Amazon jungle to ivory tower

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Napoleon Chagnon journeyed into the Amazon jungle 35 years ago to get a doctoral degree in anthropology, gain success and find work as a professor.

Equipped with canned goods, malaria pills and little else, Chagnon traversed the Venezuela jungle, went up the Orinoco River and into the domain of the Yanomamo, a virtually unknown tribe of 23,000 who lived in villages spread across a section of the Amazon about the size of South Dakota.

"I wanted to get a job in anthropology and the best way to get a job was to do something different," said Chagnon, a professor at UCSB for the past 15 years. "If I was going to make a name for myself, I would have to do it by going to the most difficult, least desirable point in the world."

Chagnon made a name for himself all right. His voyage of discovery among the Yanomamo has turned Chagnon into one of the most famous and infamous anthropologists in the world today.

His work in the field has also made Chagnon a marked man in some circles. A number of colleagues have condemned him. Politicians have rejected him. And unnamed enemies want him dead.

The controversy has angered Chagnon and caused him to consider leaving the field of anthropology.

Some of Chagnon's recent anger is directed at Venezuela officials who banned him from venturing into the jungle last summer. They claimed Chagnon's accounts of Yanomamo wife-beating, club fights and deadly raids on enemy villages were exaggerations that have provoked conflicts among the indigenous people.

The 60-year-old bearded professor, who teaches an introductory course in cultural anthropology at UCSB, said he could handle the criticism of a few colleagues and politicians -- it's the death threats that made him flinch.

"I was told by friends that people are angry at me and that people in Venezuela can be killed for as little as $100 and that I would be a prime candidate for such a thing," Chagnon recalled of his last trip. "That advice was not far behind my consciousness when I left Venezuela."

Chagnon has trekked into the land of the Yanomamo numerous times and spent nearly six years living among the tribe over the decades. His book on the natives, "Yanomamo: The Fierce People," has sold 800,000 copies over 30 years and is required reading in universities across the nation.

Yet in some circles, Chagnon is notorious.

"Chagnon is a kind of right-wing character who has a paranoid attitude on people he considers lefty," said Terence Turner, a professor of anthropology at Cornell and critic of Chagnon's work. "He believes he is the sole authority on Yanomamo matters ... There is no unified side against Chagnon. It is virtually Chagnon against everyone else."

Chagnon contends such negative opinions come from a vocal minority of anthropologists who don't like what his research says about the state of man in nature.

"If you make soup with one elephant and one skunk, the flavor of the skunk will still be overwhelming," he said.

But the stink has become too pungent, even for Chagnon, who says he's had enough and may leave the profession for good.

"If I can't do research on the Yanomamo, I am not sure I want to be an anthropologist," he said. "I won't go through this nonsense."

Chagnon sold his San Roque home this winter and will take a year's leave from UCSB next fall to write a book about the current political and professional intrigue he blames on a slew of enemies. The rivals, he contends, range from Catholic missionaries in Venezuela, who want to control the Yanomamo, to a handful of, as he said, "left-wing" anthropologists who consider his research politically incorrect because it dares to portray one group of indigenous people as savage, not noble.

"There is a witch hunt going on in anthropology today," Chagnon said. "People look for heretics and appoint themselves ayatollahs who punish the heretic for his ÔSatanic Verses.'"

Things were different in the fall of 1964 when Chagnon first stepped into the unknown and withstood dehydration, bug bites, sickness and isolation on that first jungle experience. He was only 24 at the time and all that stood between him and a doctorate degree was a year of field work in some obscure corner of the world.

INTO THE JUNGLE

Chagnon had no idea what to expect from the Yanomamo when he first arrived. He did not speak their language and knew little about their culture.

Years of study led him to believe that all indigenous peoples were peaceful beings who lived in blissful harmony. Chagnon found something very different and soon questioned his prior beliefs.

"My heart began to pound as we approached the village," he wrote in his ground-breaking book about the Yanomamo. "I looked up and gasped when I saw a dozen burly, naked, sweaty, hideous men staring at us down the shafts of their drawn arrows. Immense wads of green tobacco were stuck between their lower teeth and lips making them look even more hideous, and strands of dark-green slime dropped or hung from their nostrils -- strands so long they clung to their pectoral muscles or drizzled down their chins."

