Wildman’s Wife

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Anthropology is the study of human beings in relation to physical character, environmental and social relations, and culture. It is a science, and science is about finding out new things, not just about learning what is already known. A serious student of anthropology must look for a new social or cultural group to investigate. The problem is that almost every tribe has already been studied, and the few that have not been are (perhaps patronizingly) guarded by those who seek to preserve their unique environments.

But then, even if I could go, the idea of going to the dark jungles of the Amazon, or Borneo, or New Guinea – it just does not seem to suit me. I was prepared to go deep, but not too far from home. It was then that I heard about the isolated swamp community in the Atchafalaya River Basin of Louisiana.

Now some might say that such a group is not worthy of study. They might say that these are people who have abandoned civilization and therefore we cannot learn about progression, but anthropology is about adaption rather than just advancement, and it appeared this was a good example of that. These people were described as “feral” and that interested me. They had very little contact with the outside world despite being between two major cities in Lafayette and Baton Rouge, but the swamps presented a formidable barrier.

Study of these people also had another advantage and that was language. I knew that the people spoke a kind of Creole between themselves, but that English was known by enough of them to make it easy for me. That and the French I had learned at school should be all that I needed.

I felt that our science could benefit from an understanding of how an isolated society develops from an initial regressed position. And I had an opportunity for a significant research project almost on my own doorstep – just a few states away.

I discussed this with my professor as a topic for my Master’s paper and he agreed that I could pursue it, but he was yet to be convinced. He said: “This is anthropology not sociology”. My point was that these people were not a part of our modern American society in any way. They were separate and apart and needed to be treated as an isolated tribe just as if they were in Amazonia. I suppose that he was at least willing to let me explore it and justify it after my initial contacts.

I packed my bags and a few tradeable items – things that might be useful to an isolated community - and headed off to the Bayou State.

I found a guide in Baton Rouge who agreed to take me into the Atchafalaya. But he offered me some menacing warnings: “The men in there are wild, and strong. If it came to a struggle a small guy like you would not stand a chance. And when it comes to the law in the swamps - there ain’t any.”

I don’t think of scientists as being particularly brave, but to do your work properly you must be committed. Science is about confronting the unknown in the search for knowledge. Volcanologists do not fear volcanos, marine biologists do not fear the sea, and anthropologists have ventured deep into unexplored jungles in search of primitive societies. The thirst for knowledge drives us. And this time it was my own country. Of course, there was a tinge of trepidation, but it was fleeting.

My guide took me in to an area that he said was called “Trader’s Island” – a clearing with a small jetty and other places to drag boats out of the water, and a small open-sided shelter built from rough sawn timber and thatched with reeds. He had brought fabric to exchange alligator skins. I had brought axes and knives to exchange for a welcome into this society.

We waited and within an hour several small boats arrived. The people seemed well clothed and clean. The women in particular, seemed to have dressed for the occasion in bright colors and with hair arranged in spectacular styles. Both men and women seemed only interested in talking with one another, and largely ignored me and my guide, but he told me to sit back until he was approached by somebody he knew.

A man arrived with the alligator skins. He was a big man, with a mop of sandy hair and dark sideburns like some Victorian melodrama, and he had piercing blue eyes that scanned me even as he approached.

“I have more skins that the fabric you offer, Mon Ami,” he said to the guide. “So, I will take that as well”. He pointed at me with a large horny finger.

“This person is a student of science,” my guide explained. “He wishes to live among you for a while ad learn your ways. Would any family be willing to accommodate him for a period?”

“Science you say?” the man grinned. He turned to the crowd that had grown to its maximum and bellowed – “Who will take this scientist into their home to learn our ways?”

Everybody turned on hearing his voice. He was clearly a man of some importance as well as being physically the largest. But nobody raised a hand or stepped forward. I wonder now if he shook his head as he spoke warning people not to offer, but I was looking at them, not him.

“It looks like you will have to come with me after all,” he said to me.

