

Film Guide *for The Ax Fight*

Introduction

The Ax Fight is one of the more than twenty films about the Yanomamo Indians that are now distributed by D.E.R. The Yanomamo, who live in the tropical forest of southern Venezuela and northern Brazil, practice a mixed subsistence economy. Up to eighty per cent of their food comes from gardening, while food from hunting and foraging round out their diet. There are currently about fifteen thousand Yanomamo living in some one hundred fifty scattered villages

This film was made in the village of Mishimishimabowei-teri, a large village of some two hundred fifty people, which is located at the headwaters of the Mavaca River in the southern-most part of Venezuela (1°35'N by 65°20'W). Mishimishimabowei-teri's first contact with westerners occurred in 1970 when they were visited by Dr. Napoleon Chagnon, an anthropologist who had spent three years living among the Yanomamo. When Chagnon returned to the village in 1971, he brought with him Timothy Asch, an ethnographic filmmaker, and Creig Johnson, a soundman. The team lived in the village from February 26th to March 27th, and during that time they shot over forty hours of synchronous sound film from which this film was edited. The Ax Fight was filmed February 28, 1971. The actual event lasted about half an hour; 400 feet of film, (10 minutes) were shot. All of the original footage is included in the film.

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Film Synopsis

Large Yanomamo villages are volatile and the slightest provocation can spark a violent outburst. When a group of visitors from Ironasi-teri were visiting their relatives in Mishimishimabowei-teri tensions were high. The visitors refused to work in the garden and demanded to be fed. The fight started when one of the host women refused to share plantains with a visiting man and he beat her with a stick. Her brother and then her husband and his brother retaliated and within five minutes several men were fighting with clubs, machetes and axes. The fight continued until one man was knocked unconscious. Then elder men of influence stepped in and gradually people dispersed.

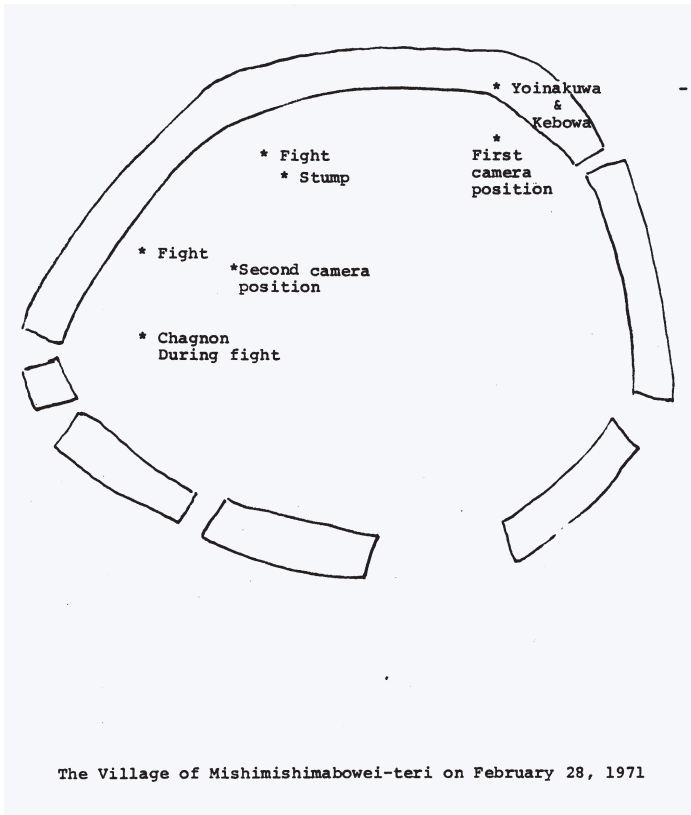
Film Structure

The Ax Fight was constructed in four parts in order to give students an idea of how difficult it is to make order out of the seeming chaos of certain field experiences. To make a translation from one cultural experience to another cultural idiom, the anthropologist often condenses, analyzes and-makes intellectual models. The first section of the film is an unedited record of the event just as the cameraman saw it on his second day in the village. Inadvertently the sound continues after the film runs out and one hears the comments of Chagnon, Asch and Johnson. After careful interviewing, Chagnon's initial information proves false.

The second section is a slow-motion, still frame replay of much of the footage, during which the anthropologist, Napoleon Chagnon, identifies the combatants and explains the significance of their behavior. His information shows that his fight is a ritualized contest, not a brawl.

In the third section, Chagnon discusses the kinship structure of the participants in the fight, demonstrating that the fight represents on a small scale the basic cleavages between local descent groups in the village.

