
Harvey A. Feit

This paper examines recent models that have sought to characterize the distinctive features of hunter-gatherer societies that distinguish them from small-scale agricultural or pastoral societies. The survey shows that distinctive features have clustered around questions of land and resource use, and around concomitant social institutions. The survey also shows that hunter-gatherers are repeatedly portrayed as living in a distinctive temporal frame, one in which the juxtaposition of a lengthy past and an instantaneous present obviates an enduring present oriented to a future shaped by human agency. I consider these models in relation to some long-established and recent ethnographic and ethnohistoric counter evidence, which I suggest has broad implications; and in relation to the cultural images crafted by subarctic Waswanipi Cree Indian hunters in Quebec. This survey concludes that there is no distinctive social feature of substance or consequence with which to distinguish hunter-gatherer societies.¹

¹. Earlier versions of this paper were read at the 1989 meeting of the American Ethnology Society, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 5–9 April; and in 1990 at the Sixth International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies, Fairbanks, Alaska, 28 May–1 June. I have been assisted by comments from the floor at both meetings, as well as from colleagues who have responded to the written versions. Although they do not necessarily agree with the final form, I want to thank the following people for improving this paper: Bernard Arcand, Nuri Bird-David, Ann Fienup-Reardon, Tim Ingold, Steve Langdon, Harriet Rosenberg, Colin Scott, and Estelle Smith. The paper draws on research funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Grants 410–87–0715, 410–88–0535, and 410–90–0802), and from the McMaster University Arts Research Board. I also want to thank the U.S. National Science Foundation for a conference travel grant to attend one of the sessions.
Introduction

In this paper I review recurrent major themes in some of the recent efforts of hunter-gatherer specialists to define what distinguishes hunter-gatherer societies from other “simple” agricultural and pastoral societies. What I show first is that the initial plausibility of the anthropological distinctions is often based on models that employ ambiguous and conflicting characterizations of hunter-gatherer relations to land and resources, of the temporal dimensions of hunter-gatherers’ lives, and of hunter-gatherer social relationships. I then claim that these recent efforts to radically separate the hunter-gatherers, based on models of their distinctive productive and social relations, stand in rather tenuous relationship to the available ethnographic evidence. In a final part of the paper I examine some hunters’ images as a contrast to anthropological models, and emphasize that hunters’ views need to be given more consideration, a viewpoint previously asserted but infrequently pursued.

My aim in this paper is to share reflections for consideration rather than to demonstrate conclusions, and my approach is explicitly selective; I use widely cited models and case examples I know well. In my conclusions, I suggest, as others have suggested before, that a universal concept of socially distinctive hunter-gatherer societies may not be a credible anthropological category.

As has been noted frequently in recent years, anthropology as a Western intellectual enterprise constructs images of “the other” that help to define ourselves (Boon 1982; Marcus and Fischer 1986). Today images of others provide one kind of powerful comparative framework within which much analysis is undertaken. In the world of the human past, probably the most important others that scholars construct, at the most distant places of time and space, are the hunter-gatherers.

Ambiguities in Anthropological Models of Hunter-Others

One key dimension of the core image of the hunter-gatherers is reflected in what has probably become the most widely quoted assertion of the relevance of hunter-gatherers to us, the opening words of the Man the Hunter volume, “Cultural Man has been on earth for some 2,000,000 years; for over 99 percent of this period he has lived as a hunter-gatherer” (Lee and DeVore 1968: 3). This dramatic image of hunter-gatherer peoples occupying all but the last fifteen minutes of the cultural human’s day contrasts paradoxically with a second well-established temporal image of hunter-gatherers: that they are bound to the momentary present.

An early version of this latter view is the assertion that hunter-gatherers are preoccupied with the daily food supply, they face unresolvable difficulties of storage, and they use relatively simple productive equipment. In accordance with this view the economist Alfred Marshall (1936) wrote that “We find savages living under the dominion of custom and impulse, scarcely ever striking out new lines for themselves, never forecasting the distant future, and seldom making provision for the near future; fitful in spite of their servitude to custom, governed by the fancy of the moment” (cited in Herskovits 1952: 88). Daryll Forde and Mary Douglas (1956: 322) wrote in a similar vein in their review of primitive economics: “In short, the productive effort of a primitive economy is capable of anticipating its future needs only for a very brief span. Accumulation is difficult, long-term planning impossible.”

Each of these images both separates us from hunter-gatherers, and links them to us. The ecologically oriented Man the Hunter statement calls attention to the idea that we have radically transformed ourselves within a very short duration of time, and that we live in fundamentally different types of human societies as a result of having crossed the neolithic and industrial rubicons; yet this transformation must have been profoundly shaped by the immense span of time in which our ancestors lived as hunter-gatherers. Thus, hunter-gatherers are both other and kin.

