
Beyond "The Original Affluent Society"

A Culturalist Reformulation¹

by Nurit Bird-David

This paper examines Marshall Sahlins's "Original Affluent Society" in relation to recent developments in modern hunter-gatherer studies and reveals a theoretical confusion of ecological and cultural perspectives within it which has hitherto been overlooked. Drawing comparatively on three case studies—the Nayaka of South India, the Batek of Malaysia, and the Mbuti of Zaire—it then reformulates Sahlins's argument using the culturalist method of economic analysis. At the same time it demonstrates the explanatory and analytical dimensions of this new method.

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The idea of "the original affluent society" was first presented during the 1966 "Man the Hunter" conference, which laid the foundations for the anthropological study of modern hunter-gatherers. The participants—social anthropologists, archaeologists, human biologists, ecologists, and demographers—were struck by the brief contribution of Marshall Sahlins, a non-specialist invited discussant, in response to their papers (Sahlins 1968a).

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Sahlins later produced a much longer essay on the idea for *Les temps modernes* (1968b), and this became the basis for the first chapter of his *Stone Age Economics* (1972). The book was a highly controversial text on tribal societies, and the essay itself—which proposed, essentially, that the hunting-and-gathering way of life provided unparalleled affluence for its followers—became notorious both inside and outside anthropology. It was hotly debated by scholars from a broad spectrum of disciplines that shared an interest in the evolution of human society. It has since become the representative text on hunter-gatherers in introductory courses (see, e.g., Cole 1988) and appears on the reading lists of most anthropology departments. Despite their initial enthusiasm, however, up to the 1980s specialists gave Sahlins's essay little serious or direct attention. It was rarely challenged or further explored through empirical research. It is fair to say, in fact, that in their research—as opposed to their teaching—many anthropologists made an effort to ignore it.

The explanation for the fate of "The Original Affluent Society" during this period is complex. The general interest in it no doubt reflected our symbolic and ideological needs and our (Western) construction of the prehistoric past. Furthermore, the essay was timely in dispelling certain inadequate conceptions of "primitive" economic life and disclosing anthropologists' ethnocentric biases. Beyond this, it marked the inception of modern hunter-gatherer research and constituted certification of its legitimacy. Above all, most specialists, and many other scholars as well, recognized, if only intuitively, that Sahlins "had a point." We sensed that he had touched on something essential to the hunting-and-gathering way of life, although—and this is the problem—we did not know quite what it was.

The ambivalence of specialists had to do with gaps between data and conclusions. Intended to provoke as well as to document, the essay soared beyond conventional scientific discourse, appealing directly to Western fantasies about work, happiness, and freedom. It offered, as a result, a peculiar synthesis of theory and data, insight and banality, breadth of view and gimmicky wit, all so craftily blended together as to make it extraordinarily resistant to analysis. Had specialists attempted to engage with Sahlins's essay in the years immediately following its publication, they would have encountered three problems in particular.

First, despite the paucity of reliable data, Sahlins drew quantitative and pseudo-quantitative conclusions concerning hunter-gatherers' work ("a mean of three to five hours per adult worker per day in food production" [1972:34]) and leisure ("a greater amount of sleep in the day time per capita than in any other condition of society" [p. 14]). In addition to the anecdotal observations—perceptive in their own terms—of explorers and missionaries he relied upon three professional studies. Two of these had been undertaken in the course of a 1948 American-Australian expedition in Arnhem Land by McCarthy and McArthur (1960)—the first a nutritionist, the second an anthropologist. The third, a remarkable

and pioneering work on the Dobe !Kung by Lee (1968, 1969), was influenced as much by Lee's evolutionary objective as by his actual fieldwork experience, which only in subsequent years came to include a more rounded study of the !Kung way of life. These case studies provided samples too small to be statistically meaningful: they concerned 13 and 9 individuals in the two Arnhem Land camps and an average of about 30 individuals in the Dobe !Kung camp, studied for one, two, and three weeks respectively.² Nor were Sahlins's conclusions capable of further testing. It is difficult enough to study "work time" among time-illiterate peoples who scatter across rough terrain as they go hunting and gathering, singly or in small groups, not only for need but for leisure, let alone to construct a comparable parameter for other peoples that pursue activities of an entirely different kind.

Second, Sahlins integrated into the argument concepts which specialists would have found difficult to use in economic analysis at that time. How could they address in analysis and pursue in the context of fieldwork suggestions that hunter-gatherers follow the "Zen way" to affluence or that "a pristine affluence colors their economic arrangements, a trust in the abundance of nature's resources rather than despair at the inadequacy of human means" (1972:29)?

Finally, and most important, although Sahlins acknowledged the difficulties involved in studying contemporary peoples as descendants or representatives of prehistoric hunter-gatherers, in discussing evolutionary processes of the macro- time scale, he projected ethnographic observations of the micro- time scale—which left much to be desired. Extraordinary as it now seems, a close examination of the published sources, McCarthy and McArthur (1960) and McArthur (1960), shows that even the nine adults who constituted the Fish Creek group were in fact encountered in a missionary station and invited to participate in an "experiment" (McArthur 1960:91). Not only that, but they "became so tired of the diet, the greater part of which was animal food, that on 12 October, the fifth day of the survey, two of the men walked into Oenpelli to get flour and rice." Luckily, they acquiesced to the researchers' wishes and "willingly handed over these foods until the conclusion of the experiment"—and so "the quantitative survey was continued" (McCarthy and McArthur 1960:147). As for Lee's early quantitative study, while it was more sophisticated and less contrived, it nevertheless focussed on a selected group that represented 58% of the 425 !Kung counted in the Dobe area in 1964—the others were involved in other activities or did not stay for the four-week survey (Lee 1969:52–54)—and Lee later found that even these selected people had previously been working for wages and had occasionally grown their food (1979:409; 1976:18).

