



Hunters and Gatherers

Introduction:

I am writing this fact sheet on a word processor. I am sitting on a chair that is made from wood, steel, plastic, and wool. I am in a centrally heated office. Tonight I will drive home in my car and know that I have food there waiting for me. I don't know what it will be yet, but I do know that it will be there. Later I will probably watch some television, or maybe see some friends, this probably sounds rather dull, the routine of so many people throughout the world. So, what is my point?

Well, it is simply this: that we take our way of life for granted. In our society the methods of food production have become very advanced. This means that only a small percentage of the population is involved in the supplying of food to the population as a whole. In the EC we have so-called mountains of excess food. We have a butter mountain, a wine lake, huge reserves of grain and meat. Consequently, we have developed a myriad of specialised jobs. We have artists, builders, electricians, mechanics, computer programmers, writers, publishers, shopkeepers, lawyers, teachers, estate agents, butchers, bakers, candlestick makers, double-glazing salesmen and of course, people who work for charities.

Why do these people work? Some would probably say "Because I enjoy what I do." Others would say "Because I have to." But most are probably working for the money. In our society, money can make statements about who you are. Whether you have a lot of it or none at all can determine whether you live in luxury or on the streets. Most of us are somewhere in between, and the thing most likely to make us move up or down the social ladder of social success is our money or our lack of it.

If you don't think you're affected by this cash-based system, ask yourself what you would do without TV, or a video, or a car, a CD player, a video game, or a telephone. You may say that you don't need them, that you could live without them. Then why do you have them? The answer in most cases will be because you like them, you want them, or you felt you needed them at the time they were bought. They were something you couldn't do without. For us, the grass is always greener on the other side. Something inside us tells us we need these things.

This is the system. Once you are in it, there is no real way out?..

This is "civilisation". You live in a house. It is warm, it is heated. If you are hungry, you go to the fridge or the cupboard. Failing that, you go out and buy food. Your ability to survive depends ultimately upon money. This leads

to an unpleasant mentality. What's mine is mine. You may choose to be generous. You may feel good if you give money to a beggar on the street. You may be naturally generous to your friends and family. You may give to charity. But society does not expect you to give. If a friend admires your car, says how much he would like one, you don't say "Take it. It's yours." Unless of course you're mad. You or someone else in your family bought it with money they earned by working for it. Likewise you can't go into a shop and take what you want. Even if you are starving and you take a loaf of bread, it is theft. You have stolen from the baker by denying him the money he would have made by selling the loaf.

In our society, you don't have to know a person to perform exchanges with them. You could go into a supermarket, take £100 worth of food, and as long as you had £100, no one would care. You may pay the cashier without even saying "Hello?". So long as they get the cash in the till, they don't care who you are, what you do, how you feel. Money in the bank.

The System

By this time, you are probably wondering whether the title is a misprint. What on earth does this have to do with hunters and gatherers? Well, bear with me. They are coming. But to understand how they live and to judge them fairly, we first have to judge ourselves. Before you can see the lives of others for what they are, you have to understand a little about why you think the way you do. I hope that what I have written thus far may help you pass judgement on your own way of life before you pass judgement on the lives of hunters and gatherers.

You may have thought you were going to hear about "primitive" people. But to call them that is to write them off before they have a chance. You may have thought that they were a part of History. Although to an extent this is true, they are also here in the present. They are not just "then?". They are real and they are "now?". Our system may work, sort of. But so does theirs, and it has done for thousands of years, much longer than ours.

You may say they have progressed much. We have learned all kinds of new tricks. We can cure diseases, make marvellous machines, produce huge amounts of food, explore space, make light, heat and sound, fly. But people still starve, we kill each other more easily than we ever could before, we pollute the land, sea and atmosphere with the by products of our technology, we can even destroy humanity at the touch of a button.

So there it is. The system in all its glory. Maybe now its time to introduce our stars, the hunters and gatherers. Who are they, and why do they still live the way they do?

