

# Chagnon's definition of unokai in regards to the yanomami essay sample

[Science](#), [Anthropology](#)



Napoleon Chagnon has observed and recorded the histories of 60 Yanomami villages. The Yanomamami are Indians that live widely scattered in southern Venezuela and northern Brazil. They usually live in villages of 75 to 80 people, but there may be as few as 40 people or as many as 300 people in a single village.

The Yanomami live by a combination of horticulture and foraging. Most of what they eat has been cultivated in their gardens. Each household in the village clears their own land and tends it themselves. Chiefs, who have to produce more food to meet their obligation to provide hospitality, commonly receive help from others. A village can produce all of its needs from only three hours worth of work per person.

One characteristic of the Yanomami is that they are accustomed to violence as a result of their values and culture and because of this, the Yanomami live in a constant state of warfare. Warfare appears as a main interest supported by a set of beliefs urging strong villages to take advantage of the weaker ones.

The Yanomami do not utilize much technology except in their weapons. The main weapon produced by the Yanomami is arrows. They make arrows that are six feet long. These arrows are very accurate. Arrows not only serve as weapons but as valuable possessions that are commonly exchanged as gifts among the Yanomami Villages that are nearby may sometimes ally so they can team up against another larger village. In order to demonstrate their friendship towards each other, the two villages trade and feast.

The men drug themselves on a daily basis with a substance called ebene, which causes an excessive production of mucous. The recipient allows for the mucous to drip freely from each nostril. It is believed among these people that the usage of this drug will have an effect in which bad spirits are relieved.

In recent years, Chagnon's writings have contributed to the label of the Yanomami as waiteri : fierce people. He has created an image of these people, which is not only questionable from an anthropological perspective, but also an image that has brought detriment to their society as a whole. By analyzing Chagnon's interpretations of the Yanomami lifestyle, one sees that his ideas are highly influenced by western standards of life.

One of the central arguments surrounding the Yanomami as violent people is the presence of unokai in Yanomami society, a word Chagnon translates as "killer". Chagnon defines these unokai as men who have either killed another person or were involved in the attack, which led to the killing. Although his arguments presented in an article of Science Magazine do not go into great detail about the process of gaining the title of unokai, Chagnon centers many of his points around the unokai and their actions.

Of the 283 deaths Chagnon recorded in 23 years among the Yanomami, he attributes 153 of these to unokai who were living when the article was published. He goes on to state that almost everyone in the villages he has visited had a family member or kinsman killed by blood revenge or because of a unokai hunting party. This supposed high incidence of violence and its

effect on a large portion of the population leads the reader to the conclusion that the Yanomami are an exceedingly savage society and that the unokai epitomize this idea.

Chagnon's ideas are in sharp contrast to those presented by Patrick Tierney in his November 2000 article in *The New Yorker*. Tierney, a noted journalist, has developed different theories about the Yanomami's violent tendencies charging that Chagnon covertly staged the incidents that appeared in his famous films of the Yanomami. Tierney blames Chagnon for stirring up Yanomami warfare with his research tactics and reporting their violence in deceptive ways. One of the most interesting statements in Tierney's article is geographer Hamilton Rice's interpretation of the Yanomami. Rice refutes that they "are not the fierce and intractable people that legends ascribe them to be, but for the most part are poor, under-seized, inoffensive creatures who eke out a miserable existence".

Chagnon's definition of unokai includes anyone who shoots an arrow at an intended victim. If 15 men shoot at a victim and only one strikes its target, all 15 are still considered unokai and must undergo the cleansing ritual associated with unokai. Although they have not actually killed, they are included in Chagnon's data as killers.

Even natural deaths can be attributed to unokai. Since the Yanomami do not believe that death is a natural state, many passings are attributed to sorcery by members of enemy tribes. These accused killers must in turn perform the cleansing ritual to ward of the spirits of the dead and can be considered

unokai. Chagnon argues that there are two types of unokai: one who is responsible for a physical killing unokai n tai and one who is responsible for a spiritual killing unokai horemou. This conception is dismissed by Jacques Lizot, a linguist who has lived with the Yanomami and studied their language for 25 years. During all of his fieldwork, he has never heard the two terms and goes on to state that the two phrases are also grammatically incorrect.

This reclassification of unokai brings a degree of invalidity to Chagnon's conclusions. The number of men who are considered killers in his studies would decrease dramatically if this new definition was applied and in turn, the view of the level of violence in the society would decrease as well. When the spiritual aspect of unokai is also taken into consideration, the level of violence decreases even further. Similarly, the number of losses of a close relative due to violence decreases dramatically, especially when you take into account that in many of these tribes almost all of the members are closely related. Even one or two killings can be linked by kin relations to affect the entire village population.

As we have learned in our class, language has a large influence on culture. In this case, a misinterpretation of meaning led to serious political and social ramifications. When the Brazilian government learned of Chagnon's arguments, it had a justification for plans to use Yanomami land for mining operations. The government argued that these violent tribes needed and wanted development and exposure to the western ideals of law. This not the outcome Chagnon had intended from the writing of the article

(hopefully), but he should have realized the possibilities for trouble when writing the book.

Further investigation into the Yanomami language could be one answer to the problems presented above. Without a full understanding of the meaning and social contexts which envelop the term unokai, it is unsafe to draw any conclusions from its uses. Chagnon's assumption that the Yanomami's unokai would be equivalent to our notion of killer is based completely on western notions of law and order.

By imposing our society's standards onto other cultures, Chagnon made a fatal ethnocentric error and has started a chain of events, which may ruin the society he has studied so passionately. One can only hope that the truth about this delicate society can be brought forth and accepted before they become one of countless indigenous peoples whose cultures are eradicated by our notions of progress.

Research

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Abstract: The nature and difficulties encountered in anthropological fieldwork are explored. Napoleon Chagnon is both writer and guide to his fieldwork among the Yanomamö Indians of Venezuela.

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