Warless Societies
and the Origin of War

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To Marshall D. Sahlins

and to the memory of

Roy A. Rappaport and Eric R. Wolf

Preface

This book is an outgrowth of several undergraduate courses—concerned with warfare in unstratified societies—that I have taught at the University of Michigan over a number of years. I have come to believe that a thoughtful examination of the relationships between human nature, war, and the constitution of society can make a significant contribution to a general liberal arts education and that this also is an area of inquiry to which students are naturally drawn. Undergraduates invariably have certain questions in mind. They want to know if there are peaceful societies in which war is lacking and, if so, what such societies are like. They want to know whether war is a primordial and pervasive feature of human existence or a set of practices that arose at a certain time in our prehistoric past. This book is concerned to address these (and other) typical undergraduate questions as well as issues of theoretical concern in anthropology. I have also made an effort to make the discussion readily available to undergraduates whose background is limited to an introductory course in anthropology by defining terms that are not found in an abridged dictionary. Discussion of covariation is phrased so as to be readily intelligible to students lacking a background in statistics. In short, the audience I have in mind includes students (and the general reader who has some acquaintance with anthropology) as well as my professional colleagues. My principal objective is to present a general model for the initial evolution of war that is grounded in the comparative analysis of ethnographic data and then to apply this to the interpretation of pertinent data in the archaeological record. The envisioned audience thus includes colleagues in the anthropological subdisciplines of archaeology and biological anthropology as well as ethnology.

A preliminary formulation of the central argument developed in this book was originally presented in a series of five public departmental lectures at the University of Michigan in 1995. The questions and comments of my colleagues contributed to the further development of these lines of inquiry and interpretation. Michael Fleisher, Bruce Knauft, Joyce Marcus, John O'Shea, Keith Otterbein, Michael Peletz, and Polly Weissner have read earlier or later drafts of all or part of the book and have offered many valuable comments and suggestions. Thanks are also due to my daughter Gwen Kelly for help in compiling the bibliography and securing permissions for illustrations, and to Julie Raybon for typing the manuscript.

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This book is dedicated to three of my teachers (and subsequently my colleagues) at the University of Michigan, whose work has continued to serve as an inspiration over the years.

Contents

Introduction

The central objective of this study is to elucidate the conditions under which warfare is initiated in sociocultural contexts where it did not previously exist, and to decipher the origin of war in that sense. The investigation begins with a delineation of the distinctive characteristics of peaceful (or warless) societies that represent both a prior sociocultural disposition and the context in which primal warfare initially arises and takes shape. This analysis of peaceful societies illuminates certain key features of the transition from warlessness to warfare and provides a basis for the identification of a key transitional case in the ethnographic record. An investigation of this cluster of tribes—and the larger regional system they constitute—provides a basis for ascertaining the causes, conduct, and consequences of nascent and early warfare. This then fleshes out the picture of the origin of war and lays the groundwork for consideration of theoretical issues pertaining to the evolution of war and the coevolution of war and society.

The archaeological record provides very little clear-cut evidence of warfare within hunting and gathering populations prior to the development of agriculture. This has led to the widely held view that warfare was rare to nonexistent until quite late in human history. Roper (1975:304) denotes 7500 to 7000 B.C. as the time period of the "first generally accepted evidence of warfare in the Near East and the world" (with the exception of the Nubian site 117, reported by Wendorf (1968), that is dated to 12,000 to 10,000 B.C.; see Roper 1975:300). By 5000 to 4300 B.C., fortifications, garrisons, and site destruction at a number of locations in the Near East provide archaeological evidence for a more general prevalence of warfare (Roper 1975:323–30). By 3000 B.C., the earliest historical records document frequent warfare between neighboring Sumerian polities over land and water rights and depict the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt by conquest.

The general picture suggested by these data is one in which the origination of war in the Near East (in about 7500 B.C.) goes hand in hand with the widespread development of a sedentary agricultural existence, while the subsequent expansion of armed conflict (beginning in about 5000 B.C.) coincides with population increase, the growth of trade, efforts to control strategic sites along trade routes (Roper 1975:330), and the evolution of

hierarchical and centralized forms of political organization (with the precedence accorded to these demographic, ecological, economic, and political factors being subject to divergent interpretations). The key point for our purposes is that—excepting a single late Upper Paleolithic site—archaeological evidence points to a commencement of warfare that post-dates the development of agriculture. This strongly implies that earlier hunter-gatherer societies were warless and that the Paleolithic (extending from 2,900,000 to 10,000 B.P.) was a time of universal peace. Warfare then originates rather abruptly. This is ultimately attributable to a major economic transformation that broadly alters social conditions and also facilitates the development of new forms of social and political organization. In the relatively brief span of 4,500 years, a global condition of warlessness that had persisted for several million years thus gives way to chronic warfare that arises initially in the Near East and subsequently in other regions where a similar sequence of transformative events is reduplicated.[1]

