

SHAMANISM AND ARMED CONFLICT
– A CASE STUDY OF THE INTERFACE BETWEEN RELIGION AND
WAR IN ABORIGINAL SOUTH AMERICA¹

*Chamanismo y los conflictos armados – un estudio de caso
de la interfaz entre la religión y la guerra en los aborígenes
de América del Sur*

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RESUMEN: El chamán amerindio siempre ha tenido como su mayor tarea de restaurar la armonía cósmica, sea en forma individual, como en curaciones, o en forma colectiva, como en el caso de un pueblo afectado por una plaga. Esta contribución trata de llevar adelante un aspecto muchas veces ignorado, la actuación del chamán en casos de conflictos armados. El caso etnográfico proviene de los 'weenhayek, un pueblo recolector del Gran Chaco. Entre esta gente, el chamán jugaba un rol importante en la estrategia y la actuación de los guerreros. Para entender las diferentes facetas de las actividades bélicas, se sugiere una vista holística del chamanismo y de los estudios societales en general.

Palabras clave: chamanismo, los conflictos armados, amerindios, Gran Chaco, el liderazgo chamánico, adivinación.

ABSTRACT: The main task of the Amerindian shaman has always been the restoration of cosmological harmony, whether it has been on an individual level, like in healing, or on a collective level, like when a village has been affected by an epidemic or any other type of plague. This article wants to bring an aspect to the fore that often has been ignored, the performance of the shaman in cases of armed conflicts. The ethnographic case used here is from the 'Weenhayek, a group of foragers in the Gran Chaco. Among these, a shaman played an important role in the setting up of a strategy and deciding time and space for the warriors to attack. To understand this combination of two phenomena, that have often been divided into two compartments by scholars, shamanism and war, we suggest a holistic view of Amerindian society, of shamanism, war and society in general.

Keywords: shamanism, armed conflict, Amerindians, Gran Chaco, shamanic leadership, divination.

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I. INTRODUCTION

During the last three decades, shamanism has been a somewhat ignored subject and armed conflicts between ethnic minorities or indigenous warfare even more so (Atkinson, 1992: 307). Thus, it is not surprising that the interface between the two has become a sadly unexplored territory. From an Americanist point of view, I know only of a handful of scholars who have paid any attention at all to the matter. Santos Granero, who has studied shamanism and politics among the Amuesha of Peru, is one of the few notable exceptions (Santos Granero, 1986).

The main thesis of this presentation is that the “activities of, or contributions by, shamans in indigenous warfare should be seen in the light of the holistic view of cosmos that many or most foraging societies have”. Through fragmentarized Western view of matters, we have often separated these two fields as “military” and “religious” respectively, while it is becoming increasingly clear that the peoples in question see no borders between the two areas. ‘Weenhayek shamanism is based on an assumption of an inherent harmony in cosmos (a view that is shared by many if not most foragers) that can be disrupted in a number of ways, e.g. through infringement of taboos, through the attack of epidemics – or through the attack of human enemies. The response is strikingly similar in all three cases. This article is based on ethnographic records from more than 30 years of contact with the ‘Weenhayek Indians (of which I have spent more than six years in the field)², as well as ethno-historical sources (Nordenskiöld, 1910; Karsten, 1913 y 1932; Métraux, 1939, 1946; Fock, 1982).

II. BACKGROUND: THE ‘WEENHAYEK INDIANS OF THE GRAN CHACO

The ‘Weenhayek Indians are foragers and fishermen of the tropical dry forest of the Gran Chaco. Their language, *‘Weenhayek Lhààmet*, belongs to the Mataco-Mak’á linguistic family, and this has sometimes been incorporated into the Mataco-Guaicuruan language group. The closest relatives of the ‘Weenhayek are thus the Wichí and other Mataco peoples, as well as the Chorote, the Mak’á, the Nivaklé (Chulupi), the Toba and the Pilagá. They live in northern Gran Chaco, along the Pilcomayo and the Bermejo rivers, on both sides of the border between Bolivia and Argentina (Braunstein, 1993: 4; Alvarsson, 1988: 32; Métraux, 1946).

The Weenhayek subsist from gathering, fishing and hunting, but, at least nowadays, fishing is more important than hunting, and foraging is complemented by some horticulture. For around a century, the Weenhayek supplemented these activi-

² I have lived in/visited the Gran Chaco from January 1976 to February 1979; June to August 1980, 1982, October 1983 to May 1985, 1988 (twice), 1992 (twice), 1993, 1995 (three times), 1996, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2010. In total, I have lived in the Gran Chaco around six years over a period of 34 years.

ties with work migrations to obtain staple foods, especially maize, and, during the 20th century, cash and Western consumers' goods³. These migrations ceased totally, however, after the mechanization of the cane- mills in Argentina in the sixties (Alvarsson, 1988: 153).

Weenhayek social organization was based on kinship-based units called *wikiyi* (close to 'kindred'). These were characterized by a given name, a fixed geographical area and by the fact that they had at least one leader or spokesman called *niyaat* (Alvarsson, 1988: 63; Braunstein, 1983). This unit seasonally fissioned into two or several bands and lived together only during the fruit-season (October-January). The present society is based on the fruit-season villages rather than the *wikiyi*. The latter has simultaneously been transformed from a group to a category (Alvarsson 1988:69). The 'Weenhayek are egalitarian and monogamous. They practice kindred (*wikiyi*) exogamy and have uxorilocal residence. Their kinship terminology suggests a Hawaiian, generational system, based on cognatic principles (Alvarsson, 1988: 80-106).

In spite of evident social change, and in contrast to other Indian peoples of the region, the 'Weenhayek have refused to be incorporated into the national society. Recently they have even been able to reconstruct features of their traditional socio-economic organization that have been absent for several decades (Alvarsson, 1988). 'Weenhayek language is now again a source of pride and villages and schools in the area have sign boards in 'Weenhayek.

Their traditionalism is characterized by a perpetuation of what are perceived to be 'Weenhayek values, a maintained strong ethnic identity and a fiction of cultural continuity. This has been possible because of the slow pace of colonization, the flexible social organization based on alliances between small, independent bilateral units, economic independence owing to commercialization of handicraft and fishing, and affirmation of legal rights to portions of their former territory.

