Chapter 20

Human Trophy Taking in the South American Gran Chaco

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HUMAN TROPHY TAKING IN THE SOUTH AMERICAN GRAN CHACO

Many South American indigenous groups practiced the taking and displaying of human body parts as trophies, and this custom extended into the Gran Chaco (Steward and Faron 1959:305). The primary focus of this chapter is the documentation of scalpning among the Chacoan hunter-gatherers. Additionally, the practice of head hunting in the region along with the role that women played in the victory celebrations associated with the acquisition of such trophies will be reported.

Based mostly on ethnographic data, this discussion describes endemic warfare and human trophy taking in the Pilcomayo River area from the period beginning roughly in the 1870s through the 1930s. This work also reports on how the ritual manipulation of human trophies affected the status of warriors who obtained such items in combat. This study concludes by pointing out the relationship between the warlike hunter-gatherers of western Chaco and the notion of “social substitution” (Kelly 2000).

While the Swedish ethnographer Erland Nordenskiöld (1919:184) viewed the occurrence of scalpning as a postcontact phenomenon, ethnohistorical evidence suggests that it existed prior to the arrival of Europeans as the acquisition of human trophies by native Chacoans was documented by explorers in the late sixteenth century.¹

At the time of first contact, nomadic band societies of western Chaco were reported to have engaged in endemic warfare. This situation created the need for young males to be trained in fighting and then to be formally initiated as warriors. Of course, not every young man had the fortitude and valor to kill and take a trophy during a raid. Only those young men who successfully obtained such
items were considered to be particularly courageous, and were thus rewarded with prestige and allowed to keep the spoils of war that included booty as well as human trophies. Band leaders usually were men with reputations for courage in battle, but they also had to show other important characteristics such as intelligence, charisma, generosity, and hunting prowess.

OVERVIEW OF ETHNOHISTORICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC SOURCES OF DATA FOR TROPHY TAKING IN THE GRAN CHACO

As previously mentioned, early explorers (dating to the sixteenth century) as well as later ethnographers documented the practice of trophy taking in the region and also collected human trophies from local groups. (See Figure 20.1)

For example, in 1875, the Italian traveler Giacomo Pelleschi (1886) collected trophy heads and scalps of fallen Toba warriors who had been killed by the Wichí. Also, the French explorer Arthur Thouar, a member of the first Bolivian military expedition that in 1883 traversed “the unexplored, ill-famed and terrifying regions along the Pilcomayo” (Thouar 1980:13), obtained the head of a Toba warrior killed during battle, with the purpose of donating it to the Museum of Trocadéro, France.² In 1909, Nordenskiöld (1919:184) acquired the scalp of a Nivaklé man from the

Figure 20.1. Map of the Gran Chaco with the location of the western Toba and neighboring indigenous groups in the 1930s.
Wíchí as well as the scalp of a Toba man killed by the Nivaklé. In particular, the hunting and gathering groups of the Pilcomayo River area engaged in this practice until the early twentieth century. Rafael Karsten, who visited the area in 1911–1912, reported that in those days some indigenous peoples still obtained and displayed heads and scalps.

The German ethnographer Hans Krieg (1980:12) traveled along the Pilcomayo River in 1925–1926 and collected for the Linden Museum of Stuttgart. He brought back two Nivaklé scalps obtained from the Pilagá—reproduced in Plate XIV 111.45 of the original edition of Krieg's picture atlas.

According to the French ethnographer Pierre Clastres (1981:236), the indigenous warriors of the Pilcomayo River may have continued the practice of obtaining trophy heads and scalps until the early 1940s. In 1966, Clastres unsuccessfully tried to purchase Toba scalps from the Nivaclé of the Paraguayan Chaco among whom he was conducting fieldwork at that time.

While conducting anthropological fieldwork in the Argentine Chaco in the 1990s, I became interested in the topic of warfare and the practice of taking of human trophies, so I interviewed elders from the western Toba group of the Pilcomayo River. They enjoyed reminiscing about the past and were eager to share information about the festivities that were held in celebration of successful scalping raids that took place during their parents' generation.