At the same time, the Man the Hunter Conference, held in Chicago, 1966, announced a challenge to the popular conviction, and anthropological opinion, that hunter-gatherers never had the leisure time to “build culture” (see references in Sahlin 1972: 3). Marshall Sahlin’s discussion of original affluence signaled the turnabout in these aspects of the anthropological conceptions of hunter-gatherers. Nevertheless, these transformations did not reject the images of hunter-gatherers’ radical, if ambiguous, distinctiveness from us. Sahlin offers an image of affluence by the Zen route of few and easily satisfied wants within the context of mobile social groupings. In Sahlin’s revision of our models of
hunter-gatherer economy, comparisons between us and them play the central role in both the evidence mustered and in the consciously polemical rhetoric of the argument. For example, how much they work and how much they own are made significant by reference to our own patterns of labor and consumption.

The ambiguity of the relationship is highlighted in Sahlin’s discussion of the conceptual problems raised by hunters’ attitudes toward their condition. Sahlin (1972: 30) consciously exaggerates the ambiguities in his phrasing of their views: “Oriented forever to the present, without the slightest thought of, or care for, what the morrow may bring (Spencer and Gillen 1899: 53) the hunter seems unwilling to husband supplies, incapable of a planned response to the doom surely awaiting him.” As primary support for the prodigal nature of hunter-gatherers, Sahlin (1972: 30) cites the seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary Père Lejeune, who commented on his winter among Montagnais hunters in 1633–1634: “I told them that they did not manage well, and that it would be better to reserve these feasts for future days, and that in doing this they would not be so pressed with hunger. They laughed at me, ‘tomorrow’ (they said) ‘we shall make another feast with what we shall capture.’ Yes, but more often they capture only cold and wind.”

While noting that some have tried to rationalize hunter-gatherer prodigality, Sahlin (1972: 31) implores us to attend to the Montagnais’ explanation of their feasting, that tomorrow will bring more of the same. And he argues that hunter-gatherer survival attests that the hunters’ view must have some objective basis. Despite the reassurance, here the hunter-gatherer is made into the other, par excellence.

Sahlin, however, is not solely bound to the radical separations that might be drawn from this view. While hunters may not plan in his models, they do engage in rationalities of diminishing returns and domestic modes of production. He tells us that they weigh the advantages of owning more than a minimal tool kit, or storing surplus subsistence, or using resources more intensively, or having numerous young offspring, or increasing local group size, against the diminishing returns of staying put when there are fresh lands to forage if one can move relatively efficiently. And he does open the door for hunter-gatherers to be analyzed as examples of domestic economies, along with agriculturalists and pastoralists.

Nevertheless, among these alternative perspectives, he leaves us, as do others, with a vision that hunters and gatherers inhabit a special world, connected yet other; people with a short vision and a long history.

Recent Models of Hunter-Gatherer Distinctiveness

While discussions of the separation of hunter-gatherers as a form of human society have continued in the anthropological literature, the primary focus has shifted in recent years from the separations between them and us to the separations between hunter-gatherers and small-scale agricultural and pastoral societies. These discussions owe as much to Meillassoux as to Sahlin and the “man the Hunter” tradition. But there are continuities that cut across different theoretical and national traditions, as will be discussed later.

Claude Meillassoux (1973) made land use and temporality central to the constitution of the self-sustaining mode of production of the hunting band, thereby spinning one of the central threads in the ongoing series of debates. His essay, published originally in French in 1967, contrasted the generalized African hunting economy with his model of agricultural economy, drawing heavily from the Pygmy ethnography of Colin Turnbull (1965b), and his own ethnography of the agricultural Guro.

The main difference between hunters and agriculturalists, Meillassoux (1973: 192) argued, is that for the former land is the “subject of labor” rather than the “object.” That is, hunters accept nature’s bounty, “without any attempts toward maintenance or reclamation.” He goes on to claim that such a mode of exploitation of the land does not lead to “any lasting organization and arrangement of the landscape,” and it “results in a kind of roving within a loose area.” A major implication of this way of living, claims Meillassoux (1973: 192–93), is the following: “For want of investment in the land, labor applied to it yields an instantaneous return, not a deferred one. This mode of exploitation involves discontinuous undertakings of a limited duration, independent of each other and whose product is obtained immediately at the end of each venture. Supplies are provided through these repeated operations, carried out at brief intervals, usually daily” (emphasis in original).

Citing Turnbull’s claim that Mbuti have an “almost complete lack of concern for the past as for the future,” Meillassoux (1973: 194) generalizes that: “The shortness and the sporadic repetition
of activities lead to a way of life which is tied to the present, without any duration or continuity. The way of life is ‘instantaneous’ (emphasis in Meillassoux).

By contrast, Meillassoux later says (1973: 198) that in agricultural societies, “where duration, expectation and cyclical repetition – that is time – are paramount, the future becomes a concern and, along with it, the problem of reproduction.”

Here, hunters stand by definition in a distinct relation to land and the products of labor, to time, and to the reproduction of social life. Indeed, Meillassoux (1973: 201) goes on in his closing comments to effectively remove hunters from evolutionary time. He constructs so radical an opposition between hunting societies and farming societies that he cannot resolve how a changeover from one system to the other could have occurred, and he concludes that “hunting may well be unable to develop into any other mode of production.” As for the stages of human evolution preceding agriculture, he suggests that “the origins of agriculture should be looked for among other activities, such as fishing” (1973: 201).