Nobody came for my knives and axes. I packed them in a bag and agreed to go with him, planning to use those items later.

My guide explained that he would come to Traders Island the first day after the full moon, which was a month. He said – “They have no need of calendars so trading day is fixed by the moon.”

Suddenly a month seemed a very long time, but anthropologists would undoubtedly insist that it would be a minimum stay to have any understanding of a society.

“My name is Claude,” he told me. “Come with me and learn our ways.” He had a grin on his face that I did not really understand. It appeared friendly but yet it was unsettling.

My guide left, and the people on the island finished their exchanges and packed their goods into their boats. Then a fire was lit and there was to be feasting and drinking. Food and crude liquor had been brought and some had already started to consume it.

There was music too. Music and dancing. Women were the first to dance with one another. They seemed to outnumber men. They laughed and they sang in their Creole dialect with vigor and joy.

I took some images with my camera and got my notebook out and started to make notes. I spoke with a few but it was clear that I was mistrusted. It seemed that I would need to use Claude to earn the right to be included, and he seemed to be the man who could help me do that.

We ate some of the food – crabs and frogs and alligator meat, served with baked yams and vegetables that I had never tasted before – and he drank some of the liquor which I only tasted. But as darkness was about to fall Claude said that we should leave to arrive at his home before it became pitch black.

As far as I was concerned it was that dark when the prow of our boat hit the wharf that carried his house. He took my arm and guided me off the vessel, and then moved around in the dark to light lamps and cast orange light onto the place that was to be my home for a month.

I suppose that I had expected something as primitive as the structure on Trader Island so I was presently surprised to see that this was a real house, with even a second level above. But the main living area was downstairs and so was the main bedroom int which I was led. It seemed that I was to be offered that room, and I was exhausted so happy to climb into bed.

Before doing so I went into the nearby bathroom which appeared almost modern. There was a porcelain toilet that appeared an antique, with a heavy cistern above, and at the other end of the room there was a stainless steel showerhead above an area lined with glazed clay tiles. The basin and pitcher were also glazed clay, but apart from the oil lamps it appeared that all the facilities you would expect were there, including a large mirror.

Claude said that he was going out for a short while to attend to something. I just collapsed into the large bed and fell asleep.

When I woke, I was shocked to see Claude lying in bed beside me, naked. He was lying on his belly snoring. The dawn was just breaking. I decided that the best thing was to quietly slip out of bed and find a place to lie down in the living room for another hour or two.

He did not awaken so I had time to see the sun rise over the Atchafalaya Basin from the verandah. It seemed that the house was partly floating, so perhaps it could rise completely if the rivers flooded. It appeared to be built of milled timber so it would be old. But I marveled at what had been made with the limited materials that the land and the water had to offer. Every now and again there was something from the outside world, but the vast majority had been fashioned from local resources. This was indeed a truly isolated society.

I reached for my notebook and started scribbling. I was glad that the only technology that I had brought was a camera and a solar charger for its battery. In this place pen and paper might belong, but nothing further advanced.

I did not notice that Claude had woken and that he was standing behind me.

“You have other work to do,” he boomed, startling me. “But first we need to get you appropriately dressed.”

It seemed that I was dressed right in light but durable cotton shirt and pants, but if there was something locally made for me to put on, I was ready to do that. But he produced a woman’s dress.

I have to say that I just laughed. It was a joke. It had to be. But then I could see that he was serious. It seemed like if it was a joke, it was only for his benefit. He was seeking to demean me somehow. Perhaps this was reserved for outsiders? I would record this, but wear the dress.

“That hair on your legs will have to go,” he said. “I can’t have my woman with hair on her body except this lovely stuff.” He ran a rough hand through my curly hair. It was too long, and I should have had it cut before I left civilization, but that was too late now.