WESTERN CHACO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

As recently as the 1870s, the land north and south of the Upper Pilcomayo River between latitudes 23°15' and 23°35' South was inhabited almost exclusively by hunter-gatherer societies. The expansion of Europeans into the region had drastically reduced the territorial ranges of the Toba and Pilagá (Guaycurú linguistic family), and the Chorote, Wíchí, and Nivaclé (Matako-Maká linguistic family), pressuring their relocation into what European settlers would consider as less desirable or marginal areas. While other hunter-gatherer bands living in eastern Chaco had adopted the horse (introduced by European colonists in the late sixteenth century) and had embraced an equestrian-foraging way of life, most of the hunter-gatherers in the Pilcomayo River area of western Chaco had remained nonequestrian foragers. They were primarily endurance walkers and runners. These "foot foragers" would eventually become familiar with horses, but at the time of the initial incursions of cattle ranchers into their territory circa the 1870s, these foot nomads generally owned few if any domesticated animals.

Each of the Chacoan ethnic and linguistic groups—referred to as "tribes" by some authors—was comprised of bands that spoke mutually intelligible variants of the same language and considered each other related by social ties and cultural affinities. At different times and under varied circumstances, as long as we have published records of their activities, Chacoan linguistic-ethnic groups have made alliances, fought, and traded with each other one.
In the late 1800s, the home ranges trekked by Chacoan linguistic-ethnic groups were separated by noninhabited buffer zones (Mendoza 2003). In 1911, the ethnographer Rafael Karsten (1932:103) observed: "These limits are commonly recognized, and trespassing, when it is willfully done, may become cause of war." Krieg reported that these bands would normally avoid trespassing territorial boundaries, although the Toba and the Pilagá of the Pilcomayo River often tried to enlarge their hunting grounds by engaging in combat, mostly over the ownership of fishing locations (Krieg 1980:17–18).

Chacoan ethnic groups that spoke variants of the same language often formed alliances with one another in order to attack other groups (Nordenskiöld 1930). For example, the Toba and the Pilagá defined the neighboring ethnic groups that spoke non-Guaycurú languages as "scalpables" (Sterpin 1993). Toba bands were the traditional enemies of the Wichí and Nivaclé bands; nevertheless language and ethnicity were not the only markers to that demarcated rivalries. Some Wichí bands from the Upper Pilcomayo fought with other neighboring Wichí. Among the Pilcomayo River groups, only the Wichí would be hostile to other bands that spoke variants of the same language, a behavior consistent with the restricted manner by which they classified kin (Fock 1963).

At times, some bands would seek to forge alliances with even some of their most invertebrate adversaries. They would invite them to participate drinking feasts and in playing a stickball game that resembled hockey (which was a form of ritualized war), or to trade garden products and crafts, such as textiles made of wool and natural fibers, and tobacco pipes. In the 1990s, I recorded various accounts from Toba elders of just such alliance-forming events involving feasting and the playing of "hockey" that were held with their traditional enemies, the Nivaclé and the Wichí. Bands also formed alliances to combat settlers as well as the Argentine, Bolivian, and Paraguayan armies.

WARFARE IN THE WESTERN CHACO

In the western Chaco, warfare was a collective enterprise against any other group that was considered to be either an established enemy or one that posed a potential threat. Various authors have cited competition over subsistence resources, a desire to retaliate a previous raid, or the desire to obtain various forms of booty as well as human trophies as common causes of aboriginal warfare. I suspect that colonial expansion—of not only European settlers but also of other indigenous groups that were displaced by Europeans from their home ranges (such as the Tupi-Guarani), fueled the violent competition over food resources among Chacoan groups.

According to Karsten (1932:103), deep-seated and long-standing quarrels often underlie many ongoing blood feuds, especially those stemming from the infringement of one band's territory by another group. Foraging, fishing, or pasturing the flocks in the ranges habitually trekked by another group without obtaining
permission from the local band was considered trespassing and it could result in hostilities that, in turn, could unleash a blood feud.

In band societies, the killing and or scalping of someone during a conflict was considered as an affront to the victim's local group. The deceased's relatives could target any member of the killer's band (not just the individual who did the actual killing) for retaliatory blood revenge. For example, a family of settlers could be targeted for revenge in response to trespassing by unrelated settlers in another area. Such an act of retaliation implied the notion of group responsibility for the infliction of damage and of group liability in the retribution.

