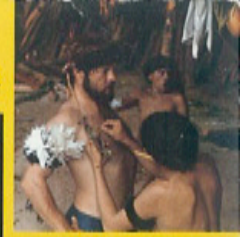


BAD BLOOD IN THE AMAZON: The strange case of Napoleon Chagnon



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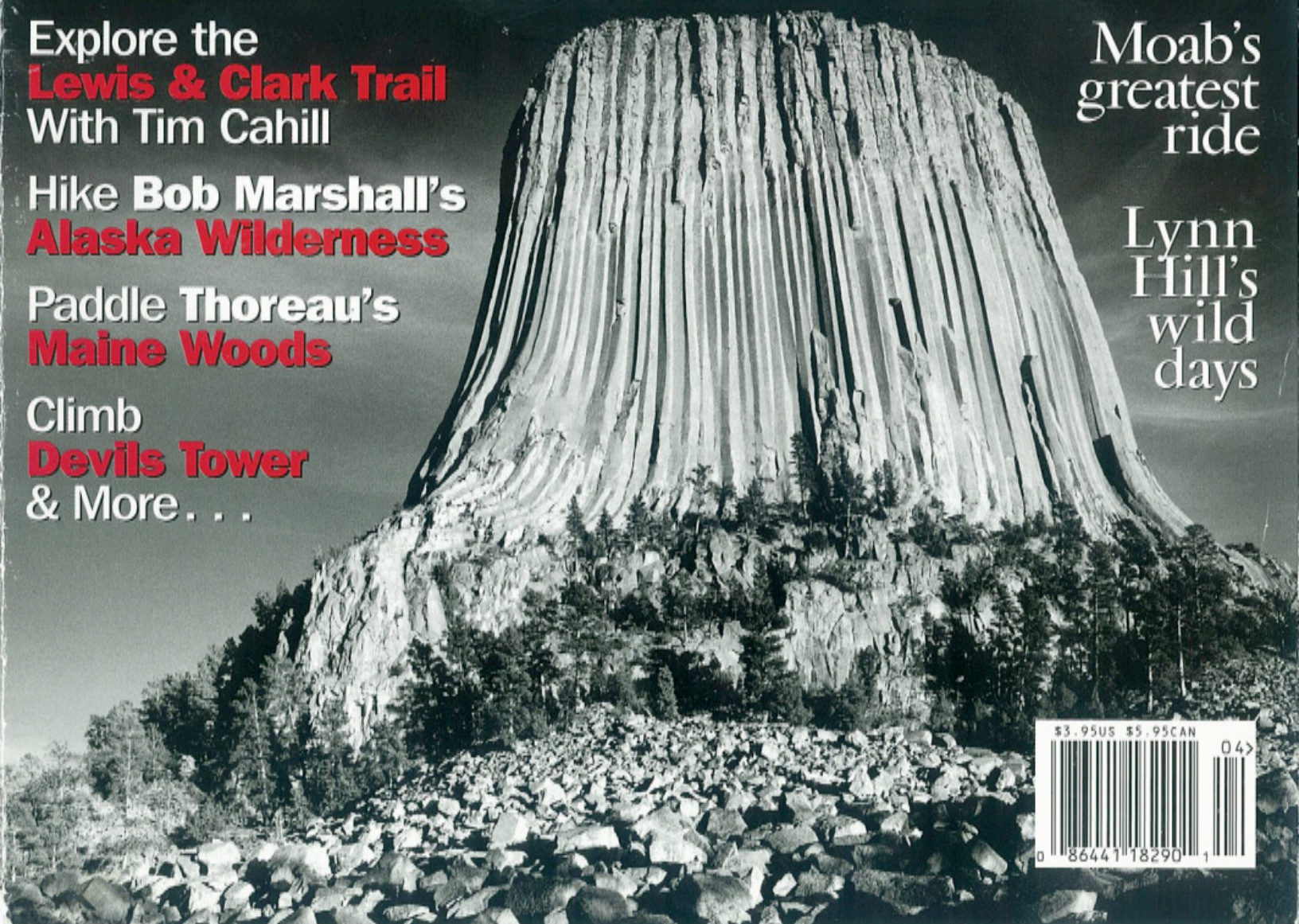
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Scott Wallace (rear, left) and photographer Les Stone with two hunters in Yanomamiland.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LES STONE

Visiting indigenous communities at the center of controversy is nothing new to Scott Wallace. In the mid-1970s, he worked among the threatened Ashaninka in the Peruvian Amazon. In 1992, he traveled to the Amazon to cover the ongoing conflict between members of the Kayapo tribe in Brazil and the miners, loggers, and ranchers who were rapidly encroaching on Kayapo territory. Most recently, he produced a report for CNN on the schism in Alaska between pro-oil North Slope Inupiat and the Gwich'in Indians, who oppose oil drilling in their native lands.

When Wallace learned of the uproar surrounding the publication of Patrick Tierney's *Darkness in El Dorado* in 2000, he decided his next stop would be the riverine jungles of Venezuela, home to the Yanomami, one of the most isolated indigenous peoples in the world. Tierney's book was, to say the least, highly critical of the methods and findings of the legendary American anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon in his work among the Yanomami. Wallace wanted to talk to Chagnon—now retired in Michigan and barred from returning to the region—and, more important, to the Yanomami themselves. But the Venezuelan government had banned access to outsiders. It was almost a year before Wallace finally secured permission to visit the Yanomami homeland last summer to report the story that appears on page 52.

Once there, he found a way of life much changed from the one observed by Chagnon decades earlier. Previously, most Yanomami lived in the highlands and moved around primarily by foot, traveling long distances between villages or while hunting. "They were only very indirectly connected to the white man's money economy," Wallace says. "Now, in the areas we were allowed to visit, people are constantly uprooting themselves and moving to the riverbanks to get government handouts."

Farther upriver, Wallace found vestiges of the world Chagnon had known. "I enjoyed the absolute simplicity of life there," Wallace says. "No television, no telephones, no vehicles. The complete silence except for howling monkeys or snapping branches at night. The air was incredibly pure and oxygen-rich; we were, after all, inside the lungs of the planet."

And Chagnon, as Wallace came to discover, was very much inside the hearts and minds of the Yanomami.