The final section is an edited version. By comparing this version to the first section, students discover how strongly intellectual models influence visual perception. A by-product should be some understanding of how filmmakers create finished film from raw footage and sound.



Text of the Film

The following is the complete narration, dialogue and all written titles in the film. The numbers indicated in the form x:y are footage counts; they refer to the number of feet and frames elapsed from the '2' on the academy leader at the beginning of the film, before the first title: "A Documentary Educational Resources Production".

3:00 PICTURE Map of Yanomamo tribal area

3:10 JOHNSON "February 28, 1971. Afternoon.

5:30 TITLE A Documentary Educational Resources Production

9:15 TITLE The Ax Fight

17:20 CHAGNON
"Two women are fighting with each other."

18:00 TITLE Large Yanomamo villages are volatile and the slightest provocation can start a violent outburst. On February 28, 1971, a fight erupted in the village of Mishimishimabowei-teri, with some 250 inhabitants. The fight began when a woman was beaten in the garden. She fled into the village, where her brother challenged the assailant to a club-fight. The contest rapidly escalated into an ax fight.

29:25 Chagnon

"Bring your camera over here, it's going to start."

32:20 PICTURE

Beginning of unedited section -

33:25 TITLE

You are about to see and hear the unedited record of this seemingly chaotic and confusing fight, just as the field workers witnessed it on their second day in the village.

249:25

PICTURE Asch changes camera position.

314:20 Asch

"Notice how completely out of their social relationships we are that they can kid us about it."

316:20 Johnson

"What do you mean, some guy came up with a machete and..."

Asch

"Yeah, but he was joking."

Johnson

"I know, but I didn't know that."

Asch

"But they were all joking. We're really, we're really out of it."

Chagnon

"Poor son of a bitch."

Asch

"What?"

Chagnon

"He had his back turned and a guy walked up to him with an ax and just let him have it right in the back."

342:12 TITLE

Wabuama

Why the hell did your shiftless son insult us that way? He said we had blemishes! We don't take that kind of talk from a bunch of visiting bastards like you!

It's your goddamn son that has all the filthy blemishes on his ugly face. He's an ass of the first order. His ugly skin is so blemished that he looks more like a pimple than a person. And it's clear to us why all your children are so foul and ugly. We know! We know! It's their ugly mothers that made them that way. You're all descended from pus and pimples. You all come from the village of Pimples.

415:15 END OF PICTURE

Johnson
 “Sound reel 14; February 28, 1971; finish of wife-beating sequence.”

Asch
 “Did you get sync on that?”

Chagnon
 “Wife-beating sequence my foot.”

Johnson
 “Okay, what is it?”

Chagnon
 “It was a club fight.”

Johnson
 “What was first?”

424:00 Chagnon
 “Well, two women were in the garden and one of them was seduced by her ‘son’. It was an incestuous relationship and the others found out about it and that’s what started the fight.”

Asch
 “No kidding!”

Johnson
 “About 3:30 in the afternoon.”

Chagnon
 “No about 3:00 it start... One guy was hit on the back from behind with an ax and just about knocked unconscious with the blow.”

Asch
 “So this is just the beginning of lots more.”

Chagnon
 “Well, when you get a village this big things like this are bound to happen at any...”

Asch
 “Did you figure out how many there were in the village?”

Chagnon
 “No. I haven’t counted them yet--there are over two hundred there.” (He turns to talk to Moawa in Yanomamo.) Aaah, that’s about the tenth person today that’s asked me for my soap.”

Asch
 “Tell him I’ll give him my soap...”

Chagnon
 “No you won’t give him your soap!”

Asch
 “...when I go home.”

Chagnon
 “They’re going to make damn sure we leave in a hurry if we keep promising them everything when we go home.”

Asch
 “Shortiwa (brother-in-law), living in your village is going to be tiresome.”

Chagnon
 “Thought I was shitting you about the fierce people, huh?”

457:00 TITLE

First impressions can be mistaken. when the fight first started, one informant told us that it was about incest. However subsequent work with other informants revealed that the fight stemmed from quite a different cause.

464:00 TITLE We learned that several former members of the village were visiting. These visitors were invited back by some of their kinsmen. However, they also had old enemies in the village, so the situation was volatile. The visitors refused to work in the garden, yet demanded to be fed, and thus tensions grew until a fight erupted. one of the visitors--Mohesiewa--demanded plantains from a woman--Sinabimi. She refused him. He beat her and she ran into the village screaming and crying.

