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Tribal warfare

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Tribes, broadly defined, are indigenous peoples outside the direct administration of a centralized, authoritative, state. Applied to the great diversity of tribal groupings, war must also be defined very broadly, as organized, deadly violence by members of one group against members of another. Tribal warfare is known to us through archaeological recovery, observers from ancient states, reports of explorers and colonialists since the era of Columbus, and systematic study by cultural anthropologists beginning in the early twentieth century. Earlier writers often conceptualized "primitive war" as qualitatively distinct from "civilized" or "true" war – either more fanatical or more game-like, and not adhering to proven military principles. More recent scholars have stressed the essential similarity of war by state and non-state peoples.

War by tribal peoples displays a gradient of more sophisticated organization and practice linked to increasing social complexity and political hierarchy. War was practiced for millennia before the advent of civilizations and writing. It continued through ancient and recent history beyond state boundaries. In recent centuries its scope receded as independent tribal peoples were eliminated or conquered. Today, independent fighting by non-state peoples continues in some remote areas, though in greater or lesser ways it is conditioned by circumstances associated with proximate state systems. Most of the detailed and reasonably reliable information about tribal fighting comes from the past few centuries, where representatives of expanding states studied the warfare of local indigenous populations in the Americas, Australia, large parts of Africa and Asia, and Pacific Islands.

Tribal warfare encompasses an enormous range of demographic scale and political organization. The Jivaro or Shuara of Ecuador of the early twentieth century lived in scattered, autonomous households. Men of individual or connected families set up ambushes against personal enemies, in what could be called feud. But feuds graded into their larger wars, when perhaps forty men would be recruited for longer-distance headhunting raids on sleeping households. Ideally, men in a raiding party would obey the war leader. In practice, they did what they thought best. Among peoples of Highland New Guinea such as the Enga or Dani, war until the 1960s came in various levels, drawing on groupings within a hierarchy of social units (village, lineage, clan, etc.). Self-made political leaders, or "big men," persuaded warriors to follow their military plans, and negotiated support from prospective allies, taking the field with upwards of a hundred men. In combat, big men stood aside, shouting orders, but often they could not even be heard. When adversaries were related, conventions of combat kept casualties lower and relations capable of repair. More long-term oppositions could lead to deadly ambushes and even slaughters. Today, peoples of Papua New Guinea still make war, but their fighting is interwoven with national political competition, and sometimes, criminal organizations.

On the slopes of Mount Kenya in Uganda prior to British rule, the herding Meru lived in settled, multi-clan communities of several hundreds. Their carefully planned raids to capture cattle would involve perhaps three hundred men, moving and attacking in specialized formations. The raid organizer was in command, though if courses of action were disputed, men could switch loyalties to other leaders. In the North American Southeast, Coronado encountered multi-village chiefdoms, 40km across, with a

20–30km buffer zone between polities. Their collective war councils mobilized warriors along kinship lines into small armies, capable of outright territorial conquest.

Across cultures, demographic, social, and political variation is always accompanied by idiosyncratic local belief systems, which shape the practice and define the meaning of war. With such enormous variation, there can be no “typical case” of tribal warfare. But many generalizations can be made. One important generalization comes directly from the cases just noted: with some exceptions, tribal warfare relies on consensus and voluntary participation, unlike states, which can command men to war, on pain of death.

Another generalization is that tribal warfare is no game. Many die. Most individual tribal engagements result in few deaths, although heavy losses, even massacres, do occur. Yet since most adult men participate in wars, combat deaths can account for a very high percentage of adult mortality, especially of males, in some cases exceeding 25 percent. The representativeness of such frequently cited high mortality figures is questionable, however, since that kind of data is usually collected in situations where war is especially prominent. Also questionable are available statistics on the frequency of war among tribal peoples. It has been claimed that 95 percent or more of all tribal peoples practice war, but those claims have been challenged as lumping together individual homicides between groups, people who fight only in defense, and people with a long history of peace who at some time in the past were reported at war. Even seemingly neutral data sets can incorporate biases exaggerating how often war occurs. An aged informant may tell a young fieldworker that in his father’s time “people around here were always making war.” That statement is included in an ethnography. Years later, students combing texts for data may code this as

“war every year.” Many independent tribal peoples have been identified that did not wage war in any form, such as the Semai of the Malay Peninsula or Kung San of southern Africa. Still, non-warring societies do remain just a small fraction of the ethnographically known peoples of recent centuries, and even societies without collective inter-group violence may have a high rate of individual homicides.

