

The war of concepts

A general typology of collective confrontations

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Abstract: Countless research works on warfare, encompassing both ethnographic case studies and broader reviews, were faced with the complexities of analysing forms of collective conflict that are a priori challenging to grasp. In addition to the war itself, scholars have frequently identified a distinct custom that, depending on the context, is variously termed “feud”, “self-redress”, or “vendetta”. However, the criteria commonly employed to differentiate these practices from warfare remain problematic in many aspects. Concerning the other types of combat that have been observed, their strangeness to western eyes has led to their being subsumed under our own category of “war”, while adding an adjective intended to indicate some specificity. Thus, mention has been made of “ceremonial” or “ritualized” wars, a term that expresses our embarrassment more than the properties of the phenomenon. All in all, few attempts have been made to develop a rational classification of these various forms, and these attempts remain unsatisfactory. After addressing a few methodological points—in particular, the error consisting of defining a social behavior by the nature of the social unit that performs it—this text proposes a framework aimed at achieving a general classification of collective confrontations. Its purpose is to enable the approach of different ethnographic and historical cases while avoiding ethnocentric biases as much as possible—both our own and those of the people concerned. We conclude with the issues raised by the archaeological identification of the different types thus identified, suggesting a first criterion of discrimination.

Keywords: War, feud, duel, justice, law, ritualized war, vengeance, resources.

INTRODUCTION

Studies on war in non-state societies, as well as the various forms of collective violence that are more or less associated with it, present a paradox. The topic has mobilized many scholars—anthropologists and archaeologists—for decades, who have discussed in detail certain forms specific to cultural areas, or who have endeavored to draw up extensive syntheses. However, the conceptualization of what war is and, by contrast, what it is not, remains a largely uncharted territory. Even works that purport to deal with this issue from the broadest anthropological perspective (Kelly, 2000; Haas, 2004; Helbling, 2006; Gat, 2008; Fry, 2009; Otterbein, 2009) actually pay relatively little attention to precisely defining their objects. At best, they strive to differentiate war from what, in anthropological literature, is referred to as “feud” and which can, at first glance, be characterized as a chain of revenges; at worst, they do not even address this question. An emblematic example is the classic work of R. Kelly

(Kelly, 2000), which focuses exclusively on contrasting both these phenomena with a category he refers to as the “death penalty”—improperly, in fact, insofar as it confuses the death penalty strictly speaking with compensatory homicide (Darmangeat, 2022).

One of the most significant symptoms of the shortcomings of reflection on the matter is the propensity to combine the ill-defined noun “war” with an equally ill-defined adjective, which is supposed to emphasize that the phenomena observed do not fit in with our idea of a genuine war. Many confrontations have been termed in the ethnological literature as “small-scale wars”, “stylized” or, more often, “ritual” or “ritualized” wars (e.g. Vayda, 1974; Gabriel, 1990; Knauft, 1990; Keegan, 2004; Chacon and Mendoza, 2007; D’Onofrio, 2014). This last qualifier deserves attention, so common is it and so poorly does it conceal the embarrassment that motivates its use. To begin with, its meaning is quite ambiguous, since it can refer as much to the belief in the magical-religious effectiveness of various acts as to the simple respect shown for defined forms, as is done,

for example, at a graduation ceremony. Therefore, it is not really known whether “ritual” war has a supernatural dimension, whether it is to honor some god or to seek a substance with invisible powers, or whether it is simply obeying certain rules that limit its scope, to the point of no longer being quite a “real” war—and one may then wonder whether the very idea of a “ritualized war” is not an oxymoron. It should be added that every war, even the most unbridled, involves a ritual component—even in modern times, when, without even evoking the blessing of arms, one could mention salutes to superiors or ceremonies such as the raising of the flag.¹

To our knowledge, no satisfactory attempt has been made to develop a general typology of collective confrontations in human societies, which could provide a relevant interpretation for the sometimes confusing phenomena observed in stateless societies that clearly do not fall under feud or war *stricto sensu*. This is the task we wish to undertake here, by taking a path that has not been traveled much before: we will focus primarily on confrontations, and not directly on the context in which they take place. Feud and war therefore no longer appear directly as such; to use a chemical metaphor, before understanding the molecules, it is necessary to identify the different atoms of which they are composed. This step is all the more necessary since feud and war, as we shall see, are far from exhausting the range of ways in which human communities have confronted each other.

1. BRIEF CRITIQUE OF EXISTING CLASSIFICATIONS

The works that have addressed these issues have most often used the following criteria:

- the military form of operations (raid, ambush, pitched battle, etc.),
- the social nature of the units involved (whether or not they are “political”),
- the goals pursued.

This list is of course not exhaustive. It could be supplemented with categories developed in relation to specific ethnographic cases: for example, the one used by K. Heider in relation to the Dani of New Guinea, between “ritual” and “secular” phases of war, or by L. Langness, also in New Guinea, who distinguished between “restricted” and “non-restricted” conflicts (Langness, 1972, p. 930). Within the limited scope of the present work, we shall confine ourselves to a brief discussion of the main approaches.

1.1. Military form

While the criterion of the tactical form of confrontations may be of interest from the point of view of military theory, it is not difficult to see that it is irrelevant from the point of view of social theory. This tactical form is only a means that depends on the ends pursued, and the same

form can be used in many contexts. Raiding, for example, is compatible with all situations where surprise is an acceptable tactic, whether in war, feud or other contexts. In more general terms, a socially relevant classification can only be based on criteria that are also social.

1.2. Feud, war and the nature of social units

For decades, one criterion has prevailed in the specialized literature to distinguish feud from war: it is generally accepted that war is done by political communities (or “polities”), while feud would be done by non-political communities (Malinowski, 1941, p. 523; Berndt, 1964, p. 183; Pospisil, 1971, pp. 2-10; Meggitt, 1977, p. 10; Helbling, 2006, pp. 114; Otterbein, 2009, p. 43; Izard and Descola, 2013, p. 313).