The grotesque effect was the result of an hallucinogenic drug the Yanomamo had blown up their noses.

"My next discovery was that there were a dozen or so vicious, underfed dogs snapping at my legs, circling me as if I were their next meal," he wrote. "I was horrified. What kind of welcome was this?"

Typical, considering that the village had been involved in a serious fight with a group from another community. Seven women had been abducted by a neighboring village. Club fights had taken place and vows of revenge had been proclaimed.

Chagnon had walked into the middle of a fairly common occurrence -- a Yanomamo feud that began over women and led to deadly conflict.

Though Chagnon's research delved into numerous aspects of Yanomamo life, including their spiritual beliefs, their gardening techniques and their genealogy, much of his work centered on their warlike behavior. These were not noble natives, but fierce people engaged in constant battles.

During Chagnon's initial 15-month study, he witnessed numerous club fights and traveled to villages that had suffered human loss from raids.

"I was in villages where arrows were flying in and I pulled arrows out of people who got shot," he said. "Their mortality rates from violence were extremely high. One village was raided 25 times. Warfare was common. Thirty percent of the adult deaths were from violence."

CONFLICTING THEORIES

Up to that point most anthropologists, including Chagnon, believed that violence among undisturbed native people stemmed from a lack of material resources, such as land, water and wild foods. The popular theory, known as cultural materialism, suggested that lack of material resources or the influence of outsiders created conflicts among a people normally in balance.

Chagnon's research, however, showed the Yanomamo fought wars that originated over women. Successful warriors collected more wives and had more children. This biological-based concept called back to Charles Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest. By striking a blow for Darwin and the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who concluded that life

in nature was "plain, short, nasty and brutish," Chagnon had declared war on the beliefs of his colleagues.

"I came to a remarkable conclusion for which the soft-headed social scientists of the world have never forgiven me," Chagnon said.

Chagnon, a quick-tempered man and passionate pipe smoker, has published more than 100 scientific articles about his visits with the Yanomamo. Few articles provoked as much controversy in cultural anthropology as his 1988 publication in the journal Science, which further damned him in the eyes of those who disagreed with his conclusions and thought he had become famous by exploiting the Yanomamo.

One Yanomamo expert, French anthropologist Jacques Lizot, has also taken issue with Chagnon's work.

"There is not a single Yanomamo specialist who agrees with Chagnon's theories," Lizot has said in the past.

One of Chagnon's former graduate students, Ken Good, now a professor at New Jersey City University, who lived among the Yanomamo and married a teen-age Yanomamo girl, also disagrees with Chagnon's views.

"Wherever he goes, Chagnon leaves a trail of bad feelings," Good said. "His description of the Yanomamo as fierce people was very offensive to anthropologists. The research was a product of Chagnon himself. Now a generation of students believe the Yanomamo are the most violent people on Earth, but they are not."

Good wrote his own book about life with the Yanomamo. "Into the Heart: One Man's Pursuit of Love and Knowledge Among the Yanomamo," tells the story of his relationship with the girl he met in the jungle. Good had three children with the Yanomamo woman. She has since returned to the jungle. The children remained with him.

The book also took shots at Chagnon. Today, Good makes no bones about his dislike for his former teacher.

"We (anthropologists) are sick of Chagnon," Good said. "He has caused such a mess, and much of this has to do with him."

WAR WITH THE CHURCH

One of the most influential groups at odds with Chagnon has been the Salesian missionaries. The Catholic order has for decades run churches near some Yanomamo villages and sought to convert the natives to Christianity.

Chagnon has accused the missionaries of unwittingly spreading Western diseases to the Indians which led to countless deaths. He has also attacked the church for giving the Yanomamo shotguns in trade. "When you give a fierce man a new weapon, he wants to use it," Chagnon said.

Chagnon and the missionaries collided head-on in 1993 when a band of

Brazilian miners murdered 17 Yanomamo. Chagnon and his Venezuelan friend, a former dentist turned naturalist named Charles Brewer, were appointed to investigate the atrocity by then-Venezuelan President Ramon J. Velasquez. The appointment outraged the Salesians and many others who accused Brewer of having suspicious ties to gold miners.

