

N.A. Chagnon Yanomamo Social Organization and Warfare. Natural History 1967. Vol. 76. p.40-70. p.44

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Furthermore, the generalization about aggressiveness has a specific limitation. Only fierce men came from blood. The Yanomamo turn to another origin myth to explain the creation of cowards and women. In this myth the legs of one of the first beings, Kanaboroma, became pregnant. One of the legs generated women. The other leg generated cowards. In such fashion the Yanomamo can explain or justify mythologically why most of them are fierce, and why some prefer to run rather than fight.

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Chronic warfare, and its associated ideals, permeates various aspects of Yanomamo culture. It may even be said that aggression is the theme of the Yanomamö way of life, the charter for which seems to lie in their myth about Moon. While studying these Indians in the humid tropical forest of southern Venezuela and adjacent portions of Brazil, I was repeatedly told how Moon, whom they call Peribo (in some cases, Periboriwä), had the habit of visiting earth to eat the souls (noreshi) of children between pieces of cassava bread. Two brothers, Uhidima and Suhirina, took offense at Peribo's activities and decided to shoot him with their arrows. Uhidima tried first. But he was the poorer shot of the two brothers, and missed. Then, when Peribo reached his zenith, Suhirina shot one bamboo-tipped arrow into his abdomen.

causing him to bleed profusely. Peribo's blood spilled to earth and immediately changed into the first men (Yanomamo). It is because man came from the blood of Peribo that he is inherently fierce and wages constant war. Such is the explanation given by the Yanomamo.

with barbed arrows, and so it goes. The Yanomamo consider it

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The Yanomamo place a high value on bellicose behavior; all men are obliged to demonstrate their capacity to behave fiercely. This usually takes the form of the stronger pushing the weaker around: threats, intimidation, shouting, chicanery, duels with fists or clubs, and, frequently, just bluffing. Many, however, display their ferocity in the relatively harmless (at least to them) beatings that they administer to their hapless wives. This punishment is for real wrongs or imagined ones, such as a slow response to a command or being too sassy. More severe punishment is meted out if the woman has been caught in the act of having an affair or sometimes if the husband merely suspects that the wife has had an affair. One man hit his wife in the mouth with a glowing brand of firewood, another cut his wife's ears off with a machete, two men shot their wives

with barbed arrows, and so it goes. The Yanomamo consider it quite appropriate to display their ferocity by venting anger on their defenseless wives, the implication being that they will be equally fierce with male competitors. Younger men admire their married superiors for beating women, even flock to them and bask in the aura of renown.

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The propensity to display ferocity (waiteri) begins early in the socialization process. Young boys are encouraged to strike their elders, then are rewarded for doing so with approving laughter by their parents. A child, only four years old, has already learned that the first outlet for his displeasure should be to strike his father - or any one else immediately available - in the face. Everybody, including the target, praises him for his waiteri.

Yanomamo treat their sons with great indulgence because males are considered to be superior and more desirable than females; they will grow up to be fierce warriors and defenders of the group.

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The net result of the infanticide practices is that there are more males than females in the population. (In some villages the sex ratio may show a 30 per cent excess of males.) Inasmuch as successful, fierce men usually have two or more wives, the consequence is that some men will be forced into prolonged bachelorhood. This gives rise to keen competition among men for the available women, imposing pressure on all the competitors to behave aggressively in the pursuit of mates. Yet another factor complicates the demographic situation. The Yanomamo prohibit coitus with a pregnant woman or a woman who is nursing a child. This situation is aggravated by the fact that women nurse children for three years or so. The Yanomamo, therefore, quite understandably do not hold rigorously to the taboo on lactation coitus. Nevertheless, men with

several pregnant or lactating wives are usually no more gratified sexually than ordinary bachelors, and like the latter, such married men tryst with the wives of covillagers. This results in bloody club fights.

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Thus, in the interest of raising warriors who will make the group invincible against enemies, the Yanomamo get themselves into a demographic situation that leads to even more aggression, a sort of social pathology for which the cure is more of the same.

An essentially unstable village life is one of the consequences of this syndrome of competition for females in an arena where aggression and ferocity is the surest way to success. In small villages containing, say, 40 people, the situation is not nearly so volatile; kinship roles and incest taboos are capable of regulating personal behavior more or less smoothly. But as villages grow in size they become more heterogeneous in their composition. Accordingly, they include more women of the appropriate kinship category available for sexual liaisons. This makes sexual affairs more common, which, in turn

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makes club fights relatively frequent in larger villages. The fighting becomes so chronic that a larger village fissions into smaller groups after reaching a size of about 100 to 150 people. If the village is actively engaged in wars, the threat from enemies may inhibit the fissioning for a while, but it cannot prevent it altogether.