However, such a criterion raises many problems, several of which have been pointed out by B. Boulestin (2020). Without repeating here his entire argument, which we fully endorse, we would like to reiterate that when the concept of political community is defined, it is in a highly problematic manner,² which gives the impression of displacing the problem rather than solving it. In practice, moreover, authors who refer to this criterion to distinguish war from feud rarely bother to explain their definition of political unity, and even more rarely demonstrate that the social entity under consideration corresponds to it. A significant example is that of the positions taken by Otterbein and Fry regarding the Tiwi of Australia: these two authors reach strictly opposite conclusions as to the nature of the hostilities waged by local groups (Otterbein, 2004, p. 83; Fry, 2009, p. 123 sq.), without either ever explaining why Tiwi groups should or should not be considered “polities”.

Let us add to the cases compiled by B. Boulestin an argument that seems to us as simple as it is decisive, namely that a social act can never be defined by the mere nature of the actor who performs it. If an anthropologist were to arrive in an unknown tribe and hear about two types of funerals, called “light” and “heavy”; and if, when questioning the natives, he were to hear that people from the raven moiety are given light funerals, while those from the bear moiety are given heavy ones, our anthropologist would be none the wiser. At most, he would come up with a theorem that establishes a relationship between two categories of phenomena: the pair formed by the two types of funeral rites on the one hand, and the structuring into moieties on the other. But as far as the nature of these rites is concerned, this information would leave him in the dark. If he were scrupulous, our anthropologist would even have to consider the possibility that both types of funerals could in fact refer to one and the same thing and that the distinction be purely terminological, just as in France, The fees charged by a self-employed worker are specifically referred to as a “cachet” when he is an artist. Thus, the claim that war is waged by political communities while feud is waged by non-political communities may be true or false; but in either case, this statement does not say a word about what war and feud are, and what distinguishes them.

Following B. Boulestin, we will thus not differentiate feud from war either by the nature of the social units involved, nor by the fact that the feud concerns revenge—vindictive wars are attested by many ethnographic or historical testimonies. The distinction between feud and war can and must be made on the sole basis of the intended outcome of the operations: while in war, physical violence seeks to defeat the enemy, that is to say, as C. von Clausewitz already explained, to “force [the enemy] to accomplish our will”, in feud, it simply aims to restore the balance of human losses. By the way, although it has not received the necessary attention, this solution had already been proposed a long time ago. As early as 1940, A. Radcliffe-Brown emphasised the existence of “the institution of regulated retaliation for homicide. Where that exists [...] public sentiment regards such vengeance as just and proper so long as the law of talion is observed—that is, that the injury inflicted is equivalent to the injury suffered, but not greater. Feuds [...] of the kind to which this example belongs cannot be regarded as the same thing as war” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940, p. xx our highlights).

As for A. Métraux, he noted for South America: “In analyzing the underlying motivations and the characteristics of South American Indian warfare, a distinction must be made between the feuds that affected small communities or extended families, and actual intertribal wars. In the former, hostilities often ceased when the attacking group considered that it had exacted just retribution for the wrongs that led them to overt hostilities. Intertribal wars, on the contrary, could be far more severe, and the attackers might even aim to exterminate the enemy” (Métraux, 1949, p. 384 our highlights).

Let us add that, in the end, the idea that feud would inherently emanate from a non-political unit represents a complete misconception, induced by ethnocentric myopia. In a society structured as a state, the custom of the feud constitutes a form of private violence, which persists in the interstices of this state and despite its opposition. It is therefore tempting to see it as the manifestation of “non-political” social groups. However, if we consider things in the order of their historical succession, and not retrospectively, feud appears as the manifestation of the use of legitimate violence in order to avenge a wrong suffered. This custom, which the emerging state subsequently had great difficulty in eradicating, clearly expresses the autonomy of the use of violence, its free availability to the social unit that implements it and thus, the fully “political” nature of the latter.

1.3. Aims pursued

With his usual rigour, A. Testart endeavoured to develop a classification of conflicts according to their aims. Although this appears in a manuscript that has not yet been published,³ the interest of this undertaking deserves attention.

A. Testart draws a first distinction between wars of acquisition (i.e., plunder), political wars, and wars with

a “specific purpose”, i.e., wars of vengeance. This initial categorisation raises classic difficulties: in reality, one war can be waged for several aims at the same time; these aims can be prioritised, with some being more or less incidental by-products; finally, there can be a significant difference between the publicly stated aims, those that are present in the minds of the participants, and the real aims pursued.

The analysis does not stop there; A. Testart adds a second criterion, which relates to the scale of the goals pursued. He thus contrasts full-scale war with “limited-purpose operations,” which encompass various phenomena such as feuds, raids, or headhunting. This distinction is reminiscent of L. Langness’s distinction between “restricted” and “non-restricted” wars: it highlights a dimension that is also crucial, without, however, providing a truly satisfactory solution. In particular, there are many ways to “limit” the purpose of an armed conflict, and it is not certain that grouping them under a single term is relevant. As we shall see, the solution proposed here does not neglect this dimension, but suggests approaching it from a different angle.

Finally, it should be noted that, despite its refinement, the classification proposed by A. Testart has the drawback of not being exhaustive. It does not cover many types of confrontations, starting with regulated battles, which are so common in the ethnography of non-state societies.

2. AN ALTERNATIVE TYPOLOGY

2.1. The two levels of analysis

The starting point of our proposal consists in distinguishing the “states of conflict” between two social entities and the physical confrontations to which they lead. Even if one does not go without the other, a war is not simply a battle, just as a feud is not a simple assassination: “on the one hand there is the relationship of hostility between groups, on the other hand there is the way in which this relationship will be translated in practice” (Boulestin, 2020, p. 45).

We will proceed from the premise that the classification must start with the confrontations – that is to say, in a way, atom—and then go back up to the state of relations—molecules. In the first instance, this approach therefore excludes from the analysis the concepts of war, feud and other possible states of social relations, in order to focus on confrontations proper. These are divided into four main types, corresponding to two binary variables.