Hunters and Gatherers



Where do these people still live? Pretty much all over the World. There are groups of hunters in Canada (Cree, Dene, Inuit, Naskapi, Montagnais, Chipeweyan), North America (Ute, Paiute), South America (Guayaki-Ache), Africa (Mbuti, Dorobo, !kung, G/Wi, Baswara et al), India (Mal-Pantaram), South East Asia (Montagnards, Negritos), and Australia (Yirrkala, Pitjantjara).

Mainly they live in remote areas that the industrialised world didn't want. The land is too dry, too hot or too cold for agriculture, too remote for anyone to want to live there. Increasingly however they have come under threat, as mineral resources have been discovered, or some other commercial purpose has been found for their lands, such as the construction of an oil pipeline, or some other commercial purpose has been found for their lands, such as the construction of an oil pipeline or the building of a dam for a hydro-electric scheme.

Until recently, hunting people were regarded by governments as an embarrassment. They were seen as anachronisms, reminders of a 'primitive' past. More recently however, public opinion has begun to change. The public is now more willing to accept that the hunting way of life is a viable one. With increasing environmental awareness, the public is also less likely to support new schemes for the industrialisation of 'virgin' land. Indeed, there have been many public protests in support of the maintenance of the hunting way of life. It is certainly very attractive in many ways. For example, it is seldom necessary to work for more than two or three hours a day to ensure that everyone will have enough to eat. The rest of the time can be spent playing games, gossiping, sleeping, gambling, dreaming or exchanging gifts. Gift exchange is very important to hunters and gatherers and will be explained below.

Few hunting people have leaders. They may have a person within the group, male or female, who is valued above the others for their skills as an orator, a negotiator, a hunter or a mystic. This person is not regarded as a leader, but more as a spokesperson for the group, or as the chairman of any discussions. Power is very limited, and extends little further than persuasion.

There are no laws, but if disputes occur, one party will simply pack his or her belongings and go to another group. Violence is discouraged. A group cannot afford to be held up in its movements by injuries sustained in fights. Warfare between bands is virtually unheard of. There are rarely more than eight adult males in a band, so the loss of even one of them could have serious implications for the group's ability to hunt and therefore to survive. Individuals who show violent tendencies are often executed by the rest of their group in order to avoid further bloodshed. Greed and acquisitiveness are also discouraged. One has possessions only so that one may have the pleasure of giving them away. A person who tries to amass goods for himself is teased and goaded by the other members of his group until he is forced to give his wealth away.

Hunters and gatherers live life on the edge. Although our own society probably developed from similar groups, we would not be able to cope with similar conditions to those in which they live. They do not plant crops. They do not keep cattle. They do not own land, although each small band tends to have its own hunting ground. For food, they depend on their knowledge of the environment. Among the !Kung San Bushmen of southern Africa, men provide about 44% of all foods, women 56%. Men tend to be the hunters, although women are also involved in the killing of smaller animals. Women tend to spend their time gathering vegetable foods which are growing in the area around the band's camp. Men also gather, and they need to frequently as they are unsuccessful in hunting. This sounds like a dangerous situation to us. If you can't find food, you starve, then you die. How do they cope with this pressure every day?

The answer is quite simple. Those who have food give to those who haven't any. They do this freely, knowing that if they are unlucky in their search for food tomorrow, next week, next month or next year, there will be people around who will have food and who will remember acts of generosity and repay them when there is need.

As groups are dependent on naturally occurring resources of food, they have to be very mobile. There is no point in trying to build up large stocks of food or possessions. In harsh climates such as the Kalahari Desert, it is unlikely that any store of food would last long before being ruined by the heat. Besides, food and possessions are heavy, and have to be carried from camp to camp by the owner. Personal possessions tend to be few, and are mainly of practical use for the owner. Bows and arrows, axes and cooking pots are typical. So wealth has very little meaning to hunters and gatherers.

