

## 21A.506 Section IV: Module 1 (Society Against the State)

### Summary of *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, Chapter 5 ("The Bow and the Basket")

Chapter 5 of Pierre Clastres' book *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, "The Bow and the Basket," describes the opposition of men and women in the Guayaki, a tribe in South America. In this society of nomads, which is supported only by hunting, there is no form of work in which both men and women take part. Instead, men do the hunting and gathering, while women do the basketry and pottery, make strings for bows, do the cooking, and take care of the children. Thus, women reign in the encampment, whereas men reign in the forest.

Clastres explains the opposition between men and women in economic terms as the "opposition of a group of producers and a group of consumers." Moreover, he points to the "opposition of the bow and the basket" and explains that each of these two instruments is "the medium, the sign, and the summary of one of two 'styles' of existence that are at the same time opposed and carefully kept separate." The bow is a strictly masculine tool and the basket is a strictly feminine tool. When a boy is young, he receives a little bow from his father and begins to practice shooting the arrow; when he is older, he goes through an initiation and is "looked upon as a true hunter," and he makes himself his own bow. Similarly, a little girl receives a miniature basket, and when she goes through her first menstruation, she becomes a woman and she makes her own basket to mark her new status.

In the Guayaki society, women are forbidden to touch a man's bow, and men are not allowed to handle a woman's basket. However, the feelings evoked by such transgressions are different: "a hunter could not bear the shame of carrying a basket, whereas his wife would be afraid to touch his bow." A woman touching a man's bow is much more serious because if she does so, she will bring upon the man *pané*, or bad luck at hunting, which would be a disaster for the economy. The man is now forced to "forfeit his masculinity" and take up a basket; he metaphorically "becomes a woman."

Clastres describes two very different cases of men who carried baskets. One man, Chachubutawachugi, was *pané*, and thus forced to carry a basket. Furthermore, no woman would have anything to do with him. He went off alone carrying a basket the women had given to him. The second man, Krembegi, was a sodomite, who "considered his rightful place to be the world of women." He wore his hair longer than other man, he only did a woman's work, and he was a homosexual. Clastres points to very different attitudes of others towards the two men. Chachubutawachugi was frequently ridiculed: the men made light of him, the women laughed behind his back, and the children did not respect him. On the other hand, Krembegi "attracted no special attention" and his "ineptness as a hunter and his homosexuality were deemed evident and taken for granted." Furthermore, each of these Guayaki were "unevenly adapted to their new status." Krembegi was comfortable in his role, whereas Chachubutawachugi was anxious and discontent. While Krembegi had "become" a woman, Chachubutawachugi was never assimilated into the circle of women, so he "literally was nowhere."

Clastres also describes the opposition of men and women in terms of their singing. Women's singing and men's singing are "total opposites in style and content." Women's singing is a "tearful salutation"; women sing while weeping, and their singing always occurs

on ritual occasions. When they sing, they hide and appear to humble themselves. On the other hand, men hold their heads high and their bodies straight. Man “glorifies himself in his song” and asserts the “extreme virility the hunter brings to his singing.” Man’s song is strictly personal and is said in the first person. Furthermore, “each singer is actually a soloist.” Clastres points out that the “collective quality” of the women’s singing and the “individual quality” of the men’s refers back to the freedom of the ‘productive’ element that is denied the women, who are only consumers.

Finally, Clastres explains the social ties between men, who are both givers and takers. The hunter is forbidden to consume the product of his own hunt. Therefore, men are dependent upon other men to survive, through the exchange of food. They are obliged to place trust in others, thus forming a social tie. In addition, due to the relatively large number of men compared to women, each woman may have a secondary husband. Men must resign themselves to sharing their wife with another man; otherwise, without polyandry, the society would not endure. They must accept and respect the other husband, despite their feelings of frustration and discontent. Thus, men are both wife givers and wife takers. Clastres summarizes that “game is to the hunter what the wife is to the husband, inasmuch as both have only a mediated relationship to the man.” The relationship that men have to food as well as to women “goes by way of other men.” Therefore, the existence of the society is safeguarded by the interdependence of men.

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