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NAPOLÉON IN EXILE

Napoleon Chagnon's best-selling accounts of living among the Yanomami Indians made him—and them—famous. Then came explosive accusations of professional misconduct, exploitation, and worse. Now, prevented from returning to the scene of his life's work, the legendary anthropologist is fighting for his reputation. Writer **Scott Wallace** follows the trail of controversy from Chagnon's North Woods sanctuary to the deepest Venezuelan rain forest—and listens to the one group whose voices haven't yet been heard: the Yanomami themselves.

Photography by Les Stone



Fieldwork: Now barred from the South American rain forest where he did his groundbreaking research, Napoleon Chagnon, in a cornfield near his Michigan home, holds one of his own portraits of a Yanomami warrior.

The mist was just starting to lift off the treetops as we made our way into the village. Pungent campfire smoke—the unmistakable smell of life, and death, in the Amazon—drifted along with hysterical wails through the porous stick walls of a nearby hut. Mongrel dogs yapped. A pair of shrieking parrots zipped low overhead.

Suddenly, a solitary warrior appeared from the opposite end of the clearing. A red loincloth swishing from his waist, he strode toward us across the sun-baked earth. His face was painted with swirls of black. In one hand, he carried a long wooden staff; the other held aloft a football-size bamboo vase of the sort still used in this corner of the world to transport the ashes of recently cremated kinsmen. Another man, sparsely clad in Nike shorts, macaw feathers affixed to his biceps, followed several steps behind, lugging a shotgun.

We were in a native village, or *shabono*, along the Upper Orinoco River, in the heart of the Venezuelan rain forest. It is one of the world's least accessible regions, and home to the Yanomami, some 15,000 Indians living along the ill-defined border between Venezuela and Brazil. Though the area has been closed to journalists since the previous autumn, photographer Les Stone and I were allowed to accompany this fact-finding trip organized by the Venezuelan government in the summer of 2001. The expedition would be the government's first on-the-ground investigation into the charges leveled against Napoleon Chagnon, the American anthropologist whose 1968 book, *Yanomamö: The Fierce People*, brought worldwide fame—and, some say, deep misfortune—to what was then one of the world's largest virtually uncontacted indigenous populations.

Like most Yanomami villages, this one has relocated frequently over the years, but these were the very people—the Bisaasi-teri—among whom Chagnon lived when he began his fieldwork in 1964. (Though Chagnon uses the term “Yanomamö” to describe the Indians in the area where he did his research, “Yanomami” is the widely accepted label for the entire group of indigenous peoples in the region.) Yanomami culture has undergone rapid change in the ensuing years, as evidenced by the Western clothing and firearms on display here. Yet we could see that certain traditions were still intact. We had arrived in the middle of a funeral ceremony, a complex ritual that, despite all the assaults of the modern world, remained almost identical to those described by Chagnon a quarter century earlier.

Along with our Venezuelan colleagues, we followed the two warriors into the gloom of the hut. In one corner, mourning women swung in hammocks arranged in a tight triangle around a smoldering fire. Close beside them, a cluster of men—some in

Chagnon in 1970, being decorated in Yanomami ceremonial garb.



the fierce anthropologist

Chagnon, despite nearly a decade of absence, has left an indelible mark on the Yanomami psyche. People told tales of the fierce outsider whom they called Shaki: Pesky Little Bee. He learned their language and uncovered their secrets. He brought precious gifts, which he used to pry from them forbidden knowledge. There is perhaps not a single Yanomami who has not heard of the legendary Shaki.

T-shirts, others with painted chests and headbands made from monkey tails—crouched by the fire. Freshly smoked wild boar and armadillo dangled from a wire above the hearth. The men intoned a repetitive chant that rose and fell in perfect counterpoint to a woman's baleful lament.

Now the warrior placed the vase on the dirt floor and set his full weight into grinding the ashes and charred bone with his staff. When he finished, he snapped the staff over his knee and fed it to the flames. With the reverence of a priest celebrating the Eucharist, his companion sprinkled the ashes into a battered tin pot and stirred them into a steaming yellowish soup of boiled plantains. Soon the pot was making its way around the room, mourners slurping it down by the cupful. The host shoved the pot under my nose, filled the communal ladle, and beckoned me to drink.



Patrick Tierney, in 1996.

the "mad inquisitor"

In his book *Darkness in El Dorado*, native-rights activist Patrick Tierney charges Chagnon with everything from spreading disease to fomenting warfare with the reckless distribution of goods.

In other far-flung corners of the planet, I'd mustered the courage to sample such delicacies as the fermented brew of masticated cassava and steaming bowls of moose-snout soup. On occasion I have ingested the symbolic flesh and blood of the Savior. But I had never been called upon to partake of real human remains, no matter how well incinerated. Reluctantly, I hoisted the chalice to my lips.

"Need a light?" asked Napoleon Chagnon. We were on the porch of his home in northern Michigan, and Chagnon was already exhaling the smoke of his generic discount cigarette into the crisp autumn air. He had spent the past several hours in the confines of his living room, defending his professional reputation. Both of us needed a break. Though I've never really liked smoking in the cold—it seems to accentuate the truly toxic nature of the habit—I steered a Camel into the flame of his lighter.

Now gray and balding, Chagnon at 63 bears faint resemblance to the svelte, shirtless Indiana Jones who once wandered the jungle with a shotgun on his shoulder—and whose image was captured so indelibly in *Yanomamö: The Fierce People*. Chagnon's groundbreaking fieldwork spanned more than three decades, and his best-selling books captivated more than a million readers with vivid tales of his exploits among the natives. He produced scores of ethnographic films: There was Chagnon on celluloid—bare-chested, painted, and bedecked with feathers, striking an erect, unflappable pose in the midst of howling Yanomami warriors. Throughout the seventies and eighties, he was a marquee name on college syllabi, the closest thing academia had to a rock star.

But by the early nineties, it all began to come undone. Responding to a chorus of criticisms from both inside and outside the country, the Venezuelan

government restricted his access to the region. Today Chagnon lives under a cloud of allegations that he perpetrated misdeeds against the population he studied. He hasn't been to the rain forest since 1995.

"The whole thing's so preposterous I have to laugh to keep from crying," he said. But he wasn't laughing. One senses that's not something Chagnon does a lot of these days, if he ever did. And his humor is so dry that you can't ever be sure he's actually telling a joke. "A paranoid is someone who suspects people are out to get him," he added in characteristic deadpan. "I know people are out to get me." When the first cigarette was done, he lit a second off the smoldering butt.

