

Collective Action for War and for Peace

A Case Study among the Enga of Papua New Guinea

by Polly Wiessner

Online enhancements: appendix

Drawing on data from the Enga of Papua New Guinea, I (1) compare the challenges in organizing collective action for warfare in small-scale societies with those for peacemaking; (2) identify the many different channels of appeal that are interwoven to elicit the cooperation of individuals with different agendas: the rational or pragmatic, the emotional and the ritual; (3) propose that warfare is a dynamic process involving continual change in response to internal group conflicts of interest that generate new institutions, rules, and morals to facilitate collective action; and (4) show how the juxtaposition of war and active peacemaking is an effective strategy for building social complexity. This raises the question of why active peacemaking was relatively rare in small-scale societies or if it indeed was in the past.

armed combat as well as peacemaking and the conflicts of interest and/or loyalty between the parties involved, in small-scale societies in general and the Enga in particular. She also presents an extensive history of, and phases in, Enga warfare reconstructed from oral sources for the last 4 centuries—quite an achievement!

Clearly, at least for me, the major theme and *portée* of the article is the contention that the juxtaposition of war and active peacemaking is an effective and powerful strategy for building social complexity—which raises the question why it is relatively uncommon in small-scale societies. A rather surprising, partial answer is strong leaders (in New Guinea in the form of big men): “A key factor in eliciting collective action for the peace process is strength and competency of leadership . . . Active peacemaking is rare without some social inequalities, attained or ascribed, and surplus production”—a possibility precluded or constrained in relatively egalitarian, unsegmented (*sensu* Kelly 2000) societies. From table A1 (“Triggering Incidents for Wars from ca. 1650 to 2010”) one can discern that in the first and second periods (ca. 1650–1855 and ca. 1855–1915), the category “Theft/property (including pigs)” has the highest frequency. In the Meggitt period the category “Land dispute” has the highest frequency. And in the last two periods (1981–1990 and 1991–2010) the “Homicide/revenge” category appears to be the most frequent triggering incident for war—and might even be increasing.

Wiessner provides a much-needed corrective to Meggitt’s overemphasis on land acquisition as the primary reason for Enga warfare. “As in most New Guinea societies, acquisition of land or other resources was rarely an underlying reason for war (Knauff 1990; Sillitoe 1977, 1978) though land issues were indeed used to provoke and punish” (appendix).

Other researchers, such as Morren (1984) and Rubel and Rosman (1978), have noted that the proximate cause of particular incidents among the Enga and other highland horticulturalist societies is the perceived need to retaliate for past wrongs, often murder or putative murder by sorcery. The desire for vengeance is often reinforced by the need to propitiate

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New Guinea provides a great base for close comparative study of tribal warfare and therefore for understanding the complexity inherent in war that is not controlled by centralized, hierarchal polities. Within New Guinea, war among the Enga people is exceptionally well described, notably in Meggitt’s *Blood Is Their Argument* (1977) and Wiessner and Tumu’s *Historical Vines* (1998). Wiessner draws on all that and more to present an extraordinarily complete portrait of pathways into war and, even more remarkably, from war to peace.

That does not mean New Guinea offers a window into war in humanity’s deep past. Skeletal trauma among 38 individuals from 1230 to 1650 suggest “interpersonal violence or warfare” (Scott and Buckley 2010:515). That falls within the great intensification of war across the Pacific basin (and globe) associated with the Medieval Climate Anomaly (750–1250) passing into the Little Ice Age (1350–1800) (Lape 2006; Nunn 2007). Wiessner’s oral history begins after most of that, around 1650.

By then, the sweet potato had spread across New Guinea, with multiple introductions of different varieties (Roullier et al. 2013). Such post-Magellanic cultivar transfers could be revolutionary, as when American maize and manioc seeded in Africa provided infrastructure for warring states and commoditization of captive people (Wolf 1982:204). Sweet potatoes set off the “*Ipomoean* revolution” (Feil 1987), starting with sustained population growth, movements, and filling in. As Wiessner documents, this led to slaughterous warfare in the early 1800s, but it also increased surplus production in pigs and expansion of exchange and ritual connections with developing social and political complexity.

Over time, Wiessner finds alternating periods and episodes of war and peace, at both local and regional levels, which through agentive coping and strategizing by elders, cultivated

exchange systems of peaceful congress and management of war to reduce death, destruction, and duration. By the end of the 1800s, peacemaking via compensation was institutionalized, and much war was governed by rules. The Great Wars gave way to even more elaborated exchange cycles that benefited gerontocratic leaders especially, who competed for followers and passed their positions along to sons and nephews.