In short, "The Original Affluent Society," in spite of

its importance, remained too complex for straightforward examination by students of modern hunter-gatherers for many years after its publication. It thus became a kind of a sacred text. It was left untouched and unapproached, and there evolved an oral tradition, passed down from teacher to student, which gave it an acceptable meaning (see Barnard and Woodburn 1988:11–12). We continued to include it in our reading lists, as much for its historical importance as for that "something" which we felt it had and also because we had nothing better to offer. Occasionally a (bright) student would exclaim, "The king is naked!" but we considered it a king even if indecently dressed.

Recently, however, ecologically oriented specialists have taken up the essay and, drawing on advances made during the intervening years in both fieldwork and theory, read it as a hypothesis to be tested by means of empirical research (e.g., Hayden 1981, Hawkes and O'Connell 1981, Hawkes et al. 1985, Gould 1982, Hill et al. 1985, Headland 1987, Smith 1987). A major session was devoted to their work at the recent Sixth International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies in Fairbanks, Alaska. Making use of quantitative data collected within research projects informed by optimal foraging theory (Winterhalder and Smith 1981), these specialists have focussed mainly on hunter-gatherers' work time. They have reported that Sahlins's argument does not apply universally, because some peoples—for example, the Ache, the Alyawara, the Agta, and even the !Kung (see esp. Hawkes and O'Connell 1981; Headland 1987; Hill et al. 1985; Hayden 1981; Lee 1979:278)—work on average at least six hours a day. They have argued that the studies Sahlins used were not universally representative (a charge which can be made against virtually any anthropological work) and, moreover, that they take account neither of the societies concerned at large nor of the full seasonal cycle, let alone of irregular ecological changes. They have also addressed the construction of the parameter "work time" and argued that it is misleading because it does not include time devoted to constructing and maintaining tools, the preparation of food, child care, and the informal exchange of information. While most of these scholars have challenged "The Original Affluent Society" on these grounds, some have concentrated on Sahlins's idea of "limited wants," reframing it within evolutionary-ecological theory (e.g., Hawkes et al. 1985, Smith 1987, Winterhalder 1990) and asking whether "limited needs" had any ecological rationale in terms of optimal foraging theory ("time minimizing," "opportunity maximizing," and "energy maximizing").

Twenty-five years after the idea was introduced, it is indeed time to revisit "The Original Affluent Society." Yet it is not enough to pick up components of the argument such as "work time" and "limited needs" and pursue them piecemeal. To understand what Sahlins was trying to get at, we must first penetrate the essay analytically and strip the argument of its rhetorical and polemical excesses. This is the first objective of this paper. The second objective is to offer an up-to-date culturally

2. Lee's output-input study was carried out over a period of four weeks, but he excluded one week during which his own contribution to subsistence effort was too great to be overlooked.

oriented analysis of hunter-gatherers' work and material welfare. In recent years a culturalist method of economic analysis (following Gudeman 1986) has developed, and its application to the study of hunter-gatherer economy has already begun (see Bird-David 1990). Drawing on culturally oriented data, new and old, concerning three groups—the Nayaka of South India, the Mbuti of Central Africa, and the Batek of Malaysia—I will argue that Sahlins's argument, duly updated and reconceptualized, does indeed hold.

I will, however, confine myself to the modern dimension of "The Original Affluent Society," leaving the evolutionary dimension to be pursued separately at a different analytical level of abstraction and with due care for the massive problems involved. The recent debate on the status of modern hunter-gatherers (e.g., Solway and Lee 1990, Wilmsen and Denbow 1991), which I have addressed elsewhere (Bird-David 1988, n.d.), lies outside the concern of the present paper, since it does not deal with how the modern peoples in question have come to be the way they are—through evolution or as a result of colonialism.

An Analysis of "The Original Affluent Society"

Along with all other observers of modern hunter-gatherers, Sahlins was struck by what he described as their "peculiar" economic behaviour. In his terms, they have only a few possessions, which can be manufactured easily from materials which lie in abundance around them, and display a notable tendency to be careless about them and to lack interest in developing their technological equipment. Lack of foresight is apparent in "their propensity to eat right through all the food in the camp, even during objectively difficult times," and in their "failure to put by food surpluses and develop food storage" (pp. 30–31). Many of these features have since been combined by Woodburn in a single construct, "the immediate-return system" (1980, 1982, 1988).

In "The Original Affluent Society" Sahlins intended to offer a culture-specific explanation of this "peculiar" economic behaviour. Referring to the formalist/substantivist controversy of the 1960s, he set himself against the use of "ready-made models of orthodox Economics, especially the 'microeconomics' taken as universally valid and applicable *grosso modo* to primitive societies" (1972:xi). He expressed, instead, a commitment to "a culturalist study that as a matter of principle does honour to different societies for what they are" (p. xi) and to a view of the economy as "a category of culture rather than behaviour" (p. xii). Any lingering uncertainty about his theoretical position is dispelled by *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976), where he argued for an economic analysis that takes into consideration peoples' cultural constructions of the material world and challenged the assumption that there is an economic sphere which is regulated by practical reason. Interestingly, he specifically criticized analyses which present a "naturalization

of the hunter-gatherer economy" and concern themselves with the "naturalistic ordering of culture" instead of "the cultural order of nature" (1976:100).

What he did in "The Original Affluent Society" was, however, precisely the reverse of his intention: he discussed hunter-gatherers' work in terms of practical reason and ecological constraints and analysed their economy with none other than a microeconomic model focussing on individuals' optimal, rational behaviour. He argued, in fact, that the imminence of diminishing returns shaped the hunter-gatherer economy, first imposing mobility and then enforcing prodigality (pp. 31–33). "Hunters and gatherers," he concluded, ignoring their culture altogether, "have *by force of circumstances* an objectively low standard of living" (p. 37, emphasis added).

