomamo by giving them shotguns as trade goods, with the understanding that the recipients would not use them in Indian wars. Of course they did, with the predictable deadly effect.

I read about the Salesians in my research on Indian education at the University of Maryland. The upshot was that in their quest to save souls they did their best to bind the Indians to their mission outposts. They made them dependent on trade goods, and sought to teach them Portuguese (in the case of Brazil) and rudimentary schooling. In the view of the anthropologists with whom I studied, this deracinated them, made them dependent, and subjected them to the evils of civilization such as alcohol.

Conclusion

That's enough summary of the book. It raises questions about modern man. In particular, why and to what extent have we lost the urge to pass down our genes that motivated the Yanomamo and every animal species throughout history?