Through Wiessner, this supercharged fast-forward in social evolution is known in ethnographic detail, making it a superlative addition to a literature that relies largely on archaeological data, as in Arkush and Allen (2006). Where would this trajectory have led if it weren't truncated by uncontrolled guns?

Wiessner takes us into a final pregun war in 1986. A welter of perceptions, interests, and enthusiasms go into any collective decision, to or from war. Individual positions are structured by age/generation, lineage, blood and marriage loyalties, and family responsibilities, all of which entail different costs and benefits from war. Then there is process. Proven methods can drum up war enthusiasm, especially for young men looking to prove themselves, but accumulating losses and debts of war provide a countervailing tide for peace.

Wiessner sees strong leaders and extensive trade as foundational for negotiating peace. That position highlights the need for more focused comparative work on the role of both, which would have relevance for realist and liberal positions in international relations theory. Making peace should not be confused with conflict management short of collective killing (Fry 2006), though the two may go along. Leaders may be consensus managers or war promoters, depending on social organization, historical circumstance, and personality, be they chiefs (Carneiro 1998), big men (Sillitoe 1978), or headmen (Kracke 1978). Trade can unite groups, but with situations conducive to monopoly can also foment antagonisms leading to violent struggle. This is clearly evident when trade in key commodities involves avenues to the outside world (Ferguson 1995). That brings us back to the mid-Ambum 1986 war.

Wiessner highlights diversity in individual motivations. That is emics. But scattered personal opinions can be politically structured at a more inclusive level, from whence comes war. Etic analysis aims at cross-cultural generalization. From the limited detail provided here, events in mid-Ambum seem like standard fare for tribal zone conflicts across the centuries and around the world.

The war began with a personal dispute and killing. Although not the killers, the Piao Kumbin clan was held responsible since it happened on their land. But there was a deeper dispute involved. Kumbin was prominent around a Lutheran mission, church, school, and aid post at Kundis, in land claimed by Piao and Potealini and accessible to both. This was the "gateway to the modern world, and, thus, a point of pride. An educated Piao man had built his house, garden, and profitable store on this border land, arousing jealousy." Kumbin decided for war "to draw the line over the piece of land considered to be the gateway to modern assets."

As the fighting progressed, Piao told Potealini they "would be driven up into the hills and never receive the benefits of the modern world." Losing, Potealini descended to the mission and burned its buildings. Piao taunted that Potealini could not control the land as they once had, and that they "would not live at Kundis and become like us. We are sons of the police and the Europeans." Police saw Potealini as instigators. Piao warned them they would "have to revert to the old way of life," while all Piao had to do was move nearer to outside sources "and grow more cash crops. You will eat native salt but you will not have tinned fish. You can light a fire, but only without matches." Some Kumbin men "said that now they will never let Potealini settle in the station area." Such contest for spatial control over external outposts is typical for war in a tribal zone.

This kind of war soon ended, with the proliferation of guns (see Strathern 1999). Mercenary bands upped deaths, from three to four in traditional Great Wars to 50 or even 200. But Wiessner shows that history has not stopped, nor has agentive coping. Cell phones became tools enabling new mediators to get to the scene of conflicts, churches intervened among congregants, and war weariness turned people against killers who were once admired. Good.

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Polly Wiessner breaks new ground in several ways. First, her integrative analysis goes beyond the typical one-sided scholarly focus on war with scant attention paid to peace (Sponsel 2016). Bucking this trend, Wiessner takes peacemaking processes seriously and, beyond that, provides an integrative analysis of war and peace among the Enga. Juxtaposing war and peace to explore an integrative interpretation of how social complexity can develop is an innovative and intriguing proposition, though I would view this interpretation as a hypothesis awaiting further investigation.

A second important topic emerging from this article is Wiessner's exploration of the shifting ways in which different parties with divergent interests are at odds with one another regarding war and peace. As part of an ongoing dynamic, different categories of social players collide. Wiessner explores areas of conflicting interests, for instance, as the goals and needs of elders and youth misalign regarding questions of war and peace, as political structure including segmentary elements exerts conflicting pressures on different actors, as the presence of affine loyalties erode clan unity when it comes to external conflict, and as women and men with their different motivations regard the pros and cons of war quite differently. Wiessner's analysis of conflicting interests and the collective action problem, related to keeping the peace and making war, are convincingly portrayed in the Enga context.