A long-standing question in western thought concerns whether “man in the state of nature,” usually meaning living outside of state administration, is peaceable or warlike. In theorizing about the evolution of human beings and more complex societies, a related question is whether the “simplest” groups, those with the least political hierarchy, are especially prone to war. Formerly, this question was framed as whether hunter-gatherers made war, since humanity lived by hunting and gathering through its biological and early cultural evolution. Accumulating evidence has shown that many hunter-gatherers have made war, often with high casualties, such as nineteenth-century Native Americans of the Great Plains, or the big settlements of fishing and foraging people of the Brazilian coasts during the age of exploration. But most of these warring foragers can be termed “complex hunter-gatherers,” with unusually productive subsistence systems underwriting large, complex groupings with developed leadership hierarchies. Recent debate has looked for and found relatively peaceful peoples where social organization is flexible, leadership limited, and mobility the norm, regardless of whether a tribe hunts or farms, e.g., the Piaroa and Pemon, shifting horticulturalists of Venezuela.

A similar debate has developed in archaeology over the past two decades. Archaeological investigation of war previously was quite limited, with exceptions for certain regions. Focus on violence, collective or

otherwise, became a major topic of research in the 1990s. One of archaeology's larger debates is about how far back war goes in time. Does archaeological evidence suggest humans have always practiced war, or that war had a beginning? Barack Obama, in his Nobel Peace Prize speech, gave voice to a widely held idea, that "War, in one form or another, appeared with the first man." What is the evidence?

War leaves archaeologically recoverable traces. Bones and burials can indicate violent deaths (e.g., embedded projectile points) and lives (e.g., healed blunt-instrument trauma on the left frontal skull). Settlement remains can be telling indicators. Are villages situated in defensible locations, are they nucleated and walled, have they been destroyed? Artistic renditions of warriors or battle can document war, but such portrayals are rare in early remains. Specialized weapons such as maces, shields, or daggers are certain indicators, but much killing is done with ordinary tools, such as hunting spears. When skeletal and settlement recovery is good for a number of sites, war, if present, should be identifiable. Many, many prehistoric periods and areas display persuasive, often obvious evidence of war.

Based on that plentitude of evidence, some scholars argue that war is present throughout our recoverable past. Others (including this author) observe that while evidence of war is common in later remains, it is notably absent in the earliest records around the world, even where skeletal and settlement recovery is good. In their perspective, war had multiple beginnings, separated by millennia over different parts of the world. Several developmental preconditions, in various combinations, made the onset of war more likely, including larger populations, more sedentary living, social hierarchy, group bounding, high-value trade, and environmental reversals. Whether or not humans always made

war connects with another very controversial question: is war an expression of our biological nature, a legacy of our evolutionary past? Scholarly adversaries continuously argue whether humans have an innate predisposition to attack members of other groups, or simply an evolved capacity for collective aggression when circumstance and culture dictate (below).

WAR AND SOCIETY

Practices of tribal warfare are constrained and conditioned by factors of technology, subsistence, ecology, demography, and geography – just as they are in state societies. Fighting reflects general levels of technological development. In 5000 BCE early farmers in northern European forests slaughtered others using their woodworking adzes. Venezuelan Yanomami shoot enemies with the same curare-covered bamboo points they use to kill tapirs, and the skills of the hunt are employed in an ambush. When there are specialized weapons such as maces, axes, and shields, these coincide with particular styles of combat. Finds from Bronze Age Europe indicate changing regional systems differentially emphasizing bows, daggers, and swords. Cross-culturally, projectile weapons that kill at a distance are more commonly used than hand-to-hand shock weapons, but that depends on the discipline or motivation of warriors for closing with the enemy. The gradual spread of the bow and arrow across North America was followed by more skeletons indicating violent death. The most dramatic weapons diffusion affecting tribal warfare was that of firearms after European contact. From North America to New Guinea, firearms quickly did away with earlier forms of fighting in open lines, and those with better sources of guns and ammunition made great advances against those without.

