**Introduction: scalping in the Gran Chaco**

Prehistoric warfare was common in South America. Indigenous peoples in the Andes and the Amazon Basin acquired head trophies for centuries before European contact, while scalping—the forcible removal of all or part of the scalp (Roberts and Manchester 1995)—was extensively practiced only among the hunter-gatherers of the Gran Chaco (Figure 1). The heads, body parts, and scalps collected by Chacoan warriors were first mentioned by colonial writers in the 1530s. Scalping continued to be documented until the 1930s. Human trophies were most appreciated, especially by the women. Scallops and body parts were symbols of the warriors’ courage and the people’s revenge on their enemies. The acquisition of these trophies strengthened the warriors’ reputation and the peoples’ sense of pride and ethnic identity.

Unlike North American Plains Indians, who made circular cuts around the crown of the head, raised the skin at one side, and tore it off (sometimes without actually killing the victim), the method of the Chacoans consisted of cutting off the entire head and then removing the scalp with the hair attached. Chacoans took the whole scalp, ears, and part of the face, and made drinking cups out of it. The victim’s heads were often discarded after obtaining the scalp, but drinking cups were also made out of the skulls.

In the mid–1500s, soon after they began to trade with European colonists in Asunción, Paraguay, the Guaycuruans of northern Chaco stopped killing their victims and traded their war captives for European goods. The colonists were eager to acquire “Indian slaves” to exploit their labor (Chaparro 1947: 63). Guaycuruan equestrian hunters continued to fight and trade with soldiers, settlers, and neighboring indigenous groups throughout the 1600s and 1700s (Saeger 2000). Other Chacoan hunter-gatherers, who trekked the Chaco Basin farther away from military forts and colonial settlements, raided and surprise-attacked one another until the early twentieth century. They collected head trophies and scalps from neighboring ethnic groups until the 1930s. The indigenous practice of scalping ended with the complete pacification of the region, after the Chaco War (1932–1936).

Different Chacoan bands occasionally allied to fight settlers and soldiers, but the warriors would not take scalps from non-indigenous victims, especially those with short hair. Chacoans did not become “scalp-hunters,” possibly because of their limited access to firearms and steel knives, as well as the absence of scalp premiums or rewards, such as those offered in North America (Friederici 1907: 431).

My interest in indigenous warfare and violence started while conducting anthropological fieldwork in Western Chaco in 1993–1995. During my interviews with elder Toba men, the celebration of victory and the technique to dry human scalps were still engaging topics of conversation that elicited a good sense of pride.

In this paper, I describe the practice of collecting skulls for scalping in the Gran Chaco based on historical and ethnographic sources. A review of the literature has convinced me that scalping was practiced by Chacoan hunter-gatherers since long before European contact, although apparently it was not common among the hunter-gatherers of the Pampas and Patagonia. Some ethnographic reports mention the ritual consumption of human flesh by the Wichi of Central Chaco, but in general cannibalism and head-hunting were not practiced by Chacoans—who differed with neighboring Amazonian groups (Porzecanci 1993). My discussion highlights the role of women in the preparation of scalps and the celebration of victory. It also advances an explanation of the spiritual and social meanings given by Chacoans to the human trophies obtained from their enemies.

**Gran Chaco hunter-gatherers**

Surrounded by the Andes on the west, the Amazon rain forest on the north and east, and the pampas on the south, the Gran Chaco basin is the second largest ecosystem in South America. The basin was occupied several thousand
years ago by hunting and gathering bands that may have entered it from different directions. These bands soon adapted their foraging economies to the Chaco’s seasonal and unpredictable microenvironments. The bands would have moved according to the seasonal availability of flora, fauna, and water resources. Their high residential mobility coupled with patterns of aggregation and dispersion gave them access to extensive information networks. The remarkable uniformity of Chacoan artifacts, subsistence techniques, kinship, and marriage practices recorded by twentieth century ethnographers (e.g., Palavecino 1928) could have resulted from exchanges occurring in the context of those information networks.