Though some of the charges against Chagnon had been circulating among his detractors in academia for years, the debate exploded into public view with the publication of the book *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon*, in November 2000. Authored by a native-rights activist named Patrick Tierney, the book is a damning critique of Chagnon and a number of other Western researchers who have worked among the Yanomami. Tierney charged Chagnon with everything from helping to spread a measles epidemic with a contraindicated vaccine to fomenting warfare among villages with the reckless distribution of axes, machetes, and other prized trade goods.

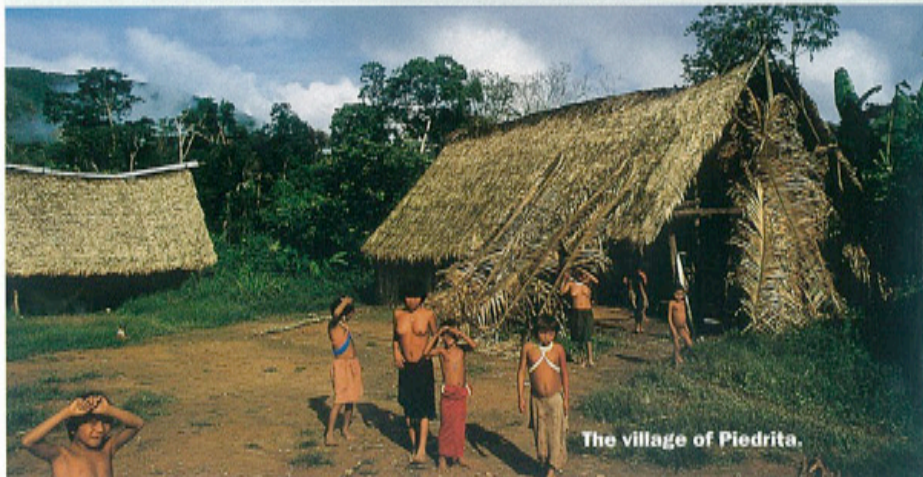
Tierney, a self-described "mad inquisitor" who devoted 11 years to researching the book, later backpedaled on the measles charge, but the image of coldhearted scientists killing off natives with genocidal experiments proved irresistible. Lurid headlines ensued, and a virtual fisticuffs between Chagnon's critics and his supporters raged across the Internet. Within days of the book's appearance, the Venezuelan government's Office of Indigenous Affairs cordoned off the Yanomami territory as though it were, as Tierney described it to me later, "a huge police crime scene."

All the while, Chagnon himself remained in seclusion in the North Woods of Michigan, defending himself mostly via the Internet and offering only the most perfunctory answers to reporters seeking comment. Now that he had agreed to be interviewed, though, he seemed to be enjoying having a bit of company in his northern redoubt. We finished our smoke and turned to go inside. The Michigan oaks had shed their leaves, and Chagnon had pheasant hunting on his mind. "I could call up my friend and see if he's got any birds to release," he suggested.

Chagnon and his wife, Carlene, lead a quiet life outside Traverse City, Michigan, a few hours northwest of the hardscrabble town

the scene of the "crime"

Only days after the publication of *Darkness in El Dorado*, the Venezuelan government cordoned off the Yanomami territory along the Upper Orinoco as though it were, in Tierney's words, "a huge police crime scene."



The village of Piedrita.

A young girl at the Catholic mission in Mavaca adopts traditional dress for a portrait.





the heart of the orinoco

Well before we reached our destination at the confluence of the Orinoco and the Mavaca, our Yamaha 40s, and then word of mouth, had announced our impending arrival.

where he grew up in a family of 12 children. Their home is spacious and sparsely furnished. Framed photos of Yanomami ceremonies and village life—all shot by Chagnon—hang along the walls at neatly spaced intervals. Many were taken during his early years among the Yanomami, before the natives began to get an inkling that a larger world might exist beyond their jungle homeland.

When he began his research, Chagnon recalled, there were still two places left on the planet to look for “unacculturated, demographically intact” tribes: the Amazon and highland New Guinea. As a young Ann Arbor graduate student in search of a thesis nearly 40 years ago, Chagnon chose the former. “The important thing was there was a relative lack of acculturation,” Chagnon said. “There was little impact from the outside world. The villagers didn’t even know about an outside world.”

Chagnon’s office is as orderly as the rest of the house. From his desk he can peer across the top of his iMac at his well-groomed yard and the woods beyond. It’s here that Chagnon spends his days, which

begin before dawn, hammering away on a book that will reveal his previously unpublished research on the Yanomami. A single photograph hangs above a couch, depicting a line of warriors brandishing bows and long-shafted arrows, preparing for a raid on an enemy village.

“There was a climate of constant fear,” Chagnon said, recalling his first impressions from the field. The Bisaasi-teri were all on edge the day he arrived in their village. Warriors from an enemy village had recently attacked and made off with seven women. Then a head-bashing club battle broke out. Not surprisingly, the young anthropologist, alone and far from home, found the Yanomami aggressive and intimidating. As its title suggests, *Yanomamö: The Fierce People* emphasized this aspect of their culture; the Yanomami lived, he concluded, in a “state of chronic warfare.”

From the start, Chagnon’s focus on Yanomami aggression provoked an outcry from a number of anthropologists familiar with the region, some of whom have gone to great lengths to attack his findings. Brian Ferguson, an expert on tribal strife and author of *Yanomami Warfare: A Political History*, says Chagnon himself had a “destabilizing influence” on the Indians. “His own behavior has stirred up violence and conflict among the Yanomami,” Ferguson told me. Tierney believes that Chagnon’s depiction of Yanomami violence also helped lay the ideological groundwork for a landgrab

MAP BY COMPUTER TERRAIN MAPPING INC.

Anthropology’s Final Frontier

The Yanomami homelands lie along the border of Venezuela and Brazil, where two of the world’s last great forest frontiers—the Guayana Shield and the Amazon Basin—seamlessly meet in a vast sea of green. Rapids and difficult terrain kept the Yanomami largely isolated from civilization until recent decades. When Napoleon Chagnon began his fieldwork in 1964, many Yanomami villages had never seen an outsider. His 1968 book, *Yanomamö: The Fierce People*, would bring them worldwide attention and make Chagnon

himself the most noted anthropologist since Margaret Mead.