Basic food production is a fundamental constraint on military practice. Subsistence in Highland New Guinea focuses on pig husbandry. In traditional conflicts, pig thefts may spark violence, payments of pigs are used to recruit allies, size of pig herds affects the readiness to initiate war, and an accumulating tally of post-conflict homicide compensations of pigs – to both allies and enemies – affects when sides are ready to settle. The cultivated open fields of Highland valleys means enemies are seen coming, and hamlets mobilize and fight in lines. In lower, more forested habitats, where hunting rather than pig husbandry provides protein, surprise raids and ambushes are more common. Where livestock are bred, they provide ready-made booty for raiders, as among pastoralists of eastern Africa from earliest descriptions up to today, and tactics are tailored for large-scale rustling. Where animals are ridden, they too can be captured, and also confer much greater mobility. The domestication and military adaptation of horses in central Asia made possible the spread of Indo-European peoples and languages.

Scarcity of critical subsistence resources is often implicated in war, but fighting to directly acquire farm land or hunting territories seems rare. Non-violent options, such as relocation, are more attractive unless other factors make for confrontation. Islands or rich riverine zones may be especially prone to conflict over land because exit is not a possibility. Up to early European contact on the Pacific northwest coast, estuarine areas combining the best resources were contested by less favored people on upland rivers or exposed coasts. In tribal memories of more arid parts of Australia, permanent water holes became foci of bloodshed during extreme droughts. The lure of conquest increases as labor is invested in clearing forests or constructing irrigation channels to

improve the productivity of land, and standing crops or stored food are often targets of attackers.

Sometimes, due to war or disease, it is people who are scarce, and captured enemies are integrated into the captors. Iroquois came to rely on war captives to continuously replenish numbers. Women are seized in war in many war patterns, though this practice varies widely. The Mundurucu, fierce raiders and mercenaries of nineteenth-century Amazonia, lived in villages constructed around female blood-kin. For them, bringing a captured woman back home was not a possibility. Imperial states often encouraged nearby tribals to raid for purchasable slaves. Over broad swaths of North and South America, Europeans regularly paid locals for war captives, thus “rescuing” rather than “enslaving” the victims.

Geography and topography shape war. The distance between enemies, whether they are close neighbors or distant strangers, depends in part on the ability to live off the land, and/or transportation such as horses or boats. Terrain-structured travel routes often channel violent struggles aimed at plundering or taxing trade in high-value goods. Some of the earliest archaeological signs of war come from the trading valleys of Anatolia. As entire regions fill up with people, the ability to exit conflict situations may be less possible, and human-induced resource degradation more likely. A broad region spanning different ecologies can include both large hierarchical polities and scattered, mobile, independent bands. Then wars may not be (only) between “peer polities” of similar character, but between (for instance) mobile pastoralists and settled, socially stratified farmers. Environmental change at regional levels or above can lead to a chain of violent displacements, as in drought-afflicted sixth-century northern Mexico beginning with the collapse of Teotihuacan. Expanding

state systems can precipitate population collisions, as when peoples of the North American eastern woodlands were pushed by European colonizers into the Great Plains, and fought with those who were already there. All these infrastructural variables affect general outlines of tribal warfare, but patterns of social organization get closer to the specifics of actual wars.

