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# The Paradox of Human Warfare Explained



Human warfare is shocking and an evolutionary puzzle, via [Getty Images](#).

The most atrocious acts of violence humans commit have been in warfare. Through human history we have left countless children orphaned and violently raped millions of women. We have found untold means to torture enemy combatants deliberately in ways beyond what most living organisms may have experienced. We have displayed the bodies of our enemies as trophies in our homes, or worse, used them as cups to consume our blood. It seems that few things we do are as morally depraved as our behavior in warfare.

Yet, it is not the egregious violence and moral depravity that makes human warfare so shocking. Deliberately torturing others may be a special human quality, but there is ample evidence of violence and pain endured by animals in the struggle to obtain resources, reproduce and avoid predators.

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What is truly shocking about human warfare is that large numbers of reproductively unrelated, and unfamiliar individuals die in combat for benefits that are widely shared. In the animal kingdom, the closest living relative to the highly cooperative eusocial insects is the animal cooperates in war in this manner.

Chimps raid neighboring communities, but in the several decades of observing them, the attacking party has been killed. They only attack when they outnumber the opponents sufficiently so that the attackers are unscathed. And the chimps that gang up for a fight are not from the same community.

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each other well, as they hail from the same community.

Ants readily sacrifice their lives in inter-colony battles, but the ants that do so are not individuals. They are giving up their lives to increase the fitness of the reproductive queen they are genetically related to.

Reciprocity and relatedness suffice to explain chimp and ant wars. Human warfare novel explanation.

But does human warfare stand out in the animal kingdom if kings, states, and other political institutions are taken out of the picture. Perhaps our weird behavior is a result of powerful rulers who can coerce us to do anything, including give up our lives.

Answering this question has taken me to a place in East Africa where different pastoralist groups wage wars for cattle, pastures and water. The Turkana, the people I work with, are cattle herders. They make a living in the semi-arid savanna of northwest Kenya by keeping camels, goat, and sheep, and seasonally moving to find pastures and water. Periodically they mobilize and raid other settlements to acquire cattle and pastures, and to take revenge for previous attacks.

These attacks give the impression that human warfare does indeed require a novel mechanism. Turkana warriors are not coerced by any authority. Yet in some areas of the Turkana region, five males die in warfare. Of the males who survive to adulthood, one out of two die.

You may be tempted to think that in an egalitarian small-scale society everyone is equal or relative, and so this is simply cooperation with one's kith and kin. But this is not true. The Turkana number a million people, and are divided into about two-dozen different sub-territories. On Turkana raids hundreds of men from different territories come together. For a typical warrior most of his fellow combatants are neither kin nor close associates. Many are strangers.

So, really, why do these men go on raids, trusting that the strangers they are fighting will do their part?

Some may say it is obvious why these men participate in warfare. After all, cattle are a source of wealth, and the path to marriage. And cattle have feet—drive them away and you can lose your fortune overnight. Not only so, without a fight they would lose their territory, and you would be a herder without good pastures? And let's not forget, it is reproductive-aged men who go on these raids. The mix of youth, testosterone, and firearms—how can this transpire?

Yet, acknowledging these motives—cows, pastures, and firearms—gets us only so far. Young, unmarried men have plenty of reasons to have a dustup with others in their community. They share pastures and water, and vie for the same women. Yet, with each other, they put aside their AK-47s, and hash out disputes with their herding tools and wrist blades.

If you think it is the desire for cows, then consider that there are cows everywhere. If a neighboring family has cows, the settlement across the river has cows, and herders

Turkana settlements have cows. Yet, Turkana men pass up on these hundreds of thousands of cows, and instead will travel large distances until they reach the settlement of people who do not consider themselves Turkana, before they raid cattle.

And yes, territory is precious. But, remarkably, Turkana from one territory typically do not raid Turkana from other territories to graze in their pastures, and such sharing is especially important in the dry season when grass and water are scarce. Yet, if the Toposa encroach, the area will mobilize a retaliatory raid.

Earlier in this post I noted that warfare is where moral depravity seems to abound. The question to ask is why we have moral concerns at all, and why they extend to a set of people who are neither relatives nor friends. Why does a Turkana herder pass up cows of some distant stranger, to go and raid the cows of some other distant stranger? Why does he stick to fight with some people, and AK-47s to fight with others? Why let some stranger graze in your scarce pastures and kill others for venturing too close? And is that set of moral concerns towards just arbitrary, or is there some logic to our moral inclusivity?

Answering this can help make sense of a lot of the violence that we want to understand and limit. It would be a place for evolutionary thinking to make a useful contribution. Over the last couple decades, the field of cultural evolution has developed a game-changing idea—the theory of cultural group selection. Posited originally by Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd <sup>1</sup>, and honed further by Joseph Henrich <sup>2</sup>, the theory reveals that the cultural evolution of humans creates conditions for group selection to occur. Not genetic group selection among culturally distinct groups. Peter Turchin has applied this theory to questions of human history such as why empires rise and fall <sup>3</sup>, and how cooperation emerged <sup>4</sup>. My work on Turkana warfare provides empirical support for cultural group selection in a non-state society <sup>5</sup>. Together with Matthew Zefferman I've posited that cultural group selection can subsume existing evolutionary theories of warfare and account for many of the bizarre features of human warfare <sup>6</sup>.

There is more to be done to evaluate the theory of cultural group selection...but as the theory tells us that the moral sphere of humans readily extends to include culturally distinct people. This is useful because it implies that we could possibly expand the moral sphere by creating perceptions of cultural similarity. Finding the common thread that connects cultures may not be just a cliché, but an evolutionarily backed-up path to peace.

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January 22, 2016

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anon says:

January 22, 2016 at 1:41 pm

I am surprised to see the Turkana called “egalitarian” considering they have la in wealth (livestock) and wives, and elders wield disproportionate social influe Pastoralists are generally considered to have “significant inequality” (Kaplan, F Gurven. 2009. *Phil Trans*). Not every group can be egalitarian but that doesn’t importance of the questions being asked.

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