

The Special Hunt

[p. 96] At times, when there has been no meat in the village for three or four days, the women decide to send the men on a special hunt. They talk together and complain that there is no meat and the men are lazy. The young married women and the unmarried adolescent girls gather at Basta's house an hour before sundown. Their faces are painted and they have put on their best dresses and beads. They start at one end of Marcos and stop at each house, surrounding each man in turn. One or two women tug gently at his shirt or belt while they sing, "We are sending you to the forest to hunt, bring us back meat." They sing in Culina, a language considered exotic at Marcos. Tomuha, whose father was a Culina, usually leads the singing, although the other women know this song, as well as other Culina songs. They say that Tomuha is best at calling a special hunt.

Most men disregard the women, continuing their activities totally oblivious to their presence, even when the entire group encircles them. Only Shamarua and Taofaka look up to pull Koyo's hair and start a mock fight with Shimiri, trying to provoke the girls into sending them for game. The women sing to every man but Baiyakondi, who no longer hunts. If there are visitors from another village, they too are included. Their round of the village completed, the women separate and return to their own households.

The following morning, soon after sunrise, the men leave, traveling two or three in a canoe, generally heading downriver for one or two hours. They beach their canoes and split up, [p. 97] following different trails into the forest, some hunting alone, some in twos or threes. They head back to the canoes a little after noon. They wait for each other and usually return together. Two or three men may hunt longer if they have not yet found any game or if they have gone further into the forest in search of large game.

While the men are out hunting, the women prepare *mama*, a drink made from corn. They strip the kernels from the cob and roast them slowly on a piece of flattened metal placed over the fire. When the kernels are brown and crisp, they are placed in a large upright mortar made from a partially hollowed-out log. The corn is pounded to a fine powder and mixed with water. The women usually work cooperatively, one woman pounding the corn while another roasts the next batch. There are only three large mortars at Marcos and each is shared by several households.

Once the corn drink has been made and the daily chores of steaming manioc and gathering firewood are done, the women bathe in the river, put on their best clothes, and spend an hour or more painting careful designs on their faces and, sometimes, their legs.

Throughout the morning while the women work and decorate themselves, a certain amount of questioning and conversation goes on concerning which man each woman is "waiting for." The expression "waiting for" describes the fact that each woman has sent someone to hunt for her: Yawandi has sent Baido, Koyo waits for Shamarua, Tomuha waits for Sharafo, while Bashkoni says sorrowfully that Buraya is away upriver, and there is no one else to send since she has too many kin at Marcos, and a woman may not wait for her husband or for any brothers or fathers, sons, mothers' brothers, sons-in-law, fathers-in-law, or sisters' husband.

Tsatsa has sent Samuel time after time, and Yawandi has sent Baido for years. Shirimba sent Taofaka a few times while I was at Marcos, but one day I watched her hide behind my [p. 98] house to avoid him, and at the next special hunt she sent no one. Occasionally Tomuha has sent two men, but two women never wait for the same man. A few of the older women, such as Naikashu and Yawanini, help prepare the corn drink, but do not wait for anyone. They watch the games that follow the men's return from the forest, but they do not take part.

A short time before the men are expected to return, most of the young girls and some of the young women go into the forest to pick a plant called *nawawakusi*. This is a variety of stinging nettle which causes a red welt and intense itching for several hours when it is rubbed against the skin. The *nawawakusi* is kept in the house ready for later use against the men.

The men can be heard coming upriver when they are still a half hour from Marcos, and all the women who are taking part in the special hunt stand in front of Basta's house. The men walk solemnly up from the port, and silently each man drops the game he has shot on the ground before the waiting women and walks to his own house. Each woman picks up the animal that her partner has dropped and takes it to her own house and begins to prepare it. The men relax in their hammocks, eating pieces of manioc and cornmeal, waiting for the meat to be cooked. Once the meat has been

skinned, cut up, and put to boil, each woman brings a pot of corn drink to her partner, setting it down next to his hammock. This drink is given even on the rare occasions when the man has failed to bring back any game.

As soon as the meat has cooked, everyone begins to eat. A great deal of visiting goes on, and invitations to eat are freely extended, so that people make the rounds of the village, eating at several houses in turn. The men compare this day's hunt to previous ones, remembering a good hunt when they brought in five peccaries and the last poor hunt when only monkeys could be found.