Kinship, broadly defined, is the organizational chart of tribal warfare. Socially defined categories and relationships structure potential allies and enemies, and how men are drawn up for combat. Marriage can cut across alignments based on birth or "blood," making alliance more possible, although in the closely knit valleys of New Guinea and elsewhere the saying is "we marry who we fight." Required marriage payments, as in livestock, can create increased demand which in turn promotes raiding, as among the African Meru or Nuer. Where the newly married go to live is key to male mobilization. Patrilocality, where men stay home and brides marry in, fosters "fraternal interest groups," which are cross-culturally associated with more frequent local war and other violence. Matrilocality, where the grooms move in with their wives' family, especially if they move far, is a basis for wider male cooperation. Broader associations of men can raid farther afield, as with the Amazonian Mundurucu.

Unilineal descent, calculated through either male or female ancestral lines, can produce clans or lineages with clear boundaries, which give structure — at least ideologically — to warring groups. "Segmentary patrilineages" provide a basis for successive levels of unity. So among the Tiv of northern Nigeria, brother commonly fights against brother, but brothers join forces against cousins, cousins become solidary against more distant kin, and all unite against strangers. This hierarchical

segmentation both facilitates local discord and provides advantage in war over unrelated people lacking this structure. Opportunistic decisions, however, mean that warrior recruitment rarely follows blood lines mechanically.

One overarching organizational consideration is the impact of European contact on indigenous societies, which typically transforms or destroys prior structures, effectively "primitivizing" indigenous systems of social boundaries and connections. The scattered, loosely structured peoples of the Orinoco region today are a shadow of the elaborate, integrated regional systems that gave rise to legends of El Dorado.

Trade also both joins and separates local groups. Trade in high-value goods may be tense over issues of who gets what, for how much. Military force can directly affect who profits more, or less, from trade. The most important and general illustration of trade impact in tribal warfare is the impact of introduced western manufactured goods, from cloth, to steel tools, to guns. Many cases mistakenly perceived as "traditional" warfare, such as the famously "fierce" Yanomami of Venezuela, on closer examination are seen to revolve around who controls access to western providers, and how generous or stingy they are. Trade was not invented with western contact, but the intrusion of alien traders with highly desired, otherwise unattainable goods can change balanced into exploitative exchange, with attendant tensions. All those factors are apparent from the journals of maritime traders on the seventeenth-century North American northwest coast, dealing with the Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka) chiefs of Vancouver Island.

Another dimension of social structure is the degree of hierarchy built into the system. The development of political leadership is constrained by overall social organization. Where people can vote with their feet,

leaving one local group and joining another, a leader's ability to shape military actions depends on voluntary loyalty, even by his kin. Allegiance is affected by his established reputation and oratorical abilities, as among New Guinea big men. Lineages or ranked clans may elevate individuals to structural positions of status and influence, called chiefs. Because of their general position, such leaders have considerable say in war decisions. But most chiefs exercise influence, rather than power. Military decisions are also shaped by how separate is leadership in war, civil affairs, and religion. War leaders, peace leaders, and spiritual adepts often act as a system of checks and balances.

The limited authority of leaders carries over to combat. In the absence of the power to punish for behavior in battle, fighters are individual warriors, not regimented soldiers. The lack of authority also means that no one can prohibit an angry or ambitious man from launching a war party, and small raids can embroil larger groups. Yet with even the least hierarchical forms of leadership, influence expands during times of war. When life and death are in the balance, people relinquish some autonomy. When war becomes chronic, war leaders may entrench. They give orders to people more or all the time, or at least try to, as seen in the complicated social-psychological maneuvering by a war leader among the Brazilian Kagwahiv. This process has been theorized as a way that war can lead to the evolution of centralized, authoritarian political systems, to maximal chiefdoms, then incipient states.

Leaders, great and small, play an essential role in managing external relations, although when groups are continually dividing and recombining, what is internal or external may be a matter of moment and perspective. Within closely related political fields, leaders often act as mediators, trying to arrest conflict before it turns into tit-for-tat violence. Though mediators have no

overarching authority, opposed parties' self-interest in avoiding the terrible disruption of reciprocal killing can be a force for settlement. Continuing sequences of revenge killings are much rarer than commonly imagined. Heading into war, alliances become vital, to secure flanks and support. Leaders negotiate agreements, often via feasting and sophisticated forms of diplomacy. The strategies a leader advocates usually serve to augment their personal position within their group. As social hierarchy develops into chiefdoms, war may be the deciding arena of status competition. Probably the most common explanation of war among chiefdoms is "chiefly ambitions." Leaders in wartime must carefully navigate both internal and external politics at once. War is not just a policy toward enemies, it is a strategic course emerging out of a dialectic of internal and external political considerations.

