

L. Warner Murngin Warfare. Oceania V.I, 1931 p.457-494. p. 457

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Warfare is one of the most important social activities of the Murngin people and the surrounding tribes. If it were not for its existence, Murngin society as it is now constituted could not exist. Any social change dependent on the loss of the trait of war would not be slight, but would demand a very decided alteration of the fundamental structures of the civilization. Warfare prevents many modifications from taking place in the society that would possibly destroy it were this element of Murngin civilization absent.

1. The Murngin are a tribe of north-east Arnhem Land, neighbouring tribes of the same region being the Yarenango, Burera, Yandjinang, Djinba, Ritarngo, Dai and Barlamomo. For an account of the kinship system of the Murngin see Warner: Morphology and Functions

of the Australian Murngin Type of Kinship, Amer. Anthropol. Vol, 32, April, 1930.

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For the last twenty years, out of some seventy battles that were recorded for this paper in which members of the Murngin factions were killed, fifty were caused by the desire to avenge the killing of a relative, usually a clansman, by members of another clan (blood revenge). Of these, fifteen were killings that were done deliberately, against the tradition of what is fair cause for a war, because it was felt that their enemies had killed the wrong people when they retaliated for injuries done them. Ten killings were due to members of a clan stealing a woman, or obtaining a woman who belonged to another clan, by illegal means. Five men were killed because they had slain men by black magic. The clans of the men killed by magic slew the men who were supposed to be the magicians. Five men were slain

screaming, hitting the trunk, and shaking the branches. After some five minutes he climbed down, moved behind me, paused, and then with a short yell hit my head, presumably with his hand. When I sat up he moved slowly away, still showing signs of excitement.



because they looked at a totemic emblem under improper circumstances and by so doing insulted the members of the clan to whom it belonged as well as endangered the latter's spiritual strength.

The underlying idea back of the causes for most Murngin warfare is that the same injury should be inflicted upon the enemy group that one's own group has suffered.

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Another belief centred around killing as a cause for war is that the spirit of the dead man enters the body of the killer and gives him double strength and actually increases his bodily size.

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It would be safe to add, on the basis of population, another hundred casualties to this figure, making a total of two hundred men who had been killed. Since each man averages three and one-half women, these men who were killed would have appropriated seven hundred women of the available supply had they lived, or, to state it in terms of the present situation, the tribes needed seven hundred women less than they would had the men lived.

Warfare, then, is one of the mechanisms on which polygyny is based. If it did not kill a fair proportion of the tribe's young men to create a disproportion in the sex ratio, polygyny, as it is now practiced among these people, could not exist.

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Warfare also helps to prevent the breaking of tribal laws by the threat of retaliation by other social groups. Finally, it acts as the ultimate police power in the functioning of Murngin society. It is the threat of its force which ultimately prevents flagrant breaking of tribal taboos.



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