2.2. Resolutive and non-resolutive confrontations

The first variable relates to the purpose of the confrontations. Some seek to resolve a dispute, in other words to restore peace—this is the case of those that take place in the context of a war or a feud. Following P. Descola and M. Izard (Izard and Descola, 2013, p. 314), we propose to refer to these as “resolutive” confrontations.

At first glance, the existence of non-resolutive confrontations goes against common sense. Who would be foolish enough to fight, and risk their life, without having the ultimate goal of getting out of a conflict situation—if necessary, by crushing all resistance? Social anthropology, however, provides several examples of situations that a priori seem implausible to us. The Tupinamba of present-day Brazil, who in the 16th century launched expeditions to bring back at best half a dozen prisoners, were motivated by what seemed to them to be perfectly compelling reasons: these prisoners were destined to be executed and devoured on occasions of capital importance (Fernandes, 1952). But in doing so, the aim was not to extinguish the animosity that prevailed with the adversary. It was even the exact opposite: the military expedition was both the result of the relationship of enmity and the condition for its preservation. As several witnesses emphasised (Thevet, 2011, p. 207), enemies were captured because they were enemies since time immemorial, and would remain so until the end of time in order to ensure that the order of things was respected. This type of non-resolutive combat, while emblematic, is far from being the only one. We will return to this.

Finally, we readily concede that between resolutive and non-resolutive confrontations, there is no solution of continuity: one would easily find situations that are indeterminate, or that have changed from one category to another. This observation (which could apply to most of the concepts used in scientific disciplines, whatever their object) in no way invalidates the relevance of these categories, insofar as most confrontations clearly fall on either side of this limit.

2.3. Discretionary versus conventional confrontations⁴

This first distinction is overlaid by a second, which contrasts confrontations decided unilaterally to those whose conduct is governed by a prior agreement between the two parties and therefore obey a set of common rules.

Discretionary confrontation hardly needs to be explained: it is the ordinary matter of any situation where one seeks to impose one's will on the adversary, whether or not this aspiration is reciprocal. In such cases, a pitched battle with equal weapons can occur, but it remains something of an accident: this situation is not sought, and even less decided upon, by either party. From the point of view of each side, it is only a last resort, resulting from the impossibility of establishing a favourable military balance of power (of which surprise is one of the most frequent elements).

As its name suggests, conventional confrontations, on the other hand, are the result of a prior agreement between the opponents. In the words of historian S. Muhlberger, writing about medieval cases, “time, place, numbers, and the specification of what constituted victory were arranged in advance and adhered to” (Muhlberger, 2008, p. 286). This last element represents the key point of this definition: it is what differentiates this type

of event from confrontations in which the parties simply agree to avoid certain weapons or acts, as in a “conventional” war. This is why we rejected this term and proposed the neologism “conventional”.

The canonical example of such confrontations is the regulated battle, this collective duel of which non-state societies provide countless examples—abundantly reported in Australia, Melanesia and the Amazon,⁵ it seems, on the other hand, absent from North America, and probably from Africa and Asia. It is of course possible to find examples of trickery, where following a regulated battle decision, one of the two sides deceives the other (by hiding troops, using illegal weapons, continuing the fight beyond what was decided, etc.). Such counter-examples of course do not invalidate the general category of regulated battle any more than deception or theft invalidate the category of exchange.

In order to restrict the degree of violence, the conventional confrontation operates on two parameters.

The first, trivial, concerns both the weapons used and the damage intended to end the fight. At one end of the continuum, there is no limitation of violence and the conventional confrontation is potentially as lethal as a free one. At the other extreme, that of maximum restriction of violence, people fight with their bare hands; the physical nature of the confrontation sometimes even ends up dissolving completely, as in the singing duels practised by certain Inuit groups.⁶

The other approach to violence moderation is more indirect: it consists of limiting the number of combatants. Instead of mobilising all the members of the groups involved, the confrontation pits a given number of individuals acting as representatives against each other—a mode that can be described as “synecdochic”. In this case, the fight involves only a fraction of both communities and, in the extreme, a single individual, in a “duel of champions”, as in the legendary opposition of David against Goliath.

The different variations of the restriction of violence in conventional confrontations can thus be represented in a two-axis diagram (fig. 1). The most unbridled violence occurs in the extreme case of the ganyarr⁸ of Arnhem Land, where the clans in conflict agree to settle their quarrel (“a spear fight to put an end to spear fights”:

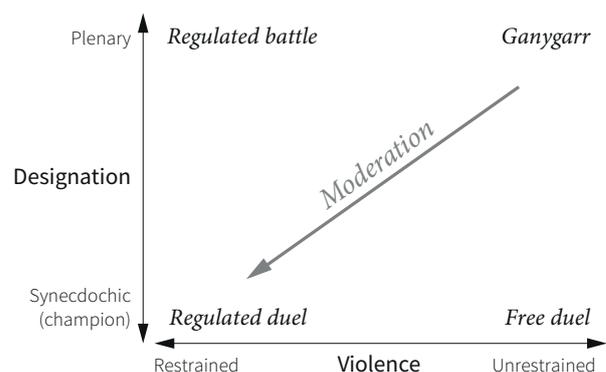


Fig. 1 – Moderation of conventional confrontations.

Warner, 1969, p. 162) in a devastating encounter where no holds are barred, including trickery and surprise. The other extreme, that of maximum moderation of violence, would be embodied by a duel of champions without the use of physical violence.

3. EXPLORATION OF THE CLASSIFICATION

The above leads us to a general classification of confrontations into four main categories, which we will now quickly explore (table 1).

3.1. Discretionary resolutive confrontations (I)

Sector I corresponds to the confrontations we are most familiar with: those in which the opponent is fought through a unilateral decision and with the perspective to establishing (or re-establishing) peace.