Hunters thus not only live without a sense of future, they do not produce a real future, that is, a future with the potential to be anything but a continuation of the present instant. This is a temporal mode of determination with a dialectical vengeance, since it undermines the evolutionary temporality that is part of its motivational sources.

These formulations have generated significant debates among hunter-gatherer scholars (including some limited revisions by Meillassoux 1981). James Woodburn (1980) has independently proposed a classification of all hunting-gathering societies into immediate-return and delayed-return or delayed-yield systems. The former are characterized by being strongly oriented toward the present with a lack of concern for past or future. The few examples include the Mbuti, !Kung, and the Hadza, among whom Woodburn worked and from which he draws much of his evidence. Woodburn (1980: 113) goes on to suggest that historically, delayed-return systems must have been based on immediate-return systems.

But Woodburn also notes that delayed-return hunter-gatherer systems are by far the most common, and that agricultural and pastoral systems are, of course, all delayed-return systems. Alain Testart (1982, 1988b) has independently developed a classification based on whether significant storage of seasonal staples occurs in the context of annual economic planning. He also has suggested that the transition to storage based societies helps to dissolve the single rubicon created by the idea of a neolithic revolution based on a single stage transition to agropastoralism.

More recently, Tim Ingold (1987: 198) has reviewed the debates arguing that the socially important diagnostic of hunter-gatherer societies lies in “whether or not people are bound to one another by enduring relations in respect of the control and distribution of the means of subsistence.” He goes on to point out that the two criteria by which hunting-gathering societies have been commonly distinguished are that labor is not invested in the expectation of a delayed return, and that there is little or no food storage, because the time lags involved in either would create the basis for lasting mutual dependencies. As he puts it, “Time ties people down” (Ingold 1987: 199).

He points out that ethnographic instances now abound of considerable prior investment of labor in technology and artifice for harvesting wild foods, and of cases with extensive storage of hunter-gatherers’ harvests. He argues, however, that hunter-gatherer societies are distinctive. What differentiates them is that social dependencies on specific other people do not develop, because hunters maintain collective access as opposed to restricted appropriation of resources.

Noting the prevalence of delayed-return hunter-gatherers, Ingold (1987: 200) distinguishes between types of delayed-return systems based on the different “time-lag associated on the one hand with the practical staggering of production and consumption schedules, and on the other with the deferment of access to socially appropriated resources.” He argues that only when there is an appropriative movement as opposed to collective access to resources does delay invest social relations with a quality of durability, and such investment with appropriation is definitive of agricultural and pastoral production. “In a purely extractive hunting and gathering economy . . . whether or not it entails practical delays, social relations have the character of immediacy – in the sense that ‘People are not dependent on specific other people for access to basic requirements’” (Ingold 1987: 200; citing Woodburn 1982: 434. Emphasis in Woodburn).

3. In his most recent and as yet unpublished work, Ingold has gone on to revise these views.
That is, even delayed-return hunter-gatherer systems share the social character of immediate-return systems, for their dependence on each other is of a generalized kind. Ingold (1986: 216) thus tries to recover some theoretical significance for what he calls "the much maligned category of 'hunting and gathering.'" Ingold (1987: 217–18) ends his discussion by noting that researchers have yet to include the "much more complicated" issue of "the categories of the people themselves." In emic terms, a common view is that present returns on hunting are viewed as the outcome of previous hunts in the past, so that what may be constructed by an observer as an immediate-return system may be a delayed-return system to the hunters themselves.

These polemics have made explicit just how profoundly the very existence or significance of the category of hunter-gatherers has come to hinge on conceptual constructs of resource utilization, labor, temporality, and their social concomitants, far removed from the apparent obviousness of the category "hunter-gatherer." While the variations and nuances now involved in the debates are not done justice by this summary review, I will stop here to consider the basic case which is being made.

Land and Resource Use, Time, and Anthropological Evidence

In the next sections of this paper I want to assess these accounts of hunter-gatherer distinctiveness by considering the kinds of evidence on which they rest, and by considering an ethnographic case of the hunters' own models. The first section considers the supposed distinctive importance of immediate-return, a task partly accomplished by Woodburn and Ingold, and therefore only briefly reviewed here. I will then consider the distinctiveness of processes of change in hunter-gatherer societies, before returning to the issue of social relations and dependencies, as articulated in some hunters' views.

At the core of Meillassoux's assumption that hunters and gatherers in general have little thought for the morrow, and that they live almost solely in the present instant, is the widely shared assumption that there is a radical disconnection between hunter-gatherers' present actions and labor, and their ability to provide subsistence for the morrow. By contrast with pastoralists and agriculturalists, it is still often claimed that nothing that the hunter-gatherers can do on one day will assure when, where, or whether food will be harvested on the next. And this appears to be considered especially true of game hunters.