For most of the tribal peoples who have been described by outsiders, political and military maneuvering occurs in a historical context that is heavily impacted by nearby states – which is where the outsiders come from. Except for a few unusually well-described situations, e.g. Roman commentaries about surrounding barbarians, most of these state-tribe contacts involve the expanding Euro-American world system since the late fifteenth century. For "remote" tribal people, interacting with colonialists is nothing new. Shavante peoples of central Brazil who made "first contact" with civilization in the 1950s were actually coming out of a self-imposed avoidance in response to centuries of Portuguese predation. The Yanomami, supposedly isolated until 1950, were being captured and sold to Europeans before the American Revolution.

Ancient expansionist states also affected tribal peoples at their peripheries – and *vice versa* – but they were not from an entirely alien cultural universe, and their

expansionism usually had limits. In comparison, post-Colombian state expansions have been massively disruptive, changing nearby tribal peoples from the ground up. War orientations of locals are always reactive to the stance of the powerful intruders. Expanding states typically seek to deal with defined polities, as opposed to the shifting populations, allegiances, and leadership they often encounter. They deliberately encourage formation of "tribes" in the narrow sense of that term, as a bounded set of local groups with sufficient coherence to together wage war or make a pact. Because such "tribalization" is common in areas near but not under the control of expanding states, these peripheries have been called "tribal zones." War in tribal zones is typically transformed in its practice, with new technologies, techniques, objectives, and alliances. Often, post-contact warfare is intensified compared to war at or before contact (seen archaeologically). To some degree, the old image of "bloodthirsty savages" is a reflection of the contact process itself.

War is never merely an expression of underlying structural patterns or political interests. In all societies, war manifests the particular cultural psychologies of the people that wage it. Cross-culturally, frequent warfare is often accompanied by aggressive male personalities. Such personalities are commonly associated with a harsh, sudden switch from mother-centered youth to male-focused manhood, a transition which is often marked by formal rites of passage. Yet there is great variability. Among the Amazonian Mundurucu, men are terrors against non-Mundurucu, yet stifle even mild expressions of hostility back home. When war is built into culture, the warrior is valorized, and social rewards go to those who epitomize those values. Boys are taught martial values from the time they walk, and are trained in the skills needed

for combat, such as life-saving techniques like arrow-dodging. The anticipated manhood is welded to warrior-hood. Among the Ilongot of the Philippines, a man had to take a head to be considered a man.

Women are fully capable of being warriors, as the "Amazon" shock troops of early nineteenth-century Dahomey illustrate, but Dahomey was a state. Among tribals, no case has been documented of major female forces, though in many instances individual women go along with war parties, even fighting. Whether some female participation is acceptable may depend on the kind of warfare waged. When enemies live close by, intermarry, and women move in with their husbands, female loyalties are divided, and the exclusion of women from anything to do with war is absolute. Just their touch may pollute a weapon. Going to war thus can play a big part in general gender relations. Societies with frequent warfare often have an ideology of male supremacy that correspondingly devalues women. Yet, again, there is variability. The Iroquois were as frequent and ferocious in war as any, yet women occupied important social and political roles, including decisions to fight.