An understanding of the origin of war that takes universal peace among our Paleolithic forebears as a point of departure is not well-supported by the ethnography of hunter-gatherers recorded during the past century in all corners of the globe. In this respect the archaeological and ethnographic evidence pertinent to the origin of war are at variance. The failure of the ethnographic record to support the archaeologically derived supposition that hunter-gatherers are peaceful is brought to light by Ember (1978). Within a worldwide sample of thirty-one hunter-gatherer societies (with zero reliance on agriculture or herding),

> 64 percent had warfare occurring at least once every two years, 20 percent had warfare somewhat less often, and only 10 percent . . . were rated as having rare or no warfare . . . Even if we exclude equestrian hunters . . . and those with 60 percent or more dependence on fishing . . . , warfare is rare for only 12 percent of the remaining hunter-gatherers. (443)

If frequent warfare is commonplace among hunter-gatherers, then the origin of war very likely predates the development of agriculture and might potentially extend far back into the Paleolithic. Moreover, Ember's data contain the suggestion that the kinds of economic factors considered relevant to the origination of warfare in the Near East may not covary with the presence of frequent warfare among some hunter-gatherers in her sample, and its absence among others. A reliance on fishing characteristically entails a sedentary or semisedentary existence analogous to that necessitated by early agriculture, and there are relatively fixed subsistence resources or productive sites that are vital to the survival of resident populations in both cases. Yet Ember's data (cited above) do not show that

hunter-gatherers with a heavy reliance on fishing are more likely to manifest frequent warfare and less likely to manifest rare to nonexistent warfare than hunter-gatherers lacking such reliance.[2] This casts doubt on the supposition that warfare originated as a result of sedentarism both before and after the origin of agriculture and involved similar processes in both instances. In other words, the ethnographic data are seemingly at variance with the archaeological data with respect to imputed causal factors as well as chronology, and this raises the possibility of an entirely different picture of the origin of war.

What differentiates warless and warlike hunter-gatherers? If the former were mobile and the latter sedentary, then establishing this point of differentiation would also make it possible to formulate a logically coherent and highly plausible interpretation of the origin of war in the sense defined here (i.e., the conditions under which warfare is initiated in a sociocultural context where it did not previously exist). In other words, whatever distinguishes these two classes of hunter-gatherers may quite possibly hold the key to elucidating the origination and early evolution of war. An inquiry conducted along these lines is pursued in chapter 2, following a consideration of the characteristics of peaceful societies more generally. An examination of earlier studies of peaceful societies provides important clues that point toward the sociocultural domains in which the distinctive and differentiating features of warless and warlike societies may be found—domains as potentially varied as economic organization on one hand, and child-rearing practices on the other.

Defining war and delineating the boundaries between war and other partially similar phenomena raise important issues with regard to both classifying hunter-gatherer societies in terms of the presence and frequency of warfare and ascertaining the point in a sequence of conflictual events at which war has begun. Does war of the variety manifested by hunter-gatherers represent a point on a continuum that differs only incrementally from other forms of lethal violence? Or, alternatively, does the transition to war constitute a watershed event that institutes practices governed by a distinctively different logic? I will argue that the latter is the case and that there is a turning point in human history (or prehistory) marked by the origin of war.

There are also transitional cases among ethnographically described hunter-gatherers and hunter-horticulturalists that are very instructive. They allow us to hear the words of social actors in situations of conflict that have reached a critical juncture. I will introduce this testimony after presenting the definitional features to which it pertains.

War entails armed conflict that is collectively carried out. It differs from other (often antecedent) forms of conflict such as disputes and altercations by the fact that participants employ deadly weapons with deadly

force. One of the key features of war is that the deaths of other persons are envisioned in advance and this envisioning is encoded in the purposeful act of taking up lethal weapons.