Everyone has barely finished eating when the young women burst into action with stalks of *nawawakusi* in their hands, [p. 100] trying to corner a young man. The men laugh, but they run, staying out of reach, hiding behind a house, until they are caught. Then they stand still, letting the girls triumphantly rub their chests, necks, and arms with the stinging nettle, which is said to give strength. The men finally seize some *nawawakusi* from the women and the chase becomes two sided with small groups of men and women in pursuit and retreat, laughing and shouting. The younger women are the favorite targets, and Koyo stops a moment to show off the red welts rising on her arms, complaining boastfully of how they hurt and itch. Children join in the chase, and, as among the adults, girls and boys are always opposed.

Two other games usually follow the *nawawakusi* chase, beginning in the large cleared area in front of Basta's house. In one, a man places a fiber rope around the waist of one of the women (not necessarily his special hunt partner), while she fixes the same kind of rope around his shoulder and under one arm. They both strain to dislodge the other's footing and to toss their opponent to the ground. Sometimes one or more people come running to add their weight; women help women; men help men. In the second game, a man takes a short piece of sugar cane, walks provocatively past several women, taps them teasingly with the cane, and runs away. One or more women will pursue him, reaching to grab the piece of sugar cane. Men help each other by passing or tossing the cane, and women help each other by blocking the men's path.

The effort involved in these games is enormous, considering that they are carried out in a clearing, under the afternoon sun, some ten degrees from the equator. When one asks why they are playing, the answer is, "*nami icnapa, no fusino*," "there's lot of meat, let's play." By about five o'clock the games stop, and everyone goes to bathe in the river – partly to cool off and partly to sooth the welts caused by the stinging nettle.

The special hunt usually results in more meat in the village than a normal day's hunt, although it can be unproductive. [p. 101] There was one special hunt in which monkeys were the only game, and they amounted to less meat than on a good normal hunting day, even though more individual animals were brought in. During two special hunts I made a count of all the game brought into the village. In the first, the total was two collared peccaries, one deer, five monkeys; in the second, the total was eight monkeys. For the ten men of my sample, the amount brought in during a third special hunt was three white-lipped peccaries, one monkey, and one bird.

The social pressure of the special hunt, the line of women painted and waiting, makes young men try hard to succeed. On one occasion, Buraya and Sharafo, usually two of the least active hunters at Marcos, searched the forest till darkness fell, risking the spirits, but returning with three large peccaries. Basta and Zacharais, secure in their position as heads of large households returned without meat one time. They beached their canoes, however, at a different port rather than run the gamut of waiting women, and they walked to their houses by a different trail, looking downcast and angry.

During the special hunts there are important shifts in the pattern of distributing meat. Meat is given directly outside of the household, rather than to a wife, a mother-in-law, or a mother within the hunter's household. Since the special hunt partner must be someone outside the circle of close relatives, this means that meat is given to a household which is not among the usual recipients of distribution from the man's household. In the normal hunt, game is often distributed to at least one other household, while meat received in a special hunt is not distributed, rather, invitations to eat are freely given by members of each household. It is the only time that young women are in a position to issue invitations to their sisters and cousins. The shift in the distribution pattern equalizes available hunting skills as men hunt for households other than their own.

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[p. 103] The choice of partners in the special hunts is usually a choice of lovers, and for this reason neither children nor close kin are possible partners. The teasing and the provocation of the

special hunt games are symbolically sexual and, despite the discretion of most love affairs at Marcos, some flirtations are obvious, and they coincide with the partnerships of the special hunt. The women of Basta's household told me of their own love affairs and those of others, and they usually chose one of their lovers as a partner.

Put at its crudest, the special hunt symbolizes an economic structure in which meat is exchanged for sex. This is neither a "natural" nor "rational" exchange since women produce at [p. 104] least as much of the food supply at Marcos, and a rational exchange would consist of viewing the economy as an exchange of women's production for men's. Certainly there is no evidence that women are naturally less interested in sex or more interested in meat than men are. This is a culturally produced socio-economic system in which sex is the incentive for hunting, and a man who is known to be a good hunter has a better chance of gaining wives or mistresses. The circular logic of the system is that men compete against other men because women are scarce. Women are scarce because sex is not free, but must be won, and because some men have more than one wife. A man with one wife is still competing and part of the reason for wanting more than one wife is to prove that one is a man. In the daily hunt, secrecy about meat prevents young men from demonstrating their prowess as hunters since only members of their own households know which man has provided the meat. The special hunt gives an opportunity for men to demonstrate their hunting skill to women other than their wives. It is a dramatic portrayal of the exchange between the sexes, which structures daily interactions between men and women.