Niels Fock (1974:225) recorded that if, say, a man from one Wichi band had killed someone from another Wichi band, the killer could escape retaliation from the victim's family by offering the aggrieved party a scalp taken from a third Wichi band altogether as blood payment. The fact that the victim's relatives were willing to accept as blood payment scalps taken from a third party who in no way had been involved in the initial raid clearly indicates that the notion of "social substitution" (Kelly 2000) was firmly established among these Chacoans.

WARRIOR INITIATION

The Toba, Pilagá, Nivaclé, Wichi, and the Chorote were societies that subjected young men to rites of passage designed to prepare them for the hardships of war.

For example, the ancient Guaycurú would pull off the hair of a newborn male child, leaving only enough to form a small crest of hair on top of the head and two thin circles around it. When a boy was 16–17 years old, he would undergo initiation to become a warrior. During the ritual, an older warrior would pull the remaining hair out from one of the circles on the youth's head. He then would scarify the body of the novice with a sharp bone and then smear the initiate's head with his own blood. Then, the older man would seize the hair-crest in the middle of the head and would wrap it in a net bag. Lastly, the body of the novice would be smeared with clay. A few years later, when the young man was about 20 years old, he would be considered a warrior, and on that occasion the whole crest of hair was cut off and the remaining circle of hair was cut short. The young warrior would then proceed to paint himself from head to toe. He would tie a red band around his head, and would don feather ornaments. According to Karsten (1932:106), the red band tied around the warrior's head, the red paint or clay applied to his body, and the blood smeared on the warrior's hair served to protect him from harmful supernatural forces.

After completing their initiation, these young men were believed to possess great physical as well as spiritual strength. They were expected to fight not only against visible earthly enemies but also to combat malevolent supernatural forces as well. In fact, a great deal of the emphasis of the initiation was aimed primarily at hardening them against spiritual attack (Karsten 1932:106).
At the beginning of the twentieth century, experienced warriors in the hunter-gatherer bands of the western Chaco would prepare initiates—through various activities designed to increase their physical endurance, mental aptitude and spiritual abilities.

Physical stamina was promoted, for example, by challenging the young men to run barefooted on hot sand at mid-day, sometimes carrying heavy loads. During communal gatherings, the best runners from each band would challenge one another to race for a prize.

Mental acuity was promoted, for example, by making the novices take the lead in organizing and carrying out hunting expeditions. Spiritual growth was promoted by encouraging them, through isolation and fasting, to have mystical encounters with spiritual beings while in the bush. In this manner, the young warriors would be physically, mentally and supernaturally well equipped to battle on behalf of their people in a land that was being increasingly encroached on by settlers.

WEAPONS

At the turn of the twentieth century, the weapons employed by Chacoan warriors consisted of bows and arrows along with hard wood clubs. Those who fought on horseback also carried long lances. They also used knives made from sharp-edged cane and knives fashioned from the jaws the palometa fish, which have very sharp teeth. This latter type of weapons was documented among the Chorote (von Rosen 1924:79, 127).

For protection, Chacoans employed body armor “shirts” made from tightly woven plant fibers which provided protection down to the waist—about 56 centimeters in length. According to von Rosen, “These shirts of caraguatá fiber string are exceedingly well manufactured, and undoubtedly form a good protection against the Chaco Indians’ arrows, which are usually wooden-pointed. Arrows with rod-shaped, iron wire points, or with leaf-like edged iron heads, on the other hand, would probably pierce even the thickest and most closely knitted caraguatá shirt. The shoulder straps in these mail shirts are knitted considerably thinner and less closely than the rest of a shirt and this is only natural, as the function of the straps is to suspend the shirt, and not to give protection against arrows” (von Rosen 1924:53). Underneath such armor, warriors wore short leather “jackets” made from the skins of either jaguars or anteaters and sometimes even cowhide (Arnott 1934:494; Karsten 1923:36; 1932:104).\(^4\)

WARRIOR STATUS, TROPHY TAKING, AND LEADERSHIP

It is important to note that not all men were successful in obtaining scalps and only those who had done so were considered to be “true warriors.” It is no
accident that in the past, band leaders were men who had killed in battle and who could display heads and scalps taken in battle during victory celebrations. Thus, there was a clear and unambiguous relationship between sociopolitical leadership and military ability in Chacoan society.

