

Tapir Distribution



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N.B. These are preliminary notes which will be replaced by a comprehensive study guide written by Napoleon Chagnon. The information and interpretations which follow are the sole responsibility of the authors.

*The tapir is a Perissodactyl Ungulate that is found in the forest of Central and South America. The tapir that Moawa shot weighed about 250 lbs.

Introduction

Tapir Distribution 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 in southern Venezuela and northern Brazil, practice a mixed subsistence economy. Up to eighty percent of their food comes from gardening, while food from hunting and foraging rounds out their diet. There are currently about 15,000 Yanomamo living in some 150 scattered villages. The film was made in the village of Mishimishimabowei-teri, a large village of some 250 people, which is located at the headwaters of the Mavaca river in

the southern most part of Venezuela. Mishimishimabowei-teri was first contacted by a westerner in 1970 when the village was 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 Craig 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.

Tapir Distribution was filmed on March 4th and 5th, 1971. The actual event lasted about three hours the first day and three hours the second day. During that time over 1,000 ft. (1/2 hour) of film were shot. The film was then edited to ten minutes.

Synopsis of the Film

An ax fight (See DER film, *Ax Fight*) had disrupted the political stability in Mishimishimabowei-teri. Several days after the fight Moawa, the most prominent head-

man in the village, killed a tapir and presented it to his brothers-in-law who comprise an important political bloc in the village. The gift of the animal served to reinforce his now shaken alliance with them. The film shows how the meat was prepared, cooked, and distributed. The choice meat went to the important men in the village, the scraps and fat went to the women and children, and finally the dogs moved in for the scant leftovers.

Description of Film

The following is a chronological description of the film that Points out important action, and includes the complete narration and additional commentary. The numbers indicated in the form x:y are footage counts; they refer to the number of feet end frames elapsed from the '2' on the Academy Leader of the film before the first title "A Documentary Educational Resources Production".

12:00 TITLE "Moawa, the most prominent headman of Mishimishimabowei-teri killed a large tapir near the village one morning. Yanonamo custom dictates that the man who kills a large animal cannot eat it himself but must give it to others."

24:10 Opening shot of Moawa walking thru, the village with the tapir on his back wrapped in leaves, and carrying bow and arrows. Although the shot is not very long, it does illustrate how Yanomamo men use the central clearing of the village (see map p.10) for display purposes, especially when returning from a hunt.

27:30 Moawa places the animal down in front of his house and announces that the animal is for

Wadoshewa and Daramasiwii, two brothers that Moawa calls Heriya (brother-in-law). In the shot Wadoshewa is wearing a silver earring and he is standing with his back to the camera. There are also many other people standing around because the killing of a large animal causes a great deal of excitement.

30:00 "Rather than present the entire animal to his father-in-law, Dedeheiwa, for distribution, as he might have, Moawa presents him with a token of blood and intestine and presents the rest of the animal to his most prominent brothers-in-law, Wadoshewa and Daramasiwa, to strengthen a political alliance with their descent group."

35:10 Wadoshewa, acting on behalf of Moawa, hands Dedeheiwa the blood and intestine and a piece of meat.

46:17 Moawa sits in his hammock eating rasha fruit and watching.



49:08 Waha-hara, Wadoshewa's son-in-law, picks up the tapir and carries it across the village to Wadoshewa's house. Waha-hara's activity in this shot and the shot at 73:24 is a good illustration of the type of

duties that a son-in-law doing bride service must do for his father-in-law. (See D.E.R. film Bride Service).

63:30 "Young men from Wadoshewa's, group

carry the large carcass back to his section of the village, and place it on the ground for dismembering.”

73:30 Wahara now brings in banana leaves that he has been sent cut to the garden to collect. The leaves serve as a clean surface on which to cut the meat. As children look on, Wadoshewa begins working on the meat with his machete.

131:00 “Wadoshewa sends the remaining intestines to his own or his brother’s household for immediate use, but earmarks the meat himself for ceremonial distribution. This constitutes the first distribution of the meat -- Wadoshewa sending the meat to his relatives to be cooked.”

146:29 Women carry in large loads of wood during the evening.

157:20 “The women also contribute firewood to the preparation, but the young men provide most of the larger pieces of wood that will be needed to cook the meat.” (See D.E.R. film *Firewood*).

159:20 Two of Wadoshewa’s relatives build a fire and roast the meat.

166:30 “Wadoshewa and his relatives spend most of the night tending the meat some of which is roasted on racks and some of which is boiled in cooking pots.”

179:00 The next morning, Daramasiwa, in front of his house, tends to the meat that has been roasting all night.

201:36 Moawa prominently associates himself with the event by holding a separate distribution of plantain soup in front of his house.”

Shot of men gathered around cooking pots of plantain soup; Wadoshewa, Daramasiwa, and Nanokawa are present.

209:04 Wadoshewa begins working on the meat, cutting the larger pieces into smaller pieces for distribution.

Wadoshewa is wearing green feathers on his arms. The man standing near him is Daramasiwa.

250:00 Still in front of Daramasiwa’s house. The meat is now cut and someone begins to open the baskets of peach palm fruit that Wadoshewa and Daramasiwa’s younger kinsmen had been sent to gather in the garden.

254:15 “Daramasiwa and Wadoshewa are responsible for providing the rasha fruits. For it is important to give both meat and vegetable in a formal distribution. This association of meat and vegetable food is very strong in Yanomamo culture. There is even a word *Dehiao* - to eat a



bite of meat and then a bite of vegetable food and chew them together.”