This structure appears to be common to most tropical forest people, and it is expressed in a myth which, in various forms is widespread among these cultures. The central theme describes a love affair between a tapir and a woman. The husband eventually discovers his wife and her tapir lover, kills the tapir, and, in many versions, forces his wife to eat or copulate with the tapir's penis after which she dies. This theme appears in two Sharanahua myths (see Chapters 7 and 9) with additional complications. In this myth the tapir, the largest game animal of the forest, is literally connected with women. Man in the role of the hunter kills his rival, who becomes meat, eliminates freely given sex from the universe, and sets up an antagonistic relationship to women, in which the hunter must win women by killing game.

A system in which women are an incentive does not lead [p. 105] to a friendly, easygoing relationship between men and women. Women look for the good hunter, the good provider, not for companionship. The prestige system carries a sting: The good hunter is the virile man, but the hunter with little skill or bad luck does not find sympathy. When children scream at their mothers, "*Nami pipai!*" "I want to eat meat!" their mothers' reply, "*Nami yamai,*" "There is no more meat," is a goad that women aim at their husbands, provoking them to hunt again, implying that they are less than men since there is no more meat.

A man may spend hours in the forest. One day Basta returned empty handed, tired, muddy from wading through swampy ground and picking ticks off his body. No words of sympathy were forthcoming, and I asked Yawandi why she and Bashkondi were painting their faces. She replied in a voice that carried clearly to the hammock where Basta rested alone, "We want to paint, there's no meat, let's eat penises!" On other days as well I have suspected that women paint their faces as an unspoken challenge to the men. In one version of the Sharanahua tapir myth, the tapir and then the hunter attract the woman by throwing genipa fruits, the fruit which yields black face paint.

When men return from hunting with nothing to show, their wives sometimes accuse them of meeting a woman to make love rather than hunt. Men in turn suspect their wives of carrying on love affairs while they search the forest for game. Both are often correct. Neither husbands nor wives are supposed to be jealous of the love affairs involved in the special hunt. In general, jealousy is considered to be a bad trait in a wife or a husband, and I have heard both men and women complain that they are unlucky to have a jealous spouse. It is seldom a reason for divorce, for "throwing away" one's spouse, nor is it sufficient reason to end a love affair, but it provokes quarrels between couples.

Yawandi has told me that men used to be "angry," that long ago they punished their wives for infidelity. I asked if that [p. 106] included love affairs with husband's brother or her *bimbiki*, and she said no, even then these were permissible lovers, and husbands were not supposed to be jealous. The terms for husband's brother and brother's wife are "*fakupa*" and "*fakuwa*." These terms refer to specific individuals who are related in this way through marriage. Their relationship falls within the category of *bimbiki*, "potential spouse."

Ipo, after her marriage to Iconahua, used to come to my house while I was working with Ndaishiwaka, her *fakufa*. They laughed and flirted and led me to ask, at a different time, if it was

usual to make love to one's *fakuwa*, brother's wife. Ndai-shiwaka said no, that one might "play" with her and that she could give food to her *faku'pa*, but that sexual intercourse was forbidden. When I told Yawandi this version she laughed and told me he lied, and several women added that he had been sleeping with his other *fakuwa* for years. A brother's wife is often an actual *bimbiki* of both men, or if a foreigner, is still an allowable sexual partner.

The hidden competition at Marcos is between "brothers," men of the same descent group. They pursue the same women since they share the same incest taboos, and any woman available to one brother is a possible wife or mistress for the other. Love affairs between *fakupa* and *fakuwa*, husband's brother and brother's wife, may ease the competition or strengthen it. The availability of *fakuwa* as a sexual partner eases the competition among brothers for wives, but when women are perceived as scarce, and one man is far more successful than the other, the rivalry among brothers may become intense. In particular, a distant "brother," with whom there are few interactions, becomes a tapir-rival for one's wife.

This competition is built into the structure of the village, and it is overlaid both by loyalty to one's kinsmen and the often friendly relationship between men who have grown up together. It is further contained by the absolute prohibition of any open competitive behavior between men and finds expression [p. 107] instead in contempt for foreigners and male solidarity in the battle of the sexes.