How did this happen? It was not for lack of trying. Sahlins offered two promising cultural propositions. The first was that affluence is a culture-specific relation between material wants and means and that hunter-gatherers achieve it by reducing their material wants through cultural processes: "Want not, lack not." This would have been a good starting point from which to explore the ideas of hunter-gatherers in relation to their economic conduct and thereby to provide a culturalist framework for understanding their economic arrangements. But Sahlins did not pursue it, in part because of lack of relevant data and conceptual apparatus and in part, unfortunately, because he sacrificed the issue to wit and glossed this proposition as the "Zen way." In so doing, he diverted attention from the hunter-gatherers' own ideas, since, needless to say, "honour[ing] different societies for what they are" means projecting upon them neither Western nor Zen ideas.

Sahlins's second cultural proposition was, essentially, that hunter-gatherers have confidence in their environment and that their economic conduct makes sense in relation to that confidence. In "Notes on the Original Affluent Society" he put this boldly, arguing that "a certain confidence, at least in many cases, attends their economic attitudes and decisions. The way they dispose of food on hand, for example—as if they had it made" (1968a:86). Notably, most of the speakers in the discussion that followed (1968a:89–92) addressed their comments to this proposition, designated by one of them as the "thesis of confidence in the yield of the morrow" (Helm 1968:89). Although they discussed it in a preliminary way, in impressionistic terms, and did not find it equally applicable to all cases, the consensus was that this proposition did apply to peoples whose economies were later to be characterized as "immediate-return systems" and in restricted ways to other groups as well.

When Sahlins made the same point again in "The Original Affluent Society," however, he added a qualifier which brought to an end the interest he and others had shown in this proposition. He wrote: "My point is that the otherwise curious heathen devices become understandable by the people's confidence, a confidence which is the *reasonable* human attribute of a generally successful economy" (p. 29, emphasis added). He later

indicated that by “successful economy” he meant gaining a livelihood while retaining a low ratio of work time to leisure time. While the initial proposition could clearly have led to a culture-sensitive analysis—because confidence in the natural environment reflects cultural representations as much as objective, ecological conditions—this addition reduced it to a practical reason and prepared the way for the ecological proposition.

Sahlins did not, I think, go back on the explanatory importance of hunter-gatherers’ confidence in their environment. He simply laid his bet on another proposition which he had come to believe would make his case more strongly. Reputed to be central and crucial to “The Original Affluent Society,” this proposition was that hunter-gatherers work an average of three to five hours per adult per day. In retrospect, and taking into account the recent work discussed briefly above, it is clear that he bet on the weaker horse. However, even in the essay itself one can see how the illusion evolved and, moreover, that this proposition is not a necessary condition for Sahlins’s argument.

Pre-1968 theory had explained hunter-gatherers’ economic dispositions in terms of their unrelenting quest for food. Sahlins’s attack on this theory was what made his essay historically important, but he addressed it only to pave the way for his own. It would have been sufficient for that purpose to point out—in a general way, and, without going into the problematic statistics—that what were then new and exceptionally rich empirical findings conclusively showed that hunter-gatherers did not work relentlessly. (This would also have confirmed the impressions of attentive travellers and missionaries.) However, Sahlins chose a more polemical and dramatic approach, and as a result, while he debunked the old theory sensorially, he lost control of his own.

He overprocessed the ecologically oriented quantitative data from the aforementioned studies and in the course of that adopted the analytical construct of “work time”—a modern Western construct par excellence that is meaningful within the ecological paradigm but not in a culturalist study. Moreover, with the zeal of the newly converted, he further quantified the quantitative measures of work time that, with considerable caution, Lee and McArthur and McCarthy had provided and so arrived at estimates of “four or five hours” (in the case of the Arnhem Land Aborigines [p. 17]) and “an average of 2 hours and 9 minutes per day” (in the case of the Dobe !Kung [p. 21]). The simplistic reduction of the data to these two figures was unfortunate, because when he then turned to his other sources he found in them suggestive comparable estimates: “two or three hours,” “three or four hours,” and “an average of less than two hours a day” (p. 26, citing Grey 1841, vol. 2:263; Eyre 1845:254–55; Woodburn 1968:54). He himself was aware that the estimates were “very rough,” but —lo and behold!—they were similar to each other and to the estimates just mentioned. (Sahlins further highlighted the similarity by printing the estimates in boldface.) These were similar enough, in any case, for scholars who had just discovered what has been called the “magic

number” in hunter-gatherer studies—the 25-strong hunter-gatherer band—and suggested a second magic number; “a mean of three to five hours” of work per adult worker per day.

This seeming fact was sufficient for Sahlins’s case: if they worked so little, they indeed enjoyed unparalleled affluence. Furthermore, it made the cultural propositions simple corollaries of this fact: if hunter-gatherers could gain an adequate livelihood by working so little, it was obvious that they could easily get what they wanted and did not want more than they could easily get, and, furthermore, it was obvious (“reasonable”) that they had confidence in their environment. Thus, Sahlins centered his concluding theory on the ecological proposition, which should not have been offered (since there was neither sufficient evidence nor any theoretical need for it), and abandoned the cultural propositions.

It is as a result of this that he provided a theory of *abundance with cost* (owing to ecological dictates) when he had set out to offer the opposite, a theory of *affluence without abundance* (owing to cultural influences). His theory was, in Winterhalder’s terms, “the neoclassical formulation preceded by a minus sign” (1990:498)—a neat formula in the best formalist fashion that lacked culture-sensitive depth. Worst of all, the whole argument came to appear doubtful in the light of subsequent work because the ecological proposition upon which it rested had been called into question. I would argue, however, that in drawing attention to the explanatory power of hunter-gatherers’ trust in their environment, Sahlins did point the way towards a culturally oriented theory of hunter-gatherers’ economic behaviour. He was on the threshold of what can now be pursued by using the culturalist method of economic analysis.

