

Napoleon A. Chagnon (1988):

# Male Yānomamö Manipulations of Kinship Classifications of Female Kin for Reproductive Advantage

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## Abstract

Chagnon's 1988 case study on male Yānomamö manipulations of female kin classification provides an example of how evolutionary pressure for reproductive success can shape cultural practices and behavior.

In the following, we will give a brief account of Yānomamö marriage prescriptions, the problems originating from them and to what extent the behavioral mechanisms revealed by Chagnon are consistent with predictions obtained from Darwin's theory of evolution.

## 1 Marriageability Problems in Yānomamö Society

The term kinship classification refers to the procedure of 'naming' relatives, i.e. according to which rules individuals denote their family members using specific terms like "uncle", "mother-in-law" or "sister".

The Yānomamö Indians of southern Venezuela utilize a kinship classification system consisting of 40 distinct terms for classifying kin. This system legitimates only a very limited number of individuals as marriageable (prescriptive marriage system). These are referred to as "suaboyä" or "hearoya", viz. female or male cross-cousins, respectively. A man thus has to marry a woman classified as his mother's brother's daughter or his father's sister's daughter; moreover, the regarded female has to be of his own generation.

The problem is that males usually marry at the age of 20 for the first time while females marry at about the age of 13. The generation length through females will thus be significantly shorter than through males since females of the 'same' generation usually get married early. Further, females begin to reproduce earlier in their lives than males do whereas males continue to reproduce longer—the reproductivity-span of women is therefore shorter than that of men. These facts combined with the prescriptive marriage system give rise to incongruencies among siblings—the generations get out of synchrony. Polygyny further contributes to the chronic "wife-shortage" (p.28) male Yānomamö face: it is hardly possible for a young adult male to find a suitable mate, i.e. a female cross-cousin belonging to his own generation. Therefore frequent reclassification of kin becomes necessary.

The above definition of marriageable partners leads to a high level of inbreeding, which—in turn—leads to multiple and complex relations among the inhabitants of a Yānomamö village. This leads to ambiguous kin classifications that should be resolved by choosing the taxon denoting the closest genealogical connection between classifier and classified. However, the taxons male classifiers choose rather correspond to the 'best' relationship, i.e. one that allows for marriage with a young woman, than the shortest.

## 2 Darwinian hypotheses

Now that we have seen the broad outline of the problem, namely that the prescriptive Yānomamö marriage system leads to asynchrony of generational levels, we can continue with trying to find out how this problem might be resolved. How can a man find a suitable young wife that increases his chances for reproduction?

Since kinship classification defines whom to marry, it "can be an intellectual tool that can be used to establish reproductively and socially useful relationships with one's neighbors" (p. 29),

as Chagnon reports. This means, in a framework of Darwin's approach, we would expect male Yānomamō to show a manipulative classification behavior as follows:

1. males will have kinship and genealogical information more immediately available than females
2. kinship reclassification by males will be biased towards putting females into the 'wife' category<sup>1</sup>
3. adult males will tend to move females of higher reproductive value into the 'wife' category
4. juvenile males will not show this manipulation behavior

The entire list boils down to two aspects. First, adult males should be found to "know more" about actual relationships among a village's population. Second, they should tend to manipulate the actual (genealogical) classifications such that they increase their own chances to get married with a female of high reproductive value, i.e. males are expected to adjust taxonomy in order to enhance their mating probabilities with *young* females.

### 3 Chagnon's Expedition

For his 1988 study, Chagnon interrogated 100 Yānomamō selected from three different villages (340 inhabitants overall). He chose males and females of each age category, showed them photographs of their co-villagers and asked them to assign kinship classes to them. Most members of the villages were related to more than 75% of all residents but even 90% of the collected classifications indicated a relationship to the classifier, as Chagnon reports. The taxon most frequently used was "sibling". Furthermore, the majority of classified kin of *all* informants appeared to fall into their "own" or "descending" generation.

Overall, Chagnon reports that the classifications for close kin corresponded quite accurately to what would be expected given the actual genealogical relationships. However, setting further out through the genealogical links the observed classifications tended to increasingly deviate from the expected ones.

These deviations were analyzed with respect to each single kinship category. Two general effects could be observed: some deviations "created" members in the category under consideration whereas others removed actual members from a category. Regarding marriageable categories, Chagnon observed the former case (creation) much more frequently than the latter. The female kin classified as wives exceeded the expectation in all taxons indicating that men are purposefully "moving female kin of less reproductive utility (e.g. sisters) into the reproductively most useful category: wife." (p.42) Males do not draw their 'new' wives from elder categories. On the contrary, they 'create' wives "by taking female kin out of from 'younger' generational categories: nieces, sisters and daughters." (p.44)

This tendency to move young females into marriageable categories was found to be most pronounced during young adulthood (at the age of 16 to 25).<sup>2</sup> Chagnon further observed that these males were fastest in classifying their kin. He speculates that this might indicate greater knowledge about actual relationships.

### 4 Upshot

In the previous section we have seen that male Yānomamō tend to reclassify females of high reproductive value into categories that provide potential mates, viz. allow for marriage. They thereby increase their own chances of reproductive success, since mating with a younger female potentially produces more offspring. These purposeful manipulations of the underlying taxonomy are consistent with the predictions drawn from Darwin's theory (see section 2).

Chagnon's investigations show that the Darwinian approach can usefully be applied to predict the kinship classification behavior of male Yānomamō. This supports evolutionary theory in general and particularly emphasizes that it can be applied to analyze human behavior in a cultural environment.

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<sup>1</sup>Yānomamō use the same term to refer to all members of the cross-cousin category, regardless whether they are actually married to them or not.

<sup>2</sup>Sub-adult Yānomamō appeared to rather create additional 'mothers'.