But to acknowledge that the harvest is not as predictable or certain as that of peoples with domesticated food sources does not support the assumption that there are no real or observable consequences of today's labor for tomorrow's harvest. The harvest of plants or animals in particular places and numbers today often shapes the pattern of abundance and the spatial distribution the gatherer or hunter can expect to find tomorrow. This point would be trivial were not the relations between present activities and future harvests so complex and subtle.

James Woodburn (1980: 101) has summarized the case:

Hunters and gatherers may control their food supplies by culling game animals selectively, by operating restrictions on hunting which have the effect of providing a close season, by using vegetable resources with discretion and replanting portions of the root so that the plants regenerate, by extracting only part of the honey from wild bees' nests so that the sites are not deserted and by many similar techniques of conservation which suggest that the distinction between hunting and gathering as a system of unplanned extraction, and cultivation as a system of planned production is not valid.

I have previously pointed out that studies in wildlife management show that hunting and fishing by humans is one of the most significant factors affecting wildlife populations (Feit 1973). For many species, the present harvests taken by hunters - whether sport hunters, commercial hunters, or hunter-gatherers - will change the wildlife population's age structure, sex balance, production rates, yields, and often the average size and health of the animals in the harvested population. Studies of the impacts of fishing show similar relationships. One does not have to demonstrate that hunters are conservationists to make the point that their present activities are profoundly connected to the outcomes of their future harvesting activities, and that those connections in many cases can be easily observed in the changing rates of encounters with animals over time.

Therefore, it would be surprising if hunter-gatherers were completely unaware of all such connections, and if they really gave no thought for the resources or for the morrow. Indeed, much of what they do shows just such considerations, changing hunting areas periodically or on rotation, and burning areas to
initiate vegetation and animal population changes. In many of these cases the consequences of their present changes in harvest patterns will not be observed the next day or week; rather, the morrow will be the next year, at the next annual fish run or waterfowl migration. We also find that many hunter-gatherers are aware that the cycles of vegetation regeneration following fires take many years to complete, and realize the associated changes in animal populations. In many areas there are reports of intentional burning by hunter-gatherers to improve or select habitats (Lewis 1982). These intentional burnings may involve annual repetitions, or they may occur once every several decades as cycles of forest or grassland regeneration are set in motion with each burn.

The conditions of productive labor therefore provide important opportunities for hunter-gatherers to experience and respond to the connections between current activity and future consequence, which may extend from days to decades ahead. Thus, even in cases where technology and artifice may not involve delayed return on labor inputs, the hunt itself, when conceived as an enduring set of practices that extend over seasons or years, involves both immediate and delayed returns on present labor inputs. If hunter-gatherers, in particular circumstances, give no thought to the morrow, then this fact needs as much explanation as does their frequent planning.

Neighbors, World Markets, and Time in Anthropological Models

Recent research examining the histories of hunter-gatherer societies and their linkages with neighboring agricultural or pastoral peoples, or with world markets, also is relevant for the assessment of both the immediacy of hunter-gatherers’ lives, and the potential for appropriation in hunter-gatherer social relations.

Let me quickly review the ambiguities that have emerged in the accounts of the supposed atemporality of earlier hunters and gatherers. Meillassoux depended heavily on Turnbull’s early ethnographic accounts of the Mbuti. This, it has turned out, is problematic because in later ethnographies it has been found that Mbuti institutions have not only been shaped by their relationships to neighboring agricultural people, but by the rapid changes brought by European colonization (Bahuchet and Guillaume 1982).

The Enduring Pursuit

This has important implications for Meillassoux’s models. The immediacy of the political tactics of the Mbuti to a rapidly changing colonial context implies a longer-term strategy: resistance. That is, not only is the relevance of Mbuti short-term decision making to general hunter-gatherer society in doubt because it is a strategy adopted in relation to neighbors and colonization, but we must also question their supposed indifference to longer-term considerations. Thus, the simple fact of immediate response needs to be interpreted carefully, as it may conceal longer-term strategizing.

The reading of both time and appropriation are also problems in other contexts where the expansion of the world market is implicated. Sahlin’s notion for evidence of hunters’ lack of thought for the morrow on LeJeune’s extended account of his sojourn among the Montagnais from Tadoussac during the winter of 1633–1634. He is aware of the difficulties in constructing hunter-gatherer economies and societies from the ethnohistorical and ethnographic records, and he comments on these at the beginning and end of his essay. Sahlin’s (1972: 8–9) notes, for example, that even explorer and missionary accounts may be speaking of “afflicted economies” (referring to Service 1962), and he notes that the eastern Canadian hunters were committed to the fur trade in the early seventeenth century according to the Jesuit Relations.

Nevertheless, one can question his use of LeJeune as a source on Algonquian culture as it might have been before significant contact with Europeans. As I have reviewed in a recent paper (Feit [under revision]), Eleanor Leacock (1954: 10, 1969: 1) who also cited LeJeune’s account extensively, noted that fur trading with eastern Algonquians actually began by the early 1500s, and specialized trading ships were frequenting the east coast of North America by the middle of the sixteenth century. Trading had begun at Tadoussac by 1550, and it became the main summer trading center for the St. Lawrence Valley from about 1580 to 1608 (Biggar 1965 [1901]: 23, 27, 29, 32; Trigger 1976, vol. 1: 210).