The fortitude or "courage" that Chacoans associated with the ability to raid successfully and take trophies was attributed to certain mystical powers that only some individuals were believed to possess. The reason for this belief was that the killing of someone was considered to be an extremely dangerous act, as the assassin would become polluted by the victim's blood. Therefore, even after a battle had taken place, an enemy's undefeated and avenging spirit posed a threat to the man who had defeated him in combat. See below for how these vengeful spirits were neutralized.

Chacoan warriors gained prestige as well as supernatural power from the scalps of their enemies for they held that these items contained the souls of defeated enemies. Therefore, the Nivaclé believed that a warrior who owned a scalp could actually converse with the victim's soul and would be granted spiritual advice. Scalps would also convey various magical chants, which allowed for deeper communication between the warrior and the soul of his former enemy, for his former rival in life would become his spiritual ally after death. Their new relationship resembled the relationship between a shaman and his spirit guide (Renshaw 2002:235–236). In fact, Chacoans attributed success in both warfare and hunting to the supernatural aid rendered by their "allies."5

The possession and display of a number of human trophies from different victims provided unquestionable evidence of a warrior's courage and supernatural power. Scalps provided tangible proof that a warrior had prevailed over an enemy and therefore, by extension, the warrior's band had also prevailed. The warrior's victory augmented his spiritual power as it allowed him to "incorporate" the victim's spirit which would then grant the victor aid in time of need.

RAIDING FOR BOOTY, CAPTIVES AND HUMAN TROPHIES

During the dry season (called the "hungry season") that occurs from the months of May to October, individuals from different bands would gather together to play "hockey," to dance, and to drink fermented beverages made of honey. During these festivities, war parties were organized against enemy groups. According to Toba informants, women at these gatherings would encourage their husbands to go raid and pillage their enemies, in part because these females often overestimated the amount of food available in their enemy's villages during the season of scarcity. These women presumed that their neighboring enemies were enjoying an abundance of food while their own children were going hungry. Also, the ideal time to engage in raiding activities was during the dry season as war parties could travel faster and could cover longer distances than during the wet season (Mendoza 2002:129).
PREPARING FOR A RAID

Raid attacks were organized, well thought out strategies. When the Toba planned an attack on another group, old men and warriors from allied bands gathered together at the campsite of the organizing group. Raids were designed to surprise the enemy in their villages. Warriors hoped to return with booty, captives, and human trophies. Abducted women and children would be incorporated to the captor's band (Arnott 1934:496; Métraux 1980:47).

Preparation for a war expedition, like every other dangerous undertaking in life, included the practice of rituals and the observance of various taboos in order to ensure a positive outcome and to neutralize any malevolent supernatural forces. Shamans would be called upon to provide supernatural protection for the attackers, and afterwards the men would drink a fermented beverage. They would then perform war dances in anticipation of their upcoming victory.

The Toba would seek omens indicating the outcome of the ensuing battle. Before setting off for war, the raiding party would divide itself into two groups with each side shooting arrows straight up into the sky, and depending on where the arrows landed, thus would go the battle. According to Kedok, “If one of the groups shot towards the Nivacle side, it was a sign that the Toba would win, but if they shot in the other direction, the portent was not favorable” (Métraux 1980:45).

Before heading off to war, men were admonished not to consume the heads of any animal they may kill throughout the course of the raid in order to prevent being hit in the head by the enemy’s arrows, and neither were they to touch the paws of any killed animal; otherwise they would fall to the ground during the fight.

Additionally, raiders were told to avoid eating fat because this would cause them to become lethargic and sweaty during an attack and also to avoid smoking tobacco as this would make them grow weary. Furthermore, Toba warriors practiced sexual abstinence before embarking upon a raid. “Whoever wanted to return from the campaign without wounds was obliged to observe strict continence, and even avoid crossing his legs with those of his wife; that is why, before going to war, the men slept apart from their wives” (Métraux 1980:45).

According to Kedok, “There were women who clung to their husbands and said: ‘Stay here, do not go, the enemy will kill you.’ The husband replied: ‘Why do you say this to me? If you speak thus, the Nivacle will surely kill me. It would be better if you asked me to bring a little Nivaklé boy or girl or simply a sheep. That gives a man courage’” (Métraux 1980:46).

