Dusk was falling in the Amazonian house. Two men sat silently. The host was dressed for war, his face painted red, wearing his feathered headdress, his shotgun propped beside him against the house post. The visitor sat facing him. Silently, a woman appeared from behind her husband. No one spoke until she served chicha beer in large, beautifully painted pottery bowls.

The visiting man spoke slowly and deliberately. "How was your day?"

Slowly, the host reached for his gun. Quietly, the two men began to converse about the inconsequential matters of the day. Toward the end of their conversation, the visitor stated his reason for coming. "I came to talk to you about your plans to kill Yaúr, if I have your permission." Nodding, his host gave his consent.

"You have complete reason to kill him. All the shamans said that he killed your daughter. He is responsible for your daughter’s illness and death. But let’s talk about the consequences. How was the ancient life?"

With equal calm, the answer came: “You kill, you go to hide in the forest, with all the families living in fear.”

The visitor responded gently. “I think what we’re trying to do here is to maintain peace. Don’t do it for me, but for our children.”

Eventually, the answer came. “Thank you for coming. I am not going to kill him.”

The visitor, a respected person summoned from the city by the families of the village, concluded the consequential matters of their conversation: “Then I ask your permission to go to him, and to let others know, too, that you do not want to kill him, but that you want to reconcile, to talk.”

As an ethnoarchaeologist, listening is my most important job. I don’t remember what prompted this story to be told, but I have my notes, hastily scribbled on the only shred of paper in my pocket. I wasn’t prepared to do interviews that day, and my notebook was at home.

What I learned that day was a first-hand account of conflict resolution in a small-scale, egalitarian society. There, in the absence of institutionalized positions of political authority, every adult man and woman is responsible for deciding matters of public importance, resolving disputes and maintaining peace, and ultimately working to achieve consensus among the affected parties about the proper course of action. I also heard voiced, clearly and consciously, the central importance of pottery bowls in the process of conflict resolution—the political realm of life—as it is carried out in the home: "Until you hold..."
a pottery bowl of *chicha* beer, no one speaks. You don’t drink from a gourd at such times.”

My hastily scribbled interview notes recorded an historical event, a hallmark of times past. I work in Conambo, a small village of about 200 Achuar, Quichua, and Zapara-speaking people in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Tribal warfare in this region subsided in the 1970s. However, it had been endemic since at least the time of the Inka. Accounts of raiding, feuding, and head-hunting were recorded by colonial administrators, anthropologists, missionaries, adventurers, and others in the region from the early 1500s into the late 20th century. Like my description, those accounts often emphasize the prevalence of violent conflict in people’s lives, only hint at the strategies of conflict management, and certainly focus on men’s roles in society. Women are relegated to the background.

Throughout the region, women and men remember the wars or grew up hearing first-hand accounts, and the potential for conflict is intimately understood and carefully managed. People talk about the 1960s as “the time when we were ending.” Families had been decimated, river valleys were vacated as people fled, and men and women sought ways to end the violence. Today, people remain vigilant, aware of the tragedy of unmitigated conflict.

Conflicts may arise easily from social interactions in any community, including Conambo. A borrowed canoe is swept away in a rainstorm: Should the borrower be responsible for replacing it? A fistfight erupts between two young men: What should be done to keep tempers from flaring again? A family builds a new house and fouls the water upstream of another family: Should the first family move from their new house? Such conflicts become political because tensions are matters of public concern. Adults in the village discuss and debate such
matters, use their influence to sway opinion, and help resolve disputes. In this way, problems among families will not escalate, strained relationships can be mended, and wrongdoings are adjudicated through an informal political system based on common law and cultural principles of appropriate behavior.

People in these communities enjoy a rich social life, including daily visits from family and friends, hunting excursions, community fishing events, and festive work parties to build houses, clear land for new gardens, and haul canoes to help family and neighbors. All of these occasions are opportunities for political matters to be discussed and resolved.