1964 to 1967:

A 26-year-old University of Michigan graduate student, Chagnon arrived in the village of the Bisaasi-teri (close to today’s Catholic mission of Mavaca). “I had visions of entering the village,” he writes, “and seeing 125 social facts running about calling each other kinship terms and sharing food . . . anxious to have me collect genealogy.” Instead, he and a companion were greeted by “a dozen burly, naked, filthy, hideous men staring at us down the shafts of their drawn arrows!” In 1966, Chagnon joined a research team, supervised by geneticist James V. Neel, that made a series of forays into villages along or near the Upper Orinoco and Ocamo Rivers.

1968 to 1975:

Fearing that measles would break out among the Yanomami, Neel’s team began to vaccinate villagers around the Mavaca and Ocamo missions during a 1968 expedition. In his 2000 book, *Darkness in El Dorado*, author Patrick Tierney suggested

that the vaccination campaign actually exacerbated the epidemic, though he later retreated from that claim.

1985 to 1986:

After a ten-year hiatus, Chagnon returned to Yanomamiland but encountered a drastically changed people. Many villages had moved closer to the missions of Ocamo, Platanal, and Mavaca, where goods were more readily available. “No Yanomamö village on or near a navigable river or stream between . . . these three posts can any longer be considered unacculturated,” he later wrote in 1992.

1987 to 1995:

Concern for the Yanomami grew as the Brazilian gold rush threatened their lands. Venezuela designated 32,000 square miles of Amazonas state part of a biosphere reserve in 1991. As officials increasingly limited his access to native lands, Chagnon made a final series of journeys—to the Siapa River highlands—from 1991 to 1993. He took his last field trip, to a village on the Brazilian side of the border, in 1995. —Camas Davis



In Mavakita, a shaman performs a healing ritual.



a culture in contention

"Chagnon saw the Yanomami as living fossils, as museum pieces," said Jesús Cardozo, his former student. "He looked at them like they weren't real people, like they have no place in modern society."



Self-adornment in Kashora-teri.

by Brazilian generals and for genocidal invasions by rapacious gold prospectors. "Chagnon marketed a romantic image of ferocious Indians whose violence justified their extinction," Tierney would tell me.

Chagnon scoffed at the idea that his research had such far-reaching influence. "You don't need an anthropologist to decimate the native people of the Americas," he said. "The Europeans have been destroying Native American cultures for 500 years without any help whatsoever from anthropologists." He blamed the controversy on jealous colleagues and politically correct, "self-appointed ayatollahs" who, he believes, have been out to get him for years. What would he say to these critics if he found himself face-to-face with them? "I don't know," Chagnon said, with

only the slightest trace of a smile. "I'd probably kick their asses."

Late in the day, we strolled across the driveway to Chagnon's wood shop, an immaculate cement-floor garage outfitted with power tools and a table saw. A shotgun and several hunting bows hung from the walls. Chagnon suggested I might try to reach the Yanomami to investigate the charges for myself—my intentions exactly—and warned that, in order to get there, I would have to coddle his enemies in the Venezuelan government and the Catholic missionaries who work among the natives.

"You want a beer?" he asked. He vanished into a back room and returned with four cans of Busch. "If you want more, we'll have to go out soon to buy it. The stores close early around here."

"We're being watched," Jesús Cardozo shouted over the din of the outboard as he scanned the forest walls on our flanks. "Can't you feel that eyes are looking out on us?" We were on our way up the powerful Orinoco, bound for its confluence with the Mavaca River—the Venezuelan gateway to Yanomami territory and the region where Chagnon began his doctoral research. At first, I thought Cardozo was joking. But later I would realize he hadn't been at all: Well before we reached our destination, our Yamaha 40s, and then word of mouth, had announced our impending arrival.

Jesús Ignacio Cardozo, 48, has been working on and off with the Yanomami since he first traveled to this area of the Upper Orinoco with Chagnon in 1985. At that time, Cardozo was still a University of California, Santa Barbara, doctoral student under Chagnon's tutelage. But within days of their arrival in the field, Cardozo fell out with his professor over conflicting ideas about the Yanomami. Cardozo never did finish his Ph.D., a failing for which he partly blames Chagnon.

I had lobbied Venezuela's Office of Indigenous Affairs for months before being granted permission to accompany Cardozo, now an adviser to the agency, on the government's first mission to investigate the allegations against Chagnon and others. The Yanomami question ranks among the most sensitive political issues in a country racked with turmoil. President Hugo Chávez, a fire-breathing nationalist, has made



Chagnon interviewing villagers in 1971.

protection of indigenous rights a cornerstone of what he refers to as the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. (I am, among other things, a television news producer. In return for access to Yanomamiland, I agreed to shoot a documentary to be screened at a Yanomami conference in the Upper Orinoco that Cardozo was helping to organize.) In all, we spent a week in Caracas—reassuring the officials that we wouldn't somehow perpetrate further crimes against the Indians—before taking a government flight to Esmeralda, where we boarded the boats.

Our destination was the Catholic Salesian mission at Mavaca, on the banks of the Orinoco. There we set up our base of operations in a round, open-air hut that was wrapped with steel caging to deter potential thieves. Yanomami kids clung from the mesh and kept us under constant observation whenever we happened to be in, leading Stone and me to dub our base the Mavaca Zoo.

For the following two weeks, we motored up and down the Orinoco, Mavaca, and Manaviche Rivers with Cardozo and a rotating crew of Yanomami boatmen and translators, visiting ever more distant villages. I would come to realize that Chagnon, despite nearly a decade of absence, has left an indelible mark on the Yanomami psyche. People told us tales of the fierce outsider, or *napë*, whom they called Shaki—Pesky Little Bee—and how he painted himself in red and black, dressed in parrot feathers, and performed witchcraft that terrified some villagers while amusing others. Shaki learned their language and uncovered their secrets. He brought precious gifts, which he used to pry from them forbidden knowledge. He told them he would pay them for their sadness. At times, he would arrive with other *napë*, who collected their blood and feces, prepared the specimens in vials “like food,” as one headman put it, and dispatched them on planes for reasons the Yanomami still don't understand. “We thought he was curing us,” the headman said. Indeed, Chagnon has become a mythic figure among the people he studied. There is perhaps not a single Yanomami—not even in the remotest corners of the rain forest where *napë* have yet to tread—who has not heard stories in the night, when men squat by fires to sing elaborate narratives, of the legendary Shaki.