Before a raid, some men were sent out as spies in order to obtain intelligence on the daily activities of the enemy. Typically, the Toba attacked at night—preferably under a full moon, whereas the Pilagá and the Wichí always assaulted their enemies at daybreak.

During the course of a raid, the wife of a Toba warrior was not allowed to spin wool or to rub their thigh with ashes while working strands of caraguata fiber
on their legs, because this would cause her husband to run slowly in battle and this could result in his death. Another taboo concerned menstruation. If a woman was menstruating while her husband was on a raid, she was allowed to sit only on mats made from hide; otherwise her husband would become lethargic during the fight.

In order to increase their strength and ferocity, members of a war party would pierce themselves with peccary bones as they traveled toward enemy territory. They would pierce their arms and chest with charata bird bones in order to be alert during the early hours of the morning, and they would also pierce themselves in the legs so as to run faster. Warriors would pierce themselves with owl bones in order to be able to see and fight in the dark. Also, piercing themselves with jaguar bones was believed to make men particularly strong (Arnott 1934:494).

Chacoan warriors wore feather ornaments around their ankles and arms into battle. They also wore headbands decorated with feathers and sometimes with bundles made from the hair of fallen enemies. “They paint their bodies black and red, and adorn themselves with plumes and other ornaments; this is, at least partly, done as a preparation for going to fight not only earthly enemies, but also supernatural powers,” according to the Swedish ethnographer Eric von Rosen (1924:103), who explored the Upper Pilcomayo River in 1901–1902.

Before leaving on a raid, the Toba and Pilagá warriors would do the “dance of courage,” which consisted of wrestling and giving each other blows. These “dances” were then imitated by the children, much to the delight of their elders (Arnott 1934:498; Métraux (1980:45).

RAIDING STRATEGIES

According to Karsten, raiders always proceeded into battle with the utmost caution in the hopes of suffering as little loss of life as possible. Rarely fighting as a compact single unit, instead they typically approached the unsuspecting enemy in a stealthy and dispersed fashion (1932:106). Silently, they would surround the targeted enemy village, communicating with each other by imitating the calls of nocturnal animals or by blowing certain wooden whistles that mimicked the calls of certain birds known to be active only at night (Arnott 1934:494). When the signal was given, the raiders would descend upon the unsuspecting inhabitants and would kill anyone they found unprotected. The warriors would not take breast-feeding babies, and they would be especially careful to leave the babies in a location where they could be found.

In order to regroup with fellow raiders after an attack, Wichí warriors would simply follow the footprints of their companions left on trails and they would also be on the lookout for any signals such as twisted branches, snapped twigs or tufts of grass strategically placed at the intersections of paths. By following these previously agreed upon signs, retreating warriors would eventually meet up with their fellow attackers (Pelleschi 1886:77). After a battle, the Pilagá would hide
their fallen comrades at secret locations so that their enemies would not be able to find the bodies of the dead to scalp them (Arnott 1934:496).

When Chacoan warriors attacked a cattle ranch, they would surround the ranch and set fire to the house by shooting flaming arrows at the roof (Karsten 1932:106). Indigenous attacks on settlers were frequent in this period, although few of these attacks were documented in published sources.

THE TAKING OF HUMAN TROPHIES

The heads of slain enemies were cut off, the scalp stripped from the skull, and both were kept as war trophies. "Whosoever kills an enemy wears as a trophy, if he has time to secure it, the scalp with the hair, the ears, and possibly a fold of skin from the back of the neck," said Pelleschi (1886:80), who actually was present during the planning and successful return of an 1880 raid by the Wichí of the Upper Bermejo River on their enemies, the Toba.

Scalps were valued differently, according to their provenance. For example, the Nivaclé valued Toba scalps more than any other type. In 1966, when Pierre Clastress carried out fieldwork among the Nivaclé, elder warriors still had in their possession the scalps taken from Bolivian soldiers killed during the Chaco War (1930–1932). Those trophies were carefully stored in leather bags or in baskets. Upon the death of a warrior, these items would be burned over his grave. This was done so that the smoke would facilitate the entrance of the warrior's soul to the otherworld which was the abode of former fighters (Clastress 1981:236). For the Nivaclé, the most sacred and powerful smoke emanated from the burning scalps of their Toba enemies.

