

MURDER IN GOOD COMPANY

Cooperation, camaraderie and a dizzying homicide rate distinguish a small New Guinea society

By BRUCE BOWER

The Gebusi, a society of around 450 persons living in a New Guinea rain forest, are a strikingly gentle lot. They revel in *kog-wa-yay*, roughly translated as "good company." Togetherness, casual talk and exuberant humor are daily staples. There is no central political structure and no jockeying for power among the stronger men; matters of concern to Gebusi, who live in communal "longhouse" settlements, are decided by consensus. Food, including bananas grown in small gardens and the occasionally hunted wild pig, is routinely shared among all the residents of a settlement. Anger, violence and warfare are frowned upon.

But behind this aura of serenity and conviviality lurks a brutal paradox: The Gebusi murder one another at a rate among the highest ever reported, about 40 times greater than the 1980 homicide rate in the United States. According to anthropologist Bruce M. Knauff of Emory University in Atlanta, who documented the Gebusi homicide rate during nearly two years of field work, their murderous ways cannot be explained by current theories of violence applied to societies such as ours that have complex political and economic systems.

"The character of homicide appears to change in simple societies that have no pecking order or dominance hierarchy among adult men," says Knauff. "Especially in these societies, there may be a pattern of social life that is generally peaceful and tranquil but is punctuated by aggression which, when it does occur, is unrestrained and frequently homicidal."

This pattern, he adds, may be a critical aspect of the evolution of human violence, since simple, decentralized societies have predominated for most of the history of *Homo sapiens*.

Anthropologists who encounter such societies often come away with a vision of "Eden in the outback," says Emory anthropologist Melvin Konner, "only to have the discovery foiled by better data." Margaret Mead's observations of life in Samoa are perhaps the most famous

instance of this tendency. In 1928, she wrote of a near-utopian Samoa unencumbered by aggression, competition, sexual repression and conflict-ridden adolescence. Since the 1950s, several accounts, including a controversial book by Australian anthropologist Derek Freeman, have described a more complex Samoa in which violent crime, including rape, is not uncommon and is often committed by adolescent boys.

In small societies of noncompetitive foragers or hunter-gatherers, violence is especially easy to overlook, says Knauff. First, the people often fear and downplay occasional aggressive outbursts, and second, even a few murders committed from year to year can translate into a high overall homicide rate.

A case in point are the !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, dubbed "the harmless people" by an investigator several decades ago. They are indeed generally peaceful and gregarious, but a systematic survey in 1979 found that the !Kung's homicide rate is nearly three times that of the United States, which is already one of the highest among Western nations. Within a population of 1,500 !Kung, an estimated 22 killings occurred over five decades, "about five more than the same number of New Yorkers would have been expected to commit over the same period," according to Konner.

A similar pattern of pervasive good will and self-effacement combined with occasional violent flare-ups and even murders has been noted among Central Eskimo groups, the Semai aborigines of Malaysia and the nomadic Hadza of Tanzania, says Knauff.

But the Gebusi study is perhaps the most intensive homicide inquiry to date. Knauff began by establishing complete genealogies for 15 of 25 Gebusi clans and partial genealogies for three others. Clan members are distantly or directly related to one another. The total number of adult deaths in the genealogical sample between 1940 and 1982 totaled 394. The cause of each death was cross-checked in extensive discussions

with Gebusi informants, including relatives, friends and acquaintances of the deceased person.

There were 129 cases of homicide, nearly one-third of all deaths, reports Knauff in the Aug.-Oct. *CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY*. The annual homicide rate from 1940 to 1982 is at least 568 murders per 100,000 persons, he says, a conservative calculation based on the partial population survey. By contrast, the 1980 homicide rate in the United States, according to Federal Bureau of Investigation statistics, was 10.7 murders per 100,000 persons; the estimate for Detroit in 1985 was 58.2 murders per 100,000 persons.

"Only the more extreme instances of modern mass slaughter would equal or surpass the Gebusi homicide rate over a period of several decades," says Knauff.

Four out of five Gebusi murders uncovered in the study involved the killing of someone branded as a sorcerer for having allegedly caused the death of another Gebusi. Death from disease, often caused by infections and parasites, is ever-present among the Gebusi and sets the stage for sorcery accusations. More than one-quarter of the sickness deaths in the genealogical sample precipitated a sorcery killing.

Although sorcery accusations are leveled at both men and women, only men carry out the homicides, says Knauff, "including some who were among the least assertive and aggressive even by Gebusi standards." In two communities he surveyed, 11 of 17 adult men had killed an alleged sorcerer.

The Gebusi believe that a sorcerer conceals his or her evil intentions toward others. After a sickness death, the first step in uncovering a possible sorcerer is to hold an all-night seance conducted by mediums who believe their bodies are temporarily inhabited by spirits. If the seance provides a sorcery suspect, that person must pass a "divination inquest." In many cases, the accused must cook a large piece of fish or meat coated with powder ground from sago palms without burning it. Fires are placed around the

food, rather than under it, making proper cooking more difficult. Cooking is performed on the hearth of the dead person, whose spirit is thought to place its hands underneath the food to ensure proper heating for innocent sorcery suspects.

If the outcome is damning, the suspect may be killed on the spot, with no intervention by his or her kin. In some cases, says Knauff, close kin are ambivalent about a suspect's guilt, causing accusers to wait weeks or months before they organize a group to ambush the alleged sorcerer in the forest away from supporters.