I am interested in exploring women’s lives. As an ethnoarchaeologist, I conduct anthropological work in contemporary societies to test and develop the ways that archaeologists may understand societies of the past. I do this by studying people’s social lives and their things—especially, their houses and the beautifully painted, delicate pottery bowls that all women make to serve beer to their family and guests—to document how and why material culture (people’s things) can provide clues to behavior. Particularly, I have become interested in women’s participation in political life in small-scale societies, and how women’s material culture may tell us by analogy about political organization in prehistoric communities. This has been a neglected topic in both cultural anthropology and archaeology. I work together with my husband, John Patton, a cultural anthropologist, who studies men’s status and alliances.

WOMEN’S POLITICAL LIVES

What is the role of women in the daily politics of managing conflict and achieving cooperation? To answer this question, we spent 9 months conducting interviews, recording people’s own assessments of political relationships in Conambo, and participating in daily life in the village. From our data, we constructed measurements of women’s and men’s political alliances and status, applying techniques from cognitive anthropology and social network analysis.

First, we learned that women’s political lives are separate from men’s. Women develop networks of relationships in the community and throughout the region that are distinct from their husbands, though overlapping and complementary. Women build their networks independently in the course of daily life, stopping to visit and talk at other women’s houses, helping in childbirth, sharing pottery clays, and giving gifts such as pottery pigments, a pottery brewing jar, or stems of manioc for propagation. Additionally, women attend festive work parties and visit other households together with their husbands, strengthening their mutual networks. Through these networks, women obtain information, monitor problems, propose solutions, and build support for their family and friends during political controversies. In the house, while drinking bowls of chicha, visiting women sit away from men, engaging in lively discussions of political issues among themselves, while men debate issues among men. At the end of the day, husband and wife sit and talk together, articulating the two spheres of politics.

Second, we learned that prestigious women are judged by many of the same criteria as prestigious men. According to people in Conambo, an important person is persuasive, solves conflicts between people, knows how to organize people, and can direct the actions of others. In particular, an important woman may “fix problems, but she must be a senior woman,” or she may “go around asking what people think to help
organize an agreement.” In fact, women are better positioned to act as political intermediaries than men, because women are more likely to build networks that cross-cut political divisions. As a result, certain women are able to very skillfully mediate disputes between men during political controversies, negotiating agreements through their networks of female allies and kin.

POLITICS AND MATERIAL CULTURE

How do women’s politics relate to material culture? To answer this question, I looked at things that archaeologists would study: houses and pottery. I measured and mapped people’s houses, inventoried women’s pottery, and studied the designs on pottery bowls. I tested women’s abilities to recognize the pottery made by women in different political networks. I compared the data with what we learned about women’s political lives, including our measurements of women’s and men’s political alliances and status.

Importantly, I needed to recognize that domestic spaces can be political places, too. In Conambo, the house is a place where political activities may occur on a daily basis. Houses are built to hold gatherings ranging from a few guests up to 50 people during discussions of political issues and festive work parties. Prestigious, influential people are more likely to have large political gatherings in their homes, and so they build larger houses. People build their houses near their allies, and they move their houses when their alliances shift. As a result, women’s and men’s political alliances can be estimated by the distance between their houses.

In Conambo, pottery beer bowls are the visual focus of political events in the house. During visits, serving and drinking chicha beer from these bowls is highly stylized and required by social etiquette. The order of serving denotes a guest’s status and social distance from the hostess and her husband. Women’s pottery beer bowls are highly visible, and so are their large pottery jars for brewing beer. Prestigious women who hold large gatherings in their houses make a lot of beer, and the number of beer jars in a woman’s house is a statistical indicator of her status. Women in different political networks in Conambo make their pottery in distinctive ways. In general, they vary the painted designs on their beer bowls,
Women, too, have vested interests in conflict management. The rift was mended, and the obligation to avenge a death was superseded by the obligation to safeguard one's children. The shaman lived for many more years in the house across the river.

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FOR FURTHER READING