In spite of the social turmoil and conversion to an Indianist version of Christianity, 'Weenhayek culture appears to be surprisingly resistant (Alvarsson 1999, 2007). Traditional mythology is still told by elders as well as youngsters, and this lore probably constitutes one of the most important factors for the preservation of 'Weenhayek identity. The myths are influenced by the transformed social conditions but they also seem to have affected, or even guided, 'Weenhayek behavior in these changes, thus influencing social change in return (Alvarsson, 1990).

III. SOURCES ON THE 'WEENHAYEK

We are heavily indebted to a handful of scholars for information on the 'Weenhayek and other Mataco groups. The Swedish ethnographer Erland Nordens-

³ See Fock, 1966/67 for more details.

kiöld was one of the first Westerners to visit, live with and describe these peoples e.g. in *Indianlif* (1910; reprinted in 1926). Nordenskiöld gave us ample information on subsistence activities, everyday life, social organization, ethnic conflicts and material culture.

The next one to visit and describe these Chaco Indians was the Finnish historian of religion Rafael Karsten. We owe to him the first analytical descriptions of the religion and the ritual life of these Indians (1913, 1932). The next one to dedicate ample time to the Mataco peoples was the Swiss-American scholar Alfred Métraux. He was the first one to recollect and publish Indian mythology (*Myths and Tales of the Matako Indians*; 1939). This was also one of the important contributions of the Argentine ethnographer Enrique Palavecino. He published a selection of trickster tales in the *Revista del Museo de la Plata* (1939-1941).

In the sixties, Danish anthropologist Niels Fock carried out long-term fieldwork among the Mataco-Güisnay. His stay resulted in a series of articles (1963, 1966 & 1966/1967), including a collection of tales and myths, (included in Wilbert & Simoneau 1982).

From the seventies and onwards, several Argentine ethnologists have published frequently on the Mataco peoples. Among these, we may mention José A Braunstein (1976) Mario Califano (1973), Ubén Gerardo Arancibia (1973), Celia Olga Mashnshnek (1973), Andrés A. Pérez Diez (1976) and Juan A. Gonzalo (1998). In the nineties we saw new volumes on the 'Weenhayek and their neighboring peoples, among them anthologies edited by Elmer S. Miller (1999), Mario Califano (1999) on warfare, and Mario Califano and María Cristina Dasso (2000) on shamanism; the latter two of particular interest to the present work.

IV. 'WEENHAYEK RELIGION AND SHAMANISM

The only religious specialists of the 'Weenhayek are the *hiyaawu*⁴, or shamans, who have advisory as well as curative functions. Through shamanic trips, these have knowledge of the supernatural and the unknown, and pass on this information to the people. Whenever a person fears supernatural intervention, he or she also recurs to the shamans for advice or curative rituals. Shamans have no direct political authority, but may, through their extensive knowledge, influence decisions. Missionary teachings have diminished the number of shamans and the number of cases actually treated by these.

Their knowledge originates from shamanic trips under the influence of *hataaj*, seeds of the cebil tree (*Anadenanthera colubrina*) (Alvarsson, 1995: 130).

⁴ Because of my desire to make identification easier, I use the singular form of 'Weenhayek nouns also in the plural, e.g. 'Weenhayek for the people (in the plural it is actually 'Weenhayeyh) and *hiyaawu* for the shaman as well as for a group of shamans (in the plural it is actually *hiyaawulh*).

Their most important tools are their calabash rattles, whistles, drums and their “spiritual” eyes. With the latter they can see right through the patient and make a quick diagnosis of the illness.

Their therapeutic methods include trips to “the other world”⁵ to release captive souls, often lost through the violation of taboos (“soul loss”). Other ways of remedy include extraction of alien spirits that have “intruded” the body, i.e. exorcism. The intruding spirits are often absorbed in “vehicles” in the form of black miniature arrows in the hand of the shamans. The healers are seldom paid any exorbitant fees, but are supposed to go gathering, fishing and hunting just like anybody else.

‘Weenhayek religion reflects the tendencies to individualism in their society. The ‘Weenhayek respect the invisible world, but they do not bow to, or worship any deity, except for in emergencies. When someone is ill or meets with malediction, he or she turns to the shaman who engages himself in contacting the suspected spirits. When a ‘Weenhayek is in severe danger of e.g. drowning, he may clutch his fish killing stick and call for help. But in daily life and under “normal circumstances” he or she needs no one.

Respect for the spiritual world is shown in the obedience of a great number of taboos, especially surrounding birth or death. The prohibitions include certain foods, looking at celestial bodies or passing through certain areas in the forest. Reverence is also notable in the awe for the power of the shamans.

V. INTERACTION WITH THE SUPERNATURAL

Up until recently, a person who suffered some kind of illness practiced a type of self-diagnosis (Alvarsson, 1992). If the problem was considered to be of a spiritual character, i.e. soul loss or intrusion, one consulted the *hiyaawu*’, the Weenhayek shaman. He initiated treatment which almost always included negotiation with the Keepers of Weenhayek cosmos.

When curing, the *hiyaawu*’ was equipped with a caraguatá string-bag *hiilu*’ (Alvarsson, 1994) that contained his primary power objects, items of hardwood and rare materials like stones and glass, plus the indispensable tobacco kit. He also wore a *‘nolheetekhih*, a head band, made of caraguatá as a proof of his direct contact with the supernatural (Califano, 1977). The calabashes that he used when curing, were tied to his hands by *niiyàk*, caraguatá string, and the rattles he used were made either of goat’s hooves or of metal plates. In both cases, they were tied together with *niiyàk*. When treatment was successfully completed, the shaman was to be compensated for the time he had spent curing the patient, and there was sometimes also need

⁵ This is my generalized definition. The ‘Weenhayek themselves distinguish between three layers of the world, the unnamed center, the under-world (*hohnat*) and the over-world (*pu-ule*”).

for a gift to the spiritual powers negotiated with. The preferred gift was a piece of cloth (Nordenskiöld, 1926: 83) or a caraguatá product, e.g. a bundle of *niiyák* (caraguatá string) or a finished string-product like a *hilu*'.

VI. ADVISORY FUNCTIONS OF THE SHAMAN

Beside their curative functions, shamans also have advisory functions. Through their shamanic trips, they have knowledge of the supernatural and the unknown, and pass on this information to the people. Whenever a person fears supernatural intervention, he or she also recurs to the shamans for advice or curative rituals. Shamans have no direct political authority, but could, especially in the old days, through their extensive knowledge, influence decisions. As we shall see below, shamans also helped out in public affairs.