Cardozo comes ashore in Mavakita.



Chagnon dedicated several editions of *Yanomamö* to his most intimate Yanomami informants, including a man named Kaobowä—“who taught me much about being human,” the inscription reads. On our first morning in the Upper Orinoco, at the funeral ash-drinking ceremony, Cardozo pointed him out: an elderly man, with matted hair and a filthy yellow T-shirt drooping off his skeletal frame, seated on the dirt floor in front of me.

It stood to reason that Kaobowä would be here, for these were his people, the Bisaasi-teri, and he had long been their headman. Chagnon first lived among the Bisaasi-teri when he arrived 37 years earlier. The Shaki moniker seemed to fit the man who constantly bombarded them with questions they didn't want to answer. Over the coming months, Kaobowä would help Shaki get answers, becoming the guide who helped unlock the mysteries of this strange world.

In those days, the Bisaasi-teri occupied a huge circular shabono in the grand Yanomami style. Sometime after Chagnon last visited the Upper Orinoco, in 1993, Kaobowä's people moved to this location. Like many Yanomami, they've chosen to leave the deeper jungle and migrate to the banks of the river, where modern goods and medicine are more accessible. They built a new community of enclosed shacks, scarcely recognizable as traditional Yanomami dwellings. And, unbeknownst to Chagnon—by now far away, with no hope of returning—they named this new village after the anthropologist who once lived among them. It is called Shakita.

As for Chagnon's dedication to Kaobowä in *Yanomamö*—the part about learning how to be “human”—I would come to suspect a subtle twist of bitter irony. For Chagnon would know, as painfully as any outsider who has ever lived among them, that the Yanomami believe they are the only real human beings to inhabit this world. And if Chagnon did not see the Yanomami as real people, as Cardozo claims, neither did they see Chagnon as one. We outsiders are mere *napë*, subhuman curiosities from another dimension who represent, more than anything else, their source for otherwise unattainable gifts of trade goods, or *matohi*. But real people we are not.

I followed Kaobowä out of the shack into the blinding light of mid-morning. With his gaunt face and emaciated frame, he looked like a feeble ghost of his former self—the handsome, muscular warrior whose images grace the pages of Chagnon's book. I explained, with Cardozo translating to Yanomami, that I knew Shaki, that I had just come from his land—Estados Unidos-teri—the United States.

“I liked Shaki very much,” he said, staring vacantly off toward the forest beyond the rooftops of Shakita. Then he added with an expectant air: “I need some clothes.” I took this to be a request, perhaps one that I should convey to the old friend who once lavished him with *matohi*. But he didn't await an answer. He turned to walk away. “What about a *foto*?” I asked. “A reminder of you that I might take to Shaki.”

“I'm too old and sick to have my picture taken,” he replied, and hobbled off across the clearing.

Most evenings we would return to the mission and swing in our hammocks, discussing with Cardozo the riddle of Chagnon. Though he pledged an impartial investigation, Cardozo made no effort to conceal his contempt for Chagnon and anyone whom he suspected of seeking out “exotic images” of the natives. “Chagnon saw the Yanomami as living fossils, as museum pieces,” he said. “He saw them as mere objects for study.”

Tall and heavyset, Cardozo cuts an imposing figure

when he raises his voice and wags a finger to make a point. He has long been one of Venezuela's most vociferous advocates for Yanomami rights. But the Tierney controversy seems to have breathed new life into Cardozo's career; in addition to his advisory role with the Office of Indigenous Affairs, he has been named to a commission impaneled to investigate the charges set forth by Chagnon's critics.

But Cardozo's journey to the Upper Orinoco had a broader purpose. Cardozo claims to seek a more equitable interaction between the natives and the outside world—and to counter the images of violence-prone Indians with which, he believes, Chagnon and others have saddled the Yanomami. So Cardozo's mission was also partly a campaign to promote political organization among the Indians, an effort to instill in the disparate villages of the Upper Orinoco a sense of Yanomami "nationhood" that never existed before.

When I suggested, on one of these late nights, that Chagnon was perhaps the most famous *napë* of them all, I found Cardozo's response somewhat startling. "Yeah, you're probably right," he said. "But you'd be surprised by how many people [out here] know the name 'Jesús Cardozo.'"

When Chagnon arrived here in 1964, he brought along a stock of supplies as well as trade goods for barter. In *Yanomamö*, he describes being barraged by demands from the natives, who attempted to take whatever they could from him—at times by stealth or outright force. "The hardest thing to

learn to live with was the incessant, passionate, and often aggressive demands they would make," he writes. "It would become so unbearable at times that I would have to lock myself in the hut periodically just to escape from it."

Nonetheless, he set about trying to make sense of his surroundings. As part of his research, Chagnon compiled elaborate genealogies of Yanomami villages and eventually reached an unsettling conclusion: Those Yanomami men who were known to have murdered someone, he determined, also had the most wives and produced the most offspring. Chagnon would later write that "much of *Yanomamö* fighting and conflict arises over sex, infidelity, suspicion of infidelity, failure to deliver a promised wife to a suitor—in a word, women."

Part of the appeal of anthropology, especially to the popular mind, is that it seems to offer a mirror in which we can catch a glimpse of our own deep past. Indeed, Chagnon himself once called the Yanomami "our contemporary ancestors." His portrait of Yanomami culture—a Hobbesian world of black magic and perpetual internecine warfare—seemed to carry dark implications for modern-day debates on the nature of humankind. His detractors came to view Chagnon as a brawling character who projected his own aggressive, alpha-male tendencies onto the people he studied.

"As Chagnon went farther into uncharted territory," Tierney writes, "he had a Conradian sense of going backward in evolutionary time to an awful, almost apelike existence." Chagnon's opponents note that the Yanomami have themselves evolved, along with the rest of humanity,

last stand in yanomamiland

"You don't need an anthropologist to decimate native peoples," Chagnon scoffed. "Europeans have been destroying native cultures for 500 years without any help from anthropologists."



over the millennia and yield no more clues into our own cultural evolution than would a study of, say, contemporary life in Oshkosh.