In the context of a feud, the typical confrontation is the compensatory homicide, where one of the two groups seeks revenge for an injury by inflicting an equivalent injury. It should be emphasised that while the feud is made up of compensatory homicides, the compensatory homicide alone does not constitute the feud: if the party that suffers it, whether out of weakness or because it recognises its initial fault, admits the legitimacy of the reprisals, things may well end there—a fairly famous case of such a configuration is reported regarding a dispute between the Aranda and the Ilaura in the Australian Desert (Spencer and Gillen, 1899, p. 490–493). The feud constitutes a “chain of revenge”, a point that L. Pospisil (1971) had perfectly identified. It presupposes a prolonged disagreement over scores; any punitive action by one side which, in its eyes, restores the balance is, on the contrary, perceived by the other as a new aggression justifying future reprisals. The likelihood of such situations arising and persisting depends of course on multiple factors; they may cease either through the renunciation of one of the parties, too weakened to continue the struggle, or through a reconciliation that will generally involve a settling of scores through the transfer of human lives (usually women or children) or wealth (the Germanic *wergeld*, or “blood price”).

As for war, the typical confrontation is of course the battle – whatever its tactical form, which in no way excludes the possibility of occasional recourse to targeted assassinations. However, in such cases, homicide does not occur as compensation, but to serve the objective that

defines war, namely the assertion of supremacy by force of arms.

3.2. Conventional resolutive confrontations (II)

We have already mentioned regulated battles, these collective duels that can be more or less deadly. However, it is important to note that this form encompasses variants that need to be distinguished.

The first, which springs most readily to mind, is one in which the objective of the confrontation is to determine a winner. This seems to be the very principle of a judicial duel, whether it pits individuals or communities (as such, or via representatives) against each other. In this case, the party victorious in the showdown has their claims legitimised, and the loser must renounce theirs.

However, a survey of the ethnological literature reveals that this is by no means the most common version. In most cases, it seems that the outcome of the duel is largely incidental and that the primary, if not exclusive, function of the confrontation is to settle the dispute by virtue of its simple unfolding. This is the feeling that emerges from descriptions of many Australian events, where it is difficult to see who is the winner and who is the loser, and to what extent the use of arms would determine anything. Such confrontations are, however, followed by demonstrative reconciliations, particularly at the large gatherings known as *corroborees*. In this scenario, the collective duel does indeed have a resolutive purpose; however, it does not restore peace by determining who is in the right, but by allowing both parties to vent their resentment, as we do it with words of appeasement and a handshake.

Let us briefly mention some rarer forms, which nevertheless deserve attention.

The first category consists of situations where the confrontation is organised in such a way as to inflict a sanction. The group having previously acknowledged its guilt then presents itself in a state of inferiority before the other, which can therefore chastise it. There are two mentions of this custom in Aboriginal Australia. Among the Jinibara of Queensland, it was organised according to a synecdochic logic: the sanction struck a champion designated by the guilty group.⁹ Among the Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst Islands, a plenary version was observed, during which “Each Melville Island fighter threw spears and clubs at the Bathurst Island fighter directly opposite. [...] Note that in this round of the fight the Bathurst Islanders did not throw weapons but merely defended themselves. They accepted a mild form of punishment” (Pilling, 1958, pp. 267–268).

A final scenario is that of regulated encounters, in which opponents, as in feuding, seek to achieve a balance of losses. Such practices have been described in New Guinea, for example among the Dani (Larson, 1987, p. 24) or the Kamanuku (Bergmann, 1971, p. 192). In both cases they coexisted with unrestrained and discretionary confrontations, from which they were clearly dis-

	Discretionary	Conventional
Resolutive	I	II
Non resolutive	III	IV

Table 1 – Typology of collective confrontations.

tinguished by the people involved, who had given each of them a specific name.

3.3. Discretionary non-resolutive confrontations (III)

Firstly, it should be noted that while resolute confrontations can be categorised according to the means by which they seek to resolve the conflict, this is of course not the case for non-resolutive confrontations. In addition to the dichotomy of “discretionary/conventional”, these will be classified according to their goals, it being understood that in reality these may well overlap.

Category III includes confrontations imposed on the opponent and which are of course sought to be won, but which are not intended to resolve a conflict and achieve peace. They can be divided into four main variations.

The first, which is akin to hunting, is undoubtedly the most familiar to us: it is motivated by plunder and is most commonly known as a *razzia*. In European history, an example of this is the Viking raids—note that the concession of Normandy was a result a posteriori, negotiated by the King of France to put an end to them, but there is no indication that it was the initial goal of Rollo and his troops. The looting can also concern human beings, in particular those who will later be made slaves or sacrificed—these being the two main objectives of the long-distance Iroquois raids that Lafitau called “little warfare” (Lafitau, 1977, p. 102).

The second main motivation for these confrontations is revenge. However, what we are dealing with here is neither the compensatory homicide typical of the feud, nor a battle in a vindictive war. The aim of these non-resolutive confrontations is not to balance out losses, nor to permanently disable the enemy. They are motivated by the simple fact that the targeted group is a hereditary enemy and is destined to remain so. Expeditions are therefore launched whose objectives are not to triumph over the adversary, but to kill a few individuals, or to capture them in order to put them to death later, while taking care not to suffer any losses. This configuration is described in particular in Amazonia—including the Tupinamba, where it has been referred to as “endless revenge” (D’Onofrio, 2003)—or in the Chaco, for example among the Chaqueños, who have inspired the following, particularly enlightening lines:

“Although sometimes described as a ‘feud’ or ‘vendetta’ [...], the wars of the chaqueños Indians—like other South American Indian wars [...] do not, however, appear to have followed a vindictive logic, according to the modern anthropological definition of the term [...]. In particular, the exchanges of violence are not governed by a rule of reciprocity in a ‘zero-sum’ game. On the contrary, and like Tupinamba revenge or Jivaro inter-tribal warfare, *caatshai* has no beginning and no end; it is, by definition, endless [...] with regard to enemies, one never is, one cannot be even” (Sterpin, 1993, p. 58 my highlights).