“Your woman?” I exclaimed. “Look, I am here to study. I don’t mind fitting in where I can, but I don’t want there to be any misunderstanding …”

He did not give me any chance to continue. His hand shot out an grabbed the wisp of hair on my chin that I liked to call a beard, and ripped it right off. The pain was excruciating, but the shock was worse. I suddenly realized that as my guide had warned me: “The men in the swamp are wild and strong, and if it comes to a struggle a small guy like you will not stand a chance.”

“I will call your Fleur,” he said, with an accent that made the last letter sound like an indecent suggestion. “That will be your name. A beautiful flower. You will have to live up to that name. You will need to look like her and move like her and sound like her, or you will make me very unhappy.”

It was a nightmare. It seemed like moments before I had been making notes and thinking that this could be my Margaret Mead moment – now my only thought was survival. To achieve that I would need to do as Claude demanded. He had all the power and I had none.

In fact his power was greater than I thought. There were other houses nearby, although accessible only by boat, but everybody seemed to be in awe of Claude. Nobody seemed to care or even notice, that the young man who had arrived in their midst was now plucked like a chicken, clothed in a dress and now wore ribbons in his hair.

I would attend parties beside him as if I was his girlfriend or his wife. I was expected to be one of the women and they attended on me as if I was, without regard for the reality of the situation that they all surely knew. Nobody spoke of it, least of all me. I assumed that Claude was watching. I was trapped in this costume.

Surely dressed as I was and walking beside Claude in the feminine mincing gait he insisted on, and speaking to everybody in a high pitched warble as he required, everybody could guess what he did to me in the evenings, and in the mornings too.

I never had much time for sex at college, although that sounds unlikely. While everybody else was going at it like rabbits on crack, I was studying. It was because I was giving my life to science, or so I told myself, but the fact is that I was never a strong performer in bed. I had left women disappointed. It seemed better to do what I did well, and not bother with persistent failure.

But with Claude I was everything he wanted in a sexual partner. I was submissive, but mainly because I was terrified – at least at the start. The pupils dilate in fear, but also too with attraction. He loved to look in my face as he fucked me – me lying on my back with a cushion under my butt while he held me by the throat and pistoned me. At least that was how it was at the start.

I supposed that it changed when I started to show him affection, as a girlfriend or even a wife might. It seemed to me that if he was ginuinely attracted to me as if I was female, I should foster that and use it as a defense mechanism. If he thought that I cared about him he might care about me, and if he did, he would not hurt me. The fact is that beyond pulling my beard out that first morning, he never physically hurt me, even when sex was rough – when we liked it that way. He could be very gentle. There was much about Claude to like.

In any case, how long can you pretend to like someone before pretense becomes reality? How long can you pretend to be like a woman before you become just like a woman? Psychology is not my field. The inner workings of the mind are a mystery to me, and to most psychologists, I think.

When the next full moon came, and Claude left me at the house to go to Trader’s Island, I was not surprised. He wanted to keep me and could not risk me leaving with the man who had brought me deep into this place. Rather than being upset I found his desire pleasing. And the following month he did the same, going to swap his skins for thing of value he came back with a gift for me - tablets to help me become more of a woman. He told me that he wanted me to be his wife and marry as they do in their culture.

“But you can have anyone you want?” I said, choking back the tears of regret.

“I have fathered too many children here,” he said. “We in this swamp understand that we are a small population and that too much blood in common is not a good thing. So, when a man has fathered as many children as I have, he should not lie with a woman capable of giving birth. It has been the customer here that men who are unsuited to being fathers, who are weak or feeble minded, must serve as wives for real men. This is our way. Write it down in your book if you like, but then marry me.”

I did leave the swamp, but only for a month, to have the surgery, and be back on the full moon

Maybe I will write my thesis one day, but I might have to leave these details out of it.

The End

© Maryanne Peters 2022

Author’s Note: Veronica asked (December 10 2021): “Have you ever done, or considered a Tarzan meets TG Jane and they set up house in a tree deep in the African jungle story?” The answer was no, but then the Wildman idea struck a chord. Why go to Africa?