War is an organized activity that requires advanced planning. The most elementary form of warfare is a raid (or type of raid) in which a small group of men endeavor to enter enemy territory undetected in order to ambush and kill an unsuspecting isolated individual, and to then withdraw rapidly without suffering any casualties. Achieving the essential element of surprise precludes undertaking such a raid as an immediate and spontaneous expression of anger in response to whatever events precipitated the conflict. This tactical requirement (of surprise) enforces protracted intervals between engagements and thus ensures that emotions have cooled well before a raid commences, and that a considered decision to elect this course of action has been collectively made through discussion among potential participants. Moreover, undertaking even the most elemental raid requires setting a date and time; planning a route, an objective, and a pattern of deployment; and (potentially) designating a scout, point, and individual to cover the rear, or otherwise allocating specialized roles among participants. War entails a division of labor that goes beyond that based on age and gender alone. The inevitable intervals between acts of primitive war provide scope for rational calculation, planning, organization, and the foregrounding of the predominantly instrumental character of war. This instrumentality contrasts with spontaneous forms of collective violence such as brawls and riots, where the intentionality centers on expressing anger rather than causing previously envisioned deaths to fulfill a purpose (although deaths may occur during spontaneous violence and the purposes of a raid may encompass fulfillment of the deferred gratification of emotionally satisfying revenge).

War also differs from other forms of violent conflict in that the use of deadly force is seen as entirely legitimate by the collectivity that resorts to arms. The deaths of other persons are not only envisioned in advance but are also believed to be both morally appropriate and justified by circumstances or prior events. The ancient principle of lex talionis—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—is an example of a concise statement of event-based moral justification for the legitimate use of force.

Moral appropriateness is integral to the collective nature of the activity of making war. Social actors are explicitly recruited to the project of causing the deaths of other persons on the grounds that it is proper and legitimate to do so. War is collectively sanctioned, and participation is laudable. Thus the men of a local group who take part in a retaliatory raid on their neighbors are esteemed by their coresidents and earn prestige.

"Murder" (or homicide) contrasts with war in that the killing is negatively valued by the social collectivity that constitutes the killer's (or

killers') reference group. Murder is culturally disapproved, stigmatizing rather than prestigious, and falls somewhere along an evaluative scale that extends from regrettable to heinous, depending on the circumstances. Such illegitimate killing is a criminal act (by definition) and is characteristically regarded as warranting retribution. This often takes the form of the death penalty (or capital punishment), defined as the appropriate killing of an individual whose criminal responsibility has been established in advance.[3] Since the kinds of societies with which we are concerned lack judicial and penal institutions, the execution of a murderer is carried out by the homicide victim's aggrieved next of kin and his supporters. The kin and coresidents of the murderer often render tacit assistance by withholding support and thus facilitating the execution. A recidivist murderer (including the witch and sorcerer who kills by supernatural means) may even be killed by his or her own kinsmen.[4]

There are many similarities between war and capital punishment when the latter is carried out by the aggrieved next of kin and his supporters. In both cases the collective use of deadly force is considered to be morally appropriate, justified, and legitimate so that participation constitutes an honorable fulfillment of civic duty. From the standpoint of observable behavior the two may also appear very much alike: a party of armed men employs the element of surprise in order to kill an individual caught unawares. However, there is one very critical difference between capital punishment and war: the death penalty is only applicable to a specific individual, the perpetrator of a prior criminal homicide. In war the killing of any member of the enemy group (or any of a class of members such as adult males) is considered legitimate. War (including feud) is grounded in application of the principle of *social substitutability* and is thus governed by a distinctive logic that is entirely foreign to murder, duel, and capital punishment.[5]

In war and feud, the killing of an individual is perceived as an injury to his or her group. The same logic engenders the companion concept of holding a group responsible, so that any member of the killer's collectivity is a legitimate target for retaliatory blood vengeance (rather than the specific killer alone). The principle that one group member is substitutable for another in these contexts underwrites the interrelated concepts of injury to the group, group responsibility for the infliction of injury, and group liability with respect to retribution. War is thus cognitively and conceptually (as well as behaviorally) between groups. It is consequently critical that war be analyzed as meaningfully entailed social action (intelligible from the actor's point of view) rather than simply in behavioral terms.

While capital punishment removes a wrongdoer whose responsibility for causing the death of another person has been established, war and feud do not excise killers from society but instead target other individuals who

are innocent of direct responsibility for prior deaths. "In societies characterized by feuding, blood revenge is often taken by a small group of men who lie in ambush and kill an unsuspecting relative of the man whose act of homicide is being avenged. The victim is usually alone and has little chance of escape" (Otterbein 1968:279). It is important to notice that such blood vengeance entails a radical emotional displacement absent in capital punishment. In the latter case the anger a man feels toward the individual who slew his brother is directly expressed. But in war and feud the anger is redirected to an entirely different individual, and one who is sufficiently peripheral to be unsuspecting. Meanwhile, the actual killer of one's brother lives on. Yet such vengeance is experienced as emotionally gratifying.

