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Latin American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence

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The appearance of Chacon and Mendoza's twin edited volumes *Latin American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence* and *North American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence*—the result of a 2003 AAA symposium titled "Problems in Paradise"—marks the latest expression among Americanists of a renewed interest in recent times on the subject of Amerindian warfare (see Goodrich 2002; Brown and Stanton 2003; Valentine and Julien 2003; Jones 2007; Chacon and Dye 2007). These two volumes differ from previous ones in not being concerned with determining the causes of Amerindian warfare, or establishing a taxonomy of war patterns, or analyzing its material aspects. Rather, they seek to counter the increasing influence of "revisionist" groups who contend that references to Amerindian warfare and ritual violence in early colonial sources are a European fabrication intended to discredit indigenous peoples and justify their conquest.

As the editors assert, scholars have tended to ignore revisionist "denial

movements” on the grounds that they base their arguments on ideological considerations rather than on actual facts. This lack of debate has benefited the revisionist movement, leading to the rapid diffusion and acceptance of denial perspectives in college campuses throughout the Americas and Europe. Through the publication of these two volumes, Chacon and Mendoza seek to redress this imbalance. Based on the latest archeological, linguistic, iconographic, ethnographic, and historical evidence, the eleven chapters that comprise the Latin American volume—the object of this review—provide a broad view of indigenous warfare in different times and geographical regions. In them, the notion that warfare and ritual violence, while not universal, was a central feature of Amerindian cultural traditions, receives significant support.

The first six chapters include a strong archeological component, but they also make use of ethnohistorical data. Contradicting past theoretical models, Matt O’Mansky and Arthur A. Demarest propose that warfare was an important ingredient of Maya politics since at least Preclassic times. They argue, however, that Maya warfare cannot be reduced to a single pattern or cause. It varied in terms of frequency and intensity according to region and historical period; status rivalry and elite competition appearing, nonetheless, as a common thread or leitmotiv throughout Maya history.

In his chapter on Aztec militarism, Rubén G. Mendoza admits that the “traditionalist” literature on Aztec belligerence and religious violence was often based on sketchy evidence. He argues, however, that new forensic methods and archeological strategies has provided novel and often incontrovertible evidence that human sacrifice was a central cultural practice in Aztec society. The main question, he proposes, is not so much whether the Aztecs practiced human sacrifice, but rather why did they adopt ritual human sacrifice and anthropophagy on such a monumental scale.

Arguing that long-distance territorial conquest is critical to the development of proto-states, Charles S. Spencer sets out to analyze the role of warfare in the expansion of the Monte Albán state around 300-100 BC. He argues that, whereas there is no doubt that warfare played an important role in Monte Albán’s expansion to the North and Southwest, the evidence is less conclusive with respect to the incorporation of its Southern and Southeastern territories. He concludes, however, that alone, or combined with other strategies, military conquest was critical to the formation of Monte Albán.

In his analysis of Mesoamerican depictions of warfare, Donald McVicker argues that the use of art to determine the importance of warfare is problematic; violence in art may reflect aesthetic traditions and stylistic choices, and “cannot be assumed to directly mirror a culture’s aggressive actions or passive responses” (p. 74). Thus, whereas the bellicose Aztecs very rarely depicted acts of warfare in their mural art, the supposedly peaceful Maya relished in such portrayals. McVicker warns that even those images depicting warfare and ritual violence

must be interpreted carefully, for they might have been intended to instill terror upon the enemy rather than to represent actual events.

Elsa M. Redmond focuses on chiefly warfare among the Arawak-speaking peoples of the Greater Antilles and Orinoco. She argues that Columbus' 1492 *Diario* provides plenty of evidence indicating that warfare was not unknown among the Taino in pre-contact times, a fact confirmed by their oral traditions. On the basis of new and exciting archeological evidence from El Gaván (Upper Orinoco) and En Bas Saline (Hispaniola), Redmond shows that important structural similarities existed between these two sites, suggesting the presence of pan-Arawakan patterns of warfare and defense, at least in the circum-Caribbean region.

John W. Verano's fascinating chapter on warfare and conquest in Andean South America draws on detailed archeological and osteological data from three mass burials found along Peru's Northern coast. Data from these pre-contact sites indicates that the dead were male war captives belonging to peoples with a different dietary tradition from their captors, that they were kept alive for a while before being executed, and that they were left in the open to decompose. Whether warfare in this region had ritual or secular causes is, however, a question that still needs to be tackled.