VII. 'IS – HARMONY

Swedish ethnographer Erland Nordenskiöld provides us with an introduction to this section:

There is a little word that the Choroti indian often uses, that is *és*. Ashluslay say *is*. It means good, well, nice and beautiful. When we appraise the industry or the primitive art of these people, we must not underestimate its meaning. He, or rather she, because it is usually the woman who possesses any artistic skill, wants that what she is manufacturing, shall be *és*. She is proud when it is really *és*. She smiles with contentment when she hears that even a white man says *és* about her artefact. (Nordenskiöld, 1926: 94)¹. (My italics).

Noone can stay more than a short while among the Weenhayek, without hearing, or even repeating the “little word” *'is*. It is easy to discern, easy to reproduce (at least approximately) and easy to understand. *'Is* is ‘good’.

It is much more than that, however. Unlike the words for ‘good’ in European languages, a single lexical term cannot account for the cognitive field denoted by the label *'is*. Nordenskiöld, who was a keen observer, noted something of the complexity of the word, but the cognitive field is larger than he could imagine.⁶ It does not only include “good, well, nice and beautiful” (ibid), but also “goodness”, “perfect”, “good” – as opposed to “evil”, and “harmony”. In spite of the verbal character of *'is*, the best overall term, if we are to pick a single one, would in fact be “harmony” – a noun. In Weenhayek thought, *'is* is the normal condition in life. *'Is* may be created through art, or it appears in the making of art, and *'is* has to be restored if anything

⁶ This goes also for Richard J. Hunt, the “proto-linguist” who knew considerably more about the Wichi/Mataco language than Nordenskiöld. In spite of his superior knowledge, he just translated the word by “good” (Hunt, 1937).

disrupts the harmony of everyday life. It is significant that two words for negative conditions, usually translated by “bad” or “evil”, are in fact negations of *‘is*. One is *ni’isa* (“not-harmony”) and the other is *‘isiit’a* (“harmony-not”).

Cosmos is based on *‘is*, harmony. If harmony is disrupted by e.g. the breaking of a taboo by a human being, the *hiyaawu*, the Weenhayek shaman, needs to restore this harmony. He needs to negotiate with the *wos* (Keepers) of nature and reestablish *‘is*. A Weenhayek person needs to be in harmony with his relatives, his people and the supernatural. Then he is in a state of *‘is*.⁷

When a person is asked about how he is, he will usually answer *‘is*, (“I’m well”). If he is ill, he will say *‘isiit’a* (“I’m not well”). If he is getting better, he says *‘is-la* (“I will be better” [soon]). If nothing special has occurred, he just states *‘is t’aat* (“It is continually alright”), etc. In my list over combinations that start with, or contains, the morpheme *‘is*, I have 19 entries. There are many more.

In Weenhayek society, we have a classical division of labor, when it comes to handicraft. Men specialize in “hard” materials and figurative styles, women in “soft” materials and geometric styles (Illich 1982). Recent anthropological works on art have shown that “women play an active role in many forms of artistic expression in small-scale societies around the world” (Anderson/Field 1993:169). The Weenhayek constitute no exception. The most sophisticated art is produced by women.

As in many other foraging societies of Amerindian origin, we also have a division of labor in the religious field. The shamans, *hiyaawu*, are usually men. The same is true for speakers at ritual events. The role of women is harder to describe and thus often neglected.

A number of recent studies have shed new light on the female role in Amerindian religious life. Witherspoon e.g. states of the Navajo, that the female activity of “weaving, as taught by Spider woman, is an act of universal integration and an artistic expression of holistic symmetry” (Witherspoon, 1993: 319). Schaefer accounts for the same activity from the Huichol: “Through weaving women participate in the general system of symbolic forms which make up and define the culture as a whole” (Witherspoon, 1993: 119); and furthermore that “these material objects are endowed with sacred meaning and power” (Witherspoon, 1993: 119).

Weaving is a religious task, comparable to those performed by men. Schaefer illuminates this by an expression in Huichol, *nepiitaa iivauna* that has a double meaning, both “I am laying the warp” (an activity associated with women) and “I am praying” (an activity associated with men) (Schaefer, 1993: 120). She further underlines this fact by accounting for the Huichol analogy between weaving and singing (the foremost male religious role) (Schaefer, 1993: 127).

Although I would not go as far as Isacson, who states about the Emberá that “whatever man does, makes, or says, is a cosmic act and a ‘religious’ manifestation”

⁷ Compare Witherspoon who refers to similar conditions among the Navajo (1982: 22-24).

(Isacsson, 1993: 7), the making of *niiyàk* and the manufacturing of string-bags, in Weenhayek society, certainly have a religious overtone.

While men are set to create harmony through the active negotiations with the Keepers of nature, *or* through making war and killing that which is evil, women create harmony by giving birth to new human beings *and* through the manufacturing of string-bag web. Schaefer writes about the Huichol that:

On their looms, women hold the power in their hands to visually manifest and transmit major symbols in Huichol culture to all of its members in the form of woven design (1993: 119)

The same is true for 'Weenhayek women who in the *niiyàk* web have the most sophisticated art form of the whole culture at their disposal. There, we find the greatest variety of symbols as well as artistic expression. In the eyes of the beholder, the string-web is *the* cultural item, *par excellence*, a materialization of 'Weenhayek ethos. In this perspective, women are responsible for the creation and perpetuation of the single most important part of the whole of 'Weenhayek culture.

The significance of the *niiyàk* web is not only limited to manual or artistic excellence, however. It is of divine origin and women were endowed with the gift of bearing the knowledge of thread-making as well as the surrealistic (in the original sense of the word) designs, just like they were entrusted with the faculty of giving life.

When a 'Weenhayek woman makes thread, she gives birth in a way (Schaefer, 1993: 120, Alaminos, 1991: 40). When she elaborates the geometrical patterns of the string-web, she recreates archetypal symbols of divine origin, thus beautifying the present. Just like the male game of *sokwá* was played because the very act of playing it, influenced nature in a positive manner (Karsten, 1930), the very act of female weaving influences nature *and* culture in much the same way.