The third major driver of this type of confrontation is what is traditionally known as “headhunting”. We

will not go into the details of a case that, in itself, would deserve a systematic study—incidentally, it is surprising that no comprehensive review of the issue has never been attempted.¹⁰ Anyway, it is imperative not to confuse phenomena with very different social meanings. The term “headhunting” has to be restricted to operations whose primary objective is to obtain heads because of the magical and religious virtues attributed to them.¹¹ This definition therefore excludes the quest for simple trophy heads, i.e. heads attesting to the glory and military valour of their taker but whose acquisition is not the primary purpose of the operations. It should be added that while the head is the part of the body most often sought in such endeavours, there are also instances where this quest involves other organs or substances. An unusual example is that of the Yagua of the Amazon, who kill in order to seize teeth (Chaumeil, 1985); another, much more commonplace, is that of scalps, which, in at least some North American tribes, played a role in every respect similar to that mentioned for heads. Rather than talking about “headhunting” alone, it would therefore be more accurate to use a more general term such as “predation”.

The relevance of considering predation as a specific motive, distinct from both looting (*razzia*) and revenge, would call for a detailed discussion. A first problem is that in some areas, there is a tendency to kill two birds with one stone, and to hunt down the heads of those with whom one has a grievance and wishes to take revenge. Yet, this is not the case everywhere and, in some places, a careful distinction is even made between the circle within which revenge is exacted and that within which heads are taken (generally, more distant on the social and geographical levels). But even if in practice they sometimes blur into one another, the motive of predation and that of revenge should be analytically distinguished. The question arises in slightly different terms with regard to looting. After all, from the point of view of those who carry it out, predation constitutes a form of appropriation of resources in the same way as the theft of livestock or precious objects would. If one goes to collect heads, it is because these are considered indispensable for initiating young people, for performing funeral rites, for inaugurating a house or a dugout, for ensuring the protection and prosperity of a village, etc. In this sense, predation is a subset of ordinary looting. Nevertheless, it could be argued that it constitutes a specific category, either because its usefulness is purely imaginary or, above all, because it is the only one that by its very nature requires homicides. This discussion is best left aside; its significance remains quite relative, since this criterion only plays a very secondary role in the classification presented here.

The essential point, on the other hand, is that “pure” headhunting unfailingly takes place in a discretionary and non-resolutive mode. Not only is the hunt carried out without the prior consent of the hunted and by using surprise, but this hunt is also carried out without ever being seen as a means of restoring good relations.

Finally, there is a fourth and probably final motive for this category of confrontations, namely mourning and the

desire to express one's grief by killing a few enemies. A major difficulty is that this motive seems particularly conducive to being superimposed on others: the mourning raid is very often at the same time a raid of appropriation, where one seeks to obtain either living captives, scalps or heads. A well-known example of the first case is that of the Iroquois, whose "little war", already mentioned, seems to have been almost always initiated on the occasion of a death. D. Richter emphasises that "raids might be inspired by *any* death, not just those attributable to murder or warfare and for which revenge or other atonement (...) was necessary" (Richter, 1983, p. 532, note 17). Further west, in the Plains, the motives are intertwined there too and it is not easy to distinguish between revenge, mourning and the acquisition of scalps. Specialists nevertheless agree that homicidal expeditions were undertaken on the death of a loved one, which were not systematically motivated by a desire for revenge: "the impulse was the same whether the loved one had been killed by the enemy or not" (Smith, 1938, p. 453). The bereaved commonly reported that their heart was "bad" (Clark, 1885, p. 263) due to their grief, and this reason was considered legitimate. The taking of scalps was, however, a crucial element in the end of the mourning period (Smith, 1938, p. 454). This connection between mourning and predation can also be observed in completely different cultural contexts. The presence of a human head taken from another tribe was an absolute necessity to conclude all or part of the funeral among the Jaqaj of the southern coast of New Guinea (Boelaars, 2014, p. 135), among the Toraja of Sulawesi (Downs, 1955, p. 41) or in Borneo, among the Iban (Davison and Sutlive, 1991, p. 171) and the Kanyan (Furness, 1902, p. 65 ; Hose and McDougall, 1912, p. 159).

3.4. Conventional non-resolutive confrontations (IV)

This fourth and final category therefore brings together confrontations that obey agreed rules and whose purpose is other than that of re-establishing good relations between the two participating groups.

The first case is extremely commonplace in our eyes, having invaded social life in contemporary capitalism to such an extent that it has become a truly globalized industry: we are talking about sports competitions. In their modern form, they now involve special precautions to preserve the physical integrity of the participants and no longer cause loss of life, unlike their ancestors (Roman *haspartum*, medieval *soule*, Florentine *calcio*, etc.) where serious injuries and even homicides were routine. Apart from this aspect, it is important to emphasize an essential dimension of the social significance of modern sport, namely that the individuals or teams who compete do not do so solely in their own name, but almost always represent collectives—clubs or nations. This synecdochic dimension makes of course these encounters much less innocent and socially neutral than their proclaimed apoliticism would have us believe. The idea sometimes

put forward that international sports competitions are a substitute for war is probably quite questionable. On the other hand, there is little doubt that by organizing a permanent confrontation, even if in a peaceful mode and through a few representatives, contemporary sport continuously fuels feelings of identity and solidarity—in particular, national solidarity—likely to be mobilized in other contexts.

In fact, although modern sport, due to the extremely formalized nature of its rules, must be considered a subcategory in its own right, it is nevertheless part of a broader set of activities that can be called competitive confrontations. Among these, many are less focused on the competition itself than on the question of identity; the aim is not to win any title, but to defend one's honor, affirming the "us" against one or more "others." These include the fights that pitted the urban moieties against each other in medieval Iran (Perry, 1999, p. 51), those that in the same period opposed European parishes during religious festivals, or the pitched battles that brought young people from the three districts of the capital Nupe to grips with each other on the occasion of the Muslim New Year (Nadel, 1971, p. 592). Italy was probably the most prolific in this area, with customs that, after having been banned for a long time, have been revived in more polite forms and today constitute both a heritage and a tourist attraction. Let us mention the *palio* of Siena (a race in which the whip is used to hit not only the horse, but also one's opponents), the Florentine *calcio* (a mixture of football, rugby and wrestling, in which almost no holds are barred), the *mazzascudo* of Pisa (a fight with wooden maces and shields), or the "war of the fists" of Venice which, in various forms, pitted two districts of the city against each other over a period of eight centuries (Davis, 1994). It should be added that these customs, although they have disappeared or have survived only largely stripped of their violence and substance, sometimes spontaneously resurface in the brawls between two neighborhoods, over a glance or any other affront to the honor of one or the other.