The Cosmic Economy of Sharing

No one can seriously suppose either that all modern hunter-gatherers will be the same or that any point needs to be made of this. It seems, however, that not only do hunter-gatherers with immediate-return systems share the economic features which perplexed Sahlins (whilst other modern hunter-gatherers differ from them in various ways) but at least some of them view their natural environments in a similar way: they have, in Gudeman’s (1986) terms, very similar primary metaphors. These metaphors are drawn from their social institutions and constitute the cores of the metaphorical models that Gudeman has called local economic models. I shall move on to discuss these metaphorical models and then show that this ethnographic material provides substance for Sahlins’s cultural propositions, a basis on which to refine them, and, in addition (and as Sahlins suspected) a means of making sense of these hunter-gatherers’ economic behaviour.

I began to explore the primary metaphors of hunter-gatherers with immediate-return systems in an earlier paper (Bird-David 1990), where I examined one metaphorical model—the giving environment—in relation to

patterns of exchange and ownership in the context of a contrast between the South Indian Nayaka and their shifting-cultivator neighbours the Bette and Mullu Kurumbas. Here I discuss a closely related metaphorical model—the cosmic economy of sharing—in relation to subsistence activities in the context of a comparison between the Nayaka and two other groups with immediate-return systems, the Mbuti of Zaire and the Batek of Malaysia. Each group has animistic notions which attribute life and consciousness to natural phenomena, including the forest itself and parts of it such as hilltops, tall trees, and river sources. I shall examine the way in which they construct their relationship with these agents—at once natural and human-like—by looking eclectically at their ritual and myth and their everyday discourse and conduct and by paying special attention to the metaphors which they use. Four features in particular are prominent:

First, the natural (human-like) agencies socialize with the hunter-gatherers. The Mbuti *molimo* festival, for example, is, in fact, precisely about this: the Forest visits the Mbuti camp, plays music, and sings with the people (Turnbull 1961). The Batek similarly say that the supernatural spirits, called *hala'*, "come to earth merely for the pleasure of sharing a good singing session with the Batek." During the fruit season, Batek frequently sing for—and with—the natural spirits (Endicott 1979:219). The Nayaka confine the merriment of a communal get-together with the natural agencies to a festival normally held once a year. However, throughout this festival, which lasts 24 hours, they converse, dance, sing, eat, and even share cigarettes with natural-cum-ancestral spirits, which they invoke by shamanistic performances.

Second, the natural agencies give food and gifts to everyone, regardless of specific kinship ties or prior reciprocal obligations. The Mbuti, for example, explicitly say that "the forest gives them . . . food and shelter, warmth and clothing" (Turnbull 1976 [1965]:253; 1978:165). They view game, honey, and other natural foods as "gifts" (Turnbull 1976 [1965]:161, 180, 277; 1961:61, 237). The Batek, according to their origin stories, hold that the *hala'* created most of the plants and animals especially for the Batek (Endicott 1979:54–55, 72) and now demand nothing in return, not even (with a few exceptions) sacrifices or offerings (p. 219). According to some versions, some *hala'* even turned themselves into the plants and animals that the Batek eat (p. 67). The *hala'*, the Batek say, keep large quantities of fruit blossoms in their abodes, "like goods on a shop shelf" (p. 44), and release the fruit in season, "freely bestowing their bounties" (p. 219).

Third, the people regard themselves as "children of" the forest, the term connoting generic ties rather than simply bonds of emotion and care. For example, not only do Mbuti often refer to the forest as "father" and "mother" (Turnbull 1965:252; cf. Mosko 1987) and say that it "gives them . . . affection" (1965:253) but also they describe it as the source of all spiritual matter and power, including the vital essence of people's lives (*pepo*) (Turnbull 1976 [1965]:247, 252). They describe

the forest as a "womb" (Turnbull 1978:167, 215; 1983:30, 32, 44) which plays a part in the conception and development of a Mbuti foetus (Turnbull 1978:165, 167–70; 1976 [1965]:178; cf. Mosko 1987:899). In a similar vein, although from the opposite perspective, the Nayaka not only refer to natural agencies (especially hilltops and large rock formations) by the terms *dod appa* (big father) and *dod awa* (big mother) and to themselves correspondingly by the terms *maga(n)* and *maga(l)* (male and female children) but also say that dead Nayaka become one with the forest spirits. They do not exclude their own immediate forefathers, and furthermore, they perform secondary mortuary rituals to help their deceased relatives join the forest spirits. The Batek also address the end point of the life-cycle, though they depict a two-stage transformation. They say that the spirits of their dead relatives first go to the land of the dead, where superhuman friends and relatives transform them into superhumans and teach them the skills and songs of the *hala'*; thereupon they become *hala'* and move to the *hala'* place (Endicott 1979:111–15, 219).

Finally, these groups not only depict their ties with the natural agencies as ties of sharing between relatives but also explain experiences which could be seen to be at odds with this cultural representation in its own terms, as temporary, accidental, and remediable exceptions. The Mbuti, for example, say that mishaps occur when the forest is asleep. Then they have to awaken it by singing and "draw the forest's attention to the immediate needs of its children" (Turnbull 1961:87; 1976 [1965]:257). The Batek even go in for a preventive measure and believe that as long as they sing, the *hala'*, who like the songs, will send food in abundance (Endicott 1979:54, 56, 219). The Nayaka explain mishaps in another way, though they too effectively relocate the volition outside the natural agencies. They maintain that the natural agencies are generically benign but, interestingly, "people from far away," through sorcery, have affected them. Nevertheless, as for the Mbuti, it is simple enough for Nayaka to restore the order of goodness. Through divination they make it known that the natural agencies are not at fault, and the natural agencies turn back into their normal, benign selves.³

While we will never know for certain how Nayaka, Mbuti, or Batek relate to their environments, it is clear enough that the metaphor of sharing provides an important clue to it. Drawn from the institution of sharing so common in these hunter-gatherers' social life, it is a primary metaphor which can help us to loosen slightly the bonds of our own Western ways of viewing the world. Whereas we commonly construct nature in mechanistic terms, for them nature seems to be a set of agencies, simultaneously natural and human-like. Furthermore, they do not inscribe into the nature of things a division between the natural agencies and themselves

3. In the case of extreme and lingering problems, it is believed that a local Nayaka has interfered with the natural agencies and has made them harmful. There is a more elaborate way of addressing this problem.

as we do with our “nature:culture” dichotomy. They view their world as an integrated entity. While many other non-Western peoples view the world in this fashion, it seems that hunter-gatherers with immediate-return systems distinctively view their ties with the natural agencies in terms of visiting and sharing relationships. We can say that their world—according to the metaphorical template carried by the image of sharing—is a cosmic system of sharing which embraces both human-to-human and nature-to-human sharing. The two kinds of sharing are constituents of a cosmic economy of sharing.