Beauty is not only something perceived and possibly preserved, in the way we in the Western world appreciate art as spectators at an exhibition, or preserve it as art collectors. When a *niiyàk* web is '*is*', it is not only so in the eyes of the beholder. The hands creating the bag are at the same time experiencing and creating '*is*'. Through the supernatural connections woven into the bag, the fingers create a meeting-point for *honhat*, the earth, the origin of the caraguatá plant, and *pule*', the sky, the origin of the divine patterns. This favor can only be experienced by actually twining the thread and [re-]creating the patterns. (Witherspoon 1982: 151-154).

While our society is composed of a majority of art consumers, created by a minority of art producers, Weenhayek society is entirely the other way around. Almost *all* Weenhayek women know how to produce string-web (and the woman who does not is not really considered a woman), and although not all women are considered masters, the vast majority can produce a web that is considered '*is*'. Thus, they participate in the collective creation of beauty and harmony.

Although the supernatural dimension of string-web production is less emphasized after christianization, (Koschitsky, 1992: 19), the concept of 'is is still intimately associated with the string-web. Weenhayek women still partake in the successive and perpetual creation of harmony.

Collective production also has a spiritual overtone, e.g. in producing a mail shirt for the leader of a war party. Conflicts between villages or ethno-linguistic groups are seen as disruption of harmony. To restore harmony, women have to work collectively to induce spiritual force into the person responsible for the revenge party.

VIII. WAGING WAR

Nowadays, fights are rare in the Indian societies of the Chaco (Rydén, 1936: 174), and the 'Weenhayek constitute no exception. There are several reasons for this. The ideals of self-control and good temper (Fock, 1963: 94) may be seen as two important elements. Social control, in the form of slander and accusations of certain transgressions, is another. Finally, the fear of supernatural retaliation if norms are violated, constitute another important force.

When fights occur, there must be a legal organization to deal with them, however. Almost all fights within the village, the *nowettheley*, are considered "family quarrels" and solved within the group under the supervision of the family head. Any problems between two individuals, who are not parts of the same *nowettheley*, are treated by the respective family heads. If these cannot arrive at a consensus agreement, the conflict has to be treated by the *niyaat* (spokesman) or the village assembly.

The *niyaat* is supposed to supervise at parties and is thus authorized to take action against a trouble-maker. Furthermore, he has some "vague judiciary powers; for instance, he may force a thief to restore stolen goods." (Métraux, 1946: 303). He is more of a mediator or a justice of the peace than a judge or a policeman, however. The only institution that may inflict punishments on the villagers is in fact the assembly, and even this has no right to impose corporal punishment (Jespersson, 1943: 94).

Among the 'Weenhayek, there is thus a legal organization that is based on "a law of private delicts" (Fock, 1966: 349), as well as one on "public delicts" (Fock, 1966: 349). The latter one includes: (a) escalated individual conflicts and (b) territorial conflicts, as well as means of releasing aggression: (c) hockey and (d) war.

IX. ESCALATED INDIVIDUAL CONFLICTS

Individual conflicts are usually considered private, and thus outside the responsibility of the village assembly. If the two parties in conflict represent two kindreds, or even two villages, however, the conflict is immediately escalated into a

collective problem. This type of conflicts requires negotiations, sometimes an arbitrator, or even the intervention of the village assembly. Adultery is one of the actions that may lead to homicide; and homicide, if committed outside one's immediate kindred, is always escalated into a collective conflict.

If unfaithfulness leads to homicide, this is considered too drastic a measure, even if it is a *crime passionel* (Fock, 1966: 352). The erring party thus immediately becomes the injured one and some kind of compensation is sought for the loss. This is also the case when a quarrel has led to homicide, or when someone is accused of having caused suicide (e.g. through infidelity).

According to Fock, the compensation could be divided into three kinds: (i) blood-money, (ii) retributive killing or (iii) compensatory killing of an enemy, each representing a stage of escalation (Fock, 1966: 352-353).

In the first case (i) the injured party, i.e. the kindred of the murdered person, sends a commission to demand compensation. In bygone days, the armed representatives painted their faces and visited the village, or the part of the village, where the culprit's family lived. With the help of a mediator, usually the spokesman of the village, they demanded economic compensation, or blood-money. Two horses and two sheep, or ten goats, was considered a reasonable amount. If the injured family was satisfied, the conflict was settled.

If they were not satisfied, or did not even try to negotiate, retributive killing (ii) was the probable outcome. Then, the men of the whole family group armed themselves and attacked the family group of the killer. If they did not achieve their goal of killing one or several of their members, which a united band often prevented, they went home and engaged the whole band. Thus, the conflict was easily escalated and could lead to war (see below). If more than one person was killed at the retaliation, the erring party became the injured party and planned retributions in turn. This could go on until the two groups were even and got tired of the killings, or alternatively, a successful mediator could arrange the matter through blood-money.

If the society was at war, there was a third possibility of compensation (iii). This was for the culprit to go to the enemy people, slaughter one of their warriors, and come back with the scalp. Thus, he could compensate the collective's loss of one warrior or worker by killing another.

If compensation was impossible or the crime considered to endanger the whole band, the culprit could traditionally be put to death by public execution or condemned to unlimited exile (Métraux, 1946: 301). Today, such a criminal, i.e. somebody threatening the safety of individuals or the village, is handed over to the local police authorities.

Nowadays, individual conflicts are solved as earlier, within the *nowetlhey* (family group), even if the crimes committed are offences according to the national law. During the 20th century, when most 'Weenhayek groups had expatriate missionaries, collective conflicts that could not be solved by the spokesman or the village assembly were often submitted to the missionaries. In those instances, these acted as

justices of peace or mediators at a higher level. One of the results of their mediation and their sermons, in combination with the harsh treatment of murderers in the national prisons, was that homicide diminished drastically during the 20th century.

Still in the late former century, the 'Weenhayek were extremely unwilling to submit their cases to the national authorities, as their experiences of the national legal system were almost entirely negative. They faced discrimination and misunderstandings because of the language barrier. The result of a report to the police was often that the 'Weenhayek person reporting was fined together with the culprit. In the early 21st century, this situation is slowly improving and more trust is building up between 'Weenhayek and the national authorities, including the police.

X. TERRITORIAL CONFLICTS

Many of the conflicts between adjacent bands or peoples were in the past caused by fights over territorial rights. These could be caused by prolonged droughts, changed course of the river, or successive elimination of important game, etc. People also fought over fishing rights (Rosen, 1921: 189) good hunting grounds or especially attractive groves of tree-fruit.