A slightly different place should be reserved for the medieval melee, which was dominated as much by the desire to practice for war as by the lure of gain. It should be borne in mind that tournaments in the Middle Ages were not limited to the famous jousts, in which knights broke lances in duels. In their earliest form, they pitted groups of riders and pedestrians against each other in a violent combat, the aim of which was to seize the weapons, the horse or the body of the opponent, given that it was forbidden to kill the prisoners: they then had to buy their freedom (Barker, 1986).

Finally, mention can be made of an institution found among the Mae Enga people of the New Guinea highlands where, in addition to the more traditional forms of confrontation, sometimes "great fights" (Meggitt, 1977), or "great ceremonial wars" (*yanda andake*; Wiessner and Tumu, 1998) took place. These, which unfolded over a period of weeks in accordance with strict rules, resulted in relatively few casualties, with the number of

deaths on each side generally counting on the fingers of one hand. Victory was decided in a way by “points”—it was awarded to the faction with the fewest deaths, but everything suggests that it was much less important than the demonstration of martial prowess by both sides. Ultimately, the concerted cessation of hostilities would give way to various ceremonies that were the occasion for intense distributions of goods, to the point that some informants saw this as the real purpose of the fighting (Wiessner and Tumu, 1998, p. 265).

While sharing many features with modern sport, certain other confrontations are sufficiently different to warrant consideration as a separate subcategory.

A first type brings together confrontations carried out for propitiatory reasons, in order to attract the favors of a deity or to ward off some calamity. One example is the ancient Olympic Games, in which the sporting aspect was secondary to the homage paid to the gods. Another example is the game called lacrosse, played by several Amerindian peoples in the east of the continent, which was a very rough ancestor of field hockey. To the great displeasure of the Jesuit missionaries who were trying to evangelize the Hurons, their direct local competitors, namely the medicine-men, would organize this type of encounter to heal the sick (Thwaites, 1897, pp. 184–186) or to bring about an improvement in the weather (Thwaites, 1899, p. 46).

A close cousin of the previous case is found in confrontations with a sacrificial purpose. There too, the aim is to win the favor of a deity, but specifically through the shedding of blood, either directly during combat or indirectly, through the killing of prisoners according to the appropriate rite. One will recognize in this option the famous “flowery war” of the Aztecs (*xōchihyāōyōtl*), in which the troops of the Triple Alliance were supposed to fight those of some of its neighbors by mutual agreement; during these apparently highly regulated battles, the aim of both sides was much less to kill their opponents than to capture them, in order to provide sacrificial victims, of which these civilizations made heavy consumption. The problem is that the evidence concerning these “flowery wars” is both very indirect and fairly divergent. In recent decades, a significant part of American research has highlighted the shortcomings of our information (Hicks, 1979 ; Isaac, 1983 ; Hassig, 1988)—a debate which, curiously, seems to have met with very little response in France, where the reality of the “flowery war” seems to be definitively taken for granted (Graulich, 2005 ; Durand-Forest, 2008 ; Duverger, 2016). In any case, prudence dictates harboring very serious doubts not only about the nature of this institution, but also about its very existence.

However, at least three well-documented customs are related to this category. The first has endured in the Andes since pre-Columbian times and continues to this day, in a slightly modified form: the tinku, an annual battle between two moieties of a village community. Not only were the few deaths that inevitably occurred not avenged, but they were welcomed in an atmosphere of general jubilation. The explicit purpose of most tinku is to predict the crop yield for both moieties over the coming year. For

the victorious side to be assured of a good harvest, the blood of the opponent must be shed and there must be at least one death. As the latter is offered to the deity of the Earth, this ritual battle is primarily a means of making a sacrifice (Molinié-Fioravanti, 1988, p. 60). The other two examples are as far removed from the previous one by geography as they are close to it by their content. The first is the pasola, an event that takes place every year in the western part of the Indonesian island of Sumba in honor of the god Nyale, during which two teams of horsemen clash with spears, causing injuries that are sometimes fatal. Here too, the blood spilled is believed to fertilize the soil (Wibawa et al., 2023). The same was true of the Newar, a Nepalese people. Every spring in the city of Kathmandu, after two weeks of sporadic clashes between young people, the adults would join the fight for an evening. They threw stones at each other, and the toll regularly included one or two deaths (Buchanan-Hamilton, 1819, pp. 43–44). Here again, these were considered sacrifices offered to the goddesses, which would have the virtue of fertilizing the soil, the fields and probably invoking rain (Toffin, 1996, pp. 71–72).

4. A SUMMARY AND SOME ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

The above developments can be recapitulated in an overview (table 2).

It should be emphasized that the dimensions of the restriction of violence (L. Langness) and/or that of the scale of operations (A. Testart), which these authors put at the heart of their classification, cut across the categories proposed here, without really overlapping them. At first glance, confrontations seeking supremacy over the adversary certainly represent military operations that stand out in terms of both their scale and their lethality, which tends to set them apart from all others. In reality, there is no strict equivalence between the pursuit of victory/domination, the scale of the conflict and the degree of violence. There are wars with very limited objectives, in which the belligerents make only very partial use of the armed force at their disposal. Conversely, as we have seen, certain conventional confrontations, such as the Australian *ganygarr*, can involve devastating violence when considered on the scale of the societies that practise it, without pertaining to war. On this point, my opinion has therefore changed since my previous writings on Australia (Darmangeat, 2020). The *ganygarr* is not a war, neither in its modalities—it cannot take place without the prior agreement of both parties, and it is agreed that this single battle will put a definitive end to the conflict—nor in its objectives: there is no indication that the winner, if there is one, imposes anything on the loser.