Hunting and Gathering as Aspects of the Cosmic Economy of Sharing

The culture-specific dimensions of hunting and gathering can be brought into relief by examining them through the metaphorical model of the cosmic economy of sharing. Within it, they are constructed as acts of nature-to-human sharing which stimulate further acts of sharing in the world.⁴ During the past 20 years, we have learnt a great deal about hunter-gatherers’ human-to-human sharing. We have learnt that sharing is a social event which demonstrates relatedness, affection, and concern. In economic terms, the value of sharing often lies in its occurrence—in that it secures recurrence—rather than in the value of the resources involved in the particular transaction. Verbally, agents praise generosity in general and generous individuals in particular, but at the same time, in what has come to be called demand sharing (see Bird-David 1990, Peterson 1988), they moan excessively about their poverty and needs. Practically, would-be-recipients request what they *see* in the possession of others and do not request them to produce what they do not appear to have. With these aspects of sharing in mind, we can see that these hunter-gatherers do indeed engage with their natural environments as with sharing partners in at least four ways.

First, as in the case of human-to-human sharing, they care about going on forays just as they do about the value of their products. For example, on some days they collect items of no immediate use and of no great value, and, having collected something, return to the camp, even in the middle of the day. A concern with the activity itself—as much as, and sometimes more than, with its yield—is even more conspicuous when people engage temporarily in other subsistence activities. They continue to go on expeditions in the forest every now and then, even though they often collect little or nothing at all and could do without it. When they forage in the forest, they feel that they are in touch with the natural agencies. The Batek, for example, “feel they are being brought closer to the *hala*” (Endicott 1979:67). The

Mbuti experience a communion with the forest in that “the moment of killing . . . [is] . . . a moment of intense compassion and reverence” (Turnbull 1976 [1965]:161). In some of their stories, the Nayaka even tell of encounters with their supernatural relatives during the course of gathering. According to one story, for example, a woman dug up roots and came upon an elongated stone (the Nayaka point out that it resembles the human body in its shape and refer to it as *kalu* [deity]). She brought the stone to the hamlet (where it still is) and placed it with the other items, including other stones as well as personal mementoes of deceased relatives, that are ceremonially entertained and fed once a year.

Second, like sharing, hunting and gathering are social events and contexts for socializing. The Batek, for example, do not “view work as a burden. . . . Most men and women approach their economic activities enthusiastically” (K. L. Endicott 1980:650). “Women often go fishing with their children as a way of filling an hour or two after other work has been completed” (p. 634). They often say when they go that “they are tired of sitting around camp” and when they return that “they were just playing around at fishing” (Endicott 1979:21). Nayaka families often walk in the forest, each on its own, at a slow, indulgent pace. While picking up usable items, they observe what has happened since last they were there, what has blossomed and what has wilted, and talk about it in a leisurely way. Mbuti approach their hunting in a similar way, as is vividly evident in the following example (which is especially interesting in that it is provided by an ecologically oriented ethnographer [see Hart and Hart 1986], who is here describing a hunt for commercial ends): “The overall pace of the hunt is so leisurely that old people and mothers with infants may join. Between casts of the nets, the hunters regroup . . . to share tobacco or snacks of fruit and nuts gathered along the way . . . to flirt and visit, to play with babies” (Hart 1978:337).

Third, as in human-to-human sharing, seeing constitutes a crucial moment in hunting and gathering activities.⁵ These hunter-gatherers tend to appropriate what they see rather than to search for something they want. They often set off from their huts with no particular sense of what they want to acquire in mind and collect what they happen to see on their way. Moreover, although it is impossible to see far ahead in the forest, they often do not even plan their route, instead going in the direction which seems best at the time. Again, they rarely request the natural agencies to produce more resources. They use, for example, very few if any magical means to try to improve their luck in hunting, fishing, and other endeavours (Endicott 1979:22). Seeing also establishes right of first access to resources in the forest, and this is particularly noticeable with respect to certain valued resources—for instance, certain kinds of

4. It should also be useful to look at hunting and gathering from the perspective of the sociology of work, which since the 1950s has gone well beyond the examination of work as labour.

5. Among the !Kung and some northern hunters individuals “see” game in divinatory dreams and then set out to get it, or they “see” where it will be best to go foraging (e.g., Lee 1979, Tanner 1979).

honey—which can be collected repeatedly in the same place. The individual who first sees the tree on which it is annually found owns the tree, which means that he has the right to initiate the collection expedition.

Finally, echoing demand sharing in the human realm, these hunter-gatherers both praise the goodness and generosity of the natural agencies and (regardless of what they actually have) frequently complain of hunger and other insatiable needs. During their 24-hour shamanistic sessions, the Nayaka, for example, repeatedly do both. Similarly, the Mbuti complain of food shortage, although they also frequently sing to the goodness of the forest as they walk in it and as they hunt and gather alone and in groups (Turnbull 1976 [1965]:167, 256; 1961:57, 79; 1978:164). As in human-to-human sharing, complaints and praise are but complementary idioms in an economic discourse premised on giving (see Bird-David 1990).