Everywhere, belief systems mark off killing in war from murder. Two common belief themes in tribal conflicts are witchcraft and revenge. Belief in a magical attack is an expression of relations between groups that are already poisoned. (Witchcraft also is imagined within local groups, and then, to kill a witch can be seen as a justified execution.) Among the Brazilian Shavante, an accusation of witchcraft represents a deadly rupture within a group, tantamount to a declaration of war, crystalizing building hostility in a literal demonization of the other. Waging shamanic assaults regularly goes right along with physical attacks. Revenge, the felt need for paying back physical or magical attacks, provides moral justification for killing. Revenge-taking,

however, is rarely automatic, but highly responsive to practicalities. Causes for vengeance may be left aside or trumped up according to political circumstances – overlooked when it comes to the powerful or friends, or seized upon against the vulnerable or potential threats. Separately or together, witchcraft and revenge beliefs provide vital and powerful personal motivations for war, along with notions of insult, bravery, and cowardice. When individuals decide for themselves whether to fight, they need powerful rationalization, something that says “they started it.” The emotional push is essential, for even if war is over practical issues, killing must be done to people, and often people who are personally known.

Beyond those particular beliefs, war is built into culturally constructed conceptions of the universe, of the origin world of the ancestors, of what it means to be a person. For those who live with and by war, war seems inherent in existence, natural, non-questionable. Myths are full of war. Religion gives major expression to this. Religion, in general, builds around those areas of life involving danger, uncertainty, injustice, pain, and loss. War is all of that, in spades, and war is usually drenched in religion. The spirits legitimate and encourage those who wage it, and may be warriors themselves. Oaths can bind warriors, and an expected augmentation of spiritual power from killings can be a powerful incentive. Shamans are called upon to foresee the future, and weaken or confuse the enemy, in ways that bear some resemblance to contemporary intelligence agencies. Questionable military decisions may be reinforced, or cancelled out, by the dreams or omens of the spiritually attuned, which are always subject to interpretation.

Ritualization in war is not limited to overtly spiritual practices. Ceremonies commonly attend the departure and return

of warriors, marking them off and setting the business of killing apart from quotidian life. Even in the heat of battle, war does not involve random violence. Attacks on the enemy follow definite rules of proper behavior, defining forms of combat, possibilities of capture, mutilation of bodies, torture, truce, etc. These rules are shared by adversaries in a common cultural universe of war. They often vary by categories of enemy, with greater restrictions regarding those with whom one expects an eventual restoration of peaceful interaction. Acting out violence, what is done and to whom, is not merely instrumental. It is a communication event, a performance with heavy symbolic weight, defining the relationship of perpetrator and victim, both for themselves and all others who constitute a rapt audience. The “anthropology of violence” – a major field in itself, which only partially overlaps with the anthropology of war – focuses on this performative aspect of violent acts and their representations.

Although the absence of overarching authority does make relations between groups a situation of “anarchy” as international relations theorists put it, it is not “anarchistic,” as in chaotic. For all of the foregoing connections and more, the social universe encompassing separate groups is highly structured in myriad ways, from geography to worldviews. War is not just a relationship between two groups, it is the expression of a larger system of related groups, often nested within even higher systems of regional interaction, and the tribal zones of expansionist states.

THEORIZING WAR

Anthropology’s multi-faceted approach to the phenomena of war is accompanied by many different approaches to explaining its occurrence. Although points are hotly

debated, many also can be combined. Four general types of theories are advocated: biological, materialist, structural, and symbolic, each with its own variants.

Biological theories come in three basic types. From ethology, innatist approaches posit some form of inborn propensity which inclines humans, or at least human males, to attack and kill members of other groups. In this view, xenophobic violence and territorial defense express innate tendencies. A second biological approach focuses on collective violence as a means of increasing inclusive fitness – the reproductive success of oneself and genetically close kin. This comes in two variations. Sociobiologists propose that reproductive advantages are direct, in the here-and-now. So it is claimed (and disputed) that among the Venezuelan Yanomami, men who kill in war have more wives and more children than those who have not killed. Alternatively, evolutionary psychologists claim that making war may not further reproductive success of those who wage it today. Rather, war led to reproductive success in our distant evolutionary past. That success selected for computational cognitive programs that make humans choose war under certain eliciting circumstances, even if that choice results in an actual reproductive loss. A third kind of biological theory, and the one that fits most easily with other anthropological approaches, is that humans, and particularly males, have an evolved capacity to act together in violent coalitions against adversaries, when doing so is in their interest, whatever those interests may be. But there is no inborn propensity to kill or to maximize reproductive success. Theories of all three types claim support with reference to violent intergroup behavior by coalitions of male chimpanzees, arguing that the two species share similarly evolved dispositions.