The Pilagá preferred scalps from male victims with long hair over those from victims who wore their hair short. The Nivaklé considered the scalps of European settlers of a lesser value as compared to those taken from indigenous warriors (Clastres 1980:236).  

VICTORY CELEBRATIONS

When Chacoan warriors triumphantly returned to their villages brandishing their spoils of war, there would be great excitement among the people. The victors would bring back sheep, goats, horses, weapons, ponchos, and human trophies. Their group's ecstatic cries of joy may have also have been tempered by the ear-piercing ritual wailing of women who had lost a husband or son on the raid. The celebration of their coup was marked by dances and by the drinking of algarroba beer—prepared by the women in anticipation of the festivities.

Pilagá warriors who successfully returned from battle with scalps to their villages were entitled to wear the red feathers of an almost extinct bird that they
call pakalú. "When we went to war, everything was red, red!" said a Pilagá warrior to missionary John Arnott (1934:494).

Rafael Karsten (1932), Alfred Métraux (1980[1937]), and John Arnott (1934) all described the victory celebrations among the Toba and the Pilagá of the Pilcomayo River area. Arnott may have actually witnessed one of these celebrations as his article on the subject included a photograph of three men with a scalp attached to a pole along with another photo of three men ready to participate in the "scalp dance." Their heads were covered with woven net bags, feathers around their ankles, and their bodies were painted.

It is important to note that instead of an actual celebration to mark the successful return of a scalping party, Arnott (a missionary then stationed among the Toba) may have only been witness to a reenactment of such a victory celebration at El Toba Mission in 1933, performed at the request of ethnographer Alfred Métraux. The ethnographer had sought to obtain a scalp, but he had to settle for "a false scalp of black sheepskin mounted on a bamboo hoop" (Métraux 1980:46).

SCALPS AS CONDUITS OF SPIRITUAL POWER

As previously mentioned, scalps were believed to contain the spirits of the victims, which were hostile to their killers, and these supernatural entities could only be subdued through ritual prayer and spiritual purification. After a period of fasting and seclusion, a killer could establish a relationship with the victim's spirit. This spirit would confer to the warrior a supernatural chant, and from that moment the warrior would recite this song in order to communicate with his victim's spirit, much in the same manner as shamans communicate with their own spirit guides. In effect, by taking an enemy's scalp and subjecting it to the aforementioned cleansing rituals, a man transformed his rival's spirit into a powerful ally that would render him assistance in both hunting and in warfare.

In order to add to the celebration of a successful raid, Chorote warriors would bring out other scalps that had been acquired in previous battles, and would wear scalp-lock ornaments tucked in their head bands. Young Toba and Pilagá warriors—who participated in the recent raid but who had returned without a human trophy were only allowed to perform the victory "scalp dance" held during the daytime. At night, however, the scalps were placed on tall poles located in the center of the village, and only men who had taken trophies were allowed to perform the "scalp dance" held during the night to the sound of a drum consisting of a clay pot partly filled with water, while algarroba beer was drunk from the skulls of the victims.

Singing, dancing, drum-beating, and rattle-shaking were regarded as powerful supernatural actions. In preparation for the "scalp dance," the warriors painted wide zebra-like black stripes across their bodies with a black stripe drawn across their faces from ear to ear, while the rest of their faces were painted red. Arms and ankles were adorned with Rhea americana (an ostrichlike bird) feathers along with
small bells that were fastened to the legs below the knees. According to Arnott, the sounds produced by these bells were considered to possess mystical qualities. Because these bells were only for use in victory celebrations, after the “scalp dance,” these items were carefully stored out of sight.

The dancers covered their heads with woven bags (made from caraguatá fiber) that incorporated feathers and bones which concealed the identities of the men in order to avoid being “hunted” (recognized) by the spirits of their scalped victims. The victors painted their bodies and hid their faces behind disguises so as to protect themselves from the scalps, which were considered to be particularly dangerous at this point. The warriors then proceeded to form a circle around the scalps that hung from poles at the center, and would dance to and fro to the sound of the drum, with each man reciting his own chant. An individual owned a particular “scalp song” which he had received either from a spirit in a dream or by it being handed down to him by another warrior, who had in turn received it from a spirit. If during the course of the celebration, a dancer grew weary, he would momentarily retire from the dance circle to scarify himself using an awl made from jaguar bone, which would renew his strength (Karsten 1932).