This displacement of vengeance also requires a more complex scheme of moral legitimation. The logic of "an eye for an eye" is a straightforward logic of first-order identity, not one of substitution. In itself, it would provide no warrant for the type of blood vengeance described above but would rather nominate the perpetrator of the initial homicide for like treatment. Substantial cultural elaboration is required to make the killing of an unsuspecting and uninvolved individual "count" as reciprocity for an earlier death, and to make it morally appropriate as well as emotionally gratifying and socially meaningful. The meaning system of war (and feud) is quite distinct from the meaning system of the death penalty, and the movement from the latter to the former constitutes a jump in level with respect to elaboration of the group concept. This entails not only an ideology of the group, but also the kind of internalization of a group identity illustrated by the statement "I *am* an American" (as opposed to "I live in America" or even "I am a citizen of the United States of America"). The substitution of one person's death for another, a substitution that is central to war and feud, is rendered intelligible by elucidating these underlying concepts.

Although war entails lethal violence between individuals who reside in separate social groups, not all acts of intergroup lethal violence exhibit the full ensemble of distinctive features that characterize war. Distinguishing war as a specific form of intergroup lethal violence is essential to elucidating the initial evolution of war in that the distinctions provide both a means of recognizing antecedent forms of collective violence and a point of departure for identifying critical variables in the developmental process that pertain to the emergence of the concepts of injury to the group, group responsibility for counteraction, and group member liability to retribution.

The boundary between war (including feud) and other similar phenomena such as collective execution can thus be very precisely specified in terms of the presence or absence of a calculus of social substitutability (see

table 1). The emergence of this calculus and its companion concepts is clearly a watershed event in human history in that it creates the preconditions for a more general deployment of lethal violence as *an instrument of the social group* and a legitimate means for the attainment of group objectives and interests. The origin of war thus brings into being an instrument of power that has the latent potential to transform society. This marks the beginning of a coevolution of war and society that shapes the future course of sociocultural development.

The ethnography of the Gebusi provides accounts of social conflicts that aptly illustrate the important conceptual difference between collective execution and war. In 1986 the Gebusi were a cultural/linguistic group numbering about 450 persons who lived in small longhouse communities of close kin and affines (averaging 27 residents) scattered across a 65-square-mile territory within the lowland tropical rain forest of south-central Papua New Guinea, in the watershed of the Strickland River (Knauft 1985:16–31; 1987:459). The Gebusi are hunter-horticulturalists who rely on hunting, foraging, processing wild sago palms, and the shifting cultivation of bananas (as staple crop). Social conflict among the Gebusi is largely a product of sorcery attributions, and these eventuate in a substantial incidence of executions (Knauft 1985:113–56). Deaths that follow from illness are believed to be due to sorcery. Typically the sorcery suspect is identified by an entranced spirit medium during the illness, and the alleged sorcerer is entreated to withdraw his or her sorcery so the ill individual can recover (100–101). When a sick person subsequently dies, it is evident that the source of illness was not withdrawn. The spirit medium then conducts a spirit inquest that confirms the guilt of the alleged sorcerer. This is typically followed by several types of divination (including corpse divination in which the deceased is shaken by the suspect and the corpse may emit signs taken to confirm guilt; see Knauft 1985:38–39).

TABLE 1. Distinguishing Attributes of Capital Punishment, Feud, and War

	Capital Punishment	Feud and War
1. Collective armed conflict	variable	+
2. Collectively sanctioned by participants' community	+	+
3. Morally justified in participants' viewpoint	+	+
4. Participants esteemed by others of their collectivity	+	+
5. Entails organized, planned, and premeditated attack(s)	+	+
6. Serves identifiable instrumental objectives (e.g., defense, revenge, excision, appropriation)	+	+
7. Social substitution governs the targeting of individuals for lethal violence	–	+

The spirit inquest and divinations establish criminal responsibility for a death. This provides a warrant for execution of the guilty sorcerer that the aggrieved kin of the deceased may or may not carry out (in all, 56 of 211 alleged sorcerers in Knauft's sample were killed; see Knauft 1985:124–25). If the next of kin are able to elicit sufficient support for an execution, an all-night séance is held to solidify a consensus of justifiable anger prior to a planned ambush of the sorcerer.

