

# Anthropology News



EVOLUTIONARY ANTHROPOLOGY SOCIETY

## Napoleon Chagnon Elected to the National Academy of Sciences

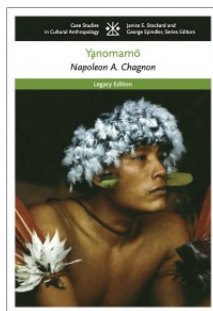
Siobhán M Mattison  
Bria Dunham



Napoleon Chagnon, newly elected member of National Academy of Sciences. Photo courtesy Chris Chagnon

UC Santa Barbara emeritus professor Napoleon Chagnon, renowned for his pioneering work exploring the evolutionary foundations of sociality and reproductive competition among the Yanomamö, is one of 84 newly elected members of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). His election not only vindicates Chagnon of unfounded accusations that have undermined his reputation and career, but is an achievement that reflects well upon our discipline.

Election to the NAS, in recognition of distinguished scientific research careers, is one of the highest honors bestowed upon a US scientist. It recognizes his 35 years studying the Yanomamö Indians of Venezuela. In his classic text, *Yanomamö* (now in its sixth "Legacy" edition), Chagnon chronicles the dynamics of a society where conflict and cooperation are integral to daily life, acquiring wives and building families. Countering accusations of genetic determinism, Chagnon has documented the complex nature of humans as alternately cruel and kind, both warlike and peaceable. These humanistic portrayals of the Yanomamö through ethnography and films have garnered accolades. His election to NAS commemorates these achievements as well as his innovative scientific methods, including pioneering the development of computerized genealogical databases, and leading the introduction of modern evolutionary theory into the field of social behavior.



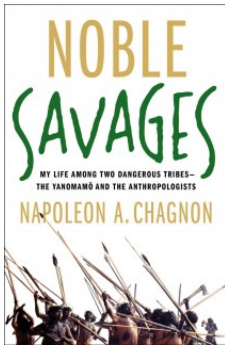
Cover image courtesy CENGAGE

Members of the EAS hope that this public and scientific recognition of Chagnon's work will mark the end of a controversy that perturbed the AAA in the early-mid 2000s. Inspired by Patrick Tierny's *Darkness in El Dorado*, which accused Chagnon and deceased geneticist James Neel of intentionally infecting Yanomamö Indians with measles, the AAA set up the "El Dorado Task Force" (TF) to examine Chagnon and Neel's ethical conduct. AAA members voted to rescind the acceptance of the TF's final report by the AAA's Executive Board, concerned that the TF had "failed to properly recognize that the [false] charges that initiated their investigation [were] themselves dangerous" (AAA 2003, see also Dreger 2011). Referring to the controversy, Monique Borgerhoff Mulder (UC Davis) echoes "[T]he tarring of [Chagnon's]... reputation at the hands of the press, and indeed of his own discipline... was painful in the extreme. This honor bestowed by the NAS will, hopefully forever, relegate this shameful event into history and restore Chagnon's reputation as one of the great anthropologists

of the 20th century."

While Chagnon's election to NAS constitutes a personal triumph, it also highlights the contributions of scientific anthropology to understanding culture. William Irons (Northwestern U) praises Chagnon's work among the Yanomamö as "the best picture of a pre-state society available anywhere... [and] ... a truly outstanding contribution to evolutionary science." As a pioneer of evolutionary ethnography, "Chagnon ... served as a beacon to ... students [struggling] with establishing ourselves first in the field, and later as academic professionals," writes Borgerhoff Mulder. Lee Cronk (Rutgers U) concurs, "[He] has provided an example of how it is possible to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles—whether in the field or among one's colleagues—in order to do first-rate, cutting-edge scientific research..." Chagnon reinforces the critical role that science plays in the AAA: "... the AAA has a major responsibility to advocate and promote

science and evolutionism as a continuing element in their ‘mission’ if anthropologists—all anthropologists—are to remain credible in the eyes of the public.”



Cover image courtesy Simon & Schuster

Chagnon, now an adjunct research scientist at the University of Michigan, his *alma mater*, continues to advance scientific approaches to the study of human nature. Though he has not returned to Venezuela since 1993, he, with support of U Michigan’s ICPSR (Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research), is developing a large, institutionally accessible database containing genealogical and demographic data, population and conflict histories, photographs, maps and other unpublished data on large, remote villages in the Siapa Basin. 2013 will also see publication of Chagnon’s memoir, *Noble Savages: My Life among Two Dangerous Tribes, the Yanomamö and the Anthropologists* (Simon & Schuster).

Congratulations to Napoleon Chagnon, who has long borne the standard for evolutionary anthropology for which he is now recognized. In our travails as anthropologists, we believe that it would be wise to emulate Chagnon’s courage, persistence and honesty. Chagnon’s formal induction into the NAS will occur at its sesquicentennial meeting in Washington, DC, a rare honor for an anthropologist, and one for which we should all be proud.

**Bria Dunham** is the EAS webmaster and will be assistant professor of global health and anthropology at Mercer University. She is interested in how evolutionary and anthropological insights can inform global public health, and conducts research related to parental care and

courtship.

Comments on and contributions to this column are welcome. Please send to **Siobhán Mattison** ([sm.mattison@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:sm.mattison@auckland.ac.nz)). Columns are archived at [www.evanthsoc.org](http://www.evanthsoc.org).

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