"I was with Chagnon right here the night before I was going in to visit the Yanomami for the first time," Cardozo said one afternoon as we drifted past a muddy path that led to a village set back from the river. "And he said to me that night—I'll never forget this—'Jesús, tomorrow you enter the Stone Age.' Christ, can you imagine? He looked at them like they weren't real people, like they have no place in modern society."

In fact, the Yanomami do use stone tools, though not of their own making. They frequently stumble across ancient ax heads and flat-sided grinding rocks in the forest. Archaeologists say the tools were fashioned by ancestors who roamed the jungle before the Yanomami arrived. On several occasions, I would see shamans using such flat stones to grind *yopo*, their hallucinogenic snuff, into powder.

On our second day in the Mavaca region, we attended a raucous meeting to discuss our presence in their territory and to request permission to shoot stills and video in their communities. Even in the best of times, taking pictures of the Yanomami can be a delicate task. Many Yanomami believe that when they're on the brink of the hereafter—which in the disease-ravaged Upper Orinoco could be just about anytime—all it might take is the snap of a shutter to push them over the edge. At the meeting, Kaobowä's younger brother, Shararaiwä, launched into a

wildly expressive tirade, claiming that Chagnon had failed to make good on a promise to bring an outboard motor for photos he took years ago of the two of them skinning an anaconda. (Chagnon says he made no such promise.)

We found ways to put the Yanomami at ease. Sometimes it was enough to put my digital video camera in the hands of a native apprentice. The Polaroid camera Stone brought along often proved to be the clincher. Among the Kashora-teri, whom we found living in lean-tos under the forest canopy, young women scrambled to bedeck themselves as soon as Stone broke out the *cdmara instantánea*. They smeared one another's faces with red berries, then added dots or swirls with masticated charcoal. They slid wooden shoots through their pierced noses and cheeks.

At a bend in the Mavaca, we came ashore one afternoon to visit an offshoot of the Washewë-teri people. They were putting up a new shabono at the entrance to a crystalline stream they called Kreepiwe. The headman was in the midst of outfitting a new set of cane-shaft arrows with turkey tail feathers. His brother crouched over a nearby fire, painting bamboo arrow points with curare, a dark, syrupy neurotoxin that can drop tapir, monkeys, and, when push comes to shove, human enemies. We had come with gifts, I told the headman through an interpreter, and we would leave behind a cash donation to the community.

We immediately endeared ourselves to men and women alike by handing out coveted green tobacco leaves, (*Continued on page 98*)



The village of Warapana-teri, on the banks of the Mavaca.

NAPOLEON IN EXILE

(Continued from page 61)

which the Yanomami roll up and stuff inside the lower lip. The next morning, I was filming a father eating a breakfast of boiled monkey as he swung in a hammock with his two young boys. He licked his fingers and grunted, indicating his expectation of further payment. I dug through my pack and produced a box of felt-tip markers, figuring his kids might want to draw.

Within minutes, nearly every villager was getting decorated with the markers. One man covered another man's back, torso, and legs with random two-digit numbers. A small boy's face was scrawled with blue lines. Yet another had a single word written in block letters along the length of both forearms. It said "napë."

Early in Chagnon's attempts to study Yanomami kinship systems, he ran into a seemingly insurmountable problem: Uttering the names of dead relatives, the so-called *kamakari*, is sacrilegious for the Yanomami. So he began to pay—Tierney says bribe—young informants, including Kaobowä, to reveal the secret names. But according to Tierney, this coercion—together with the destabilizing effect of doling out scads of trade goods, including machetes and axes—actually created much of the strife Chagnon viewed as endemic to Yanomami society.

One afternoon we disembarked on a low bank and wandered into an open-sided shabono known as Caruana. Children in loincloths sprawled in the red dirt, playing marbles. Two shamans sat cross-legged under the palm-frond eaves of the communal shelter. Green parrot feathers adorned their earlobes, and their faces were dappled with polka dots. A pile of yopo and a bamboo blowpipe used for shooting it up each other's noses lay on the ground between them. Dark green streams of yopo-laced snot dribbled from their nostrils. One of the men beckoned. He pulled my face to within inches of his dilated pupils and said in Yanomami: "If you want to take pictures here, you will have to pay."

"Ask him what he thinks about a Casio," I told Cardozo as I knelt and rummaged through my camera bag for the watch. Only after I set the proper time, date, and day of the week did the shaman nod his satisfaction. The shaman, as it turned out, was also the village headman. Together with his Yanomami name, which I never learned, he had,

he said, two other names, to facilitate dealings with the napë. One was Juan Carlos. The other, he said, was Chagnon.

As the afternoon wore on, and the effects of the yopo seemed to fade, Juan Carlos became talkative under Cardozo's questioning. Napoleon Chagnon first came to visit his people years ago, the headman said, when they lived deeper in the jungle and called themselves the Mrakapiwei-teri. He brought many gifts—machetes, axes, and fishhooks—and they welcomed him. But the atmosphere soon turned sour. "He started asking about the names of our dead ancestors, the kamakari. He asked: 'What was the name of your father? What was the name of your mother?'" Juan Carlos said. "But we don't do that; to name those who have been here before us is prohibited."

The Yanomami burn their dead, and they believe that after the vital part of the soul sails off into the sky, the baser component—what the Yanomami call the *purë*—settles with the smoke of the funeral pyre into the surrounding forest. There, the evil spirit lurks, attacking travelers and spreading illness. The Indians go to great lengths to keep the *purë* away by eradicating any sign of their dead relatives, often destroying all the former possessions of a departed soul.

Jan Finkers, the Salesian brother who runs a mission school at Mavakita, later told me that this fear is so powerful that when one of the mission students died a few years ago, the child's parents came to the mission and hauled away the boy's desk, chair, pencils, and papers to heap on his funeral fire. Finkers, a Dutch-born missionary who has lived among the Yanomami for 30 years, is among Chagnon's local critics. According to Finkers, Chagnon's relentless efforts to learn the names of the deceased provoked profound unease among the natives. "It's so bad that if I speak the name of your dead relative, you are obliged to kill me," Finkers said. "The elders were furious, because it took away their sense of security."