Since it can be too hot in summer or cold in winter, too dry or instantly inundated, Europeans considered Gran Chaco a miserable place to live. For centuries it was a refuge for native peoples (Fock 1982: 3). The Chacoans who contacted the European colonists in the mid–1500s are called “typical Chacoans” by Argentine anthropologists. They are descendants of the prehistoric hunter-gatherers who inhabited the region long before, although very little is known about their past—almost no archaeological research has been conducted in the area. Prehistoric Chacoans may have been self-organized, mobile, non-packed hunters and gatherers focused mainly on the exploitation of animals and terrestrial plants, and occupying subsistence ranges over which the groups moved (Binford 2001). Throughout the region, this was a very successful adaptation that produced population growth and dispersion. As new indigenous groups entered the Chaco Basin, Chacoan hunter-gatherers began to use aquatic resources more extensively and started practicing some horticulture. They also pursued their own pastoral attempts, probably as early as the sixteenth century.

Chaco’s ancient landscape was parkland with patches of forests, woodlands, savannas, and grasslands. This mosaic of vegetation was kept stable by occasional river flooding and periodic fires caused by lightning or set by the aborigines. After the Europeans colonized the area, the frequency and intensity of the fires decreased as the cattle grazed the pastures, also encroaching upon the aborigines’ home ranges. Western Chaco was drier and harsher, while Eastern Chaco offered vast plains for the herds, interspersed with woodlands that provided timber for fence-posts, railway sleepers, and charcoal. By the 1900s, the basin’s natural pastures had become scarce and with them, the avestruz (Rhea americana) and the medium-to-large terrestrial herbivores hunted by the native peoples (Buchner 1982).

Aboriginal warfare
Ulrico Schmidel, a soldier who participated in the early days of the Spanish conquest and colonization (1534–1554) in Buenos Aires and Asunción, Paraguay, described the defeat of the Guaraní by Guaycuruan warriors. In 1541, the Guaycuruans scalped thousands of Guaraní “as they used to do it, from the severed heads.” Schmidel also reported that Yapiurí warriors “cut their victims’ heads incredible fast with a small stick” (Schmidel 1945).

Other colonial chroniclers also documented the endemic warfare of Chacoans. For example, in 1584, Captain Hernán Mejía Miraval reported to the Spanish Governor of the Tucumán Province that he had captured and killed many Chacoans, collecting scalps and head trophies that these Indians had taken from their enemies (Cabrera 1910:

Figure 1. Map of the Gran Chaco with the location of the indigenous groups in the twentieth century.
The missionary Alonso Barzana wrote in 1594 that Chacoans “do not know how to plant or build, they only hunt and fish; they find gusto in killing one another” (Fur- long 1968: 88). In 1702, Juan Zamudio, the governor of Salta, reported that Chacoan warriors were so fierce and cold-blooded that “they cut the heads of men and women, and drink from the skulls” (cited by Gullon Abao 1993: 43). Similarly, in 1710–1711, the expedition of Captain Urízar informed that the Mocoví of southern Chaco celebrated their victories drinking from the heads and scalps of their victims (Vitar 1997: 75).

By the time of contact with Europeans, Gran Chaco was inhabited by mobile bands of hunter-gatherers that had probably developed territorial boundaries. These bands were engaged in lethal raiding and counter-raiding; their raids involved ambush and surprise attacks, but could also occur during chance encounters. Alfred Métraux (1949: 384) said that the term “warfare” was unsuitable to describe the perpetual vendettas between small communities. The victims of attacks included individuals of all ages and both sexes. Human trophies in the form of heads and body parts were taken from men and women, although scalps were reportedly taken only from males.

Early colonial writers provided clear evidence of social tensions among native groups—chroniclers said that had the Spaniards not arrived, the warlike Chacoan foragers would have conquered and decimated the more sedentary agriculturists who lived in the periphery of Gran Chaco. Palisades were reported in Pilagá villages in the early 1900s, but in general the hunter-gatherers did not build defensible settlements or fortifications. Indigenous violence and warfare were strategies to gain control of highly valued natural resources (Larsen 1997), in a region that was already under population pressure. As population increased, new groups would have formed, reducing the subsistence area used by any given group and resulting in increasingly packed ranges (Binford 2001: 363).