Given the still prevailing anthropological images of hunter-gatherer temporality and change, the seventy-five years of seasonal contact with the fur traders prior to LeJeune’s account may seem unlikely to have fundamentally transformed Montagnais conceptions or behavior patterns. But I believe that here we are judging plausibility based on models that have convinced us that there are distinct temporal dimensions of change in hunter-gath-
er societies. For who would argue that seventy-five years after direct intermittent trade with Europeans, there were not important changes among New Guinea highland peoples, or among the seventeenth century Iroquois?

As it turns out, there is clear evidence that, by the 1630s, the Tadoussac Montagnais had experienced a major displacement of native goods with trade goods, and that they had become middlemen in the fur trade, and were no longer just subsistence hunters or fur producers. It is reported by Trigger (1976) and Bayley (1937) that the Montagnais middlemen were defending access to the harbor of Tadoussac against other bands, that they were the center of a trade network extending some hundreds of miles into the interior, that they had formed alliances with other Montagnais and Algonquian groups (with whom they were trying to drive the Iroquois out of the St. Lawrence Valley), and that they could muster over a thousand people to Tadoussac for Champlain’s visit in the spring of 1603. Trigger (1976, vol. 1: 235) argues that the hardships and starving condition of the Indians witnessed by Champlain upstream at Quebec in 1608 was likely the result of the disruption of traditional subsistence patterns.

This evidence of shifts from subsistence production to trade middlemen, of extended market trade alliance formation, of trade motivated warfare, and of appropriating and limiting accessibility to trading sites, does not suggest that LeJeune was residing with a society comprised solely of the highly fluid hunting bands with unrestricted access to resources that have been assumed to be the subjects of his observations. Nor does it suggest that these were people who lacked foresight, planning, long-term strategies, or even cunning.

I suggest that the initial failure of some anthropologists to see the changes brought about by early contact is due in part to the extra-long time horizon, and the presumed slow changes we associate with hunter-gatherers. Thus anthropological perceptions of hunter-gatherers have been shaped by a presumed long period of slow change in hunting societies, just as they have been shaped by the presumed synchronicity of hunter-gatherer objectives.

While these may seem like contradictory views, they are actually complementary in important ways. Both the assumption of very slow change and the assumption of the immediacy of action construct hunter-gatherers who are outside of time, for they are simultaneously caught in the momentary present without foresight, and they are relatively unchanging.

Hunters’ Views of Social Relations and Differentiation

What, then, are hunters’ views? I cannot generalize about what hunter-gatherers think with respect to their temporality and social distinctiveness, but I can offer one example with some general implications for questions of social relations and forms of lasting mutual dependencies.

Waswanipi Cree Indian hunters in subarctic Quebec have a profound awareness that they do not control the morrow’s harvest, but this is closely linked to the view that what they do today will nevertheless significantly affect that harvest. These two views may be common among circumpolar hunters, although Waswanipi constructions of the issues are certainly distinctive.

The Waswanipi express this dual relationship through the linking of the concepts of reciprocity and knowledge to future time. This structural connection is embedded for the Waswanipi in the continuity, change, and differentiation of social relationships. I will set out the structural and processual frameworks sequentially in this summary account.

It is widely said by Waswanipi that what they catch is a “gift”; animals are *chimikono* or *chashimikono* (“it is being given to us” or “it is being given to us to eat”). What these statements emphasize is that the killing of animals by humans is not solely the result of the knowledge, will, or action of human persons. Calling animals “gifts” places the emphasis on the opposite pole. Hunting is not in this view solely an application of human labor to passive resources. Animals are spoken of as being “like persons.” When questioned about who gives the gift, Waswanipi hunters, who now are all Christians, respond with either “God,” or the category names of various spirit beings, or they say the animals give themselves.

But the gift implies obligation and reciprocity. “When we have food, and we are living with others, we give them half our food, and it seems we find more to replace it.” A series of proverbs.

---

4. A fuller account of these data is developed in Feit [under revision]. See also Feit (1991).


6. Much of the material in this section is drawn from previously published ethnographic papers, especially Feit (1986). It dates to an ethnographic present covering the period from 1968 to about 1985.
emphasizes how one must give food to others in order to receive more gifts from spirits and animals. The same reciprocity is found in injunctions not to kill too much, and to kill only what is given. A piece of the meat is burned in the stove each day, and this offering is thereby given back up the stove pipe to the wind and animal spirits as a sign of respect, and to “tell” them to give more animals in the future.

Mary Black (1977) has suggested that the Ojibwa term usually glossed as “living beings” would be better glossed as “powerful beings,” and a cognate terminology is used at Waswanipi. God is said to be all powerful, and the boss, or leader, of all things. Human beings receive power from spirits, and differ from each other as power increases with age and with the care and attention individuals give to interpreting and cultivating knowledge. Power is linked to status, hunting leadership, and to the stewardship of hunting territories.