From this ethnographic glimpse of hunter-gatherers with immediate-return systems it appears that the metaphor of sharing is a clue both to their views of their environment and to their action within it. Recent theory—from diverse perspectives—indeed shows that cognition (concepts, especially metaphorical ones, and percepts) is interrelated with action (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Gibson 1979, 1982; Ingold 1989), and this is, of course, in harmony with our own most commonplace experience. For example, our use of the metaphor “a dog is a friend” indicates that through close interaction with the dog we have come to perceive and approach it as a friend. Even when we represent the dog as an animal, in the course of what Marx called the life activity we engage with the dog as our friend and express this in various ways in our conduct and discourse.

The primary metaphor of “sharing” is thus a concept with which *we* can make sense of the hunter-gatherers’ economic arrangements (Gudeman 1986) and, moreover, a metaphorical concept by which *they* make sense of their environment, one that guides their action within it. Through their close interaction with the environment they have come to perceive it, and act with it, as with a friend, a relative, a parent who shares resources with them. Though in certain contexts they talk about aspects of their environment in “knowledge of” terms, for the most part in the course of their life activity they normally engage with it as if they were in a sharing relationship.

The metaphor “the natural environment is a sharing partner” thus constitutes an analytical tool (to be used with caution, in awareness of the inevitable uncertainty of our own authorship, continually checked and refined as we use it) to examine the issues which Sahlins raises in “The Original Affluent Society.” For example, how do hunter-gatherers with immediate-return systems construct their needs vis-à-vis their environment in culture-specific terms? Do they trust their environment, and in what culture-specific sense? How does this metaphor make sense of their seemingly “peculiar” economic behaviour?

Rewriting Sahlins’s Cultural Propositions

Do hunter-gatherers have “confidence in the yield of the morrow”? Being keen observers of nature’s vicissitudes and ecological variations, hunter-gatherers with immediate-return systems are as cognisant of uncertainties in the “yield of the morrow” as we are, and probably more so. They have experienced periods of hardship in the past and know only too well that such periods may recur. Nevertheless, as in a sharing relationship, although they do not know—and know that they cannot know—what the natural environment will provide, they are confident that under normal conditions it will give them food. Moreover, irrespective of what they obtain in any particular hunting and gathering event—in any momentary episode of the life-long engagement of sharing—the very fact that they have obtained something in their eyes reaffirms their relationship with the natural agencies and therefore secures the recurrence of sharing. In a sense, then, they do have “confidence in the yield of the morrow”—a confidence born of the view that the environment is morally bound to share food and other material resources with them and that under normal conditions it will.

There is a certain truth in Sahlins’s suggestion that hunter-gatherers have “limited needs,” although it is empirically—not merely theoretically—inaccurate to say that they restrict their material desires in the way that Zen believers do. True, they are not interested in possessions and do not go to a great deal of bother to obtain and accumulate them. However, it is equally apparent that they delight in abundance when circumstances afford it and that they consume ostentatiously what they have. Furthermore, to quote Barnard and Woodburn (1988:12), their “demand for food and other goods from anthropologists, as well as from members of their own societies, is very great, indeed at times almost insatiable.” Although these observations seem contradictory, they make sense given that these peoples construct their material requirements from their natural environment—and also, in many ways, from their social environment—in the way in which they construct their demands in a sharing relationship. They culturally construct their needs as the want of a share. Therefore, they require of their environment what they see when they see it and do not request it to produce more. But at the same time they enjoy and exhaust what they have obtained, however much it is, and persist in their demands for shares, irrespective of what they already have. They thus restrict their material wants, but in the way in which one does within a sharing relationship.

Not only food but also technological means are constructed as objects which are shared between the environment and people. This means that they are also regarded as items which can be appropriated from the environment, used without effecting modifications, and then returned to it, directly or via other people. As Woodburn has pointed out, these people often pick up tools just before, and for, the imminent collection of a

resource and then leave them behind. They do not concern themselves with developing their technological equipment, although, if the environment provides sophisticated equipment, such as a gun or a Land Rover, they will readily use it, while showing the same remarkable (but not "peculiar") disposition to be careless about it. Their expertise has come to be the sophisticated use of the material means which the environment provides.

With one critical proviso, there is also value in Sahlins's suggestion that hunter-gatherers' economic dispositions are predicated on abundance. The proviso is that "abundance" is an assumption of their economic model—homologous with and opposite to the assumption of scarcity in Western economic models. In non-extreme situations, irrespective of what we have, the assumption of scarcity has a bearing upon our decisions, choices, and actions. In the case of these hunter-gatherers, the assumption of abundance has the same function. It is consistent with their view of the natural environment as a sharing partner, which implies that as human agents appropriate their shares they secure further sharing. The assumption of scarcity is consistent with Westerners' mechanistic view of the natural environment, which implies that in the course of time, as human agents use up resources, the total stock is depleted.

In conclusion, then, Sahlins suggested that hunter-gatherers follow the "Zen way" to affluence, which presupposes that "human material wants are few and finite, and technical means unchanging, but on the whole adequate" (1972:2). This way contrasts, he argued, with the modern Western one (the "Galbraithian way"), whose assumptions are appropriate to market economies—"that man's wants are great, not to say infinite, whereas his means are limited, although improveable." Hunter-gatherers with immediate-return systems in fact follow a third way—the "sharing way"—to affluence. Their way is based on assumptions appropriate to their sharing economy—that material wants are linked with material means which are available for sharing. (They want a share of however much is available.)

Further, Sahlins observed that in the Western market economy "all economic activity starts from a position of shortage. . . . one's resources are insufficient to the possible uses and satisfactions" (1968a:86). In this respect, the hunter-gatherers' case is the reverse. All economic activity starts from a position of affluence (affluence as a premise). One expects to obtain sufficient resources—at times of abundance even in excess of possible uses and satisfactions.