The growth and following fission of a *wiky*' often caused repeated territorial conflicts before new borders were established. The same thing happened repeatedly when the Mestizo started to settle in the area. After the pacification of the 'Weenhayek, territorial conflicts have diminished. Lately, demarcation and defense of the lines of the legal territories of the 'Weenhayek, acquired by the missions, have been entirely peaceful.

XI. HOCKEY AS A MEANS OF RELIEVING TENSION

The traditional Mataco peoples knew only one kind of ball-game, the *ha'laàlhota* ' or "hockey" (Nordenskiöld, 1926: 61, 142). It was considered both a diversion and a sport. Boys, adults and even old men engaged in the games. The players were divided into two teams, each comprising 10 to 25 players. The rules were similar to those of Western rugby and hockey. The idea was to get the wooden ball on top of the opponents' woodpile. This was accomplished by hitting it with curved sticks, similar to those used in hockey (Rydén, 1936: 172-174). A definite score of goals was decided before the start, and the game ended when a team had scored the stipulated number of goals.

For the young men, hockey was also a way of showing off, a complement to the dances. When the game included two villages other aspects were also added to this. A prize was often set up, a goat from each village, attractive pieces of clothing, etc. The team that won also brought back the prize – or invited their opponents to a party. Inter-village hockey was also an important political instrument. It was employed as a means of *releasing aggression*, and according to the Indians, as a substi-

tute for armed conflicts between villages that were at variance with each other (Métraux, 1946: 334; Fock, 1982: 23). Instead of waging war on each other, the battle was fought on the hockey ground.

The hockey game was also an instrument to control repeatedly the competitive force of neighbor villages and groups. A growing village had better and more players than a declining one. In the case of conflict, the villages immediately knew the presumptive strength and courage of the opponents. Thus, many potential conflicts could easily be mediated as both parties could anticipate the outcome.

After the pacification of the area, around the Chaco War, hockey lost this political role. In the 1950s and the 1960s, it was gradually abandoned. Several reasons seem to have contributed to its decline. The political need for hockey was no longer there. The Mestizo looked upon the “primitive” game with contempt. A Norwegian missionary preached against all kinds of ball-games in not too distant Embarcación. Football became the new sport in many villages, and thus a substitute for hockey. It is even claimed by the Indians that the Argentinian authorities prohibited all kinds of *juegos indígenas* (Amerindian games), including hockey.

For a few years in the 1970s, hockey was played at the mission school in Villa Montes as a means of physical activity, diversion, and preservation of ‘Weenhayek tradition and the ethnic pride of the children. It was probably an important step towards cultural consciousness raising among the suppressed ‘Weenhayek at the time, but after the strong support from the expatriate missionaries was withdrawn, Western soccer or football again took over among ‘Weenhayek youth.

XII. ARMED CONFLICTS

From what we know about the Chaco at the turn of the century, armed conflicts seem to have been common (Nordenskiöld, 1926: 22, 100-103, 127, 129; Rosen, 1921: 184-189; Métraux, 1946: 312-315), even though the loss of warriors in each battle may have been fairly limited (Nordenskiöld, 1926: 101). As the information that we possess originates from these relatively late sources, this impression may be historically untrue, in that the recurrent fights during the past century were very likely caused by the increased pressure from the Whites (Métraux, 1946: 234). We know for example that in the past, fights between bands of the same ethnolinguistic group were often substituted for by hockey (see above) or prevented by band alliances.

The armed conflicts between two ethnic groups resembled to a large extent the local conflicts between bands. Territorial conflicts (see above), homicide or suspicion of killings caused by witchcraft and looting of domestic animals were the most common reasons for initiating an armed conflict against a neighboring people (Métraux, 1946: 313). The campaigns were led by the *niyaat* (spokesman) or a *hiyaawu* (shaman) and initiated by a drinking bout.

XIII. DRINKING BOUTS

The 'Weenhayek believed that the beer made from the chewed pods of *jwa'aayh* (algarroba, *Prosopis alba*) would give them special, spiritual strength for the fight. When they drank it, they felt that their fear disappeared and that they felt much more valiant than before. Aloja, or "beer", could be brewed from almost all sweet vegetable products of the 'Weenhayek household. *Jwa'aayh* was considered the best (Karsten, 1913: 204), closely followed by 'aqààyek (honey), 'inààthis (Water melon) and *leetse'nih* (chañar). 'Ijpaat (maize) is the most common base ingredient among some neighboring peoples, but rarely used by the 'Weenhayek. When the most cherished tree-fruits were gone, 'inhaataj (tusca) could be used (Karsten, 1913: 203), sometimes mixed with honey to a strong mead (Fock, 1982: 9).

Traditionally, an aloja party constituted both the nutritive and the ritual peak of the year (Karsten, 1913: 203; Nordenskiöld, 1926: 55; Métraux, 1946: 246; Fock, 1982: 9). When enough quantities of a fruit had ripened, the village spokesman, or any other family head, invited the other villagers to a party. An aloja feast could be celebrated as a part of the initiation of a young girl, as part of the wedding ceremony – and as a religious ritual before or in connection with dangerous undertakings, such as armed conflicts or raids during war.

According to Karsten, the basic idea was that the aloja fermentation constituted a process where divine forces gathered, and the intoxication that followed was a kind of communion with these forces, where they took possession of the human beings that drunk the beer (Karsten, 1913: 204) and reinforced them or protected them e.g. during the war raid they were about to embark upon.

As the aloja was thought to induce this spiritual strength in the partaker of the ceremony, the brew was also susceptible to attack from negative forces. Therefore, a singer was contracted to sing over the aloja to protect it from evil spirits that might destroy the fermentation process (Karsten, 1913: 206).

Women of the inviting cluster, or all the women of the village, started to gather enormous quantities of fruits in the morning, and subsequently proceeded to pound them in mortars. One part was boiled for a few minutes. Another part was chewed and spat into the vessel for the brew.