Having said this, the exchange of gifts by hunters and gatherers is staggering for its generosity and its frequency. In the !Kung, gifts are exchanged in special arrangements between partners, known as hxaro. Each person will have a number of hxaro partners who are drawn from their immediate family, from other members of their own band, from neighbouring bands and even from more distant bands, sometimes up to 200 miles away. These partners give each other gifts, but not at random.

Once a gift has been given, the giver will wait until he or she receives a gift in return. This return of gift may not be given for several months, but there is an understanding between partners of the debt owed to the giver by the receiver.

Spreading the Risk

The point of this arrangement is that it spreads risk over a wide area. If a person has had an unproductive day foraging, he knows he can rely on his hxaro partner for food. If there is a general shortage of food within a band, they will turn to hxaro partners in other bands for support. If the problem is even more widespread, they will disperse to their most distant hxaro partners' lands, and will stay until the localised crisis has passed.

ssed. This could be for up to two years, so great is the generosity and hospitality extended to hxaro partners. There is such generosity because partners know they can expect the same favour in return someday.

In recent times, the old principle of sharing has been placed under threat by the introduction of money and consumer goods into the lives of hunter gatherers. Many former hunting people have turned to wage labour, as they have seen the 'benefits' to be gained from having money and from western consumer goods. Others work for money for only some of the year, then return to their traditional way of life for the rest of the time. Most now depend at least to some extent on the products of the industrialised world. The problem is where to draw the line on what is to be given freely and what an individual can 'own'. In other words, where does the principle of sharing end? This is perhaps best answered by looking at the Aborigines in Australia.

For the Aborigines, sharing goes beyond their every day goods. Radio cassette players can be acquired from others simply by expressing the desire for one. But the line has to be drawn somewhere. For young men, the most prized possession is the motor car. They are bought with either saved-up welfare cheques or with money earned by casual labour. But the problems start when the car is bought. The owner will suddenly find he has a large number of friends, all of whom wish to borrow his car for some reason or another. He does not have to give them the car. Cars are seen as exempt from the gift giving system.

He does however have a duty to lend them his car if he can. If he does not, he will be accused of stinginess, and of being 'jealous for the car'. When two people wish to borrow the car at the same time his dilemma is worse. He does not wish to refuse either of them, but how can he allow one to borrow the car without offending the other?

Fortunately for the hapless owner, his problems don't last long. Cars are often driven at high speed across the desert, often by people who have little or no idea of how to drive and who certainly have received no professional tuition. The combination of harsh terrain, dust, heat and horrendous driving means that few cars last more than a few months anyway. When they stop working, they are dumped. Owners are usually philosophical. 'There are plenty more automobiles.'

Before ending this look at hunting people, it is worth considering the environmental implications of their way of life. They operate under an unusual set of constraints. They live off finite resources. They must never take more from one place in a year than can be replaced naturally in the next. Therefore populations have to be strictly controlled. Only a certain number of babies can be born each year, so as not to place undue strain on the resources.

Furthermore, no one is allowed to acquire too much of anything - food, possessions, power, as this may upset the balance, not only of the group, but also of the environment. If too much is gathered, not enough may

be left to enable natural replacement. Therefore, hunters and gatherers have to live not only in harmony with themselves but also with their surroundings.

They could learn a great deal by observing us and our way of life. Already, young aborigines are leaving their clans to go to college and university. There, most learn either medicine or the law. But after this, many return to their homelands to act as doctors, nurses and legal advisors for their own people. They are learning to organise themselves against the encroachment of western civilisation. They accept that there will be changes and adaptations to be made, but still prefer to live as they have done for hundreds of generations.



We could learn from hunting people. They could teach us how to take from the land without ruining it for the future. They could teach us to live more harmoniously with one another. I don't suggest that we all revert to being hunters and gatherers. But we could at least think about adopting some of their values. We have to look more towards the long term, and a sense of conserving our resources for the years to come, rather than taking all we can as quickly as possible for a fast buck. The system doesn't help us in this respect. Money is everything, just about. Perhaps we need a new system?.

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