Long, golden rays of light were now seeping through the trees around Caruana, bathing the earth in a rich, yellow glow. But Juan Carlos's face was dark. What if whispering the forbidden names to Chagnon had been a terrible mistake his people were still paying for in unknown ways? he asked. "We're scared that I told him my father's name," he said. "The sadness never leaves us."

Patrick Tierney's most sensational charges involve a series of scientific expeditions to the Upper Orinoco led by University of Michigan geneticist James V. Neel, who was the head of a department in which Chagnon then served. The massive project, partly funded by the Atomic Energy Commission, was intended to gather a vast storehouse of genetic data on the Indians, in part to offer an uncontaminated baseline to compare with mutation rates among survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings.

With his knowledge of Yanomami language and culture, Chagnon essentially served as the team's diplomat, arranging cooperation with the villages, often in exchange for trade goods. Beginning in 1966, the multidisciplinary team collected blood, stool specimens, dental impressions, throat swabs—just about everything imaginable. On an expedition in 1968, the team also brought along at least a thousand doses of measles vaccine. The front of contact with Western culture was penetrating ever closer to the Indians; it was only a matter of time, Neel figured, before a devastating measles epidemic would break out in this "virgin soil" population. And it did, right in the team's midst. Hundreds—maybe thousands, Tierney says—perished in an outbreak that his book alleged was exacerbated by the vaccine itself.

Neel died in early 2000, only months before the release of Tierney's book. But leading epidemiologists quickly rose to Neel's defense to dispute Tierney on the measles charge. No evidence existed, they said, to indicate that the vaccine's attenuated virus could morph into a wild, contagious one, as Tierney had theorized.

I first met Patrick Tierney in late 2000 as he kicked off his book tour at the American Anthropological Association's annual meeting in San Francisco. With gaunt cheeks, a high forehead, and deep-set eyes, he had the melancholic look of an El Greco portrait. By this time, he had already backed away from his most extreme charges, but he remained passionate in his conviction that Neel, Chagnon, and others were criminally reckless in administering the vaccine. "They were vaccinating sick people," he said. "Who knows what their responses might be? The whole thing was atrocious." Tierney still believes that the researchers, perhaps suffering from illness or accompanied by infected guides,

represented the principal vector for spreading the epidemic deeper into the bush.

Had Patrick Tierney interviewed a man named Ernest Migliazza, he might have spared himself some embarrassment. Migliazza, now 75, is a former linguist who splits his time between the Washington, D.C., area and his native Italy. Once married to a Baptist missionary, he lived for years among the Yanomami, and he developed one of the first written Yanomami grammars. In fact, Migliazza claims to have coined the name "Yanomami" as a generic term encompassing all the Indians who spoke four related dialects in the Upper Orinoco and neighboring watersheds, including the "Yanomamo," Chagnon's name of choice for the Indians of the Mavaca area. He also happens to be a surviving member of the 1968 expedition to the Upper Orinoco.

Though Tierney still charges that the measles came up the Orinoco with the expedition, according to Migliazza, "the measles were in Brazil the year before." By the time the research team reached the Yanomami villagers in Venezuela, he says, "they already had measles."

For Chagnon, both the vaccination effort and Neel's genetic survey were sidelines to his own anthropological research. But Migliazza notes that by participating in Neel's project—with its generous funding and regular forays into the Amazon from the mid-sixties to the early seventies—Chagnon was able to spend far more time in the field than most anthropologists. "It was a big hit for Chagnon," Migliazza says.

It also allowed Chagnon to range more widely through the region than would have otherwise been possible. In the process, he collected more raw data from the Yanomami—and left a far greater imprint in return—than perhaps any other napë interloper. And as I would come to find for myself, Shaki the Collector of Forbidden Names, Shaki the Gatherer of Blood and Shit, and Shaki the Dispenser of Precious Gifts—all would fuse into a single figure in the collective mind of the Yanomami.

According to Migliazza, that image was suffused with one more thing: Chagnon's reputation as a hotheaded tyrant. In *Yanomamö*, Chagnon describes his constant battle to protect his stash of supplies and tells—often humorously—how he deliberately cast himself as a stern bully who would

brook no thievery. "He was trying to show himself fierce so they would be afraid of him," Migliazza says. While not everyone on the research team agreed with Chagnon's portrayal of Yanomami ferocity, they seemed to agree on this: The fiercest man in the jungle was Chagnon himself.

Though three decades have passed since those days, Chagnon's famous bellicosity has not abated. During the long interview at his home in Michigan and in subsequent phone conversations, his anger flared repeatedly. "Bullshit" was his initial response when asked about the damage he might have inflicted by gathering his genealogical data. It was one of those questions Chagnon perceives as thinly veiled attacks on his character and his work, and he fired back. He blamed Finkers and other missionaries for trying to keep him out of the Upper Orinoco for years.

"They've been working on the Yanomamö to get them to see me as this horribly despicable guy because I asked for the names of the kamakari," he said. "[The Indians] all know I learned the names of their deceased ancestors. But I treated it like they did, very judiciously and respectfully."

As the day turned to evening and we drank our beer and smoked while staring out into the blackness of the Michigan woods, I came to see Chagnon as a man who rarely, if ever, retreats from confrontation. I could imagine how—in those early, difficult days in the jungle—he'd learned to exaggerate this blustering part of his personality until it became an indelible aspect of his nature.

He bristled when I asked what he made of charges that he exploited his encounters with previously uncontacted Yanomami villages for his own self-promotion. "I don't look at 'first contact' as a coup similar to raping a virgin," he said. "It's a privileged opportunity to learn something precious about another people before it's snuffed out. I would have given my left testicle to see the Plains Indians in the 15th century, to see what they did, to see what their society was like."