Among the countless questions that the preceding pages have barely touched on, there are obviously those relating to the aims of military operations. While the importance of revenge, and of a settlement of conflicts

	Discrétionnaire	Conventionnaire
Resolutive	- by victory ¹ - by balancing ²	- by victory - by catharsis - by balancing - by sanction
Non resolutive	- acquisition { of goods of human beings of bodily elements - endless revenge - mourning	- propitiatory { sacrificial non sacrificial - competitive { “great fights” ³ identity-based games / sports

1 Possibly in the context of a war.

2 Possibly in the context of a *feud*.

3 *Yanda andake* of the Mae Enga (New-Guinea).

Table 2 – Overview of the types of confrontation.

that can be called “judicial”, has been emphasized, the issue of appropriation of resources has been left aside. But this issue is nonetheless important as there is a general consensus on this point, even among scholars with completely divergent opinions. Both the “hawks”, who argue for an ancient origin of war, or the “doves”, who place it in a more recent period, agree that war is about controlling resources. The only point of debate is the benefit/risk ratio of this armed struggle depending on the different ways of life. For some, the struggle for resources exists at all stages of social organization since it conditions biological evolution itself. For others, resources are only worth seizing or defending by force once they have become sufficiently concentrated, after sedentarization has allowed a local accumulation of goods and humans, or has made escape much more costly. Yet it seems that this whole approach requires serious nuancing. To begin with, the ethnological literature argues for the rarity, if not the absence, of such a motivation in mobile hunter-gatherer societies—this is, for example, what emerges from the analysis of the particularly well-documented Australian case (Darmangeat, 2020). Incidentally, in their pioneering work on the subject, and in a break with a tradition represented, for example, by A. Beyneix (2001), J. Guilaine and J. Zammit had perfectly identified this point: “Although there is no doubt that conflict frequently revolves around ownership of material goods, this does not explain all inter-community clashes. The breakdown of alliances, causing or taking offense, ongoing animosities, and the notion of ‘inherited enemies’ are all equally valid reasons as to why simple quarrels may turn violent, yet none of these reasons is linked to agricultural production. Thus, it may well be that these causes of conflict date back to before the Neolithic” (Guilaine and Zammit, 2005, p. 26)

Next, and probably even more counter-intuitively, ethnology shows that this absence of material motivations in collective conflicts persists in many societies in which wealth is beginning to play a significant role.¹² This is undoubtedly a paradox worth exploring. Let us conclude by considering how the preceding analysis could benefit archaeology. It goes without saying that discriminating

between the various cases that we have identified on the basis of their material traces is a virtually impossible task. Archeology, in the best of cases, finds corpses which it can prove were killed in a short period of time; this is enough to conclude a collective homicidal conflict, but it is far from sufficient to be able to determine what type it is. However, even if it is impossible to answer this question, it is imperative to keep in mind that not every homicidal collective conflict is necessarily a “war” in the sense that we tend to understand it—just as not every war is necessarily the result of a competition for resources. To end on a more positive note, we can put forward a two-part proposal, which, albeit modest, nevertheless represents a step forward and could extend the decision tree proposed by J.-M. Pétilion (see this volume). Two elements can indeed be considered as sure signs of the discretionary nature of the confrontation. The first is the presence of women, children, or the elderly among the victims. This pattern is highly unlikely in the context of a confrontation involving only selected combatants, and therefore, in the vast majority of cases, males in the prime of life. The same is true of the mutilation of corpses, which, both in spirit and in ethnographic data, also appears to be hardly compatible with conventional fighting.

NOTES

- 1 The “false dichotomy” between ritual and war is criticized in particular by E. Arkush and C. Stanish (2005). As for K. F. Otterbein (2004), if he rejects the idea of “ritual wars”, it is because he de facto restricts the scope of his analysis to the forms that our own text refers to as discretionary and resolutive.
- 2 Thus, the formula proposed by R. Narroll and colleagues (1964) and taken up by K. F. Otterbein (2009) is not really intended to define a political community, but another concept, the “territorial team”. Some of the problems posed by the notion of political unit are, for example, raised by A. Radcliffe-Brown (1940 ; pp. xviii–xix).
- 3 *Éléments de sociologie générale*, livre III L’État, le droit, la guerre, 2009, unpublished.

- 4 In the oral communication from which this text originated, I used the terms “unilateral” versus “bilateral” which, on reflection, do not seem to me to be the most appropriate choice.
- 5 For Australia, see a survey in C. Darmangeat (2021, pp. 61–68). For New Guinea and the surrounding islands, see, among many examples, the *yaling enga maga lona* organized by the Maenge (Panoff, 1985). In the Amazon, N. A. Chagnon (1968) reports several variations among the Yanomami. In Tierra del Fuego, we should also mention the *jelj*, practiced by the Selknam (Bridges, 2007).
- 6 To be precise, however, these song duels do not seem to have taken on a truly collective character (Darmangeat, 2023, p. 78).
- 7 Synecdoche is a figure of speech that consists of designating the whole by one of its parts.
- 8 This transcription replaces that of *gaingar*, used by L. Warner.
- 9 See L. P. Winterbotham, *Some native customs and beliefs of the Jinibara and neighbouring tribes on the Brisbane and Stanley rivers, Queensland, 1957*, unpublished.
- 10 With the exception of the few pages devoted to the topic by C. Coiffier and A. Guerreiro (1999), or by A. Testart (unpublished, see footnote 3). The work edited by J. Hoskins (Hoskins, 1996), in addition to remaining centered on a specific cultural area, does not pursue such an objective.
- 11 See footnote 3.
- 12 Although we are not able to present exhaustive data on this subject, we would like to point out, in addition to those concerning Australia, those relating, for example, to the Inuit world, particularly for the Alaskan seafront (Darmangeat, 2023).

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DISCUSSION

Laura Waldvogel: According to you, the conflicts of the Tupinamba are neither war nor feud. So, how would you classify them?