Ethnographic accounts indicate that unannounced foraging in the home range of another band, damage to fish weirs, unauthorized appropriation of food kept in storage, and theft of cattle or horses were immediate causes for retaliation and vendetta raids between neighboring ethnic groups. Sometimes the hostilities were initiated to recover a child or a woman who had been taken as captives. During these raids, the attackers took goods and horses as booty, and also abducted children from the enemies’ villages.

Pastor Arenas (2003) transcribed the following narration from a Toba man identified as C. T. P.: “There was a fight in the Pilagá village. The Nivaklé war leader called kame:’na appeared mounted on a short yellowish horse. He was carrying a spear. He also wore a leather vest. Other Nivaklé men were with him. When kame:’na entered the Pilagá village, he wounded a woman with his spear. The other women and children escaped to the bushes, but some people couldn’t because they were wounded with arrows. Then kame:’na saw a young man who was still alive. He jumped to the ground and started scalping the man. The Pilagá cried out loud because he was still alive. kame:’na looked attentively all around to see if someone else was there, but the other Pilagá escaped to the bushes. When kame:’na got closer to the victim to pull out the whole scalp, a Pilagá man appeared and shot him. kame:’na felt the arrow in his body. He left the scalp and ran to his horse, trying to gallop away, but he couldn’t. When his horse had walked about ten steps, kame:’na fell dead on the ground.

The man who shot the arrow shouted to his own people: ‘the war leader is dead!’ Other Pilagá men appeared and they immediately scalped kame:’na, pierced his body and hanged body parts from the trees around the village. After that, they celebrated a fiesta to commemorate that they had killed the Nivaklé who wanted to attack their village” (Arenas 2003: 72, my translation from Spanish).

Scalping was practiced as a form of coup warfare, as in the North American Plains (Miller 1994: 216). While anyone might scalp the slain enemy to show the trophy, the warriors who could report a large number of first coups (touching or striking a living unhurt enemy and leaving him alive) were accorded much esteem (Reese 1940: 15). However, the warrior’s action had to be witnessed by a fellow warrior to count. Heads and scalps were the preferred trophies, but other body parts could also be taken as badges of triumph. Wichí warriors would take the hands, feet, and genitalia of male or female victims to hang them from trees near their villages (Arenas 2003).

The Chacoans’ main weapons were war clubs, bows and arrows. Wooden clubs were aimed at the victim’s head, although the warriors would also throw the club at the legs of a fugitive. Chief Lasto, Enxet of Misión Nueva Vida, Paraguay, told Pastor Arenas the following: “We used the club in our wars. We first shot an arrow and then hit the wounded victim in the head with the club; if we did not have arrows, we would hit the person in the arms, the forehead, or any other part of the body to put the person down” (Arenas 1981: 90, my translation from Spanish).

The warriors severed the heads of the fallen victims with a small knife. This knife was made of sharpened animal bones or the jawbone with teeth of palometa fish, similar to piranha (Gullon Abao 1993). In 1610, Father Diego de Torres described this knife made of teeth as “a cruel instrument with which the Indians could decapitate many people in a short time” (cited by Chaparro 1947: 42).

Chacoans’ arrows were tipped with sharpened wood, since no stone is found throughout most of the Gran Chaco Basin. In historical times, the arrows were also made with iron heads. To protect the thorax—commonly struck by arrows, see Milner 2005—Chacoans wore leather vests
made of deer, tapir and “oso hormiguero” sometimes covered with jaguar skin. The Mocóbi painted colored designs on the outer part of their vests. Chacoans on the Pilcomayo River area also wore vests tightly knitted by women with the fiber of chaguar (identified by Arenas 1981, 2003 as Deinacanthus urbanianum, Bromeliaceae). Most Guaycuru equestrian hunters added spears to their war paraphernalia. Warriors fighting or fleeing on horses had vulnerable torsos. Leather shields and those made of vegetable fiber or even wool became useless when the warriors adopted firearms.

**Human trophies**

Warriors and shamans of allied bands planned the war raids carefully. The decision to attack an “enemy” band was made by consensus. Since it was consensual, people joined in the fiesta to encourage the warriors who were about to participate in a raid; they also celebrated the war victory together. Their joy and collective excitement were consequences of the warriors’ bravery and accomplishments (Dasso 2004).