The dancers would then vociferously direct curses at the scalps in order to expel the malignant spirits that were believed to reside in these trophies. According to Arnott, the purpose of the “dance of the scalps” was to render the malevolent spirits harmless and to send misfortune to the people from whom those scalps had been taken. The “scalp dance” would continue for several nights, and then the human trophies, the paraphernalia, and weapons would be carefully stored out of sight, to be brought out again only at another victory celebration.

Men who had taken a life during a raid, as well as hunters who had killed a predator (such as a jaguar), had to undergo purification rituals that involved both chanting and ritual seclusion for a period of time afterward (Susnik 1990). Commenting on such rites of Chacoan killers, von Rosen (1924:104) established a parallel between indigenous warfare and the hunting of animals. Chacoan men would recite chants over the animals they had hunted in the forest before bringing them into camp. Successful hunters would then refrain from any strenuous physical activities for a period of one or two days. Similarly, after obtaining a human trophy and participating in the commensurate victory celebration, warriors would ritually purify themselves (along with their weapons) by seeking isolation for a period of a few days where they would undergo a fast and recite chants.

**WOMEN’S ROLE IN VICTORY CELEBRATIONS**

Women had an active role in these celebrations as a Wichí man would take the scalp that he had just obtained in battle and he would give “it to his wife who danced to express her joy at her husband’s killing an enemy” (Métraux 1939:117).

In 1929, the Toba and the Pilagá raided a Nivaklé village to avenge the murder of Tenayó, one of their leaders. Tenayó was killed while out river fishing.9
and during that battle a Toba warrior nicknamed “Presidente” obtained a Nivaklé scalp.

In 1933, Métraux interviewed the Toba and collected data on how victory celebrations were conducted. Upon the return to the village, a scalp would be given to a woman who then would joyfully rub it against her thighs. Afterwards, another woman would seize the scalp and scratch it as if it were a man’s cheek and then she would affectionately address it by asking the following question: “Do you want to marry me?” Also, the widow of any Toba man who had been killed during the raid would request the scalp in order to sleep with it in her hut. Reportedly, the joy of widows would be great whenever warriors granted this request. After a while, the widow would return the trophy to the warrior and say: “I am happy now, the death of my husband has been avenged” (Métraux 1980).

Elder Toba men took great pleasure in explaining the appropriate techniques for drying human scalps into the cup-shaped objects which were then used for the drinking of fermented beverages during victory celebrations.

SUMMARY

Since the sixteenth century, ethnohistorical sources have described the hunter-gatherer societies of the South American Gran Chaco as being warlike takers of human trophies. Young individual males were trained and formally initiated as warriors in order protect and defend their people in a setting characterized by the presence of endemic warfare. Warriors from different bands would coordinate their efforts in order to attack other groups. Conflicts seem to primarily have been motivated by competition over subsistence resources, and resulting antagonisms were fueled by the desire to seek revenge. The disruptive effects stemming from the incursion of European settlers into the region exacerbated preexisting tensions.

After a raid, truly brave warriors (i.e., those who had killed an enemy and obtained a trophy) would return to their villages brandishing either heads or scalps which gave testament to both the warrior’s courage and to the humiliating defeat of the enemy. All warriors participated in victory celebrations, but only those men who had obtained a trophy were permitted to participate in the “scalp dances” held at night.

Although trophy taking was an act undertaken by an individual who sought recognition as a courageous warrior, any trophy taken from a defeated enemy also brought prosperity and well-being to the entire band. Because of this, all band members—men, women, and children—celebrated the acquisition and public display of such items. During the time between celebrations, the human trophies and the ritual paraphernalia employed by warriors in the “scalp dance” were carefully stored out of sight, to prevent misuse and contamination, as these objects were believed to be powerful objects imbued deep spiritual power. In the minds of Chacoans, the ability for men to successfully lead war parties was attributable to the aid they received from their spirit allies.
CONCLUSIONS

In the distant past, hunter-gatherer bands that exploited bountiful environments most likely would have striven to avoid armed confrontations with other bands. However, as resource availability diminished in relation to increased population density, the likelihood of violent conflicts would have increased.