The remaining five chapters in the volume are based largely on ethnographic data, complemented in a few cases by ethnohistorical or archeological data. Richard J. Chacon, Yamilette Chacon and Angel Guandinango analyze the causes of the ritual battles enacted during the Inti Raymi festival in highland Ecuador. After a brief revision of early colonial sources substantiating the importance of such battles in Inca state ceremonies, the authors present a rich and dense ethnographic account of the "taking of the plaza" as practiced in Cotacachi. They conclude that this ritual battle is associated with the ancient worship of the Inca solar and earth divinities; the shedding of human blood being a necessary offering to ensure the abundance of crops in the coming year.

According to Stephen Beckerman and James Yost, warfare in the Upper Amazon was not a colonial product. In some instances, European colonization exacerbated indigenous warfare; in others, however, it suppressed it, for the colonizers' main objective was to transform indigenous peoples into submissive laborers. Through a comprehensive analysis of twentieth-century Waorani raids, the authors arrive to the conclusion that revenge was the detonator of most confrontations; the main causes of warfare were a combination of universal human emotions, such as fear, grief, and rage, but also ambition, greediness, and lust.

Adopting a contrary line of thought, William Balée proposes that, whereas revenge might have been an important psychological motivator in sixteenth-century Tupinambá warfare, the ultimate objective of Tupinambá wars was the conquest of land and the control of key subsistence resources. At the time of

contact, he argues, the Tupinambá were in a process of expansion along the Atlantic coast of Brazil. Such a process was associated with the emergence of multi-village chieftainships possessing the manpower and resources indispensable to engage in large-scale and prolonged warfare.

Marcela Mendoza adopts a similar view in her analysis of hunter-gatherer warfare in the Gran Chaco. While revenge is the main reason adduced by Chacoan peoples for the existence of long drawn blood feuds, the primary causes can almost always be traced to the trespassing of the trekking areas of neighboring groups, or the despoiling of enemy settlements. Nineteenth-century Western Chaco warfare did not deviate from this pattern, its main cause being the encroachment and displacement of indigenous peoples by incoming mestizo colonists, which led to fierce competition over diminishing resources.

Infringement upon territorial rights was also a crucial cause for warfare among Fuego-Patagonian aboriginal people, according to Alfredo Prieto and Rodrigo Cárdenas. Although scarce, archeological evidence demonstrates that warfare was not unknown in pre-contact times. And although the main objective of Fuego-Patagonian warfare was not the acquisition of land, the ethnohistorical and ethnographic record shows that warfare sometimes led to territorial expansion at the expense of enemy groups.

The volume ends with a chapter by Chacon and Mendoza on the ethical problems involved in reporting instances of warfare and other forms of violence among indigenous peoples. The editors argue that members of the revisionist camp may be correct in denouncing the biases of colonial chroniclers, intent on presenting a negative view of indigenous peoples to justify their subjection. This critical view should not, however, constitute a justification to ignore or leave unreported indigenous institutions and cultural practices that, while being an expression of the darker side of human collectivities, present indigenous peoples on an equal footing with respect to human collectivities in other parts of the world and historical periods. Representations of indigenous peoples as harmless and peace-loving may not only render them vulnerable to aggression and encroachment by external agents, as has often been the case when indigenous groups have been “pacified,” but also can backfire once idealized depictions of indigenous lifeways are contradicted by actual practices.

Contributors to this volume do a great job in demonstrating that warfare and various other forms of ritual violence were important ingredients in the lives of pre-contact native Americans. They clearly demonstrate that the opposition between Amerindians and Europeans was not always one between peaceful and bellicose peoples. As a whole, however, the volume is less successful in revealing how Amerindian forms of warfare differed from those prevalent in Europe. This question needs to be confronted if we want to determine the uniqueness of Amerindian societies and cultural traditions. It can only be answered, I suggest, by adopting an Amerindian point of view, paying closer

attention to Amerindian cosmologies and ontologies. With its broad temporal and geographical scope, its recourse to a variety of sources of information, and its theoretical underpinnings, *Latin American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence* is certain to become an indispensable reference for anyone interested in warfare in general, and in Amerindian warfare in particular. It is also bound to generate much welcomed and hopefully constructive discussion.

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García has produced a good and very readable book. Let there be no doubt about it! Through six brief chapters and an introduction she traces contemporary negotiations of (ethnic) identity among speakers of Quechua in Highland Peru centered on bilingual education and interculturality (*interculturalidad*). She perceives the struggles as a new mode of indigenous activism that merits specific attention. In the (Amazonian) experience of this reviewer, *interculturalidad* appears a sort of new buzz-word widely used in Peru; yet, few people have seemed to have a clear perception of what exactly it means. García explains it