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Noble Savages: My Life Among Two Dangerous Tribes -- The Yanomamo And The Anthropologists

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NOBLE SAVAGES

MY LIFE AMONG TWO DANGEROUS TRIBES—
THE YANOMAMŌ AND THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS

NAPOLEON A. CHAGNON



Synopsis

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT SCIENTIFIC MEMOIRS OF OUR TIME When Napoleon Chagnon arrived in Venezuela's region in 1964 to study the Yanomamé Indians, one of the last large tribal groups still living in isolation, he expected to find Rousseau's "noble savages," so-called primitive people living contentedly in a pristine state of nature. Instead Chagnon discovered a remarkably violent society. Men who killed others had the most wives and offspring, their violence possibly giving them an evolutionary advantage. The prime reasons for violence, Chagnon found, were to avenge deaths and, if possible, abduct women. When Chagnon began publishing his observations, some cultural anthropologists who could not accept an evolutionary basis for human behavior refused to believe them. Chagnon became perhaps the most famous American anthropologist since Margaret Mead and the most controversial. He was attacked in a scathing popular book, whose central allegation that he helped start a measles epidemic among the Yanomamé was quickly disproven, and the American Anthropological Association condemned him, only to rescind its condemnation after a vote by the membership. Throughout his career Chagnon insisted on an evidence-based scientific approach to anthropology, even as his professional association dithered over whether it really is a scientific organization. In *Noble Savages*, Chagnon describes his seminal fieldwork during which he lived among the Yanomamé, was threatened by tyrannical headmen, and experienced an uncomfortably close encounter with a jaguar taking readers inside Yanomamé villages to glimpse the kind of life our distant ancestors may have lived thousands of years ago. And he forcefully indicts his discipline of cultural anthropology, accusing it of having traded its scientific mission for political activism. This book, like Chagnon's research, raises fundamental questions about human nature itself.

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Customer Reviews

Napoleon Chagnon is the greatest living anthropologist and writes a gripping true great adventure story. He also shows the ugly side of academia, which one of my students called a "sheltered workshop for Aspergers cases." Chagnon produced a boxcar full of field notes from decades of studying the Yanomami indians of Venezuela and Brazil systematically surveying village demography and compiling geneologies and life histories of generations, all this in the service of an authentic evolutionary biological approach to anthropology, turning the discipline into a true science instead of a literary and folkloric study of customs and oddities. Think of how many contacts with pristine peoples were lost to science because the anthropologist wanted to study witchcraft or garden magic instead of biological and cultural indicators of fitness (successful reproduction), kin selection, reciprocal altruism, war and conflict, power relations among men and among women, marriage systems, village fission and fusion, etc. Chagnon was bitterly, brutally, and unfairly attacked by prominent colleagues who misrepresented and lied about his arduous and dangerous field work, tried to get him fired, attacked his funding, usually people who never left their air conditioned offices, and preferred to "deconstruct" their colleagues work instead of contributing something new by learning difficult languages and sweating in the field. If there existed an Nobel Prize for anthropology, Chagnon should be the first recipient. His years of work and risk document a stone age people rapidly being corrupted, assimilated, and exterminated by bigoted missionaries, crooked politicians, military and greedy invaders. This is heroic scientific work, and an excellent read to boot. Put it on your must read list.

One of the first Anthropology books i read as an undergrad was Chagnon's book on the

Yanomamo: the Fierce People. Only now, after taking his effort for granted, I find that this book was a landmark not only for finding one of the last truly aboriginal peoples on the planet, but for its honest interpretations of its implications. Aboriginal and native does NOT equal mild and peace loving, with a wonderful social contract. In the wild, we are just as uncivilized as we are in civilization. I had no idea he was fighting an entire enterprise of "progressives" who wanted to rewrite history as well as human nature in search of utopia. What a great read, and an amazing life. I applaud him for his honesty, and his perseverance. Perhaps, like him and many others, it is time for us to wake up and smell the coffee- which is not what is being sold to us by the so called progressive elite, the progressive media, and our progressive politicians, but especially the currently well ensconced progressive educational hierarchy- from elementary schools all the way through (perhaps even especially in the most elite) universities.

I could insert a few other fields in place of "anthropology" and the story here would be accurate. Political and philosophical beliefs bend the science to a form of advocacy. Chang on is a brave man to have fought this fight. That aside, his stories about the native tribes and the implications are fascinating. I am a reader of Jared Diamond's work as well, and for some reason, Chagnon's book here is more credible and more insightful...perhaps because of his devotion to data. This is a must read for anyone who is interested in human culture, government, social dynamics or sociobiology along with the incredible works of E O Wilson. A must read.

I read the first half, where he lives in the jungle close to the tribe he is studying. Anthropologists have brutal jobs that keep them away from their immediate family for months on end. The tribe itself was alternately charming and stomach turning. I think this took place close to the beginning of real scientific rigor in social science fields. Especially giving more weight to evolutionary/genetic-based traits and de-emphasizing socialization. I am interested in evolutionary biology/psychology, but I don't find it a cheerful subject. The truth (if this is truth) will set you free, they say. But that doesn't mean it's easy to take. So I quit the book early, but think I learned a lot from what I read.

This is probably the most important book in anthropology and I am not exaggerating. I remember learning just a bit about Chagnon when I got an anthropology degree. I wish I had learned more then, but at least now we have his work summarized in his own words. We are very fortunate that he studied the Yanomamo when he did. He collected data meticulously and scientifically. That data can be extrapolated to learn so much about our cultural past. Chagnon summarizes much of it. The

best aspects of the book are when he talks about other cultural anthropologists. In my own words, so many are left-wing ideologues that they have effectively supplanted the field. Chagnon lived it. He has the incredible story of it. Again this is a must read for anthropologists.

I highly recommend this book. It is clear, well written, entertaining, and informative. When Chagnon recounts his experiences of arriving at the Bisaasi-teri village, the harsh tropical environment, the hazards, odors, heat, humidity, disease, language barriers, culture shock, and absence of all the niceties of modern living, it becomes apparent that there is a clear distinction between evidence based academics who conduct real fieldwork and the lazy armchair academics who conceal their lack of knowledge, evidence, clear understanding, deductive reasoning, and critical thinking with incoherent, jargon laden, gibberish nonsense. Chagnon is an exemplar of how academics should conduct their research and arrive at their conclusions.

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