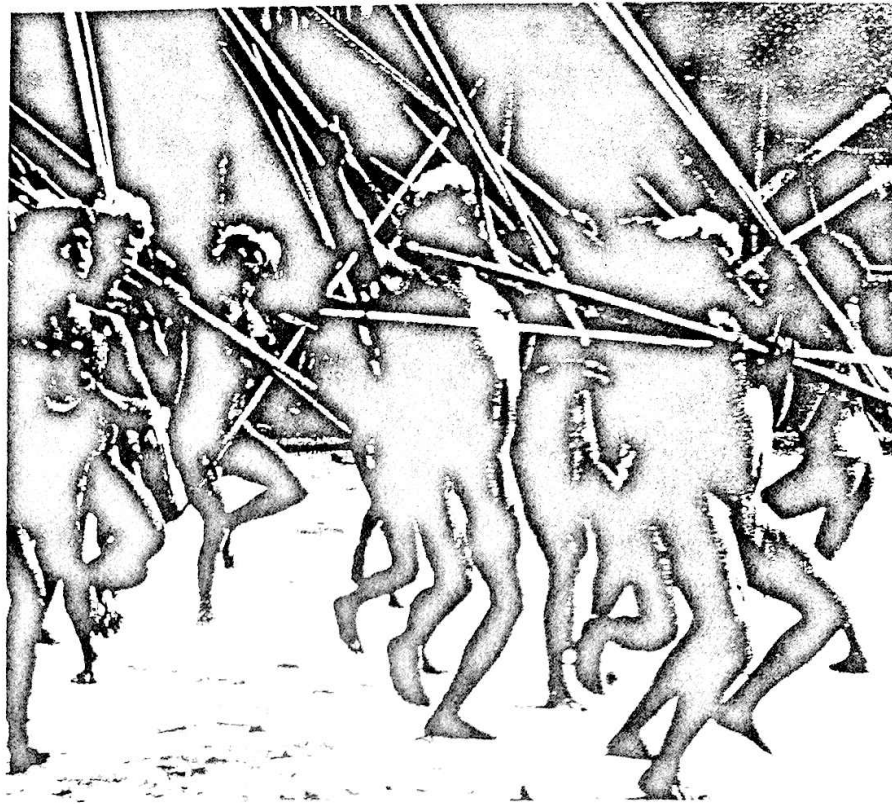


CASE STUDY

Culture Shock—The Yanomamö

Every society has its own culture, its own way of viewing the world. Some cultures—like those of the United States and Canada—are quite similar. Others are very different. Sociologists use the term culture shock to describe the upset and the disorienting feelings people experience when they enter a culture that is different from their own. In this case study Napoleon A. Chagnon, an American anthropologist, describes his own culture shock when he first met the Yanomamö in November, 1964 and how he had to assume attitudes and behaviors that, ideally, he preferred not to adopt, in order to cope with the normative demands of their culture, which was completely alien to him.



These men of the Yanomamö tribe are about to depart for a raid on another village.

The Yanomamö (the word is pronounced “Yah-no-mama” and is nasalized) are South American Indians who live in southern Venezuela and northern Brazil. There are about 10,000 Yanomamö living in some 125 villages. When Chagnon first visited them, from 1964 to 1966, they had had almost no contact with the outside world. The Yanomamö are known as “the fierce people” because of the importance aggression and fighting play in their culture. Each village is in a constant state of warfare with others. Men often beat their wives and engage in chest-pounding duels and club fights with one another.

At first Chagnon found the going rough. It took him months, for example, to learn that the Yanomamö had deliberately lied to him when he asked questions about their kinship. Indeed, they invented phony names for everyone in the village, as each tried to outdo the other in coming up with the most ridiculous name.

Eventually, Chagnon became good friends with the Indians. On a trip in 1975 he was amused when one Yanomamö reflected about his first visit: “I remember when you first came to live with us,” he reminisced. “We could really intimi-

date and trick you then and make you give away vast quantities of valuable goods for almost nothing and convince you that it was a fair bargain.” He laughed aloud and sighed: “Those days are gone, for . . . you have become just like . . . you know how to trade. You have become a Yanomamö.”