479:20 CHAGNON
 The film opens as Sinabimi is comforted by her sister. Her brother, Uuwa, is infuriated by the beating. He takes up his club and marches to the center of the village and publicly insults Mohesiewa. Mohesiewa comes out to fight; he thrashes wildly at Uuwa, who keeps his distance and then delivers a calculated blow with his larger club, hitting Mohesiewa on the forearm, Stunned and angered, Mohesiewa attacks as if to use his bow stave as a dangerous thrusting spear, and Uuwa backs off, deflecting the blows with his club. Mohesiewa's younger brother, realizing the Mohesiewa has been injured, rushes out to repel Uuwa until Mohesiewa can regain his advantage and take up a longer club. Their sister quickly brings Mohesiewa a more suitable club. The three men temporarily square off, staring at each other. Mohesiewa's mother approaches, takes the bow stave and reprimands Uuwa. She comforts her son by stroking his injured arm, while Mohesiewa's sister continues to provoke the situation with vicious insults. A small crowd gathers, but the conflict stabilizes at a level where vituperative insults and hostile glares are passing back and forth between the principles of the fight.

Mohesiewa quits the area. He leaves his younger brother to keep his assailants at bay and meet any new attack. The fight seems as though it were over at this point.

575:00 However, Sinabimi's husband, Yoinakuwa, and his brother, Kebowa, are not going to allow it to end and they fetch their axes and machetes. Although it was Yoinakuwa's wife that was beaten by Mohesiewa, it is Kebowa who wants to settle the matter with axes. Kebowa attacks Mchesiewa, but Mohesiewals kinswomen seize the ax handle and try to prevent him from striking. This diversion gives Mohesiewa enough time to grab the ax handle himself and struggle with Kebowa until help from his male kinsmen arrives. Since Yoinakuwa could not deliver a clean blow with his machete during this struggle without hitting his own brother, he tries to get behind Mohesiewa and attack him from that angle. Mohesiewa's kinsmen send the women to fetch axes and machetes, for the fight has now escalated. Mohesiewa's younger brother again comes to his aid, this time carrying a machete. He arrives just as Kebowa manages to wrest his ax from Mohesiewa and strike him soundly on the leg with the blunt edge. Infuriated, Mohesiewa's brother discards his machete and takes up an ax. He attacks Kebowa, delivering a series of crunching blows with the dull side of the ax.

Namokawa, the leader of the visiting faction, wearing green feathers on his upper arm, realizes that the fight is getting serious and steps in to try to prevent further injuries. He carries Do weapon, relying on his well-deserved and demonstrated authority. Mohesiewals brother, after delivering several blows on Kebowa's leg with the dull side of his ax, threatens to escalate the fight even further; he turns the sharp side of his ax up-ward and prepares to hit Kebowa on the head. Alarmed by this new threatens a woman from Kebowa's group seizes the ax handle, turns the sharp side down and drags him out of the fight. Kebowa sees that his back is turned and rushes him from behind. He strikes a powerful overhead blow with his ax, the dull side forward, hitting Mohesiwals brother squarely in the middle of the back. He instantly collapses to the ground and lies there motionless. The situation is now very tense; for it is not clear if the young man has been killed or is merely unconscious.

Nanokawa, alarmed at this, quickly takes up a heavy club and wades aggressively into the throng. A partisan of Kebowa drives away a woman whose biting insults threaten to provoke the men to even greater violence. Other men who had patiently refrained from getting into the fight until now are enraged. They, also, take up their weapons and step into the fight.

732: 00 Mohesiwals older agnates, men of his fathers generation, form a protective ring around the injured youth, as he lies on the ground and slowly regains consciousness. Two of Mohesiewals fiercest agnatic relatives, men that he calls 'father', conspicuously place themselves between Kebowa's group and the injured youth, trembling with constrained rage. Their presence and demeanor are sufficient to bring the fight to a standstill at this level. And the participants revert to verbal insult and then gradually leave.

764: 15 Some of the women, dissatisfied with the outcome, continue to provoke the situation. They had fought among themselves in the garden and they have their own scores to settle. One of the female residents hurls insults at Mohesiewa's sister and the women of Nanokawa's group-women who were visitors in her village.

Section 3: Lineage Chart

782:00 CHAGNON

864:00 TITLE

A final edited version of the fight follows.

1020:00 TITLE

Several days after the fight, some of the visitors began leaving. Tensions were temporarily relieved.