When asked to explain the power of God, the most common statement is that what God thinks, happens. When asked to explain their own power, hunters’ most common statement is that they sometimes know what will happen, that what they think sometimes comes true. In hunting, when the things a hunter thinks about actually come to be in the future, he is said to have miiyopayit, or “good luck.” And when they do not come to be, he has matisipao, or “bad luck.” Luck or power is thus not a matter of chance, but of an ebb and flow of connections between human lives and a personalized universe, and many proverbial statements attest to this perception, and to the danger of too much luck or power. This is said to be “God’s way.”

Power is most often manifested in niikanchischeyihtan, literally “future knowledge.” Forms of knowledge of the future are actively sought in dreams, conjuring, scapulamancy, divination, and various other “traditional” practices that have their roots, if not their present forms, in pre-Christian Cree practices.

We typically think of power as the ability to control others or the world. For the Cree, power involves less control and more a quest, an openness to truth or knowledge that comes to be in the world. Future knowledge is not the passive acquisition of knowledge, it is described as “looking to find what one knows,” much as hunting involves looking for signs that game are willing to give themselves. Power is a coincidence between the knowledge a person has and a future configuration in the world. The coming to be of that config-

uration is anticipated in knowledge, and created by the diverse powerful beings in the world; and humans can participate in it. The model, then, is that humans do not ultimately control life, but intimately and respectfully link their thought and action to those other powerful beings who create the conjunctures of life.

Humans who try to actualize understandings in social praxis sometimes integrate their thoughts and actions with other beings in such a way that they participate in the power of the becoming of the world. Hunting is a participation in power. In this sense, human life is itself a process of participating in ongoing power, by which the world comes into being through time, and the essence of hunting (as that of life) is the experience of linking present anticipation and future events.

One of the processual dimensions of this system of meaning and practice is thus in the organizing and interpreting of hunting itself. Another processual dimension, however, lies in the quest for social reputation and in intergenerational socialization and social relations.

Elder hunters often tell stories of their important hunting experiences, stories with themes such as killing animals everyone knew were there but could not find; or sending others out with instructions on where to look, and the success of those they advised; or the time they made a big catch and broke a period of hardship or hunger for many people.

These stories have a self-aggrandizing dimension quite out of keeping with aspects of the most common Waswanipi model of the hunter, outlined above. Yet, they are stories consistent with the outline in other respects, for they are stories about the actualization of power – personal, social, and spiritual. And they are explicit demonstrations of the contributions of elders to the hunt, and of their claim to respect.

Most young Waswanipi men learn these stories not just as moving personal tales, but as part of their educational process as hunters. Both the stories and the models of reciprocity and power outlined above are communicated by elders in the context of showing the teenagers how to be effective hunters. Young men sometimes comment that they have better hunts when they live with an elder hunter. And they are frequently concerned with learning hunting well and developing good reputations, which are bestowed by their elders.

In the contemporary historical context, the stories are explicitly mobilized by the elders in opposition to the assumptions and
learning the young men bring with them to the bush, after having spent varying durations in the public school system. Comments by those young men who take up hunting as their primary activity tend to confirm that the views of the elders contrast sharply with what they have learned in school. The presentation of animals and natural occurrences as social beings, the emphasis on harvests as gifts to be reciprocated with spirits and kin, and the assertion that power is knowing the future all contradict school learning.

The difference is encapsulated in what I take to be an intended contrast between Waswanipi usage of the terms “good luck” and “bad luck” as expressions of the cycles of power, and the school taught notion of “luck” as unexplainable chance occurrence. Knowledge derived from the elders is central to the young hunters’ efforts to make sense of their experiences in the bush, where “good luck” and “bad luck” are demonstrated and explained by elders in convincing ways. The elders try to construct for the young hunters a world that the latter’s schooling neither taught them to expect, nor is capable of explaining.

The process of passing on the hunting culture and practice to succeeding generations thus not only regenerates the hunt, it reproduces the social system of relations, including the social differentiations that both hierarchically separate and link generations. The temporally binding image of power, linking present to future, is central to this process, for it is through learning the ways of power that young men become respected hunters. For Waswanipi hunters, it is a common conception that the hunt is a lifelong quest for knowledge and power, an enduring pursuit.

Conclusion: Social Differentiation and the Distinctiveness of Hunter-Gatherers

The Waswanipi therefore remind us of an essential social temporality, that hunting as experienced events and as practical activity is embedded in recreation across generations of social relations. Is the Waswanipi case relevant to other hunter-gatherers, and to the period before Christianity or exchange with the world market? There can be no definitive answer, but the problems of social “reproduction” exist throughout social history, although not in identical forms, and there are grounds for considering specific features of the Waswanipi data in a more general perspective.

It is clear that the Waswanipi are not reflecting just post-fur trade, post-missionization or post-schooling values, although each of these has had its impacts. Daily practices of social reciprocity and egalitarianism do not have roots in market exchanges or formal schools. Daily pursuit of power does not have roots in Christianity. Nevertheless, extrapolation is treacherous, for these values have been shaped and reshaped as responses to such exchanges. Some suggestions are appropriate here.