The containers used, were large calabashes (Rydén, 1936: 112), ceramic pots or, most often, a trough fabricated from a trunk of *soop'wayukw* (palo zapallo) or *tseemlhàk* (Bottle tree). In the latter case, the tree was cut down, lopped, and carried in between two men (Fock, 1982: 19), or rolled on the ground, to the village. The log was excavated with hardwood sticks or axes, and as the wood used was light, this was a swift process. Finally a fire was lit inside the log to dry it out more quickly and to smooth and harden the walls. The log was fixed to the trunk of a tree at one end and secured by two stakes at the other end. Then the boiled and chewed fruit was poured into the vessel and finally, late in the evening, it was filled with water (Rydén, 1936: 112).

According to my informants (and my own estimates based on this information), a “normal” trough held some 180 liters, whereas an “exceptionally large” one, as at a wedding at Simbolar in 1942, held an estimated 1, 800 liters.

The fermentation is a fairly swift process and is said to easily go wrong. Thus, it is no wonder that special care was taken to promote the process and to protect the brew that was the result of much work and large quantities of tree-fruits. The saliva of the women, produced when chewing the fruit, was evidently seen as the condition for the fermentation process (Karsten, 1913: 206). The latter was also to take place during a moon-lit night to get the best results as the moon was thought to speed it up (Karsten, 1913: 204)⁸.

Finally, around sunset, the brew was covered with sticks and grass and left to ferment under the surveillance of the singer. He placed his pim-pim drum on a stand, planted in the ground, and started to beat it, singing.

After a few hours, he made interruptions now and again to try the brew. When it was strong enough, his task was completed and he awakened the host. In a few instances, the whole village was awake and the party was initiated, even if this happened long before dawn.

People gathered in the open space outside the house cluster, if it was a private party, and in the open space in the center of the village, if it was a community feast. They were seated in a large circle, the men on stools and pieces of wood, forming an inner circle with the women on skins or hides, forming the outer part. The spokesman walked around and collected all weapons; he even searched people if necessary. Later, he deposited all the arms in his own house to prevent bloodshed during the party. According to some of my informants, the spokesman never drank much. One of his tasks was to stay sober to be able to intervene if conflicts occurred.

The men were invited first. The host's wife brought a calabash full of aloja from the trough and handed it over to her husband, or placed a container by his side, so that he could pour out aloja into the calabash, straining it through his fingers (Rydén, 1936: 89-90). He drank a mouthful and presented it to the man sitting next to him, who was expected to drink half of it, or less, and then pass it on to the next. To drink it all at once was considered bad manners (Métraux, 1946: 350). “First, it was bitter, but gradually it became more and more tasty”, one of my informants put it. When the calabash was emptied, it was sent back to the host who filled it anew.

The women were served when the men had received a few rounds of the aloja. They drank less than their husbands and were ready to intervene if a fight occurred. Their task was to attend to the aloja and pass it on to the host, but simultaneously they tended to their own tasks. According to Rydén, the women among the Chulupi did not participate at all in the drinking (Rydén, 1936: 90).

⁸ Rydén, however, attributes the rapid fermentation to the remains of yeast fungi in the previously used vessels (1936: 112) but cannot account for the process in a new vessel.

Normally, this was a genuine drinking party. Food was not served and drinking was interrupted only by dancing by young men and women; singing by old men, accompanied by calabash rattles; music by young men playing the musical bow or a flute; or story telling by the old men. If a fight occurred, one of the old women could calm it down with one of her songs.

When the beer was finished, water was poured over the fruit pap, and the beverage was stirred. Then, the somewhat weaker aloja that resulted was served again. The process was repeated a second time, which meant that virtually all alcohol was leached from the fruit pap, which was now poured out.

If not going to a war party, most men drank until they were quite intoxicated. Many of the young men, who were unaccustomed to drinking, threw up. The atmosphere was usually cheerful, though, and as the aloja was of low alcoholic content, the intoxication process was slow and gradual and it was almost impossible to get rashly drunk. A proof of this was that the parties could go on for several days (Métraux, 1946: 350). Fights were not uncommon and blood revenges sometimes took place during the aloja feasts, however⁹.

If supposed to be a preparation for war, the party was ended by dancing (Métraux 1946:313), most probably a war dancing ritual to enhance strength and a community feeling (“team spirit”) among the warriors.

XIV. TACTICS

If a conflict escalated, and nothing could be done to stop it, war was seen as the only solution. Encouraged by the young men, the leaders took the group on a campaign. When the target was located far away, the war party left in the middle of the night and camped close to the village they were to attack. War camps were selected so that the “natural protection of a river, lake, or wood prevented surprise attacks.” (Métraux, 1946: 314).

When on a campaign, communication was important. Just like on a hunting expedition bird-calls could be used to convey messages. Métraux tells of a series of

⁹ The brewing of fruit beer and the occurrence of aloja feasts was mentioned by the first chroniclers (see Lozano, 1733: 55, 81 or Mingo, 1981(1797): 398) and is probably of early origin. According to Nordenskiöld, the fruit beer was of high nutritive value for the Chaco Indians during the summertime (1926: 55) and, according to Palavecino, the tree fruits were thus associated with a time of joy (1964: 381). See also Karsten, 1913: 203, 1932: 36, Jespersson 1943: 117 and others. In course of time, even some of the colonists took up the custom of brewing aloja from algarroba (Kraft, 1943: 169). The aloja parties were nevertheless considered to be highly immoral and “uncivilized”. When the Protestant missionaries arrived on the scene, they preached against the use of alcohol, mainly because of the growing addiction to the White man’s liquor among the Weenhayek men (Rydén, 1936: 164). In the end, these factors combined and the aloja party tradition was discontinued in the 1960’s.

other means of communication: the use of columns of smoke, bunches of grass or inclining sticks as signals of warfare (Métraux, 1946: 317).

War tactics seem to have been fairly similar among the different groups – except for the equestrian peoples. Métraux states the following about the neighbors of the ‘Weenhayek, the Pilagá:

When resting in the evening, the shamans, who accompanied the Pilagá, fell into trance, and their familiar spirits helped them ascertain the whereabouts of the enemy. [Meanwhile] During the night, the Abipón scouted the nearby plains, sometimes blowing horns and trumpets, to make sure there was no danger nearby. (Métraux, 1946: 317).

As a part of the preparations, the ‘Weenhayek painted their faces black to induce fear and put on mail shirts and skin girdles to protect their bellies (Nordenskiöld, 1910: 119; see further below). The most common tactics during war raids were matutinal surprise attacks. The arms used were bows and arrows, clubs and spears. The party sneaked up to the village in complete silence. When attacking, all the invaders screamed to increase fear and cause chaos. When possible, all men were killed and scalps taken as trophies. Women and children were brought back home as prisoners of war. If not exchanged for other prisoners, many of them were later incorporated into the society through marriage or adoption¹⁰.