Film Structure Explored

The first section of the film is the entire, unedited picture and sound track exactly as it was filmed by Asch at the time of the fight. It is, of course, a very subjective view of the event, for it was filmed by one man, standing in one place and watching the fight through a tiny window. However, since the event was exciting and happened quickly, the filmmakers felt that the best way to preserve the initial integrity of the event was to show the film in its most complete form, including the out of focus moments when Asch was searching with his camera. Furthermore, the filmmakers felt that putting the unedited section first and providing minimal background information was the best way to recreate their initial experience while recording the event, for it was only their second day in the village and the fight broke out quickly and unexpectedly.

There is a clear example, -though, of one of the problems with this approach: the shot of a young boy drawing a line in the dirt with a pole (320:00). Asch filmed this because to him, as an American, "drawing a line" has some obvious, symbolic meaning, especially in the context of a fight. However, the Yanomamo share no similar notion; to them drawing a line in the dirt with a stick is just something that young boys do on hot afternoons. Therefore, the relationship of the shot to the fight is only temporal and spacial, yet by filming it when he did, Asch gave it symbolic significance--particularly to an American audience. This shot is an excellent example of ethnocentrism. Since this is a problem that all anthropologists face while doing field work, it was decided by Asch to leave this shot in the film, much to Chagnon's annoyance, as he felt he would now have to explain, continually, a behavior which was distracting and had no significance to the Yanomamo.

After 400' Asch ran out of film but Johnson still had tape. He left the recorder running and when Chagnon joined them, he recorded part of their conversation that followed. The filmmakers

felt that these immediate comments complemented the unedited section, so-it was decided to include about a quarter of the recorded conversation over black film. Again there is a problem: Chagnon's comment (424:00) about the cause of the fight proved false. At the start of the fight, Chagnon had asked a Yanomamo, what it was about. He replied that it was about incest. Chagnon believed incest to be the cause of the fight until that evening when he began checking his information with other informants. The filmmaker decided to include this misinformation because it again raised some interesting points about doing fieldwork. First that even an ethnographer who has lived in another culture for

* It was logical to initially believe the first informant, since illicit sexual relations are often the cause of fights (Chagnon 1968a) Of course, among the Yanomamo, incest covers classificatory ties.

years can be confused by an event such as this fight. Secondly, it points out the importance of checking and double checking one's information.*

In the slow motion replay of the film, narration has been added to describe the action and the footage has been edited to eliminate action that was not relevant to the fight, such as the stick-dragging. There is one important point that is implied in the narration but never stated: the fight is not a free-for-all. Throughout the participants are continually weighing their choice of actions, knowing that if they escalate the fight too much there is a good chance that people will be killed but that if they do not react strongly enough they will lose face.

The final interpretation of the fight, the edited version, was included as a counterpoint to the first version. It is only one example of the many ways this footage could be edited. The viewer can see that in making the footage flow more quickly and smoothly a great deal of the information is lost and the initial integrity of the event is damaged.**

Backgrounds and History

Yanomamo villages are made up of patrilineal families from several lineages that have intermarried. Within these lineages, males of the same generation call each other 'abawa' (brother), while their cross cousins in other lineages are called 'shoriwa' (brother-in-law). According to the prescriptive rules of Yanomamo, marriage, a man may only marry a woman he calls 'suaboya' (female-cross-cousin). This means that within a lineage the males of the same generation compete for the 'same women. Because of this competition between 'brothers', a man's best supporters are usually his 'brothers-in-law, men with whom he has exchanged women.

Certain men emerge as headmen, usually because they are excellent hunters and warriors. Such men are good choices as allies