Emphasis on reciprocity is widely reported among living hunter-gatherers. And it is clear that the profound concern with the coming to be of the future, as reflected in practices such as dream seeking and interpretation, shamanistic practices, conjuring, and divination have deep historical roots and are widely reported among contemporary and earlier hunting-gathering peoples. However, the social distribution of such practices is not typically uniform across generations. There are therefore prima facie grounds for considering the implications of the Waswanipi findings in broader historical and geographical contexts, subject to further analyses.

In general, the hunt is in some respects short, but the quests of which it is a part may be enduring. And it is in that endurance, as an experience, and as a construction of the world by socially located elders who actively construct authoritative meanings, that power is displayed, socialization occurs, and unequal social relationships of consequence may be actualized. Such relationships create and make public claims and rights to resources and/or to knowledge, and they create real social dependencies between individuals and generations.

Ingold, it seems to me, is wrong, at least for the kind of cases I have cited here, to assert that the distinctive feature of hunter-gatherers is that social relations have the character solely of immediacy, in the sense that people are not dependent on specific others for access to basic requirements. Social relations themselves are reproduced through time via the same processes by which the knowledge and practice of hunting are reproduced. These processes depend on specific linkages and dependencies that endure in the form of intergenerational transmission of knowledge, and therefore differentiation. Ingold has viewed hunters through a temporally shallow horizon that isolates production from knowledge, and social relations from full social reproduction, including primary and secondary socialization.
In conclusion, I would suggest that the link between production on the land, the transmission of knowledge, and the reproduction of social formations among hunter-gatherers may not universally distinguish hunter-gatherers from small-scale agricultural or pastoral societies. We have yet to define a rubicon with social consequence and substance that can systematically differentiate these societies.

Epilogue – The Mirror of Distinctiveness

Returning to the all too frequent attempts to fit hunter-gatherers into the long human past or the short-term present, there is an irony. Anthropological constructions of hunter-gatherers are implicitly and in substantial terms disempowering, for the anthropological models deny the planning and the everyday processes of change that are essential to both effective intentional action and to the human role in historical process. In short, we construct hunters who have a past and a momentary present, but who lack a real future, one with possibilities they might set about constructing as social actors. The political implications of such anthropological models are important, whether intended or not.

But there is a further irony, because these views are mirrored by the reflections of some hunters, who express similar bewilderment at the temporal frameworks that limit the vision of some of the people of European descent with whom they deal.

The Waswanipi Cree hunters are constantly amazed at the short-term view taken by Canadian resource exploitation projects—forestry, mining, and hydroelectric developments—which then cause long-term or permanent environmental degradation for what appears to the Cree to be short-term benefits. In many cases the Cree are convinced that the destruction can never be reversed. Yet they see companies come and go, mines open and close. Hydroelectric dams may last longer, but plans and operations are constantly changing. The impact of each operation consistently exposes the lie in the companies’ claims that the impact is short term and well contained. The Cree live with the consequences.

The Cree hunters are often confounded at the kind of society and beliefs that can generate what they consider to be irresponsible behavior, for they know that they have lived on these lands since times before the present era. The stewards of the hunting territories emphasize that the land was inherited from their fathers and grandfathers, and will be passed on to their children and grandchildren. Their time horizon thus stretches over at least a century as they consider their present. Cree hunters occasionally say they have trouble understanding how Euro-Canadians can ignore the past and the future generations when they destroy the land.

The issues are reflected in a quote from an elder Waswanipi hunter, the late Jacob Happyjack (1983), who was universally respected in the community. Speaking through an interpreter who quotes Jacob in the third person, he answered a question about what he expected in the future:

He’s been hunting for fifty years, and he has been keeping track of his land, and he finally realizes how much damage the white man has been doing to his land. He thinks all the damage that has been done is irreversible, the land will never be the same as it’s been before.

It’s gonna be really different, won’t be able to survive as good as before. Like when he was hunting he used to live alone in the bush, and they would have their children alone in the bush, and when the bush was good that’s how they managed to survive. Since he was born he has never had a job and he has never worked, and he has still raised his sons and daughters to be full grown from the bush. Now that the land has been ruined, he doesn’t think any of his sons could raise their families like he did when the land was still good.

What he did before on the land, he wasn’t thinking about himself but about the younger generation—so they could survive as he did. What he learned from the bush, he didn’t learn from his father; he taught himself in the bush. When he was growing up for [in] his family, many times he used to think about that, and he thought about times he didn’t see his dad. Sometimes when he was out hunting he just stood there and thought about his dad, and he used to cry. Then he finally got better and better at hunting. Then he finally learned(?)

When he looked at tracks of other people and he knew they didn’t have no food, he went to their camp and it was true they didn’t have no food. And he went to his camp to get a toboggan load of food and he took it to them. He can’t do that [now], he’s too old and he’s getting sick. Sometimes when he looks at his son he wishes his son could do the same thing he did in his younger days.