Materialist theories have taken several forms. As the anthropological study of war

first geared up in the 1960s, an influential school of thought argued that war, for all its destructiveness, somehow functioned to maintain a balance between local population numbers and environmental resources. In this ecological view, war led to relocations adjusting people to game or land availability, or to buffer zones where hunted animals replenished, or to reduced population growth, either through casualties or by valorizing male children and thus leading to selective female infanticide. With deeper examination, these adaptive functions were questioned. By the 1980s, cultural ecological approaches to war saw natural resource availability as important, but as only one set of variables, along with cultural, historical, and political factors. Some recent archaeological writings, however, suggest a return to a Malthusian perspective, with war portrayed as the regular result of growing populations pressing on limited resources. Other, current materialist views are not concerned with overall environmental balances. They emphasize tangible strategic objectives, such as obtaining livestock without the work of raising them, or taking captives, or controlling valuable trade routes. Materialists also emphasize the political, that war may not benefit an entire group or society, but only some of its members. For a social and political elite who decide military policy, the political benefits of war can be great, regardless of the costs or benefits to others. Even in relatively egalitarian societies, such leaders as exist can make use of dangerous situations to advance their own agendas, both in relation to outsiders, and among their own people.

Structural theories see war less as a result of war-makers seeking goals, than as a manifestation of social organizational patterns, which themselves have causes other than war. Extensive testing with ethnographic statistics, as found in Yale University's Human Relations Area Files, shows that social



Plate 91 Dani tribesmen attack the Damal tribe during inter-tribal wars in the village of Old Kwaki in Timika, Indonesia. Reuters/Muhammad Yamin STR/Corbis.

structures that bind male blood kin into “fraternal interest groups” (FIGs) are strongly associated with frequent local warfare. In some views, FIGs are sufficient in themselves to explain local warfare. When FIGs are combined with a patrilineal ideology enabling situational unification at progressively higher levels – the segmentary lineage mentioned previously – such societies may be structurally inclined toward predatory expansion. Cross-cultural statistics also show that increasing social hierarchy and political centralization – political evolution – leads to more sophisticated military techniques, which confer an advantage in conflict over less sophisticated adversaries. For chiefs, wars demonstrating their prowess may be required to assume their position in the hierarchy. In a region of large, hierarchical polities, there may develop a “military aristocracy,” whose members require war to

justify their existence and maintain their superordinate position.

Finally, symbolic (or “cultural”) approaches see war first and foremost as an expression of the learned values, meanings, and emotions of a given, particular society, which may be very different from the values, meanings, and emotions of other peoples. The possibility of cross-cultural generalization is thought to be limited because explanations must be put in culturally specific terms. In this view, cultural scripts tell those who grew up learning them what is the right thing to do. For instance, many North American tribes practiced “mourning wars,” the expression of a felt need to kill an enemy in response to a natural death within one’s own group. Cultural symbols that are meaningless to outsiders may embody fundamental understandings, and impel believers to defend, restore, or impose them by violence. Some symbolic approaches

focus on constructed images of self versus other in intergroup relations, which key into one group's rationale for taking lives. Other approaches dovetail with the broader anthropology of violence, in seeing the performative aspect of violence, rather than reproductive or material concerns, as the important thing in itself. War, in this view, is a play being acted out.

THE RETURN OF TRIBAL WARFARE?