During the surprise attack, either the victim’s head or scalp were taken, although heads were often discarded in some secluded place on the way back to the villages, after the whole scalp with the ears and parts of the face had been taken from the severed head. I have not been able to find references to what happened to these scalped heads after they were mutilated and discarded by the warriors, although one author commented that burying a corpse without head would have been an added offense to the kindred of the victim. On the way back to the villages, Wichí warriors carried the scalps hanging from a cord around their waist, as fishermen used to do when they brought their catch. A Toba warrior who had collected a scalp would paint his body with the blood of the victim. In returning to the village, an old woman helped wash the blood from the warrior’s body (Arenas 2003).

Women actively participated in the celebration of victory and the dance of the scalps. They were in charge of drying and preparing the trophies. The scalp was cleaned of any remaining loose flesh, and then stretched by sewing a thin stick around its opening in the form of a hoop, tied with a cord at the end of a branch or a pole. The hair was carefully combed. Enxet women used to dry the scalps by rubbing the inside with hot ashes; then they combed the hair (Arenas 1981: 91). The Toba, Pilagá, and Nivaklé would let the scalp dry by mounting it on a wooden loop, so it would take the shape of a cup (Métraux 1949: 409, Fritz 1994: 25).

Nicodemo told Niels Fock (1982: 93) how the Wichí used to dry fresh scalps: “To prepare the scalps before the feast, a supple stick was sewn along the entire opening. Heated clay balls, about the size of an egg, were placed inside the scalp to eliminate the fat and to dry it and harden it. Nothing was done to plug the eye, nose, and ear openings, so when someone drank beer from a scalp he simply covered the bottom of it so as to lose nothing.” Older women handled the scalps, but young women could become sterile by doing it, and so they were excluded (Susnik 1990: 54). Women also collected the fruits to prepare the fermented beverage that men drank during the fiesta.

Human trophies were brought to the villages to prove that the enemy was killed, and to give the community, especially the women, the opportunity to rejoice in the enemies’ defeat. Women who were old enough to remember would recount past offences suffered at the hands of those very same enemies, while they mocked and played with the trophi—s. Whenever Wichí women danced or drank from head trophies, they would say: “Before you killed me; now I’m killing you” (Fock 1982: 93).

All the ethnographers who have studied the subject (e.g., Métraux 1937) have highlighted women’s participation in mocking and ridiculing the enemies represented by heads, scalps and body parts; these jokes often included erotic and sexually explicit games. Nicodemo told Niels Fock the following: “One woman placed a scalp over her genitals, and repeatedly striking it she said: ‘Dear husband, at last you’re coming!’ Then she threw the scalp over to another old woman who said: ‘I took your husband in order to have intercourse with him.’ The first one began to cry and they tore each other’s hair, pretending to be fighting, but they were merely playing games. They danced and screamed, and Tokhuan [trickster, cultural hero] said that when they drank from the scalps they were really drinking from the enemies they had killed” (Fock 1982: 93).

Once the scalp was dry, Toba women drank from the scalp—cup. A Toba identified as C. T. P. told Pastor Arenas: “A woman was singing and the warrior gave her the scalp that was already dry. The woman filled that man’s scalp with water. She offered a sip to the other women. If one couldn’t take it and vomited, it was a signal that she was a weak woman. When all the women had drunk, the scalp—cup was returned to the owner. Then the war leader would pierce the skin of the weak women with the bone of wild pig to make those women stronger” (Arenas 2003: 72–73, my translation from Spanish).

Days after the return of the war party, when the fermented beverage was ripe, the people celebrated the dance of the scalps. The scalps were hanging from poles at the center of the village. The women sang and danced around the poles. The warriors who had brought the trophies to the village also danced, but they covered their heads with knitted bags to avoid being recognized by the souls of the dead (Métraux 1937, 1949). The war leaders would fill up the scalp—cups with fermented beverage and the men drank. They also offered it to young men—but the cowards couldn’t stand it and would vomit.
The masked warriors had to avoid the threat posed by the soul of the dead seeking revenge. Killing a human or an animal predator was dangerous; the killer was polluted by the blood of the victim and had to undergo rituals of purification to cleanse him and give him control over the victim’s soul (Renshaw 2002: 235). Nivaklélé warriors obtained mystical power from the scalps (Sterpin 1993). The warrior would communicate with the soul of his victims and the souls would give him songs and would share with him valuable information.