The political stink led to the formation of a second investigative team headed by a Salesian bishop. In short order, Chagnon and Brewer were out.

No one has ever been brought to trial for the killings.

Outraged by the turn of events, Chagnon vented in an op-ed piece published in the New York Times on Oct. 23, 1993. In it, Chagnon accused the missionaries of dragging their feet to maintain power over the Yanomamo territory.

"The massacre site was horrifying," Chagnon wrote. "But equally worrisome was the effort of the local authorities -- the Roman Catholic Salesian missionaries -- to derail our investigation and keep the plight of the Yanomamo hidden."

The bad press Chagnon spread came back to haunt him. Not long after his op-ed piece was published, negative "dossiers" appeared at American universities, including UCSB. The documents, sent out by the Salesians, include unfavorable Venezuelan newspaper articles that accused Chagnon of having ties to gold miners.

Chagnon contends the claims are groundless and the product of "limp-wristed anthropologists in South America who are afraid to take on the Salesians."

Chagnon partially blames himself for the controversy.

"I bear 50 percent of the responsibility," he said. "I never drew first blood, but responded to the attacks and my responses were so devastating that it shocked them. When I responded it had very significant international consequences."

Others familiar with feud say Chagnon is not at fault.

"Chagnon has portrayed the Yanomamo as fierce because the Yanomamo are proud of being fierce," said Chagnon's friend and fellow anthropologist, Robin Fox of Rutgers University. "But the left wing does not like this, and there is a bizarre coalition in Venezuela of politicians and academics who are in cahoots with the church, which is fighting for territorial dominance ... It's political correctness gone mad."

Though controversial, Chagnon remains a favorite among his contemporaries at UCSB.

"He's an inspiration," said Michael Jochim, an archaeologist who has been with UCSB's anthropology department for 20 years. "Some people don't like his results, but no one else in the world can match his data gathering. He

is unique and dedicated. A lot of anthropologists undergo rigors, but his are tough. I don't know how he does it."

END GAME

Today, Napoleon Chagnon seeks a less maddening life. He plans to go native again next fall and return to his roots in northern Michigan where he grew up as one of 12 children.

Life was a bit brutish for Chagnon during those early years in Port Austin, a summer tourist town of 500. His father was a day laborer and the family had few luxuries. Indoor plumbing was an extravagance the Chagnon home could not afford.

Raised as a devout Roman Catholic, Chagnon was taught at an early age that "God made everything."

He questioned that notion through books.

"If you read about the birth of the sun, for example, you realize there are scientific explanations for things," Chagnon said.

After graduating high school, Chagnon got $100 from his father, who wished him luck in life. In other words, the free ride was over. From now on, if Chagnon came home for food or shelter, he would have to pay.

"That is how it was then," Chagnon said. "Kids were considered a liability."

Chagnon excelled in high school and won a scholarship that guaranteed him a job as a highway surveyor. Instead, he enrolled at University of Michigan. It was 1957, and the Russians had just stunned the world with their Sputnik satellite. Like so many other competitive young Americans, Chagnon wanted to study physics and do his part for the country. An introductory course in anthropology changed all that.

"At the time, I did not even know what anthropology was," he said. "I thought it was the study of bugs."

That first class led to another and by the end of Chagnon's sophomore year, he had given up physics and found a calling.

"Anthropology was a field in which fundamental questions are answered, like why you believe in God and not spirits, or why people avoid eating meat on Fridays," he said. "These are arbitrary customs that humans have come up with based on cultural situations. I found that fascinating."

Now Chagnon will focus his intellect on other things. He plans to write a book about his battles on behalf of the Yanomamo. The book will be called the "The Noble Savage."

The change of scenery will also give him time to spend with his wife of 39 years, Carlene, and his pets, Cody, a German shorthaired pointer, and Josey, a giant schnauzer.

But those who expect Chagnon to go quietly into that good night know little about the man.

"Anthropology is no longer an enterprise where you discover new things and become admired," he said. "That person is now the most hated, and I am tired for being punished for doing what I am good at. I never thought my research would ever lead to a controversy of this nature. I was trained to believe if you spent time in another society and documented what they did, people in the profession would admire you. The net result is the opposite. They despise and have contempt for me and have gone to extreme lengths to denounce me. I have found that bitterly disappointing."