Revenge killings, even after an ambush, are rare, notes Knauff. Only four of the reported sorcery murders resulted in a return killing by relatives of the slain person. Most killings in recent years, he points out, have taken place with the implied consent, mainly through lack of vocal support, of all the accused sorcerer's close kin. Otherwise, there is the possibility that a grieving relative could report the murder to New Guinea government authorities. A couple of cases, both involving the killing of an accused sorcerer in a fit of rage, have resulted in reports to state officials and imprisonment of the killers.

A few other killings in Knauff's sample occurred during ritualistic bow-and-arrow skirmishes between Gebusi from different settlements.

Add it all up, and the peaceful Gebusi have quite a bit of blood on their hands. But since sorcery is probably the last thing any Gebusi of sound mind would practice, why are so many murdered for their alleged witchcraft?

Current theories of violence offer no satisfactory answers, contends Knauff. For example, sociobiologists have proposed that one characteristic of violence in human societies is a kind of "genetic selection." In this view, which draws on the notion that there is an innate tendency toward aggression, an offender is more likely to murder a genetically unrelated victim in order to minimize the loss to the gene pool of persons who share a high percentage of his or her genes.

Gebusi violence, however, seems to defy this prediction. In a breakdown of genetic relationships in one community of 30 men and 34 women, Knauff found that homicide victims were far more likely to be killed by relatives living in the same longhouse settlement.

Another theory, springing from the position that violence is learned, holds that local groups of related males in simple societies compete and fight with other "fraternal interest-groups." These hostile bands are said to be precursors of military organizations in larger, more complex societies.

But aggressive, men-only organizations are lacking in Gebusi society, ex-

plains Knauff. In fact, married men often move to the settlements of their in-laws, creating overlapping social ties throughout the society. In general, men as well as women go out of their way to share food and other resources. Displaying dominance or superiority over others is treated as a breach of "good company."

A third possibility, based on several cross-cultural studies, is that an emphasis on punishment and obedience in child-rearing by authoritarian, emotionally distant fathers promotes aggressive adult male behavior. Here again, says Knauff, the Gebusi are theory busters. Physical punishment of children in their society is extremely rare. Fathers are affectionate and undemanding of their sons, he observes, "and in two years I only once saw a father so much as shove his son in irritation." The greatest threat to a child's trust is the stark realization that mother or father may soon die, either from natural causes or at the hands of sorcery accusers.

According to Knauff, in many cases "sorcery homicide is ultimately about male control of marriageable women." Although Gebusi rarely discuss the balance of women in a clan or smaller living groups, there is an underlying expectation that after a woman marries, a close female relative of her husband's will at some point be encouraged to marry back into the woman's clan of origin. A strikingly high number of sorcery accusations and murders, says Knauff, are aimed at members of a group thought to be holding out on its obligation to promote marital exchange. It is not unusual, he notes, for a woman to be accused of sorcery and killed by her own brothers as a way of taking vengeance on their brothers-in-law.

Nevertheless, the Gebusi deny that there are male disputes over women. "The heavy cultural pressure against anger expression seems to maximize the problems in their system of marital exchange," says Knauff.

In simple societies such as the Gebusi, marked by a lack of male status distinctions, Knauff proposes that violence revolves around the control of sexual relations and that sporadic, violent incidents serve to reestablish cooperation in the community.

A number of anthropologists welcome Knauff's extensive homicide data but add their own caveats or interpretations to the findings.

Both Leland Donald of the University of Victoria, British Columbia, and Robert K. Dentan of the State University of New York in Buffalo suggest that a history of being raided by more powerful neighboring societies contributes to an attitude of helplessness, rather than harmlessness, among people like the !Kung, Semai and Gebusi. Resignation to the inevitability of periodic massacres, they say, can encour-

age a cultural retreat from angry and violent expressions.

Semai communities are also being pressured by the Malay government to give up their land for industrial development and move to urban centers, says Dentan, who has done field work among the Semai. Although tensions are building and Semai murders, "either of arrogant outsiders or of friends in drunken outbursts," are likely to increase, Dentan has no evidence of periodic Semai homicide related to male rivalry over marriageable women.

"Knauff's account is probably the best description of capital punishment in the ethnographic literature," comments Keith F. Otterbein of the State University of New York in Buffalo. Gebusi killings, he says, are usually viewed as legitimate, seldom involve retaliation and involve the premeditated execution of a suspect found guilty, elements that define capital punishment. Otterbein notes that sudden, unplanned killings occur more often among the Eskimo and !Kung, a homicidal variation that Knauff does not account for.

Knauff, however, says the line between accepted and inappropriate killings in simple societies "can become vanishingly thin." In the case of the Gebusi, some sorcery murders are accepted by the community while others are actively opposed or tolerated only out of cowardice or fear by the victim's supporters.

There is also a vanishingly thin line between Knauff's explanation of Gebusi homicide and sociobiological theory, write Martin Daly and Margo Wilson of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, in a commentary accompanying Knauff's article. Pegging sorcery killings to male control of marriageable women, they contend, echoes the sociobiological emphasis on male competition to reproduce with available females as an important spur to violence and homicide.

According to Daly and Wilson, "it is clear that homicides, among the Gebusi as among other peoples, arise out of conflicts of interest."

They also question whether Knauff's reliance on the recollections of Gebusi individuals, without having observed for himself any homicides, has distorted his findings.

Extensive cross-checking of each homicide account, as well as the details of associated seances and divinations, produced a relatively accurate, conservative estimate of the murder rate, responds Knauff. On two occasions, he adds, his presence and that of his colleague and wife Eileen M. Cantrell may have prevented a sorcery killing. In one case, the anthropologists gave verbal support to the relatives of a woman who was being threatened by her accusers. It was a classic ethical challenge for those studying homicide. "We couldn't just stand by and let someone be killed," says Knauff. □