Chacoan band leaders were also war leaders who had collected human trophies (Mendoza 2002). Some of the terms used to describe leadership in Chacoan languages refer specifically to the leader’s prowess as a killer. In historical times, Chacoan men got together to fight other ethnic groups viewed at the moment as enemies. Those who had brought human trophies to their villages were given the distinction of wearing feather and wool ornaments that symbolized their status as braves.

The celebration of victory and the scalps’ dance were collective performances intended to strengthen the communities’ pride and the warriors’ standing. By rejoicing together, the participants honored the warriors and helped them to overcome the fear of being hunted down by the souls of the dead. At the conclusion of the celebration, the warriors could reintegrate to the community, already purified. The Nivaklélé kept their scalps for life; other Chacoans discarded the trophies once the fiesta was over or left the trophies to decompose or become damaged (Arenas 1981: 92).

**Conclusion**

Chacoan hunter-gatherers collected human trophies from their enemies well before the time of European contact, in the early 1500s. The first colonial writers described as “endemic warfare” the frequent raids and surprise attacks in which the indigenous peoples engaged. With these raids, the bands were withholding the hunting and gathering grounds, and the best fishing spots, from neighboring bands that wanted to forage there. Those defined as enemies usually spoke a language different from one’s own language (except the Wichí, who would view other Wichí bands as enemies). In each band, men of courage would get together to plan the attacks and also trained to participate in war raids. Those who were able to kill an enemy during the attack and returned to the village with a head, a scalp, or body parts taken from their victims were rewarded with social prestige and the honor of wearing special ornaments that would let others know about their accomplishments.

Human skulls were sometimes kept and used as drinking cups during the celebration of victory; although more often the heads of the victims were discarded after removing the scalp with the ears and parts of the face. Unlike the Natives of the North American Plains—who used to take a small patch of skin at the root of the scalp lock leaving the victim alive—the operation of scalping in the Gran Chaco was fatal for the victim. The person who collected the scalp was not necessarily the same who had killed or wounded the victim; neither was the number of scalps or other human trophies the measure of the warrior’s prowess but the number of enemies he had killed with witness.

Upon returning to the villages, the fresh scalp was given to older women to dry and turn into a drinking cup (with a wooden hoop that would keep the scalp concave, forming an open cavity that could hold beverages). Men and women participated in the dance of the scalps, but the warriors who had killed an enemy covered their faces with a knitted bag while dancing to avoid being recognized by the soul of the deceased. Taking a human trophy and bringing it back to the village for the rejoicing of one’s own people was a bold individual action full of danger, an uncommon daring behavior carried out in part to satisfy a collective need for revenge (Dasso 2001). Warriors acted as ambitious persons, motivated by the desire to please the group (Clastres 1981). Once the celebration of victory concluded, the owners of the scalps either kept the trophies for a while or threw them away in some place out of sight. The Nivaklélé, however, would keep their scalps for life and would establish a particular spiritual relationship with the souls of their victims.

Women participated actively in the whole process. While men were planning the attack, women encouraged them to seek booty and revenge for a previous offense. Women abstained from sexual relations and observed restrictions on the consumption of certain foods and other behaviors to favor their husbands’ success in war. Older women assisted the warriors who had killed a victim. They enjoyed mocking and ridiculing the human trophies brought back to the villages, collected the fruits to prepare a fermented beverage, and also dried the scalps in preparation for the dance of the scalps.

These collective celebrations of victory ended with the complete pacification of the region after the Chaco War (1932–1936) between Bolivia and Paraguay. Pilagá warriors collected their last documented scalp in 1936, although the Nivaklélé might have continued with the practice until the early 1940s (Clastres 1981, Fritz 1994). The last documented scalps were taken from Argentine settlers and Bolivian soldiers by young Pilagá and Nivaklélé warriors who got together to resist the encroachment of their lands until the use of violence was not a viable method of resistance anymore.
References


Skull Collection, Modification and Decoration