In the 1960s, tribal warfare was thought to be nearly extinct. The last practicing examples would fade out with advancing "civilization." No one thinks that today. Today, tribal warfare is in the daily news. The US army is pushing to absorb knowledge of tribal structures as fast as possible. For better or worse, a small fortune (small for the US Defense Department) is backing the incorporation of "ethnographic intelligence" throughout the military, from Human Terrain Teams deployed with battalions in Iraq and Afghanistan, to incredibly sophisticated computer models designed to predict and control conflicts with "indigenous networks." Understanding tribal warfare has become a tactical and strategic imperative, but with evident confusion. For instance, on January 28, 2010, the *New York Times* ran a front page story, "Afghan Tribe, Vowing to Fight Taliban, to Get US Aid in Return." On January 31, its Week in Review had the front page headline, "Afghanistan Is Built On Its Tribes." Yet a recently released white paper produced by the Human Terrain System, titled "My Cousin's Enemy is My Friend," concludes that tribes, in the narrow, politically unified sense – as the Pentagon hopes to use them – are weak to non-existent in Afghanistan. The practice of war by tribal peoples, and even questions of what constitutes a tribe, have moved, or returned, to the center of the world stage.

To evaluate the present and future of tribal fighting, it has to be seen historically, in how the global flow of events has affected war and society among tribal peoples. Leaving aside archaeology, observations about tribal peoples and their wars, both ancient and recent, are provided by people from states, who come in contact with people beyond their rule. These descriptions, of course, carry observer biases about "savages," whether the observer is an early explorer or a contemporary anthropologist. Of even greater importance, the proximity of state systems itself transforms life and warfare around their peripheries. The concept of a "tribal zone" around the edges of states requires historicizing the political structures and military behaviors of non-state peoples. They are not doing "what they always have done."

As noted earlier, European expansion since the fifteenth century has been far more disruptive than the expansion of ancient land empires, because of the vast geographical, biotic, technological, and social gaps entailed. All those dimensions of war and society previously discussed are affected, and sometimes radically transformed. Colonialist demand for products such as furs or cacao created new valuables for local peoples to fight over, and traded them new weapons to fight with. Hostile chiefs have been knocked off their pinnacles and friendly ones raised up. States encouraged tribal groups to make war on each other to gain slaves, further their own imperial rivalries, or just divide to conquer. Yet indigenous peoples and their leaders responded to changing circumstances and intruders' designs with their own agendas. Although tribal warfare may seem to be purely traditional to outside observers, the violence is shaped by the interaction between indigenous elements and much larger situations and dynamics.

Throughout the less developed world today, where older identities retain vitality,

and incorporation within state systems is only partial, people react, organize, and fight using existing lines of mobilization and cleavage. These include lineages, clans, tribes, and chiefly hierarchies, but also layers of ethnicities, “races,” status groups, social classes, geographic regions, village–town–city differentiations, and networks of varying levels and extent. Usually, even the most “traditional” cultural identities have been remade by history, both recent and older. Local alliances and oppositions are entwined with global flows, of money, guns, drugs, diasporas, and information. Recent tribal violence is structured by world-spanning tensions, no longer England versus Spain, or East versus West, but global just the same. All politics may be local, but local actors evaluate the larger conflicts which encompass their immediate concerns, and make salient whatever aspects of identity and opposition that fit into their own plans. Larger powers try to play the locals, and the locals try to play the larger powers. Tribal conflict today is not an anachronism, it is an adaptation of indigenous structures and beliefs to the most current circumstances. No formula of “how tribes work” can explain tribal warfare of the past, today, or the future. But an appreciation of the social complexity of warfare, and of the violent symbiosis of tribe and state, may provide a useful orientation.

SEE ALSO: Anglo-Zulu War (1879); Apache Wars (1850–1886); Aztec warfare; Ethnic cleansing; Iroquois Confederacy; King Philip’s War (1675–1678); Little Big Horn, Battle of (1876); Maya warfare; Mfecane (1815–1840); Nomadic warfare; Pequot War (1636–1637); Queen Anne’s War (1702–1713); Seminole Wars (1817–1818, 1835–1842, 1855–1858); Shaka kaSenzangakhona Zulu (ca. 1787–1828); Sioux Wars (1854–1891); Vikings; Warfare in pre-colonial Africa; Women and war.

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