This complex of behavior that is related to hunting is part of learning the sex role of a man. The changes of the last twenty-five years are gradually shifting roles and expectations, but the role of a man is still first and foremost that of a hunter. A small boy's first toy is a bow and arrow, a tiny version of his father's five and a half foot bow. Three year olds gravely stalk butterflies, their kin beaming with pride. Six year olds beg their older brothers to make them bows and arrows, and boys of ten and older are experts at manufacturing two-foot bows and short, straight arrows. Men make three types of arrows for hunting: broad, lance-shaped bamboo points for big game; barbed hardwood points for monkeys and birds; and a three-pointed barbed, hardwood point for fishing. Nowadays a man must also find a way to earn the money to buy a shotgun and shells.

Skill at hunting, especially with bow and arrows, seems to depend on starting young. Most men are good hunters, though some are better than others. Samuel is the only really poor hunter at Marcos, and it may be related to the fact that he spent a few years in early childhood living with a Peruvian. His own father was dead, and the Peruvian adopted him. When Yawanini, his mother, married Zacharais, his father's brother, they took Samuel back to the *maloca*.

I asked Yawandi once why Samuel was a poor hunter. She replied that when Samuel went to hunt peccary, the peccaries ran away; and when Samuel hunted for capybara, they fled. Samuel missed out on the early learning in which fathers encourage their sons' efforts with tiny bows and arrows. This would lead to being the poorest among the group of older boys who spend their days hunting birds and frogs. I have never dared ask Samuel since questioning a man's lack of skill at hunting is equivalent to discussing his lack of virility. I believe that Samuel's failure as a hunter is not primarily due to a lack [p. 108] of the physical skills but rather to his lack of understanding of the complex of rivalry and sexual antagonism that is an integral part of hunting at Marcos.

Little boys are taught to be sexually aggressive and little girls are taught to provoke and protect themselves. A mother laughs with pride at her two-year-old son's imitation of the motions of sex or her small daughter's pout and slap at a teasing man. Three-year-old Comafo was brought to my house by one of the women who take care of him. Old Baido laughingly pretended to grab the woman, and Comafo stood up fiercely and aimed the conventional Sharanahua "fuck you" gesture at Baido. Comafo's grandfather pounded his chest and beamed proudly at his small grandson. Everyone else laughed, and Comafo cried. Comafo has learned a basic social fact, that other men are his competitors over women, and this is why Basta, his grandfather, was proud. Comafo has not yet learned to conceal his anger, but adult laughter will soon teach him. Samuel may have failed to learn the relationship between competition for women and hunting skills as the way of winning them. Samuel has mistresses, but he is unable to take a second wife since he gives in to Ifama's jealousy. A successful man at Marcos need not pay attention to his wife's feelings.

In most ways in everyday life the sexes are evenly matched at Marcos, but they are matched against each other in a semi-playful, semi-hostile battle. Sharanahua women are strong, but the men usually succeed in tossing them in the games of the special hunt. The women, however usually succeed in coercing the men to hunt for them. Only once in the time I spent at Marcos did they fail. This was an evening when many visitors had come from Boca de Curanja, and almost all the men

were together drinking strong manioc beer at Basta's house. The young women sang to them, but no one hunted. Unlike a usual evening when men are scattered in their own households, sitting alone or playing with a child, the men were able to present a solid front. [p. 109] They could argue that no one would lose face or come out ahead since no one would hunt.

Sharanahua women are rarely frightened by any man, unless he is drunk, but a group of men together are viewed as dangerous. The women say, "We'll be raped," and will not join such a group. I never was told of a case of rape, but the threat keeps women "in their place," from taking part in activities that are seen as male, and from attempting to push the men too hard. Women express feelings of antagonism toward men by attacking them with *nawawakusi*. On one occasion the men had been drinking heavily the day before, and by early evening were extremely drunk. Several fights were threatened, and one man was so drunk that he fell off the floor of his house, a four-foot drop to the ground. The next day his wife led a bunch of women in an attack on the men with *nawawakusi*. She attacked several men while several other women attacked her husband.

The men's threat of rape and the women's attack with *nawawakusi* are symbolic statements demonstrating the structure of male and female social groupings. The stability of the male-female relationship, based as it is on mutual social and economic dependence allows for the open expression of hostility. There are other hostilities at Marcos and their expression would widen cracks and break up the village whereas the battle of the sexes provides a village-wide loyalty. The ritualization of male solidarity in antagonism to female solidarity puts strain on the only relationship in this society that can stand it. This combination of same sex solidarity and antagonism to the other sex prevents the households from becoming tightly closed units. The competition between "brothers" is relieved by their moving to different households, as Moon in the myth leaves his brother, in obedience to the matrilineal rule, and this rule prevents the patrilineal descent groups from solidifying and separating out from the village.