

Preface

This book is part of a broader effort to develop a uniform theory of war. Over the past decade I have elaborated an explanation intended to address the multidimensional nature of war in a theoretically consistent way. Most of my work deals with war among nonstate peoples, although I have applied aspects of the theory to issues of modern warfare (Ferguson 1988a, 1989a). At its most general level, this work has produced two complementary approaches.

One (Ferguson 1990a) concerns war as a total social fact—a condition of society with causes and effects ramifying through all domains of cultural organization. I have expanded and elaborated that broadly sketched approach in a series of comparative studies using Amazonian material and dealing with interlocking aspects of the sociocultural system: ecological adaptation (Ferguson 1989b, 1989c), social organization (1988b), politics (*n.d.a*), and sociocultural evolution (1993). All those findings inform the present work.

The other basic approach was actually developed first, in a case study of indigenous warfare on the Pacific Northwest Coast (1984a). This approach aims at answering a narrow yet fundamental question: why do wars occur? Why does actual fighting happen when and where it does? That is the question addressed in this monograph.

The subject here is warfare among the Yanomami. These inhabitants of the rugged Brazil-Venezuela border region are a challenge to any anthropological explanation of war. Their legendary fierceness, their popular reputation as perhaps the most violent people on earth (e.g., Booth 1989:1138; Lumsden and Wilson 1983:139; O'Hanlon 1988: back cover), makes the Yanomami question virtually inescapable for a student of war. Even though I had never seen a Yanomami—my own field research was in Puerto Rico on an entirely different subject—any

time I discussed warfare I was asked, “What about the Yanomami?” Unsatisfied with existing explanations of their conflict, I set out to apply the two approaches, to see if they worked in this supremely puzzling case.

In a separate article (Ferguson 1992a), I applied the general model of war as a total social fact to the Yanomami of the Orinoco-Mavaca area. That article describes how these particular Yanomami have been pushed into an extreme conflict mode by interacting circumstances related to the intense and highly changeable Western presence in their area. It concludes that the historical encounter has resulted in a lowered threshold for war—a warlike disposition that makes violence more likely. These findings will turn up in many discussions to come.

This book addresses the question, Why do actual wars occur? Its goal is to show the underlying tensions that structure reported instances of Yanomami warfare. In attempting to find answers, I adopt four basic positions that go directly against strong currents in the anthropology of war. First, I believe that to understand the occurrence of war, the primary evidence must be recorded behavior rather than actors’ stated understandings. Second, this behavior must be examined in concrete historical context rather than as a generalized cultural war pattern. Third, the existence and variation of actual Yanomami warfare in historical context is explainable largely by reference to changing circumstances of Western contact, which, contrary to established opinion, has been important to the Yanomami for centuries. And fourth, warfare is motivated primarily by actors’ concerns with their material well-being.

Probably most anthropologists concerned with war would reject some or all of these points. Moreover, many would reject *a priori* the possibility of an explanation of war that applies across cultures. I see theories as tools, instruments for building a better understanding. In that sense, the acid test of a theory is whether it is useful—whether through the application of the theory we achieve a deeper knowledge of a subject. This monograph is a test of that sort.

It is equally important to make clear what this book is not. It is not a general portrayal of the Yanomami. Anyone who wishes to understand the richness of Yanomami culture should consult the bibliography for more appropriate works. The current study is, in contrast, deliberately one-dimensional. The analytical model developed in the next chapters is a world away from the Yanomami’s own views on life and death. Nevertheless, the model does account for observed variations in warfare—what the Yanomami actually do.

Alcida Ramos (1987) has discussed how different researchers’ interests and orientations “reflect on” their portrayals of the Yanomami;

elsewhere (1990:4) she noted that any portrayal of them, or of any indigenous people, has potential political implications. Both points are made particularly pressing by the ongoing struggle over preservation of Yanomami territory in Brazil and Venezuela. This book examines the Yanomami in order to better understand the nature of war. But it can also contribute to our understanding of who the Yanomami are by demythologizing them, by taking them out of an imaginary, timeless isolation and integrating them within a changing social universe. We shall see that the current assault on the Yanomami is only the latest in a long and sad history, although this time the results could be terminal. And we will see that the Yanomami are not particularly warlike on their own, although they can be so in certain circumstances.

At the outset, several acknowledgments are in order. The arguments in this book have been worked out over several years in communication with many friends and colleagues, including Bruce Albert, Patricia Antoniello, Timothy Asch, Bill Balée, Jane Bennett Ross, Brian Burkhalter, Anne Marie Cantwell, Charlotte Cerf, Janet Chernela, Karen Colvard, Jeff English, Eugenia Georges, Ken Good, Jonathan Haas, Carol Henderson, Peter Kincl, Eglée López-Zent, William Manson, Joan O'Donnell, Sandra Prado, Barbara Price, Bonnie Quern, Alcida Ramos, Dolores Shapiro, Janet Siskind, William Smole, Leslie Sponsel, Alaka Wali, Joel Wallman, Neil Whitehead, Stanford Zent, and all the participants in the H. F. Guggenheim/School of American Research Advanced Seminar that led to the book *War in the Tribal Zone*.

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I have not used diacritical marks on Yanomami words in this book except in the bibliography. Their use in original sources is highly variable, and I am already asking enough of my readers without also asking

them to worry about pronunciation. I have standardized the spelling of names of particular local groups, generally going with the most widely used spelling in English language sources. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in the text are my own.

Finally, I feel I should apologize to the Yanomami for using the personal names of individuals. To do so, especially when the person is dead, is considered a serious insult (see Chagnon 1977:10–11). But since these names are already in print, I do not see sufficient reason for inventing pseudonyms.