271:00 “To underscore his bond with Nanokawa, his wife’s brother, Wadoshewa himself carries a large basket of rasha and the choicest meat to Nanokawa’s house. Thereafter he sends the meat and vegetable foods to other relatives by using his sons and brothers as couriers.”

In all twenty-two people received food, although some received only meat and some only rasha.

344:00 The choice meat has now been given to the important men, and the women, children, and dogs move in to work on the fat and bones.

356:20 Daramasiwa’s wife, Kaosarama, has taken over the distribution of the scraps and she directs a young boy to deliver a piece of fatty bone to one of her relatives.



The killing of a large game animal and its distribution (a Reahumo) is an important event that creates great excitement in a Yanomamo village. Not only will many people in the village get fresh meat, but the distribution itself serves as a means of lubricating the kinship system that holds the village together. Yanomamo villages are made up of groups of extended families held together through bonds created by mutual exchange, the most important of these being the bond between two families created

by the exchange of women in marriage. However these bonds need to be publicly reaffirmed from time to time, and the Reahumo serves this purpose. Furthermore, Yanomamo social organization is such that there are problems in maintaining solidarity. In view of these problems an event like a Reahumo takes on even more political significance.

Each Yanomamo lineage is led by a powerful individual or group of brothers. Since the Yanomamo equate power and prestige with the control of women, the headman of the village is the one who controls the most women, specifically by arranging marriages. By arranging marriages one is able to exchange women from one’s own lineage for wives and the political support of brothers-in-law. This support is essential to the Yanomamo because they are constantly engaged in inter-village raiding with the objective being to steal women. So one needs allies to both protect the group and to steal women from other groups. Furthermore a Yanomamo man may only marry his cross-cousins (mother’s brother’s

daughter or father’s sister’s daughter), and since the Yanomamo are patrilineal and have a lineage exogamy rule this means that brothers and parallel cousins compete for women. This is further complicated by the fact that there is a shortage of women among the Yanomamo because they are polygamous and they practice female infanticide, in order to have more warriors (males).

Given this situation, the successful Yanomamo

is not only fierce (waiteri) and able to steal other women and protect his own, but he is also able to manipulate the system in such a way as to gain allies in the form of affines while keeping the support of agnates. When we analyze the elements in *Tapir Distribution* we see that this is exactly what Moawa is doing.

In order to fully understand the political significance of this particular Reahumo one must first know that *Tapir Distribution* was filmed March 4th and 5th, four days after an ax fight had erupted in the village. (See D.E.R. film *The Ax Fight* and film note) The ax fight had its roots in a long power struggle for lineage leadership between Moawa and Nanokawa. These two men are parallel cousins and therefore compete for control of same women. Moawa finally prevailed and forced Nanokawa and some of his followers to move away from the village. However, Nanokawa and his followers had many relatives in the village who wanted them to return, Wadoshewa, Nonokawa's brother-in-law: was particularly anxious for his return. Wadoshewa finally cleared him a new garden and convinced Nanokawa's group to return. The presence of Nanokawa's group in the village created a great deal of stress. They now behaved as visitors and demanded to be fed. Finally a fight broke out between some of Nanokawa's followers in Wadowshawa's lineage and members of a third lineage, allied to Moawa, who were led by Yanakuwa. The fight ended with no one being seriously injured, but Moawa, as headman of the village found himself in a difficult position. He now not only had trouble within his own lineage, but he also had trouble with two groups of allies in two different lineages.

To stabilize his political position Moawa went hunting and shot a tapir. He was obliged to present it to a relative, normally his lather-in-law, for distribution. But this time he only presented Dedeheiwa, his father-in-law, a token gift of meat and

he gave the rest of the animal to Wadoshewa's and Daramasiwa's lineage. Dedeheiwa is the headman of his lineage and he too is an important political force in the village; however since his lineage was not involved in the fight, and since he and Moawa have a very stable relationship, Moawa could afford to neglect Dedeheiwa's lineage this time. Furthermore as an important village leader, Dedeheiwa also wants the village to be politically stable.

By presenting the meat to Wadoshewa and Daramawa, Moawa exhibits the shrewdness that makes him such an excellent leader. First, he reaffirms his bond with Wadoshewa's and Daramashiwa's lineage. Secondly, Moawa knows that Wadoshewa's will give meat to Nanokawa and his followers because the two groups are closely related. This serves to strengthen Moawa's position within his own lineage, since Moawa through Wadoshewa is providing Yanokawa and the other members of his lineage with meat. When Moawa hosts the distribution of Plantain soup in front of his house on the second morning, he is reminding everyone in the village of this fact.

Therefore, by disposing of the tapir in this way, Moawa has enhanced his political position considerably. Although he has done nothing to strengthen his bond with Yoinakuwa's lineage by the same token he has not lost anything either since it was Wadoshewa who distributed the meat and not Moawa himself.

In conclusion we see, in terms of political solidarity, there is a contradiction in Yanomamo social organization. An individual needs as many allies as possible, yet in gaining the support of affines, he risks losing the support of agnates. It is often difficult to make new allies without losing old ones.

It is also interesting to note that compared to many other hunting people the Yanomamo do not have highly structured rules governing the distribu-

tion of meat. The Yanomamo hunter must give large game to a relative, and he usually gives it to his father-in-law to fulfill bride service obligations. Among the !Kung Bushmen and other hunting people there are complex rules concerning ownership of game, and what meat goes to whom and in what order. This comparative lack of rules concerning meat distribution among the Yanomamo permits them to easily use meat distribution as a means of achieving specific political objectives.

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