Finally, Sahlins wrote that "otherwise curious hearthen devices become understandable by the people's confidence" (1972:29) and that hunter-gatherers behave "as if they had it made" (1968a:86). He was right on both points—if read to say that just as Westerners' behaviour is understandable in relation to their assumption of shortage, so hunter-gatherers' behaviour is understandable in relation to their assumption of affluence. Moreover, just as we analyze, even predict, Westerners' behaviour by presuming that they behave as if they

did not have enough, so we can analyze, even predict, hunter-gatherers' behaviour by presuming that they behave as if they had it made.

Towards New Ecological Propositions

In terms of the cosmic economy of sharing, then, the "peculiar" economic behaviour of hunter-gatherers with immediate-return systems makes sense. Moreover, reconceptualized in this way, Sahlins's cultural propositions hold. But the reader is likely to ask: under what ecological conditions can people maintain, and live by, such an economic model? Furthermore, do they in fact have abundant resources, or do they merely think that they do? These are our questions, framed within our models; the people in question would not ask them. Nevertheless, most of our colleagues in the world of learning and in policy-making circles—let alone most students of hunter-gathering peoples—think in Western terms. We therefore have to address these questions, especially since Sahlins's implicit assumption that hunter-gatherers' confidence in the environment is explained by abundance (albeit under conditions of enforced mobility and prodigality) does not hold.

Unfortunately, much as we might want to explore the ecological dimension of these hunter-gatherers' cultural-economic system in their own terms, we cannot do so. In the case of the farmers of the eastern Andes, Gudeman and Rivera (1990) have shown that Westerners, and even certain Western economists, can engage in direct conversation with the local people, but this is possible only because of the close affinity between the local model, the folk Western model, and the model of certain Western economists (they argue for a historical link dating to the Iberian conquest of the Americas). In the case of the hunter-gatherers, in contrast, there is a fundamental disjuncture between the Western and the local model: the terms of each exclude the other. While the Western model presupposes a detached observer concerned with an inanimate nature, the local one presupposes an actor personally involved with an animate natural environment (see Ingold 1989).

However, as I have shown above, the local model relates experientially to action and, moreover, to the same physical reality—the natural environment—with which we are concerned. Therefore, although we cannot translate their experience into our terms, we can come to understand it (see Lakoff 1987:chap. 17) by finding a new way of looking at the natural environment. We need to create a new metaphor of our own and use it as an imaginative cognitive model. Ideally, this metaphor will evoke the way in which these hunter-gatherers relate to their environments in terms equivalent to their own. From such a metaphor we should be able to deduce new, testable propositions and gain novel perspectives on their economy.

I think that there is a metaphor which fills the bill, and it involves the Western institution of the bank. Not only is it the major institution of exchange in the West-

ern economy, and therefore equivalent to sharing, but we draw on it metaphorically, just as the hunter-gatherers draw on sharing, when we are dealing with resources which, for us, are ambiguously placed between the animate and the inanimate (we have, for example, blood banks and semen banks).

Furthermore, the bank is a system which is both concerned with the circulation and use of resources and founded on trust. Individuals save resources for future need, but instead of keeping their valued resources privately they deposit them in the bank, in trust, so that when the time comes they will be able to repossess either them or their exact equivalent instantaneously. For the most part, however, these resources are meanwhile accessible to the public for gainful use, on the basis of the statistical fact that at any given time only a fraction of the savers will claim their deposits. Now, the hunter-gatherers not only have trust in their natural environment and regard its resources as their due shares but, indeed, also make intermittent claims on those shares. They engage in occasional opportunistic pursuit of other subsistence activities (for example, labouring for their neighbours) and frequently shift between these and hunting and gathering (see Bird-David n.d.). Moreover, the bank is a system which can only work if people do not withdraw proceeds from it in order to hoard or circulate them within restricted, private circles. This is precisely the case among the hunter-gatherers and is, after all, what the social institution of sharing is all about. It seems, therefore, that the metaphor "nature is a bank" captures the essence of these hunter-gatherers' engagement with the natural environment while embodying the material basis as well as the cultural aspect of their economy.

Among the many possible propositions which can be deduced from this metaphorical model, there is one which is relevant to the question of the ecological foundations of the local economic model. This is that the hunter-gatherers can maintain their trust in the natural environment—and a successful economy—even when the natural environment cannot, in fact, provide sufficient resources for everyone simultaneously. This hypothesis may seem paradoxical, but it is no more so than the case of the Western bank (see Samuelson 1951:323). The crucial ecological condition may be, as it is in the banking system, a minimum threshold of resources which corresponds to the fraction of the group that is likely to make claims on its shares instantaneously. To explore this possibility, we will need to move away from the goose-chase study of "near pure" hunter-gatherers and look instead at the temporal and idiosyncratic structures of hunting and gathering in the heterogeneous groups that we encounter. We will need to find out what portion of the group pursues foraging at any given period of time, how frequently individuals within the community shift between subsistence activities, and how often they hunt and gather. We may then be able to work out the minimum ecological threshold for a successful economy premised on trust in the natural environment. There is a related proposition of which we must be

aware: this kind of economy can collapse as a result of a breakdown of confidence even when there is no crucial decline in the level of natural resources. The history of banking systems provides examples of this, and we may find also hunter-gatherer cases.

The second question, and the more intriguing one, concerns the extent to which these hunter-gatherers' cultural-economic system generates wealth. Does the fact that they view their environment as rich make it richer? Ecologically oriented scholars have already explored the proposition that sharing—human-to-human sharing—constitutes a kind of collective insurance against unpredictable natural fluctuations and argued that it safeguards individuals from poverty (e.g., Wiessner 1982, Cashdan 1985, Smith 1988, Gould 1982). They have not, however, gone far enough. They ignore both a fundamental part of the ecological equation and the way in which the actors themselves view their environment. Since these scholars view natural resources as an independent variable, they take into account neither the stochastic link between past human use and present level of natural resources nor the fact that, like money in a bank, natural resources left in nature can grow.