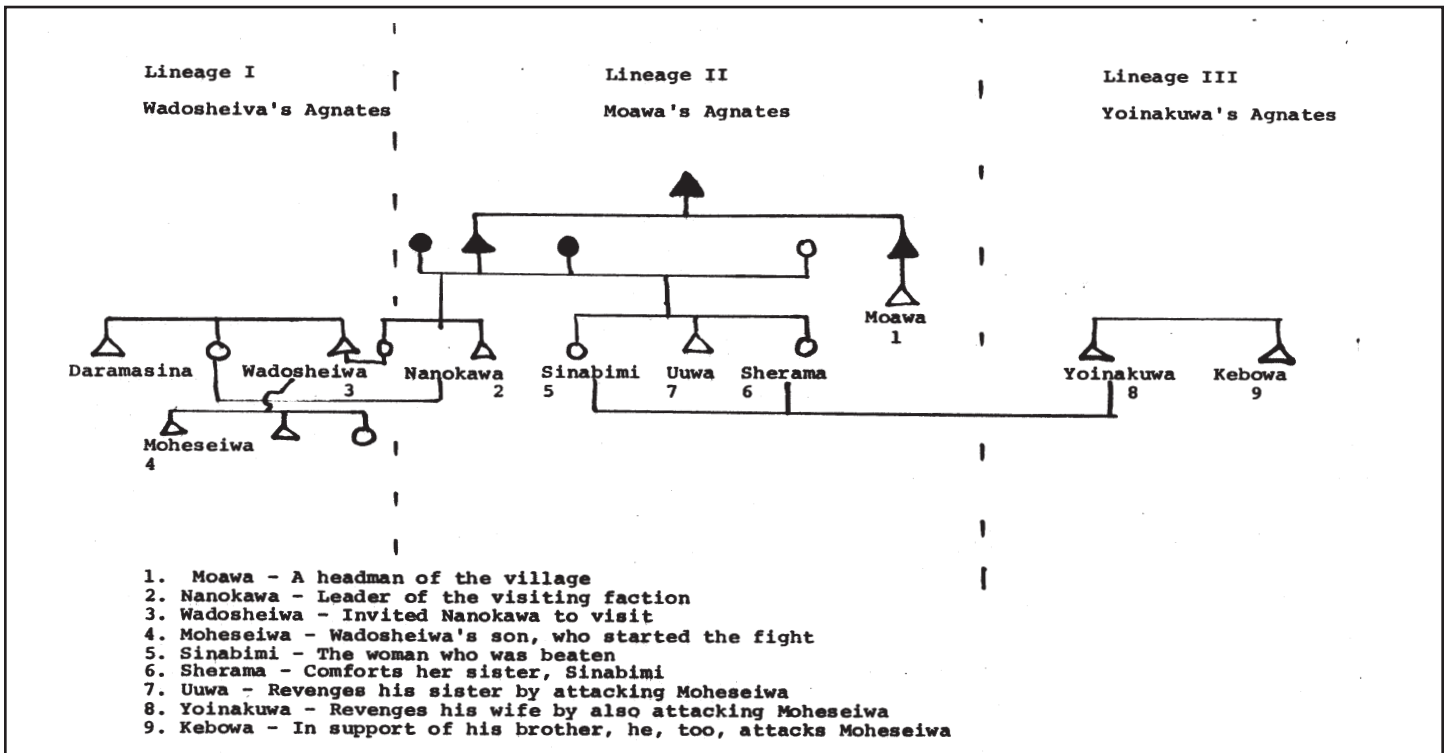
so other men are eager to exchange women with them. Often a headman's 'brothers' will elect to follow him because they stand a better chance of getting a wife, either by having the headman arrange a marriage for them or by stealing women on a raid led by the headman. However, in a large lineage, it is often the case that more than one man -merges as a leader. Not only do these leaders compete with each other for women, they - compete for followers from within their own lineage. When this

* See the film on Chagnon's field work: A Man Called Bee: Studying the Yanomamo, also produced by DER.

** The film editor noted that the final presentation of the fight was edited to fit into the context of the entire film. Since the viewer has seen the unedited footage, he could and did take liberties with the footage that he would not have taken were he editing the fight to stand on its own as a sequence. Asch adds, though, that few filmmakers edit social events in such a way that the integrity of the event is maintained.

competition gets too severe, the lineage will fission with one headman and his allies leaving the village. Since a man's allies are both agnatic and affinal, when Yanomamo villages fission, whole lineages do not move out, but rather sections of two or more lineages allied through marriage.

The history of Mishimishimabowei-teri and Moawals rise to headmanship illustrates this. When Moawa was young, he proved himself to be a capable leader and won some followers. His main rivals in his own lineage at that time were Sibarariwa, a man of his father's generation, and Nanokawa. Relations grew worse as Moawa matured and finally, in 1955, he and a group of followers split away from Sibarariwals village. In time, past fights were forgotten and Moawa rejoined the group, only to have the process repeat itself. Each time Moawa split from Sibarariwa and Nanokawa, his following grew stronger. By 1971 his village, Mishimishimabowei-teri, was stronger and larger than his adversary's. Furthermore, each time Moawa and his followers split with Sibarariwa and Nanokawa there were many people in both villages with dual allegiances. People tried to resolve this ambiguous position by migration back and forth between the two villages. This was the situation in 1971 when the fieldworkers were living in Mishimishimabowei-teri. Wadoshewa lived in Mishimishimabowei-teri, but his brother-in-law, Nanokawa, and his son, Moheseiwa, lived in Ionosi-teri with Sibarariwa. In order to re-unite his family and strengthen his political position in the village, Wadoshewa cleared a garden for Nanokawa and invited him back.



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