7. He was nevertheless somewhat distinctive in the community because, having lost his father when he was young, he could claim to have painfully taught himself more about how to hunt than most men of his generation.
Key Issues in Hunter-Gatherer Research

Edited by Ernest S. Burch, Jr., and Linda J. Ellanna

Published in 1994 by Berg Publishers, Inc.
Editorial offices:
221 Waterman Street, Providence, RI 02906, U.S.A.
150 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JJ, UK

© Ernest S. Burch, Jr., and Linda J. Ellanna

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the permission of Berg Publishers.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Burch, Ernest S. and Ellanna, Linda J.
Key issues in Hunter-Gatherer research / edited by Ernest S. Burch, Jr., and Linda J. Ellanna.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
I. Hunting and gathering societies. I. Burch, Ernest S., Jr., 1938-
II. Ellanna, Linda J., 1940-
GN388.K49 1993
306.3—dc20

Front cover photograph: Lawrence Ilugtun Sage with part of an evening's harvest of ringed seals, Kivalna, Alaska, June 26, 1964. Photo by E. S. Burch, Jr.


Printed in the United Kingdom by Short Run Press, Exeter.
References


Altman, John C., ed. 1989 Emergent inequalities in Aboriginal Australia. Sydney: University of Sydney. (Oceania monograph no. 38.)


References


Bondel, Conrado S. 1985 *Tierra del Fuego (Argentina): La organización de su espacio*. Ushuaia: CADIC.


—- 1985 La economía prehistorica de los habitantes del Norte de la Isla Grande de Tierra del Fuego. Tesis de Doctorado [Ph.D. Diss.], Universidad de Buenos Aires.


References


Brice-Bennett, Carol, ed. 1977 *Our footprints are everywhere: Inuit land use and occupancy in Labrador*. Nain: Labrador Inuit Association.


Budagyan, F. E., ed. 1961 *Tablitsy khimicheskago sostava i pitatel’noy tsemnosti pishevykh produktov* [Tables of the foodstuffs’ chemical content and nutritional value]. Moscow: Medgiz.


ogy and population structure. Juneau: Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence, Technical Paper No. 77.


———. 1990 Eskimo essays: Yup'ik lives and how we see them. London: Rutgers University Press.


———. 1986 Renewable resources, economics and native communities. In Native people and renewable resource management. J. Green and J.

References

Hearne, S. 1971 [1795] *A journey from Prince of Wales’s fort in Hudson’s Bay to the northern ocean*. Edmonton, Alberta: M. G. Hurtig, Ltd.


References


Lesepsi, J. B. 1801 Lesesepsovo puteshestvi po Kamchatke i juzhnoj strone Sibiri, 1 [Lessep's's travels in Kamchatka and southern part of Siberia, part 1]. Moscow: Gubernskaja tipografija u A. Reshetnikova.


MacNeish, June Helm 1956 Leadership among the northeastern Athabascans. Anthropologica o.s. 2:131-163.


Marcus, George, and Michael Fischer 1986 Anthropology as cultural critique. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.


Martinc, M. 1973 Panorama de la colonización en Tierra del Fuego entre 1881 y 1900. Anales del Instituto de la Patagonia 4:5-70.


———. 1987 Los cazadores paleoindios de Tres Arroyos (Tierra del Fuego). Anales del Instituto de la Patagonia 17:47-60.

Mathiessen, Therkel 1928 Material culture of the Iglulik Eskimo. In
Key Issues in Hunter-Gatherer Research


McCargo, Dave 1985 Allotments threaten public lands. Sierra Borealis (Spring) 6.


Meehan, Betty, and Neville White, eds. 1990 Hunter-gatherer demography: Past and present. Sydney: University of Sydney. (Oceania monograph no. 39.)


Michael, Henry N., ed. 1967 Lieutenant Zagoskin’s travels in Russian America, 1842–44. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. (Anthropology of the North, translations from Russian sources no. 7.)


Noatak, Andrew 1990 Personal communication to Kenneth Pratt, 3 April. Mekoryuk, Alaska.


Richards, Thomas, and Michael Rousseau 1987 Late prehistoric cultural horizons on the Canadian plateau. Burnaby, British Columbia: Simon Fraser University. (Department of Archaeology publication no. 16.)

Ridington, R. 1988 Trail to heaven. Iowa City: University of Iowa.

———, 1990 Little bit know something. Iowa City: University of Iowa.


References


Smith, Allen E. 1990 Personal communication to Kenneth Pratt. 8 January. Anchorage.


———. 1990b Personal oral communication to H. S. Sharp, November 25, 1990.


References


Tatô, Seikoku 1985 Hogeji no kekishi to shiroyô [History and statistics of whaling]. Tokyo: Suisansha.


Terry, William M. 1950 Japanese whaling industry prior to 1940. Tokyo: SCAP. (Natural resource section report no. 126.)


Tjushov, V. N. 1906 Po zapadnomu beregu Kamchatki [Along the western side of Kamchatka]. Zapiski Imperatorskogo Russkого Geograficheskogo Obschestva po Obshchej Geografii [Notes of the Emperor’s Russian Geographical Society, Department of Geography] 37(2).


References


———, 1990 Personal communication to N. Blurton Jones, May.