According to Kelly (2000:5, 141, 143), among otherwise peaceful hunter-gatherers, the frequency and severity of spontaneous conflicts over resources vary in relation to resource availability. As the opportunities diminished for hunter-gatherer bands to retreat, armed violent confrontations increased along with the number of retaliatory strikes from those who had been attacked.

What eventually entailed is what Kelly (2000) has termed "social substitution"—instead of targeting the actual killer or the trespasser, any member of the offender's group could be the subject of vengeance. According to Kelly, war is cognitively and conceptually understood as a confrontation between independent groups, and this notion of group liability differentiates warlike from nonwarlike hunter-gatherer societies.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Chacoan hunter-gatherers of the Pilcomayo River area had already adopted this policy of "social substitution" with regard to conflict and violence. For example, the Toba would raid any Nivaclé village in vengeance for an attack by any other Nivaclé band. Also, the family of any settler or colonists could be punished for an aggression initiated by any other settler or colonist.

For another example, see the case of Wichi warfare described by Niels Fock (1974). Individual warriors, who assumed the responsibility for killing an "enemy" in retaliation for an offense, faced great danger from those who, in turn, would seek to avenge the retaliatory strike. However, men who successfully avenged the death of kin would enjoy being accorded great prestige as well as receiving deferential treatment from fellow band members.

Band life in the Gran Chaco was characterized by many conflicting tensions, with each individual warrior seeking a certain degree of autonomy, and yet at the same time it would be reasonable to assume that each man also desired to be part of a group. Additionally, each individual warrior no doubt had motivations based on self-interest, and yet it would also be reasonable to assume that each man would have had some concern for his fellow band members. This tension was most likely present amongst all hunting and gathering societies, whether they were peaceful or warlike.

NOTES

1. For example, the expedition of Captain Hernán Mejía in 1584 sought to punish western Chaco Indians for "taking from them many scalps, hands, and heads of other Indians that they had killed" ("tomándoles muchos pellejos sobados de cueros de indios, manos y cabezas, que ellos habían muerto") (Cabrera 1910:17).
2. The accounts of Arthur Thouar's travels along the Pilcomayo River area between 1882 and 1887 were published in 1991 under the title *A Travers le Gran Chaco: Chez les Indiens Coupeurs de Têtes* (Through the Gran Chaco: Among the Head-Hunting Indians).

3. I conducted fieldwork among the Western Toba of the Argentine Chaco in 1984–1985, 1987–1988, and 1993–1995. This research was supported by grants from the Argentine Council for Scientific Research (CONICET). In 1993–1994 and 1996–1997, I also received support from the Graduate College, the University of Iowa.

4. In 1933, upon a request by ethnographer Alfred Métraux, Kedok described the attack of a Toba war party on a Nivaclé village. One Nivaclé warrior who, despite having received direct hits, fought on with great courage nonetheless, before being mortally wounded by an arrow to the forehead. When the Toba examined the warrior's body, "They then understood why the arrows had not injured him: the dead man wore two armours, one of jaguar skin, the other of cowhide" (Métraux 1980:44).

5. "When a Chorote Indian takes a scalp or fixes the scalp lock of a slain foe under his frontlet, it is probable that he considers that he has not only succeeded in obtaining a material trophy, but that the possession of the scalp or scalp lock to some extent confers upon him power over the spirit of his fallen adversary" (von Rosen 1924:178).

6. John Arnott (1935:115) reports that in 1933, Pilagá warriors killed and scalped several Bolivian soldiers in revenge for the murder of two Pilagá men who were attacked while river fishing. Also, he documents that in 1935, Pilagá and Nivaclé warriors acquired the scalps of two Argentine settlers, a woman and her daughter, in revenge for a previous attack on the Pilagá by the Argentine Army. These raiders then fled to Paraguayan territory "and that night danced round the scalps."

7. Those scalp-locks resembled shaving-brushes, said von Rosen (1924:103)—writing at a time when small brushes were part of the standard shaving kit.

8. These drums consisted of clay pots partly filled with water and covered with hide. The hide was tied around the pot with a string of caraguata. When the drum was used, it usually was placed on the ground and sat on a ring of straw. The sound was produced by using a single drumstick (von Rosen 1924:147).

REFERENCES