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The attitudes and values associated with ferocity also carry over into the intervillage political realm. Here it is considered part of policy to bully and coerce weaker neighbors so that they will provide women. Small villages are obliged to enter into military alliances with neighbors for purposes of defense, but the principals in an alliance can never trust each other. The allies confront each other with the hope of remaining at peace but meanwhile are intent on gaining the upper hand in the marriage exchanges that will take place between them to cement the alliance.

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In this connection, each village has an informal group of men who are considered to be the waiteri. These "fierce ones" dictate policies of the village in regard to raids on other groups; the younger, less influential men are then required to follow through and execute these policies, reluctant though some of them may be. In terms of a village's capacity to conduct war successfully, the more fierce ones it contains, the better it can defend its sovereignty. For example, a village was forced to abandon its garden and migrate to a new area because "all the fierce ones were killed by the enemies" and nobody else in the community was capable or interested enough to prosecute the war against these enemies.

Each village, in addition, has at least one recognized leader, or "big man" (pata dodihiwa). His position is determined, in part, by the size of

his kinship group and by his military achievements and demonstrations of ferocity in fighting. Some villages have two such headmen, arising from the two dominant political groups that are bound to each other by marriage ties extending over several generations.

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Before discussing these patterns let us see how concepts of aggression permeate still other aspects of Yanomamo culture. To begin with, there is the Yanomamo concept of the cosmos. It has four layers, of which the first is "the empty layer." Man (again remember that Yanomamo were the first people created) lives on the third layer, which itself originated when a piece of hedu, the place of the souls of dead men (layer 2) fell down. More recently, another piece of hedu broke off and fell to earth (layer 3), where it struck the village of Amahiri-teri and kept on going, carrying the village down to layer 4. The people of Amahiri-teri have no meat because their part of the jungle and the game it included was not carried down with them. They must therefore rely on eating the souls of men on the earth layer. This is why a constant struggle is waged between men on earth



and the spirits sent by the people of Amahiri-teri.
In addition, supernatural struggle is conducted
right on earth among enemy villages. Each has sha-
mans who control and manipulate a number of small
demons (hekura). These are sent against enemies to
eat the souls of children and thereby weaken the
enemy by causing death in his village.

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Despite all the pressures on men to behave fiercely,
many men, particularly the younger ones, are frightened
and reluctant to participate in raids. But their
fierce elders intimidate them into participating, for
a group that refuses to defend itself soon earns the
reputation of being timid and will fall prey to the
incessant demands of its stronger neighbors for women.
I accompanied one raiding party partway to its destina-
tion. Several of the young men wanted to turn back
before we were an hour away from the village, allegedly
because they had sore feet or malaria. The leader
of the raid gave them a stern lecture on cowardice,
which brought them back into line. But the leader
himself, a man of some 35 years, had also been reluc-
tant to go on the raid. He was obliged to do so,
however, by the entire system of pressures from his
allies, some of whom had recently begun demanding

women from his group because it appeared to fear its
enemies. In the interests of the village, he had to
raid the members of a village that had recently killed
his brother, not so much for personal revenge, but
because his group was acquiring the reputation of
being cowardly and unwilling to defend itself.



It can be seen that warfare affects Yanomamo society in multiple ways. As with the Plains Indian societies of the American West, the social organization and many other aspects of the culture reflect the total commitment of the society to the warfare motif. This commitment is expressed in individual attitudes, and its effect on social structure, in the evolution of primitive societies to modern ones, has probably been great.

A.P. Vayda Hypotheses About Functions of War. Natural History 1967. Vol. 76. p.40-70 p.48

Functions of Primitive war. Hypotheses presented by various writers are concerned with the functions of primitive war in maintaining or regulating certain economic variables. According to these hypotheses, war breaks out between groups when the inequalities in their possession of, or access to, certain economic goods or resources reach a certain magnitude. Such hypotheses are "functional" ones if they go on to state that the effect of the warfare is to reduce the inequalities to an acceptable level. Examples are hypotheses that say that the distribution of camels among Bedouins and of horses among Plains Indians is regulated when groups with too many animals become the victims of stock-raiding by enemy warriors.¹⁻³ With respect to certain primitive people who are not pastoralists, similar hypotheses

have been presented, but with land, rather than camels or horses, as the redistributed resource. Meggitt^{4,5} offered such a hypothesis with reference to the Mae Enga, a horticultural people of the New Guinea highlands, while I have offered it as applying to the warfare of various primitive people who have in common the practice of swidden, or slash-and-burn, agriculture.⁶

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