Victory feasts were commonly held after a successful attack. During those feasts, women danced with the taken trophies, like scalps, hands or heads. They sang, shouted or drank out of the skulls of the slain enemies. The bones of the enemies were used for pipes or for whistles or their skulls were used for cups (Métraux, 1946: 313-315). Scalps were dried, fixed to a ring of bark or fibers and attached to, or hung from, a long pole. On important days, these scalps were brought out from the hut and exposed as important trophies that brought status to the killer or the owner¹¹.

XV. MAKING PEACE

The conditions for peace were based on a principle of compensation. If a person had been killed by the enemy, peace could be attained either after a retributive killing, i.e. one life for another, or if the murderer’s family paid blood-money in the

¹⁰ Erland Nordenskiöld gives us several accounts of war: of the Ashluslay versus the Toba (1926: 22); of the Choroti - Ashluslay coalition versus the ‘Weenhayek (Mataco); as the reasons for war this time, he mentions fishing rights and plundering (1926: 100-103). He also accounts for war feats and peace-making among these peoples (ibid.) Nordenskiöld also has a section on the Chané and Chiriguano wars (1926: 127, 129).

¹¹ See Nordenskiöld who gives a broad account of scalping and the use of scalps. He also tells of children playing “taking scalps” (1910: 16, 18, 24, 63, 83-84, 122).

form of sheep, horses or goats to the injured family group (Nordenskiöld 1926:102). Large armed conflicts between ethnic groups were settled in the same way. Emissaries could carry bundles of arrows and bows to pay war debts, i.e. to compensate for dead individuals. Sheep and horses could also be used as compensation. (Nordenskiöld, 1910: 124).

After the turn of the century, when the increasing threat from the Mestizo became more and more obvious to the Indians, inter-Indian conflicts were suppressed and several alliances between ethnic groups were established, like the one between the former enemies, the Toba and the Mataco (Métraux, 1946: 313), to be able to resist the growing force of the Whites.

XVI. THE MAIL SHIRT AND OTHER PROTECTIVE GARMENTS

War was fought with bows and arrows, clubs and spears. During the 20th century, rifles and shotguns were included in the arsenal.

One of the most important war articles, however, was probably the textile armor of the Mataco-Guaicurú peoples, called “mail shirts” by Métraux (1946). In his major work on the Chaco Indians, *Bland Indianer*, Rosen e.g. states that:

In the Choroti huts I often found a type of thick shirts, knotted of a tightly twined caraguatá string, fig. 106, but I never saw them in use. When I inquired about the reason for this, it was said that such garments are used mainly in combat and that they are worn as a protection against the arrows. Caraguatá shirts are found also among the Ashluslay and the Mataco (1921: 141).

Rosen was a bit hesitant about the use of the mail shirts at that time, but others have confirmed their use, and my informants were able to reproduce exact replicas, and confirm their use, over seven decades after his visit. Métraux states that: “Sleeveless shirts, netted in the same crochet-like technique as bags, are used primarily as armor and as ceremonial garments, but may also afford protection against excessive cold (Mataco, Toba, Pilagá, Ashluslay, and others)” (1946: 272).

In the Weenhayek language, the shirts are likened to the tough and hardy skin of the Iguana abdomen: *'aalhuts'et'aj* (“iguana-stomach-skin”). Just like the iguana, a Mataco-Guaicurú man wearing his mail shirt has a good protection of his abdominal and breast region. The shirt is woven of a double caraguatá web, and can protect the bearer from all types of wooden arrows. An arrow that hits a man in a mail shirt “hurt, left a bruise, but did not enter the body”, according to an old Weenhayek informant.

A simpler variant of the mail shirt, or possibly a complementary garment, was the abdominal armor, the *t'ookwe p'ot* (“breast-cover”), made of skin, caraguatá web or woolen cloth. It was used during rough hunting and possibly also in combat.

It was 25 cms wide and 100-120 cms long; it was wound around the waist and tied with small strings¹².

The long, pre-War hair-dress of the Weenhayek required considerable time for making up and combing. Considering this, and the “Absalom syndrome”¹³, it is not to wonder that a hair net was used frequently while out hunting or during combat in the forest. The ‘*nolheetekhih*, or hair net, was knitted in the same technique as are the string-bags, and may be a development of these as foraging bags like e.g. the *hi-lu*’, are pulled over the head when taking honey from aggressive bees’ nests.

XVII. THE PUBLIC FUNCTION OF SHAMANISM (AS E.G. IN WARFARE)

As indicated above, the *hiyaawu*’ (shaman) had multiple functions in the village. He constituted the main spiritual protection of the village, he was the primary source of knowledge about the supernatural world and he had important curative functions¹⁴. Here, I will not enter into his cultural or religious functions, but merely sketch some political implications of his office.

The ‘Weenhayek shaman was most often a man, but could also be a woman. As stated above, he or she dedicated himself or herself to gathering, fishing, gardening, and hunting just like the other villagers did. His hut was not different from theirs, nor his clothing or his food. He was, as the others, an “ordinary” villager with a specialty. His specialty was considered the most important one, however, and because of this he enjoyed a somewhat higher status than the rest. His status was based on fear as much as on respect. His office was not hereditary.

In times of crisis, however, the shamans wielded more power than usual. This is true when it came to a disruption of harmony in the form of an epidemic – or in the case of a military attack or other forms of armed conflict. “An important duty of shamans is to protect their band by chanting and shaking their rattles at night when there is a danger” [from the supernatural world] (Métraux, 1946: 363).

XVIII. THREAT BY AN EPIDEMIC

Métraux provides us with the following vivid image of an anti-epidemic ritual among one of the Mataco peoples in the thirties:

¹² For an illustration, see Nordenskiöld, 1926: Pl. 13, Fig. 42. Note that this is not the same garment as *qawaq*, the abdominal belt. That belt was always made of wool and used on ceremonial occasions or at feasts to fasten the *chiripa*.

¹³ The “Absalom syndrome” refers to the Old Testament story in which King David persecutes his son Absalom after a conflict and Absalom is getting caught in an oak, hanging by his long hair (2 Samuel, 18: 9, 14).