But it was not so easy or pleasant. Here Chagnon describes his first encounter with the Yanomamö:

My first day in the field illustrated to me what my teachers meant when they spoke of “culture shock.” I had traveled in a small, aluminum rowboat propelled by a large outboard motor for two and a half days. . . . We arrived at the village, Bissai-teri, about 2:00 P.M. and docked the boat along the muddy bank at the [end] of the path used by the Indians to fetch their drinking water. It was hot and muggy, and my clothing was

soaked with perspiration. It clung uncomfortably to my body, as it did thereafter for the remainder of the work. The small, biting gnats were out in astronomical numbers, for it was the beginning of the dry season. My face and hands were swollen from the venom of their numerous stings. In just a few moments I was to meet my first Yanomamö, my first primitive man. What would it be like? . . . Would they like me? This was important to me; I wanted them to be so fond of me that they would adopt me into their kinship system and way of life. I was determined to become a member of their society. My heart began to pound as we approached the village and heard the buzz of activity within the circular compound. . . .

The entrance to the village was covered over with brush and dry palm leaves. We pushed them aside to expose the low opening to the village. The excitement of meeting

my first Indians was almost unbearable as I duck-waddled through the low passage into the village clearing.

I looked up and gasped when I saw a dozen burly, naked, filthy, 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 dripped or hung from their noses. We arrived at the village while the men were blowing a hallucinogenic drug up their nose. The mucus is always saturated with the green powder and the Indians usually let it run freely from their nostrils. My next discovery was that there were a dozen or so vicious, underfed dogs snapping at my legs, circling me as if I were going to be their next meal. I just stood there holding my notebook, helpless and pathetic. Then the stench of the decaying vegetation and filth struck me and I almost got sick. I was horrified. What sort of welcome was this for the person who came here to live with you and learn your way of life, to become friends with you? They put their weapons down when they recognized [my companion] and returned to their chanting, keeping a nervous eye on the village entrances. . . .

[By evening,] I had not eaten all day, I was soaking wet from perspiration, the gnats were biting me, and I was covered with red pigment, the

result of a dozen or so complete examinations I had been given by as many burly Indians. These examinations capped an otherwise grim day. The Indians would blow their noses into their hands, flick as much of the mucus off that would separate in a snap of the wrist, wipe the residue into their hair, and then carefully examine my face, arms, legs, hair, and the contents of my pockets. I asked Mr. Barker how to say "Your hands are dirty"; my comments were met by the Indians in the following way: They would "clean" their hands by spitting a quantity of slimy tobacco juice into them, rub them together, and then proceed with the examination. . . .

The thing that bothered me most was the incessant, passionate, and aggressive demands the Indians made. It would become so unbearable that I would have to lock myself in my mud hut every once in a while just to escape from it. Privacy is one of Western culture's greatest achievements. But I did not want privacy for its own sake; rather, I simply had to get away from the begging. Day and night for the entire time I lived with the Yānomamō I was plagued by such demands as: "Give me a knife, I am poor!"; "If you don't take me with you on your next trip to Widokaiya-teri I'll chop a hole in your canoe!"; "Don't point your camera at me or I'll hit you!" "Share your food with me!"; "Take me

across the river in your canoe and be quick about it!"; "Give me a cooking pot!"; "Loan me your flashlight so I can go hunting tonight!"; "Give me medicine . . . I itch all over!"; "Take us on a week-long hunting trip with your shot gun!"; and "Give me an axe or I'll break into your hut when you are away visiting and steal one!" And so I was bombarded by such demands day after day, months on end, until I could not bear to see an Indian.

It was not as difficult to become calloused to the incessant begging as it was to ignore the sense of urgency, the impassioned tone of voice, or the intimidation and aggression with which the demands were made. It was likewise difficult to adjust to the fact that the Yānomamō refused to accept "no" for an answer until or unless it seethed with passion and intimidation—which it did after six months. Giving in to a demand always established a new threshold; the next demand would be for a bigger item or favor, and the anger of the Indians ever greater if the demand was not met. I soon learned that I had to become very much like the Yānomamō to be able to get along with them on their terms: sly, aggressive, and intimidating. . . .

Source: Excerpted from Napoleon A. Chagnon, *Yānomamō: The Fierce People*, 2d ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), pp. 4–10, 140–143. □