The metaphorical model "nature is a bank" implies a more complex development of their proposition, namely, that sharing constitutes an insurance scheme which also involves investment in a banking system. Not only does it safeguard individuals from unpredictable troubles but also it increases their resources. The simpler way in which this may happen can be best explained by an example drawn from a non-monetary banking system. For instance, with the blood bank each individual protects himself by giving blood when he can and receives blood when he needs it. However, the total volume of blood in the bank meanwhile increases as well, because what may not have been a resource before now becomes one. For example, blood which may have been the wrong type for one's friends and relatives becomes a usable resource once it is deposited in the bank. We need to explore whether these hunter-gatherers' economy works in a similar way. For instance, does the general sharing of large game generate wealth because a large amount which would have been wasted on one's own friends and close relatives stretches farther when it is divided among all members of the group?

The second and more complex way in which a banking system generates wealth can be illustrated by our monetary banking system, in which money in fact generates more money. The folk explanation is simple enough: we say that money grows, and, noticeably, we ourselves use the metaphor "money in the bank is like a plant in nature." The technical explanation is complicated and lies in the paradoxical nature of circulation and ownership in this system (put simply, it has to do with the fact that for each pound sterling in the bank, there are about four individuals who simultaneously own it and use it). We need to explore the ways in which this may happen within these hunter-gatherers' economic system. The sharing of large game, for example, may also generate wealth in an additional way: recipi-

ents of meat are likely to postpone hunting, since they have had a share and since they are confident that meat is secured in the bank of nature until they need it, meanwhile allowing more time for natural increase. I suspect that if we examine the temporal and idiosyncratic patterns of foraging, as well as patterns of ownership and circulation, with these aspects of the banking system in mind, we will find that in many other ways these hunter-gatherers' economic system, premised on trust in the natural environment, does generate wealth. Sahlins summarized his case by the catch phrase "Want not, lack not." It may well be, however, that the hunter-gatherers' case is "Think rich, be rich."

Conclusions

The fundamental flaw in "The Original Affluent Society" was Sahlins's conflation of cultural and ecological perspectives. As shown here, however, this problem can be resolved, and the relevant empirical studies then show that Sahlins did indeed "have a point"; his essay is a king that could—and should—be scientifically reclothed. The evocative title of his essay was inspired by John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1969 [1958]). It is ironic that Galbraith in fact emphasized the impact of ideas on the economy, arguing—in a mirror image of what I have argued for the hunter-gatherers in question—that the assumption of scarcity continues to influence economic conduct in the increasingly wealthy West and thereby acts to preserve poverty. The irony is doubled, for in the second edition of his book Galbraith criticized those who misread his argument and overrated his point on the shortening of work hours. His main argument was that the way to the really affluent society lies in an ideological disengagement between production and economic security and between production and income. These ideas are precisely the ideas which are embodied in the cosmic economy of sharing. In respect to their cultural ideas, therefore, hunter-gatherers with immediate-return systems constitute the original affluent society in a more comprehensive sense than Sahlins envisaged.



Comments

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Bird-David's model of a "cosmic economy of sharing" is, in reality, two models. For Model 1, she abandons the opposition between nature and culture, social relations and cosmology, to ask that hunter-gatherer practices upon the environment be comprehended as "an inte-

grated entity," a single cosmic continuum structured through the logic of the hunter-gatherer model of "the cosmic economy of sharing." From the vantage point supplied by this model, the anthropologist sees that it is only by imagining the cosmos and deriving a sense of how and why they have to share with it (and within it) that hunter-gatherers come to sing to the forest, hunt for the joy of hunting, claim only what they immediately see, water stones, blame the forest for misfortune, and so on. With a theoretical grasp on the indigenous, this essentially constitutive model of cultural form gives access to the signified practice of hunters. It tries to make sense of what is ecologically inexplicable and, from an anthropology debated amidst the constructed naturalness of commoditised existence, to reintegrate and dissolve what moderns tend to extract as Economy. Moreover, this model makes the social relation of reciprocity among hunters themselves intelligible. Thus "the cosmic economy of sharing" provides "the metaphorical template carried by the image of sharing." Accordingly, both human-with-human and human-with-forest acts of sharing crystallise about the basic categories of this single indigenous template. Neither a "social relation" nor a "principle" of reciprocity is privileged.

Model 2, by contrast, resuscitates the nature: culture split. "Society" happens first of all, and, in both anthropological and indigenous terms, the model/template of "the cosmic economy of sharing" seems to have become an afterthought. The imagined cosmos becomes "a clue to their views of their environment and to their action within it"; thus a hunter-gatherer world of things and actions already constituted by a different set of determinations is presupposed. Social reality and the image of nature have come apart again. The indigenous model and its semi-ritual effects (e.g., watering stones, singing to the forest), formerly cultural metaphors for action (Geertz), have become cultural metaphors of reality, and this is a reality structured below the level of a distinctly disembodied symbolic representation (Lakoff and Johnson).

Concretely, the forest, the desert, or the ice-cap becomes the epitome of a friend and sharing partner but, for all practical purposes, only an "as if" person of the band—a credible but nonetheless *imaginary* extension of the real networks of pooling and reciprocity, a fiction that expresses its fictionality as well as its signified. Accordingly, belief in the forest's imaginary potency is conceived to be about as strong as the belief that one's dog is really just another human person (which is to say, excepting for neurotic poodle-combers and the blind, not very strong at all). In the meantime, "the cosmic economy of sharing" has been put away in the kennels, and a metaphorical look-alike has been taken out.

So what of sharing itself, if it no longer crystallises about the same symbolic template as practices oriented towards the imaginary ecological friend and, indeed, if it is to be accorded a higher coefficient of reality than practices sprung from the metaphorical imaginary?