¹⁴ For further information on this issue, see e.g. Métraux, 1946: 360-365 and the section 3.2-3.

When a community is threatened, everyone may join in a ceremony to ward off the impending evil. When a Mataco band dreads an epidemic, it symbolically fights the spirits or disease demons. Both sexes wearing red head bands with feathers, necklaces and red waistcoats line up behind a row of arrows stuck into the ground. They begin the counter-offensive with magical songs accompanied by gourd rattles. At intervals the shamans take a snuff of hatax (cebil, *Piptadenia macrocarpa*) powder to achieve a mild state of trance, when their liberated souls go to the sky in the form of birds to challenge the hostile spirits. Then everyone threatens the invisible enemies with rattles and bunches of feathers, marches against them, and steps on them as if to crush them.

The ceremony is concluded with a general disinfection: The performers blow on each other, tinkle their rattles all over their neighbors' bodies, and dust them with feather bundles. The souls of the dead shamans may be invited to participate in the ceremony, and some cebil powder is dropped on the ground for them (Métraux, 1946: 354).

XIX. THREAT BY WAR

It is not far-fetched to assume that the war raids were initiated in a similar way. In general, there was no discernible difference between the treatment of (what we would call) "spiritual" attacks (such as epidemics) and that of "military" ones (as in the case of armed conflicts). The drinking bout was given to induce general spiritual strength into all the warriors. But the shaman, however, also had access to other means.

The 'Weenhayek shaman e.g. could learn about the future by releasing his free spirit and by traveling at night to the land of the spirits (*honhat*) or by consulting 'Ijwáala', the Sun (Métraux, 1946: 363). Thus they could gain knowledge about what was going to happen, and thus prepare for the avenge of the attack. Mbya shamans "not only could foresee future events, but by their magic they could prevent their realization. Thus, they could forestall diseases, wars and famines that might have destroyed their people" (Métraux, 1946: 364).

"Shamans at times follow the warriors when on military expeditions. Through their charms, they were supposed to gain victory for their party" (Métraux, 1946: 364). Likewise, when drought or epidemics threatened or afflicted the village, their political power increased notably.

The charismatic qualities of a shaman could, especially in periods of crisis, mean that he influenced the politics of the village, or, in some cases, even took over the leading functions of the *niyaat* (Métraux, 1946: 303, 364). In his "political career", he thus used his spiritual powers and his patients as a basis for his office, similar to the way in which the ordinary *niyaat* used his following of relatives.

XX. THE USE OF A SPECIAL DIVINATORY MAIL SHIRT

While on a war commission, the shamans (or other especially appointed leaders) used mail shirts featuring the *wààn'lhàjwho'* (nandu-back) design. The average soldier wore shirts manufactured with the *hap'alaqhen'* design while a special *wààn'lhàjwho'* mail shirt sometimes was made for the leader of the raiding party. Apart from being a swift runner, as all warriors, this person was supposed to “know”, i.e. have access to esoteric knowledge to guide the party in battle.

Victor Gutiérrez, one of Monica Koschitsky's informants, states that:

In war, the ordinary man used the *athlutset'aj* mail shirt; he did not use *huanltaj huó*. The design *huanltaj huó* comes from *fwistes*, that's why it has power, because the chaguar (caraguatá) is from *fwistes*. (1992: 72)

This quotation shows that Gutiérrez attributes a special importance to this design. *Jwistes* (in my orthography) is a category of powerful spirits, here said to be the origin of the *wààn'lhàjwho'* design. Thus, the bearer of the mail shirt could receive the necessary information from them.

To achieve this intimate link, this design was supposed to be manufactured by all the grown-up women of a settlement together (ibid). The emphasis on collective labor, common effort, exclusivity, etc. point to the use of *wààn'lhàjwho'* as a focal point of cosmic energy, often symbolized by the recurrent cross (or dividing line) in this design. This design is probably associated both with physical and spiritual alertness and could thus be used to increase the mental and spiritual power of the shaman. It is also supposed to attract and concentrate cosmic energy and thus knowledge through its pattern.

XXI. REWARD TO SHAMANS FOR INITIATIVES IN WAR

Shamans who accompanied their people in war raids were compensated by receiving a good deal of the possible bounty. Métraux provides us with two accounts from neighboring peoples:

After an expedition, the Abipón awarded the shaman who had accompanied them the best parts of the spoils. Dobrizhoffer (1874, 2:87) remarks that medicine men “had plenty of excellent horses, and domestic furniture superior that of the rest” (Métraux, 1946: 364).

Thus it is obvious that the Amerindians of the Gran Chaco considered shamanic intervention in warfare as valuable, and perhaps as crucial for success.

XXII. CONCLUSIONS

The present article has intended to focus on the activities of, or contributions by, shamans in indigenous warfare. As indicated in the introduction, this interface between shamanism and warfare has often been overlooked. My suggestion is that this may be explained by the compartmentalization of reality that is prevalent among many Western scholars. Shamans have been studied as part of religion and warfare as part of the political organization. Thus the interface between the two has been obscured by our preconceived notions of reality.

Instead, I urge, that shamanism, as well as warfare, should be seen in the light of the holistic view of cosmos that most, or even all, foraging societies have. Warfare should not only be regarded as a part of the political organization, or as a result of territorial conflicts, but also, and especially in this case, as a “disruption of harmony” in a wider sense. At the same time, shamanism should not only be regarded as an activity in the religious sphere, but as an active force also in the political sphere. Therefore, in this article, I have tried to present and analyze shamans’ contributions to warfare as something akin to healing, as a type of restoration of harmony, just as in the individual healing ritual, but on a larger, communal scale. Retaliation and peace-making thus correspond to the battle and negotiation with spirits on an individual level; and in both cases spiritual warfare is employed.

Even though warfare in these societies was an almost entirely male activity, I have tried to give a few glimpses also of women’s contributions to bellicose activities. I have tried to show their importance, not only in giving birth to new members of the group, (less important among egalitarian foragers), but in preparing the important, and in the main “spiritual”, fruit beer for drinking bouts before war raids; and in giving “birth” to the spiritually important web design that connects the shaman with the “other” world. Thus women’s “life-giving” contributions may be just as important as the “life-taking” activities of the men.

All in all, the major contribution of this work may be to advocate a more holistic approach to societal studies, and not the least, to the issue of warfare.

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