> The spirits [of the entranced medium] roundly condemn the suspect as an irremediable sorcerer and a continuing threat to the community. The audience becomes caught up in escalating rounds of whooping, hollering, and joking, amid which the medium's spirits may present plans for the attack. At dawn, bonded in vitality and without sleep, the men go out to stage the ambush. In some cases they have been aided by complicity among the suspect's close kinsmen, but even when this is not the case, only the alleged sorcerer is attacked, leaving his or her kinsmen unharmed. Some resistance may be encountered from the suspect's agnates and other close kinsmen. Seeing that they are outnumbered, however, they almost invariably flee, leaving the alleged sorcerer to his or her fate. The suspect is shot with arrows or clubbed to death, then butchered and taken in net bags back to the settlement to be cooked and eaten. (102)

Communal consumption of the butchered sorcerer entails communal acceptance of the moral appropriateness of the execution and is also regarded as a component of just retribution.

When a sorcery execution party encounters resistance, fighting may ensue that resembles warfare. However, the shouted comments of the parties on both sides make it clear that the concept of killing a member of the sorcerer's group in lieu of the sorcerer himself (or herself) is never entertained. The following case is particularly instructive with regard to this point (the account of the execution is provided by the sister's son [ZS] of the slain sorcerer, who is reciprocally the mother's brother [MB] of the informant).

> A man had been accused of sorcery and suspected that there might be an attempt on his life. He therefore sent word out to all his kinsmen, some of whom came to stay with him in a show of support. In the evening, however, a group of visitors that included the accuser entered the village with the ostensible reason of requesting a curing séance for the accuser's sore foot. Since the visiting party was large, the suspect and his supporters did not dare turn them away; they welcomed and shook hands with the visitors, sitting down all together on the longhouse

porch. After talking a while, the accuser suddenly jumped up and grabbed a large piece of firewood; others among the visitors held the suspect and restrained his kinsmen. The suspect was clubbed over the head and killed. His kinsmen broke free and, obtaining their bows and arrows, staged a battle against the visitors outside the longhouse. Though one or two people received minor wounds, the fight was quickly over. As my informant (the ZS of the slain man) stated, "It was getting dark and we could not see to fight. The women and the wife of my MB [the wife of the man killed] shouted to us, 'Don't let anyone else die; they came to shoot my husband; now that he's dead, let that be enough!' The visitors shouted, 'We didn't come to shoot at you!' And so we stopped shooting." (Knauft 1985:123)

The events described here culminate in an armed conflict between men of two communities that has all the observable characteristics of warfare except group liability for the infliction of injury by a group member. Although the execution party gains a momentary advantage over the accused sorcerer's kin and coresidents, they utilize this only to *restrain* the sorcerer's supporters, not to dispatch them. Only the sorcerer himself is killed. The kin of the executed sorcerer then initiate an exchange of arrows as an expression of their anger and sorrow at their loss. This expressive—rather than instrumental—violence is a short-lived outburst. The expressive character of these acts is evident from the fact that there is no subsequent retaliation by the executed sorcerer's kin. They do not seek to take vengeance upon the executioner and/or his supporters at a later date (as would be characteristic of war). This is due to the fact that the slain sorcerer's kin ultimately accept the legitimacy of such executions knowing that the sorcerer's criminal responsibility for a death has been established in advance by the conventional equivalent of "due process," that is, a spirit inquest and divination.

This acceptance of the execution is verbally expressed by the women of the community, and especially by the slain sorcerer's wife, who speaks as one of the potentially aggrieved next of kin. She acknowledges the selectivity of the execution and essentially expresses the view that there is no injury to the group. Moreover, she explicitly rejects a payback. Although one might well expect her to be one of the persons most likely to cry out for blood vengeance, she instead says "don't let anyone else die." The members of the execution party then affirm that they have no quarrel with the slain sorcerer's community or kinsmen, and the exchange of arrows ends.

The execution party then withdraws, and there are no further hostilities between these two communities. In all such instances this is invariably the case. Even though the close agnatic kin of an executed sorcerer sometimes do not accept the validity of the precipitating sorcery attribution, and may consequently desire revenge for what they regard as a miscarriage

of justice, this desire remains unrealized due to "the near-impossible task of organizing collective retaliation against men from another community" (Knauft 1985:130).[6]

The Gebusi collective armed conflict described here is not war but rather the administration of capital punishment by a sorcery victim's aggrieved next of kin and his supporters (cf. Otterbein 1987:484). It is distinguishable from war because only the perpetrator of a crime is targeted for killing. The calculus of social substitution that is the hallmark of war is clearly absent. The Gebusi case studies of sorcerer executions presented by Knauft (1985) thus exemplify the boundary between war and phenomena that are partially similar (particularly from a strictly behavioral perspective). Delineating this boundary makes it possible to rigorously discriminate between warless societies and those in which warfare is present. This, in turn, lays the groundwork for an analysis of the characteristics of warless (or peaceful) societies and for pinpointing the features that differentiate these from societies characterized by frequent warfare.[7]