Christophe Darmangeat: Obviously they should be classified in the discretionary/not resolute category, i.e. in the same category as the *razzia*. Is it a *razzia* in the strict sense, or should we use a different term for them? I am not really sure. There are still some unanswered questions. I build categories because without them, you can't make sense of anything. But the difficult reality is that things never fit perfectly into these boxes: so of course, there will always be borderline cases. And besides those, there are also undecidable cases, simply because our information is too incomplete. The impression given by Tupinamba expeditions is that the combatants do not undertake them to win, in the sense of trying to impose conditions of victory on their enemies. They launch an expedition on an enemy village every year, and that's just how it is. In North America, there are similar practices. Among the Plains Indians, there is a wartime season every year. They set out, try to win the battle and then return. It doesn't seem like the aim is to impose anything on the enemy. Is this impression accurate or not? So, once again, I would tend to classify the Tupinamba operations as non-resolute and discretionary. Would it be better to find another name for them than *razzia*, which suggests something small-scale, whereas these operations involve 2,000, 3,000 or 5,000 combatants? It's still an open question.

Jean-Loïc Le Quellec: For the wealth issue, which, if I have understood your final intuition correctly, seems to come into play a little late. Could it not be taken into account in the overall framework, by adding a third dimension? Because you have a two-dimensional table. By creating a cube rather than what we see on the screen, could you not introduce wealth, or perhaps something else?

C. D.: Actually, this third dimension would not be wealth as such. It would represent the objectives. That is, are people fighting for revenge? Or are they fighting to acquire resources—and within resources, we might need to distinguish between territory, the capture of living human beings, and so on? Yes, ideally, we could cross-reference the modalities and the objectives. However, even with just two dimensions, the table already tends to get complicated, so I think that adding a third one is a good idea in theory, but much less so in practice. Here is an obvious point: by definition, a feud can only be about revenge. The whole idea of the feud is to settle scores. War, on the other hand, can be about anything: there can be wars of vengeance, wars to seize territories, wars for political domination, etc. So clearly, war is linked to different goals. The problem is, I don't know how to write it in a way that keeps it legible. Once the cubes are on paper, it quickly becomes complicated! So, there is a problem with clarity. But in principle, we need to cross-reference

all of this with the different objectives, and then we will have a comprehensive classification... even if it would be difficult to use.

Maxime Petitjean: I just wanted to follow up on the question about the distinction between war and feud, which is quite interesting. So basically, your idea is that the nature of the social unit involved is not important and that what really matters is the practice itself. But how can we analyze it? In the classic argument that says we are not dealing with political units, there is still a point where the nature of the political unit has practical consequences, since we tend to think that what defines a political unit is precisely the ability of institutions to compel the whole community to take part in operations. So, in that case, can't the nature of the actors also be important?

C. D.: Let me repeat, I am not saying that the nature of the actors is unimportant or irrelevant. I am saying that it does not define what the practice is, and therefore these are two different things. This distinction is essential if we then want to do good sociology and possibly ask ourselves who wages war, who engages in feuds, etc. But it does not tell us what war and feud actually are.

M. P.: It does, however, have practical consequences, since it enables the community to constrain all its components.

C. D.: You are thinking of a state-like political community; indeed, the State forces people to go to war. But if you look at the Iroquois, everyone agrees that they wage war. Yet, no Iroquois is actually forced to do so. So, if we say that war is waged by political units and that political unity is defined by its ability to force people to take up arms, then the Iroquois don't actually wage war.

M. P.: Perhaps this is the conclusion?

C. D.: This is one possible conclusion. But in that case, it comes back to the definition in the Larousse dictionary, which claims that war can only occur between states, and anything done by people who do not have a state cannot be called war. And it seems to me that this is not an accurate way to divide up reality, because in the non-state world, there are situations where people clearly engage in combat to defeat others and impose their will on them. Let's assume that we no longer call these "wars". Fine. But then, what do we call this phenomenon? It is not feud either...

M. P.: It is a resolute armed conflict.

C. D.: So what you are therefore suggesting is that, within the same category (discretionary resolute conflict), we only call the confrontation a "war" when it is waged by a State. What use is that to us?

M. P.: It's another form of collective confrontation.

C. D.: It is not another form. It introduces an additional criterion, namely the obligation for the combatants to participate or not. But if we go down that path, we could add countless other criteria. Do people fight with projectile weapons? Behind fortifications? In pitched battles or by surprise? Moreover, in anthropological literature, there

are authors who use various criteria. For example, they distinguish raiding with war. But raiding is a way of fighting that does not tell us anything about the underlying social context. Personally, I use the distinction between “discretionary” and “conventionary”, but I also set aside a number of criteria that, in my opinion, are not helpful. This obviously does not prevent us from later noting, that there are several differences between state and non-state wars, starting with whether or not the combatants were forced to participate. This, obviously, from the combatant’s perspective, changes a number of things! But from the perspective of the social phenomenon we are dealing with, I do not believe it is fundamental.

Maurice Fhima. A feud is a conflict between individuals or groups who live within the same legal community. In other words, for revenge to take place, both sides must agree on what is to be avenged. The issue with the *ganygarr*, which you mentioned, without knowing exactly where to place it, is that it pits two clans, i.e. from the same community, against each other. Both clans agree that women were stolen, that it is reprehensible, so they

start a feud. But if a woman is stolen from another community, this does not pose a problem and will not lead to a feud. So, one key difference between a feud and war is that war is between two communities with completely different values and references.

C. D.: I don’t know why you say that. There are feuds, acts of revenge killings, that sometimes go extremely far. In Australia, people sometimes travel 200 km to kill, and they haven’t asked the targets for permission!

M. F.: So, is it a feud in this case?

C. D.: Yes, of course. A feud is anything that is done to balance the number of deaths, with the idea that once things are even, it will stop. In my opinion, that is the right definition. Once again, it was B. Boulestin who proposed it; I find it insightful and it seems perfectly appropriate to me. And indeed, according to this definition, the question of whether the operation is conducted internally or externally does not matter. As with the previous point, about whether or not it is obligatory to wage war: that is a secondary question that can be considered, but which does not affect the definition itself.