By the early 1990s, world attention increasingly focused on the noose of greed and environmental devastation that encircled the Amazon's indigenous tribes. And Chagnon became a lightning rod for attacks by activists, critical colleagues,

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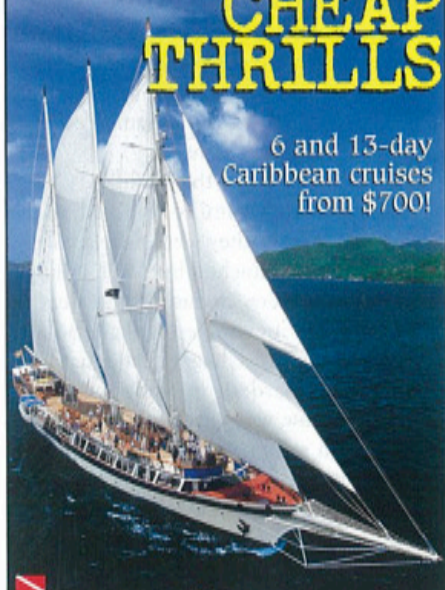
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and Venezuela's scientific establishment. Finding his access to the Yanomami blocked by government officials, an increasingly desperate Chagnon managed to pull off an end run. Through a mutual friend of the Venezuelan president's mistress, he was able to arrange a final series of forays into the rain forest, dropping in with military helicopters on previously uncontacted Yanomami villages deep in the Siapa River drainage.

At the mission village of Mavakita, Cardozo introduced us to a robust warrior in his mid-30s named Bokorami. He had tiny dots tattooed across his upper lip that resembled the whiskers of a jaguar. A dazzling blizzard of butterflies swirled around us, and from somewhere up the hill came the eerie wails of a shaman performing a healing ceremony. Bokorami said he had guided Chagnon on those helicopter trips and that, in return, Chagnon had promised to send shotgun shells and gunpowder. "He said he was going to pay me with these things, but he never paid," Bokorami said. "And now I am sad."

When I later asked Chagnon about the accusation, he offered his own explanation for refusing to pay Bokorami. An experienced hunter and warrior, Bokorami had said he could find a particular village Chagnon wanted to reach by helicopter. Bokorami was unable to locate the village in question, so they proceeded across the treetops to the first shabono they could spot, which turned out to be a never-before-contacted Yanomami community called Doshamosha-teri.

No sooner had they landed, Chagnon said, than Bokorami recognized, much to his horror, that they were near a village he had recently attacked in a raid, killing two of its members, including the headman. Fearing the inevitable revenge, Bokorami "turned white," Chagnon said, and immediately reboarded the chopper to return home. "Now, would you pay him for that?" Chagnon asked. "I don't feel as though I owe him anything."

Both Bokorami and Chagnon, it seemed, had come away from the experience bewildered and frustrated. It is the sort of misunderstanding that appears to have infected many of Chagnon's relations with the Yanomami. And it wasn't just with the Indians: By the early nineties, Chagnon had alienated a number of Venezuelan officials, missionaries, even other anthropologists.

"It's all in how you present things," Cardozo told me one night in Mavaca. "It's about tone. Here in Venezuela, the tone makes the music." In Cardozo's opinion, Chagnon was tone-deaf and arrogant, neglecting the diplomacy that might have earned the trust of the Venezuelan establishment.

The lantern's glow cast shadows across Cardozo's face as he swung in his hammock. "You hear what the Yanomami are saying," he added, "that Chagnon didn't give a damn. 'He used us to make himself famous.'"

The Venezuelans barred Chagnon from Yanomami territory for good in 1993, soon after he arrived in the remote mountain village of Haximu-teri, where at least 16 Yanomami had been slaughtered by Brazilian gold prospectors. A group of Venezuelan officials and soldiers detained him near the grim scene of charred ruins and dazed survivors and advised him to leave the region. Aside from a brief 1995 trip to a village on the Brazilian side of the frontier, it was the last time Chagnon would visit the Yanomami.

Bereft of direct contact with the subjects of his life's work, Chagnon withdrew from academia in 1999. He and Carlene packed their belongings in Santa Barbara, where Chagnon held his last teaching position, and they moved back home to Michigan.

For the Yanomami, one of the greatest possible sins is stinginess. When a person dies, his body is consigned to the pyre. If the deceased was generous in this life, his soul soars off to the great beyond, where he will enjoy abundance and good health. The Yanomami largely judge a person's character by what he brings with him and what he's willing to give them.

One morning in the village of Kreepiwe, I set about making breakfast, heating water and cracking open a can of deviled ham. At least 15 pairs of eyes studied my every move. It was time, I realized, for this napë to display some largesse. I mixed quart after quart of Gatorade powder in my water bottle, each packet a different flavor, and passed them around. The villagers clicked their tongues in astonishment at the kaleidoscopic display of electric green, cherry red, pineapple yellow. I tore open a large package of crackers, smeared them with peanut butter, and handed them out. "We are happy when napë like you bring us things and make food for us," one boy said, and the others nodded in agreement.

I thought about Chagnon and his own tale about peanut butter and crackers. "It was one of the few foods the Yanomamö would let me eat in peace," he writes in one edition of *Yanomamö*. "It looked suspiciously like animal feces to them, an impression I encouraged." Chagnon needed every strategy he could think of to preserve his resources; I could afford to be generous.

But I wondered if the long-term impression Chagnon made by hoarding his stuff and grossing out the natives might have contributed to his current dilemma. Perhaps the very nature of Chagnon's undertaking was too greatly at odds with the values of the people he came to study. Or was it, as Chagnon suggests, a question of interpretation, that his long absence allowed his enemies to fill Yanomami ears with poisonous ideas about him?

The deeper we pursued the legend of Shaki into the jungle, the deeper the ironies seemed to grow. For one, in trying to exhaustively document this purportedly "pristine" native population, Chagnon may have unwittingly helped draw them closer into the embrace of modern society. And while the scientific world gained from Chagnon's work detailed knowledge of this mysterious society, and while Chagnon gained fame—if not fortune—as well, it was not so easy to discern what the Yanomami got in return.

One thing I can say, with near absolute certainty, is that Chagnon will never be allowed to set foot among the Yanomami again. Toward the end of our tour, Cardozo convoked a meeting with some of the Yanomami from along the Mavaca River. The voices of two Chagnon detractors dominated the proceedings, but one in particular struck me with its sheer—dare I say it?—fierceness. It belonged to a young warrior who called himself, curiously enough, Alfonso, which happens to be Chagnon's middle name.

"When Shaki comes, there is *bishiki*, confusion," Alfonso said. "Those of us who are leaders now say he doesn't enter here. Tell him: 'No one here wants you now. No one will work with you. Forget about us. Forget our name—the Yanomamö. Forget that we exist.'"

Wallace talks about the Chagnon controversy and the Yanomami in an exclusive online Q&A. Visit www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure. AOL Keyword: NatGeo Adventure.